Teaching for a Habitable Future with Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

"We'll Have to Seed Ourselves Farther and Farther from This Dying Place"

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Abstract This essay draws on the author's experiences teaching in the fall of 2020 and serving as associate director of the City University of New York's Transformative Learning in the Humanities initiative to propose and describe an "environmental" or "habitable pedagogy" for the twenty-first century.

Keywords pedagogy, Octavia Butler, active learning

How do we engage our students? In the fall of 2020, when I was teaching a writing-intensive college composition course from my Brooklyn home office (a tiny desk I wedged into my bedroom closet) with students dialing in from as far away as São Paulo, it seemed all of academe was asking how to improve their pedagogy while just trying to survive. Most of us have been wholly unprepared and untrained to adapt and update our pedagogies in response to our changing world.[1] Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) rails against the banking model of teaching that has encultured us, since our own student days spent sitting behind desks, to believe that faculty are the only experts in a classroom.[2] In the banking model, faculty hold all the power and knowledge in a class, while the scope of student engagement is limited to passively receiving that knowledge and hoarding it for future use. We assume that the very nature of a discussion-based literature course or a writing-intensive one disrupts this model—but not always. When we ask students questions to engage them, and if we have correct answers in mind, then the discussion becomes a slowly dispensed lecture that reifies the current system rather than providing students fertile soil for original thought.[3] The passive, industrial learning model is a pedagogy of the past, a holdover from the nineteenth century meant to train workers to sit at desks or machines like automatons, not cultivating them to become problem solvers, innovators, creators. If we were satisfied

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with it, no one would have complained in 2020 about lecturing to a screen of black Zoom boxes or, after posing a question to students, scanning window after window of blank stares in response. In a traditional lecture—onsite or online—we model for students that only one person, one expert, is obligated to know the correct answers to the world's biggest questions, allowing students to defer and delay their active role in learning and in society. There's an alternative. We have an astounding opportunity for change in the wake of a crisis: we can turn from the banking model of the past to an ecological one, adopt a habitable pedagogy that teaches students how to live in a rapidly evolving world and solve its problems to make our planet habitable for future generations.

In the fall of 2020, during a global pandemic and a record-breaking year of high temperatures, catastrophic wildfires, and Atlantic hurricanes outnumbering the letters in the Greek alphabet, my class read Octavia Butler's apocalyptic novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), which bore an uncanny resemblance to real life, down to the shortages in toilet paper. In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin, "Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive."[4] While Butler's Black woman protagonist, Lauren Olamina, leads a group of survivors to greener lands, she writes in her Earthseed journals, "we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place."[5] She characterizes this "dying place" as "the rotting past" and describes what parts of us refuse to change, resist taking root in "a future that makes sense."[6] Her fictional world is an apocalyptic nightmare "without any signs of ethical transformation," similar to what Axelle Karera portends if we are unwilling "to inflect the project of ethics in the Anthropocene with the radical politics it is much in need of."[7] The way Olamina characterizes refugee survival following disaster offers us an apt metaphor for our present moment: at the time of writing (who knows where we will be when you read this), we are at a turning point. We could try to go back to the way things were, to resuscitate the pedagogy of an unrecoverable past, one that precipitates the suffering and death of more vulnerable populations, as Karera warns.[8] Or we could change and adapt our methods—this is the mission of Olamina's Earthseed journals—to meet the world as it is in the present moment: warming and on fire with eighty-four million forcibly displaced people (equivalent to the population of Turkey).[9] The classroom is a necessary starting point for a larger pivot in higher education. It is within our power as instructors to shed the racially unjust, environmentally catastrophic ways of the past, and move toward "a future that makes sense": one that is equitable, one that cultivates problem solvers and engaged citizens through structures of equal opportunity.

In this article I examine what it means to "seed ourselves" in a habitable future through pedagogy, and I offer some practical examples of how to put this into practice in a class. I argue for cultivating the conditions in which every student may flourish. Strengthening students' agency, environmental identity, and self-efficacy benefits all learners and fosters environmental stewardship.[10] We can scaffold activity, flexibility, and equity into our classes to mimic the fertile future we want to come to fruition, and plant our students there so they have their best chance at not just surviving but also *thriving*, as Bettina Love urges.[11]

A good starting place is to use discussion methods that solicit 100 percent participation from everyone in a class and not only the hand-raising few. Just one quick

exercise can do this in five minutes or less: everyone jots down a brief written response to a question (sixty to ninety seconds); when their time is up, they partner with one person near them and share what they wrote (sixty to ninety seconds); then a few of those pairs share with the whole class what they talked about together (two to three minutes). The shorthand for this exercise is "think-pair-share," and it can turn the quietest class into a rowdy one filled with inspired discussion. Active learning offers us a path toward a habitable pedagogy. These methods prioritize the health of the whole learning community and are flexible enough to allow for the organic, serendipitous growth of any class, whether meeting onsite or online. These activities are deliberately organized to make the power dynamics of a classroom more horizontal. They cultivate a sense of student belonging and a belief that growth is possible, that we are all people of the world responsible for learning and for problem-solving. In a course enriched by equal opportunity and the intrigue of possibility, our students are given more responsibility and hope—a taste of self-actualization and autonomy—so they may take root somewhere "that makes sense" and grow into citizens who lead us to a future that is more equitable, one in which local knowledge is valued.

Active Learning and a Habitable Pedagogy

Active learning is exactly what it sounds like: alive, effective, flowing. When we create a learning environment founded on supportiveness, one that emphasizes collaboration and teamwork above competition, the learning that occurs is more symbiotic and beneficial to everyone. As Beronda L. Montgomery outlines in *Lessons from Plants* (2021), plants make decisions about how to focus their energies (e.g., whether to grow tall or stocky aboveground, thick or thin roots belowground): they send and receive signals that help them determine whether to compete or to collaborate with their neighbors.[12] They are unable to move very far from wherever they've been placed—or, as students might see it, they are "stuck" with their groups—and so they communicate through volatile organic compounds released into the air to learn where they are, who they are next to, and determine how to adapt. When among friends or kin, they grow larger mycorrhizal networks underground, which are highly beneficial to plants. "Mycorrhizae establish resource-sharing networks," Montgomery explains, and through them, plants share nutrients like carbohydrates as well as information about environmental stimuli (e.g., an aphid or beetle attack) through signaling to each other.[13] These mycorrhizal networks are crucial to the plants' active learning, so necessary to their survival and flourishing. One of the many lessons we can take from the active learning of plants, as Montgomery points out, is that "responses to the environment need not be individual; at times they are best initiated collaboratively."[14]

A habitable pedagogy implements active learning on a large scale by cultivating a whole learning community to function more like the cooperative thriving of an ecosystem, mutually supporting each other's flourishing, and, on a smaller scale, by giving students ample opportunities to engage in direct communication with one another. I used active learning to light up a Fall 2015 American literature course, which met in a windowless room at 8:00 a.m. Our "warm-up" discussions in pairs and small groups sometimes attracted attention from other people in the

building—we were lively for that pre–coffee hour. Over time, I've learned that once students get started with a good, low-stakes prompt for inspiration, it's difficult to stop them, and that's the point: they apply what they've learned, share it with one another, find a flicker of passion connected to the course material, and burst with ideas. These students give me hope that, with the opportunity to stand in the sun and grow organically together, they will lead us to greener lands and a habitable future. In this section I review the merits of active learning, show how it is foundational to what I am calling a "habitable pedagogy," and offer some examples of how to use these methods in English courses.

Looking at the wealth of data available underscores the fact that active learning *works*. Its impact has a ripple effect well beyond those five minutes of discussion in a think-pair-share, especially when we talk to students about what active learning is, why we're using it to structure a discussion equitably, and how it functions to help students achieve greater proficiency in the skills of the discipline. A 2019 study conducted at Harvard University showed that active learning requires students to put in *more* effort than they do when they listen to a lecture.[15] Experts from an array of disciplines have shared data in numerous replicated studies demonstrating that students engaged in active learning have significantly greater outcomes: they score higher on tests following active learning sessions, and these positive results are more consistent across the board than in traditional learning.[16]

Active learning creates a rigorous learning environment precisely because it requires the mutual, even interdependent, engagement of students and instructor(s). On the students' part, they have to think hard, be resourceful, and act on what they know. They are tasked with supporting and mentoring one another, and sharing information and successful strategies horizontally, which helps reduce some of the instructor's burden, so they don't have to shoulder all of it alone. On the instructor's part, we prepare the learning activity, and, afterward, guide students to reflect on the deeper significance of what they have just done (e.g., in think-pair-share, participants use critical analysis, communication, and summarizing skills). Reflection, also known as metacognition, ushers student self-assessment and strengthens their grasp on the ripened fruits of a lesson.[17] This shared effort in learning mirrors the reciprocal, symbiotic relationship between tree roots and fungi. Robin Wall Kimmerer notes, "The tree roots host these fungi, feeding them the sugars of photosynthesis. In return, the fungi extend their filamentous mycelium out into the soil to scavenge nutrients for the tree. The vigor of many trees is completely dependent on this congenial relationship."[18] In the many years I taught as an adjunct spread thin across different campuses, I found that when I invited students to be cocreators—to be involved in their own syllabus making and assessment—I spent less energy hearing complaints about grades and felt more invigorated by teaching and mentoring.

Another good example of active learning in English—and a method that develops students' sense of efficacy, advocacy, and ownership of their responsibility in the climate crisis and beyond—is assigning students public writing (e.g., blog posts, creating or editing Wikipedia articles, writing op-eds). Whether writing separately or in collaboration, in this type of active learning students engage in synthesizing different ideas—even ones that seem at odds with one another—and

workshopping writing to develop a finished, polished product.[19] Public writing can play a specially poignant role in English courses that focus on environmental studies, particularly when a multitude of intersectional perspectives need to be taken into account to convey the urgency of climate change to a wide audience, including those who are skeptical of its relevance to their lives. Allen Webb at Western Michigan University, who has published widely on teaching climate change in the humanities, often assigns his students public writing. He finds public writing gives students a sense of purpose as they develop the rhetorical skills necessary to write compellingly for diverse audiences. The immediate practical application of knowledge also helps, in some cases, direct student eco-anxiety into useful outlets, toward advocacy and community.[20] In my Fall 2020 college composition course, students conducted research on local environmental, geographic, and sociopolitical histories; went for socially distanced "nature walks" around their neighborhoods; and then synthesized their research and observations, writing for a semipublic audience on HASTAC.org (the website of the Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory, called "haystack"), an academic social network of over eighteen thousand members. This platform allowed students to engage with a wider network of academics from around the world, who engaged with their posts through likes, comments, and shares, while also commenting on one another's posts.

This public-facing work can be adapted to graduate-level courses as well. Kaitlin Mondello's students in her Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Climate Change master's-level course compiled a public annotated bibliography. Each student conducted a deep dive on a core text, such as Richard Powers's *Overstory* and Ursula K. Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, and produced a comprehensive summary of the text, suggestions for further reading, and thoughtful discussion questions for other classes or book discussion groups to consider. This valuable teaching and reading resource is free and publicly available on the Academic Commons of the City University of New York (CUNY).[21]

Giving student studies meaning and consequence beyond a class—steering students to professionalize their work into contributions to society—is a form of active learning and is essential to furthering students toward the objectives of writing in English courses. If the writing can be done in collaboration, even better. A study published in 2020 revealed that student learning suffered during the switch to remote teaching in the pandemic, but that small-group activities helped reduce this loss.[22] Group work, in general, affords students paths to build support networks, like sharing strategies for troubleshooting problems, while also encouraging them, through a collaborative learning process, to synthesize multiple ideas, implement feedback, and produce the best possible product.[23] Meanwhile, we can mentor students on how to ask clarifying questions, how to respond to lukewarm or even unhelpful feedback—something we have to do all of the time when readers 1 and 2 point us in contradictory directions. A quick way to do this, on any learning management system discussion board or class WordPress site, is to have students end their posts or comments with a specific question for their peers—it could be something they're curious about but haven't teased out yet, or a request for specific feedback on their writing. Then, when students comment on one another's posts, they have

some direction, a place to start responding in service of their peers. The higher-order skills of interpreting and applying various forms of feedback will serve students for a lifetime.

Cultivating healthy human interaction and collaboration is a vital part of a habitable pedagogy. Natural growth happens socially, in fits and starts, in response to environmental conditions and stimuli. The whole learning environment and all its actants play roles in the growth of the mind. Active learning treats students as essential contributors to a twofold learning process: they are held accountable for both self-directed learning—they learn to be curious about themselves, their communities, and their experiences as valuable sources of knowledge to draw from—as well as their greater responsibility to the whole learning community. For example, the answer to the question, "How do we engage our students?" and many others, can be found by simply *asking our students* what engages them. Posing this question to a class and deeply listening to student responses takes less than a few minutes and upends traditional learning.[24]

When we ask students, we learn directly from them, and they learn from one another. We can adopt a more ecological, growth-based model and make our teaching methods more responsive to students so that they, and our pedagogy, can synthesize new information and new circumstances and metamorphose according to our rapidly evolving world. Instead of spinning in circles guessing how to engage our students, we can structure our courses to draw from the collective, diverse expertise we find in any given class, the root networks we form when we share and grow together.

A habitable future is a crucial framework for this pedagogy. "Sustainable" may seem a likely alternative, but it signals surviving on a planet made nearly uninhabitable by extractivism rather than thriving together, with a shared sense of mutual responsibility, on an inhabitable planet. Sustainability language inadvertently replicates our current "fixed mindset," to borrow a phrase from Carol Dweck: our inability to believe that we can grow, change, and do better.[25] Making sustainability our goal inadvertently perpetuates our alienation from nature by continuing to regard our nonhuman neighbors, Ailton Krenak argues, "as mere resources for industry and extraction," ignoring their meaning to us as humans.[26]

Further, setting sustainability as the goal largely presumes we are, now, at a place of relative equilibrium and safety that only needs to be maintained. This privileged stance ignores the ongoing trauma(s) endured by climate refugees around the world and those currently facing climate disaster.[27] Instead of using sustainability discourse that maintains the status quo, a habitable pedagogy sprouts from what Dweck calls a "growth mindset," or a belief that we can grow, improve, and yield better results. The goal of a habitable pedagogy is not to dismiss student eco-anxiety or placate it with sustainability rhetoric, nor is it simply to direct students toward "practical anxiety" (anxiety that is useful, connected with motivation), which can, down the road, lead to activist burnout if we don't complement it with strategies for self-care.[28] Instead, the manifold goals of a habitable pedagogy are to create the inclusive, fertile conditions in which every student may thrive; increase flexibility to give students more autonomy; mentor students on best practices for doing

something fruitful with that autonomy; and develop students' emotional resiliency to establish healthy habits and prevent burnout (e.g., self-defeating eco-anxiety, activist burnout, etc.).

Montgomery in "From Deficits to Possibilities" derives a powerful metaphor for good mentorship from observing common habits of plant care: when there is a problem with a plant in our charge, we look to its environment (i.e., sunlight, water, soil) and make adjustments to improve conditions. Montgomery argues that we can do the same for our students when we use growth-focused mentoring and avoid centering students' "deficits." Importantly, Montgomery urges us to support individual students "as they move along a *self-defined* path in a particular context."[29] The key is to allow students space and room to stand in the sun, to become self-directed learners who sprawl in directions that inspire them and nourish their own—and one another's—deepest curiosities and greatest interests. They don't have to find this path alone, and we know that they perform better when they learn from each other.[30]

A habitable pedagogy brings together a growth-oriented mentorship and the efficacy of active learning. The two combined cultivate students' confidence, so essential to imagining a new and better world, and their higher-order skills for adaptation on a planet that's rapidly changing. Caring for and maintaining an inhabitable planet, especially in our epoch of globalized commerce, requires worldwide collaboration, not just the actions of a select few who typically stand at the front of a room. In a class built on a more inclusive ecological model, engaged learners become engaged citizens.[31] An (in)habitable pedagogy prioritizes creating the ideal learning conditions for all students to live, imagine, and innovate in a class with the hope that they will lead us to a habitable planet in the future. It's radically inclusive: activities that engage *all* students, not just those privileged few who have the self-assurance to repeatedly raise their hands.[32] The goal is to prepare all students to be creative thinkers, deep listeners, conscientious collaborators, and dynamic leaders. To do that, we sometimes have to resist the impulse to explicate, because we can inadvertently distance students from their own learning (this causes students' "enforced stultification" in Jacques Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster*).[33] We need to cede some control, which I will describe in the next section, to afford students enough freedom to grow according to their own volition and through their own twists and loops toward the sun.

Reading Apocalypse When the World Is on Fire

Rather than build a traditional, more prescriptive syllabus, I began our Fall 2020 composition course by posing this question as a writing prompt: "What should we be writing about right now?" I had no set agenda, no correct answer in mind, only my expressly honest curiosity. Students took the question seriously and compiled a long list of worthy topics. They pursued these topics throughout the semester, writing about racial inequities, ongoing climate crises, media bias, the upcoming presidential election, the challenges of being small business owners, and more. They wrote about their neighborhoods and their geographic and sociopolitical histories, and, most importantly, they stepped into an awareness of themselves as local

experts able to articulate their own values and began to see their communities as sites of knowledge making. We turned social distancing into the basis for connecting with our immediate surroundings, but it wasn't without its challenges. In this section, I focus especially on teaching climate change amid a global crisis and what happened when we read Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Throughout, I offer some examples from my own teaching experiences that center student knowledge(s) and experience.

By the time we arrived at *Parable of the Sower*, I thought we would be prepared to draw parallels between literature, racial justice, climate science, and our present pandemic. We certainly did that, but, in retrospect, the parallels were too uncanny. We were overstimulated by the constant news of the latest political assaults on truth and reason, living in fear without vaccines and with a very high-stakes presidential election looming, and the world was literally on fire.[34] In sum, we were living through trauma that sometimes expressed itself in numbness of feeling and other times erupted in intense empathy, despair, and an inability to disconnect from a single tragic incident. Whether it was as close to home as a recent death in the family or as far away as another political explosion between the United States and foreign powers, each seemed to weigh on all of us more than before. We lacked tolerance for bad news. It should have come as no surprise to me that when we read the first chapters of *Parable of the Sower*, my students were not at all concerned with big ideas, topics they themselves said we should be writing about: climate change, economic disparity, critical race theory. Instead, they dwelled most on two minor characters, Tracy and Amy, who disappear from the novel early on.

Tracy's and Amy's stories are brief, brutal, and triggering. They live in Olamina's walled community before it is destroyed. We find out secondhand, in the length of one full sentence, that Tracy became pregnant at the age of twelve after years of being raped by her uncle, Derek. The men in the community don't punish Derek but ask him to leave. There are no police to call (at least not without paying them and risk getting blackmailed for more money), no money for prenatal care or an abortion. Tracy's mother seems to blame her for everything, and Tracy's "maternal instincts didn't kick in," leaving her daughter, Amy, neglected.[35] No one seems to care about the four-year-old Amy except for Olamina, who takes her in, bathes her, and teaches her the alphabet. They form an attachment, but, just before her fifth birthday, Amy is shot by a random stranger through the community's metal gate.

Olamina witnesses death every day: people outside their enclosed community throw gruesome objects over the wall: "A maggoty, dead animal, a bag of shit, even an occasional severed human limb or a dead child"; dead bodies are left lying outside the wall, but "these were all outsiders. Amy was one of us."[36] Amy's death feels different, and the event is given pause for reflection in the novel. Although Butler soon introduces even more tragedy and crisis, all my students wanted to focus on Tracy. I've taught rape in literature as an act, not a metaphor, and centered entire writing courses on the subject of consent. Nevertheless, I was surprised my students were so drawn to Tracy's story. Immediately, I responded to and validated their reactions, their outrage at her mother's victim blaming and their questions about why Tracy seems to be forgotten in the narrative itself—an oversight on Butler's part, perhaps, or maybe an intentional demonstration of how numb to adversity and

injustice everyone in the novel has become. Rape is suggested elsewhere in the novel as a systemic problem: countless impoverished women, often depicted as naked and badly abused, roam the streets outside this walled community like zombies. What student attention to Tracy showed me was that no event was too small or too minor, and some of the active learning methods I will discuss in the next section helped me be responsive to students.

Open discussion in a classroom, especially one in which students are encouraged to respond to each other, can grow like a field of wildflowers. It's more spontaneous and disorganized than a traditional garden but nevertheless becomes a thing of beauty. Further, this wild, sprawling garden activates hardworking bees. It feeds the production of tangible takeaways like ideas for further exploration in research and writing for the next round of papers. I've learned over the years that instead of directing students elsewhere (wherever I planned to focus our discussion), often it is better to invite students to say more and for me to pause. I listen and wait the way bees watch one another dance to learn new paths to nectar from one another. The learner's mind needs time to explore, to dance, to process in order to grapple with new concepts, build new neural networks, and eventually form original hypotheses and theses. Professors are often in a rush—there is simply too much ground to cover and not enough time. Yet the deepest and most meaningful learning happens when we allow students to have their responses, to process their emotions, not imposing our own onto them even if the text we assigned brought out these feelings. Whatever else I have in mind to talk about can stop a thoughtful conversation if I redirect too soon. Collectively, during the pandemic, we needed room—and I needed patience and flexibility—to stay with the trouble and learn sympoietically as Donna Haraway counsels, to allow students room to wonder, to ask *why*.[37] The dance of conversation can be a tad roundabout, but students find inspiration for papers in all sorts of places.

Our collective feelings more or less mirrored the emotional life of Lauren Olamina, who has a suprahuman condition called "hyperempathy." She physically feels the suffering of others, even that of animals, when she directly witnesses their pain. For example, on a small expedition to practice shooting in a remote location, a wild dog stalks Olamina's group and lunges to attack. Her father shoots it three times, but the big gray animal lies on the ground, twisting in pain, its forefeet making running motions and claws scraping the ground. Olamina cannot walk by with the rest of the group because its pain becomes her pain. To save herself from falling to the dirt, she raises her Smith & Wesson and puts the animal out of its misery. Then she feels the dog die: "I had felt it die, and yet I had not died. I had felt its pain as though it were a human being. I had felt its life flare and go out, and I was still alive."[38] This suprahuman ability—or a debilitating sensitivity, as it is often characterized—seemed, at least to our class, less like fiction. We were unusually susceptible to anxiety and grief, following the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg, for example, or dwelling on the horrible trauma of a fictional child like Tracy.

Butler wrote the novel in the early 1990s, but she set it in 2024–27, far enough ahead to be plausible then and eerily close to us in both time and content. In the novel, global climate devastation and economic crisis have dissolved the middle class, making the wealthy richer (enough to attempt launches into space

to start life on Mars) and the poor poorer (jobless, homeless, and barely surviving food and water shortages). Looking back at the marginalia I left in my paperback, I see a casual note, "so real," written next to this passage: "In New York and New Jersey, a measles epidemic is killing people. Measles!"[39] The measles epidemic in the novel is caused by poverty: people cannot afford the cost of vaccines. It seemed Butler had predicted the confluence of globalization, a warming planet, and economic disparity into an epidemic.

I wondered, in the fall of 2020, if it was a mistake to assign this novel. However, Olamina's concerns and priorities, so stripped of the security and privilege of a pre-pandemic life, made all of us feel less alone. Our class had, by the time of reading, grown community roots. In the words of Emanuele Coccia, "Roots make the soil and the subterranean world a space of spiritual communication."[40] Looking back now, I understand how Olamina's hyperempathy was so close to resembling our own emotions that fall. Most of our discussions circled around Olamina's responses to stimuli. Was she callous or reasonable? Was she really *hyper*-empathetic or was she the only person truly able to bear witness and not deny reality? Olamina's condition brought us to a fruitful discussion about the role of empathy in garnering attention to climate change and social justice.

At the 2022 Modern Language Association Convention, most panels on environmental studies addressed some version of hyperempathy—without naming it as such—as well as how to mentor students through eco-anxiety and despair, and the "cruel optimism" (to borrow from Lauren Berlant) of directing students toward activism while knowing that burnout is a problem.[41] Empathy can be a persuasive literary tool; it has been employed by writers like Rachel Carson, who portends a future without birdsong in *Silent Spring*, and utilized by environmental advocacy groups in ads and documentaries like *Sonic Sea* (2016), *Chasing Coral* (2017), and *Our Planet* (2019). In the course, we channeled much of our empathy into public writing, employing compelling rhetoric to advocate for public policy changes—a form of training for activism. At the same time, our class understood the consequences of caring too much. For that reason, in the next section, I include exercises for cultivating students' emotional resiliency.[42]

Practical Ways to Seed Ourselves in Transformative Pedagogies

We may have been exhausted by seat time on Zoom, but our class certainly came together, largely due to some structures I put in place to build a community of support, to take as our example the mycorrhizal networks of plants and grow our root networks together even while living thousands of miles apart. The following activities worked in our class, and they would benefit all students in any class environment, online and in person. What they have in common is total participation, which structures equity and inclusion into any course.

Entry and Exit Tickets

A great entry ticket to kick off open discussion is to ask students to write down one sentence that resonated or puzzled them in the reading—or whatever the prompt, it ought to be something students can respond to in one to three minutes.[43] If meeting in person, students could write their answers on the board or on pieces of

paper that they turn in. If meeting online, students can type these in the chat, or you could use a Jamboard or Zoom's white board feature. If you just handed back a writing assignment, the prompt might be: "What challenges did you encounter on the last assignment?" or "What action or approach will you take to improve your writing skills for the next deadline?" A reflection such as this one encourages students to analyze some of the feedback they've received. An exit ticket, given at the end of class, comes in handy after a lukewarm session—when you're not quite sure what went wrong—to ask students what could have gone better and what they plan to focus on as they prepare for the next class meeting. The key component to showing students that their participation matters is to collect their responses and react to them in some way (e.g., use an entry ticket as the basis for class discussion, or an exit ticket to adjust your teaching, etc.). Responses can be anonymous or used to take attendance. The entry/exit ticket can also serve the dual purpose of checking in with students to see how the writing is going, and find out where they are struggling—then, during class time, we can share helpful strategies for overcoming whatever seems to be tripping up the majority of the class.

Amplifying the Warm Welcome Online

Building community online is tough, and in a pandemic, it felt nearly impossible, but there were strategies that worked in crisis that can be useful to teaching future hybrid courses or ones that meet exclusively online. Without the benefit of greeting one another in person, in my Fall 2020 course we used sound to build community. We began class—even before the typical entry ticket—with a dance party to a different song each meeting. I started the first class with Stevie Wonder's "Superstition," and in the meetings that followed, a different student selected a new song each time (submitted in advance). After the dance party ended, the student who picked the song would say a little bit about why they chose that one for our class. Punctuality was good because students wanted to hear their peers' songs. By the end of the semester, we had a playlist of thirty-odd songs representing our class community. It is still publicly available on YouTube Music where students can continue to listen to the good vibes we brought to our class.[44]

Mindful Check-ins with the "Popcorn" Method

In the pandemic, it was easy to forget common courtesy like saying, "Hey! How are you?" when running into someone in a hallway. To open our virtual class meetings in a way that recreates this daily human interaction, I altered my usual entry ticket about the reading to focus on student health and well-being. I would choose one student at random and ask them, "How are you?" They would answer, then pick a peer at random and ask them, they would answer, then pick another peer at random, and so on, until everyone had asked at least one person how they were doing, and all of us had a chance to share—either verbally or in the chat. This participation method is called "popcorn" because it's a randomized way to call on everyone proactively, keeping everyone warmed up. The mic stays active: there's no dead silence or waiting period between speakers. Further, listeners have to pay attention because, when it's their turn, they need to know who hasn't been called on yet to be able to pick the next person to pass the mic to. The popcorn method can be adapted to ask students

any question; however, this particular wellness check-in reinforces that students' lives outside of class matter and are critical to supporting the learning process. They might say, "I'm stressed because I have three exams this week" or "I'm tired because I had to babysit all day," and this information is crucial to our understanding of their learning capacity each day.

Antiracist In-Class Reading Practices

Students often feel anxious when asked to read a passage aloud. A traditional education teaches them that there is a "right" and a "wrong" way to read. Reading aloud can be an especially intimidating prospect for multilingual students and those who struggled with literacy in the past. To transform this fixed mindset, ask several students—I ask as many as five or six—to read the same passage aloud. I tell them in advance: "I'm going to ask for *at least* five volunteers, so I'll wait until I see five hands up. You'll see why in just a moment: everyone is going to read this paragraph differently, so we'll hear it as many times as we need to until we've read it with every possible inflection, to get the most possible meanings it might have into the air for discussion." Knowledge is plural, and the nuances of any one student's articulation become sources of theory making. For example, in *Parable of the Sower*, after Olamina describes feeling the dog die yet not dying herself, there is one standalone line to end the chapter: "Pow."[45] I had multiple students read the full paragraph and then that last line: they gave different meaning to the onomatopoeia by reading it as shockingly loud, surprisingly quiet, or as an expression of sadness, sarcasm, or anger. This exercise inspires deep and nuanced close readings. It fosters mutual respect, shows students how much they each have to contribute, and emphasizes that difference is a valuable source of knowledge and theory making.

Connecting Content to Students' Lives

During the pandemic we witnessed success in classes where professors altered assignments to be immediately relevant to students' lives and communities. Given the environmental focus of our course, I asked students to go on one-hour nature walks—with earbuds out—to meditate on the rhythms of their local neighborhoods. The reflective walks provided students a bridge between their communities and the course: in their next papers, they applied theoretical readings to local environmental and socioeconomic issues. Students could, if they chose to, move from "noticing and appreciating" to becoming "active stewards" of land, as the practicing psychologist Leslie Davenport recommends (e.g., students might join a community garden, support a seed library, or volunteer at a school that maintains a children's garden).[46] Public scholarship can take many forms. At the University of Florida, Laken Brooks had her students complete service learning projects that ranged from hosting socially distant book exchanges in mutual-aid Facebook groups to advocating for more Black authors to be included in open-access audiobook libraries.[47] At the College of Staten Island, students conducting archival studies with Susan Smith-Peter and collecting oral histories with Joseph Frusci populated a Facebook community page with a digital collection of images and stories about how the pandemic impacted their daily lives. The Museum of the City of New York included several of these items out of more than twenty thousand submissions in its exhibit,

New York Responds: The First Six Months.[48] These are examples of academic rigor immediately put to good use beyond the walls of the academy.

Writing a Three-Minute Manifesto

This exercise is inspired by the designer Bruce Mau, whose instructions are simple and inspiring: "Write down what you want to do with the rest of your life in the next three minutes."[49] If three minutes seems short for this scale of visionary thinking, Mau assures us that it's just right: "People know the future they want; they just haven't been asked." Give students this powerful question as a writing prompt—their responses could be personal or related to climate change or both—and then have them each stand and read their manifestos. In reading them aloud, a class will likely "discover a common commitment to creating a beautiful world," and, "most powerfully, they discover the hidden beauty that was sitting in the room around them," as Mau says. This inspiring exercise isn't just for students, it's for all of us: we can also use it to transform our departments, starting by imagining the beautiful future we want. At Transformative Learning in the Humanities (TLH), Cathy N. Davidson and Shelly Eversley have done this activity as a collaborative manifesto in a shared, live-edited Google Doc with fifty-one faculty representing over twenty unique disciplines and eighteen two-year and four-year colleges at CUNY.[50]

Group Office Hours

Collaborative learning doesn't end at dismissal. Group office hours benefit everyone: they can save instructors time spent repeating some of the same writing advice, and students learn from analyzing and supporting one another's writing craft. When I first held group office-hour sessions in the fall of 2020, most went like this: one student asked a question about their paper and shared their screen so we could all examine the issue together. I worked one-on-one with the author while the other students listened and thought about how to make similar adjustments to their own writing. As students grow more comfortable commenting on their peers' work, a more collaborative writing workshop session can be facilitated by asking, "What do others think? How might another writer here approach this problem?"

Cultivating Emotional Resiliency with Check-Ins

Some climate disaster events and/or readings are more physically or emotionally proximate than others, and the mindful welcome check-ins can be adapted to foster resiliency. Most professors are not trained psychologists, and it's important to respect that limitation and refer students to local sources of support as needed. However, we can still be mindful mentors and cultivate students' emotional resilience during difficult times by offering them validation. One scoping study on eco-anxiety recommends making space for grief and even "anticipatory loss" without judgment or pressure to rush the mourning process.[51] Following any tragedy (e.g., a wildfire or hurricane), we can open up a typical welcome check-in by offering a reflection such as this one that Davenport suggests: "This is a moment of . . . (use the most accurate word) suffering, struggle, sadness, fear, upset, distress, pain, loss, etc."[52] This will focus the class on processing emotions related to the event, confirming that it's worthy of our attention and reflection. I've often reserved ten minutes of

class time following a school shooting to check in with students and see how they're doing—feeling safe on a campus isn't a given. What follows can be structured with a specific prompt, such as, "What's one source of good energy you will draw from during this moment of [repeat word used above]?" Some suggestions for responding—if students hesitate—might include self-care, comfort food, self-compassion, generosity, and rest.[53]

Cultivating Emotional Resiliency through Free Writing

If despair or eco-anxiety persist, the meditation above could go even deeper as a prompt for a five- or ten-minute free writing session. Ask students to remember a time when they exhibited courage, self-compassion, or strength, and to explore that memory and reflect on what that feeling itself is like. At the end of the free write, ask if anything surprised them or if they realized something new about themselves. Then, you might ask them to carry that feeling—of courage, self-compassion, or strength—with them for the rest of the day, or for the rest of the term. Davenport asserts that this meditation on "remembered strength" helps individuals reconnect "inherent qualities that have helped them cope successfully with difficult times in the past and to evoke those strengths in the current situation."[54] Students can draw from that remembered feeling again and again to access their own inner sources of strength and resiliency.

Conclusion

We have a most unprecedented and astonishing opportunity for transformation in the wake of the pandemic.[55] Never have so many instructors in higher education—across disciplines, institutions, and national borders—critically reconsidered how we teach. To create the conditions in which students habitually learn from one another, deepen their human relations while growing more complex neural networks on an individual basis, we need to care for the souls of our students, as bell hooks so wisely advised, to listen to them and tend to the root networks we form when we learn together.[56] Adapting to and caring for every student may seem a recipe for burnout: most college instructors in the United States have high teaching loads and hundreds of students.[57] But when we alter the environmental conditions to better support learning—more evenly distribute responsibility and authority in our classes by encouraging collaborative learning—we create a community of care that supports instructors, too, and we plant every student in ideal conditions for growth, adaptation, and flourishing in the future.

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Notes

1 McMurtrie, "Damaging Myth"; McMurtrie, "Why the Science of Teaching."
2 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
3 Cathy N. Davidson calls this a "distributed lecture" (foreword).
4 Le Guin, introduction, xiv.
5 Butler, *Parable*, 78.
6 Butler, *Parable*, 79.
7 Karera, "Blackness," 34.
8 Karera, "Blackness," 34.
9 UN Refugee Agency, "Refugee Statistics." See also Prashad, "World of Migrants"; and Prashad, "Vijay Prashard [*sic*] People's Summit Speech."
10 Nelson, Ira, and Merenlender, "Adult Climate Change Education."
11 Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*.
12 Montgomery, *Lessons from Plants*, 33–44.
13 Montgomery, *Lessons from Plants*, 48–49.
14 Montgomery, *Lessons from Plants*, 52.
15 Deslauriers et al., "Measuring Actual Learning"; Reuell, "Study Shows Students."
16 Deslauriers, Schelewand, and Wieman, "Improved Learning"; Mello and Less, "Effectiveness of Active Learning."
17 Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, *How People Learn*; Chick, "Metacognition"; Davidson, "Why Start with Pedagogy?"; Gooblar, *Missing Course*, 65–70.
18 Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss*, 149.
19 For more on collaborative writing, see Savonick, "Write Out Loud."
20 Webb, "Just in Time."
21 See Mondello, "Annotated Visual Bibliography."
22 Orlov et al., "Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic." See also Flaherty, "Power of Peer Interaction."
23 Davidson and Katopodis, "Eight Ways."
24 For more on listening, see Montgomery, *Lessons from Plants*, ix–x. See also Eversley, "Course Planning."
25 Dweck, *Mindset*. See also Moser et al., "Mind Your Errors"; and Yeager et al., "National Experiment."
26 On sustainability as extractivism, see Krenak, *Ideas*, 50.
27 For more on climate refugees, see Walia, "Dispossession"; and Prashad and Rehman, "'Rich Countries Are Pretending.'"
28 Pihkala, "Eco-Anxiety."
29 Montgomery, "From Deficits to Possibilities," 3. My emphasis.
30 Griffiths, "Teaching and Learning in Small Groups"; Juvonen et al., "Role of Peer Relationships"; Mohammad, "Evaluation of the Efficacy."
31 For examples, see Katopodis and Davidson, "Contract Grading and Peer Review."
32 For more on anti-racist, inclusive teaching methods, see Chavez, *Anti-racist Writing Workshop*; Taylor, "Polymath"; Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together?*; and Ober and Saltzman, "Achieving Total Student Participation."
33 Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 7.
34 Migliozzi et al., "Record Wildfires."
35 Butler, *Parable*, 33.
36 Butler, *Parable*, 50.
37 On sympoiesis, see Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30–35.
38 Butler, *Parable*, 46.
39 Butler, *Parable*, 54.
40 Coccia, *Life of Plants*, 80.
41 See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
42 Dana Luciano, in a 2022 MLA panel titled "Stuckness: Reading and the Time of Climate Change," urged us to think about the ethics of pushing students toward activism and cautioned against doing so without fostering some awareness of the cruel, self-crippling optimism of activism that leads to burnout ("Unstaging Climate Grief").
43 For more on entry and exit tickets, see Katopodis, "Entry and Exit Tickets."
44 Katopodis, "EC1 Zoom Dance Party."
45 Butler, *Parable*, 46.
46 Davenport, *Emotional Resiliency*, 162–63.
47 Brooks, "Reimagining Service Learning."
48 Smith-Peter and Frusci, "Including Staten Island."
49 Mau, *Bruce Mau—MC24*, 65.
50 For more on TLH, see https://www.cuny.edu/academics/faculty-affairs/cuny-innovative-teaching-academy/transformative-learning-in-the-humanities/.
51 Baudon and Jachens, "Scoping Review."
52 Davenport, *Emotional Resiliency*, 93.
53 Davenport offers further suggestions for guided meditations (*Emotional Resiliency*, 93–96).
54 Davenport, *Emotional Resiliency*, 94.
55 Davidson and Harris, "Making Remove Learning Relevant."
56 hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 16.
57 On remedies for teacher burnout, see Katopodis, "Pedagogy of Self-Care."

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