

Education & Pedagogy Unit, American Academy of Religion

A Guide to Critical Pedagogy (in case you are Perplexed—A Nod to Maimonides)
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Paintings by Micaela Amateau Amato from
Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle,
A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era



You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

—Buckminster Fuller

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House

—Audre Lorde

As an eight-year old in 1979, I was confronted with an image that changed my world. It was on the



back cover of a magazine in my dad's kitchen—a photograph taken in the late 1800s. Proudly standing

next to a 30 foot-in-diameter redwood tree, a logger, ax in hand with his foot propped up in a traditional masculine position of conquest. The caption read: "It took 20,000 years for this tree to grow and 20 minutes to be cut down." I remember the tightening in my throat, rush in my stomach. I felt awe and horror, utter confusion.

As a child who had not yet been inundated with messages of ecological destruction, I didn't know how to read this image. It felt like both a benediction for Progress and reprehension for its consequences. Today, we are all too familiar with these kinds of disorienting and demoralizing images, but rarely know how to decipher contradictory but seemingly inevitable implications. Too often, mainstream middle-class response is to consume our way "out" of our disorientation—numbing ourselves through materialist addictions that then reinforce the very root of our derangement. Through neoliberal globalization, our world mirrors the Titanic cruise ship—the quintessential symbol of the Anthropocene: so many people died during the debacle of the Titanic because the ship executives had prioritized lounging space over lifeboats.



How are our daily choices recklessly reinforcing the very systems (climate crisis, environmental racism, isolation/ alienation) conscientious citizens question or even attempt to dismantle? How can we ask questions about what we need, what we already have individually and as a community, and how we can co-rethink to live more symbiotically?



How can we educate ourselves and our children to take nothing for granted; to filter *perception-management* and the seemingly self-evident through cultural, historical, and ecological contexts; to unlearn *what we think we know* while not only debating, but embodying differing perspectives? How can we embody an ecoliteracy, not through individualized, privatized behaviors, but *in community*—in order to generate collective action as a sustainable Movement. Embodying ecoliteracy means co-creating infrastructures in which all sectors of society feel empowered to act individually and collectively—and we have the capacity to do it.¹ This means redefining resiliency. Throughout the US, city commissions on community resiliency focus their citizen-education programs on *adaptation* and *preparedness* for climate chaos. We must shift that focus to *prevention* through questioning the *interrelational roots* of each crisis.

On the margin of the margins:

I have been living off grid (economically, culturally, and in terms of near-zero resource consumption and waste) since I was a teenager. And, for almost thirty years, I have lived in intentional communities—across the United States, and in Belgium, France, and Tunisia—from permaculture ecovillages to a macrobiotic commune to a queer-focused political theater group. While living in ecovillages across the world, I found that my life choices, my passions and desires, were still on the margins of the margins. So I wrote a climate-chaos adventure fable and resource encyclopedia about embodying ecoliteracy in our daily lives. By highlighting intersections among cross-cultural and natural-world models, my transdisciplinary book *Zazu Dreams: Between the Scarab and the Dung Beetle, A Cautionary Fable for the Anthropocene Era*, is a biocentric, historical resource guide.

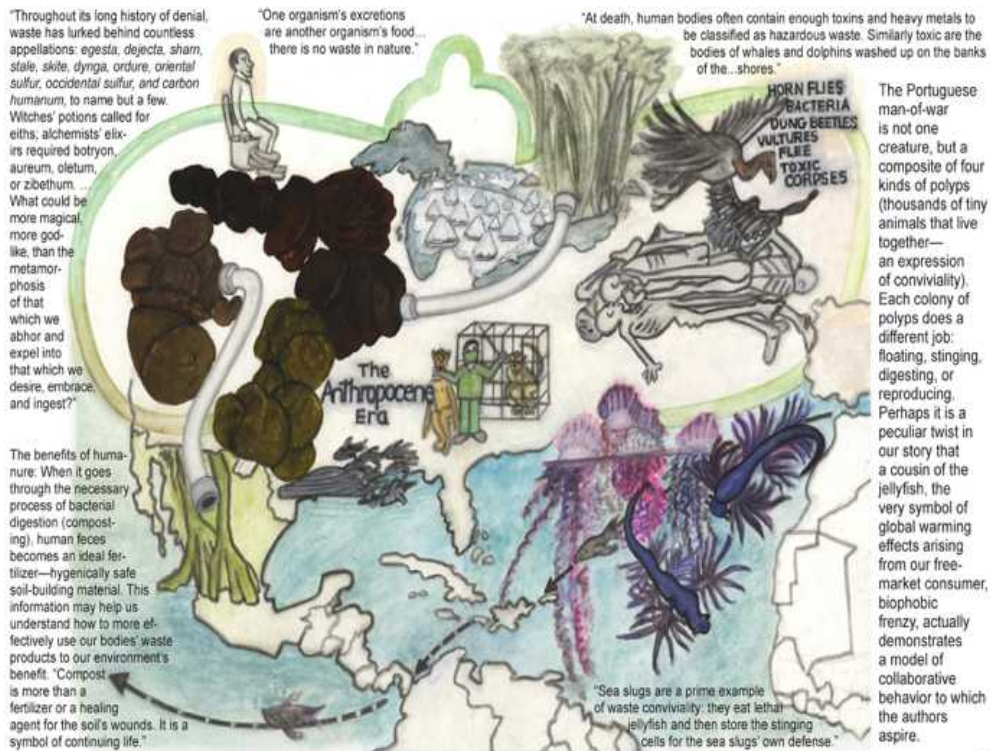


Because it is so rigorously interdisciplinary and incorporates hundreds of examples of theory-in-action, it is extraordinarily challenging to pinpoint a target student group. Currently, it is used in undergraduate and graduate courses ranging from Environmental Science to Conflict-Resolution Studies, including: Ethnic Studies, Human Ecology, Middle Eastern Studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Environmental Science, Cultural Studies, Conflict Resolution Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Philosophy, Biology, Social Justice and Peace Studies, Eco-Critical Studies, Environmental Humanities, Sustainability Studies, Health Equity, Social Justice, International Law and Human Rights. Educators and activists adapt the material for their particular practice. To help navigate the research process, I include a guide in the beginning of the book named after Maimonides' "Guide to the Perplexed" and a resource encyclopedia at the end of the book deriving from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*.

¹ “Émile Durkheim termed 'collective effervescence,' a moment when the torrent of communal sentiment is larger than the sum of individual emotions” (Yifei Li, “Qi,” Matthew Schneide-Mayerson, Brent Ryan Bellamy, and Kim Stanley Robinson, *An Ecotopian Lexicon*, Introduction: 219).



Rooted in transgenerational, climate justice dialogue, *Zazu Dreams* explores how to cultivate awareness of *embodied energy* to develop social and emotional intelligence. When this awareness shifts into collective action, we co-inhabit an embodied ecoliteracy. This collaborative practice is *not* about “50 Things You Can Do To Save The Planet.” It is about our fundamental relationship to *how* we recognize the context and history of the objects with which we live (from the pencils we use to the clothes we wear to the building materials we use to create our homes) i.e., true cost, life-cycle analysis (LCA), (designating both the local and global cycles of extraction > transportation > manufacture > assembly > production > installation > representation > distribution > consumption > disassembly /deconstruction > disposal /decomposition /containment > saturation).



Intergenerational Ecoliteracy:

In contrast with the empire of normalizing media that colonizes our relationships with our own bodies and our earth, *lived* ecoliteracy embodies a decolonizing, liberatory practice of cultivating dynamic intersubjectivities. In the vein of Toni Morrison whose writings gave children “agency and soul,” this bridge between generations creates deep empathy and relevancy, encouraging children to learn all subjects from multiple perspectives—including activities about racial and health equity, ethnic, sexual, and cultural difference. *Zazu Dreams* embraces this social justice ecoliteracy challenge. In the interface between climate-refugee narrative and its interdisciplinary endnotes, myth mingles with science, literature, and polyvalent histories in order to re-examine manufactured consent and miseducation.

Learning from scientists, healers, engineers, architects, philosophers, musicians and artists (many of whom are refugees) across the world throughout history, the characters become aware of how ecological relationships are bound to humanitarian crises. In each country they visit, they witness historic examples of social permaculture among humans and within our natural world. Bridging theory and practice, the book demonstrates how everyday lives can serve as intergenerational models of integrating spirituality, infrastructure redesign, and ecological consciousness that lead to essential



paradigm shifts. For example, reclaiming ancient Middle Eastern spiritual-pharmacopeias, mosaic-based art, the sacred embodied in bioregional agricultural systems, and environmental architectural engineering practices can serve as practical solutions to our pandemic of racism / ethnic cleansing, climate crisis, and COVID-19.

Storytelling as Ecological Culture:

Ours is one of the rare cultures that does not value storytelling as a viable means of teaching history. Here in the United States, storytelling is seen as “folk,” characterized as “low-culture,” or denigrated as merely for childhood audiences. Ironically, how we educate our children and ourselves is indicative of our culturally-ingrained anti-intellectualism—at the core of our culture's resistance to deep inquiry and collaborative creativity. Foucault incites us: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (69). As a woman-of-color raising my nine-year old son in the US, I have intimately experienced the intra-cultural impacts of the institutional segregation of

children from adult terrain. I have found this segregation particularly hypocritical in communities that claim to avoid patriarchal-capitalist dictates.

Such segregation reinforces neoliberal denial of our corporeal, societal, and global interconnectedness—instilling conformist laws of conduct that continually replenish the toxic soup in which we all live. Every day I make the conscious choice to deflect how this plutocrat-driven democracy impacts my son. It is this intergenerational chasm that *Zazu Dreams* intends to cross and subvert. Transgenerational storytelling can stimulate an ethic of empathy that urges us to expand our sense of play, vulnerability, uncertainty, and intuition—simultaneously an emotional and cognitive state. This homeostatic vigilance is integral to my practice of motherhood, and is at the core of my waste-transformation/ climate-justice ecoliteracy project.



Micaela Amato's full-page paintings emphasize the realm of magic and play, invite the reader to make unexpected and imaginative associations. By entering one's consciousness through the mediated vehicle of storytelling, we aim to surprise our reader—evoking the possibility of reconsidering consequences of one's daily choices. Our story's characters explore unfamiliar geographical and metaphysical terrain while they learn about social and environmental costs of subjugating others. Just as embodied ecoliteracy offers an opportunity for transgenerational dialogue about the Anthropocene, our narration of the histories of marginalized ethnic minorities is our point of departure for an extensive discussion of ethnic erasure in the context of human rights, globalization, and corporate-driven democracies.

In their book *Nurture Shock: New Thinking About Children*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman investigate the vital consequences of discussing race / ethnicity with children as young as two-years old. Similarly, the correspondences between the two sections of *Zazu Dreams* (storytelling with images and endnotes with images) highlight our empathic capacities as communal, co-implicated beings. In contrast with how our society underestimates children's aptitude for deep empathy and complex thought, at the root of this project is an understanding of children's capacity (and adult's) to harness multiple intelligences (cognitive, intuitive, emotional, corporeal, synesthetic, memory). Howard Zinn

exhorts, “I believe that history can help us imagine new possibilities for the future. ...Maybe our future can be found in the past's moments of kindness and courage rather than its centuries of warfare” (37). Deep, culturally-sanctioned empathy emphasizes a re-spiritualization of nature that embraces community and self-regulatory equilibriums. In contrast with austerity, corporate-bailouts, and increased profits for Big Pharma, Big Banks, Big Ag, Big Oil, Big Telecom, storytelling as ecological culture necessitates co-creative infrastructural design and implementation.

Inhabiting Our Interconnectedness:



It's weird that they are treating the coronavirus like an international crisis, but not the end of humanity as an international crisis.

—Zazu, my nine-year old son, referring to our ecovillage's response to COVID-19, not climate crisis

An urgent embodiment of interdependency between environmental degradation and marginalized ethnic, racial, and economic communities in conjunction with a sense of creative play requires multilateral paradigm shifts. For example, when I taught in the Education Department at UC Santa Cruz, I conducted my classes through the lens of deep self-inquiry and body consciousness. I asked my students to write a daily gratitude journal *in conjunction with* an internalized-fascism journal—referring to Foucault's warning of “...not only historical fascism, the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini [...] but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism...[that] causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us.”² Ironically (and predictably, given the pervasiveness of hegemonic cognitive injustices), my most outspoken students were tremendously resistant to both our somatic learning activities and our *relational* research techniques. They repeatedly insisted on *acquiring* what they termed “operational definitions.” I integrate this pedagogical warning as a call to direct action. When we begin to disentangle our complicity from our vulnerability and collective capacity for social justice, we can shift emotional impotency that inhibits practical action. Those of you who are interested in my syllabi, please contact me.

² Foucault's introduction, *Anti-Oedipus*, xii.

Catagenesis (pragmatic-creative renewal, creativity after catastrophe) is one coalitional path. This renewal can include patterns in nature and intercultural models of symbiosis that counteract the paralysis of climate-anxiety/ climate-grief. We can practice this renewal as a foundation for ecological intelligence. Only by understanding how all forms of oppression are interconnected can we understand that all forms of emancipation are equally interconnected; as all forms of climate chaos are enmeshed, all forms of climate justice are equally bound. Like the metabolism of the human body and the earth's tendency towards homeostasis, the metabolism of our cultures must be scrutinized as a relational organism. From this visceral commitment, we can cultivate regenerative economic tools for biocultural transformation; integrating, rather than competing with our natural environment or isolating ourselves



from it. We must bridge the humanities and the sciences through the lens of storytelling in order to decipher *what we think we know* about climate change, eco-literacy, indigenous environmental philosophies and practices, agribusiness, and petro-pharmaculture.

In his book on *The Disinformation Age*, Eric Cheyfitz writes:

The emphasis on 'storytelling' here is critical as [Alhadeff] demonstrates through practice in her most recent book, *Zazu Dreams*. ...It is also relevant to her intercultural approach; or example, traditional Indigenous philosophies are communicated not through analytic modes but through narratives culturally understandable by the whole society. Storytelling is at the very heart of Indigenous societies, which makes traditional knowledge in these societies exoteric rather than esoteric (56).

Rather than storytelling-as-entertainment, separated from our daily lives, we must integrate it as fundamental to community relationality and functionality. A theory-in-action example of living



ecological ethics that use storytelling-as-pedagogy is how my family and I *perform* our home—a biocentric art installation converted school bus tiny home. Congruently in my written and visual work, I explore mutual justice and shared consciousness that, for hundreds of generations throughout the Middle East, the Caribbean, North Africa, and India, have nourished coexistence between humans and nature. Henry Giroux writes:

Everyone was excited as bonfires burst with flames, celebrating the great Rabbi Raabbi.¹⁰⁰ Tehilla and Naim told us that Raabbi was persecuted by the Romans and forced to hide in a cave for thirteen years. During his exile, Raabbi wrote the mystical Zohar. The Zohar¹⁰¹ is a spiritual text that channels the energy of Biblical mysticism, revealing the secrets of the Universe—every dimension of our world and our universe.¹⁰² This book is written as a recording of spiritual energies, and it is the foundation for the Kabbalah.

Suddenly I made another connection: when Moumnia read to me Arundhati Roy's *The Cost of Living*, she said: "All we can do is to change [history's] course by encouraging what we love instead of destroying what we don't."¹⁰³ As we visited Rabbi Raabbi's grave, I began to shiver. This is what we must do.

This wasn't only about being at a *kever* (burial plot) in the *midbar* (wilderness, desert) and chanting *keshef* (prayer said with a *misyan*) for a *miracle* or *afshar* (miracles). This was also about our deepest sense of being *agraduim* (grateful) while sharing a communal sense of *otzma* (hope) in order to take immediate action.

We prayed to our severed tradition for an end to profit-driven biocide, we prayed for an end to the monoculture of the mind,¹⁰⁴ we prayed for ecological intelligence to help us figure out how to encourage people to connect the dots between environmental justice and human rights, and act together to stop the suffering of people whose lands and water are poisoned and stolen; we prayed for a transition from a global extraction economy to a global regenerative economy; we prayed for zero-deforestation agriculture and product chains, ethically shared seeds,¹⁰⁵ proper poop-use,¹⁰⁶ an end to the epizootic of bee colony collapse, and for a miracle to release the turtles, whales, dolphins, dugongs, and manatees that had been caught and were dying in huge illegal drift gillnets¹⁰⁷ along their migration routes, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean.

Zazu Dreams reclaims the power of language as both a poetic intervention into politics and storytelling and as a powerful force for reclaiming the radical imagination. [It]

moves across disciplinary borders, collapses genres, unsettles how we think about the planet and the need to keep it going, and inspires and energizes a sense of individual and social agency and collective hope as it unfolds.³

If we bring attention to institutional misinformation, we can begin to understand how we can transform our individual and collective (local communities to transnational corporations) habitual behavior. We can shift our production/ consumption/ disposal habits—offering non-violent, symbiotic solutions that average citizens can adopt as we transition from our petroleum-pharmaceutical-addicted cyber-culture to an economics of solidarity. Intergenerational models

“I understood more and more that there was so much work to be done; that the only way to heal ethnic and racial divisions and the ecology of our global body is to see how we are all interconnected. We all have to take care of each other.”



of community and empathy (co-implication/ co-responsibility) generate such dialogic thinking and action. This joyful, intercultural, interspecies approach to climate-crisis mitigation weaves together simultaneous individual, community, and infrastructural change. Disrupting our homogenizing “monoculture of the mind” (Vandana Shiva), this strategy involves unlearning what we think we know while tapping into the fertility of our curiosity, spontaneity, beauty, and ever-evolving interconnectivity.

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³ Giroux along with Noam Chomsky, Rabbi Lerner, Bill McKibben, James Hansen, David Orr, Arun Gandhi, Paul Hawken, Karen Barad, SHK-G HumptyHump, Thom Hartmann, Claire Colebrook, Stephanie Seneff, Eve Ensler, James Wines, Antonia Juhasz, and Daliya Kandiyoti endorsed *Zazu Dreams*.

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