

# **“The Humanities’ Role in Addressing the Climate Crisis”**

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Transcription:

Hello, I am Elisabeth Weber. I teach German and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Together with my colleagues John Foran and Richard Widick, I drafted the [Statement by Humanists and Social Scientists in Support of Global Youth Uprising for Climate Action](#). I am honored to be part of this panel.

The humanities have a unique role to play in addressing the climate crisis, and in these few minutes, I will focus on the medium of teaching literature, fiction and the deep impact it can have on students.

Fiction not only mobilizes the potential of imagination in all its diversity and creativity, it also, at its best, convenes town hall meetings of a very particular kind. As Toni Morrison put it, “Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power.”<sup>1</sup> Morrison spoke in the context of the fact that, “in a wholly racialized society [like the United States], there is no escape from racially

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, New York, Vintage Books, 1993, 15

inflected language” (12), but her description of the potential of fiction is valid also as guidance on what kind of expressive culture is needed in the context of the climate crisis we are facing, in which a myriad of town hall meetings all around the globe are vital, a myriad that include the entire diversity of human and non-human others.

Of course, I refer to Toni Morrison also because her analysis of a “racialized society” is of greatest concern for climate activists and scholars demanding climate justice: we know that communities of color are more exposed to suffering the most devastating effects of climate change. This intersectionality, to use Kimberlé Crenshaw’s extremely productive concept, is at the forefront of the climate struggle.

If Toni Morrison is right that “cultural identities are formed and informed by a nation’s literature,”<sup>2</sup> by the stories that are told and retold, in fiction, in cinema, in history, in music and all the other forms of expressive culture, then it is through stories that cultural identities can also be changed. People may be moved to action by being moved by stories. It is in stories that empathy with the foreign other and even with those stigmatized as enemies is more likely to happen. That is where teaching the humanities, including teaching literature can be a persuasive catalyst.

To speak with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “education in the Humanities attempts to be an *uncoercive* rearrangement of desires.”<sup>3</sup> In a carbon-fueled society, in which relentless consumption asserts itself as the highest fulfilment of desires, such a “rearrangement of desires” is a powerful potential.

This rearrangement of desires is anything but guaranteed. Today it seems more impossible than likely. Seen from what already “is” and what is considered “possible,” it *is not*. It is “impossible” in the sense Jacques Derrida uses this word: unpredictable, unthinkable, impracticable. Literature, however, is a privileged place for the impossible to happen because its

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<sup>2</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 39

<sup>3</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Righting Wrongs,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 526. Spivak continues: “If you are not persuaded by this simple description, nothing I say about the Humanities will move you.”

labor lies in conjuring a “rearranged” desire into occurrence through the invention and intervention of language. Fiction writing, “in changing language, changes more than language.”<sup>4</sup>

Educators are at a decisive cross-roads: As the international youth-led movement for climate action and climate justice shows, young people around the world call not only for a rearrangement of priorities, but of desires on the local, national and international levels. They call for the deep transformation that the humanities and social science explore. They call for a reinvention of all relations: between rich and poor, between indigenous peoples and those who have inherited the riches of settler exploitation, between North and South, between animals, plants and humans.

If the dystopias of decades of block buster movies are indicators of the nightmares of our collective unconscious, they are much more in resonance with the findings of climate science than the timid mainstream political discourses and economists’ blind faith in endless growth. These dystopias bear witness to the trauma to come. Young people around the world have understood the very real possibility of those seemingly impossible scenarios. It is our responsibility as educators to support them in creating the languages of testimony and the languages of communities imagining, inventing, and bringing into existence climate justice.

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 55.