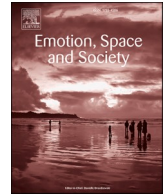




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The Emotion, Space and Society AAG Lecture: Emotional entanglements in a world that's falling apart

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ABSTRACT

In human geography, many of us are involved in community-engaged and activist research, much of which is inspired by deep emotional commitments to progressive change. Yet, the last three years have taken a toll on academics. Many in academia are anxious and burnt out, as the demands of the neoliberal university remain relentless despite the seeming collapse of the world around us. We have witnessed a radical restructuring of research, teaching, and praxis as the pandemic changed our ability to do in-person work. Building solidarity and enacting social change under these circumstances has been challenging, to say the least. And while the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the critical global interdependencies between all of us and inspired new forms of mutual aid and support, it has also inspired rising division and growing right-wing movements based on imaginaries of fear and insecurity. In this paper, I discuss how emotional geographies are inherently woven through all human experiences and interactions, but they are especially implicated in issues of social and spatial justice. Given ongoing global crises, I argue that holding onto emotions in academic research, teaching, and praxis is more important than ever.

1. Introduction

In March 2020, our lives as we knew them came crashing down around us. We watched in fear as an unknown virus began to spread across continents; numbers rose exponentially region by region as the contagion marched ever closer to our homes and loved ones. Some of us became glued to our devices seeking answers among doomsday news feeds, pressing refresh again and again to find some sort of solace, yet it never arrived. In fact, solace from the never-ending cycle of catastrophic news rarely arrives in the present moment. The pandemic threw kindling on an already explosive social and political situation, including the global rise of fascism, white supremacy, and the fall of democracy; global climate change, natural disasters, and megadroughts; the attack on women's rights, a reckoning with police brutality, and a widening chasm of inequality, to name but a few. And, we have all weathered this turbulent storm differently depending on our respective levels of privilege; while some have been riding the waves in luxury yachts, others are barely treading water.

As noted by Davidson, Bondi and Smith in 2014 (Davidson et al., 2014), thankfully we now rarely need to argue that emotions matter. Over the past two decades, geographic scholarship has explored how emotions are relational and tied to place and, in effect, shape how we view and experience the world around us (Bondi 2005; Davidson and Milligan, 2004; Anderson and Smith, 2001; Thien, 2005). Yet, as I co-wrote with Kye Askins a few years ago (Askins and Swanson, 2019), the outrage, fear, sadness, and anxiety that we feel about the profound social and spatial injustices in the world move us to continue arguing for

expanded research and teaching regarding emotions, space, and society. In this paper, I argue that while emotional geographies are inherently woven through all human experiences and interactions, they are especially implicated in issues of social and spatial justice. And given ongoing global crises, holding onto emotions in academic research, teaching, and praxis is more important than ever.

I am moved to speak about failure, too. Here, I take inspiration from Davies, Disney and Harrowell's 2021 special issue in *Emotion, Space and Society* on failure and academic honesty. They state, "the increased emotional turmoil experienced by many academics during the pandemic, combined with an inability to speak openly and honestly about failure, has added to pre-existing stresses that have long characterised the commodified system of higher education" (Davies et al., 2021, pg. 2). Following Mountz et al. (2015), they note that this has compounded the emotional and embodied impacts of our work. In speaking about failure today, particularly my own experiences with failure, I hope to open up a dialogue and a space to discuss how many of us are struggling. I know I am.

I imagine a time in the future where scholars will look back on this period to understand the profound emotional turmoil of 2020–2023. I would argue that most of us in this room continue to live and breathe the embodied impacts of this period in history. While we may be post-pandemic (or, at least this post-this one), we're still facing global climate disasters, ongoing survival migration combined with rampant xenophobia, anti-LGBTQ+ movements, deep inequality, among other dire issues. There is a pervading sense of existential dread as we watch the world seemingly collapse around us, while we pretend that

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everything is back to “normal.” Is it normal to live through choking wildfire smoke and air quality that isn’t safe to breathe? Is it normal to endure record breaking hurricanes that destroy life, land, and property? Is it normal for seemingly strong relationships to have dissolved over the course of the pandemic? Is it normal for children to still be afraid of public spaces? Is it normal to become emotionally numb? Perhaps, yes, to this latter question.

While emotions can move us and compel us to act, they can also paralyze us. While some approach crisis by launching headfirst into the fire, others choose to cover their eyes and ears to shut out the atrocities simply in order to cope. Still for others, care is a privilege that they cannot afford. As noted by Katherine Boo (2013, pg. 254), “in places where government priorities and market imperatives create a world so capricious that to help a neighbor is to risk your ability to feed your family, and sometimes even your own liberty, the idea of the mutually supportive ... community is demolished.” How can we care for others when we can’t even care for ourselves? At times, our efforts to enact social change and build solidarity feel doomed to fail in a seemingly uncaring world.

But what about hope? As Rebecca Solnit (2016, pg. xi) notes, “Your opponents would love you to believe that it’s hopeless, that you have no power, that there’s no reason to act, that you can’t win.” Yet, she goes on to say that “Hope is a gift that you don’t have to surrender, a power you don’t have to throw away.” While this may be true, hope is awfully tenuous these days. Nevertheless, as Solnit and Young Lutunatabua (2023) would insist, it is not too late, and we must find a way to grasp and hang onto even the tiniest threads of hope in order to take action against the ongoing injustices of the world.

The rest of this talk will be structured in three parts. In Part I, I will speak to the power of emotions to move us, pulling from my own experiences working with unaccompanied migrant children and asylum seekers in the U.S./Mexico border region. In Part II, I will speak about failure. I will focus especially on the early days of the pandemic where our lives shifted online. I will also speak to failures in education and explore how affective politics are being used to fuel alt-right attacks on educational institutions. In Part III, I will speak about the importance of hope in emotional geographies, particularly in terms of research, teaching, and activism. Overall, I would like to prompt a lively discussion on these intersecting and difficult issues.

2. Part I: emotional entanglements on the U.S./Mexico border

I’m going to begin by backtracking to 2018 to provide context for my pre-pandemic research and activism in the U.S./Mexico border region. During the Trump administration, more than 5000 children were physically separated from their parents and guardians as they sought asylum and safety in the United States. While their parents were shackled, incarcerated, and charged with criminal offences, infants through teenagers were flown and bussed to 121 detention shelters spread across 17 American states (ACLU, 2018). Record keeping was poor, and the system quickly lost track of whose child went where. Most of these children were separated from their families over an intense three-month period in 2018 due to a new zero tolerance policy intentionally designed to deter rising levels of family migration (Coddington and Williams 2022; Dickerson, 2022). By June 2018, investigative media reports began uncovering the dreadful conditions migrant children were being forced to endure. They reported on children in cages confined in large warehouses, former airport hangers, and tent camps (Soboroff, 2021). Children and teens complained about lack of access to soap, toothpaste, showers, diapers, sanitary napkins, adequate clothing, among other basic necessities. Harrowing audio clips of very young children crying for their mothers and fathers fomented public outrage at the seeming callousness of the administration (Thompson, 2018). The U. S. Federal Government absurdly chose to defend these conditions by arguing that while U.S. legislation governing the detention of migrant children stipulates “safe and sanitary conditions,” there is no specific

mention of “toothbrushes,” “towels,” “dry clothing,” “soap” or even “sleep.” So, they argued, they were in the clear (Flynn, 2019). Children died in detention, too. The deceased from Guatemala included Jakelin Caal Maquín, 7 years old; Felipe Gomez Alonso, 8 years old; Juan de León Gutiérrez, 16 years old; Wilmer Josué Ramírez Vásquez, 2½ years old; and Carlos Hernandez Vásquez, 16 years old. From El Salvador, the deceased included Darlyn Cristabel Cordova-Valle. She was 10 years old (Hennessy-Fiske, 2019).

I have been working with child migrants in Latin America for 20 years and specifically with unaccompanied migrant children for over ten years. I began my involvement with unaccompanied migrant children in the U.S./Mexico border region by volunteering at a shelter in San Diego County. I volunteered as a weekly geography teacher and worked with mostly Central American youth between the ages of seven and seventeen who were awaiting reunification with family members in the United States. Using participatory pedagogical techniques, I provided rights education and helped youth map their journeys and envision their hopeful futures in the United States. I later volunteered with a pro bono legal aid organization to do intake interviews with migrant youth in detention to help gauge their eligibility for visas or asylum.

After three years of hearing harrowing stories from migrant children fleeing conditions of extreme violence and pervasive threats of gang recruitment and given increasing numbers of children arriving at the U. S./Mexico border, I collaborated with colleagues from University of Texas-Austin, Texas State University, and colleagues from COLEF-Matamoros in Mexico to develop a binational research project. Our work focused on Central American and Mexican migrant youth in Mexican immigration detention centers, and we used ethnographic and participatory research methodologies to uncover young people’s experiences with migration, detention, and deportation (see Swanson et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2022b).

When the zero tolerance family separation policies were implemented in 2018, most Americans didn’t realize that migrant children were already being detained in the United States (Heidbrink 2014; Martin, 2011; Terrio 2015). But the viral images of distraught children being torn from their mothers’ arms, along with heartbreaking photos of children incarcerated in warehouse cages, pushed many people to finally take action. Buoyed by this outpouring of anger and indignation, my colleagues and I in San Diego began developing a grassroots organization to address increasingly inhumane immigration enforcement measures like family separation. Our collaborative efforts rapidly took off and by 2020, our volunteer-based organization had provided emotional and financial support to over 1200 migrants incarcerated in 25 different detention centers across the United States. We developed a pen pal program in an effort to provide solidarity and emotional support to those locked inside. Through community-based fundraising, we donated over \$70,000 to detained migrants from over 45 different nations, including many from Central America and Mexico, as well as asylum seekers from Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Venezuela, Haiti, Afghanistan, and many other nations.

Every week, we received approximately 20–30 letters from detention. In these letters, people described egregious conditions, such as medical neglect, wage theft, lack of access to basic hygiene necessities, contaminated and insufficient food, among other serious complaints. They asked us to please help them publicize what was happening behind the locked prison doors. So, we worked with graduate and undergraduate students to release a policy report which received widespread media coverage, and we distributed the report to the California Attorney General, as well as other local and state politicians (see Detainee Allies, 2019). We worked with the ACLU, lawyers, and local activist groups to publicize the stories we were hearing. Our policy report also helped spur a successful private prison divestment campaign across the California State University system.

When Covid-19 hit the prisons, the situation became even more dire. Incarcerated people had little to no access to masks, hand sanitizer, or even sufficient soap. The prisons started keeping detained people on

lockdown, which meant they were confined to their cells for 23 hours of the day. In their letters, they reported illegal prison transfers, hunger strikes, prison guard abuse, significant mental health struggles, as well as terrible or non-existent health care (Asoni, 2023). We started receiving heartbreaking letters like this one:

I am pleading on my own behalf, because detention in this time of health crisis is more dreadful and worse than before. In just about two to three weeks ago we were informed by the health professionals here that only one detainee tested positive to Covid-19, and now, just about three days ago, that is on the April 24, 2020, information also has it that 98 detainees and 24 officers have tested positive to Covid-19, and it's obvious that this situation is going to get worse in few weeks or months to come, if nothing is done to curb it.

Please, young men full of life should not be allowed to fall sick and die when our lives could be saved alternatively. Strong men with full potential are crying here for life. Come and help us as much as you can to get us out of here ... I come to the United States to seek for protection and refuge and to seek for an asylum. Please come and help us before we all die here (Letter 2178).

Another asylum seeker who had previously written, "Whenever you reply to my letters, it is a light for me in the darkness ... It is true it makes me cry because your letter showed care and love as a human" (Robbins, 2019). Now he wrote:

Hello my dear friends ... I'm writing to let you know about my health. I am gravely ill ... and I have tested positive for Covid. I am not taking any medication in detention. I am having trouble breathing. This is my first time ever being this sick Could you please help? If not, I will die here in detention. Thank you in advance for your understanding (Letter 2230).

Yet, within four months of Covid-19's arrival in California, our organization also collapsed. We began as a community effort around a kitchen table, where everyone pitched in as they could, whether it be translating letters, tracking donations, writing reports, or stamping envelopes. Working collaboratively together and in community with people young and old was a big part of what we did. Yet, when Covid hit and everything moved online, our ability to work in community ended. We tried to continue our work over Zoom, but it wasn't the same. Those with more privilege ended up shouldering the lion's share of the work, which rapidly led to burnout and fatigue. At the same time, the letters we received had a heightened sense of urgency given that detained people were now dying – or at risk of dying – due to Covid-19. Decisions were no longer being made in community, which led to conflict. The intense stresses of the pandemic heightened emotional responses and exacerbated disagreements that could no longer be hashed out in person. In the end, we were forced to abandon the important work we were doing, which leads me to Part II: Failure.

3. Part II: failure under Covid-19

John Horton's (2020) brilliant *Emotion, Space and Society* paper titled, "Failure failure failure: Six types of failure within the academy" (please read it: it's amazing), outlines a series of questions to consider in higher education. For one of these questions, he asks "How might we create more spaces to disclose things not going to plan, in ways that are helpful, supportive, not-self-aggrandizing and which accommodate diverse forms of failure (including failures with no happy endings)?" There was certainly no happy ending to the collapse of our organization. To me, it felt like we had abandoned too many people who relied on our financial aid. The money we sent into detention not only allowed people to make phone calls to their loved ones, buy stamps to communicate with their lawyers, but it also allowed them to purchase small comforts, such as a cup of soup. The letters our over 250 pen pals sent in helped inspire a bit of hope into an otherwise dreadful situation. But, for a

variety of complicated reasons, we stopped our work and abandoned those in detention. This was an epic failure.

In the personal realm, more failures ensued as I tried to help my then 11-year-old son transition to online education. It was a nightmare. I'm sure many of you can relate. My online classes with students became less about learning and more about coping. We had long check ins on our respective lockdown situations. No one was okay. Some had been forced to move back in with parents in cities far away, while others were entirely alone. I developed what felt like the attention span of a squirrel as my existential dread worsened. Day drinking became a thing. As Caroline Faria (2020) notes in her spot-on, tongue-in-cheek paper, during the early days of the pandemic many of us were led to believe that the work must continue at all costs! So, we pulled from the dredges of our emotional labour to put on a smile and teach our online classes, attend online faculty meetings, chair online committee meetings, mentor online students, and experience a slow and agonizing zombification by Zoom. Meanwhile, we still had to find the time and energy to teach our children, feed our families, take care of extended family members, care for our communities, and so on. And death was all around us as global Covid counts grew higher and higher.

During the throes of the pandemic, I worked with my students to develop a student-led research project to investigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on San Diego State University (SDSU) students and faculty. With a group of 12 undergraduate and graduate students, we surveyed 458 students and 131 faculty, and complemented these with a photovoice project on the spaces of lockdown. We discovered that at SDSU almost 50 percent of undergraduate students were employed in 'essential services' and were working just as much or more than they were pre-pandemic. Almost 75 percent of students and faculty declared that they experienced negative mental health impacts due to virtual learning. Students and faculty reported an increase in sleepless nights, and over 70 percent of students reported waking up feeling tired either 'always' or 'most nights.' Our photovoice project uncovered students working in crowded and shared bedrooms, and faculty teaching from nurseries and garages. Quotes from faculty were especially illustrative: "I'm just 100x more stressed and anxious. As an untenured woman faculty of color, I'm already stressed about doing 'enough'." Or, "I'm exhausted. I'm doing my best to support students, but teaching is just one part of my job and all parts (teaching, research, and service) have significantly increased workloads right now." And, "We engage in a lot of emotional labor to put on a happy/supportive face in class despite being constantly stressed and demotivated about the state of national affairs and online teaching ourselves." Illustrative of this, another commented, "I've had three funerals I've attended via zoom and taught class a few hours later without saying a word about it." Students and faculty alike felt like the university was failing to support them (Alcantar et al., 2021).

Our findings support Horton's (2020) analysis regarding the pervasiveness of individualized performance anxieties in the spaces of academia. Even though the pandemic raged around us, the pressure to remain productive never ceased. In fact, many felt that the shift to online everything intensified workloads since we could now schedule back-to-back online meetings without having to consider physical travel times. Learning to teach online felt like "learning to teach all over again" (Alcantar et al., 2021). The sense of burnout was profound, yet the demands upon our time never ceased. Even efforts to be social moved online as we adopted online "happy hours" to try to remain connected. This pushed many faculty to the brink of exhaustion and made it impossible to "do more." As one of our faculty respondents stated, "As much as I want to go above and beyond like I used to help students, especially with mental health, I just can't" (Alcantar et al., 2021).

The pandemic also helped exacerbate an already turbulent political divide in the United States (and other nations as well). This growing political stress provoked new anxieties about the state of the world. Wearing masks and compliance with public health mandates became maddeningly political. In San Diego, more and more trucks began

circulating with ‘Don’t Tread on Me,’ and ‘Make America Great Again’ flags. On my (admittedly toxic) neighbourhood NextDoor app, I read posts from neighbours banding together to do arms training in case they needed to protect themselves and their properties from BLM and antifa protesters. Meanwhile, my own antifa grad student was also doing arms training, just in case. Then, on January 6th, 2021, the world watched as 10,000 mostly white, American men violently stormed the capitol in an effort to overturn the election. Seemingly led by a shirtless “viking” known as the ‘Q Shaman,’ almost 2000 rioters penetrated the capitol building to “stop the steal” – or the perceived theft of Trump’s second presidential term.

To explain this growing polarization, Arlie Hochschild (2016) describes the United States as becoming increasingly divided by empathy walls, where vast regions are segregated into emotionally toned enclaves. She explains that our ‘feeling rules’ – our understandings of what we should and shouldn’t feel – are shaped by our own deep stories. These deep stories provide an emotional accounting system of our place in the world. Through an ethnography of working class, white conservatives in Louisiana, she describes how the right often believes that the liberal media and elite are imposing their ‘feeling rules’ upon them to manipulate them into feeling sorry for people who are experiencing racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. These feelings of guilt, shame and sadness go against their deep stories and their perceptions of themselves as honourable Americans who have lived by the rules to work toward the so-called American Dream. Hochschild argues that the perceived manipulation of their emotions, or the sense that they are being coerced into uncomfortable or the “wrong” feelings is what the conservative right is pushing back against (see also Boler and Davis, 2018).

Conservative pushback against this perceived emotional manipulation is especially apparent through political activist Christopher Rufo, the alt-right mastermind behind Battlefront, a centre for “narrative, legal and policy warfare” (Jones, 2021). Rufo has risen to prominence by embracing a Gramscian approach to engage in a war of position on educational institutions in the United States. Using Fox News and conservative politicians as his mouthpiece, he argues that “decent” Americans are being made to feel fear, shame and humiliation through race and gender sensitivity trainings. He uses fearmongering on supposed child brainwashing and sexual predation (or “grooming”) to build a moral panic on the indoctrination of children in schools on ‘radical’ gender ideology and critical race theory. It’s been quite effective. He’s now been tasked by Florida’s Governor DeSantis to “recapture higher education,” and he sits on the New College of Florida’s board to push back against the “left-wing hegemony over public universities.” (Rufo, 2023). While embracing classical education on the basis of so-called objective truth, Rufo and his conservative colleagues balk at education that causes emotional discomfort, and they use this perceived discomfort to advance their alt-right educational agenda. As he concludes, “We will never win if we play by the rules set by the elites who are undermining our country” (Rufo, 2022).

As professors and graduate students in American universities well understand, this attack on the subject matter we teach has been devastating. I know too many academics whose research has already been shamed on Fox News, Breitbart, and other conservative outlets. My colleagues have experienced aggressive and even violent personal social media and email attacks, causing tremendous distress. In 2022, Florida’s “Stop Wrongs To Our Kids and Employees Act,” or the “Stop W.O.K.E. Act” took the assault on education a step further to legally prohibit instruction that spurs the wrong feeling rules. Specifically, the legislation states that students “should not be instructed that he or she must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress for actions, in which he or she played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex” (Florida Senate, 2022). Florida’s new Parental Rights in Education legislation, or the “Don’t Say Gay Act,” prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity in grades K-3, and allows parents to take legal action against schools if they don’t

abide (Florida Senate, 2022b). The Governors of both Florida and Texas are now pushing to defund diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in higher education, as they seek to attack spaces that disrupt their deep stories about America (Gewin, 2023). Across the United States, other states are following suite, suggesting a profoundly worrying rightward shift in American educational spaces largely based on affective politics.

4. Part III: hopeful emotional entanglements

The last few years have had a devastating effect on our collective mental health. A persistent barrage of personal, institutional, and political trauma has ricocheted across spaces and places to scar our bodies and haunt our psyches (Coddington, 2017; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes, 2015; Mountz, 2017). As Dean Spade notes, there is little question that things *are* really terrifying and enraging right now, so perhaps feeling *more* rage, fear, sadness, grief and despair is appropriate (Spade, 2020, pg. 28). Afterall, profound feelings are often what move us to act (Askins, 2009; Bosco, 2006; Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Jasper, 1998). While some push back against uncomfortable feelings that cause distress, others embrace the pain, sadness, and anger, to launch compassionate and caring campaigns. Yet, it has become blatantly obvious that our ability to care has become compromised under neoliberal austerity measures that prioritize individual rights over collective wellbeing (Askins and Blazek, 2016; Lawson, 2007; Parizeau et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2020). As the authors of the Care Manifesto (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, pg. 4) note, the pandemic has dramatically exposed the violence of neoliberalism, which has not only left us less able to provide care, but also less able to receive it. While hearing about the never-ending atrocities of the world, they argue that carelessness has become routine, thus further exacerbating global crises. Instead, they ask, what would happen if we were to put care at the very centre of life? What would happen if we created global alliances of connected care that disregarded borders where we could practice mutual aid to support others in their times of need? In November 2022, I joined Catherine Nolin of UNBC and Grahame Russell of Rights Action on a delegation to Guatemala. We visited numerous communities to understand how U.S., Canadian and international resource extractivism has contributed to historic and ongoing environmental and human rights violations in the region (Nolin and Russell, 2021). During a visit to a Mayan Q’eqchi community, one of the women emphasized the visceral and embodied impacts of these struggles when she pleaded, “I hope you understand our fight; that you *feel* our pain” (November 9, 2022). In a 21st century filled with crises, we must embrace these feelings and pain in our research and teaching, no matter how much it hurts.

Despite all odds, I remain hopeful. This isn’t a blind hope that things will somehow get better, but rather more of a hope that is grounded in action. Again, back to Rebecca Solnit, who notes (Solnit, 2016, pg. 3), “Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope.” Or as Canadian activist Maude Barlow (2021) explains, hope helps us move forward “to put one foot in front of the other when despair would tell us not to move” (Barlow, 2021, pg. 1). Or as abolitionist Mariame Kaba states, “hope is a discipline” and we have to practice and embrace it every day (Kaba, 2021, pg. 27). If we look at the past 100 years, there have been tremendous positive changes in many realms, including women’s rights, civil rights, LGBTQ + rights, environmental rights, among others. As history demonstrates, movement building takes time and patience, and it’s often hard to predict the outcomes. Or as Solnit, 2016, pg. 3–4) writes, “Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension.” Without a doubt, there have been devastating setbacks in recent years, but if we take the long-term view, there have been significant gains, too.

In August 2021, I moved back to Canada after living abroad for 16 years to become a professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. At my new institution, I’m teaching a course titled, Development and Activism, which is designed to provide students with the hands-on

tools needed to push back against global and local injustices. I've structured this class as a project-based and student-led course and this semester students have decided to organize a campaign on housing and food insecurity in Halifax. A recent survey discovered that over half of Canadians said their mental health and levels of optimism had worsened over the first two years of the pandemic, with women faring significantly worse than men. The findings also uncovered that two-thirds believe that Canadian's compassion for one another has weakened, and almost 80 percent believe the pandemic has brought about the worst in people (Angus Reid Institute, 2022). Young people have especially struggled during the pandemic, and students are dealing with significant anxiety and mental health issues. For this reason, many of our readings are about activist optimism in order to help students hang on to hope in a world that's seemingly falling apart. And, I've noted that while many of the students began the semester despondent about the state of the world, they're beginning to feel more optimistic as they take steps toward positive change. Drawing from a mutual aid model, they've learned about the importance of working in community using consensus-based decision making and the importance of working with joy. So far, they've ratified a campus-based mutual aid society, they've mobilized a march on the provincial parliament, they've organized a food drive, and they've convinced a local grocery store to provide weekly donations to our campus food bank which is struggling to meet growing demand. In a progress report, one of my students wrote, "This class has changed my perspective on my degree. For the last year, I have been considering switching my major because I was becoming discouraged. We were learning about tragedy and terrible things that happened in the past but not learning what to do about it. I was losing hope. But this class lit the spark again." Another student emailed me to state that while she had been feeling very discouraged, the course helped remind her that she still has "the ability to fight for change through activism."

As Margaret Atwood (1987) notes, "The facts of this world seen clearly, are seen through tears." There have been many failures over the past few years, most especially the epic public health failures that have resulted in almost 7 million reported global deaths (Johns Hopkins, 2023), which have disproportionately affected the poor, the racialized and the colonized. We need to acknowledge the profound pain, trauma and despair that haunts us in this gruelling world. But we also need to use this despair to fuel our action. We need to mobilize ourselves, our colleagues, and our students to organize collectively across academic silos and disciplines to actively work for change. It's possible that the Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opening to imagine a different kind of world and a societal shift that recognizes the profound importance of care, emotional support, and kindness in our institutions and in our lives. I urge us to grab onto these threads of hope – no matter how tenuous – to begin weaving together the kind of world we'd like to live in.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kate Swanson: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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