

# Pedagogies of Critical Hope as Discipline in and Among Wildfires

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As a scholar-activist of the cultural politics of climate change with 15+ years of experience, I was not prepared for the deeply visceral and existential shock of moving to a new academic job in the summer of 2023 into the most active site of record-breaking wildfires in syilx Okanagan territory in British Columbia. Barely able to contain my own overwhelming feelings of doom and gloom, I felt for the first time, a deep sense of loss as to how to teach the youth who were to be in front of me – less than 10 days after we returned from being evacuated from our home. Knowing that I would either have to ignore this important impingement on ‘normal routines’ of fossil fuel late capitalism or change my teaching, I began in earnest to explore orientations toward hope – a notion that I once thought too politically inert to be of use in teaching or in the wider cultural politics of climate change.

My Environmental Justice, Epistemic Justice course centered crucial Indigenous local and global movements and BIPOC-led shifts, but I felt the urgent need to explicitly turn and guide students toward hope at these times of wildfires. Starting with the thesis of Rutger Bregman who overturns the presumptive competitive throughline of human history in his book *Humankind: A Hopeful History* (2020) was an important first step. Bregman demonstrates that news cycles and certain dominant narratives in society orient us to affirm a negative bias against humanity as evil, despite much evidence that when faced with crisis, humans can also be extremely cooperative and resilient. This orientation is politically consequential as belief in the premise of humanity as inherently ‘good’ or inherently ‘bad’ shapes how we collectively act. But as an Afro-descended feminist scholar-activist, I also knew that hope written through a white male Christian Euro-centric gaze also comes with an ease that is neither accessible nor practical to all. In my orientation toward critical understandings of hope, I turned to the compelling Black, feminist, abolitionist praxis of Mariame Kaba’s hope as “discipline” (2018) which signifies the ways that one can, *and must* continually show up to do the work, even when the odds feel stacked. This is a grounded hope that is practiced every day with an understanding of the long histories that have got us to the present moment and a long view to transformative futures. Kaba demonstrates that cynicism and doomism are luxuries that ‘we’ – especially those who have already been on the frontlines of injustice – cannot afford. These critical understandings reveal the political nature of hope, not as optimism, but as action-oriented practice that contributes to transformational approaches to the climate crisis.

As figure 1 and 2 below demonstrate, grounded hope in this context of wildfires may emerge from rituals of visiting with, and caring for land-based relations that exist in the spaces outside of classrooms. Moving with students through Ponderosa pine forests that have long thrived in these regions of wildfire, teaches disciplines and practices of hope that students, too, can move through and orient toward. There is a kind of false narrative about academics rarely talking to ‘real people’ about how to move through climate anxiety, but those of us who teach – especially undergraduates – have the privilege and responsibility of relating with scores of youth coming of age at this time. Combatting doomism and eco-anxiety with critical versions of hope as discipline in our teaching and research constitutes a crucial intervention in generating liveable futures for and with more-than-human relations. We are inevitably experiencing climate crises, but we can opt to move through, teach and learn in ways that play to our cooperative and resilient attributes, rather than those that feature competitive chaos. Practicing hope as discipline offers key political and pedagogical shifts at this juncture.



*Figure. 1: Wildfire August 2023 - sylx land (Kelowna, BC). Image credit: Anita Girvan*



*Figure. 2: Spring renewal April 2024 - sylx land (Kelowna, BC). Image credit: Anita Girvan*

## **References**

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