

Education For the End of the World (as we know it)

Kathleen Kesson

LIU-Brooklyn

Emily Hoyler

University of Vermont

As we consider the field of education for sustainability, and move into an ever-more-uncertain future, questions arise: *What are we sustaining? Why? Just what do we mean by “sustainability” anyway?*

Perhaps instead of asking *What is worth sustaining?* we might begin with the question *What do we need to let go of?* Most prescriptions for sustainable culture and education for sustainability presuppose a continuance, in some (perhaps modified) form, of a world in which people in Western industrialized countries continue to enjoy the comforts and prosperity of modernization (a process) and modernity (a social system), the seeds of which “sprouted in the form of a radically new approach to human inquiry in what we now call ‘science’ and the transformation of that science into a marriage with a dynamic technology”¹—driven largely by the extraction of non-renewable energy stored in the body of the earth for millions of years.

The industrial and technological revolutions that ensued have at their core a brutal centuries-long process of imperialism, invasion, conquest, enslavement, genocide, land theft, removal and relocation, capital accumulation, and the continuing (if shape-shifting) exploitation of global

labor in order that an increasingly concentrated group of people might enjoy the promise of a “progressive evolution”² and maximize their own comfort, security, and wealth.

Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, in her important book, *Hospicing Modernity*,³ is clear that the modern world as we know it is in decline; to be more precise, it is in its death throes. We can tinker around the social and ecological edges of our lives, recycle our plastic, buy electric cars, diversify our corporate boards, reuse our shopping bags, and grow gardens, but the modern system, no matter from whence one dates its commencement or how one defines it, is in need of *hospicing*—it is beyond reform, beyond fixing, and in desperate need of “palliative care for a dignified death for the old system and assistance with the gestation and birth of new, potentially wiser systems.”⁴

The invitation is to resist the urgency to problem-solve, the haste to fix, the impulse to build a metaphorical seawall to hold back the flood. Rather, in the words of adrienne maree brown, “our temporary and cyclical work is to notice what is broken, clean up the dangerous fragments of the past, and let them go—or remake them into something beautiful, and then begin again.”⁵

At this juncture, we find ourselves agreeing with Stein and her colleagues in their rethinking of the question of education for sustainability:

Thus, instead of asking how we can reorient education to support sustainable development, we ask what kind of education could prepare people to face the impossibility of sustaining our contemporary modern-colonial habits of being, which are underwritten by racial, colonial, and

¹ Donald Oliver, Julie Caniff, and Jouni Korhonen, *The Primal, the Modern, and the Vital Center: A Theory of Balanced Culture in a Living Place* (Charlotte, VT: Foundation for Educational Renewal, 2002), 20.

² Oliver, Caniff, and Korhonen, *The Primal, the Modern, and the Vital Center*, 21.

³ Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

⁴ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 88.

⁵ adrienne maree brown, “Murmurations: Breaking Is Part of Healing” in *YES! Magazine*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2022/08/23/adrienne-maree-brown-ending>.

ecological violence. In other words, rather than reimagine “education for sustainable development” we consider how we might imagine “education for the end of the world as we know it.”⁶

Can we educators, eternally optimistic that the right approach to education can solve the ignorance, brutalities, and inequities of the modern world, bear this thought? That we might not be able to fix the world through education (as we know it)? That the assumptions of the capitalist/colonialist/modernist paradigm at the heart of our educational ideas that is, almost without exception, a world/historical hegemonic force, is the engine of annihilation rather than the benevolent force for progress, humanistic values, and continuous improvement that it has for so long claimed to be? That modernity itself denies the violences necessary to maintain it, denies the limits of our bio-systems, and denies the magnitude and complexity of the problems we face?⁷

Perhaps, we must. What if this is the most viable path forward? What will it take to arrive at a place where we can engage in this sober reckoning with the end of the world as we know it?

Encountering the Shadow

One way we might begin to grapple with the moment is to learn to see what is often hidden.

In Jungian psychology, the *persona* is the outward expression of the ego, the face we show to the world. There is another side to the personality, however, those aspects that we deny or repress in the unconscious. Jung called this part of us the *shadow*:

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without

considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspect of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.⁸

We believe it is time for us to face the shadow of modernity, which in Jungian terms has been suppressed under a multitude of outward distractions: narratives of endless economic growth; the myth of universal development towards equality and freedom; continuous improvements in the quality of life for some; pervasive, frivolous, and diverting entertainments; and, now, the pernicious spread of false information and conspiracy theories to confuse and befuddle us even further.

The shadow of modernity is a complex specter, a montage of five hundred years of colonization, exploitation of land and labor, patriarchy, and vast inequalities of wealth. The apparition is no longer merely a shade, but has begun to manifest in undeniably concrete ways:

- There is widespread hunger, oppression, and violent conflict
- The planet is besieged by crippling drought, lowering the levels of rivers as well as underground water tables, threatening agricultural production and the survival of major cities
- Torrential rains have inundated cities and towns in widespread areas in Pakistan, Mississippi, South Korea, Inner Mongolia, and, most recently, Florida
- Dangerous and prolonged heat waves have hit the United States, Western Europe, India, and China
- Wildfires have devastated millions of acres in the United States, Australia, the Amazon rainforest, Indonesia, and Siberia

⁶ Sharon Stein, Vanessa Andreotti, Rene Suša, Cash Ahenakew, and Tereza Čajková, “From ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ to ‘Education for the End of the World as We Know It,’” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 3 (February 23, 2022): 283.

⁷ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 88.

⁸ June Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung’s Psychology* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1994), 215.

- Species extinctions continue unabated, with estimates varying from 24 to 150 a day disappearing from Planet Earth.⁹

This is the very short list. The human social costs are immeasurable, in terms of dislocations, loss of life and home, climate migration, hunger, and conflict—and are likely to only intensify as the ravages to our various systems accelerate.

It is no longer reasonable to doubt the reality that we have entered what some call the Anthropocene (*ánthrōpos*, “man, human” and *-cene*, “an epoch or geologic period”), a period wherein human impacts on the environment related to energy use and other factors are causing a shift out of the relatively stable Holocene period into a new geological era. Some scholars suggest that this period might more accurately be called the “Capitalocene,” as it is not humanity as a whole, but rather the system of empire-building, colonialism, and the accumulation of capital begun in the 1400s that has impacted environmental systems dramatically, culminating in the “Great Acceleration” from the mid-twentieth century onwards, during which the loss of ecosystems due to temperature overshoot and other factors may be irreversible.¹⁰

This means, in stark terms, that our generation—those of us born in the mid-twentieth century and forward who have enjoyed the fruits of the scientific/technological revolution—may be responsible for the elimination of life as we know it on our planet. As one philosopher says, “We’re Doomed. Now What?”¹¹

⁹ Ahmed Djoghlaif, “Message from Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaif, Executive Secretary, on the Occasion of the International Day for Biological Diversity,” at the Convention of Biological Diversity, <https://www.cbd.int/ibd/2007/>.

¹⁰ Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2015).

¹¹ Roy Scranton, *We’re Doomed. Now What? Essays on War and Climate Change* (New York, NY: Soho, 2018).

¹² The word entanglement comes to us from the world of quantum physics, and in utterly simplified terms refers to

Facing the Shadow

We agree with de Oliveira that we must first face the “constitutive denials”—our collective shadow—in the narrative that modernity has shaped for us before we can “begin again” to remake the world. She frames these thusly:

- The denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm (the fact that our comforts, securities, and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation elsewhere).
- The denial of the limits of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality (the fact that the finite earth-metabolism cannot sustain exponential growth, consumption, extraction, exploitation, and expropriation indefinitely).
- The denial of entanglement¹² (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than ‘entangled’ within a wider living metabolism that is biointelligent).
- The denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together (the tendency to look for simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good and that may address symptoms, but not the root causes, of our collective, complex predicament).¹³

Arguing against addressing these denials is the objection that we can’t frighten young people

the interdependence of matter and energy systems. As often happens, the term began to surface in social theory, and has come to signify “both the multiplicity of interconnected worlds and our entanglements in multispecies ecologies that include different knowledges, practices, and technologies” (Common Worlds Research Collective, “Learning to Become *With* the World: Education for Future Survival,” 2020, 8,

<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374923>.)

¹³ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 23.

with these realities, that we must shelter them from the hard news of the relentless catastrophes that are upon us lest they give up hope. But the shadow is a sneaky ghost; when not acknowledged it makes its presence known in various ways including the epidemic of youth despair, anxiety, and depression.¹⁴

Jung outlined in detail the defensive measures individuals will go to in order not to confront the shadow: “he will not see his own weaknesses, but will find causes everywhere else for his inability to accomplish more of what he sets out to do. Always there will be an unfortunate combination of events which works against him, or there will be somebody that is out to get him.”¹⁵ In this perhaps, we can see the scapegoating of immigrants, the rollback of rights for women, and the racist backlash against the incremental social progress made by people of Color in the United States as the predictable defensive moves of a patriarchy and White supremacy to protect its shadow. But the healing of the social body, much like the healing of the human psyche, must come to terms with its shadow—what “is true for the individual as microcosm, it is surely true for the nation as macrocosm.”¹⁶

Young people are certainly aware of the social and ecological challenges facing humanity and are concerned for their futures. Assisting them in understanding the root causes of the present situation and providing opportunities to exert agency can counter the despair and anxiety that so many are experiencing. We will not solve the problems of climate catastrophe or mass extinction, of social justice or inequities, if we cannot at last acknowledge the rot at the core of the modern system and move forward with humility to repair, regenerate, and reconcile the human

and non-human relationships that have been fractured by the modern system.

Some might call for a “rethinking” of education and of culture. But it is possible that we cannot even think outside of the parameters of modernity, despite the popularity of expressions that exhort us to “think outside of the box.” What makes it so hard to think outside of the boundaries in which we have been imprisoned, much like the subjects in Plato’s cave who mistake the shadows being cast on the walls for reality?

The discipline of education within modern/colonial societies actively participates in the reproduction of these denials. Our discipline is not well equipped to interrupt denials since it mostly works with modern/colonial theories of Cartesian subjectivity focused on the mastery of content that virtually erase the role of our individual and collective unconscious.¹⁷

Descartes does get blamed, perhaps unfairly, for a lot, but to understand him is to place him at the root of modern subjectivity, with its profound rupture between the external world and the internal world. Descartes understood the Self as a rational, unitary subject capable of objectively viewing the world and its constituent parts. The legacy of this split is the victory of logic and analysis over intuition and feeling, the triumph of alienation and estrangement of the human from the world, along with the inclinations and capabilities to master, control, and predict. While Descartes can’t be directly blamed for such modern barbarisms as gulags, death camps, and nuclear war, it is fair to say that he set the conditions for such outcomes with the brutal separation of self from world, and the resultant perception of all that is external to

¹⁴ Erskine, H.E., Baxter, A.J., Patton, G., Moffitt, V., Patel, H.A., and Scott, J.G. “The Global Coverage of Prevalence Data for Mental Disorders in Children and Adolescents,” *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 26, no. 4 (2017), 395-402.

¹⁵ Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul*, 224.

¹⁶ Singer, *Boundaries of the Soul*, 224.

¹⁷ Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, “The Task of Education as We Confront the Potential for Social and Ecological Collapse,” *Ethics and Education* 16, no.2 (2021), 146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2021.1896632>.

oneself as “things”—what the Marxists call *reification*.¹⁸

In education, this mastery of the objective world takes the form of the mastery of academic content (most often in the form of decontextualized abstractions and the memorization of sound bites) and a negation of other vital experiences: sensuousness, emotion, imagination, wonder, relationship, and depth of learning.

What might happen, if instead of these negations, we find ways to truly center the curriculum around the “end of the world as we know it”—enabling the new ways of thinking, feeling, doing, and being that we all need to survive, to thrive, and to engage creatively with the remaking of the world?

Dismantling our Optical Delusions

Modernity and modernization developed alongside Humanism, a system of thought that attached central importance to human beings, rather than to divine or supernatural forces.

Secular forms of philosophical Humanism helped to free humankind from centuries of superstition and dogma, and supported self-reflection, inquiry, and the advent of human rights. But the liberation of humans from limiting dogmas, coupled with the advance of Enlightenment science, had contradictory effects, as Max Weber proposed over one hundred years ago: a world that benefitted in many ways from rationally-derived explanations, but a world no longer rich with the mysteries and wonder of creation—a disenchanted, alienating place devoid of spiritual and transcendent dimensions of experience.¹⁹ And compounding the long-term effects of this emergent worldview, the new

empowerment of the individual resulted in the centering of the human species and an emphasis on the domination and control of nature, rather than an acknowledgement of our entanglement with all of creation.

Many ways of knowing hold that we are comprised of four bodies, or dimensions of being: an intellectual body, an emotional body, a physical body, and a spiritual body. Each of these bodies are essential to our wellbeing and our integral wholeness. Yet schooling concerns itself primarily with building and fortifying the intellectual body, while denying the other three. Through suppressing the physical body (containing bodies to chairs, single file lines, and personal space), taming the emotional body (through things such as social-emotional curricula that foster compliance), and banishing the spiritual body altogether (as the system cannot discern between religion and spirit), we further diffract the human experience and exacerbate the sense of fragmentation pervasive in Western thought and ways of being.

Humanism is closely related to the forms of education still dominant on the planet today. Such distinctions as those between the knower and the known, the mind and the body, and the separation of reason from emotion might be said to have descended from Humanistic philosophy. The Cartesian concept of the “I” as a bounded entity, surrounded by stable substances and objects in space that constitute separate “others” to manipulate, utilize, and transact with, is at the heart of Modernity/Humanism.

Is it possible that this construct no longer serves the needs of survival? Can we live with the reality that life itself is flux, and the solitary individual, with its sense of separation, mastery, and control in concert with an economic system predicated on resource extraction, endless growth, and needless consumption, has led us to

¹⁸ Kathleen Kesson, “Inhuman Powers and Terrible Things: The Theory and Practice of Alienated Labor in Urban Schools,” *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies* 2, no.1 (2004), <http://www.jceps.com/?s=Kesson>.

¹⁹ David Labaree, “Max Weber’s ‘Science as a Vocation,’” (2019), <https://davidlabaree.com/2019/07/29/max-webers-science-as-a-vocation/>.

the ecological tipping point at which we find ourselves? A well-known scientist had this to say about our ontological condition, in a personal letter written to Robert S. Marcus, then Political Director of the World Jewish Congress, who had recently lost a son to polio:

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of *optical delusion of his consciousness* . . . Not to nourish the delusion but to try to overcome it is the way to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind.²⁰

Reconceiving the very nature of what it means to be human has implications for all aspects of human experience. Reconceptualizing the aims and purposes of education has significant philosophical dimensions and correlative practical implications.

As such, we pose the following questions:

- What if our educational processes were devoted to unlearning the “optical delusions” of modernity?²¹
- What if we devoted ourselves to helping young people understand the world as a living, breathing organism rather than a great machine that can be programmed and calibrated to meet our human needs?
- What if schools (or whatever we create to replace them) became spaces where young people could realize their full, multidimensional humanity, rather than merely how to become cogs in an economic machine predicated on the demolition of the planet?
- What if we opened up the hidden treasure of epistemological pluralism to our young, and encouraged them to delve into the

possibilities of narrative and myth, of ancestral knowledge and intuition, of embodied knowing rather than restricting them to the narrow versions of reason and logic we have been so successfully indoctrinated with?

- What if cultivating an “attainable measure of peace of mind” was an actual educational aim?²²

Such questions highlight the pedagogical need, emphasized by de Oliveira, to “expand our existing sensibilities, affective landscapes, and constellations of knowledge and relationality,” an expansion that might prepare us all “with the stamina and strength to face the difficulties of unlearning our investments in a dying system.”²³

This multi-faceted task brings us to the questions posed by the editors of this journal: *What is worth sustaining and why? What cultures? What ecologies? What traditions? What knowledges? Which human needs are worth sustaining? Which are not?* And of great importance to readers of this journal, *What role should education play in all of this?*

If, then . . .

If we are capable of letting go of the deeply embedded assumptions that structure educational thought in our modern world, *then* we might be able to assist young people in learning to live with uncertainty, paradox, and complexity, and with the truth that there is no holding on, nor letting go, because by its very nature, nothing is permanent. We might begin to realize the ontological need for an educational philosophy and practice that is *relational*—that understands there is no separation of self and other, of knower and known, of subject and object, but rather endless flows of being and becoming in which we are deeply entangled with everything in creation, visible and invisible, material and molecular, objective and subjective.²⁴

²⁰ The quote is from Albert Einstein and can be found at Rabbi Jonah C. Steinberg, “Beyond the Delusion of Separateness,” (1950/2016), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/beyond-the-delusion-of-se_b_13219428.

²¹ Steinberg, “Beyond the Delusion of Separateness.”

²² Steinberg, “Beyond the Delusion of Separateness.”

²³ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 101.

²⁴ Adrian Ivakiv, *Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times* (Goleta CA: Punctum Books, 2018).

We apologize for adding more questions than answers to these provocations. But we are not without prescriptions and possibilities that *could* enable a truly “post-modernist/post-Humanist” education to emerge, one that refuses the “fixed horizons of certainty” and moves us toward “engaging with what is viable yet unimaginable.”²⁵ We are fully aware that such grand experiments have been tried before and come up against the modernist brick wall built of centuries of hierarchies, domination, exploitation of people and planet, of grand schemes of reason and universalities, and of the compelling promises of security and certainty. The centuries-old philosophies of modernism brought us an educational model premised on individual achievement, the acquisition of increasingly abstract forms of knowledge, the myth of meritocracy, and the sifting and sorting of humankind according to narrow definitions of ability.

This model has spread across the planet, and conventional wisdom states that the more educated one is, the better, and the more people who have access to this form of education, the better off we will all be. However, we must acknowledge that much of the damage being inflicted upon the planet in the forms of chemical pollution, climate change, species extinction, and sophisticated weaponry has been implemented by highly educated people.²⁶

How is this possible?

Shadows on the Cave Walls

Modern education values literacy and numeracy above all, and in our urgency to indoctrinate children into the modern economic system, we

have attempted to hasten the acquisition of these skills by ever-younger age groups to the point that we now apply “remediation” and “reading recovery” techniques to children as young as five and six years of age. Meanwhile countries such as Finland who have a much more relaxed attitude towards early academic achievement continue to surpass the United States in international measures of school achievement, despite fewer school hours, no standardized tests, long recesses, and free lunch.²⁷

The transition from immersion in the sensory world of early childhood to the world of abstract signs is a major event in the life of a child and should be approached with the reverence it deserves. The origins of alphabets lie in pre-history, with pictorial representations of plants, animals, serpents, and events in the lives of people. David Abram reminds us that “the glyphs which constitute the bulk of these ancient scripts continually remind the reading body of its inherence in a more-than-human field of meanings . . . they continually refer our senses beyond the strictly human sphere.”²⁸

Educated people often divide humans into binary categories: literate/illiterate; modern/primitive; smart/dumb. These categories embed some deep cultural assumptions: that history is a linear narrative of material progress, that humans are getting smarter, and that our lives are improving immensely with rapid developments in science and technology that make our lives safer and more comfortable. Cultural groups that have not developed a written text are considered inferior, less intelligent than modern, text-based cultures. However, pre-text societies did manage to survive and thrive for many tens of thousands of years prior to the invention of

²⁵ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 102.

²⁶ David Orr, “The Dangers of Education,” In *The Renewal of Meaning in Education: Responses to the Cultural and Ecological Crisis of Our Times*, edited by Ron Miller (Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press Brandon, 1993): 25–37.

²⁷ Stephen Tung, “How the Finnish School System Outshines US Education,” *Stanford Report* (2012), <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2012/january/finnish-schools-reform-012012.html>.

²⁸ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1996), 97.

such modern artifacts as paper and written alphabets, printing presses, cameras, and now, the binary coding of the digits 0 and 1 to represent words and images, along with the storage of enormous amounts of information on tiny digital devices. With the advent of these technologies, some cognitive capacities have atrophied, including orality and memory, capacities that pre-text societies developed to a high degree.

What has also diminished with the advent of text is our inclination to engage sensorily with the animate and inanimate worlds, the capacities that once made it possible for the kinds of deep relationships and connections that created the sense of universal love for and connection with all beings, including the non-human world. As we struggle now to reweave some threads in the animistic fabric of the world, we need to examine some of the assumptions about the role of text in our individual and social development.

Text-based reading and writing are indeed vital ways of learning about the world, but in the early years, and continuing on up through the grades, language needs to be given expression in multiple creative ways, thus becoming a *living thing* rather than mere marks on a page. As language becomes a living thing, so the world is animated. The Earth begins to breathe, and if we listen carefully and attune to the more subtle energies of the living world, we might begin to comprehend the speech of the more-than-human-others: the call of the crow, the rustle of the deer through the grasses, and perhaps even the electric waves of vibration amongst the chattering mycelium, the songs that connect the trees of the forest at their most elemental level. As David Abram says so eloquently: “Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world.”²⁹

In many Indigenous societies, some of which have lived in relative balance with their biosystems for since time immemorial, language, memory, and information are deeply connected to *place*. The landscape itself is often linked to vital intelligence, which might be further encoded in song, dance, myth, story, or ceremony. It is difficult for modern rootless people to understand the tragedy of land loss, such as what Native American people (and others) experienced when they were forcibly relocated away from their homelands onto reservations. The loss of ancestral burial locations and sacred ceremonial sites contributed to a loss of cultural memory and identity, which has taken generations to begin to recapture. Some pre-text people used the skyscape as a memory device; you have probably heard of the navigational feats of island people who used information from the stars, wind patterns, bird migrations, and a strong oral tradition to guide their long ocean voyages—and this, for thousands of years. The prodigious memory skills of many Indigenous people are well documented; one study, for example, shows that Navajo elders memorize and classify more than 700 insects, including their identifying features, habitats, and behaviors.³⁰

Language, for modern people, is *decontextualized*. It has been torn from its home in the rocks, in the stars, and in the waters. Many modern people do not experience a deep sense of connection to place. Easily transportable languages such as English are unequal to the task of helping people to establish relationships with the natural world that lead to long term regeneration and sustainability. With the click of a finger on a keyboard, people in Vermont, Kenya, and Singapore can “communicate” at a basic level. But as theorist Chet Bowers highlighted so well, the transmission of words and facts via computer is not a neutral technology, but rather has

²⁹ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 89.

³⁰ Lynne Kelly, *The Memory Code: Unlocking the Secrets of the Lives of the Ancients and the Power of the Human Mind* (London, UK: Atlantic Books, 2017).

culturally-transforming effects in which certain human capacities are amplified and others are diminished.³¹ Amplified are the reinforcement of individually-centered relations, decontextualized ways of knowing, and the centrality of commodified relations. Diminished is local and intergenerational knowledge, human and other-than-human communal contact, and forms of communication mostly unknown to modern people but a part of everyday life of many Indigenous people.

*What do we have to learn from the wind? What are the whales singing about? What about the intelligence of mycorrhizal fungi? Can we learn to "think like a tree?"*³²

Our challenge, then, is that we need to slough off the logo-centered biases of our modern worldview, and then reconstruct and reintegrate the positive aspects of this tradition with the folk cultures and wisdom traditions of the world that have sustained a reciprocal relationship with the many other-than-human species with whom we share the planet. We need to cultivate ways of knowing, feeling, doing, and being that respect the texture and immediacy of reality as well as the power and elegance of abstract thought. We need to create meaningful stories and rituals of enactment for (modern) people who have lost their deep sensory engagement with the natural world—people who mistakenly see decontextualized bits of information as the central road to truth and wisdom. With the cultivation of such relational ontologies and epistemological pluralisms, we may, as a species, begin our emergence from our modern cave and its shadows into the bright light of an animated and enchanted world, one in which the human species is entangled, embedded in a multiplicity of interconnected worlds.

³¹ Chet Bowers, (2000). *Let Them Eat Data: How Computers Affect Education, Cultural Diversity, and the Prospects of Ecological Sustainability* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2000).

³² Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World* (Vancouver BC: Greystone Books, 2016).

Midwifing a New Paradigm of Education

The modern vision of reality is a fragmented one in which relationships have been fractured—relations between people, between people and animals, between people and the plant world, between people and their labor, and between people and the mysterious energies of the cosmos that sustain the coming-into-being, the sustaining, and the perishing of life.³³

We believe there is a new vision of reality emerging, a vision grounded in relationship, the cultivation of deep relationship with all of creation and between the past, the present moment, and the future, and between the visible and the invisible worlds. We believe that young people are sensing these new possibilities, and that it is up to us, to all of us who care about young people and value learning, to support their desire for an education that is relevant, meaningful, and purposeful and which satisfies their longing for a future that is just, sustainable, and joyful.

But as de Oliveira reminds us:

Before anything different can happen, before people can sense, hear, relate and imagine differently, there must be a clearing, a decluttering, an initiation into the unknowable; and a letting go of the desires for certainty, authority, hierarchy, and of insatiable consumption as a mode of relating to everything. We will need a genuine severance that will shatter all projections, anticipations, hopes, and expectations in order to find something we lost about ourselves, about time/space, about the depth of the shit we are in, about the medicines/poisons we carry.³⁴

³³ Kathleen Kesson and Donald Oliver, "On the Need for a Re-Conceptualized Theory of Experience," in *Curriculum Visions*, edited by William E. Doll, Jr. and Noel Gough (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2002): 185-197.

³⁴ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 235.

What may *not* be worth sustaining is the very notion of sustainability itself, along with comforting ideas of certainty, security, and stability.

“Hospicing modernity” implies that we provide palliative care and harm reduction for the dying system as we move into rebirthing something new, something not yet imagined. de Oliveira notes a number of pitfalls, as modern people come face to face with the realities of what must be surrendered: that “diversity, equity, and inclusion” may be but “form(s) of currency consumed by the dominant groups without a substantial commitment to changing the systemic conditions of suffering;”³⁵ that “oppression Olympics” can become a convenient way to divide and conquer;³⁶ that critique, while useful, “leads only to cosmetic rather than to substantive changes;”³⁷ that we place too much trust in idealized leaders; and last, and perhaps most important, as systems really do begin to collapse, that people in the dominant group look toward authoritarian leaders who will establish order and fix the chaos, and restore their privileged place in the social hierarchy.

Pitfalls notwithstanding, we must not allow them to paralyze us. Dedicated educators meet with young people daily, and circumstances require that we engage. If we can bring ourselves to “let go” of the apparatus of the educational paradigm brought us by the old German Republic of Prussia, a quasi-military state, which gave the West compulsory schooling, educational technologies of surveillance and control, the idea of a prescribed national curriculum, and regular testing we can humbly begin to explore educational correctives, alternatives to the constituent denials that de Oliveira poses.³⁸

In Vermont, where we live and work, we see evidence on the ground of the new thinking, feeling, doing, and being that might enable us to

survive and thrive: people forming communities of mutual aid; engaging collectively in agroforestry and planting permaculture gardens in their communities; working together to establish wetlands and other adaptive measures for flood protection; establishing eco-communities; creating time banks and alternative currencies; attempting to redistribute land to underserved communities; learning to forage and discovering local plant-based medicines.

These efforts represent a commitment to *localization*, a framework best developed by Helena Norberg-Hodge and the local futures movement her work has sparked.³⁹ Young people often complain that their schoolwork has no relevance; transforming the curriculum to engage students in the meaningful work of a just transition to a way of life with the capacity to provide a more stable and enduring social and ecological context for the flourishing of human and non-human species is truly relevant to the historical moment.

An emerging movement for “community schools” is beginning to embrace this more robust understanding of the entanglement of young people and their families, schools, natural surroundings, and community organizations, including non-profits, farms, forests, parks, and businesses. Current legislative policy and some state funding supports the development of a new model of schooling with deep connections to local resources and expertise. Communities in Vermont have much to offer the education of young people in this time of transition, with their emphasis on local and participatory democracy (town meetings and many activist groups), the hundreds of worker- and consumer-owned co-operatives, its well-developed organic agriculture sector and farm-to-plate initiatives, its deep commitment to careful land use, its vast

³⁵ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 182.

³⁶ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 183.

³⁷ de Oliveira, *Hospicing Modernity*, 183.

³⁸ John Taylor Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education: A School Teacher's Intimate Investigation Into the*

Problem of Modern Schooling (New York, NY: The Oxford Village Press, 2001).

³⁹ Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Local Is Our Future: Steps to an Economics of Happiness Paperback* (White River Junction, VT: Local Futures Press, 2019).

alternative health care community, and its wealth of creative resources in the form of artists, craftspeople, musicians, and performance spaces. The COVID pandemic sparked the creation of outdoor learning spaces in many schools in Vermont, and there is a thriving forest school movement in the state.⁴⁰

Recent policy has laid a strong foundation for a structural transformation of schools. Carnegie units have been discarded. Grades are not required (schools develop systems of “proficiencies” that students can meet in multiple ways). Credit-bearing learning can occur in school or out of school, and young people can identify mentors in the community to work with. The system is far from perfect—there are pockets of genuine innovation, there is backlash in some places to innovation, and there is a portion of the education community that is more or less “stuck” in the status quo. But there is movement, and a growing awareness that business as usual will simply not suffice given the enormous social and ecological challenges we face.⁴¹

Only when we can acknowledge the scope of the modern crisis, admit to ourselves that the social, political, economic, and ecological systems we have taken for granted are in various stages of breakdown, can we begin to administer the palliative care needed to lessen the agony of mortality and engage creatively with the possibilities of a new birth. “Hospicing modernity” will require engaging in service to ease the suffering that will inevitably accompany the passing of an outmoded way of life. Though we concur with the observation that White supremacy culture tends to rush to fix problems without adequate attention to uncovering the root of the

problem,⁴² one of the main themes of de Oliveira’s work, we do believe (perhaps optimistically) that palliative care and midwifery—the birthing of the new—can be creatively coupled to meet the challenges of our time.

To that end, in the above table, we propose several “pedagogical possibilities” that could be reanimated and reoriented to disrupt de Oliveira’s denials. Relying on the status quo (the continuance of modernity) for our survival is magical thinking—the idea that the systems created by highly-educated people that have got us into this mess can get us out of it. We have sketched here an outline of the deep ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that must be challenged and reconceptualized if we are to have any hope of cultivating a new civilization, one that might be truly “sustainable”—in the sense of providing a stable and enduring social and ecological context for the flourishing of life.

We are heartened by the appearance of a recent report commissioned by UNESCO that affirms many of the propositions we have explored here, including the important idea that attempts to achieve sustainable futures that continue to separate humans off from the rest of the world are delusional and futile. The report asserts the centrality of education in a pivotal role of radically reconfiguring human place and agency within this interdependent world, and boldly states the necessity of a “paradigm shift: from learning *about* the world in order to act upon it, to learning to become *with* the world around us.”⁴³ The report affirms that our very survival depends on our capacity to make this shift.

⁴⁰ Riley Hopeman and David Sobel, “Taking the Classroom to the Forest: A School’s Forest Fridays Program,” *Community Works Journal*, <https://magazine.communityworksinstitute.org/taking-the-classroom-to-the-forest-a-schools-forest-fridays-program/>.

⁴¹ Kathleen Kesson, *The Community Schools Blueprint: Transforming the School/Community Partnership* (New York, NY: The Bay and Paul Foundations, 2021).

⁴² Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Culture.—Still Here,” (2021), <https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/white-supremacy-culture-still-here.pdf>.

⁴³ Common Worlds Research Collective, “Learning to Become *With* the World.”

de Oliveira's Four Denials ⁴³	Pedagogical Possibilities
<p>"The denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm (the fact that our comforts, securities, and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation elsewhere)."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical pedagogies could foster an unsettling of the dominant narratives, acknowledging and illuminating the ways that systems of privilege and exploitation persist in replicating injustice and harm. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Center the voices and experiences of those who experience systemic injustice and exploitation. • Young people who experience positional privilege or who benefit from these systems could learn to recognize and understand their relationship to these systems. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Take responsible action toward "participating in creating conditions for all life to thrive."⁴⁴
<p>"The denial of the limits of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality (the fact that the finite earth-metabolism cannot sustain exponential growth, consumption, extraction, exploitation, and expropriation indefinitely)."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogies of place could engage learners in relationship with place and community to come to know and appreciate a place deeply. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Grapple with the consequences of living in an extractive, fossil-fuel-addicted, consumerist society. ○ Explore and create ways of living in balance with the earth's abundance.
<p>"The denial of entanglement (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than 'entangled' within a wider living metabolism that is biointelligent.)"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogies of kinship could focus on the interconnectedness of humans and the bio-systems we depend on. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Foster emerging understanding of bio-intelligence ○ Embrace ontological and epistemological pluralism rooted in an axiology of knowledge-creation for the sake of fostering wellbeing and creating conditions for life to thrive.
<p>"The denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together (the tendency to look for simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good and that may address symptoms, but not the root causes, of our collective, complex predicament)."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living systems pedagogies could foster curiosity and inquiry to engage with complexity. • Reveal root causes of the crisis. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Nurture an understanding of the multitude of ways that modernity, and its capitalist/colonialist formation has brought us to the ecological tipping point. • Rather than engendering despair, this deep understanding of how living systems operate positions learners to imagine, dream, and create new ways of being and living for collective wellbeing.

We agree with Donald Oliver, in his important treatise on the limits of modernity, that we must:

begin by reclaiming or creating living places and renewing genuine cultures both without and within our own being and in the oneness where that being seems to belong. This effort will require many of us to quiet the noise of much of our immediate modern reality and enter continuing, sustained, and significant living places in which we can participate and negotiate and

engage simply what in the moment of our history seems right and meaningful.⁴⁴

Somehow, we have to find appropriate ways to unravel a way of being that, in recent years, has accelerated around the world at a dizzying rate. It is impossible to address the problems in education or propose new models of sustainability unless the crisis of modernity—its shadow—is addressed head on. The transition from a dying society to an as-yet-undefined future will not be painless. It will not be without conflict. But it is necessary.

⁴⁴ Oliver, Caniff, and Korhonen, *The Primal, the Modern, and the Vital Center*, 324.

Kathleen Kesson is Professor Emerita of Teaching, Learning and Leadership (School of Education at LIU—Brooklyn). She is the former Director of Teacher Education at Goddard College and was the founding Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont, a research and policy organization. She has published numerous books and articles on democracy and education, arts in education, critical theory, curriculum theory, and spirituality and education. She is currently a Global Affiliate with the GUND Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont and is a contributing member of the Great Transition Initiative, a project of the Tellus Institute at Harvard University.

Emily Hoyler is the managing director at the University of Vermont's Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education, as well as a professional affiliate with Shelburne Farms. She is also a doctoral student in the University of Vermont's Transdisciplinary Leadership and Creativity for Sustainability program. Her current interests include unsettling self/systems, community resilience, cultivation of relational space for change, critical pedagogies, Education for Sustainability, compassionate systems awareness and social fields, community-engaged learning, place-based learning, youth leadership, climate justice, and middle level education.