Article:
Webb, D. orcid.org/0000-0001-9435-8676 (2025) Radical hope and anti-anti-utopianism in the post-apocalyptic academy. Research in Education. ISSN: 0034-5237

https://doi.org/10.1177/00345237251384870

Special Issue: Utopia and science fictions in educational philosophy and theory

RESEARCH *in* EDUCATION

Research in Education
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–18

DOI: 10.1177/00345237251384870
journals.sagepub.com/home/rie
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Radical hope and anti-anti-utopianism in the post-apocalyptic academy

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Abstract

How and where can one find hope amid the blasted landscape of higher education? It has been 30 years since Bill Readings declared the university "in ruins" and things can scarcely be said to have improved since then. Some place their hope in trying to recover and rebuild "the public university". This paper takes a different tack. Rather than considering higher education "in crisis" (from which recovery might be possible), the paper invites us to consider the post-apocalyptic academy (the end of a world). A post-apocalyptic lens has heuristic value because it frees the imagination from the constraints imposed by a romantic attachment to the past and provides a position from which to look at ourselves anew. Taking inspiration from Jonathan Lear's study of Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, and the "radical hope" that enabled Coups to lead his people through a process of cultural collapse, the paper explores what it might mean to adopt a stance of radical hope in the face of the collapse of purpose and meaning within the contemporary academy. Arguing for the importance of reading radical hope in conjunction with Fredric Jameson's "anti-anti-utopianism", the paper offers some thoughts on what an anti-anti-utopian radical hope might look like and call on us to do. These are illustrated through vignettes reflecting on articulations of hope to be found within a number of post-apocalyptic science fiction novels. Some may regard the hope emerging from this discussion a little "thin". It may also, however, be the best hope we have.

Keywords

educational futures, higher education, philosophy, radical hope, anti-anti-utopianism

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Introduction

How and where can one find hope amid the blasted landscape of higher education? It has been 30 years, after all, since Bill Readings declared the university "in ruins" and things can scarcely be said to have improved since then (Readings, 1996). True, there are some who insist that all has not been lost and that it is still not too late to recover the university from the decades-long crises that have engulfed it. For those associated with the field of Critical University Studies, "the project of rebuilding the public university" is a project of social hope (Newfield, 2016: 161). The public university—imagined as an institution with a noble mission to serve the public good and enhance social wellbeing—is positioned as the objective of hope, and recovering the public university is that towards which hopeful activities are directed (see Webb, 2025). But what if this project misreads the situation? What if it makes sense to talk less about higher education "in crisis" (from which recovery might be possible) and more in terms of the post-apocalyptic academy (the end of a world)? What if there is no rebuilding whatever it was that was considered "a priceless asset" (Ingold, 2020: 37) in the supposed heyday of the 1960s–70s? What if the conceptual framework that once made sense of academic life has been lost and what it means to be an academic subject is no longer intelligible? How and for what can we hope in such circumstances? This is the question the present paper explores.

In his widely-read study of Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, Lear (2006) poses the ethical question of how we as humans should face the prospect of cultural collapse. My aim in this paper is to take Lear's central concept of "radical hope" and explore its value in helping think through possible responses to the collapse of meaning within the contemporary academy. I begin by highlighting that radical hope is open to readings which barely distinguish it from wishful thinking, complicity, or sheer endurance, none of which hold out much promise. In order to mitigate against this, I argue for an imbrication with the "anti-anti-utopianism" first signalled by Jameson (2005). It is this anti-anti-utopian inflection that ensures radical hope remains open to the possibility of possibilities and keeps it steadfastly at odds with the present. I then go on to outline some of the key characteristics of radical hope as an *orientation* and as a *practice*. To preface my discussion, I draw on work within science-fiction studies to highlight the utility of the post-apocalyptic as an analytical frame, and I evoke the articulations of hope to be found within a number of post-apocalyptic/science-fiction novels—Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (2017), Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* (2017)—as a means of illustrating the characteristics of anti-anti-utopian radical hope. Some may regard the hope emerging from this discussion a little "thin". It may also, however, be the best hope we have.

On radical hope and the apocalypse

The notion of "radical hope" comes from Jonathan Lear's much-cited study of Plenty Coups (1848–1932). Faced in the 1850s with the breakdown of their traditional way of life, Plenty Coups led the Crow Nation through a process of cultural devastation, providing the radical hope needed to sustain his people as they weathered the storm and came through the other side. Lear makes it clear throughout that he is less concerned with

detailing what actually happened to the Crow and more concerned with the general question of how we as humans should face the prospect of a similar cultural collapse. Lear argues that "the possibility of collapse" is "an *ontological vulnerability* that affects us all insofar as we are human" and his "aim is to establish what *we* might legitimately hope at a time when the sense of purpose and meaning that has been bequeathed to us by our culture has collapsed" (Lear, 2006: 9, 50, 104, emphases in the original). More than this, he tells us that "it is a possibility we all must live with—even when our culture is robust" (ibid: 9).

To invoke Lear's notion of "radical hope" in the context of the contemporary academy in no way implies a drawing of parallels with the experiences of the Crow. Nor is it necessarily to argue that higher education has witnessed a total cultural collapse. It is simply to respond to the general question posed by Lear, namely, how we should face this prospect. By "cultural collapse" Lear means the loss of any larger framework within which daily acts gain meaning and significance. The Crow were once a nomadic, hunting, warrior tribe who by the 1880s had moved to a reservation where warfare was prohibited and hunting had become almost impossible. The Crow people still engaged in practical day-to-day activities "but they lost the rich framework in which such acts made sense" (Lear, 2006: 57). Phrased more powerfully, Lear refers to this as the death of Crow subjectivity. From this he develops the general argument that once larger frameworks of meaning disappear, "the possibility of constituting oneself as a certain kind of subject suddenly becomes problematic" and "all that's left is a ghostlike existence that stands witness to the death of the subject" (ibid: 44, 50).

This paper explores the question of what it might mean to face the death of the academic subject. Extensive research over the past 25 years has traced the breakdown of traditional understandings of academic life in which meaning and significance were given to daily acts through concepts such as autonomy, academic freedom, vocation, community of scholars, intellectual endeavour and craftsmanship, unconstrained critical inquiry, the pursuit of truth and beauty, passion, love, care, and "making a difference" (e.g., Archer, 2008; Cidlinska et al., 2023; Degn, 2018; Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Harris, 2005; Skea, 2021; Winter and O'Donohue, 2012).[1] This body of research suggests that techniques of neoliberal governmentality in particular have reconstituted academic subjectivities such that academic life is increasingly experienced as fractured, meaningless, confined to a purely marketised logic, or centred on mere survival (Angervall, 2018; Cannizo, 2015; Gil-Juárez, 2019; Peng, 2024; Shore, 2010). Understanding "academicity" as a discursively constituted matrix of practices, enactments, desires, articulations, and affects that construct subjects who are culturally intelligible as "academics", Charteris et al. (2016: 40) point to "an unravelling of the academic subject" within the neoliberal university. Of course, the notion of a stable, coherent "traditional" academic subject is a fiction and there is a certain romanticism attached to some of these arguments—a romantic attachment to "the humanistic ideal" of "the proper academic" (Cidlinska et al., 2023) which glosses over the fact that the bearers of "traditional" academic identities have traditionally occupied privileged subject positions (Clegg, 2008). Nonetheless, one can recognise the fiction and eschew romanticism and yet still bear witness to cultural collapse and the loss of meaning, still feel an affective unravelling, and still experience academic life as an increasingly unintelligible ghostlike existence.

Rather than conceiving the present juncture as one of "crisis" (a breach in the normal state of affairs requiring interventions to save something under threat), the apocalyptic may serve as a more useful figuration. Davidson defines the apocalyptic imaginary as one "in which a catastrophe, or a series of catastrophes, destroys the familiar institutions and practices of the present" (2025: 480). For Monika Kaup, "post-apocalyptic fiction is about crawling out of the rubble and remaking the world and society from within the wasteland of ruins" (2021: 5). This lends the post/apocalyptic heuristic value because it frees the imagination from the constraints imposed by a romantic and nostalgic attachment to the past (now destroyed and lying in ruins) (Folger, 2022). Precisely because the dominant logics of the old order are no longer redeemable within the post-apocalyptic imaginary, it has the potential to operate as a "possibility-disclosing practice" aimed at keeping "the possibility of a different future open, resisting resignation and accommodation to what is" (Davidson, 2025: 486). Post-apocalypticism can thus be empowering in "providing a place from which to look at ourselves in a new light, thereby freeing us to think and act in new ways" (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018: 574).

The Apocalypse is often rendered as The End of The World. Given the existential threat posed by environmental catastrophe and nuclear war, to evoke the apocalypse in the context of higher education may appear frivolous. However, the apocalypse might better be understood as *the end of a world as we know it* rather than the end of the world as such (Wade, 2025). Davidson helpfully reminds us that apocalyptic visions of the end of *the* cosmos are socially and historically situated expressions of certain social groups, proving ultimately to be "the end of *a* cosmos, a delimited totality of institutions, relations, and assumptions" (2025: 488). What would it be to imagine the end of the old academic cosmos, the demise of its familiar practices, relations, and assumptions? What if, as Manathunga and Bottrell suggest, the academy has experienced a cataclysm and "there is a real sense in universities that the very narratives with which we construct our academic subjectivities have been made unthinkable" (2019: 167)? What would it be to declare that there is *no hope at all* of a return to the putative heyday of the university and to start from the premise that "rebuilding the public university" is inconceivable? What would it be to crawl out of the rubble and face the world from within the wasteland of ruins? Returning to Lear's animating question, what might we legitimately hope at a time when the sense of purpose and meaning bequeathed to us by our culture has collapsed? Is there value to be had in orienting ourselves to our current situation is a spirit of radical hope?

Radical hope: Wishful thinking, collaboration, heroic endurance?

The radical hope offered to the Crow peoples by Plenty Coups had its origins in a dream he experienced in the wilderness as a 9 year old. This was a complex mystical dream but it was interpreted by the Crow elders (who took the dream to be a message from the spiritual world) as simultaneously foretelling the end of the Crow way of life *and* offering hope. The message taken from Coups' dream was that the Crow peoples will witness a radical rupture but that *something good will emerge* even though the nature of this good escaped their current capacity to grasp (Lear, 2006: 92–94). For Lear, Plenty Coups embraced "a peculiar form of hopefulness"—the hope for revival, for coming back to life after the end of one's culture in a form that is not yet intelligible (ibid: 95). On the basis of his dream, he

committed himself to the idea that, on the other side of the abyss, the Crow will survive and flourish. Lear suggests:

> What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it (ibid: 103).

The Crow held onto the dream as their traditional way of life collapsed. The dream provided them with the strength needed to commit to the idea that after the storm they would survive. As Lear puts it, Plenty Coups led the Crow in the light of a dream which "gave the tribe the resources to adopt a stance of radical hope…a basis of hope at a time when it was systematically unclear what one could hope for" (ibid: 115, 141).

What would it mean "to adopt a stance of radical hope" in the face of the death of academic subjectivity (or the real prospect of it)? Summarising Plenty Coups' appeal to the Crow, the general message offered by Lear seems to be this: we need to accept that out traditional ways of being are coming to an end and that the concepts with which we used to make sense of our experiences are becoming increasingly unintelligible; we must abandon any notion of the good life we once cherished and acknowledge that things are changing in ways beyond our capacity to grasp; nonetheless, "from the disaster, something good will emerge" and we will find a way to flourish even though we do not yet know what "the good" or "flourishing" might look like (Lear, 2006: 97). Taken at face value, there is an unnerving resemblance here between radical hope and wishful thinking. Lear tells us that radical hope "is committed to the bare idea that *something good will emerge*" (ibid: 94). How, one might ask, is this different from the kind of positive thinking Terry Eagleton rails against in *Hope without Optimism* (2015)? Is the primary take-home from Lear's study the suggestion that we should reassure ourselves that "everything is going to be fine"?

The radical hope sustaining the Crow through their experience of cultural devastation was the hope that there would emerge an entirely new way of being (unimaginable now) that would still be a *Crow* way of being—an unimaginably new way of flourishing as *themselves*. By the 1880s the Crow—a former nomadic, hunting, warrior tribe—had become confined to a small reservation. Plenty Coups signed a treaty with the US government and joined forces against the Sioux. He encouraged the Crow to acquire the white man's education and to be open to their religion (Coups was baptized and married in the church). The Crow settled into farming and Plenty Coups himself took to displaying crops at agricultural shows. At the time, Chief Sitting Bull regarded Plenty Coups as a collaborator (Lear, 2006: 107) and others have argued similarly since (Dreyfus, 2009). Goldman (2023: 8) suggests that radical hope can in practice "be difficult to distinguish from resignation, capitulation, and even collaboration". If we adopt a stance of radical hope in the face of cultural collapse and the unintelligibility of academic life, how can we guard against this sliding into realistic accommodation, complicity, capitulation and collaboration? Research highlights the growing extent to which academics willingly align with a management-oriented identity (Tülübaş and Göktürk, 2023; Zhang and Gong, 2024). How is radical hope to be distinguished from simply collaborating with cultural collapse as it happens?

A longstanding association exists between *hope* and *endurance*. This is most commonly found in Christian theology—one thinks, for example, of Charles Péguy's epic poem *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* in which hope is presented as a mysterious virtue that enables (nay demands) humanity to endure the trials of life with quiet serenity (Péguy, 1996). Boscaljon argues, however, that "hope is also a nonreligious capacity to endure suffering for uncertain ends" (2015: xvi). Is this not what radical hope is asking us to do, to *endure* cultural collapse in the name of the radically uncertain notion that something good just will emerge? Experiencing a growing sense of meaningless in the face of cultural collapse, but having the courage to endure in radical hope, recalls the condition Ghassan Hage terms "existential stuckendess", a mode of being that calls forth "a celebration of one's capacity to stick it out rather than calling for change" (Hage, 2009: 74). Hage refers to this as the "heroism of the stuck":

> With this form of heroism, it is not what you actively or creatively achieve that makes you a hero but your capacity to stick it out and 'get stuck well', so to speak. To be a hero under such circumstances is to be resilient enough to endure stuckedness (ibid: 75).

One sees this form of heroism playing out every day in the academy. Snatching agency from the very jaws of its lack, one asserts one's freedom by choosing to *endure more*—one takes on more marking, more administration, more teaching; one sacrifices more evenings, more weekends. This becomes inscribed within notions of academic citizenship, within understandings of what being a good academic citizen entails. As Hage remarks, "the more one is capable of enduring…the more of a good citizen one is" (2009: 78). One orients oneself toward cultural collapse and the loss of meaning by displaying "a certain nobility of spirit" through one's capacity to endure in a civilized way and thus take one's place among "the community of the stuck" (ibid: 75, 79).

Anti-anti-utopianism

Nobody could describe Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013)—a dystopian "cli-fi" novel set in a post-apocalyptic future Australia ravaged by the effects of climate catastrophe—as "hopeful". But nor is it entirely hopeless. The central character, Oblivia Ethylene, perseveres throughout the novel as she experiences a series of brutalities, traumas, and "trials" (in the strong existential sense given this term by Gabriel Marcel). This is something other than sheer endurance, however, and there is never the slightest suggestion of Oblivia's accommodating herself to events. Oblivia carries with her a trace or residue of something akin to hope, which coexists with hopelessness. Oblivia inhabits a world of post-apocalyptic chaos and destruction but there is the hint of the possibility of renewal, of the possibility of a future reconfigured society, even if this lies beyond our current imaginative and linguistic capacities. The novel is an extraordinarily powerful negation of the colonial utopian imaginary, from which nothing can be redeemed. But in the final closing page, in a flickering half-suggestion that "Swans might come back" (Wright, 2013: 334), lies a radical hope—the hope for coming back to life after the end of one's world in a form that will be both new and yet recognisable as a renewal. Shallow wishful thinking this is not—there is unfathomable depth to those four words. Oblivia's

character embodies radical hope, but there is more to it than that. Wright creates a complex multi-layered structure of feeling in which—with regard to the concerns of the present paper (the complexities and layers stretch so much further)—radical hope is imbricated with something else. How might this be characterised?

The Swan Book is a "critical dystopia", a text conveying the hopelessness endemic to the dystopian genre but which "self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation" (Moylan, 2000: 195). The critical dystopia has as its socio-political correlate the "anti-anti-Utopianism" Fredric Jameson identified as "the best working strategy" for those sensitive to the problematic nature of Utopia conceived as programme but who refuse to fully relinquish an attachment to "the very real political function of the idea" (Jameson, 2005: xvi). Famously arguing that the success of Utopia lies in its failure, Jameson tells us that Utopia's deepest political function is to hammer home "our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself" and thereby to highlight the "cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (ibid: 289). Far from signalling "liberal capitulation", however, an anti-anti-utopian stance—recognising the impossibility of utopia but refusing to give up entirely on the desire—gestures toward "a rattling of the bars" of our imprisonment (ibid: 232-3).

Given that no act of the imagination can escape the conditions of its production, imagining *an entirely new* way of being Crow—like all Utopian production—was impossible for Plenty Coups. Likewise, imagining a radically new form of subjectivity is impossible for us dwelling within the rubble now. However, Lear's radical hope is only "contingently unimaginable" (Martin, 2014: 107). Plenty Coups hoped that on the other side of the abyss there would be an entirely new way of being that would nonetheless be a *Crow* way of being. This was radical hope "for an outcome (survival as Crow) that he *may one day be able to experience*"—an outcome that outstripped present concepts but not all possible experience and thus outstripped present concepts of goodness but not all possible experience of goodness (Martin, 2014: 107-8). While it is impossible to delimit the radically new way of being to be hoped for, "radical hope points toward the *possibility* of such an object" (Shockley, 2019: 66); the possibility of possibility as it were.

Hope, by its very nature, is always open to disappointment. The radical hope offered by Plenty Coups was that the Crow will find a way of life that they *will recognise* as the survival of the Crow. But hope offers no guarantees and Plenty Coups' radical hope was open to defeat. In spite of both the unimaginability of its object and the possibility of its disappointment, anti-anti-utopian radical hope refuses to accept that the good cannot be hoped for. It refuses the anti-utopian temptation to despair, to accommodate oneself to one's circumstances, to endure them heroically because seeking something other is always doomed to failure. This is a far cry from the kind of hope recommended by Lesley Head in the face of environmental devastation, a "gritty, keeping going kind of hope" (Head, 2016: 24). Radical hope takes heart from the multiplicity of conditions under which flourishing might take place. The form that any future flourishing might take is beyond our current capacity to grasp, but "the recognition that there is a very wide range of possible ways of flourishing…serves as the proper object of radical hope" (Shockley, 2019: 72). In this way, anti-anti-utopian radical hope "keeps us radically unreconciled to the present" (Eagleton, 2015: 69).

In a neat little phrase, Balasopolous refers to anti-anti-utopianism as "the becoming-reflexive of negativity" (2024: 162). The anti-anti-utopian gesture takes its awareness of

the impossibility of Utopia—the impossibility of imagining the objective of hope and the impossibly of constructing a project seeking to realise some imagined utopian vision—into its engagement with that very impossibility itself. In this encounter there lies an excess beyond mere hopelessness. As exemplified by Oblivia's struggle and journey in *The Swan Book*, anti-anti-utopianism comprises a reflexive negativity which confronts the seeming closure of the now with an openness that can be distinguished from collaboration and with a courage that can be distinguished from heroic endurance (a quiet rattling of the bars of her imprisonment, indeed). Anti-anti-utopianism becomes a heuristic orientation, a way of reading events and situations, and "impossibility becomes a concrete and motivating obstacle instead of a nebulous and paralyzing one" (Balasopolous, 2024: 173).

Radical hope as orientation

Hope—and how to sustain it amid catastrophe—is a constant refrain throughout Claire G. Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (2017), a post-apocalyptic science fiction novel that uses alien invasion as a lens through which to explore the ravages of settler colonialism. Talking of humans after their colonisation by the Toads, the novel poses a question that echoes Lear's central concern: "They had lost their homes, their families, their children, and they were second-class citizens where once they had ruled. They had lost everything; having no hope they had slipped into a deep depression. That mood was everywhere – there was nothing positive, nothing left to hope for. How can you hope when everything, even your future, has already been taken away?" (Coleman, 2017: 158). It seems significant that one of the principal characters within an indigenous encampment is called Esperance. Barely surviving, Esperance is always on the look-out, forever fearful, constantly on the run to evade the Settlers. When her grandfather is killed by Toads who track down and destroy the encampment, '[t]he only family Esperance had, the only hope she truly felt, her entire world, died" (ibid: 276). Experiencing the apocalyptic end of her world, the loss of all sources of meaning, Esperance (Hope) nonetheless survives and the novel ends with her wandering alone, carrying only the thought that "Somewhere in the gorges and caves of this desert land…there would be survivors…Esperance's people had just lost their final battle, so she would find more people" (ibid: 289-90). Aside from signalling defiance, what is it that Esperance is seeking here? In the face of cultural devastation, how might Hope be found in more people?

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt introduces the concept of natality by stating that "the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (Arendt, 1958: 9). She later goes on to argue that it is *only* the full experience of natality, i.e. *only* the capacity to begin things anew that newcomers bring with them by virtue of being born, that bestows hope upon human affairs (ibid: 247). The "inherent unpredictability" of human action, compounded by its perpetual capacity to begin things anew, undergirds the frailty of human institutions and the tendency of action "to force open all limitations" (ibid: 190-91). In perhaps the strongest formulation of natality, Arendt says: "The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (ibid: 178). Bringing Arendt into conversation with Lear, Edgoose (2009) argues that natality is what makes teaching an act

of radical hope. The newness and unpredictability of natality ensures that every teaching encounter holds the promise of transforming one's life and the lives of others in significant though untraceable ways (ibid: 119). Because the future is uncontrollable, Edgoose regards utopian projects as foredoomed to failure. However, for those experiencing cultural collapse and the loss of meaning, natality—with its promise of miracles—holds the prospect of "teaching our way out when nobody knows the way" (Edgoose, 2008).

This resonates with post-critical educational philosophy, which also draws on Arendt to locate hope in the practice of teaching (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2018a). Post-critical pedagogy starts from the affirmative premise that there is good in the world worth preserving and positions teaching as an act of love in and through which the good is passed on to the next generation "in such a manner that it can be taken up in new and unexpected ways" (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2018b: 16). The hope articulated here is "*hope in the present*"—a "hopeness" without a hoped-for (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2020: 57). Hope is ignited when students gather together to focus on something so intensely that all sense of time disappears, when all that exists is the here-and-now devotion to a thing of study which opens up possibilities for seeing things anew (Zamojski, 2020). As ruined as it might be, the university is still "a collective of studiers" and still a site where studious gatherings with "unpredictable, eventful effects" take place (Schildermans, 2021: 47, 125). As such, we should be "attentive to the possibilities that might still remain within the ruins of the university", possibilities for "educational transformation", for opening up new futures, and for making possible processes of becoming that are "radically open-ended" (ibid: 19, 122). Education "is about bringing into the world the unforeseen" (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2018b: 13) and passing on a love for the world to newcomers who will take it up in unpredictable and unknowable ways (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2018a: 18).

As with Arendt, hope is placed in the full experience of natality, in the capacity of the newcomers, having received it as a gift, to begin the world anew. Leaving aside the question of natality's constraints—Arendt tells us that "the chances that tomorrow will be like yesterday are always overwhelming" (Arendt, 1977: 170)—an elision exists here between the *new* and the *good*. On the one hand, natality is "an opening of pure potentiality" that can lead in "an infinite number" of directions and is thus "a vulnerable gesture" (Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2018a: 78, 72). On the other hand, educational transformation, no matter what direction it leads, "is good in and of itself" (ibid: 83). I share Terry Eagleton's caution in this regard, when he notes: "One should not rejoice at the mere prospect of open-endedness…To unfurl is not necessarily to flourish" (2015: 96). Returning to the question of radical hope, Edgoose defines this as "hope without an imagined end, hope with an openness to the future and the unimaginable nature of the unfolding events to come" (2009: 114). This is a misreading of Lear, however, for whom radical hope is committed, not to openness without an end, but to the bare idea that a currently inconceivable form of *flourishing* will emerge. Recalling Balasopolous' characterisation of the anti-anti-utopian, natality offers a bulwark against the paralysing sense that we can never escape the past. What it does not do, however, in and of itself, is provide a grounding for the *good* as Lear understands it.

For the Crow people, their radical hope had a grounding—it was rooted in something that tied the unknowably new to the good. Their hope was grounded in the person of

Plenty Coups as a leader and prophetic dreamer with the capacity for radical anticipation. *He carried himself and his people forward, committed to the idea that it was worthwhile to do so* (Lear, 2006: 78). I think it safe to say that we lack a figure like Plenty Coups to provide a trusted mooring for our radical hope. Oblivia Ethylene's radical hope was grounded too, in Country; the Aboriginal conception of land and its complex interactions with human and non-human beings. In *The Swan Book*, Country is an active, vital presence with its own agency; perhaps the central character of the novel, and it is in Country that Oblivia (herself a kind of extension of Country, perhaps even a voice) grounds her radical hope. Can we conceive of anything that offers the mooring provided to the Crow by Plenty Coups or the connectedness afforded to Oblivia by Country?

An anti-anti-utopian radical hope is undoubtedly a form of commitment, a commitment to possibility. To live and act in radical hope also requires a form of courage, the courage to *stay*, to abandon the security of traditional notions of the good, and to pursue forms of flourishing that are unimaginably new. In thinking through where a grounding for this commitment and courage might lie, it is helpful to return to Arendt, for whom an important aspect of natality is the fact that action "always establishes relationships" (Arendt, 1958: 190). This is significant because it draws our attention to the relational character of hope. Thinking back to Esperance's search for more people, she was seeking out not only the newness they might bring (natality) but also the relationships they might forge (relationality). Given the centrality of family as the locus of hope running through *Terra Nullius*, it could be argued that what Esperance was seeking was *kinship*.

Borrowing a phrase from Bernard Dauenhauer, anti-anti-utopian radical hope can be regarded as "a double-rayed act" (1986: 108). It has one eye on its impossible-to-conceptualise objective but "the primary ray is that directed toward other agents" (ibid: 106). It is commonplace within pragmatic theories of hope to stress its relational, intersubjective nature. In the work of Shade (2001) and Rorty (1999), for example, one finds powerful expressions of the idea that hope is cultivated through creating and sustaining relationships. The proper objective of hope becomes *ourselves*, our intelligence, adaptability, creativity, imagination, courage, tenacity, resourcefulness, agency, and capacity for self-creation. In Rorty's formulation, hope is the "sense that the human future can be made different from the human past, unaided by non-human powers" (1999: 208); it is "taking the world by the throat and insisting that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined" (1998: 138). To hope in the face of cultural collapse is to possess a profound confidence in our capacity to transform the ways in which we organise our lives, this confidence serving to expand the boundaries of the possible.

Like Shade and Rorty, Dauenhauer understands hope as the double conviction that the future need not be like the present and that the character of the future can be influenced by human agency. Although its primary ray is "directed toward other persons in whose efficacy one hopes" (1986: 110), it is important not to lose sight of its secondary ray (a state of affairs), which in our case is a future flourishing that lies beyond our present conceptual and linguistic capacities to grasp. This is *contingently* unimaginable—it outstrips present concepts of goodness but not all possible experience of goodness. It is a state of affairs we may one day experience. Anti-anti-utopian radical hope keeps one eye on the objective that currently lies beyond all representation but exists as a possibility to be found. Future flourishing could take many forms but these will be *recognisable* as

flourishing. On the one hand—consistent with a post-critical approach—we can direct our hope *toward* the relational encounters, the dialogic interactions, the collaborative work we engage in with our peers, our colleagues, our students, our networks; and we can ground that hope *in* our collective creativity, imagination, resourcefulness and agency; and we can hope *for* unanticipated possibilities and alternative horizons to emerge. On the other hand, however, we need to stay attuned to the potentiality of these horizons of possibility to open out onto a state of affairs that we will recognise as a new form of subjectivity. It is this double-rayed act that prevents radical from hope losing itself in pure natality.

Radical hope as practice

Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* (2017) tells the story of multiple characters as they abandon the dystopian hyper-capitalist surveillance society of the near future (run by the super-rich zottas) and establish a fluid network of decentralised, digital, post-scarcity, utopian communities. It is a story of utopia-in-the-making and of the tensions, threats and conflicts encountered along the way. About half way through the novel, an exchange takes place between Gretyl and Seth about the point of walking away in the face of constant and growing hostility and violence from zottas. What are we doing? asks Gretyl. In his reply, Seth draws a strange-seeming analogy: "If your ship goes down in the middle of open water, you don't give up and sink. You tread water, clutch onto a spar, do something" (Doctorow, 2017: 285). Those who do something are "hopeful. Or at least not hope-empty…So what we're doing, Gretyl, is exercising hope. It's all you can do when the situation calls for pessimism…Hope's what we're doing. Performing hope, treading water in open ocean with no rescue in sight" (ibid: 286). Treading water in open ocean with no rescue in sight. This seems like a peculiar and slightly arresting way of characterising hope. Can anything instructive be taken from this?

Placing hope in each other can have something of a religious feel to it. I *believe* in my students; I have *faith* in our collegiality. Indeed, Dauenhauer secularises Gabriel Marcel's theological "I hope in thee for us" as a shorthand for hope. I want to avoid such connotations here. Yes, the radical hope I am suggesting is oriented toward our intersubjectivity and relational encounters, and grounded in a confidence in, and commitment to, our collective agency. But hope is not only an orientation. It is also a practice. In Seth's articulation, those who are not hope-empty are called on to *do something*. "Treading water in open ocean with no rescue in sight" evokes a number of qualities often associated with hope: patience, perseverance, resilience, and such like. It also captures two other important dimensions. The first is activity and hard work—treading water requires effort and can be exhausting. The second is attentiveness. Those who are treading water in hope will become highly attuned to their environment, attentive to any change in the ripples of the water, receptive to any distant noise, open to the slightest trace of difference.

That *receptivity* is central to an understanding of radical hope has been widely noted (e.g., Back, 2021; Flores and Rousse, 2018; Roy, 2023; Shockley, 2019). Radical hope demands an attentiveness to what is emerging in the conditions of the present, a heightened awareness of what is happening in the here-and-now; it requires us to make ourselves at home in the ruins of the world collapsing around us, to sit and "stay with the trouble" as Harraway (2016) would have it; to throw off the dream of ever recovering what

has been lost and to stare with clear eyes into the darkness, receptive to any new paths opening up, to any inchoate sense of new forms of life and modes of being emerging from the rubble. Rather than abstracting itself and taking flight into some distant future, the very uncertainty of radical hope infuses every present encounter with a sense of potential, offers an invitation to experiment, to throw ourselves deeper into the shadowy corners of the present, to be alert to—and to *feel for*—any changes in the ripples of the water.

Radical hope also requires patience and the capacity to wait. It is tempting to try to force the situation. Gannon (2020), for example, working within the tradition of Freirean critical pedagogy, draws on Lear to position teaching as an act of radical hope. Unable to tolerate its contingent nature, however, he cannot resist the pull of a positive utopian project and seeks to align radical hope with a "meaningful program for an achievable future" (Gannon, 2020: 13), a move at odds with the very nature of radical hope itself. As noted above, waiting does not necessarily imply passivity. Waiting can be an active, demanding process. Although the term "active waiting" is associated with the philosophy of Gabriel Marcel, it is important to move beyond his understanding of the activity involved. For Marcel, hope's waiting is "active" in the sense that it requires courage to remain steadfast in the midst of life's trials and to rise above them as one make's oneself available to receiving the gift of God (Marcel, 1967: 280-1). I have argued elsewhere that Marcel's is an anti-utopian hope (Webb, 2024). In contrast, Kallio et al.'s (2021) work with asylum seekers and refugees reveals how waiting can be reclaimed as a space for forging connections, making alliances, and pushing at the boundaries of constraint. Reading the refugees' radical hope with an anti-anti-utopian inflection, they illustrate that "waiting does not equal staying still, indifferent, or unchanged…Spaces of waiting are thus also spaces of struggle, action, and political possibility" (Kallio et al., 2021: 4008).

As we actively wait—directing our hope toward our relational encounters, placing hope in our collective agency, dwelling in the midst of the rubble, hyper alert to everything happening in the here-and-now—we should be working to foster the background conditions from which an object we could hope for can emerge. What we know is that the dominant logics of the old order are no longer redeemable. We need to experiment, then, with disruptions that contain the potential to open up new horizons of meaning. This does not mean simply continuing with our quotidian study practices in the hope that something "miraculous" occurs (pure natality). It requires rigorous processes of critical self-reflection and examination; it means disrupting organisational structures and classroom relations as far as is possible; it means reimagining curricula and pedagogies to foreground the voices, histories, and experiences of students marginalised by the dominant logics of the old order; it demands attentiveness, reciprocity, close and receptive listening, pedagogical strategies aimed at surfacing subjugated histories, memories, desires and longings; it requires forging connections with groups and movements beyond the academy (and across *all* working within it) in order to establish relations of real solidarity and collectivity (never part of the dominant logics of an academy structured around individualism and hierarchy). This requires a lot of hard work and emotional labour from educators (Lopez, 2023; Zembylas, 2022). Passive waiting this is not.[2]

From a post-critical perspective, such a proposition may appear too critically oriented. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, it lacks connection to a clear programme. Disruptive work without a concrete goal can feel disorienting and perhaps even pointless

(what are we working *for*?). If we lack the conceptual resources to imagine the object of our radical hope, is not rattling the bars of our ideological imprisonment simply reckless? Throughout all this, however, we remain attentive, receptive, open to *emergence*. We inhabit the corpse of the university-as-was and rummage around for inchoate murmurings of something unimaginably recognisable—the new we cannot conceive of but will nonetheless know and feel as a renewal. There is no telos at play here. There is no Blochean Totum making its absent presence felt.[3] The situation calls for what Mavis Biss terms the radical imagination, "the specifically imaginative excellence required to bring inchoate experience to conceptual consciousness" (Biss, 2013: 948). This is a process of working through preconceptualised experience in order to slowly, iteratively, give conceptual shape to the inchoate feelings and intuitions that cannot be articulated within our existing cultural framework. This will require experimentation, and the emergence of a new cultural language and a new social imaginary might more readily be traced in the realm of art and literature than within the confines of academia as such. The work of Ansgar Allen comes to mind here, whose academic writings survey the dead space of the university (e.g., Allen, 2024a) but whose experimental fiction disrupts conventional linguistic and conceptual schema as it picks apart the very structure and practice of education (e.g., Allen, 2021, 2024b).

The present is always pregnant with the future. Our current conjuncture, however, has rightly been characterised as "a kind of phantom pregnancy"—the old world is dead and decaying but there is no sign of the new world being born (Thompson, 2013: 10). The opacity of the present means we can focus only on the next step ahead, making the road by walking as it were. We need to be receptive to emergence but not every emergence is "good". Care must be taken to avoid a simple valorisation of the new. The new can lead toward destruction just as much it can portend flourishing. In working through pre-conceptualised experience, it matters that our attentiveness foregrounds those marginalised, exploited, ignored, silenced and used by and through the discourse of the old order. It matters that disruption opens space for queer, Black, Indigenous, disabled, poor, precarious articulations and futurities. In *A Third University is Possible*, la paperson suggests that if there is any hope at all, it is "the hope of the scyborg" (2017: 55). A multiplicity of conditions exist under which future flourishing might take place. Who knows what kind of human, non-human and technological entanglements and assemblages await.

Conclusion

Radical hope is forged in the fire of despair, in the midst of cultural collapse and the loss of meaning. Research over the past two decades has traced the collapse of the cultural norms that have traditionally given the daily acts of academic life sense and meaning. Rather than orienting our hope toward the recovery of what has been lost (the overly romanticised "public university"), what if we accept its demise (mourn its death if you like) and face the world from the wasteland of its ruins? Cassegård and Thörn refer to "the paradoxical quality of hope—the fact that giving up hope may be a way to gain hope" (2018: 574). While adopting a post-apocalyptic perspective may not seem the most obvious way to gain hope, the post-apocalyptic imaginary serves to clear the ground so we can look at ourselves in a new light. Jonathan Lear argues that Plenty Coups provided the Crow

Nation with the radical hope needed to survive their own apocalypse and come out flourishing on the other side. The apocalyptic prospect of cultural collapse faces us all, Lear suggests, and his study addresses the general ethical and ontological question of "what *we* might legitimately hope at a time when the sense of purpose and meaning that has been bequeathed to us by our culture has collapsed" (Lear, 2006: 104). This paper has explored the question of what it might mean to adopt a stance of radical hope in the face of the collapse of purpose and meaning in the contemporary academy.

Some of Lear's phrasings and arguments invite a wholly unpromising reading of radical hope—that we should simply go along with cultural collapse and endure it in the conviction that something good *just will* emerge from the disaster. I argue, then, for an anti-anti-utopian radical hope. This remains faithful to what Lear considers "radical" (the fact that hope is directed toward a future goodness that transcends our current imaginative and linguistic capacities to grasp) but stresses its *contingent* unimaginability (the object of hope outstrips present concepts of goodness but not all possible experience of goodness). Anti-anti-utopianism recognises the impossibility of utopian politics but refuses to give up entirely on the idea, keeping us rattling at the bars of the ideological and conceptual closure within which we are imprisoned.

Radical hope with an anti-anti-utopian inflection can be understood as both an orientation and a practice. As an orientation, radical hope is directed *toward* the relational encounters we engage in with each other, is grounded *in* our collective agency, is a hope *for* the emergence of unanticipated possibilities and alternative horizons, and is *attuned to* the potentiality of these horizons of possibility to open out onto a state of affairs that we will recognise as a new form of flourishing. As a practice, radical hope demands that we make ourselves at home amid the ruins of the academy, remaining highly attentive to what is happening in the here-and-now, hyper-receptive to any inchoate sense of new forms of life emerging from the rubble. This requires patience and the capacity to wait, though this is an *active waiting*. As we wait, we engage in strategies of disruption in an attempt to open up new horizons of meaning, and we exercise the radical imagination as we seek to give conceptual shape to those emergent feelings and intuitions that cannot be articulated within our existing cultural framework. The norms of the old world are beyond recovery and any new subjectivity worthy of the name will only emerge from the experiences of those who were only ever marginally present or welcome within it. In time, this long, patiently impatient process of feeling around may alight on a form of being together that we recognise as a new way of being *ourselves*.

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Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. I write this in late March 2025 amid the furore surrounding Donald Trump's interventions in higher education and Columbia University's "capitulation" to his demands, seen by some as a betrayal of core academic values such as autonomy and academic freedom. As Striffler (2025) rightly notes, however, "the question we should be asking ourselves—especially those of us who live in academia and should know better—is why would we expect universities…to protect free speech, academic freedom, and dissent at all". Given that all meaning has been emptied out of the academy, aside from the mere reproduction of itself within the regime of capital, Striffler notes that "complicity" is a better term than "capitulation" to describe Columbia's response and "that it is baffling that anyone would expect anything different" (ibid).
2. One finds a purely passive waiting running through Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* (2013). The feel of the whole novel is permeated by a lack of agency, of *waiting-out* the post-apocalyptic present. This lack of agency comes through in the definition of hope Toby offers the Crakers: "Hope is when you want something very much but you do not know if that thing you want will really happen" (Atwood, 2013: 292). This purely passive definition, emptied of any and all agency, is characteristic of the book's overall structure of feeling. The novel ends on a note of pure natality, with Swift Fox saying she was pregnant again and "that is a thing of hope" (ibid: 390), the entire burden of hope for the future being placed on a new birth.
3. In a paper touching on questions of hope and utopia, one might have expected Ernst Bloch to figure more heavily. While Bloch's process philosophy and speculative materialism seem to offer grounds for hope—matter is open; the material world is always in process; within actuality lies a striving toward potentiality; the not-yet as a form of possibility, latency, tendency; the objectively-real being-in-possibility (Bloch, 1995)—he never escaped a teleology I want to avoid here (Webb, 2000).

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