

SEEDING RADICAL IMAGINATION, MOVING BEYOND SEPARABILITY, PROVOKING AUTHENTIC SELF EXPRESSION, AND GENERATING COMMUNAL PRACTICES FOR OTHERWISE WORLDS WHILE SITUATED ON THE PRECIPICE OF HUMAN DISAPPEARANCE

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Drawn from our winter break respite by an email noting the upcoming submission deadline for this journal, we read Karl L. Wheatley's (2024) article and encounter resonance: his reference to teaching toward ecological literacy with "courage to keep sticking my neck out and talking about the elephants in the room" and our shared need for "more social and professional support from people in a similar position" (p. 63). Inspired, we begin crafting place-based, ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007) vignettes that illuminate what taking action for Climate Justice looks like for us as citizens of Newark, New Jersey and agent provocateurs within colonial institutions.

We write from the ancestral lands of the Lenape peoples who were forcibly removed. Living stories of indigenous peoples around the globe inspire our work toward Climate Justice.¹ Here, we illuminate ontological inquiries into who we wound up being as human beings within the modernist worldview (the entire System of White Supremacy)² that privileges profit and progress³ over life. We seek access to *otherwise* worlds (King et al., 2020) of authentic self-expression within local coalitions rooted in relationality (Escobar et al., 2024), ways of being and acting consistent with radically imagining, generating, and sustaining Climate Justice.⁴

While we agree that human culpability for climate crisis must be marked, with Kathryn Yusoff (2019) we refuse to whitewash the historical root of extraction and exploitation of living flesh—human and non-human—by adopting the word anthropocene. We cannot simply pretend that Climate Justice can be generated without acknowledging this horrific root and acting urgently for reparations. While scientific innovations are crucial for addressing climate crisis, without completing the pervasive inhumane practices inherited from our past, we will inadvertently continue to recreate them, continue to put all life at risk.

With Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), we appreciate the enormity of the task before us: to hospice modernity enroute to enacting (midwifing) novel dispositions to face a world in crisis with maturity, humility, and integrity—to grow up, sober up and show up for ourselves and our communities. Machado de Oliveira alerts us to the crucial need to replace the Cartesian subjectivity of "I think, therefore I am!; I say, therefore it is!; I own, therefore I rule!" with "You are, therefore I am," or "We relate, therefore we are" (pp. 136–137).



OUR RELATIONALITY

We have been engaging together with the contested conversation of curriculum for 15 years, and our journey has recently included reading texts by Kathryn Yusoff, Sylvia Wynter, Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, and Malidoma Patrice Somé out loud with Rutgers colleagues, members of the wider Newark community, and other beyond. Our practice of reading out loud emerged from Carolyne's participation with an international group that meets on Zoom every week to read the book, *Speaking Being: Werner Erhard, Martin Heidegger, and a New Possibility of Being Human*, by Bruce Hyde and Drew Kopp (2019). Here we share the intention we read at the beginning of the call to generate a shared context of ontological inquiry based on discovery rather than Cartesian Subjectivity:

Intention for the call: to practice both horizontal and vertical reading, that is, to read the text carefully—from beginning to end, getting what the text says—and to read it closely, that is, to be open to surprise and to then follow lines of flight that emerge from looking with wonder at what shows up in reading the text, all the while maintaining the ontological direction of the conversation such that each and every participant—whether reading or listening or engaging in the inquiry emerging from the reading—discovers something for themselves today, which they may or may not share on the call.

“In a conversation with a thinker we must attend to four points, and more attentively to each point in the series, for the rigor of thinking lies in this attentiveness of listening, not in the effort (the forcing) of representational, conceptual grasping that wills to know. We must attend:

- 1) to what is said; for those today, this is difficult enough;
 - 2) to what is not said;
 - 3) to what is unthought, but is to be thought;
 - 4) to what cannot be said, because it remains ever silent.”
- Martin Heidegger, GA 97, Anmerkungen I-V5

The door for those of us today, for whom attending to what is said is difficult enough, is to notice when we are listening [interpreting] in ways that pull us away from attending to what is said, such as when we listen merely

for what we already know, or
for being entertained, or
for associations and memories, or
for contrasts and comparisons, or
for judgments and evaluations.

This invitation to a novel disposition for reading may seem strange or even not needed. As skilled Cartesians, we assume we already know how to read effectively and may ask, “Why all this fuss about how to read?” To develop this novel disposition requires that we consciously bracket what we already know and cultivate a “beginner’s mind” to enable discovery. We invite you to bring this disposition to your reading of our article. Note how often you are pulled away from the words by your habituated “will to know” reading. When this happens, simply return to



reading. Our experience has been that with practice we find ourselves within a field of wonder and discovery beyond conceptual grasping—a field for attending to what is unsaid and may be unthought but needs to be thought. After Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), we seek to braid sweetgrass with you that intertwines “science, spirit and story ... [such that it may] be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other” (p. x).

LEAH: HURRICANE BERYL

Facing the magnitude of the task of enabling a world without separability (between us and the land, and each other) requires more than a change of narratives, convictions, or identities. It also requires more than a mere intention to change. It requires an interruption of harmful desires hidden behind promises of entitlements and securities that people hold onto, particularly when they are desperate or afraid.

—Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*

Through the open window, the sun shines the alarm on my face to wake. I rise from the couch without delay and proceed into the bathroom of my AirBnB to brush my teeth and wash my face. I pour water from a 1.5-liter bottle, careful to consume just the amount needed. The splash on my face provides a momentary respite from the stifling heat. In the last two years of extended visits to Jamaica, I had never felt this hot, I had never been out of running water or electricity longer than a few hours. I choose an outfit that reflects my newfound wisdom of the significance of protecting my melanated skin. I wait for my phone and tablet to power on. The phone has less battery power than the tablet. I turn it off, load my crossbody bag with both devices, and double-check I have all other essentials for the day. Hurricane Beryl not only dashes away all U.S. assurances extended through AirBnB policy but also forces me outside from sunup to sundown.

The temperature is a few degrees cooler outside than inside the loft. I greet Antonio⁶ and inquire about his overnight security shift. On the ground level of the complex, I encounter Rocky, head of maintenance, and his staff, Dex and Victor. We exchange pleasantries, and I ask Rocky, specifically, “You good?” He replies, on cue, “Yah, mon. Give tanks,” and then offers an update on the status of the power outage for the upstairs units, which continues to be shrouded in uncertainty. It’s already been a week since the hurricane touched down. I offer to purchase drinks for them from the supermarket in the complex. Insultingly frigid air blasts my body as I walk through the automatic sliding door. I feel a dull ache in my right ear. I ask the security guard for permission to charge my phone; I make my purchase and proceed back into the heat. The men express thanks, and I leave them to find a place to eat my breakfast of a packaged cinnamon roll and small box of mango orange pineapple juice. Across the road, I sit on a boulder in the middle of a construction site, chewing silently as I gaze at the sea; I sit with the being of togetherness, desiring it without the force of a natural disaster.

**CAROLYNE: 2024 40-DAY RUTGERS NEWARK ENCAMPMENT**

Just as we say “never again” with respect to the fascism that produced the Holocaust, we should also say “never again” with respect to apartheid in South Africa, and in the southern US. That means, first and foremost, that we will have to expand and deepen our solidarity with the people of Palestine. People ... inside and outside the apartheid wall.

—Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*

Ultimately, pleasure activism is us learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on the planet.

—adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism*

I sit on a bench outside the Rutgers Newark Law School with a student and her parents, meeting for the first time. United in our shared commitment to an end to genocide in Gaza, for a free Palestine, and demands for Rutgers’ divestment from companies that support this atrocity, I ask this student what she is discovering. Without hesitation she says, “I am discovering new community.” I, too, discover new community as my more-than-human companion Goldie and I walk here daily and encounter unexpected conversations that uplift and inspire. I am educated about the horrific daily realities of apartheid born from settler colonialism—violence and starvation, bombing hospitals and schools, killing women and children in Gaza—all made invisible as American complicity for genocide is cloaked in propaganda designed to dehumanize and desensitize us from our deep connection with Palestinian brothers and sisters, desensitize us from our humanity.

Our conversations often begin with, “What a beautiful dog ... I love her keffiyeh ... Can I pet her ... Can I take her photo ... What’s her name?” These initial questions soon become crucial existential inquiries that create solidarity. Goldie deepens access to new community, access to pleasure activism (see brown, 2019), for all who are willing to be catalyzed within her loving presence.

On another day, I see three students sitting on a bench and ask to join them. They are enrolled in the MFA Creative Writing Program, and our conversation moves into sharing intellectual mentors who inspire our current scholarly projects. Paper and pen come out as we note new resources to explore. Conversations at the encampment point toward what I long to encounter more often in my classrooms: meeting students’ parents; inquiry space unencumbered by past-based separation of students from each other and from their professors; release from carrying the emotional freight of grades and competition; students courageously unafraid of engaging in pleasure activism toward a new future where all human and nonhuman life is honored, a future bigger than who we wound up being as Cartesian subjects in a modernist world.

LEAH: RESISTING COLONIAL ACADEMIA

Decolonizing authority is a conversation about power dynamics and is important to revolution, resistance, movement, and our activism because one would have to heal themselves from the idea of being subordinate in order to truly inherit their divine right to be seen as credible and free.

—EbonyJanice Moore, *All The Black Girls Are Activists*



2:58 pm on an August Thursday. I tell myself I will join our virtual book club session solely as a listener. About halfway into the session, as a discussion break comes to a natural close, Altagracia delicately invites me to share anything on my mind. Tears trail down my cheeks as her sensing pulls the thread to my unraveling. My throat tightens; the most I can utter is that I have a lot on my mind and I chose to be present today because our collective reading brings me joy. I thank everyone for their care and concern.

At the end of the hour, I ask Carolynne if she has time to stay on Zoom. I tell her the source of my stress is that I have not secured a full-time job. She asks about searching for an academic position. I share that the narratives I tell myself and others are that this is something I want to pursue when I am older or that I do not feel prepared for navigating the politics of colonial academia. Our conversation evokes other, incongruous narratives. I am a co-founder of our activist-scholar reading group. I have been invited to write a book chapter on critical teacher leadership. I have been researching curriculum in segregated schools with two colleagues. Teaching, writing, and research are passions of mine. “Not knowing how to navigate the politics” translates into “I fear entering the system until I know everything about it; otherwise, I will fail.” My desire to avoid disappointment, rejection, and failure is expertly navigating “my bus” down the gold-plated streets of modernity (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). I re-member that this is not a new struggle; it is an inevitable conversation encountered by all who engage critical ontological inquiry (Kincheloe, 2006), all who take their theory to the streets (Owens, 2020), all who risk believing in otherwise possibilities.

With a renewed spirit and excitement of what is possible, I plan to return to Jamaica on a “self-authorized sabbatical” to write and to continue exploring and practicing new ways of being in the world. Paramount to these endeavors is letting go of the colonial authority that imposes on academia standards for what is credible and who is an authority (Moore, 2023). For me to carry out the scholarship that I say is important to me presupposes that I hold myself to the standard of my central ethico-onto-epistemological foundations, which include my ancestors and indigenous ways of knowing. Holding these as my standards affirms my possession of “The Range,” described as my education, my lived experience, and my ancestors qualifying me, authorizing me, and amplifying me (Moore, 2023, p. 114). Being grounded will protect me against colonial academia’s attempts at spirit murder (Aya, 2022) and will carry me to the place where I can thrive while developing my research and praxis.

CAROLYNNE: GENERATING INTIMACY IN AN ONTOLOGICAL INQUIRY COURSE

A learning process is something we can incite, literally incite, like a riot.

—Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

I’m teaching an undergraduate liberal arts course, Collaborative Leadership and Social Innovation, that utilizes ontological inquiry (see Baldev et al., 2013; White et al., 2020, 2023). Ten students are enrolled. One of them, Raymond,⁷ sits in the back row every class session and rarely speaks words. His body speaks grins that leave me wondering if he is laughing at me, if he is cynical about the possibility of our course inquiry actually contributing to him as I say things like, “We will explore how we’ve all been infected by the entire System of White Supremacy” and explain that, rather than looking at racism or sexism or ecocide as individual societal phenomena, we will be examining the entire system that creates and maintains all of it.



It takes a few weeks for the classroom space to thaw from the cautious ways of being students develop to navigate their college classes for the grades they desire. When enrollment is small, students comment that they are surprised and intimidated because they can't hide. We engage activities to create sacred and brave space⁸ that opens for all of us when a student shares,⁹ speaks courageously about a vulnerable as-lived experience. That happens today for this class when a student who appears comfortable asking and answering questions tells us, "I feel like I don't belong here." Shocked by the incongruity of our perception of him and his internal dialogue, within cognitive dissonance wonder emerges.

We are about halfway through the semester, engaged in a conversation about what each of us most desire to contribute to the world. Raymond says, "I want to end poverty in the South Ward of Newark." Stunned, I say something like, "And you've been sitting on that this entire course? Wow!" As the semester continues, I find myself inserting connections back to his amazing commitment.

It is the day before our final exam session and students will share pages from the graphic novels they've created about their encounter with the course. I notice that Raymond submits his novel early on Canvas. I read it and discern needed edits (our course is writing intensive with an institutional expectation that students will enhance their skill with writing in English). An opportunity surfaces. I email Raymond and ask if he is willing to read his entire novel to the class and allow us to workshop it. He quickly agrees. A highlight of his novel is his acknowledgement that he was initially quiet, not talking or being part of the class, because he was not interested. It was not until he started "trying on" the course material in his life that he discovered the value of course practices such as authentic listening instead of arguing and the importance of using his voice to make a positive difference in the world.

LEAH: LAND RHYTHMS

Condition your intellectual, political, and affective muscles for facing storms and running marathons and torturous terrains.

—Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*

I start an ontology journal "as a way through"—to the next node on my professional trajectory, to the next stage of my life. In writing, I get lost in my imagination, make sense of the world, and contribute to social science disciplines. I prefer to produce writing that blurs the line between creative and academic (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Now back in Jamaica, I practice writing at the beach. This is usually preceded by a 40-minute walk from my room and an hour-long swim. When I am working on my tablet, I take care not to get so engrossed that I prohibit connection with others. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021) describes a thought exercise where humans have to (re)create civilization after a global catastrophic natural disaster. I walk in the world as though Hurricane Beryl was that disaster for me. I don't want to return to a way of being that isolates me from others.

One morning, I arrive ready to swim only to find the beach inundated with brown seaweed. I sit at the bar, taken by the sea. I listen to the waves crash loudly; the same wind that moves the water sends the smell of sulfur deep into my nose. A local once told me that the presence of this seaweed means the sea is cleaning itself. I enter a space of curiosity regarding this phenomenon. I wonder what I can learn about and from the sea. The framing from which I approach this inquiry



is The Game Changer Intensive, a Climate Justice course offered by Pachamama Alliance. In the course, we “explore how human beings can play an important role in catalyzing a transformation at the species level from human supremacy to human responsibility and sacred reciprocity with the community of life” (Pachamama Alliance, 2025b, n.p.). At the intersection of teacher leadership, my primary sphere of academic interest, I am further committed to collaboratively shifting how we prepare teachers to facilitate the education of young people for sustainable futures.

CAROLYNE: SPEAKING POSITIVE OBSESSION

Positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts. Positive obsession is dangerous. It's about not being able to stop at all.

—Octavia E. Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*

I agree to join a small group of colleagues from around the country with a project to infuse Ontological Inquiry into k-12 curriculum in a California school district. One member of our group is an activist for Climate Restoration with a long history of working with politicians at high levels of influence. He also has years of participation with groups who engage in Ontological Inquiry. I speak in one of our meetings about my commitment to partnering Ontological Inquiry with Climate Justice and of our need to explore who we wound up being within the modernist world to gain access to new ways of being and acting beyond modernity, ways consistent with generating and sustaining Climate Justice. My communication does not appear to register for him. I encounter this reaction in conversations with many people and wonder why I am not heard.

I choose to repeat myself in another meeting of our group, and on this day, my colleague says, “I have tears in my eyes as I discover that I was holding Climate Justice and Ontological Inquiry as separate spheres where I participate. I didn't know what I didn't know about their crucial relationship.” On this day, I discover that it may not be the case that people disagree with me or that I am not saying something powerfully. Rather than engaging my ever-present Cartesian meaning-making machine, I could choose to simply keep speaking this positive obsession until it can register; when that will happen is unknown.

LEAH: WELCOME HOME

The hummingbird that has, for the course of its lifetime, been obsessed with forest fires and dragons and driven my attention outward now turns around, looks at me, and tells me to integrate body and spirit, space and time, form and movement. She wants me to work toward the dragons *within* me, not scorching forests; the settlers *within* me, not amputating arms; the Indigenous relations *within* me, not self-harming; and all other animals *within* me, shaking themselves out of indifference. I am slowly learning that rather than being “in” the spirit or the body, I can be “with” both, and everything they are entangled with. “Home” is much larger, more diverse, and more complicated than I thought it would be.

—Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*

Marcia, a Jamaican woman in her mid-40s, arrives after work to her middle daughter's apartment—next door to her home and downstairs from mine—to spend time with her



granddaughter. Tash is in her early 20s and gave birth to Summer six months ago, right before the end of my last stay. I am chasing and being chased by Tahaylia, Marcia's 7-year-old daughter, in the gated parking space while Marcia, Tash, and the baby sit in the shade of the veranda. This time of intergenerational socializing in front of the house is a common late afternoon occurrence. I feel acceptance in this sacred space of Black womanhood. I offer without second-guessing if what I have is worthy. I am soft (Moore, 2023). I want to forever be soft like this. In being soft, I sense the hardness of separation that has been existing between myself and other human beings, other-than-human beings, and the land. In being soft, I release tension and trauma of the U.S. brand of White Supremacist Heteropatriarchy that runs through my body (Moore, 2023). I affirm being welcomed as well as welcoming. Where before I would wait to be acknowledged from the edge, I now actively search for portals, for connections, for relationality (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Here, in Jamaica, I have built a homeplace (hooks, 1990) that I take back and forth with me to Newark and everywhere else I be.

I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us.

—Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

CODA

We have no ready-made answers for the global existential polycrisis of climate change, resource depletion, the disappearance of wild nature, decline of the world's oceans, proliferation of toxic chemicals, exploding inequality, massive deregulation, wars and the threat of extreme weapons, genocide, technological overload, and diminishing confidence in our political system. Richard Heinberg (2024) advises us to “fundamentally change our thinking” and “start with self knowledge” in order to address this unprecedented convergence of risk (p. 36). What does it look like to actually change our thinking? What if our self knowledge is already always encased within a modernist paradigm? What if generating Climate Justice requires what may initially appear to be strange, weird, or uncomfortable yet opens space for new possibilities in how we relate with the land, each other, and other-than-human beings?

Living in service to her commitment to Climate Justice today looks like Leah starting a communal Substack with four colleagues where they write in response to each other about public education, teachers unions, and labor activism from divergent standpoints. The Future of Our Schools Collective derives its name from a book written by one of the members, Lois Weiner, and uses critical lenses to advance research-informed and up-to-date analyses of attacks on public education. It serves as a conduit for Leah to express the interdisciplinary nature of her research as she weaves seemingly disparate conceptual tools into fabrics that can be used to wrap living beings in care (Owens, 2025). And her commitment opens her to new work as she accepts a position as the Ports and Policy Analyst for Newark's South Ward Environmental Alliance.¹⁰

Living in service to her commitment to Climate Justice today looks like Carolyn discovering joy on Newark sidewalks where she and Goldie encounter a wide array of citizens: folks who may not have homes, children, employees at Audible's national headquarters where in a few weeks they will allow employees to bring dogs to work, former Rutgers students, or construction workers adding to the Newark housing stock. Each encounter is initiated by Goldie's loving presence, metaplasma for interrupting the common practice of ignoring people we pass on sidewalks. Donna Haraway (2003) uses the word metaplasma for “the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remolding the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (p. 20). A recent



encounter begins with a young woman saying, “I know you. Is that Goldie?” as she lovingly pets her. I ask, “Didn’t we meet at the Encampment?” She says, “Yes!” with a warm smile. Goldie and I extend our walk several blocks, savor reunion. An encounter at Military Park ends with a young man asking me to take a picture of him with Goldie. He coaches me to take additional ones so Goldie’s whole body is captured with them looking into the camera. A week later this same young man walks by my stoop. Goldie barks, he pulls out his phone to show her their prior visit. These encounters disclose always already intimacy. Terry Tempest Williams (1994) advises that “our lack of intimacy with each other is in direct proportion to our lack of intimacy with the land. We have taken our love inside and abandoned the wild” (p. 64). Intimacy is crucial for fueling activism toward Climate Justice and a world that works for all. We invite you to join us in playful wonder about practices you could invent that may catapult your Climate Justice activism. We would love to read what you discover on the pages of this journal.

NOTES

1. We define Climate Justice as a movement to replace the dream of the modern world that prioritizes progress and profit at the expense of life with otherwise worldviews that put life first. See Pachamama Alliance (2025a).
2. The System of White Supremacy includes all forms of socially constructed supremacy: racism, patriarchy, homophobia, religious supremacy, human supremacy, ecocide, the religion of capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism.
3. With Prakash and Esteva (1998), “Consumption, the fundamental function of a schooled society is exquisitely learned through the ritual of schooling” and “faith in (unlimited) progress” (p. 92).
4. Stating our intention in a different register, Fred Moten (as quoted in Harney & Moten, 2012) writes, “The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve recognized that it’s fucked up for us ..., this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly” (pp. 140–141).
5. Translated by Drew Kopp.
6. People named in our vignettes have granted permission for the use of their proper names; if not, we indicate a pseudonym has been assigned.
7. Raymond is a pseudonym.
8. See Richardson (1993) regarding sacred space and Arao and Clemens (2013) regarding the importance of also creating brave space where we courageously move outside our comfort zones, are willing to be challenged, and accept that we may feel annoyed, angry, anxious, surprised, confused, and/or defensive as we engage our learning edges.
9. As explained by Hyde & Kopp (2019) the word “sharing” evokes speaking in such a way that “one’s self and not merely one’s story [is] made available, leaving the other touched rather than merely informed” (p. 2).
10. South Ward Environmental Alliance is a collaboration among residents and community-based organizations to focus upon place-based Climate Justice issues.

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