



Staying with the Climate Trouble: On (Not) Containing the Crisis in the Classroom

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Abstract

Trying to introduce the climate crisis into the classroom as a crisis presents us with a pedagogical challenge: how to contain the crisis without foreclosing it? Focusing on Naomi Klein's *How to Change Everything*, I suggest that attempts to contain eco-anxiety mainly by stressing "what students can do" risk foreclosing the crisis by obscuring its real urgency. Rather than offering what Jenny Offill ironically calls an "obligatory note of hope," we might consider that our deepest obligation isn't to alleviating eco-anxiety but to helping students listen to and be guided by it: to help students, as Donna Haraway puts it, "stay with the trouble."

Keywords

climate pedagogy, climate change, climate crisis, [eco-anxiety](#), [How to Change Everything](#), "staying with the trouble," hope

In recent years, I've framed most of my literature classes in relation to the climate crisis. The premises of such an approach are that "climate change is not a STEM issue," but, rather, "a worldview issue, entangled with our values, perceptions, beliefs, and lifestyles" ([Oziewicz](#), 2023, p. 36), and that—because worldviews are established, maintained, normalized, and, perhaps, challenged and changed by stories a culture tells about itself and the world—one important way of studying the climate crisis is studying literature. The first challenge, though, is to establish the crisis as a crisis, to draw on the basic science to justify a melodramatic but apt picture of our deranged present moment:

our planetary house is burning down; the time left to save part of it is running out; but we keep adding more fuel to fire.

In a culture where the dominant discourses of climate change domesticate its urgent and existential threat by casting it as a (pretty low priority) political “issue,” it’s hard to make that issue present in the classroom as a truly existential crisis. Indeed, even the term crisis can be seen to keep the most disruptive meanings of climate change at a distance, lumped together with other crises, like the “debt crisis.” Insofar as the continued burning of fossil fuel in the global north has already been responsible for the death of [millions](#) of people, mainly in the global south, and guarantees the death of hundreds of millions, or probably [billions](#), of people in the future, it might be better to replace crisis with terms such as “[climate homicide](#)” or “[atrocities in process](#).” For that reason, teaching literature in the context of the climate crisis presents pedagogical challenges akin to those involved in attempts to confront historical atrocities like the Holocaust.

Shoshana Felman’s “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching” (1992) offers a revealing account of some of those challenges. When she taught videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors, her students felt “at a loss, disoriented, and uprooted” (p. 48). Reflecting on that dynamic, Felman comes to see that her job as a teacher necessarily involves “creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand,” but doing so without “driving the students crazy” (p. 53). The central pedagogical question thus becomes “on the one hand, how to access, how *not* to foreclose the crisis, and, on the other hand, how to *contain it*?” (p. 54).

That’s a compelling way to describe the challenge of teaching about climate change. But there’s also a significant difference between containing the secondary trauma of *an historical* event and containing the traumatic response to becoming aware one is living in the middle of an atrocity *in process*. For Felman, “it is the teacher’s task to recontextualize the crisis and to put it back into perspective, to relate the present to the past and to the future and to thus reintegrate the crisis in a *transformed* frame of meaning” (p. 54) so that the students’ then “contained” knowledge can be “*put to use*” (p. 53). But the crisis of the climate is precisely that the future *cannot* function as a stabilizing point of reference. It is that future that is itself *at stake*, dependent on how knowledge of that crisis can sufficiently be “*put to use*.”

How can it be put to use? Discussions of how to bring the climate crisis into the classroom often propose “containing” the crisis by answering that question and thereby offering the students some hope. Kirsten Hunt (2023), for example, responds to her students’ “palpable anxiety about the future of the planet” by stressing that essential to teaching the class “what climate change is” is teaching “what they can do about it” (p. 24). But knowing *that* students need to hear what they can do isn’t the same thing as knowing *what* to tell them. For this, Hunt turns to Naomi Klein’s *How to Change Everything* (2021). Where she sees that work as providing “actionable tools” and thus offering “a sense of hope for the future,” however, I want to suggest that Klein’s book offers less a clear basis for hope than a demonstration of how efforts to “contain” the crisis often function as ways of foreclosing it.

The book begins with what are meant to be inspiring stories of young people taking action, sketching the story of Greta Thunberg, the student strikes she inspired worldwide, and a lawsuit that “sixteen kids from twelve countries” have filed against five countries. These are, indeed, “examples of activism that have been *successful to counter climate change inaction* on a sociopolitical level” (Hunt, p. 25, my italics). However, the difficult truth is that they haven’t (yet?) *countered climate change itself*—a state of affairs that Klein quietly acknowledges by noting that “Greta’s speeches brought no dramatic action from world leaders” (p. 23).

Elaborating on how she sees Klein’s forestalling “anxiety about the fate of our planet” by offering stories to inspire hope, Hunt turns to Klein’s evocation of “The Green New Deal,” presented as “achievable” in light of the precedents of the New Deal and the Marshall Plan—cases where the U.S. has successfully “dealt with crises in the past.” As with stories of student activism, though, Klein’s models of the New Deal and the Marshall Plan can offer substantial hope only if you don’t look at them too closely. As one historian of the period has observed, “The New Deal made America safe for capitalism,” while “the Marshall Plan would do the same for Europe” (Kunz, 1997, p. 164). Yet, as Klein herself has argued extensively in *This Changes Everything*—with its pointed subtitle *Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2021)—the climate crisis is fundamentally a *problem of capitalism itself*. While “what the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity’s use of resources,” Klein writes, “what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion” (p. 21). As precedents for

responding to a climate crisis rooted in our economic model, then, evoking programs like the New Deal and the Marshall Plan seems more desperate than it does inspirational.

Specifically, in Klein's chapter, the "sweeping change" the historical precedents are meant to inspire in the present is the passage of the version of a Green New Deal (GND) introduced to the U.S Congress in 2019. Once more, however, it's hard to see how that bill actually responds to the *urgency* of the present crisis. Where the legislation effecting the original New Deal and the Marshall Plan mandated specific programs and massive spending—passing those bills was *taking action*—the 2019 GND bill asked the House merely to declare its "sense" that "it is the duty of the Federal Government to create a Green New Deal" and its "sense" of what the GND's goals should be. This GND sets out goals, that is, but itself takes no action. It expresses a sense of things but mandates nothing. As our planetary house burns down, students are asked to find hope in the prospect that, if their activism is successful, those in power, rather than taking adequate action, would express a sense that they should make a plan to take such action—kicking the climate action can down the road yet again.

Recognizing that the New Deal in fact exacerbated racial inequality, the GND does stress social and economic justice. But when it comes to the most immediate cause of the crisis, the hoped-for plan calls for eliminating greenhouse gas emissions *not [fast and fully enough](#)* to probably prevent the most apocalyptic scenarios but only "*as much as technologically feasible*" (my emphasis)—as if the problem was essentially one of as insufficiently developed technology, rather than what Klein pithily calls an economy "at war with many forms of life on earth" (2014, p. 21).

Ultimately, as we bring the more than inconvenient truth of the climate crisis into the classroom, much of what students are told "they can do about it" seems to shy away from another inconvenient truth: despite many local victories, the fight against climate change hasn't slowed, much less begun to reverse, the steady [rise](#) in greenhouse gas emissions. It has often been pointed out that making profound changes takes time—that though the arc of the moral universe is long it bends toward justice. But if the arc of the moral universe is long, in a house on fire time is short. Any real hope we might stir in our students must be premised on confronting this urgency. In other words, responding to the students' "palpable anxiety" by teaching "what they can do" carries its own danger:

the danger that, in purporting to already *know* what they can do, one will err on the side of foreclosing the crisis, of minimizing its actual urgency.

In lieu of focusing on what students can do, I've found it helpful to address *what needs to be done*—cutting greenhouse emissions fast and fully enough, as defined by the IPCC. I especially stress the following:

- a) though time is short, it is (as I write this in late 2023) probably *not yet too late to do that*;²
- b) the impediment to doing that is not technical but, rather, political;
- c) unlike the geophysical laws of nature, political realities are always subject to further negotiation.

At least until the house burns down.

While I think some students have been stirred by this approach, I don't suppose it can provide what Hunt finds in Klein's book: a way of offering students "fewer moments of eco-anxiety and more moments of hope" (p. 26). Perhaps, though, the point isn't to alleviate anxiety but, rather, to listen to it, to live through it, and to be guided by it. Perhaps, as teachers, we might focus less on offering what Jenny Offill calls an "obligatory note of hope" (p. 67) than on the value, even the necessity, of what Donna Haraway describes as "staying with the trouble." If the point is to help students confront the reality of the climate crisis *as an existential threat*, that is, perhaps our deepest obligation is not to hope but to attending to the trouble itself. We can't know in advance precisely what that might mean, or whether it will help the process of what Hunt calls "finding a way through." But we can invite students into our own state of not-knowing and thus into the process of finding out (which I hope to describe in a follow up article). And we can hope that in that joint process students might yet help find a way both to stay with the trouble and to arrive at their own sense of "what they can do" to help put the fire out while we still can.

² In a 2018 [report](#), the IPCC finds that limiting warming to 1.5°C would require greenhouse emissions to be about halved by 2030 (relative to 2018 levels) and brought to "net zero" by about 2050.

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