Uncovering Possible

Pedagogies for Apocalyptic Times

Edited by

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Series in Education

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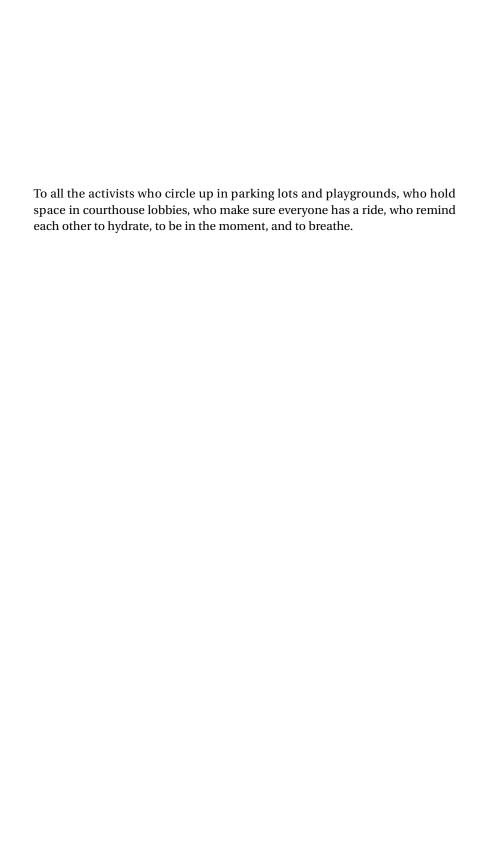


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To our families, especially our children: the world we dream of is shaped by your joy and your unwillingness to accept injustice. Thank you for being our teachers.

Foreword: Whose World is Ending?

Soraya Chemaly

Abstract

In this introductory reflection on the volume, author Soraya Chemaly frames the themes of the book and draws readers' attention to the lessons we have learned in the past five years and potential opportunities to recommit to some of those learnings. In poetic and catalyzing language, Chemaly calls for a rejection of neutrality and an embrace of radical community care, rebuilding of inclusive and equitable spaces of learning and action, and a commitment to a belief in a shared fate that can transcend the harmful powers that would rather see us divided.

Keywords: apocalypse, opening, opportunity, COVID, rebuilding, power

"Apocalypse" is a word no one wants to consider relevant to their own lives. Typically, we refer to it as an overwhelming catastrophe, widespread destruction, and the end of a civilization. In contemporary life, because of humanity's technological capabilities, apocalypse is taken to mean the potential end of humanity itself.

However, etymologically, in its original Greek — *apokálypsis* — the word means something entirely different: "uncovering" or "revelation." So, in the spirit of this book, apocalypse begs the question, "Whose world is ending?"

Today's "end of the world" is not about "the world" but rather a very specific world born out of a Western, capitalist, and colonial worldview. For most Indigenous people, Americans of African descent, and many peoples of the Global South, apocalypses aren't a future possibility but are, rather, history; they are ongoing extractive economies, imperial wars, genocides, past and modern slavery, pervasive carceral, continuous forced displacement, and relentless ecological devastation.

The Western worldview most of us inherited is a totalitarian one that assumes the systems that have sustained power — heteropatriarchal hierarchies of sex and gender, white supremacy, nation-states, capitalist economics, and Westernized global governance — are "civilization" itself. As these teeter on the brink of

catastrophe through mutually reinforcing crises and risks, we, born into this culture and, notably, shaped by Christian teleology, think, "The apocalypse is coming!" in the modern sense produced by this system.

This book, however, *doesn't* fall into this trap. In this book, apocalypse comes to mean revelation and transformation. It centers, in teaching and pedagogy, the adaptability, resilience, care, relationality, survival, and ongoing resistance of non-Western and Indigenous peoples.

We *are* living through *an* apocalypse, but as educators, we need to think of this in the truest sense of the word: How do we talk about and reveal the systems that are collapsing? How do we approach the power structures being laid bare and the institutions repeatedly proving themselves inadequate to the task of justice? How do we provide visionary frameworks that speak of a broader imagination and more just and free alternative futures?

Education has never been neutral, but in times of crisis, its critical role and responsibilities are crystalized: Either you teach to maintain a dying status quo or you teach in ways that effectively and with the least harm, break that status quo down and, with the greatest love, build something new and brave out of its ashes.

This book is about the latter: pedagogy as an act of courage, radical resilience, care, resistance, and world-building, all of which are affected in real time through words, meaning-making, and actions.

Teaching and pedagogy, in these pages, are about what can happen when we understand the need to stop conforming, to refuse power, and to be brave enough to say no; we need a different approach and, with it, a new society. They are about what it looks like, as educators, instructors, guides, and mentors, to cultivate kinship instead of hierarchy, mutual care, and collectivity instead of the isolation of individual strength.

In the face of backlash and repression, teaching has to be a form of disobedience, which, in turn, is the beginning of every meaningful transformation. It is possible, as you will see here, to teach compassion instead of control. Harm *reduction* instead of a default harm *production*.

Pedagogy has to go beyond the transfer of knowledge and explicitly create awareness of our interdependencies and the conditions for mutual care and liberation.

We know that when systems break down, their artificiality is laid bare. Schools, prisons, policing, gender roles, anti-blackness, capitalism — all were constructed, maintained by violence and force, not a purported natural order. The moment these systems encounter challenges or begin to falter, we see exactly how mercenary, *un*natural, and harmful they have always been.

Nowhere are conflicts over the past and the future being fought so starkly and contentious as in our schools: Classrooms are battlegrounds where students and teachers alike are anxious, being surveilled, punished, and controlled under the guise of discipline and neutrality. It is in schools that every wrenching "political" issue of the day is being arbitrated, implemented, and felt: the regulating of gender and sexual identity; the banning of books, language, and critical thinking; the enforcement of cruel immigration policies; and the wholesale dismantling of decades worth of essential diversity, inclusion, equity, and accessibility programs and protections.

Yet, within these same spaces, there is also the possibility of something else: subversion, kindness, and the promise of a better, different way of learning, relating, and living.

Teaching, when done with intention, is, ultimately, a profoundly queer act. Not in the narrowest sense of identity, but in its complete refusal to adhere to fixed rules, timelines, and categories — its joyful insistence on openness, fluidity, emergence, and the ever-present possibility of transformation and potential.

Today, schools are mainly designed to teach obedience — to follow the rules, respect authority, and stay within prescribed boundaries. But what if education encouraged the opposite? What if learning meant disobedience and disruption? Disobedience, after all, is a necessary condition for justice. It is, today, survival for many of us.

Queerness is so frightening to so many for good reason. As pedagogy, it also resists binaries — success/failure, teacher/student, right/wrong, order/chaos — and instead embraces subtly and complexity. It makes it possible for teachers and students to pause and make space for emergence and the unexpected, for students to co-create knowledge rather than simply absorb what they are told. It demands that we ask: How can violence be slow as well as immediate? Who is hurt when curiosity is punished? Is what people call "free speech" really free? Who benefits from conformity? The answer, always, is those whose very existence is a challenge to the structures that maintain dominance. To teach queerly is to refuse to be a cog in that machine.

In the same vein, abolition is often misunderstood as destruction, but at its core, it is, again, about building something new. In education, abolitionist pedagogy means not just revealing and resisting carceral logic — the policing, surveillance, and punishment that pervade schools — but actively constructing and co-constructing liberatory alternatives and solutions. It is about recognizing that, when students are treated as potential criminals, as disruptions, as problems to be managed, learning cannot take place.

The school-to-prison pipeline is not metaphorical. It is real, and it disproportionately affects Black, brown, queer, poor, and disabled students.

Every suspension, every disciplinary action rooted in punishment and control rather than care and understanding, feeds into this system. Teaching as an abolitionist means refusing to participate in carceral structures and structures of thought in all we do as educators. It means mutualism, not punishment; transformation, not the punishment of "transgression." It means centering the voices of those most impacted and hurt by and asking what education could look like if we started from a place of mutual care instead of calculated containment of difference.

Pedagogy is relational. The corporatized school district, the neoliberal university, and the standardized testing model all operate on and sustain myths of individual achievement, of competition, of, essentially, the survival of the fittest. But we learn best and our knowledge is enriched by being communal.

Kinship in education, for instance, means rethinking not only how students relate to each other but also how students and teachers relate, not through authority but mutual respect. It means seeing that students are not emptyheaded, but full, complex beings who bring their own experiences, thoughts, knowledge, and histories into the room. This mutualism helps everyone reject limiting roles and hierarchies that, inevitably, privilege some voices over others. Learning together means resisting together, surviving together, and thriving together.

And survival and thriving are the key.

Backlash against progressive education and educators is not just remote or theoretical; it is very, very present and material. It's a federal portal for reporting teachers who teach Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). It's censorship of words; bans on books; and the harassment, denigration, and punishment of teachers who acknowledge history, affirm queer and trans life, or dare to create spaces where all students feel safe and seen. Supporting students in these conditions means more than just academic guidance; it means being shields, allies, and co-conspirators. It means protecting them while you prepare them for life.

To teach in this moment is to care deeply and radically. This means care that is not soft or passive but fierce and strategic. Care that functions, often, outside of sanctioned spaces and institutions, existing, if necessary, in the shadows. This is pirate care — teaching in ways that create and contribute to underground systems of support that are critical when official structures fail or deliberately fail to support only parts of our communities. This looks like networks of teachers and librarians sharing banned books, mutual aid drives to ensure that students get resources their schools deny them. It means quiet acts that help sustain entire communities.

To be sure, caring for others is necessary and revolutionary, but it is also *exhausting*.

Backlash in education and against progressive educators is never just about curriculum — it is about making the work teachers do expensive in every way: physically, emotionally, professionally, economically, and socially, making it so untenable, so draining, and so risk-laden that people committed to justice are depleted and forced out.

So, this book is also about caring for the carers and reducing and resisting burnout as a political necessity and a pedagogical tool. This means refusing isolation, supporting each other, and prioritizing harm reduction even when we are working in broken institutions and systems.

Intentional harm and burnout reduction acknowledges that while we work to dismantle oppressive systems, we must also work and live within those same systems. So, how we teach is also about recognizing and minimizing our own oppressions while we fight for wider transformations. Not every educator has the ability and privilege of working outside of pervasive institutional constraints, but every educator has the ability to push against them in ways that are diffuse and effective.

Our learning, like our teaching, is never linear, never finite. Pedagogy involves this cycle: Reflecting on the past, recognizing what is harmful to our students and selves, dismantling what is unnecessary and painful, and building what is necessary and just. Then do this again. And again. Mistakes, self-doubt, and failure are always part of this process. The key is to keep moving, questioning, and creating, with accountability and mutual support.

Education has never, once, ever, been neutral, and in the chapters ahead, neither are we. Reading this book will bring you, I believe, as much hope and insight and joy as it did me.

The apocalypse we are living through is not just an ending; it is an opening, particularly for those of us who are teaching and learning every day. It is an opening where, especially with the help of the lessons here, we are able to think about and decide what comes next. This is why the pedagogy taught in these pages matters, as a living act of life-affirming community.

In the face of repression, we build. In the face of backlash, we care. In the face of despair, we teach. In the face of violence, we love each other.

Introduction: Course Schedule

Nora Maybury

Spring 2020 - French 340: Oral Skills

An advanced study in moving mouths around unfamiliar vowels
We watch the professor's tongue hit his teeth, not like that *mais comme ça*Sent home to distinguish pronunciations through delayed Zoom connections
Updating our vocabulary; *contagieux, unprecedented, pandémie*Even *en français*, these words can't be romanticized.

There is no skill in communicating the worry of unknowns Only empathy and patience as time strides by and stays put Why do we entertain the fanfare of academia in times like these, Our government is withholding the only test I can bear to take What do grade point averages mean to ghosts?

Summer 2020 - Arts 310: Living with Dying; Analyzing HBO's Six Feet Under Syllabus finalized in early spring, seats filled before the hospital beds Somber introductions and acknowledgment of newly found relevance Binge-watching episodes between planning memorials I've been waiting 15 years to stop whispering about death But now as we yell, they don't listen.

My final project is a business plan; implementing grief education in schools There is beauty in creating the structures we wish we'd had And anger in knowing our pain doesn't necessitate change I am no stranger to death I know there are much worse things to face.

Fall 2020 - French 400: Linguistics

Apocalypse, from the Greek *apokalyptein*, "to uncover"

Etymology turning despair to opportunity

The clarity of interconnectedness cannot be unseen

How can our words keep up with circumstances,

Do we dare attempt to articulate our fragmented realities?

I study language collecting descriptors, Work in health because care transcends translation. Indefinitely distanced, I seek connection through expression Covid dismantled my lexicon and my sense of community I rebuild them both.

What if We Never Looked Back Toward 'Normal'? Framing Apocalyptic Pedagogies

Nastasia Lawton-Sticklor Climate Disobedience Center Cara Berg Powers

Clark University

Nastasia: I'd like to start by naming the complexity of apocalypse, and how much the process of gathering this work has changed my concept of apocalypse from this flat, two-dimensional focus on the pandemic to a more three-dimensional view. We're survivors of past apocalypses, moving through current apocalypses and anticipating the ones ahead of us all at the same time. I think the pandemic started out feeling fairly linear; so many of us remember the last Friday in March before schools closed: the Beginning. We had, to some extent, this shared experience of crisis across the globe. And now, four years later, we are apparently in a "post-pandemic" world, whatever that means. As the educators, activists, and community members poured their work and experiences into the container of this volume, the linear model that I had been using to characterize apocalypse really fragmented.

We can't really define what point we're at in apocalypse, beginning-middle-end, because we're in *all* of it. We're living in this complicated space of past, present, and future layered on top of each other, feeling the reverberations of past apocalypses, living in crisis now – of climate change, of ongoing violence, of oppression – and then we're also anticipating what's to come. And so we're trying to recover, survive, and anticipate all at once, and in the midst of all of that, trying to build structures that will allow us to heal, thrive, and meet what's to come.

I know this isn't a new concept to folks doing justice work. And we talk about teaching amidst crisis all the time; Lisa Delpit's¹ work around this has been especially inspiring for this volume. But I do think in teaching, there's still a sense of "once things calm down, I'll be able to do all of the things I want to in my classroom." I know I have felt that. There's this sense of waiting until the perfect moment to pull out my best strategies, to take risks, to reach the "top of my game." But that perfect time never seems to come.

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