

Living in a Time of Social and Climate Crisis: Musings on the Importance of Trans-Disciplinarity

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Abstract: How do we navigate a world in crisis? Headlines are replete with escalating environmental, social, and economic catastrophes. Anxieties grow as many experience the weight of inertia set in, not for lack of concern but rather for concern over the material realities—trying to keep those we love safe, housed, and fed. Yet, what if we could see, much like civil rights activist Septima Clark (ca.1910–ca.1990), chaos as a gift—an opportunity to (re)build a more just world? This essay explores possibilities via storytelling, the study of diverse disciplinary thought, and work on the land: a path that has highlighted the power and promise of diverse ways of knowing, being in, and caring for the world and the critical need for trans-disciplinary studies, work, and dialogue as we, to paraphrase Arundhati Roy (2020), begin to fashion the world anew.

Keywords: trans-disciplinarity, critical theory, feminism, praxis, eco-criticism

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After nearly a year and a half of juggling the demands of virtual schooling and working from home, we approached our daughter’s elementary school for orientation—like most—cautiously optimistic. From beneath her mask, she spoke of friends and teachers, art classes and recess—all the things she would do *in person*.

Sadly, the howl of chainsaws quickly silenced her excited chatter. In moments, her eyes welled with tears as several majestic pecan trees crashed to the earth. They had provided shade for the school’s playground for untold years and were home to countless species, including a pair of red-tailed hawks our daughter had lovingly named *hamaca* (hammock) and *huracán* (hurricane). We would later learn the trees were “cleared” to make way for a parking lot.

At just 10 years old, this was sadly not my daughter’s first experience of the callous destruction of our natural world. The ways human desire and greed often supersede the rights of many, including nature. On several occasions she wept for other trees being cut, wading through dusty remains, pleading for forgiveness with tear-soaked eyes. The same child at 18 months would extend her tiny hand, filled with grapes, saying “*num, num*”—inviting the rocks, trees, and lizards to share equally in her bounty. In her eyes (and heart), the world is animate, the trees her friends—magical, majestic beings with whom she shares memory and breath.

As we returned home, she quietly said: “I have to do something.” Hours later she emerged from her room with a series of four posters (as an example, please see Figure 1 below). “I’m going to ask [the principal] if I can put these on the fence. Maybe people will see them and stop cutting down the trees ... I know it probably won’t help, but I have to try.” For weeks, they twisted in the wind, pleading with passersby to stop and reflect on our collective responsibility to care for and protect our shared home—and all its inhabitants.

Figure 1

Stop Destroying, 2020



Despite my daughter’s plea, a glance at global headlines and, for many, the social and material reality of daily life reflects a world in crisis. A lack of care for people and planet alike. We face increasing concerns regarding the deployment of nuclear weapons (Murray, 2025). Scholars and scientists argue that human activity has set into motion a sixth great extinction (Kolbert, 2014); the fifth eradicated dinosaurs. A recent study finds a “catastrophic 73% decline in the average size of monitored wildlife populations” (World Wildlife Fund, 2024, p. 14) since 1970. Ice caps continue to melt; armed conflicts, racial violence, and gendered violence continue to escalate; wildfires, tsunamis, hurricanes, droughts, and floods continue to increase in frequency and scale; and climate-related (forced) migration continues to intensify, as does the rising scarcity of arable land, healthy food, and potable water (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data, 2024; Flores et al., 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2024; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014; Ripple et al., 2024). For many, such chaos naturally elicits fear, anxiety, and despair. Many throw up our hands, asking, “What can be done?” Inertia often sets in. What if, however, we—much like civil rights activist Septima Clark (ca. 1910–ca.1990)—saw this chaos as a gift, as an “opportunity to breed new life for all of us” (p. 1)? What might this ask of us? In our thinking, practice, and care for people and planet?

To grapple with such questions and navigate this world (and my own fears and anxieties, not least of which as a mother), I sought the wisdom and guidance of various scholars and practitioners, ranging from critical social theorists, geographers, and feminists to poets, eco-critics, spiritual leaders, and farmers. Many—if not most—move beyond the isolating confines of “disciplinarity,” directly acknowledging the critical need for broader horizons, intellectually and otherwise. Thus, my apologies in advance for attempting to summarize (far too) briefly my insights into various groupings. I do so *not* to endorse limiting intellectual divisions but to highlight the ways in which these various currents are indeed quite complementary, often emerging from a single sea concerned with questions—and actions—of justice and love.

(Re)Centering Trans-Disciplinarity

In their examination of methodologies used to inform and frame our understanding(s) of the world, critical social theorists question the veneration of “rational,” “objective” science and the penchant to statistically (and otherwise) hold constant the very things that are *the* most significant in our individual and collective lives (Horkheimer, 1972; Marcuse, 1969). To be clear, there is not a categorical disavowal of the “sciences” or “scientific methods” per se, but rather a critique of the ways in which, for example, these approaches can decontextualize—via methodological necessity—complex, interconnected, and mutually constitutive phenomena, particularly in the social sciences. Max Horkheimer (1972) suggests, for example, that in contrast to “traditional theory,” with its fascination with facts and categorization, critical theory is “a theory dominated at every turn by *a concern for reasonable conditions of life* [emphasis added]” (p. 199). Of preeminent importance to the former is explanatory and predictive power, while the latter is concerned with transformation. Transformation, that is, of the conditions that can—and do—preclude a “reasonable life,” one concerned with, for example, liberation and emancipation from exploitive and extractive economic and social systems. As such, there is a critical interrogation of how and why, in any given historical and socio-political moment, we come to formulate ideas and questions, modes of inquiry and analysis, and makings of ourselves and others, the world and our place(s) in it (e.g., Butler, 1999, 2009).

Discourse analysis is, thus, central. A critical inquiry into the (pre)conditions that render certain ideas, language, and practices as “legitimate” and “intelligible,” sanctioned and rewarded as such; and, how, in contrast, others are framed as “rogue,” “unscientific,” or “irrational” and thereby dismissed or otherwise silenced. Arturo Escobar (2012), for example, invites us to assess the ways in which “discourse is the process through which social reality comes into being” (p. 39). Such an analysis lays bare the ways in which our “social reality” is just that: a *process*, socially constructed, and, thus, open to transformation. Braving this transformation allows us to revive, to (re)imagine, to build alternative lexicons, social and political consciousness, cultural practices, and institutions that can (and do) support human and ecological wellbeing—now and for generations yet born.

Similarly, feminist and womanist scholars invite us to (re)center personal and collective experience in histories, methodologies, and socio-political and organizational practice (e.g., Collins, 2000; hooks, 2000; Tronto, 1993). Qualitative methods, stories, and testimonials that weave together our individual and shared experiences, tragedies, hopes, and (re)visions for a

more just future (hooks, 2000) are given due credence. Great attention is, once again, brought to consciousness-raising, not only with respect to various issues of injustice but also our (often unacknowledged) complicity therein. Likewise, many (if not most) feminist theorists offer a critique of care/ing: what constitutes caring labor, who performs it, under what conditions, and to what ends. Like others, Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2000) situates this analysis within a larger critique of liberal individualism, noting that the exaltation of “autonomy” and “individualism” dangerously obfuscates our inherent interdependence. This is a recognition that we are all (including the Earth) in need of—and *deserving of*—care, quality care, and that those who provide it—by choice or otherwise—should do so in dignified settings, receiving just support and compensation for their efforts (e.g., Folbre, 2008; Held, 2002; Poo, 2015; Tronto, 1993). As such we are reminded of our collective responsibility to (re)value labor, community, and love.

Like many of those already noted, critical economists and geographers, as well as eco-social-critics and poets likewise, emphasize the incommensurability of fostering greater care for each other and our natural world within our current global economy, given its growth imperative (Berry, 2017; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Klein, 2014; LaDuke, 2005/2016; Leopold, 1949; Schor, 2011; Schumacher, 1973; Shiva, 2014). They remind us, in theory, research, and poetic prose, that we must acknowledge and live within limits. But that *we need not* associate said limits and restraint with “confinement,” rather: “On the contrary, our human and earthly limits, properly understood, are not confinements, but rather are inducements to formal elaboration and elegance, to *fullness* of relationship and meaning” (Berry, 2017, p. 215). They also caution against the often-unquestioned confidence in “techno-scientific solutions,” to arrest our ominous fate, noting that despite profitability to those in power, they are often nothing more than mere “strategies of delay” (Berry, 2017, p. 207). They stress, rather, that alternatives do exist; *they always have*. That is, ethical economies based on small, local, non-exploitive nor extractive connections to the land, culture, and community. These prioritize the commons (land, as well as other social resources—education, healthcare, technology, etc.) and support regenerative agricultural practices, worker-owned enterprise and wage-ratios, reductions in working hours, self-provisioning, and gleaning, as examples (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Klein, 2014; Nembhard, 2014; Restakis, 2010, 2021; Schor, 2011; Shiva, 2014; Wolff, 2012). These are economies that understand—and honor—our *interdependence* and the abundance that is living and working in solidarity.

Similarly, spiritual and social leaders raise questions of ethical consequence, evaluations of values and principles that govern behavior—individually and collectively. Calling upon the wisdom of countless faith traditions and non-dominant cosmologies spanning millennia, they speak against the greed, envy, individualism, and consumerism that have come to define our economy and inform our ways of being with each other and the earth (e.g., Hanh, 2013; King, 2015; Francis, 2015). Like critical theorists, they caution against an unquestioned faith in “objective” and “neutral” science and technology to “save us” from our social and environmental crises, noting how reductionist tendencies often obfuscate the larger context and our collective responsibility to address root causes—to include capitalism (e.g., Francis, 2015). In contrast, they offer a call to awaken, to listen to the “bells of mindfulness” (Hanh, 2013, p. 33) calling us to remember—and honor—our inherent interconnectedness and the responsibilities therein. To (re)value compassion and solidarity, to honor limits and practice

restraint to ensure the wellbeing of all. And, to remember the power of love: “The large house in which we live demands that we transform this worldwide neighborhood into a worldwide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools” (King, 2015, pp. 78–79).

Opening my mind and heart, these readings were at once liberating and overwhelming. I began to make connections theoretically and conceptually, yet I needed something else—another way of *being-in-solidarity*. The works of Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, and Thich Nhat Hanh, among others, called me to be present, to work with and learn from the land beneath my feet, to practice these ideas—*weaving together heart, mind, and hands*.

So, my family began to volunteer at a friend’s small, organic farm in the summers. For years, their harvests had nourished and sustained us, but now we were more personally connected. We began to experience the labor that is sowing, tending, and harvesting crops in the heat and humidity of the American South; so too did we experience the miracle that is the coming together of seed, soil, and water with labor and love. These days offered a slower pace—an invitation to be present with and care for the land and each other. We worked and laughed with drenched brows, never once concerned about time or breaking news. We were too busy building something far more sacred—soil *and* community.

I also began to volunteer at a friend’s organic medicinal herb farm. Here, too, I was invited—by gentle example—to listen to the wisdom of nature herself. When I arrive, my friend gets me started: “Clip back the holy basil,” ... “Weed the ashwagandha,” ... “Prepare a bed for the calendula.” As I ask a question here-or-there, I gently drift into the background as she begins to commune with the plants. She smiles at the way the morning dew makes the chamomile look as though it’s dusted with freshly fallen snow. As we pass the lemon verbena, her hand moves gently through the leaves and up to her nose; her smile is one of gratitude. Noting downturned leaves, she offers apologies to the echinacea, promising to bring water momentarily. There is a palpable sense of care and kinship, a reverence that defies words. On one occasion, I lamented that, as a renter, I still did not have a garden of my own. That I longed to grow medicinal plants and food for my family, but I didn’t want to continue to “invest” in a home that wasn’t mine. She spun around, with an uncanny firmness: “It’s not about you ... every plant you plant, every time you enrich the soil—that is good ... You can leave every bit of it knowing it was right.”

Invitations

We are often made to believe—professionally and otherwise—that minimal, if any, overlap can or does exist among various disciplines and livelihoods. Increasingly, we are encouraged to dismiss (or silence) other ways of knowing and being in and with the world. Rather, many are encouraged to pursue advanced (“formal”) education and training as it relates to increasingly specialized areas of focus to attain some perceived level of “expertise” or “authority.” Often, the world becomes smaller. We begin to lose our place, as the often joked about “imposter syndrome” sets in with feelings of overwhelm and inadequacy. Although quickly dismissed, might there be unspoken wisdom here? A wisdom that recognizes these feelings as a healthy response to unhealthy expectations? A reminder of the sheer complexity of the world and, thus,

the need to humbly resist pressures that we alone (or any given discipline) can learn or know anything in its entirety?

Many, if not all, of the noted writers and farmers remind us that the pressure to specialize, atomize, and decontextualize the world (as well as our work and places in it) is, often, socially fabricated—made of human hands and minds, each with their own unique commitments, politics, and proclivities, acknowledged or not. The veil can, thus, be lifted, revealing intricate webs of connection that can (and do) foster complementary *versus* adversarial relationships and knowledge-sharing. From this place, we might welcome the opportunity (and encourage others) to step back and extend our gaze beyond limiting, disciplinary boundaries to seek the wisdom, guidance, and passion of others to inform our *collective* understanding(s) of the world and our varied—yet complementary—role(s), place(s), and responsibilities therein. To do so, I would like to propose a set of invitations to (re)imagine trans-disciplinary spaces of learning and exchange.

First, I would encourage a theoretical revival, particularly of grand and (critical) social theories and diverse cosmologies attuned to context—historically, socially, politically, and otherwise. An embrace of multiple ways and methods of knowing and understanding the world and, in particular, the conditions that give rise to, *or foreclose*, “reasonable conditions of life” (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 199)—for people and planet alike. Currently, we—particularly in the helping professions—often rely on specific “theories,” if any at all, to understand or predict—most often—*individual behavior*. Although helpful in some situations, such theories can also obfuscate the larger context and root causes, fostering the proliferation of individual diagnoses (that are not uncoincidentally billable within our current economic system) versus the delineation of systemic pathology. Also, with respect to methodology, I would encourage a movement away from the unquestioned elevation and application of “science” and “scientific methods” and see them rather as one of many tools that can be called upon to gain in our understanding and (re)visioning. As suggested by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), “I envision a time when the intellectual monoculture of science will be replaced with a polyculture of complementary knowledges” (p. 139).

Second, I would, thus, invite us to (re)imagine and (re)build formal and informal spaces of learning and knowledge exchange—via trans-disciplinary curricula and programs of study, training and certificate programs, conferences, direct practice, engaged service, and work with the land, to name but a few. These are spaces that would move beyond the confines of disciplinary and vocational boundaries—and the professional and methodological “legitimacies” bound up therein—and focus instead, for example, thematically. This would mean inviting attorneys and theologians, youth and elders, regenerative farmers and ecologists to help us—collectively—understand the ideas *and* practices that do or might support local-to-global food sovereignty. It would mean engaging child and aging care providers, sociologists and artists, clinicians and nurses, economists and therapists to explore the limits and possibilities of caring- and solidarity-based economies. As affirming and participatory spaces, they might be (re)constituted within and across farms and porches, houses of worship and public libraries, as well as colleges, universities, and other (“formal”) training and educational centers.

Third, and lastly (for the sake of brevity), I would encourage us to commit to this as a dynamic and ongoing process of theory, action, and reflection. To embrace, for example, the need for continued (r)evolution(s) in thought and action; to seek opportunities for trans-disciplinary collaboration, learning, and sharing; to rethink metrics of “productivity,” “yield,” and “impact” attuned to collective wellbeing; to recognize and honor “failure” as a meaningful learning tool; and to (re)imagine and build alternatives—together—that center health and wellbeing. Such a process might, in the words of Paulo Freire (2005), enable us to see “the world unveiled” (p. 39)—to take (accurate) account of the challenges, as well as the gifts and opportunities, in all their complexity. With eyes (and hearts) wide open, we might then be able to read the chaos that surrounds us as an invitation to honor the power and promise of diverse ways of knowing and being in the world ... and therein nurture the praxis of social transformation to support the wellbeing of people and planet.

Figure 2

Interconnected, 2022



August 2022

While talking over my ideas for this piece with my daughter, at this point 10 years old, I asked her thoughts on living and learning in community, connections to each other and the earth. As always, she presented her thoughts in image (please see Figure 2 above). She spoke of “all the different plants and animals,” the “storied” nature of the forest—larger trees providing shade to younger trees, plants and shrubs filling the understory, animal habitats throughout. She added: “Most importantly ... they are all connected.” She pointed to the roots—each distinct, yet supportive of the whole, caring for each other in an intricate web of reciprocity that nurtures individual and collective wellbeing.

Our children—and the earth—know the way. Are we ready to follow?

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