Teaching for Climate Justice

A Rethinking Schools Collection | Edited by Bill Bigelow

AFP PHOTO / JASON REDMOND

Introduction

The other day, I went for a walk with a teacher union friend. She mentioned that in a recent conversation with a school district official, she talked about the role that teachers might play in the district around curriculum development. The administrator stopped her abruptly: "We don't *develop* curriculum in this school district. We *buy* it."

That attitude, that practice, damages education. It turns teachers into consumers of curriculum written by — well, who knows? Houghton Mifflin Harcourt? Pearson? McGraw Hill?

No matter the discipline, this curriculum-as-commodity approach deskills teachers; we become direction-followers, who perform lessons written by people at great distance from the classroom — people who do not know our students and almost certainly do not begin with social and environmental justice in mind.

This "We don't develop curriculum, we buy it" orientation is especially problematic when it comes to helping our students grasp the enormity of the climate crisis. As I highlight in the article, "Teaching the Truth About Climate Change Is Up to Us, Because Textbooks Lie," included in this booklet, every science and social studies textbook used in Portland, Oregon, earned an "F," as measured by the five standards a school district committee applied to evaluate the texts. For example, no textbook described any actions that ordinary people — much less, students — could or are playing to address the climate crisis. Letter-writing, petitions, demonstrations, student strikes, civil disobedience: Silence.

No corporate textbook company has an interest in equipping our students with the critical skills needed to join this work.

Teaching for Climate Justice collects articles from *Rethinking Schools* magazine's quarterly "Earth, Justice, and Our Classrooms" column — launched in our Spring 2018 issue. We introduced the column by saying that we hoped to "offer encouragement and resources for teachers to help students explore the roots and consequences of the crisis and figure out how to respond." No corporate textbook company has an interest in equipping our students with the critical skills needed to join this work. It's up to us.

One theme that weaves through the articles included here is that despite the frightening, life-on-Earth-threatening nature of the climate emergency, and its obscene inequality, teaching about this needn't be grim. In fact, it can be joyful. As Rethinking Schools editors write in a recent editorial, "Joy is not an escape from the hard realities of our world, but a dive into them. Students experience joy from their connection with one another, how we invite their lives into the curriculum, the new insights sparked from their studies, their engagement in *things that matter*. Joy is the product of our respect for our students as intellectuals, writers, artists, and activists."

Several articles included in this booklet refer to the climate justice resolution passed unanimously by the Portland, Oregon, school board in the spring of 2016. Part of Resolution #5272 reads: "All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice — especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change."

A curriculum that encourages activism is not about teachers imposing our conclusions on students. It is an acknowledgement that the alternative to activism is crushing climate despair. As we

introduce students to the science of climate change, to the daily accounts of how the climate crisis is ripping through the world, to the dystopian predictions contained in Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports, we must also always highlight the many courageous and creative ways everyday people are working for a livable future.

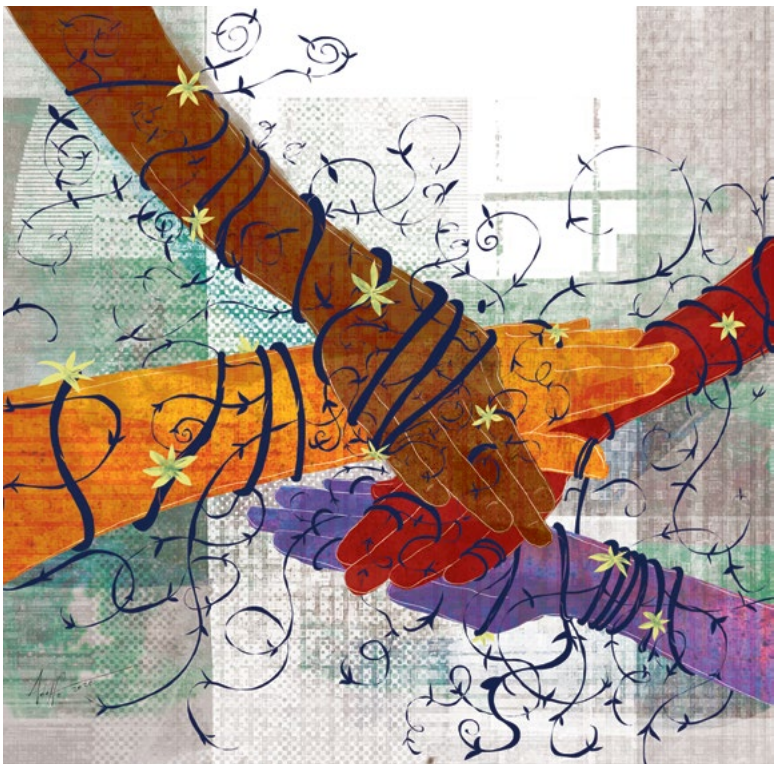
***Teaching for Climate Justice* is activist teaching.**

Teaching for Climate Justice is activist teaching, hopeful teaching, joyful teaching. The articles in this booklet are an invitation to educators to join the national conversation about how we help our students understand what is happening to our climate, why it is happening, who it is affecting, and what we can do about it. This work belongs to all of us. ■

We Need to Ask Our Students to Dream — and to Dream Big

BY BILL BIGELOW

Back in the 1980s, I taught an elective class at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon, called Literature and Social Change. It centered around the questions "What is a good society and how can we get there?" To seed students' utopian imaginations, we read books like Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. A number of the novels we studied paid insufficient attention to race and class, and we read all the books critically, but students were enchanted by a number of them. My aim was not to provide a blueprint for the New Society so much as to urge students to consider that *another world is possible*.



ADOLFO VALLE

Regarding this society as temporary — and considering alternatives — has always been a worthy educational aim. But because of the climate crisis, today it is more apparent than ever that our curriculum should become utopian, in the best sense of the word — that it asks students to imagine, and to become a part of creating, a Green New World.

We know with certainty that if we continue to allow planet-altering decisions to be dictated by the profit-hungry imperatives of the already-too-rich, we face a horrific future. As one Australian filmmaker told the *New York Times* in the midst of the hellish wildfires there, "We have seen the unfolding wings of climate change." What just a few years ago seemed science fictiony, distant, and intellectual is now visceral. Climate change is here, it is now.

A central mission of today's curriculum must be to help students grasp the enormity of the climate threat that confronts us. But, paradoxically, this frightening reality itself requires us to fuel our classrooms with hope, to imagine the radical changes that are essential if we are to confront the root causes of climate catastrophe.

We need to guard against our climate curriculum focusing too much on loss — and on supposed solutions that appear punitive, subtractive: check your carbon footprint, no more driving, no more flying, stop buying so much stuff, no more meat, turn down the heat. Climate change lessons can present a dystopia of rising seas, drought and growing desertification, raging wildfires and toxic air, ocean acidification, melting glaciers, biblical flooding, species extinction, and the exodus of climate

refugees. To help students face these realities with the resolve needed to combat and ameliorate them, we need to nurture a vision of the future that is not rooted in fear and deprivation, but is hopeful, possible, and exhilarating.

Daniel Denvir's excellent podcast *The Dig* recently featured two of the authors of *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*, Daniel Aldana Cohen and Thea Riofrancos. (Other authors include Alyssa Battistoni and Rethinking Schools contributor Kate Aronoff.) The book is probably not one that I'd use with high school students, but it is one that teachers should read and discuss. *A Planet to Win* clearly and compellingly presents how a Green New Deal will respond to the immediate demands of the climate crisis, and, at the same time, address the seemingly intractable problems of health care, jobs, houselessness, education, and racial inequality.

The Green New Deal is more inspiration than legislation, but *A Planet to Win* begins to flesh out what it could look like in practice, and why a radical Green New Deal is actually more politically feasible than the tepid proposals advocated by mainstream pundits and politicians. The authors remind us that "Capitalists invest in projects to make money and to consolidate their power, not to make the world a better place." Thus: "To decarbonize fast, we have to take democratic, public control of much of the economy to put equitable climate action first."

We can still escape a large portion of the misery and barbarism that the climate crisis promises to unleash, but, as Naomi Klein writes in the foreword to *A Planet to Win*, we need to seize this moment to dare to "dream big, out loud, in public, together." And in school. Our schools need to be sites of radical imagination, where we invite our students to picture what our society could look like if we took the climate crisis seriously and acted accordingly. What will it take to abandon fossil fuels in favor of renewable energy in just a few years? If we're going to survive with any measure of health and social decency, this will be an inventive, revolutionary — and potentially joyful — period of transition. Our curriculum needs to reflect and contribute to this process. This is the opposite of the "It's going to be awful — yours must be a life of sacrifice" message that our climate teaching can too easily slide into.

Our schools need to be sites of radical imagination, where we invite our students to picture what our society could look like if we took the climate crisis seriously and acted accordingly.

A Planet to Win authors group the work ahead into four categories: moving rapidly and aggressively away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy; vastly expanding low-carbon work as we transition away from high-carbon work, targeting investments especially in poor, working class, and communities of color; rebuilding the world ("a radical Green New Deal could build landscapes of no carbon splendor in and beyond cities"); and international solidarity, to ensure that our green transformation is not at the expense of the Global South, as could easily happen.

This utopian dreaming is beginning to burst into the public conversation. In large part, this is thanks to young activists like the 150 middle and high school students who in February of 2020 demanded congressional action on the Green New Deal at a Sunrise Movement demonstration at the U.S. Capitol. "We're done playing by the rules," said 18-year-old Selene Santiago-Lopez of Wake Forest, North Carolina. Santiago-Lopez was one of 20 students arrested.

The Green New Deal is now backed by the Amalgamated Transit Union, which calls for "public transit, free for all, arriving on time, available around the clock, and completely powered by the wind, sun, and seas." The inspiring Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, declares that "our federal government must spearhead a national mobilization that . . . harnesses American ingenuity, creates millions of well-paying union jobs, and saves the planet for our children."

In our classrooms, we need to invite students into this work. Students might take on the positions of other labor unions and imagine what the Green New Deal might look like in their sector. We could first have them look at the New Deal of the 1930s. As Klein writes in the book's foreword, "the original New Deal was rife with failings and exclusions. But it remains a useful touchstone for showing how every sector of life, from forestry to education to the arts to housing to electrification, can be transformed under the umbrella of a single, society-wide mission." Works Progress Administration workers built tens of thousands of bridges, and thousands of public buildings and schools, along with parks, playgrounds, and athletic fields. The Civilian Conservation Corps prevented and fought forest fires, worked on flood control, disaster relief, soil conservation, and wildlife aid. Corps workers built hiking trails, amphitheaters, cabins, picnic facilities.

What would a similar effort look like, given our short timeline to break free of fossil fuels? What social needs require urgent attention? How can we do this work in a way that simultaneously addresses the climate crisis and the crisis of inequality?

As climate justice educators, this is our work now: finding ways to seed students' utopian imaginations about the possible futures cracked open by organizing around the Green New Deal.

As climate justice educators, this is our work now: finding ways to seed students' utopian imaginations about the possible futures cracked open by organizing around the Green New Deal. Without a trace of hyperbole, the toxic stew of racial capitalism, colonialism, and fossil fuels has brought us to the brink of global catastrophe. Strangely, it has also brought us to the brink of alternatives that our planet — and our students — desperately need. It's our job to engage students in imagining those alternatives and doing everything we can to help them be part of the movements that will bring them to life. ■

Teaching the Truth About Climate Change Is Up to Us, Because Textbooks Lie

BY BILL BIGELOW

In 2016, the school board in Portland, Oregon, approved a comprehensive climate justice resolution, one part of which mandated that Portland Public Schools "will abandon the use of any adopted text material that is found to express doubt about the severity of the climate crisis or its root in human activities."

MICHAEL DUFFY

I was a member of the committee of parents, teachers, students, and activists that pushed for the resolution. In drafting it, we knew that there were a couple of especially egregious texts in Portland classrooms, but until we sat down in the spring of 2017 to formally evaluate 13 middle and high school science and social studies textbooks, we had no idea that every single one of the texts adopted in famously green and liberal Portland misleads young people about the climate crisis.

Few teachers put their faith in multinational behemoths like Pearson and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. But our Climate Justice Committee needed more than hunches about how these corporations' profit-first orientation would distort their coverage of climate change — we needed evidence.

Before our committee collected district-adopted textbooks to evaluate, we developed a rubric to evaluate their adequacy, inspired by the work of K. C. Busch at Stanford's Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. Here's what we came up with:

- The text provides stories and examples that help students grasp the immediacy, systemic nature, and gravity of the climate crisis.
- The text includes actions that people are taking to address the climate crisis, locally and worldwide.

- The text emphasizes that all people are being affected by the climate crisis, but also highlights the inequitable effects of the crisis on certain groups (e.g., Indigenous peoples, people in poverty, Pacific Islanders, people in sub-Saharan Africa, people dependent on glaciers for drinking water and irrigation, etc.)
- The text does not use conditional language that expresses doubt about the climate crisis (e.g., "Some scientists believe . . ." or "Human activities may change climate . . .")
- There are discussion and/or writing questions that provoke critical thinking.

Given our climate emergency, meeting these criteria seemed to us to be a reasonable cut score.

Thirteen retired teachers and members of our Portland Public Schools Climate Justice Committee gathered to evaluate the school district's texts. The first thing we noticed is how difficult it was to find anything about climate change in many of the books. A typical social studies text, *History Alive! Pursuing American Ideals*, includes no mention of climate change, but offers breathless paeans to fossil fuels: "Oklahoma's oil reserves are among the largest in the nation. Fossil fuels helped the United States become an industrial giant." As one committee reviewer wrote, in this and other texts, "there is an opportunity to look at early U.S. history as prologue to the climate crisis, but this book is utterly silent."

Contemporary Economics includes not a word about climate change. The iconic *Magruder's American Government*: 844 pages with no reference to global warming, climate change, greenhouse gases. One committee reviewer wrote: "How can a book about the U.S. government say nothing about the climate crisis — or environmental policy more broadly? This is egregious, unacceptable." Despite a focus on industrialization, neither volume of the Advanced Placement text *Sources of the Western Tradition* includes anything about climate change — as if we can cleave fossil fuel-powered industrialization from its contemporary climate consequences.

"How can a book about the U.S. government say nothing about the climate crisis — or environmental policy more broadly? This is egregious, unacceptable."

Other texts acknowledge the existence, or at least the possibility, of climate change, but the texts' language is drenched in doubt. *Issues and Life Sciences* describes global climate change in just one sentence, as a "potential threat to Earth's biomes." However, other "threats" to the Earth's biomes — eight of them — are listed as actual, and climate change a mere potential threat.

The books are littered with conditional language. The high school text *Biology*: As greenhouse gas concentrations increase, global temperatures "may be affected," and there might be "potential" for serious environmental problems. And: "Explain how burning of fossil fuels might lead to climate change." *AP World History* informs students that the global rise in temperatures "might have serious consequences."

A key component of Portland's climate justice resolution is its insistence on student agency: "All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice — especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change." But not a single text our committee reviewed suggests that students or ordinary people can play a role in addressing this growing crisis — or that "frontline communities" are themselves responding to climate destabilization. In its one sentence on climate change, *Pursuing American Ideals* says that "environmentalists fear" problems like global warming.

Similarly, *Modern World History* acknowledges that "environmentalists are especially concerned . . ." and that "Scientists also are worried about global warming . . ." These are both true, of course, but our curriculum should emphasize our students' own role in making the world a better place, rather than assigning concern and action only to scientists and environmentalists.

All 13 of the books earned an F.

Do we expect this report card to influence these corporations' treatment of the climate crisis in their textbooks? No. The corporate giants that publish school textbooks have no interest in raising critical questions about the frenzied system of extraction and consumption at the root of climate change — a system from which they benefit. Our aim is to build an argument that we cannot look to conventional sources of curriculum to educate our students about the causes of climate change and the kind of fundamental social transformation needed to address the crisis.

All 13 of the books earned an F.

For this, we need a grassroots approach to curriculum development — a partnership among educators, parents, environmental organizations, frontline communities, and our students. We need to demand time for teachers to collaborate, to write new curriculum, to share stories — to learn from one another and from the communities being hit by climate change first and the hardest. The climate crisis threatens life on Earth. Our students have a right to learn about this and to know that they can make a difference. ■

Climate Change, Gender, and Nuclear Bombs

BY BILL BIGELOW

A key part of the climate justice resolution adopted by the school board in Portland, Oregon, in 2016 states, "All Portland Public Schools students should develop confidence and passion when it comes to making a positive difference in society, and come to see themselves as activists and leaders for social and environmental justice — especially through seeing the diversity of people around the world who are fighting the root causes of climate change."

The resolution calls on teachers "to investigate the unequal effects of climate change and to consistently apply an equity lens as we shape our response to this crisis."

As with so much else in the world, gender is one of the crucial variables determining how the climate crisis affects us.

JOCELYN NG AND ARAVAPO LEO

Catherine Pearson's short, classroom-friendly *HuffPost* article, "Why Climate Change Is a Women's Issue," summarizes how many of the key features of climate change — drought and uncertain rainfall, rising sea levels, more frequent superstorms, spread of new viruses, rising temperatures, and worsening air quality — often hit women harder than men. Women in poor countries spend more of their time finding water and collecting fuel. For a host of reasons, women are much more likely than men to be killed in natural disasters, and much more vulnerable to the rape and abuse that so often follow the trauma of climate-related hurricanes, floods, or wildfires. Most of the world's farmers are women, and the ravages of climate change more quickly upend their lives. Rising temperatures worsen air pollution, which can cause respiratory distress for pregnant women and lead to low infant birth weight. And on and on. Of course, women are not only the victims of climate change, but also some of its most formidable opponents. Around the world, women activists are on the front line of the fight against the oppressive systems hastening our climate crisis.

For two years, Portland's Climate Justice Committee, charged with overseeing the school board's resolution, had the good fortune to partner with one of those activists: the Marshall Islands performance poet Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner. (See Michelle Nicola's "Teaching to the Heart: Poetry, Climate Change, and Sacred Spaces," *Rethinking Schools*, summer 2017.) Kathy led two professional development sessions for teachers and community members and more than 30 presentations to about

2,000 students — all supported by the school district, thanks to the climate justice resolution.

Too often, climate change is framed as an environmental issue — about carbon dioxide, melting glaciers, ocean acidification, and polar bears. Kathy emphasizes that climate change is much more; it's about the intertwined legacy of colonialism, racism, militarism, sexism, and a profit-driven economic system. And in the Marshall Islands, the climate catastrophe is layered onto the tragic history of nuclear testing, which has taken an especially harsh toll on women through its horrible legacy of miscarriages and birth defects.

Like other colonized people who have been invaded, bombed, abused, and lied about, the Marshallese have an intimate relationship with the violence of colonialism and the violence of climate change. As Kathy writes on her blog:

> I have been passionately advocating against climate change because of my deep sense of fear that our islands will one day be wiped off the map, due to the rising sea levels. But I never realized that we, some of us more than others, have already known the pain of lost homelands. Three [Marshall] islands have been literally vaporized because of the power of the bombs. Bikini and Rongelap atoll are forever lost to our people because of high levels of radiation.
>
> This is a loss we've had to bear "for a greater good" — a reasoning that is very similar to those who are convinced that our need for consumption outweighs the livelihoods of others.
> For an International Women's Day blog post a couple years ago, Kathy wrote about the impact of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands:
>
> From 1946 to 1968, 67 nuclear weapons were detonated, which is the equivalent of 1.7 Hiroshima bombs being exploded daily for 12 years in terms of radiation exposure. Just the Bravo shot alone, a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb, was 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima.
>
> Women disproportionately bear the burden of the trauma their society has been exposed to — in this case, they bear the burden of a nuclear legacy. It was women who found themselves with birth defects after exposure to the radiation and fallout. "Jellyfish babies" is what they call them. Tiny beings with no bones.
>
> Kathy elaborates in her poem, "History Project":
>
> the miscarriages gone unspoken
> the broken translations
> *I never told my husband*
> *I thought it was my fault*
> *I thought there must be something wrong*
> *inside me*
>
> I flip through snapshots of American marines and nurses
> branded white with bloated grins
> sucking beers and tossing beach balls
> along our
> shores

and my islander ancestors
crosslegged before a general
listening to his
fairy tale
about how it's
"for the good of mankind"

to hand over our islands
let them blast
radioactive energy
into our lazy limbed coconut trees
our sagging breadfruit trees
our busy fishes that sparkle
like new sun
into our coral reefs
brilliant
as an aurora borealis woven
beneath a glassy sea

An essential classroom resource on this hidden history is the film *Nuclear Savage: The Island Experiments of Secret Project 4.1*. The racism of nuclear testing is breathtaking. In 1956, Merril Eisenbud, director of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission's health and safety laboratory, described plans for sending Marshallese back to the atoll of Rongelap, just three years after the largest nuclear test in history: "That island is by far the most contaminated place on Earth and it will be very interesting to get a measure of human uptake when people live in a contaminated environment." As if that were not outrage enough, he added, "While it is true that these people do not live the way Westerners do, civilized people, it is nevertheless also true that these people are more like us than the mice."

The racism of nuclear testing is breathtaking.

In addition to "History Project," Kathy's poems "Dear Matafele Peinam," "Tell Them," "Fishbone Hair," "Two Degrees," "Utilomar," — all available as video performances online — and her agonizing new poem, "Monster," introduce middle and high school students to how climate change is embedded in a web of colonial and gender oppression. Kathy points out that the Marshall Islands society is matrilineal. "Our mothers bestow land rights and chiefly titles. We believe that it is through our mothers that we receive power. But what will happen to that power if there is no land to pass down?"

Our climate justice resolution in Portland talks about the importance of centering the lives of "frontline" people in our curriculum — Indigenous peoples in the Arctic, sub-Saharan Africa, Bangladesh, Pacific Islands, and throughout North America. The work of Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner is a vital resource to remind students that women are in the front line of the front line — not just as the victims of colonialism and climate change, but as poets and protesters, actors, and activists. As Kathy reminds us on her blog — and as we see with each passing day — women are giving "birth to a new life, to fresh possibilities." ■

Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner's work can be found at her blog, jkijiner.wordpress.com, and in her book Iep Jaltok: Poems from a Marshallese Daughter *(University of Arizona Press, 2017).*

Students "Warrior Up" for Climate Justice

BY BILL BIGELOW

We're sitting in the cozy, inviting library of Portland, Oregon's Madison High School (re-named McDaniel High School in 2021). For her research and presentation on a "climate warrior," Ana chose the late Stephen Schneider, a leading scientist on the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. I ask what impact it had on her to study Schneider. She simply says, "He makes me want to be a better person."

ROSE HIGH BEAR

In an audacious embrace of Portland schools' 2016 climate justice resolution, teachers in the high school's Citizen Chemistry for All course — a class enrolling more than 300 sophomores — have adopted an essential question: "Why are human changes to Earth's carbon cycles at the heart of climate destabilization?" In a paper on McDaniel's approach to studying climate change, "Warrioring Up for Climate Justice," chemistry teacher Treothe Bullock and Restorative Justice coordinator Nyanga Uuka explained that teachers "wanted to support students in building a bridge between the personal and the planetary." Students demonstrate their learning in an annual two-day "Climate Justice Fair," and represent "communities which are engaging as 'climate warriors,' providing critical analysis of their work and/or proposing additional needed activism."

An honest, rigorous look at the science of climate change can be terrifying and disheartening. Falling into cynicism is a hazard one confronts simply by living in our society, with its inequality, violence, and lack of democracy. But add to that, knowledge of the inexorable rise of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere — and what this heat-trapping pollution means for the Earth — and despair feels like more than a threat, it feels like common sense. Knowing this, McDaniel chemistry teachers focus not purely on the science of climate destabilization, but also on individuals and organizations taking action to reverse it, inviting students to research "climate warriors," those who have not given up, those who "know the truth," and yet are not defeated by it.

McDaniel chemistry teachers — which included Bullock and Rachel Stagner, both members of

Portland schools' Climate Justice Committee, and Tim Kniser — require students to identify one of the climate-related crises or issues explored in class and to create a slideshow, poster, short film, podcast, or some other way to "show how a 'climate warrior' is fighting against this issue." And at the fair, students offer verbal and written feedback to at least four other presenters.

I attended the fair in 2017 and 2018. In addition to other chemistry students, audience for the presentations includes other staff members, 9th-grade students, and community members.

At the inauguration of the first Climate Justice Fair in spring 2017, the library buzzed with anticipation. Bullock launched the day with an invitation: "There isn't anyone who has the answer. We're figuring it out." Every student received a "Climate Justice Passport" to take notes in and had to identify the climate warrior, the issue they are involved in, the chemistry connection, and to evaluate the proposed solution.

Students' "warriors" have been diverse and have included: Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, a plaintiff in the landmark Our Children's Trust lawsuit, *Juliana v. United States of America*; Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Irish president Mary Robinson, who works on the intersection of climate change and women's issues; Rose High Bear (Deg Hit'an Dine), producer of the NPR series "Wisdom of the Elders"; West Virginia mountaintop removal activist Maria Gunnoe; Berta Cáceres, the Honduran Indigenous and peasant organizer who won the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015 and was assassinated in 2016; Crystal Lameman, of Canada's Beaver Lake Cree Nation, featured in the film *This Changes Everything*; and Zack Rago, a reef aquarist and scuba diver who appears in the film *Chasing Coral*.

"I'd never heard of environmental racism. I never really heard that this affects people of color more than others."

The young woman presenting Rago as her "climate warrior" taught me more about coral during her short presentation than I'd ever known. (Did you know that coral is simultaneously rock, plant, and animal?)

In this year's fair, one student presented on Robert Bullard, a scholar and activist often referred to as the father of environmental justice. One of the Latina students listening to the presentation said, "I'd never heard of environmental racism. I never really heard that this affects people of color more than others."

Other students chose organizations or movements as their warriors rather than individuals. One student focused on 350.org, especially their "Keep it in the ground" campaign — "They really want you and me to get involved in this." A couple of students presented the Indigenous movement to oppose DAPL, the Dakota Access Pipeline. About the pipeline's builders, Energy Transfer Partners, one student presenter commented: "There is not much depth to what they want. They just want more." Another pair of students presented on the 350 Pacific Climate Warriors. One presenter, Julia, began intensely: "Before I get into it more, I just have to say that people's homes are at risk. And how would we feel if we lost our homes?" After the short presentation, one student said, "I find it inspiring that they are working together to save their home. Their mantra is 'We're not drowning, we're fighting.'"

One of the tensions in teaching about climate justice is that the more students come to recognize how dire the crisis is, the more they want to try to make a difference. And that's great. But our culture is soaked in individualism, and inevitably, some students' default reaction is to think only about what they can do by themselves. As I listened to presentations, I asked students what they intended to do with all that they'd learned from their "climate warriors." One student said, "I intend to take five-minute showers from now on." Another committed to drinking only from reusable water bottles. And one student, clearly moved by her research, described her personal commitment to abandon eating meat, because of cattle's outsized carbon footprint.

There is nothing wrong with any of these. But we can't consume — or conserve — our way to climate sanity. That's going to take organizing and collective action. Encouragingly, a number of students emphasized this in their presentations. Leticia said that learning about the work of Indigenous activist Winona LaDuke, of Honor the Earth, "makes me want to protest pipelines." Another young woman, whose climate warrior was the Marshall Islands poet and activist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, said that Jetñil-Kijiner taught her: "Don't ignore the issue. Talk to people. Participate in protests against coal mines and pipelines. And make changes in your own life."

Despair is always a step away when we begin looking deeply at the contours of our climate emergency. But in McDaniel's Climate Justice Warrior project, students encounter the hope and determination of activists alongside the disturbing science of climate change. And as dire as the news can appear, our curriculum needn't be similarly grim. During the Climate Justice Fair, the school library was electric with laughter — students telling stories, others listening respectfully, blurting out the frequent "wow" and "I never knew that."

In McDaniel's Climate Justice Warrior project, students encounter the hope and determination of activists alongside the disturbing science of climate change.

This is the kind of teaching that needs to be going on in every high school in the country. ■

Tax the Rich, Fight Climate Change

BY BILL BIGELOW

Following the 2018 midterm elections, national media missed one piece of very good news. By a margin of almost two-to-one, tens of thousands of Portland, Oregon, voters approved an imaginative clean energy initiative that offers a model for the rest of the country — at the ballot box, but also in our classrooms.

Work on Portland's Clean Energy Fund began in February of 2016 in a church basement when representatives of the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), Verde (a community-based environmental organization), the Coalition of Communities of Color, the NAACP, and 350PDX (the local affiliate of 350.org) met to discuss how work to fight climate change could simultaneously address racial and economic justice and create living wage jobs. The initiative was the first ballot measure in Oregon's history launched and led by people of color. And it's what we need a lot more of: conversations, activism (including curriculum) that lead people to recognize that the "just transition" away from fossil fuels can also be a move toward a society that is cleaner, more equal, and more democratic.

MICHAEL DUFFY

The Clean Energy Fund will be supported by a tax — technically, a surcharge — of 1 percent on corporations with gross retail receipts nationally of $1 billion and at least $500,000 in Portland. Food, medicine, and healthcare are exempt. A 1 percent tax on the 1 percent. Corporations affected include big retailers like Walmart, Target, J. C. Penney, and Best Buy, but also the media behemoth Comcast, which dominates Portland's cable market. Organizers estimate that the tax will raise $30 million a year. The money will go to a fund dedicated to clean energy projects — renewable energy and energy efficiency — targeted explicitly to benefit low-income communities and communities of color. The fund will also support regenerative agriculture and green infrastructure projects aimed at greenhouse gas sequestration and sustainable local food production.

An important component of the new initiative will be creating clean energy jobs that "prioritize skills training, and workforce development for economically disadvantaged and traditionally underemployed workers, including communities of color, women, persons with disabilities, and the chronically underemployed." Workers will be paid more than $20 an hour, which at the time was at least 180 percent of minimum wage.

Khanh Pham, an organizer with APANO (and now an Oregon state representative), recently spoke about why her organization helped create this initiative: "Asians and Pacific Islanders are the first and hardest hit by climate change. Many of our members, particularly our immigrant members, are struggling to find living wage work. This ballot initiative allows us to tackle both climate change and growing inequality at the same time."

The tax targets rich corporations not just because they are rich, and can easily afford to pay — although that would be reason enough — but also because of their climate-hostile practices: selling heavily packaged non-recyclable products and their carbon-intensive shipping of goods long distances from factories often powered by the dirtiest fossil fuels. Levied only on giant retailers and not on local businesses, the measure also represents a way to favor local production and sales.

Classroom Implications

Portland's successful clean energy campaign offers lots of lessons for how we can reframe the climate crisis in our classrooms. So often just the mention of climate change is accompanied by a sigh of despair. But the Portland initiative shows that we can shift from what often feels like a journey into dystopia to a narrative of social transformation. Yes, our curriculum should focus on the increasingly scary greenhouse gas trajectory, but our students are unlikely to be moved solely by horror stories of raging wildfires, melting glaciers, rising seas, monster hurricanes, and yes, dying polar bears. We also need to engage their imaginations, their hope for a better world. The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report calls for "rapid, far-reaching, and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society," which need to "go hand in hand with ensuring a more sustainable and equitable society." This can and should be at the heart of a climate change, a climate *justice*, curriculum: imagining how a just transition away from fossil fuels can create a healthier and more equal society.

Portland's successful clean energy campaign offers lots of lessons for how we can reframe the climate crisis in our classrooms.

The multi-organizational conversation that led up to Portland's clean energy initiative began from the standpoint of *social justice* — what has been called an "environmentalism of the poor." Instead of a conservative curriculum that asks students to consider all they will lose as a result of global warming, which is an implicit embrace of the status quo, we need a radical curriculum that asks students to consider all they will gain from a just transition away from fossil fuels.

Portland's campaign to establish the Clean Energy Fund had solidarity at its heart — people in diverse communities coming together to pursue a just transition that makes life better for the vast majority of people. Our "just transition curriculum" also needs to have solidarity at its heart. As we make activism common sense in our classrooms, we need to help students practice thinking about the ways communities can collaborate across historic borders toward a common future.

This is what Adam Sanchez, Tim Swinehart, and I attempted in a role play we wrote, "Teaching Blockadia: How the Movement Against Fossil Fuels Is Changing the World," posted recently at the Zinn Education Project. In the role play, students join one of seven groups, each of which seeks to protect its community from the impact of fossil fuels. For example, some of the groups include ecoCheyenne, Northern Cheyenne tribal activists in Montana, fighting coal strip-mining and methane development; Our Hamburg, Our Grid, the Hamburg, Germany, group that spearheaded the campaign to seize the electrical grid from private utilities; the "Warriors of Sompeta," in Sompeta, India, who organized to shut down development of a coal-fired power plant in their community; and the Beaver Lake Cree Nation, struggling

against tar sands oil development on their land in Alberta, Canada.

In the role play, students learn about the peculiarities of their situations, but also rotate from group to group to encounter different struggles and to figure out how they can work in solidarity with each other toward a green future — one not dominated by fossil fuels or the imperatives of for-profit corporations. Students-as-activists come together to demonstrate at a "Fossil Fuels for a Better Future" gathering, give speeches, and display posters they've created on the vision that unites their activism. Part of students' assignment is to visually represent how at least two of the anti-fossil fuel struggles are connected and can support one another.

Portland's just-approved clean energy initiative will help schools in some obvious and immediate ways. The fund can support the placement of solar panels on school buildings; it can support revitalized school gardening and farming programs; and support programs that train young people in green building design, weatherization, and solar installation. But it also offers teachers a paradigm shift on climate education. It shows that when we begin to explore the roots of multiple injustices — from climate change to income inequality — we can begin to imagine the outlines of a movement and a curriculum powered by solidarity.

"McDaniel students are pursuing futures in the fields of climate justice and sustainability, and taking their educational experience into their own hands."

An update: As of 2022, a student-led group at McDaniel High School in Portland — the site of the annual Climate Justice Fair organized by Chemistry for All teachers — has joined with community groups to apply for a Portland Clean Energy Fund grant to develop a student-teacher-community collaborative to shape a climate justice career path at the school. Students are working with the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, Latino Network, and the Somali American Council of Oregon to imagine ways that climate justice education can serve broader community needs. As the grant request explains: "McDaniel students are pursuing futures in the fields of climate justice and sustainability, and taking their educational experience into their own hands. With this project, we will create a plan to design and implement curriculum through a climate justice lens, which can serve as a model for other PPS high schools to adapt and expand upon." At the time of publication, no decision had been made on funding this proposal. ■

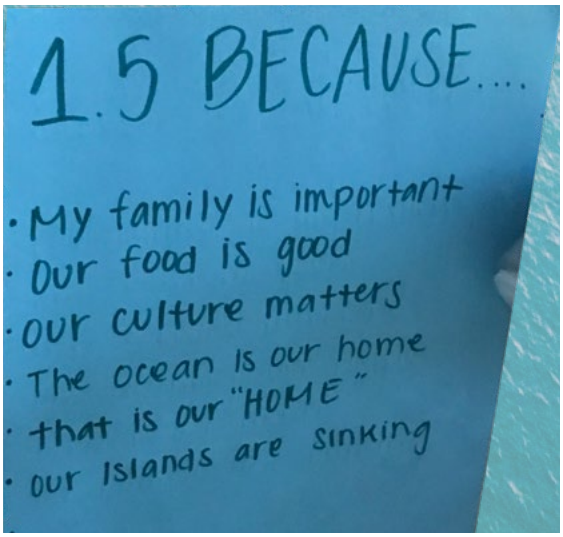
“Because Our Islands Are Our Life”

BY MOÉ YONAMINE

“Because our islands are our life,” Akeke said into the mic in front of more than 1,000 people gathered in Portland’s Roosevelt High School commons for our Unity Fest.

On this Friday night, our Ethnic Studies classes had organized an event to bring our community together — one of the most diverse schools in Oregon. Combatting overt acts of racism in our neighborhood, students like Akeke had stepped up in front of a sea of families and peers to deliver a piece of themselves. The entire Pacific Island (PI) Club stood behind him, 27 students strong, shouting together “1.5!” — demanding the world adhere to the target of no more than 1.5° Celsius of warming over pre-industrial levels.

“Because my people’s homes are being destroyed,” read Eseta.



“Because my home is dying and we don’t want to be known as ‘climate refugees,’” echoed Leka.

“1.5!” The room vibrated with the collective boom that spread through the commons as phones recorded and parents crowded in for a better view. “1.5,” J.J. bounced as he shouted, as if trying to reach the rest of the world with his voice.

My students represent a diversity of islands, cultures, and experiences from Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia. In early May 2019, all of the PI Club students squeezed into my classroom on a hot spring day, determined to learn, organize, and advocate for their ancestral islands in the face of climate change. This was not a new journey for some with older siblings and cousins who had testified three years ago at a school board meeting and met with district representatives to demand that we stop using textbooks that lie about climate change. From stories students told in my classroom after school, conversations with students’ families, and personal writings, I knew how many of our PI students and families are threatened by the impact of climate change to their home islands.

It was with this in the bellies of their souls that the students walked out for the March 15 climate strike. My Ethnic Studies students had just participated in a Pacific Climate Warriors role play, portraying island peoples finding solidarity to help each other fight for justice through the United Nations. My students walked out to join more than 2,000 young people from around Portland who had gathered to march. Upon their return to campus, Gwenn came into my classroom with her friends and cousins and plopped down at the table.

“So, how was the march?” I asked.

“It was so emotional. It made me cry,” she said. “I didn’t think I’d get emotional like that. So many people were out there and I couldn’t stop thinking about our islands,” she said.

“But they didn’t let us talk,” said Makeleta.

During the student speeches part of the rally at the end of the march, student after student went to

the mic but none was Pacific Islander. The students had asked to say a few words and were told there was no time. "How can you say that you don't have time to hear from us?" said Gwenn.

"This isn't just some issue," said Makeleta. "This is about my family," she echoed.

A number of my students were set to attend the Portland Public Schools (PPS) Climate Justice Committee's strategy day in April. My students expressed the urgency in representing their voices as PI students within the broader fight for climate justice education. Nine students from Roosevelt attended, blending in with about 50 high school and middle school students across the district. They spent the day analyzing the PPS climate justice resolution that Roosevelt PI students before them had helped propose and pass just three years before. My students were now strategizing ways to hold PPS accountable.

At the end of the meeting, students developed actions they could take to push for a bold climate justice education. "Have a PI version of this meeting," said Melipone. "We need to talk together first because this is an emergency for us," he said. This became one of the key demands from the youth gathering.

Back at school, Akash said, "I hate that we have to keep waiting and ask PPS for money when this is so serious for us. I say we just do it. Just do the PI Summit, with or without PPS." And from there, the idea of a PI Climate Youth Summit was born with the seniors taking the lead in organizing an action project.

"It's either walk now or swim later," said Akash.

The next week, a three-hour summit was ready, with facilitation by Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Makerusa Porotesano. Kathy had been to my classes several times in recent years, teaching students about the power of poetry to talk back to the world, modeling stories from the Marshall Islands in a voice of resistance. Makerusa had presented about climate change and the often-untold histories of Samoa to my Ethnic Studies classes. The students knew right away that they wanted Kathy and Makerusa to lead them to a place where they can learn, gather their voices, and find their own fight as immigrants and members of a Pacific Island diaspora.

Through the course of the afternoon, wrapped up in an unbearably hot classroom with 11 fans blowing, climate change was the joke of the day as students sat uncomfortably. Despite the heat, students were eager to understand climate change, to be educated about fighters who look like them, and to joyfully connect across stories and laughter of island culture.

At the end of the afternoon, Kathy turned to the board and wrote, "1.5 because . . ." And from there, each student wrote — some about memories of being home, a few telling about sacred grandparents and family members they left behind and others addressing the pain, the fight, and the determination of rising up together. Threading the poem together in one collective voice, everyone agreed that this was the piece they had to do together at the Unity Fest as PI Club — to show up for their communities and home islands symbolically as one.

Stepping up to the four microphones facing the huge crowd of people at the Unity Fest, the students roared "1.5!" to the screaming and clapping of their peers and families.

"It's either walk now or swim later," said Akash.

"Because if our islands drown, our identity goes with it," read Leka.

"And I don't want to lose my roots," said Kaiya.

Taking the words of 350 Pacific's Climate Warriors, the 27 students closed in unison:

"Because we are not drowning. We are fighting." ■

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1.5 Degrees, Because . . .

By the students of Roosevelt's Pacific Island Club

1.5
Because our islands are our life
Our loved ones are there
Our animals roam free in paradise

1.5
Because the coconuts my mom always talks about
The sweet pineapple, taro, and lu sipi as a part of who we are
Listening to our elders' ancestral stories

1.5
Because people's homes are being destroyed
Our music is becoming extinct
Our sacred coral will die

1.5
Because family members are dying
My home is dying
And we don't want to be known as climate refugees

1.5
Because our islands shouldn't be history but something to live on forever
It is where our heart is
It's what our lives and futures depend on

1.5
Because if our islands drown, our identity goes with it
And I don't want to lose my roots

1.5
Because the sinking of my friends' islands
Protecting the treasure of our people
The warming of the globe that our islands made the smallest impact on

1.5
Because of my history and ancestors
Our cultures valuable to each of us from different islands

1.5
Because my roots come from there
It's where I grew up
It's where my family is
It's where my life is
It's a part of me

1.5
Because I don't want to lose the ocean that we swim in and the beach that we eat on
I don't want to see more of my family members struggle through the "American lifestyle"
I don't want to see my family go through the pain of leaving their home

1.5
Because the islands is what represents me
and I want to be able to show my kids and grandkids where we come from

1.5
Because our feelings matter
It's either walk now or swim later
and we don't want to be known as climate refugees

1.5
Because our voices need to be heard loud and clear
1.5 because "we are not drowning, we are fighting"

Teach the Fossil Fuel Industry — Our Students' Enemy

BY BILL BIGELOW

A while back, I was invited to lead a workshop on teaching the climate crisis at a teacher education program at a Portland, Oregon-area college. I chose an activity I wrote called "The Mystery of the Three Scary Numbers" — included in the Rethinking Schools book *A People's Curriculum for the Earth* and at the Zinn Education Project's Teach Climate Justice site. It's based on a famous Bill McKibben article in *Rolling Stone*, "Global Warming's Terrifying New Math." The terrifying math that McKibben lays out is simple: To keep the climate from warming more than two degrees Celsius over pre-industrial temperatures, the world's "carbon budget" is 565 gigatons — carbon of all sources that, collectively, the world can emit and have a reasonable hope of staying under two degrees. The terrifying number is how much carbon is stored in the known reserves of fossil fuel companies and countries that act like fossil fuel companies, like Saudi Arabia: 2,795 gigatons — five times the amount of the world's carbon budget. Yes, I know, there are lots of problems with this formulation. For one thing, two degrees is a horribly inadequate target, which would condemn much of the world to climate catastrophe. And the 2,795 number grows every day, as profit-driven fossil fuel companies — and the governments they purchase — drill and dig and scrape the Earth for still more fossil fuels. But the core lesson remains: We cannot burn a substantial portion of known fossil fuel reserves and hope to survive.

RICK RAPPAPORT

In the activity, students receive short clues on strips of paper about different aspects of the three scary numbers — 565 gigatons, 2,795 gigatons, 2 degrees Celsius — and circulate in the classroom, finding people with other clues that connect with theirs. Following the activity, students write on the three numbers, what makes them scary, and the implications: What should we do?

The future teachers had lots of thoughts on this, but one person was especially passionate: "We have to convince the fossil fuel companies to keep all these fossil fuels in the ground — it's crazy to continue to explore for more and more when we already have too much."

This was a heart-felt, well-meaning comment. But think about this for a moment. The climate crisis puts at risk the future of life on Earth. Isn't it lunacy that humanity and nature should be held hostage by the fossil fuel industry? Should we have to plead with them to exercise restraint? Does this have the slightest chance of success? These corporations cannot be reasoned with; they cannot

be talked into committing suicide as fossil fuel producers. An article in the Aug. 9, 2019, edition of the *New York Times* ("With Saudi Aramco Set to Disclose Earnings, Could an I.P.O. Be Next?") underscored what's at stake for these companies. Aramco, the world's largest oil producer, had 2018 profits of $111 billion, making it by far the most profitable corporation in the world. Said another way: The more this industry ignores the climate crisis, the richer it gets.

And yet, the threat the fossil fuel industry poses to the future of life on Earth makes almost no appearance in mainstream curriculum. Here in Oregon, where I taught social studies for almost 30 years, the state K–12 social studies standards, approved in May of 2018, include not a single mention of "fossil fuels," "oil," "coal," or "gas" in the standards' 27 pages.

The Next Generation Science Standards acknowledge that "Human activities, such as the release of greenhouse gases from burning fossil fuels, are major factors in the current rise in Earth's mean surface temperature (global warming)." But the standards fail to acknowledge the fundamental contradiction between continued fossil fuel use and planetary survival. Instead, a middle school NGSS standard offers this meek (and convoluted) suggestion: "Reducing the level of climate change and reducing human vulnerability to whatever climate changes do occur depend on the understanding of climate science, engineering capabilities, and other kinds of knowledge, such as understanding human behavior and on applying that knowledge wisely in decisions and activities."

The climate crisis puts at risk the future of life on Earth. Isn't it lunacy that humanity and nature should be held hostage by the fossil fuel industry?

No doubt, teachers can use this standard to teach critically, but this incoherent, obfuscating language fails to acknowledge the obvious: We are in a climate emergency; our house is burning down and it's urgent that we stop those people who are pouring fuel on the fire.

We need a curricular conversation about how we can teach about fossil fuels from the earliest grades through teacher education, and in multiple disciplines. At the Zinn Education Project, we feature simulations and role plays that can help students recognize how the fossil fuel industry jeopardizes life everywhere:

- "The Climate Crisis Trial: A Role Play on the Roots of Global Warming" puts oil and coal companies on trial, along with an assortment of other social groups — like U.S. consumers, and even the system of global capitalism — for "putting at risk the lives of countless millions of people around the world."
- In "Dirty Oil and Shovel-Ready Jobs: A Role Play on Tar Sands and the Keystone XL Pipeline," multiple groups wrestle with the question of whether the president should approve this massive fossil fuel enterprise — a project now defeated, but which teaches lots of important lessons.
- And to underscore the relentless greed of the fossil fuel industry, "Standing with Standing Rock: A Role Play on the Dakota Access Pipeline" asks students to look at the winners and losers of this pipeline, and especially to examine the impact on the Indigenous peoples of the area, whose supply of clean water this project jeopardizes.
- "Coal, Chocolate Chip Cookies, and Mountaintop Removal" begins with a clever but problematic game developed by the American Coal Foundation, which turns mountaintop removal coal mining into a playful hunt for buried chocolate chips in cookies. Played critically, the game can expose the brutality of mountaintop removal mining, how the market system externalizes social and environmental costs, and the propaganda spread by the fossil fuel industry.

- In a role play that emphasizes hope and possibility, "Blockadia: Teaching How the Movement Against Fossil Fuels Is Changing the World," students meet activists from seven different organizations who in imaginative ways challenge the fossil fuel industry, as they create non-polluting alternatives in the process. Each group finds ways to express solidarity with the others.

These lessons tell the truth about the deadly impact of fossil fuels, so as to engage students in the vital work of exploring alternatives — through organizing and activism. And teaching against fossil fuels is not just for older students. In her Rethinking Schools article, "How One 2nd-Grader's Story Inspired Climate Justice Curriculum," Portland teacher Rachel Hanes describes a Storyline project she taught with her students, in which citizens in their imaginary community of Happy Town receive a letter from the president of the Carson Environmental Oil Co., proposing a pipeline that will come through a part of their town and "bring many new high-paying jobs to your area." Student-citizens joined a town hall meeting to discuss the proposal, wrote persuasive letters to the mayor, and defeated the proposal in a community-wide vote. Rachel followed up by introducing her students to other young activists at Standing Rock and in the Our Children's Trust lawsuit.

Students everywhere need to understand the role that the fossil fuel industry plays in jeopardizing their futures — and learn how to resist.

"Climate justice" education means a lot of things. But one key aspect is that we involve students in probing the social and economic roots of this crisis. The climate crisis is inexplicable without looking at the intersection of fossil fuels and the capitalist system. Students everywhere need to understand the role that the fossil fuel industry plays in jeopardizing their futures — and learn how to resist. Today, these should be basic skills. ■

Teacher Unions Take on the Climate Crisis

BY RACHEL M. COHEN

As young people across the country join the global movement to mobilize school strikes to demand climate action, one group is starting to think more seriously about how to best support those efforts: their teachers.

Educators, like those in the California Federation of Teachers and the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), are beginning to leverage their power both as teachers and union members to push the bounds of climate activism.

COURTESY OF CFT AND AFT LOCAL 1931

Kurt Ostrow, a high school English teacher in Fall River, Massachusetts, has helped lead his union to the forefront of the climate movement over the last few years.

"Climate to me has always been the major crisis that needs to be addressed, and even though in the classroom I really try to prioritize it, it just doesn't feel always enough," he says. "So I have been trying to use the leverage that we have as a union of 110,000 people to support the movement."

In his first year of teaching five years ago, Ostrow went as a delegate to MTA's annual meeting, where the union's social justice caucus — Educators for a Democratic Union — sought a teacher to introduce a resolution (known as a "New Business Item") recommending the divestment of state pension plans from coal. Ostrow's college friends had been leaders in the campus divestment movement, and he had always participated in their actions as an ally, so he was happy to volunteer to introduce it.

"We lost a quorum, so we weren't able to take a vote on it, but the next year we did it again and it passed," he said. "That was really how I first dipped my toes in."

When the youth climate strikes took off in 2019, Ostrow, who now serves on the board of his statewide union, began thinking harder about how teachers could help them. At its March board meeting, he decided to introduce a resolution that the MTA would support the youth climate strike scheduled for March 15. It passed unanimously.

At the union's next annual meeting, held in May two months later, leaders of the social justice

caucus deliberated over what environmental resolutions they should introduce to best support the Green New Deal.

"I knew we could put forward a resolution that said MTA supports the Green New Deal, and I think that would have passed easily, but I really wanted to create a decision point, like a 'Which side are you on?' moment that would really force teachers to confront their own conscience," he said. "So I decided to go radical, and I put forward a New Business Item calling for the MTA to propose a national teachers strike in support of the Green New Deal."

It's illegal for teachers to strike in Massachusetts, and following Ostrow's impassioned speech at the conference, there was heated debate. In the end, though, it passed.

Ostrow was pleasantly surprised. "I'm a member of the Sunrise Movement, and my dream is to try and coordinate our efforts with Sunrise's long-term vision of striking for a Green New Deal," he said. "So I was just trying to plant the seeds in members' brains, but to be honest I hadn't done any organizing around it. I wasn't calling other locals and saying, 'Hey, there will be this NBI and will you support it?'"

"Our goal is to figure out how we can push the MTA to take more and more radical actions in support of the Green New Deal."

At the National Education Association's (NEA) annual meeting in July, an MTA delegate introduced a resolution for the national union to also call for striking in support of the Green New Deal. It failed, with too many members nervous about the legality of such a move.

The next month, two high school students who were organizing for the Sept. 20 global youth climate strike came to the MTA's August board meeting and asked the union to pass something backing their efforts. The union did, and also upped its engagement in the weeks leading up to Sept. 20.

"For the March strike, we just endorsed it, issued a press statement, and Max Page [the union's vice president] spoke at a rally," said Ostrow. "There wasn't a lot of coordinated effort."

Leading up to the Sept. 20, 2019, strike, explained MTA's president Merrie Najimy, the union did more outreach, and organized a statewide conference call with members to discuss how to get involved. "Our legal department wrote an advisory where the gist was to say you have this right to participate, and as an organizer you can push your principal, your superintendent, to make this a field trip day," she said. "You have the right to take a personal day."

On the day of the strike, Ostrow took his students down to a climate rally as part of a class field trip. He knows he was fortunate: In New York City, the school district, despite saying students could receive excused absences for participating in the climate strike, issued an order that barred teachers from going. The city's education department decided that any employee participation, including class field trips or even staging walkouts on school property, would violate rules of ensuring a "politically neutral learning environment."

The MTA's work has continued since the strike. At its October 2019 board meeting, the union officially endorsed the Green New Deal, and a new member-driven climate crisis team held its first meeting in November. "Our goal is to figure out how we can push the MTA to take more and more radical actions in support of the Green New Deal," Ostrow said. One possible tactic is taking collective sick days. "If you can take off to take care of your kids, well, the fact is Mother Earth is sick," he said.

MTA is not the first teacher union to endorse the Green New Deal. In March, the 120,000-member California Federation of Teachers passed a resolution in support of it, and was actually the first statewide labor organization in the country to adopt a climate justice agenda in 2016. That agenda includes support for fossil fuel divestment, for enacting climate legislation, and for educating members and students about the crisis.

Looking Nationally

So far, the national teacher unions have been more guarded.

AFT President Randi Weingarten marched with union members in New York City during the Sept. 20 strike, but the statement she issued did not commit the union to any political action beyond educating children about the issues. "If we can help students learn about the science of climate change, help them understand free speech and citizen advocacy as part of civic education, and encourage their belief in themselves, we've done our job in helping the next generation secure their future," Weingarten said.

Lily Eskelsen García, president of the NEA, has taken a similar approach. In a statement, García said, "Educators around the nation are proud that their students are leading on climate change because they know it is an urgent threat. We teach our kids to be leaders in the classroom and their communities, so it is inspiring to watch them speaking up to demand action on the climate crisis from elected leaders."

Najimy is more optimistic about growing activism from teacher unions. She pointed to a new working group on climate justice that's forming with the national Bargaining for the Common Good network, a coalition of labor and grassroots organizations dedicated to leveraging union contracts for social justice. "When we go back to the bargaining table, we can use our power in labor to negotiate new ways of acting for the climate," she said.

"We risk losing credibility with an entire generation of students if we cannot take action in support of the defining cause of their generation."

College faculty, like their K–12 counterparts, are also starting to organize in support of their students.

Leading up to September's climate strike, a small group of professors organized an open letter calling on fellow educators to cancel classes and strike. Almost 830 people signed it. Two of the organizers, Jonathan Isham, an economics and environmental policy professor at Middlebury, and Lee Smithey, a peace and conflict studies professor at Swarthmore, co-authored a *Guardian* op-ed in late August urging the same thing. "We risk losing credibility with an entire generation of students if we cannot take action in support of the defining cause of their generation," they wrote.

Isham works at Middlebury with environmental activist Bill McKibben, and he taught McKibben's seven 350.org co-founders back when they were college students. In an interview, Isham said he understands it can be easier in some ways for college faculty to take off compared to public school teachers. He praised his university's human resources department for being supportive of faculty who wanted to cancel classes for the strike, as professors were given the option to take a personal day off.

"I think the No. 1 thing educators can do is educate, and share what we know about the climate crisis and climate instability with our students," he said. "That is our primary job, but I like to say the classroom has porous walls, and I think it's important to also get out in the world and stand up as a citizen." ■

A slightly different version of this article was first published in In These Times.

Rachel M. Cohen is a journalist based in Washington, D.C. Follow her on Twitter @rmc031

The Freedom to Harm vs. the Freedom from Harm

BY BILL BIGELOW

The smartest piece I have read during the COVID-19 era is Ibram X. Kendi's May 4, 2020, *Atlantic* article "We're Still Living and Dying in the Slaveholders' Republic."

When armed demonstrators appeared at the Michigan Capitol, protesting the state's stay-at-home orders, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer noted that some of them "carried nooses and Confederate flags and swastikas." "I love freedom," one demonstrator told Fox News. "In America we should be free."

ADOLFO VALLE

Kendi connects the dots — and the way he connects them has implications for how we teach about freedom, race, U.S. history, climate change, our relationship with the Earth, and the future of humanity.

Kendi roots today's tug-of-war over freedom in the country's history of enslavement:

Slaveholders desired a state that wholly secured their individual freedom to enslave, not to mention their freedom to disenfranchise, to exploit, to impoverish, to demean, and to silence and kill the demeaned. The freedom to. *The freedom to* harm. Which is to say, in coronavirus terms, the freedom to infect.

Slaveholders disavowed a state that secured any form of communal freedom — the freedom of the community *from* slavery, from disenfranchisement, from exploitation, from poverty, from all the demeaning and silencing and killing. *The freedom from*. The freedom from harm. Which is to say, in coronavirus terms, the freedom from infection.

Proclamations that "we are all in this together" distract us from seeing how people's responses to COVID-19 are rooted in a history of racial capitalism. Justifications for slavery — and for waging war to defend slavery — prefigure today's shrill demands to "open up our country" in the name of freedom.

For Kendi, the core struggle in U.S. history turns on two contradictory visions of freedom — individual freedom and community freedom:

> From the beginning of the American project, the powerful individual has been battling for his constitutional freedom to harm, and the vulnerable community has been battling for its constitutional freedom from harm. . . .
>
> Slaveholders hardly seemed to care that secession was going to condemn the non-slaveholding southern community to war, to mass injuries and death on battlefields and in contraband camps. Slaveholders hardly seemed to care that the Confederate States would have been a veritable hell for poor, non-slaveholding whites and the hell of hells for enslaved Blacks. Too many Americans today hardly seem to care that withdrawing states from stay-at-home orders too soon would scarcely free their communities from the viral war, from mass infections, and deaths on hospital and bedroom beds, a veritable disaster for innumerable white Americans and a disaster of disasters for innumerable Americans of color.

Kendi reviews some of the brutal statistics that shine a light on the racial disparities of the pandemic. On April 24, Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia, a former enslaving state, was the first governor to ease quarantine restrictions. The day before Kemp lifted the quarantine, five of the country's 10 counties with the highest COVID-19 death rates were in Southwest Georgia. In each of these counties, Black people were the largest racial group. By early May, according to the Centers for Disease Control, more than 80 percent of hospitalized coronavirus patients in Georgia were African American.

"Again and again," Kendi writes, "white Americans have sacrificed the *freedom from* in pursuit of the *freedom to*.

"Again and again," Kendi writes, "white Americans have sacrificed the *freedom from* in pursuit of the *freedom to*. Again, and again, the price of those decisions has fallen on the heads of people of color."

As Kendi concludes his article: "There is something about living through a deadly pandemic that cuts open the shell, removes the flesh, and finds the very core of American existence: the slaveholder clamoring for his freedom to infect, and the enslaved clamoring for our freedom from infection."

"We're Still Living and Dying in the Slaveholders' Republic" focuses on the pandemic, but let's pick up Kendi's analysis and lay it on top of the climate crisis — a crisis that will be more severe and more long-lasting than COVID-19, and in fact, will lead to more pandemics through destruction of animal habitat. Here, too, we find a war of freedoms. On the one hand, the capitalists, the fossil fuel industry, the bankers, Fox News, and the broader right wing demand the freedom to mine, to drill, to frack, to mountaintop remove, to rape with pipelines, to colonize the atmosphere, to burn, to flood, to drown.

The freedom to. The freedom to harm. Which is to say, in climate terms, the freedom to destroy.

On the other hand, the rest of the world — Indigenous communities, people of color, the Arctic, Pacific Islanders, the young, the old, threatened species — demand the freedom from breathing wildfire-polluted air, from bulldozed homes, from drowning, from becoming climate refugees, from drinking poisoned water, from conflagrations, from the fear to bring children into the world.

The freedom from. The freedom from harm. Which is to say, in climate terms, the freedom from destruction.

The individual freedom to wreck the world. Against the communal freedom to survive. This struggle needs to be at the heart of our curriculum.

When we teach about climate change, it is easy to get lost in the details. No doubt, a climate justice curriculum is complicated. Educators need to equip students to understand the science that

explains the basis of today's climate chaos. We need to probe the causes of the crisis, looking at the commodification of nature in the Americas, which began as far back as Columbus; at the history of industrialization; at the rise of coal, oil, and gas; and at that industry's disinformation campaign that lied about the impact of the inexorable rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We need to story the horrifically unequal consequences of climate change, which mirror the inequity we see playing out across our country and around the world in the pandemic. And we also need to expose students to the vibrant climate justice resistance that has blossomed into a social movement, and invite them to see themselves as a part of this movement, because activism is the only route to survival.

Kendi insists that we "open the shell" to examine the fundamental source of our predicament in the history of enslavers and the enslaved. When it comes to teaching the climate crisis, yes, let's dive deep and help students sort through its causes and consequences. But we also should lift students out of these details. We need to help them see the battle that has raged — and still rages — over whose vision of freedom will prevail: the freedom to harm, or the freedom from harm. ■

Kendi insists that we "open the shell" to examine the fundamental source of our predicament in the history of enslavers and the enslaved.

Protesting Pipelines
Teaching the Indigenous-Led Movement Against Fossil Fuel Infrastructure

BY URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA

There is something about oil and gas pipelines. The way you can look at a map of hundreds of thousands of miles of the terrible tubes, seeing how tightly the thick web of fossil fuel infrastructure has gripped the lands where we live.

The way the technology is so basic, so simple. Just a cylinder — like a child's straw but bigger — through which the toxic stuff gushes, from one place to another.

Given the pure physical immensity of fossil fuel infrastructure in North America, one would think pipelines would be a more prominent fixture of our consciousness and curricula. And yet, like so many forms of exploitation of the Earth and its living creatures, they can be hard for many of us to see — and are often made harder to see by their manufactured invisibility in the official curriculum. Like the tiny particle toxins industry spews into our air and water, the predatory fine print on a home loan, or the undocumented slaughterhouse worker whose COVID-19 infection shows up nowhere in official statistics, pipelines are purveyors of injustice that don't usually make the headlines. But pipelines, particularly for the people who live in their path, are right there, running through that wild rice marsh, under that river, across that farm, alongside that reservation. Obvious, touchable, tangible, visible.

NICHOLAS LAMPERT

And what is visible is vulnerable — to resistance, rebellion, sabotage, and disruption. And vulnerable to exposure in the curriculum.

#NoKXL. #StopLine3. #NoACP. #NoJordanCove. #NoMVP. #NoTAP. Pipeline resistance, led largely by Indigenous people, is happening all over this country and our world, and our students deserve a curriculum that bears witness to this growing movement, and gives them an opportunity to critically reflect on their place in it.

In 2016, when Energy Transfer Partners began work on the Dakota Access Pipeline, the $3.8 billion, 1,172-mile conveyor of half a million barrels of oil a day, across four states and under two massive rivers, the Missouri and Mississippi, some Indigenous people said it was the Zuzeca Sapa — the Great Black Snake. In a Lakota prophecy, the Black Snake would slither across the land, poisoning water and sacred sites before devouring the Earth. But as historian Nick Estes, a citizen of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, writes, "While the Black Snake

prophecy portends doom, it also sparks hope." In order to defeat the Black Snake, to protect the Earth, a movement was born:

> Youth runners from Standing Rock led grueling hundred-mile and then thousand-mile runs to spread the word of the Black Snake threatening their homelands. Thousands, and then millions, answered the call. "City by city, block by block, we stand with Standing Rock!" "Tell me what the prophecy looks like, this is what the prophecy looks like!" "Mni Wiconi! Water is life!" These were the chants that ran through city streets across the world and on the isolated county and state highways of what is currently North Dakota.

Although the United States' expropriation of Sioux land — without which DAPL could not have been approved — is an old story, what felt new about the #NoDAPL resistance camps at the confluence of the Missouri and Cannonball rivers was the scope of solidarity. With between 1,000 and 3,000 Indigenous and non-Indigenous permanent camp residents during the late summer of 2016 and the winter of 2017, more than 300 tribal nations opposed the pipeline, and statements of solidarity came from all corners of the globe. Social media lit up with #NoDAPL campaigns that garnered millions of likes, clicks, signatures, and donations. After initially being covered only by Unicorn Riot and Democracy Now!, the uprising became too large to ignore, garnering critical ink on the front pages of even the most mainstream of mainstream media.

Years later, and still very much in the midst of the fight against DAPL, Standing Rock now stands as a kind of template for activists, a model of what is possible. Again, historian Nick Estes:

> If there is a lesson to be learned from the historic movement that began at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation to halt DAPL, it is that great men don't make history. Presidents at the helm of a white supremacist empire will not save us or the planet. That much is sure. Nor do they, as individual men, doom our collective fate. The good people of the Earth have always been the vanguards of history and radical social change.

There are five key tasks of an anti-pipeline curriculum. It should:

1. Highlight the place of the current protests in a longer history of Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism, and give lie to the myth that "All the real Indians died off."

2. Place pipelines into the context of a larger climate justice movement. The framework of justice pushes us to not address just the short-term dangers of pipelines (spills, leaks, contamination of land and water), nor only their long-term threat as conveyors of the fossil fuels that are scorching our globe and its living creatures, but also as a manifestation of a larger system of exploitation of the land and its peoples that here in the Americas dates back as far as 1492 and up to the present. Climate justice argues not just for an end to pipelines, but also an end to a system of settler colonialism and racial capitalism — and reaches out toward a more just set of relationships, a more just world.

3. Challenge our students to reflect on their relationships — to each other, the land, water, and animals, those they cherish and those they would like to see transformed. As Estes writes, "For the Oceti Sakowin, the affirmation Mni Wiconi, 'water is life,' relates to Wotakuye, or 'being a

good relative.' Indigenous resistance to the trespass of settlers, pipelines, and dams is part of being a good relative to the water, land, and animals, not to mention the human world." Let's ask our students: What does it mean to be a good relative? A good ancestor? And what is the appropriate response to those who are breaking the sacred bonds — and rules — of kinship?

4. Upend standard civics education. The traditional civics curriculum asks students to become experts on a set of already-created laws and institutions, rather than the authors of a new regime of rules and principles. Those old laws and institutions have not protected the Earth and water that our students will inherit. Our curriculum should affirm their right to demand a different future — through organizing, activism, civil disobedience. Indeed, today's supposed criminals are the ones winning us a right to a healthy tomorrow.

5. Help students see the connections between myriad forms of state violence: the kind that poisons the water, air, and climate; the kind that uses its military and police to wage "a heavily armed, one-sided battle against some of the poorest people in North America to guarantee a pipeline's trespass"; the kind that keeps 40 million people in the United States living in poverty and many more precariously close to it; the kind that murders Black people by putting its knee on their necks and tear-gases and pepper-sprays them when they protest.

Although there is much work still to be done to produce an anti-pipeline curriculum that meets these ambitious goals, the Zinn Education Project's Teach Climate Justice Campaign offers some key places to start. A role play I co-wrote with Rethinking Schools curriculum editor Bill Bigelow and high school teacher Andrew Duden on the Standing Rock uprising offers students key background on a pipeline whose future is still up for grabs and ripe for study. While oil is currently gushing through the Dakota Access Pipeline, recent court rulings affirm the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's long-standing contention that the project was not properly permitted — permits that students learn about in the role play — and should be immediately shut down. Also available to educators through the Zinn Education Project website is Necessity: Oil, Water, and Climate Resistance, a new film directed by Jan Haaken and Samantha Praus. Focusing heavily on the fight against Enbridge's Line 3 in Minnesota, the film profiles "valve turners" committing civil disobedience, the lawyers who defend them, and the Indigenous activists whose lands are most imminently in danger. The film is a powerful vehicle for students to analyze the efficacy of different strategies of political activism and for considering the roles of uniquely positioned individuals (race, class, gender, ability, citizenship status, etc.) in a collective struggle.

The existential threat posed by the climate crisis compels us to design curriculum that is relevant to the moment, responsive to our students' fears, and inspires the understanding that change is possible through action. As the movement against fossil fuel pipelines grows, our classrooms can become pipelines for justice, moving the hopeful and necessary stories of climate activism out of the shadows of the official curriculum and into the light. ■

Ursula Wolfe-Rocca (ursulawolfe@gmail.com) is a Rethinking Schools editor and is an organizer and curriculum writer for the Zinn Education Project.

Let's Not Ask Our Students to "Return to Normal"

BY TIM SWINEHART
ILLUSTRATOR MOLLY CRABAPPLE

What are the lessons of the pandemic? In this time of interlocking crises, what aspects of our world are most in need of repair? These are questions I am addressing with my students with greater frequency and urgency, especially as we inch toward the promise of a post-COVID-19 world. One way I had a chance to do this recently with my students was by sharing the excellent short film *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair*, and asking students to reflect on the lessons for today offered by the film's writers and producers: Naomi Klein, Avi Lewis, and Opal Tometi.

In the article that accompanies the film at the Intercept, Klein shares the questions that guided the film's production: "Do we even have a right to be hopeful? With political and ecological fires raging all around, is it irresponsible to imagine a future world radically better than our own? A world without prisons? Of beautiful, green public housing? Of buried border walls? Of healed ecosystems? A world where governments fear the people instead of the other way around?" The product of these questions is a complex, sometimes dark, but ultimately hopeful story told in the eight-and-a-half-minute film, set to the same style of stunning watercolors by Molly Crabapple that helped make the original *Message from the Future* so beautiful and compelling.

I've used the first *Message from the Future*, narrated by New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, with high school students and adults, as I ask them to imagine an ecologically and socially just future worth fighting for — not the dystopian future that we are so often told to accept as inevitable. Similarly, our Portland Public Schools Climate Justice Committee recently used the first *Message from the Future* film at one of our meetings to help encourage participants' radical imaginations as we envisioned what a Green New Deal for Schools might look like in Portland. The conversation that followed was inspired and utopian, in the best sense — unconstrained by the limited vision of what is possible within current school budgets starved by years of austerity. The power of both films lies with the underlying assumption that not only do we have a right to be hopeful, but indeed that fighting for a better world has to involve the sort of dreaming and visioning that can chart a path from here to there.

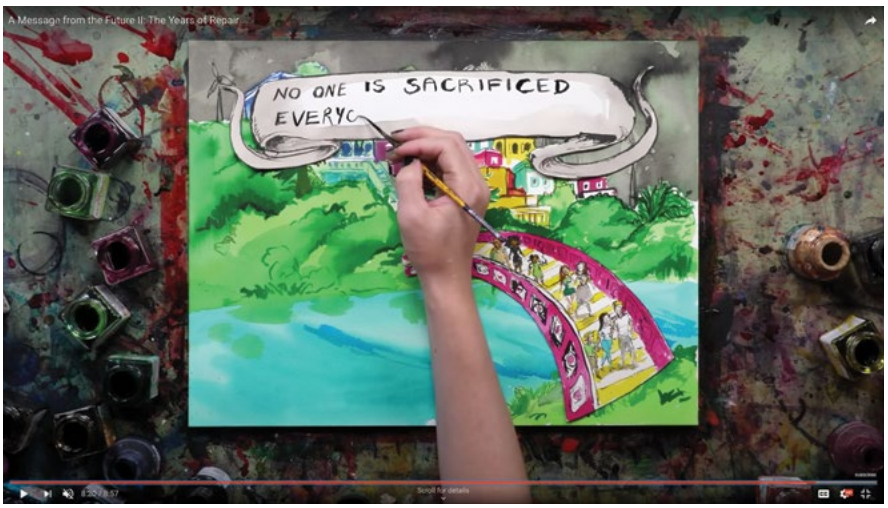
Where the first *Message from the Future* offers a decade-long vision of radical transformation, the result of Green New Deal policies passed by a progressive majority in Congress and the White House, the second film takes a more grassroots and more international approach to imagine the "years of repair" that could follow the coronavirus pandemic. The focus in *The Years of Repair* is less on the halls of power in government, and more on the power that grows from the streets and out of communities. Klein explains the intention of this shift: "This time, rank-and-file organizers and activists would be the stars. Given the array of corporate powers resisting change, and the bleak electoral options on offer, social movements are now the only force left with the power to grab the wheel of history and veer us off our current deadly trajectory."

I've tried to make social movements and grassroots activism the central focus of my teaching about the climate crisis, to help students rethink the "benevolent leader" theory of change implicit in much of their social studies education, and to challenge the "power of the individual" narrative that pretends we can buy green and recycle our way out of the crisis. I appreciate that *The Years of Repair* helps students envision how movements for Black liberation, workers' rights, immigrant justice, Indigenous rights, and environmental justice have interlocking roles to play in repairing our broken social and ecological relationships. As Molly Crabapple's stunning paintings transition from Black Lives Matter protests to renters and workers striking in streets across the world, and from Indigenous Land Back campaigns to community farms designed around the needs of pollinators, we can't help but see connections between all these issues and movements that are too often seen in isolation.

These connections were prominent in the reflections shared by my Environmental Justice students after we watched the film together, including a student who wrote that the film helped illustrate for her "how issues of colonialism, capitalism, and racism are all intertwined with the problem of climate change." My students also shared an appreciation for the solemn focus in the film on the ways that some of the problems we currently face are likely to get worse, including climate-fueled disasters and a terrifying reference to future pandemics, such as "COVID-23." Many students shared a sense that the film felt more somber than the first *Message from the Future*, but that this also

made it feel "more honest and realistic," as one student commented. Most surprising for me was the sentiment shared by several students that this realism helps to make the film more hopeful — that through its honest portrayal of the struggles and hard work of repair that lie ahead, it helps us to think seriously about the future at a time when it can be hard to imagine any sort of life beyond the pandemic.

Another aspect of the film that stood out to students is the intimate portrayal of humanity, a story told through images of hands, "the hands that packed the box, that picked the tomato, that planted the seed . . . the hands that stroked the brow, that said goodbye. The hands were us, all of us. That web of hand to hand, and breath to breath relationships was a reminder that we are entangled, making each other sick, keeping each other alive." I appreciate this section for a couple reasons. One is the reminder of the radical interdependency that underlies all life on Earth, that we fail to recognize and honor at our peril — and that has been thrust back into our collective consciousness at moments throughout the pandemic. This section also helps explain why these interdependent relationships are easily forgotten in a class society — the exploitation of workers who face a disproportionate share of risk is so often hidden from view in the meatpacking plants, the agricultural fields, the package distribution centers, and other places of "essential" work that allow the privileged to "shelter in place," at home. The film describes what it will take to repair and rebuild a society centered on just economic relationships: robust public investment in housing, health care, and education, the restoration of polluted landscapes and communities, and reparations for enslavement and genocide that continue to create increased vulnerability within Black and Indigenous communities. It concludes with the slogan "No One Is Sacrificed. Everyone Is Essential."



One of the ways I'm using *The Years of Repair* with my students is as an artistic model and a source of inspiration for them to create their own artistic renderings of a future worth fighting for. We'll share the poems, narratives, comic strips, and paintings they have created in upcoming classes, and I look forward to continuing the work of radical imagination that began for us with The *Message from the Future* films. I'm also planning to have students research the coalition of groups — including

the Movement for Black Lives, La Vía Campesina, Global Nurses United, and the Sunrise Movement, among others — that collaborated with the film's writers and producers to help launch *The Years of Repair* and to use it as an organizing tool in their work. I've taught about many of these organizations in the past, but I'm grateful that, in this case, students will be able to see them as a coalition — a movement of movements — already demonstrating what it looks like to engage in the difficult and necessary work of repair.

As we begin to imagine life after the pandemic, we can help our students question the call to "return to normal," which not only disregards the sacrifice and death that have enabled companies to profit and stock markets to rise while millions face unemployment and eviction, but also fails to call out all the ways that "normal" wasn't working prior to the pandemic. The fault lines of the pandemic have amplified the white supremacy, economic inequality, and ecological devastation that have always been normalized within U.S. society. The disruption of the pandemic and the transition out of it offer an opportunity to repair and rebuild while centering solidarity, justice, and ecological resilience — and while following the lead of the social movements already doing this work. Our classrooms are crucial sites where students can begin to imagine what this repaired future might look like. ■

To watch *A Message from the Future II: The Years of Repair,* go to: bit.ly/TheYearsofRepair

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Screenshot stills of the video. Molly Crabappple's work can be seen at mollycrabapple.com.

The Attack on Anti-Racist Teaching Is an Attack on Environmental Justice Teaching

BY BILL BIGELOW

In his magnificent book, *How the Word Is Passed*, Clint Smith quotes the Rev. Dr. William Barber II: "The same land that held people captive through slavery is now holding people captive through this environmental injustice and devastation." But why? Why do race and environmental devastation align so neatly?

In an increasing number of states, it is illegal for teachers to engage students in attempting to answer this question.

Legislators in more than 20 states have passed laws — or are attempting to pass laws — to prohibit teachers from putting racism at the center of their classroom inquiry about the nature of U.S. society. It is now a crime for a teacher in Iowa, for example, to suggest that the United States is "fundamentally or systematically" racist.

ERIK RUIN

But the hailstorm of legislation attacking anti-racist education has a less obvious target: teaching about the environment and about climate change. One of the most extreme pieces of legislation is Missouri's House Bill 952, which explicitly bans the use of Zinn Education Project (ZEP) lessons in all of the state's public schools. (ZEP is coordinated by Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change.) This would outlaw our lessons on the Tulsa Massacre, the U.S.-Mexico War, and Reconstruction. But it would also prohibit teachers from using every lesson, article, and other resource at ZEP's Teach Climate Justice Campaign — arguably the most comprehensive online collection of climate justice teaching materials.

These include lessons that emphasize the unequal impact of a fossil fuel-driven economy and the climate crisis on Indigenous peoples. "'Don't Take Our Voices Away'" is a role play that focuses on the first gathering of Indigenous peoples to share experiences of how climate chaos is ripping through their communities, and to make demands of the wealthy countries that are the main source of this devastation. "Standing with Standing Rock" helps students recognize the fossil fuel invasion of Sioux territory in a long history of land invasions, broken treaties, and white aggression against Native people in the United States. Other ZEP lessons

similarly center the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on people of color. The proposed law would deny teachers the right to use all these resources.

The racial inequality that any environmental justice curriculum seeks to expose and critique is not the invention of critical race theorists. It is the product of the long history of white supremacy and colonialism — which began in the Americas with Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of the Taíno people, whom he called "the best people in the world . . ." — a people who "love their neighbors as themselves . . ." Columbus wrote these words and then proceeded to colonize, enslave, and brutalize — and put nature at the service of greed. Colonialists razed forests in favor of sugarcane, introduced pigs that uprooted Taíno crops, and began cattle ranching and a plantation agriculture system that "exposed the surface soils to wind and water erosion far more drastically than the Taínos' careful *conuco* [mound] planting," according to Kirkpatrick Sale in *The Conquest of Paradise*. The Spaniards' arrival marked the beginning of "ecological imperialism" in the Americas. The attack by white people on people of color and on nature were inseparable. This environmental racism is "fundamentally and systematically" part of our society's DNA — stretching back to 1492 — and yet is now illegal to study in an increasing number of states.

Climate Illiteracy

The right-wing legislation would deny students climate literacy. Racial inequality — and the struggle against it — is at the heart of the climate crisis. Roles describing two people who live in Miami in "Stories from the Climate Crisis," a mixer activity included in *A People's Curriculum for the Earth* and at the Zinn Education Project, offer one glimpse of how racism is implicated in climate change. As seas rise, housing prices in higher-ground neighborhoods in Miami are increasing three times as fast as beachfront property. The white real estate speculator Tom Conway is buying up property in these predominantly low-wealth neighborhoods of people of color, like Little Haiti and Liberty City, ruthlessly evicting tenants who have made their homes and businesses there for more than 30 years. Paulette Richards, an African American woman, lives in Liberty City. She struggles to hold on to her home in the face of what activists call climate gentrification.

Racial inequality — and the struggle against it — is at the heart of the climate crisis.

This one small drama is both an instance of, and metaphor for, how structural racism is at the center of the climate crisis. At its root, climate change is driven by investment and political decisions of predominantly white people striving to increase their wealth, and then exploited by other predominantly white people (like Tom Conway), who profit from disaster. All of us live with the consequences — but especially those who have been on the receiving end of the long history of slavery and colonialism, whether in Liberty City (like Paulette Richards), Puerto Rico, the Marshall Islands, Bangladesh, Zambia, or the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Climate literacy requires educators and our students to reflect on how racism shapes both the causes and effects of the crisis.

It also demands that we engage students in considering what to do about the climate crisis — and how potential solutions could intersect with solutions to other social problems. How, for example, could a Green New Deal simultaneously address climate change, joblessness, immigration justice, houselessness, and racial inequality? An honest, rigorous look at climate chaos threatens to turn our classrooms into dens of cynicism. Only activism can inoculate our students against despair. And yet one Texas bill that is part of the collection of silencing measures around the country seeks to prevent teachers from encouraging social and environmental activism. House Bill 3979 calls for sweeping prohibitions against student activism. Part of the bill reads: "No school district or teacher shall require, make part of a course, or award course grading

or credit including extra credit for, political activism, lobbying, or efforts to persuade members of the legislative or executive branch to take specific actions by direct communication at the local, state, or federal level, or any practicum or like activity involving social or public policy advocacy." Pause for a moment to reflect on the breathtaking nature of these restrictions.

When we talk about "teaching climate justice," a key piece of this means that we focus on how the crisis is crashing unequally throughout the world.

This curricular gag rule is aimed at civil rights and racial justice activism — and no doubt at students' involvement in agitating for the removal of racist iconography in Texas. Climate justice activism is collateral damage — but devastating, nonetheless. The fall before the pandemic, Sept. 20, 2019, saw the biggest student strikes for climate justice in history. The Texas bill, and others like it, would keep students in the classroom and out of the streets — and away from experiencing the efficacy that comes with being part of a social movement.

When we talk about "teaching climate justice," a key piece of this means that we focus on how the crisis is crashing unequally throughout the world, highlighting the voices of those who are hit hardest and who have the fewest resources to stave off catastrophe — as well as emphasizing the resilience and resistance of these marginalized communities. And teaching climate justice also means engaging students in a search for the roots of this inequality. Inevitably, real teaching — teaching that prompts students to search for explanations and imagine solutions — will come into conflict with laws that ban putting racism at the center of our inquiry.

So there is our choice: We comply with laws that require us to make our students ignorant, or we attempt to teach the truth about the intersection of racism and environmental harm — and urge students to get into the world and make a difference. ■

Teaching the Green New Deal: The Prequel

BY SUZANNA KASSOUF, MATT REED, TIM SWINEHART, URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA, AND BILL BIGELOW

In an article introducing the student-friendly short video, *A Message from the Future*, about life after the Green New Deal, Naomi Klein points out:

> Almost every vision of the future that we get from best-selling novels and big-budget Hollywood films takes some kind of ecological and social apocalypse for granted. It's almost as if we have collectively stopped believing that the future is going to happen, let alone that it could be better, in many ways, than the present.

KATE LEIB | CREATIVE ACTION NETWORK

This coming dystopia seems to be prefigured in our students' own lives: the pandemic and police violence, the forest fires that engulfed the entire West Coast in 2020, the extraordinary cold snap that devastated the southern United States, and so much more. But as we know, these scenarios of a miserable future will not necessarily motivate our students to action — in the classroom or in the world.

As the five of us reviewed the Rethinking Schools book *A People's Curriculum for the Earth*, toward assembling a second edition, we knew that we wanted more activities that would energize students not only by the harm that must be prevented, but also by the beautiful possibilities on the carbon-free horizon, the kind of future expressed in the ambitions of the Green New Deal (GND). Of course, the Green New Deal is not a single policy or even a platform, but a still-developing vision of transformation. We want students to be engaged as architects of that vision, not just observers — to make judgments about, and share opinions on, the collection of policies needed to prevent climate disaster and secure a more just future.

Yes, the GND is ambitious. That makes it easy for protectors of the status quo to dismiss it as impractical, impossible, pie-in-the-sky. Without concrete historical parallels to refer to, we worried that

our students' imaginations would fall prey to cynicism or defeatism. So we decided to begin a suite of lessons on the Green New Deal at the obvious place: the original New Deal, from which the GND of course takes its name and inspiration. It was in Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address that he accurately described what the people, experiencing the emergency of the Great Depression, expected from his administration: "action and action now."

In a draft of a new lesson we wrote — posted at the Zinn Education Project's "Teach Climate Justice" site — students learn about the ambitious and multifaceted plan of "action and action now" through the stories of a wide variety of everyday people who interacted with New Deal policies. Students meet:

- Viola B. Muse, hired as part of the "Negro Unit" of the Federal Writers Project to document the stories of the last living formerly enslaved people in Florida;
- Martina Curl, an artist hired to paint murals around Oregon by the Federal Art Project;
- Fred Ross, hired by the Farm Security Administration to manage a camp in California for migrant workers fleeing the dust bowl and unemployment;
- James Lowe, hired by the Civilian Conservation Corps to do forestry work in rural Pennsylvania;
- Emma Tiller, a sharecropper in Texas who benefited from the Works Project Administration's jobs program even while criticizing FDR's agricultural policies;
- And 15 more.

The role for Martina Curl, for example, describes her growing up in a family of migrant farmworkers in the Northwest, doing backbreaking work picking fruit from when she was 8 years old. But "the trees, the animals, the people — they all enchanted me."

> The beauty of the natural world never left me, and I fell in love with painting and drawing. I wanted to earn my living doing what I loved, and spent years after high school working and saving to attend the Museum Art School. When I arrived, I felt out of place. My peers were wealthy and spent summers painting landscapes on luxurious vacations while I was picking fruit with my mother from sun-up to sundown. Four years of working nights, weekends, and summers to support my education wore me down, and ultimately prevented me from finishing school. I felt depleted and discouraged — sure that I would never be able to support myself and my son with art.

It's only when the New Deal's Federal Arts Project came along that Curl could combine her socialist politics and her love of art:

> From 1936 to 1942, I received a $90-a-month stipend to create paintings and murals around Oregon. The Federal Arts Program exemplified the world we were fighting for: one of economic equality, beauty, and justice.

As students take on the personas of people whose lives were touched by New Deal policies, they meet each other in a mixer. They find people who benefited from a New Deal program, who experienced some kind of racial or gender discrimination, who were able to help others because of one of these programs, who, like Martina Curl, were able to do cultural work, whose lives were transformed.

We hoped these glimpses of the New Deal would equip our students, when it came time to talk

about the *Green* New Deal, with historical encouragement to dream big and with plenty of practical ideas about how to transform those dreams into policies. The lesson asks them to step out of their roles to reflect on what can be learned from the original New Deal for a Green New Deal today — one that would focus on jobs, infrastructure, racial justice, fighting climate change, and addressing other pressing environmental issues.

Our activity on the New Deal is not meant to hold up the 1930s as a "When America Was Great" moment. We are clear-eyed about the New Deal: Its housing policies exacerbated and deepened segregation and the racial wealth gap; many of its provisions left out agricultural or domestic workers, and therefore the majority of Black workers in the United States; although the Indian Reorganization Act halted some of the government's most genocidal policies toward Native peoples, many other projects — like dam building — ignored treaties and destroyed ways of life; and it was during the New Deal that the Roosevelt administration oversaw the mass deportation of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The New Deal, like the country from which it sprang, was poisoned by white supremacy. A number of characters in the mixer speak to their exclusion from New Deal programs or about its shortcomings.

The lesson asks them to step out of their roles to reflect on what can be learned from the original New Deal for a Green New Deal today.

And yet, the New Deal was a time when the people of the United States demanded the government respond to their needs and suffering. It was a time when the government did respond — quickly and tangibly — to the emergency of the moment. And it was a period that some truly progressive ideas were given a chance — if only briefly — to take flight. Back to Naomi Klein, who argues that despite its significant limitations the New Deal "remains a useful touchstone for showing how every sector of life, from forestry to education to arts to housing to electrification, can be transformed under the umbrella of a single, society-wide mission."

A Green New Deal is possible, and indeed in some respects is already underway. We can help our students recognize that the Green New Deal is not the only big and righteous idea dismissed as impossible even as it was *already* coming into fruition. When the immediate emancipation of 4 million enslaved people seemed like a remote possibility, enslaved people were already freeing themselves, they and their allies were already conducting the Underground Railroad, and abolitionists were already taking every possible opportunity to make slavery untenable, to create the crisis that would serve as an opportunity for lasting change.

That is what we hope to communicate to our students: We make the impossible possible by acting, by organizing, by doing. The example of the New Deal can help students imagine — and then enact — a bridge over the gaping chasm between an unsustainable now and a habitable and humane future. ■

The lesson described in this article can be found at www.zinnedproject.org/materials/new-deal-to-green-new-deal.

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To Teach About the Climate Emergency, Let's Learn from the Movement to Abolish Slavery

BY BILL BIGELOW

"A code red for humanity."

That's what U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres called the 2021 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group 1. As Guterres said: "The alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: Greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk."

AFP PHOTO / JASON REDMOND

The temptation is for teachers to spend our time cataloging the dire consequences of climate chaos — and its causes — equipping students to grasp the enormity of what is unfolding around us. Yes, we need to do that. And we need to do it better. But the key curricular conversation we need to initiate with students is: What can we do about it? And we need to raise this question with a no-bullshit urgency.

In the same week of the IPCC report, climate justice activist Jessica Reznicek entered Federal Correctional Institution-Waseca in Minnesota to begin serving an eight-year sentence for damaging pieces of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 and 2017. Reznicek and fellow activist Ruby Montoya set fire to heavy machinery used to construct the pipeline. Reznicek and Montoya moved along the pipeline, damaging valves — which, according to *Democracy Now!*, delayed pipeline construction for weeks. They are climate heroes.

It's not a teacher's job to recruit fossil fuel saboteurs. However, what Reznicek and Montoya know — and what we want our students to grasp as well — is that by pursuing its profit-first mission, the fossil fuel industry is destroying the conditions for life on Earth. Naomi Klein puts it succinctly: "The oil companies' business plan is to wreck the planet." Given the central role they have played in creating and exacerbating the climate emergency, the fossil fuel enterprise is an odious, illegitimate form of property. Our teaching about climate justice needs to be built on that truth.

I've been reading Andreas Malm's passionate — and provocatively titled — book, *How to Blow Up*

a Pipeline. Malm describes the vantage point of the lords of the fossil fuel industry:

> They are not perturbed by the smell from the blazing trees. They do not worry at the sight of islands sinking; they do not run from the roar of the approaching hurricanes; their fingers never need to touch the stalks from withered harvests; their mouths do not become sticky and dry after a day with nothing to drink. To appeal to their reason and common sense would evidently be futile. Their commitment to the endless accumulation of capital wins out every time.

The endless accumulation of capital. There has never been a moment in world history when the survival of humanity and life on Earth collided so decisively with the imperatives of the capitalist system.

But students can learn from a moment in our history when a social movement confronted and defeated another odious form of "property": the enslavement of human beings. The abolition movement had no respect whatsoever for enslavers' legal right to own and control their property. Indeed, the movement called for the immediate expropriation of the largest industry in the United States. Yes, industry: On the eve of the Civil War, there was more money invested in the enslavement of human beings than in all the banks, railroads, and factories combined.

The abolition movement had no respect whatsoever for enslavers' legal right to own and control their property.

By the 1850s, the institution of slavery was supported by the Fugitive Slave Act, which provided a diabolical legal architecture to prevent enslaved people from seeking freedom: Bystanders in every state could be drafted to recapture enslaved people; enslavers could easily make claims against alleged escapees, and no Black person could testify in court in their own defense; and anyone "directly or indirectly" helping someone to escape slavery could be arrested and imprisoned. (In textbooks, this collection of measures is politely referred to as part of the Compromise of 1850.) The entire state apparatus was at the service of the slaveocracy. And in 1857, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, the U.S. Supreme Court gave its blessing to slavery, and white supremacy more broadly, with Chief Justice Roger Taney offering his infamous assurance that Black people were "altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect . . ."

Abolitionists understood they owed no allegiance to a legal system that opposed humanity.

Sure, lots of the abolitionists' work was legal. They formed above-ground antislavery organizations, published newspapers, preached sermons, held meetings, wrote books, passed resolutions. They even raised money to purchase people from their enslavers.

But they also defied the Fugitive Slave Act, "stealing" people from their supposed owners, transporting and harboring people who seized their own freedom, defending freedom-seekers with armed vigilance committees, and forcibly preventing people's re-enslavement. The most popular novel of the 19th century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was a paean to the Underground Railroad, and (despite its stereotypes) celebrated acts of armed resistance by the enslaved. Some, like John Brown and his comrades, went so far as to try to foment rebellion.

And, of course, the enslaved themselves were the beating heart of the abolition movement: In countless ways — some covert, some public — their resistance was the ongoing source of moral authority that undermined the justifications invented to legitimate people's enslavement.

A climate justice curriculum should include a careful study of the abolition movement. (See the Rethinking Schools book *Teaching a People's History of Abolition and the Civil War*.) The antidote to students' despair and resignation about the climate crisis is not necessarily for them to study the crisis more intensively. It's the history of radical activism we need to build into our curriculum — radical as in going to the root of a problem and letting morality rather than legality be our guide.

Of course, other social movements also have lots to offer about how to effect change, but the abolition movement was arguably the most audacious movement in U.S. history. Not only did it call into question the legitimacy of a bedrock U.S. institution, and urge the expropriation without compensation of the "means of production" of the most powerful segment of the U.S. ruling classes, it did so in the face of increasingly pessimistic circumstances. In 1833, the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded. By 1860, after almost 30 years of organized antislavery activism, twice as many people lived in slavery, more U.S. territory was dedicated to slavery, enslavers possessed more wealth, and as mentioned, the federal government's commitment to slavery was more solid than ever.

As students confront climate catastrophe, the abolition movement teaches that fundamental social change is possible, that change can come rapidly, decisively, and unpredictably.

As students confront climate catastrophe, the abolition movement teaches that fundamental social change is possible, that change can come rapidly, decisively, and unpredictably. And the abolition movement teaches that we needn't be "reasonable"; we should not allow the people who are the source of a problem to dictate how we organize to address that problem. Andreas Malm echoes a key insight of the abolition movement: "The ruling classes will not really be talked into action. They are not amenable to persuasion; the louder the sirens wail, the more material they rush to the fire, and so it is evident that change will have to be forced upon them." There is nothing sacred about laws that uphold injustice; as Howard Zinn asked rhetorically, "Are we not more obligated to achieve justice than to obey the law?"

In our curriculum, let's connect students with people like Jessica Reznicek and Ruby Montoya, whose activism is in the spirit of the abolition movement. In "Teaching Climate Disobedience," Ursula Wolfe-Rocca describes a lesson about the activists disrupting Enbridge's Line 3 pipeline in Minnesota, like the Ojibwe lawyer and organizer Tara Houska, who was also arrested at Standing Rock resisting the Dakota Access Pipeline; and Ernesto Burbank, a citizen of the Navajo (Diné) Nation, who chained himself with others to the security gate at a Wells Fargo bank in Duluth, Minnesota, demanding that Wells Fargo divest from all fossil fuels, especially Enbridge Energy.

In the role play "Teaching Blockadia: How the Movement Against Fossil Fuels Is Changing the World," posted at the Zinn Education Project, students encounter people from around the world who are imaginatively resisting and creating alternatives to the fossil fuel industry.

There is a festival of climate activists — inheritors of the abolitionist tradition — waiting to meet our students.

We can connect young people with radical activists and with movements — past and present — that respect life more than property and authority. ■

Helping Young People Imagine a Future of Climate Solidarity

BY BILL BIGELOW

> They streamed out of their schools, bubbling with excitement. Little trickles of them flowed from side streets into grand avenues, where they mingled with other streams of children and teens. Chanting, chatting, dressed in everything from crisp school uniforms to leopard leggings, the kids formed rushing rivers in dozens of cities around the world. They marched by the hundreds, thousands, and tens of thousands.

That's how Naomi Klein begins *How to Change Everything: The Young Human's Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other*. This desperately needs to be our future: everywhere on Earth, "rushing rivers" of student climate justice activists — *protecting the planet and each other*.

Increasingly, educators are equipping young people to analyze the physical and social roots of the climate emergency, its unequal impact throughout the world, and activist strategies to address it.

For all this, we need stories.

Three new young adult novels appreciate the severity of climate change but also celebrate young people's growing consciousness and their work together to make a difference.

The Mystery Woman in Room Three

The Mystery Woman in Room Three, by Aya de León, is a compelling, fast-paced story set in near-future, climate-changed Florida. The heroines are two Dominican, undocumented high school students — smart, brave, and committed to do the right thing. The mystery: Who is that frail woman in the Shady Orchards Nursing Home? Is she being held against her will? Is she drugged? As the truth begins to emerge, they team up with Sunrise Movement activists and other young people of conscience. ("Us four teenagers are the only ones who know about a plot to change the course of history.") The novel is about more than climate change; it addresses immigrant rights, racism, the Green New Deal, and youth activism. The book is also a meditation on how gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, race, and social class shape young people's relationships.

The Mystery Woman in Room Three is not published in print, but is currently available for free download at *Orion Magazine*, a welcome gesture from the always-valuable *Orion*. In an online interview at *Orion*, author Aya de León describes one of her motives for the book: "I wanted to write a story about winning in the climate crisis. So much of what we call climate fiction takes place in a dystopic future, after human beings have failed to solve the crisis in the current era. I wanted to write a story set in the here and now where people — everyday people, and young women of color in particular — are the heroes that save the day."

Paradise on Fire

Adaugo — Addy — is originally from Nigeria. She was orphaned when her parents died in a fire and came to live with her Grandma Bibi in the Bronx. We come to admire and love the remarkable Addy

as we join her summer sojourn to Wilderness Adventures in northern California, with other African American teenagers from New York and New Jersey — not all of whom are as delighted to be there as is Addy. Addy is obsessed with maps and mazes — escape routes. She finds a home in the forest — and, gradually, a community with other young people. A summer paradise. And then there is fire.

Jewell Parker Rhodes' gently paced novel segues into a thrilling narrative, in which Addy and friends attempt to escape the conflagration.

Prompted by the 2018 Camp Fire that burned more than 150,000 acres and almost completely destroyed entire communities, including Paradise, California, author Jewell Parker Rhodes' gently paced novel segues into a thrilling narrative, in which Addy and friends attempt to escape the conflagration. Wildfires have joined the terrible pantheon of climate-change produced disasters. The tense and perilous trek of the young people of *Paradise on Fire* [Little, Brown] becomes a metaphor for what all of us will need to confront the climate crisis: bravery, imagination, tenacity, solidarity. As Addy concludes: "See the whole. Map the whole. Hard doesn't mean impossible."

Teachers who share their "teaching climate justice" stories at the Zinn Education Project can receive a free copy of *Paradise on Fire*.

Running

In Natalia Sylvester's 2020 novel, *Running* [Clarion/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt], Senator Anthony Ruiz is running for president of the United States. He is a Republican. He is a U.S. Senator from Florida. And his daughter, 15-year-old Mariana, is not so keen about being a prop in his campaign. At first, she simply objects to the invasion of her privacy by prying media, and parents too eager to show her off: "How much more of our lives will we give up before it's no longer worth it?"

But as Mariana connects with young activists in her high school's PODER social action club, she begins to awaken to issues in South Florida — and the world: the threat to clean water posed by the wealthy's version of "development," feminism, homophobia, class inequality, gentrification, and climate change. No, most 15-year-olds' fathers do not run for president. But it's impossible not to be drawn in as Mariana's growing critical awareness leads her further and further from her father's empty campaign slogans — and, inexorably, toward a decision between obedience to her parents or to her conscience. As Miami's polluted water becomes the key issue of the campaign, Mariana concludes, "There is no such thing as both sides when one side is drinking contaminated water and the other side is contaminating it."

* * *

Mariana's insight about the bankruptcy of "both-sidesism," is as true for our curriculum as it is for a political campaign between people who want clean water and people who want enormous profits. Educators who care about the future of nature and humanity should not be timid when it comes to encouraging students to come to see themselves as activists. When our students grasp what is at stake today, it is not manipulation or propaganda that drives them to activism. It is common sense.

We need more books that celebrate young people who find themselves as they come to political consciousness and commitment. ■

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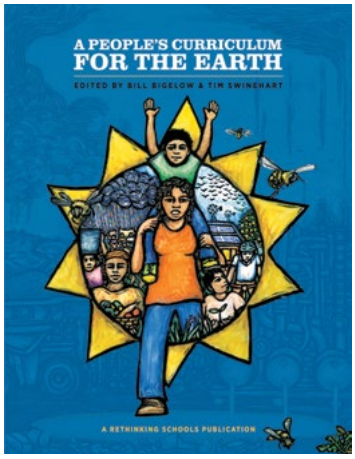

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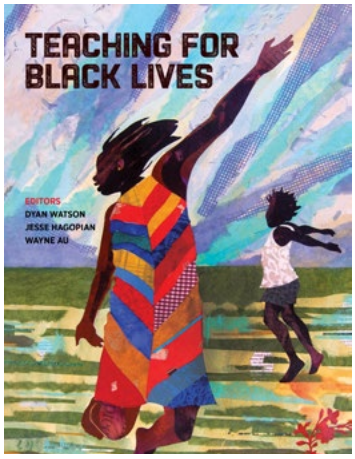

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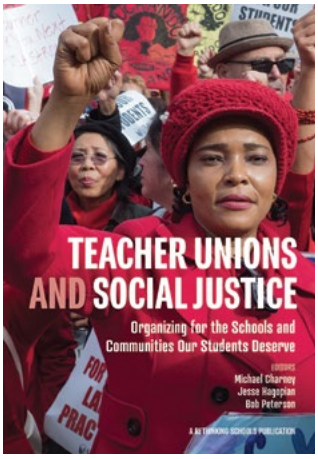

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