

Staying with the Climate Trouble: Part Two

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Abstract

In teaching about climate, when it comes to the troubling question of “what can we do?” I’ve argued that we try to help students stay with, rather than prematurely and inadequately, resolve that trouble and that we do this by inviting them into our own state of not knowing. How to stay with the pedagogical trouble of doing that, including the trouble of trying to contain the despair that an honest account of the climate crisis may provoke? This essay suggests that one approach to that question in the literature classroom is to teach texts in which characters themselves grapple with the question of “what can we do?” Ultimately, the pedagogical challenge is to help shape these textual encounters into an awareness that, especially as it is shared, despair might be something other than a terminal condition—indeed, might be a necessary passage through to whatever comes next.

Keywords

climate pedagogy, climate crisis, eco-anxiety, *Staying with the Trouble*

The author would like to acknowledge Duncan Rayside.

How can we introduce the climate crisis into the classroom as a crisis without leaving students despondent? In Part One of “Staying with the Climate Trouble” (2023) I tried to elaborate on how I think about that pedagogical challenge in my college classroom, arguing, somewhat against the grain of much climate pedagogy, that our deepest obligation isn’t to reassure students by offering them hope—by directing them to “what they can do”—but, rather (borrowing [Donna Haraway’s phrase](#)), to help them “stay with the trouble.” In this, I was reacting against the way climate action is often introduced into the classroom in the same normalizing terms with which it takes shape in the public discourse more broadly, a discourse in which even the most purportedly “ambitious” climate policy, like Biden’s Inflation Reduction act, remains [farcically inadequate](#) to the severity and urgency of the problem.

Advocating that students stay with the trouble isn’t asking them to abandon the question of “what can we do?” but, rather, to more fully feel and understand what’s at stake in any particular form of doing. “We can’t know in advance precisely what [that staying with the trouble] might mean,” I wrote, or whether it will lead to actions commensurate to the scale and urgency of the problem, “but we can invite students into our own state of not-knowing and thus into the process of finding out.”

In this follow-up article, I’ll try to say something about what “inviting students into our not-knowing” might look like in the climate classroom. Again, I’m focusing on college literature classes, taking as premises that, as Marek Oziwicz puts it “climate change is not a STEM issue,” but, rather, “a worldview issue, entangled with our values, perceptions, beliefs, and lifestyles” 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 (Oziwicz, [2023](#), p. 35).

In one way, inviting students into our not knowing is part of what many teachers in the humanities already try to do. In teaching a piece of literature, the kind of questions on which we focus aren’t in the main those can be answered definitively and finally. A colleague of mine once said that teaching certain texts many times over was easy because “I know where the bodies are buried,” but even a buried body undergoes changes. We do establish frameworks for addressing the key questions, steering students toward certain kinds of terms and concerns, but what we’re after isn’t

a final knowledge, a closing down of a question. Rather, it's a process of engaged exploration that cannot produce the last word.

To invite students into our own not-knowing, then, is to treat the question of “what they can do” in something like the same manner we treat other questions in a literature class, however different the stakes of the inquiry might seem to be. One way to do this is to examine texts that themselves stage the process of characters confronting “what to do.” For me, one useful text in this regard has been Jenny Offill’s *Weather*, where we see a range of responses to that question, both in the central character Lizzie herself and in others, including her mentor, Sylvia, a climate public intellectual. It is Sylvia who feels compelled to provide in her work what she mockingly calls an “obligatory note of hope” (p. 64), but, tellingly, Offill herself does the same thing, appending to her narrative a link to obligatorynoteofhope.com, a site offering both “Tips for Trying Times” and “Ways to Get Involved.” The novel thus ushers the reader beyond itself, as if to insist that the question “what to do” cannot remain sequestered within the text. And in doing this, the book asks us to consider to what extent a note of hope that presents itself as “obligatory”—that arises not from studying the facts of the case but, rather, from a need that precedes any facts—can reflect more than the desperation that prompts it. In this way, *Weather* both points students toward some concrete things they might “do” and also asks them to stay with the trouble of scrutinizing to what extent the site’s various “Tips” and “Ways” seem consistent with a truly adequate response to the desperation of our moment.

A short list of other works that stage characters grappling with “what to do?” might include, most prominently, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry of the Future*, though, in my view, while Robinson does visit the trouble, finally, as what Samuel Miller McDonald has called a “tale of the plucky bureaucrat who uses science, reason, and technical expertise to stumble on the perfect combination of policy incentives and new technology to save the day,” the book abandons rather than stays with that trouble (McDonald, [2021](#), n.p; Zimmerman, [2022](#)). At almost 600 pages, the book is in most contexts too long to teach, unless one assigns only selections. Though the same is true of Stephen Markey’s even longer *The Deluge*, that book does stay with the trouble more thoroughly, rooted more deeply in characters critical of the very systems and institutions of power, and their leaders, that in *Ministry* “save the day.” To what extent

do other works that one might list here seem to represent the process of staying with the trouble? That's a good question to bring to those works, which might include Jessie Greengrass's *The High House*, Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow*, Ilija Trojanow's *The Lamentations of Zeno*, and the film *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (a narrative drama based on Andreas Malm's non-fiction book of that name about why, not how, to blow up a pipeline).

However much the question of "what students can do to help try to stop the climate house from burning down" resembles the kind of questions that humanities classes normally consider, there is nonetheless a big difference between the kind of generative not-knowing that structures those classes and the desperate not-knowing we're confronted with when students understandably ask what they can do. I've implied that inviting the students into the former kind of not-knowing (considering the question of "what they can do" as a literary question) might help usher them into the more desperate, latter, but I've also invited them into that latter not-knowing more directly, by sharing with a class a draft of this essay, in the hope this might help students sense how crucial their own agency is in grappling with the question. One student remarked that in response to reading the essay, and discussing it in class, she began to feel angry and then "inspired" to do something (or, rather, to take the question "what can I do" more literally and personally).

Ultimately, if we invite students to stay with the climate trouble, we're necessarily challenging ourselves to stay with the pedagogical trouble of doing so. For me, that teacherly trouble has partly involved an awareness that, in issuing such an invitation, to some degree I'm likely dealing with my own climate anxiety by passing it along to classes of college students who as a group (along with high schoolers) even before COVID-19 was suffering what the National Education Association called an "epidemic of anxiety" (Flannery, [2018](#), n.p). In doing this, to a degree, I'm probably kicking the climate-action can down the road—like the world climate "leaders" at COP meetings, braying on about removing carbon from the atmosphere at some future time. At the same time, though, insofar as inviting students to stay with the trouble takes the form of inviting them to join me in the space of not-knowing, it helps construct the classroom as a space in which we can stay with the trouble *together*, where staying with the trouble is a form of sharing the trouble. In this, it responds to

the central pedagogical challenge Shoshana Felman identified as having both to let the crisis into the class as a crisis and to “contain” it, so students don’t get too “crazy” (Felman and Laub, [1992](#)).

Importantly, however, this is not the same as providing for students the “fewer moments of eco-anxiety and more moments of hope” for which Kirsten Hunt calls (Hunt, [2023](#), p. 25). Even if confronting the dire extremity of our moment needn’t drive them too “crazy,” it is likely to open them to some degree of despair. But part of staying with the pedagogical challenge, I’d suggest, is helping them understand—and thus perhaps experience—despair as something other than a terminal condition. Here, one might ask the class to consider something like what Orestes means, in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Flies*, when he tells Zeus that “Human life begins on the far side of despair.” Or one might invite them to wrangle with what contemporary novelist Peter Dimock means when he says that, in responding to the climate crisis

Despair is a much richer world than denial. Denial is a dead world and goes nowhere. It has no future. Despair . . . possesses the generative power of whatever comes next, which we are in no position to know but that we have the ability through language to create.... [His book explores possibilities for finding our way] not out of despair but through it . . . It’s not the notion that we always have to get past despair or we have to manage it or solve it. The deeper truth of language gives us a way to inhabit it. Before we come to a solution we have to live it. We skip the living part of it, the living of despair. Out of that [living it] will come whatever comes next (“Interview”, [2021](#)).

Examining such statements in class can become a way of declining to put the cart of hope before the horse of despair. And as with hope, so too with optimism. “You don’t fight fascism because you are going to win,” Sartre wrote in *The Age of Reason* (1947), “You fight fascism because it is fascist.” Taking a cue again from Sartre, one can ask the class to think seriously about what it means to fight for a cause, even if victory seems unlikely—about what’s at stake in the fight against the ecocidal status quo, whether (against the odds) we manage to pre-empt the worst-case climate scenarios or we don’t.

I've thus come to frame climate courses by presenting students with a passage from the poet Carolyn Forché's "Ourselves or Nothing" (1982). Attending closely to these lines is an act of literary criticism, of course. But in indicting a culture numb to both the legacy of historical atrocities and, by implication, to the atrocity-in-process constituted by anthropogenic global warming, the poem also challenges students to "go after that which is lost": to open themselves to the trouble with which the poem as a whole may help them stay. And in this, the poem can work as a way of inviting students both into our own not-knowing and into the joint process of trying to find what's next. In that spirit I'll close with "Ourselves or Nothing"'s final lines:

Go after that which is lost
and all the mass graves of the century's dead
will open into your early waking hours:
Belsen, Dachau, Saigon, Phnom Penh
and the one meaning Bridge of Ravens,
Sao Paulo, Armagh, Calcutta, Salvador,
although these are not the same.

....

...everywhere and always
Go after that which is lost.
There is a cyclone fence between
ourselves and the slaughter and behind it
we hover in a calm protected world like
netted fish, exactly like netted fish.
It is either the beginning or the end
of the world, and the choice is ourselves
or nothing.

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