Jill Gatlin, New England Conservatory

Climate Privilege, the Social Construction of Emotion, and Creative Climate Justice: Activity and Assignment Prompts

These loose prompts and article excerpts, pared down from longer sets of reading questions to focus on emotion and action, draw on not only climate change scholarship but also critical race theory and social justice pedagogy to facilitate students' reflections on (1) the social construction of their emotions in relation to positionality and privilege—not just *how* they feel about climate change but *why* they feel that way, (2) affective habits and social forms that correspond with and support climate denial or action, and (3) participating in climate justice action as a form of creativity. These prompts are adaptable to discussions, collaborative activities, journal entries, essay assignments, creative activities, or action-oriented assignments.

See my **Climate Change Arts and Culture Syllabus** for additional resources and my article, **"Climate Justice Pedagogy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Proximity and Empathy in Contexts of Privilege"** (forthcoming in *Resilience*) for tools from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities that help students locate themselves on a spectrum of climate privilege. Research on local climate impacts, carbon footprint calculators, geographic charts of per capita carbon emissions and severity of climate impacts, economic analyses of disproportionate emissions and "climate debt" (Klein), and narratives of climate injustice help students define their climate privilege and/or disadvantage. Also see the list of introductory readings on privilege at the end of this document.

(1) The social construction of emotions in relation to positionality and privilege. After students reflect on their emotional responses to climate change, ask them to define the positions of privilege and/or disadvantage, cultural values, group norms, social forms, intellectual processes, personal and societal philosophies, psychological practices, political beliefs, spatial locations, temporal constructs, etc. shaping these emotions. Potential resources:

> "Dispositions may be privately held, but they are socially constructed as well, just as emotions are understood through the lens of a cultural ideology" (Schneider 204).

> "How we respond to disturbing information is a complex process. Individuals may block out certain information in order to maintain coherent meaning systems (e.g. cognitive dissonance see e.g. Festinger 1957; Gecas and Burke 1995), desirable emotional states (Rosenberg 1991), a sense of self-efficacy (Gecas and Burke 1995), and in order to follow norms of attention, emotion (Hochschild 1983), and conversation (Eliasoph 1998). Society organizes patterns of perception, memory, and organizational aspects of thinking (Zerubavel 1997). These cultural norms are in turn attuned to specific political economic relations" (Norgaard 405).

(2) Affective habits and social forms that correspond with and support climate denial or action. How do particular emotions—and the social contexts that influence them—fuel climate denial or action? Which emotions facilitate avoidance? Which prompt engagement? How do inattentiveness, attentiveness, and mindfulness fit into these processes? What do we avoid examining when we settle with quick emotional responses? How do emotional and social labor correspond to one another? How do these emotions and social orientations intersect with

privilege and/or disadvantage? How can we move beyond paralyzing emotions? What social resources does that require? How might we apply frameworks for understanding different forms of racism and antiracism to our relationships to climate injustice?

To what extent are you concerned about people disproportionately affected by climate change in other countries? To what extent are you concerned about climate impacts on nonhuman nature? To put it differently, how much do you care? Why? How is caring a personal matter, and how is it an ethical or societal matter? If you haven't thought about these questions much before, why not—what keeps us from thinking in these ways? Potential resources:

> Edgington on "Moving Beyond White Guilt," "How We can Defuse the Negative Aspects of Guilt" ("Get information," "Do something," "Listen," "Talk," "Moving On").

> "I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others" (Tatum 130-131).

> Boler discusses "a greater need for new conceptions of the relation of emotions and power. As we develop alternatives to privatized and naturalized models of emotion, I offer two concepts of the analysis of emotion and power relations: 'economies of mind', which refers to emotion and affect as models of currency in social relations; and as an alternative to theories of depth unconscious, I suggest we consider emotions as 'inscribed habits of inattention'" (268).

> "[T]hough we know about [climate change], we don't *know* about it. It hasn't registered in our gut; it isn't part of our culture" (McKibben 1).

> "In addition to the more identifiable strategy of interpretation, people collectively held information about global warming at arm's length by following established cultural norms about what to pay attention to, feel, talk, and think about in different contexts. I categorize these as 'cultural denial.' From the perspective of sociology of cognition, people learn to think through socialization into different 'thought communities' (Zerubavel 1997). At the same time as they feel 'just like everyday life,' these culturally prescribed norms of attention reflect a particularly insidious form of social control akin to Steven Lukes's third dimension of power" (Norgaard 408).

> "For example, simply upholding norms of attention with respect to space made the lack of snow and warm temperatures seem less significant (depoliticized in part because

connections to unusual weather events elsewhere were not made), while following norms of attention with respect to time encouraged community members to not think too far ahead into the future, hence minimizing the extent to which the implications of immediate events are forecast. Cultural norms of emotion limited the extent to which community members could bring strong feelings they privately held regarding climate change into the public political process, which in turn served to reinforce the sense that everything was fine. Mechanisms of cultural denial are however more complex. Elsewhere I describe other cultural aspects of denial such as how community members used an available repertoire of conversational tactics, emotion management strategies, and techniques of shifting attention in order to follow local norms" (Norgaard 408).

"Ignoring the obvious can be a lot of work. In her work on apathy in the United States, sociologist Nina Eliasoph observes, 'We often assume that political activism requires an explanation, while inactivity is the normal state of affairs. But it can be as difficult to ignore a problem as to try to solve it, to curtail feelings of empathy as to extend them" (Norgaard 404-405).

"When people hear about climate change, they may, for example, hear an implicit criticism that their lifestyle is the cause of the issue or that they are morally deficient for not recognizing it. But emotion can be a useful ally; it can create the abiding commitments needed to sustain action on the difficult issue of climate change. To do this, people must be convinced that something can be done to address it; that the challenge is not too great nor are its impacts preordained. The key to engaging people in a consensus-driven debate about climate change is to confront the emotionality of the issue and then address the deeper ideological values that may be threatened to create this emotionality" (Hoffman).

Also see: Höppner and Whitmarsh (125-129), Wolf (48-49, 58-60).

(3) Participating in climate justice action as a form of creativity. What counts as action, or what is the range of possible actions in response to climate change? What does it mean to create climate justice? How might we creatively intervene at scales ranging from the personal to the systemic? What kinds of actions would interest you most? What might you have the passion to advocate for or skills to get involved in? What steps would you need to take in order to do so? What emotional and social resources would you need? How might some aspect of your lifework intersect with creative climate justice? Potential Resources for creativity in the arts (and beyond); I'd love to have more resources here on making, performance, process, creation, etc:

"'Making'—what I called in my first book 'crafting'—links structures of power, labor processes, and performances of gendered, national, and racialized subjectivities, in historically and culturally specific settings. Making and labor, including the making of race, become forms of power-laden creativity (Ingold 2013). Far from the auratic product of genius, springing fully formed from the artist's imagination, art is work: sometimes joyous and exciting, sometimes tedious, always requiring craft, prodigious effort, and, especially in theater, collaboration. I claim behind-the-scenes cultural / labor as the making of theory, the crafting of politics, and the making and unmaking of structural

inequalities such as race. Commonsense binaries between creativity and the arts, on the one hand, and labor, theory, and politics, on the other, split a complex, multilayered process. Creativity is work, practice, method: a site of theory making and political intervention" (Kondo 6-7).

"[W]hat emotions should the playwright [or other artists] play with?" (McKibben 2).

Addendum: Basic Resources on Privilege

Green, Beverly. "What Difference Does a Difference Make?" In *Diversity in Human Interactions: The Tapestry of America*. Edited by Larry C. James. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. 3-20.

McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Peggy McIntosh, 1988.

Tatum, Beverly. "Defining Racism: 'Can We Talk?'" In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. Edited by Maurianne Adams, et al. New York: Routledge, 2000. 81-82.

Wildman, Stephanie M. with Adrienne D. Davis. "Language and Silence: Making Systems of Privilege Visible." In *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. Edited by Maurianne Adams, et al. New York: Routledge, 2000. 52-58.

Works Cited

Boler, Megan. "The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1997, pp. 253–273.

Edgington, Amy. "Moving Beyond White Guilt." *Transformation*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1998, pp. 5–7.

Hoffman, Andrew J. "Climate Science as Culture War." *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 10.4 (Fall 2012).

Höppner, Corina and Lorraine Whitmarsh, "Public Engagement in Climate Action: Policy and Public Expectations." In *Engaging the Public with Climate Change: Behaviour Change and Communication*. Edited by Lorraine Whitmarsh, Saffron O'Neill, and Irene Lorenzoni. London: Earthscan, 2010. 48-49, 58-60

Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014.

Kondo, Dorinne. *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity*. Duke, 2018.

McKibben, Bill. "What the Warming World Needs Now is Art, Sweet Art." *Grist*. 22 Apr 2005.

Norgaard, Kari Marie. "Climate Denial: Emotion, Psychology, Culture, and Political Economy." *Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, edited by John S Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, Oxford U Press, 2011, pp. 399–413.

Schneider, Barbara. "Uncommon Ground: Narcissistic Reading and Material Racism." *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2005, pp. 195–212.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "Defining Racism: 'Can We Talk?'" *The Social Construction of Difference: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*. Edited by Paula S. Rothenberg with Kelly S. Mayhew. New York: Worth, 2014. 128-132.

Wolf, Johanna. "Ecological Citizenship as Public Engagement with Climate Change." In *Engaging the Public with Climate Change: Behaviour Change and Communication*. Edited by Lorraine Whitmarsh, Saffron O'Neill, and Irene Lorenzoni. London: Earthscan, 2010. 125-129.