

Leading Transformative Higher Education



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(DE)COLONISING MY ACADEMIC SELF: MANIFESTING A DREAM OF TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION IN MURTER, CROATIA

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Introduction

Our current times paint a rather bleak picture of the world in which we live in: ecological catastrophes, financial disasters, famine, wars, social injustice and political upheavals, human greed beyond the need... the list goes on, Thus, daring to dream a different reality has become essential yet not easy in times when dreaming is still scorned and discouraged. In the professional world of science and academic education this attitude is particularly strong. In this world, bounded by rationality and scientific reductionism, dreamers are hardly taken seriously. Yet dreaming is what gives the world hope if we are to sustain humanity. In this paper I will speak about the importance of staying strong, open and pure in the process of carrying your dream into its reality despite all resistance as well as your own doubts you may experience on the way. I will take you on a journey of my early life dreams while growing up on a small island in Croatia; how my strong visions took me into an empowering international academic career; and how I have eventually exited it as my disappointment grew with its limited institutional frames; only to return to that same island to work on my current dream to

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set up an experimental nature-based campus for the University of Tomorrow, the initiative behind which this book also stems from.

I will describe how I have increasingly become disillusioned with rigid academic structures, its power games and its alienation from the problems of the 'real world'. Being a passionate and dedicated teacher I have become increasingly frustrated with the fact that at university we provide our students with too many theories and not enough necessary direction on the ways of manifesting our theories into practice. I believe that this is something that our distressed world cannot afford any more. Every year I am faced with a new generation of desperate and confused young people who are overwhelmed with the world's unsustainable living. Through their eyes, I have come to realise that our higher education structures are no longer pertinent for the challenges that lie ahead of us. I believe that we educate our students for the world of yesterday, rather than the world of tomorrow.

That strong inner realisation became very suffocating and worrisome for me. I stopped believing in my profession and the work I did within the existing structures. The process of letting the security of a permanent job go, was tough. But I had no choice; I had to resign from my 'comfortable' University job in order to follow my dream. In my aspiration of taking teaching as a sacred profession, I have a vision to create an inspirational, learning-based, and action-driven meeting ground for progressive minds and spirits who believe in the vastness of human potential and who work on creating a more just and sustainable world. For all details of the dream in terms of what, how and where please see our web site <http://www.phoenixarbor.org/en/>, as the purpose of this chapter is to give you an insight into what has propelled me into my dream of transformative education. The reflexive story of my 20 years experience in an institutional academic frame serves as an insider's insight into the current problematic of higher education.

Yet, I inform the reader: this is a highly reflexive piece that does not fully comply with academic rules of writing. If we want to speak about the universities of the future, of transformative education, our writings have to become more embodied, personal, experiential and disruptive to the mainstream academic ruling and conditioning that holds us to restrictively linear 'objectivity'. To perform transformational pedagogy we academics and teachers need to work on our own social emancipation of personal liberation and decolonization. This is one of the key messages behind

telling the story of my own process of (de)colonisation. Here bell hooks² has been my biggest inspiration. In the range of her works (e.g. 1994; 2003) she has spoken about the alienating nature of academisation and our work setting 'where writing acceptable theory for promotion and tenure often means using inaccessible language and/or academic jargon (2003:xii)'. Which is why we keep alienating students in our suffocating classrooms in which they are expected to passively sit and receive our theories and knowledges as supposed 'tabula rasa' of disembodied experiences. There have been many moments in my academic career when I felt that there was no connection to 'real life' in the opaque languages of poststructuralism and deconstructionism. While these areas have originated from the urge of social transformation they are infused with the struggle for cultural domination and are contested by competing groups and/or individuals who wish to impose their own definitions upon their accepted meanings. Tony Ward, another inspiring practitioner of transformative pedagogy captured this process very well:

Our theoretical language is often so impenetrable, since the struggle for meaning in each of us is confused by the opposing requirements of moral integrity and institutional acceptance. We struggle continually against the prostitution of our own voices for material and academic recognition, being afraid to speak simply in case we speak too directly against the source of our own privilege. And the fear which animates our language increases as we feel our economic survival and the intellectual status upon which it depends to be in danger (1996:157).
So I will try to keep it simple and let my 'story' to begin.

The Power of an olive tree: How has it all begun

"It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting"
(Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*).

² When she begun her career as a young feminist academic she decided to use her pen name, "bell hooks" which was her grandmother's name. She put the name in unconventional lowercase letters to distinguish herself from her grandmother but also to disturb the so-called neutrality of the patriarchal science. And indeed it was only feminist writers who begun to use full name and surname in academic texts in order to display the dominant gender of male academia (as opposed to 'impersonal' surnames which until then was the only 'allowed'/legitimate form of academic writing).

My story given here is of cyclical nature. The chapter will begin with the island where I grew up as a child; and it will be the point where it will end. The story of the Alchemist, Coelho's Santiago, leaving your 'olive tree' to follow your own personal legend, your own destiny³. The island is called Murter (situated in the Dalmatian part of the Croatian Adriatic coast) and it is full of olive trees.

My grandmother loved olive trees. They were the main source of her livelihood: I vividly remember how she would exchange olive oil for other food that she could not buy as she was not earning any money but lived from what she could produce from the land that she nurtured. And there was fish that my grandfather would catch. There was always water shortage and we didn't have running taps, only community wells. Life was tough for her but I remember it being very beautiful for me as a child. I played all day in the open fields, picking flowers and wild fruit, swimming in the clear blue sea with my friends, running freely everywhere (there were rarely any cars around) in that small fishermen village of 1700 people at that time. I still remember the feeling of sticky fingers when helping my grandmother to dry figs by slightly pressing and sorting them in the sun. And the sounds and smells of early spring when I would collect baby almonds and break their green shells to peel their skin and eat their delicious soft, white texture. I still remember juicy cherries that us kids would cheekily pick from trees growing everywhere. I played outdoors endlessly.

These were the late 1960s and mid-1970s. At some point *tourism arrived to my quiet village*. During the summers we suddenly got an influx of people arriving in their cars from Germany, Austria and Italy and looking for places to stay so they could enjoy their holidays on our beautiful beaches and surrounding islands. With tourism arrived *development* and modernization into the whole village. There were no hotels so we all started to improve our houses to accommodate visitors that needed to rent rooms.

³ I like the symbolism of that book and will use it throughout my chapter but I need to stress that the protagonist of my story is a girl. She is not Fatima who patiently waits for Santiago to follow his heart and find his personal treasure. She wants to disrupt the dominant patriarchal nature of most of our writings where men always play the main heroic role while women remain in the background to hold the space. She too needs to envision and follow her own personal legend and that is what it will become an important aspect of my story as we go through.

Our fishing boats turned into touring boats. We got running water, bathrooms built inside our houses, the radio and the television. I still remember how my grandmother called the radio 'a strange box that produces a noise' (she never learned how to switch it off). It was a huge leap into a modernized future.

Everyone in the village has begun to turn to tourism as their main source of their income. The beautiful fruit trees, vegetable gardens, almond trees, and olive trees – had all slowly become forgotten. Yet my grandmother never gave up on her trees and continued rising at 5am to work her fields. She tried to enthruse me with it but I resisted as I was entering complex times of my adolescence. My heart sinks now when I recall how she would sigh about having to do the work all alone as my father wasn't showing any interest in helping her either. This paradise for a child (the tight community gaze of either 'curious' young men or vigilant older women) quickly became a cage for a young woman. Only summers gave some relief as the community gaze turned more towards tourists that would flood our village in their thousands (their numbers in the peak season would come to five times of us locals). That was very exciting. With all those foreign languages spoken around us, we were getting out of our little island bubble. We could not travel but the 'world' was coming to us. Our visitors were sleeping in our houses and were eating with us at the same table. In doing so, they were bringing different ways of life into our homes. And that was the moment when my first *dream* was born: 'I need to *travel the world*. I have to get out of this small, suffocating village; I have to experience the world'.

When hitting the age of eighteen that is exactly what I did. I left the village for my University study. To begin with, I really didn't travel far. I just moved to a city 300km away and was back in my village every summer. Soon after my graduation I met my first true love, became pregnant, and had begun to settle down in the northern part of the country. I left the village to live in a city but my dream of travelling the world started to look quite dim as being a young, married woman with a child in a patriarchal society did not make my travel prospects very bright. That was when the Yugoslavian civil war broke out in 1991, a year after our wedding. Our Yugoslavian ideology of unity and brotherhood that was celebrated under the command of president Tito was brutally torn apart eleven years after his death. Being raised within the Yugoslavian ideology I suddenly became aware of my Croatian national identity and the 'fact' that my equally Yugoslavian husband was a Bosnian Serb. We lost half of our friends over night; I was considered to be a betrayer of my nation and we

were put into this ambivalent and dangerous category of a 'mixed marriage' that does not belong to a 'side'. Moreover, our daughter, although born in Croatia with a Serbian father and a Croatian mother, was supposed to receive her father's ethnicity (the traditional patriarchal rule). This would be a terrible decision to make for my daughter who would then have to face difficult consequences and be exposed to serious discrimination. Another suffocating bubble started to rise and the female version of the Alchemist's protagonist had to continue her journey and find her treasures elsewhere. It was about time to follow her dream and to travel the world. And so she did. I migrated to New Zealand with my husband and our daughter (she was two back then) in 1993, in the midst of that terrible war. We left on a one-way ticket so I didn't know when we would be able to come back. I still vividly remember the last visit to my village on my own as my husband could not come any longer for the local hostility was too much. I was sitting on my favorite beach where I had played a thousand times as a child. It was a fresh November evening. I was fully alone there. I could not stop crying in my deep sadness for the madness of this world; for the need to flee so far away from my home and my roots. Many were relieved that we were leaving (especially my father) and we didn't have anyone to welcome us on the other end either. Yet we believed we were going to a 'promised land'. And in many ways it was. But immigrant life is never easy; especially when it is forced upon you rather than being a willing choice. And that was the point when my serious engagement with critical higher education began.

The beginning of my academic life

In my determination to not become a 'second class citizen' I decided to fully 'integrate' myself into the society - by pursuing further education. I applied for a doctoral scholarship at the *University of Auckland* at the Department of Geography. In a fierce competition I received a scholarship amongst a lucky few and managed to find a supervisor who trusted my capacity, despite my obvious 'broken English' at the time. The Alchemist story continues. The king Melchizedek tells Santiago, "*when you really want something to happen, the whole universe conspires so that your wish comes true*".

My PhD study was an exciting journey. Positioned in the economic geography that was primarily based on a paradigm derived from the neo-Marxist Frankfurt critical school (i.e. Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Eric Fromm, Walter Benjamin) and multidisciplinary perspectives of political science, sociology, cultural studies, social

anthropology, environmental science, etc. I had learned to see the world with wide-open and critical eyes. Unpacking the socio-economic and political layers of our modern lives through the critical understanding of advanced capitalism, (post)modernity, history and class consciousness; Eurocentric coloniality, discourses, power and ideology; dialectics of structure and agency my doctorate was not only heading me towards a PhD degree but more importantly to a deep understanding of my own positionality as a 'subject' in a society. I was thrilled by new insights into my consciousness but struck by the fact that we can go through our lives without seeing how we shape and are shaped by structural relations of economic and political systems, ethnicity, gender, class, ideology, socio-cultural perceptions, norms, traditions and stereotypes. And how little freedom we seem to be exercising over our lives.

The picture given by my PhD mentors and all those critical writers looked bleak. The Eurocentric colonialism and modernity has swamped the Earth to such an extent that it seems that there is no escape. The concentration of corporate power and media makes us consumerist dupes. The neoliberal ideology is a totalising model that sees life itself as a resource and people as free agents only when they consume and participate in the globalised capitalist world. Moreover, postmodern writers claim that we as individual subjects don't even 'exist', we only *perform* social expectations and our deeply entrenched ideological beliefs. We are all social constructions that are performed for us in social interactions and we hardly have any power of individual free agency to change it. And it is all deep in our subconscious bodies colonized by the apparent 'normality' of common sense. As Alain de Botton (2006:214) states in one of his sociological critics of the materialism and so-called progress of the world today:

Ideology is released into society like a colourless, odourless gas. It is embedded in education, government apparatus, commerce, newspapers, advertisements, television programmes and textbooks – where it makes light of its partial, perhaps illogical or unjust, take on of the world; where it 'gently' implies that it is simply stating age-old truths with which only a fool or a maniac would disagree (p. 214).

Consequently, my PhD was engaged with the question of dialectics between structure and agency, issues of social and economic injustice and how people, places and spaces are formed and (re)created within those processes.

My enthusiasm for critical academic writings seriously grew. These perspectives explained my dramatic war experiences, of human 'madness'. I understood how deeply conditioned us humans are. How so many concepts that we take passionately into our hearts are often very recent societal inventions used for protecting certain class interests. In my case, that was particularly distressing in relation to the notion of the nation-state identity, a mere 200 years old concept invented by capitalism for the purpose of trade and market regulations. Yet many Croatians, many people lost their lives in their deep patriotic beliefs to fight for something that they believed to be their natural birthright since forever. My 'island origins bubble' exploded, my narrow mind perspective excitingly expanded. I felt like I was giving a birth to a new version of myself.

My first academic job and the new institutional ideology

'Equipped' with these new frontiers of knowledge and with strong passion for teaching, as soon as I finished my PhD I enthusiastically embarked on my academic career. I truly saw teaching as a 'sacred profession'. Having the privilege of facing a fresh generation of young people every academic year – I perceived it as an ideal opportunity to open their horizons in the same way as mine had been thanks to my teachers and inspiring academic writers. But the first academic job I landed wasn't in the critical economic geography but actually in a Business School, at Tourism Management department! This was because during my PhD geographic explorations of socio-economic inequalities as manifested in places and localities I had come across tourism as a powerful form of neo-colonialism that promoted the Eurocentric gaze which in turn marginalised 'Other' ways of being and doing. In my PhD research, this was the case with Maori indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand who had become impoverished and alienated from their land, labelled as 'savages' and as such became the object of the European (tourist/colonial) gaze. That was my critical view of tourism. Yet, the teaching expectations of the Business School were very different. They expected me to teach courses such as tourism management, marketing, tourist behaviour and so on as tourism has become an important industry for the country and it had to fit into that neoliberal, neo-colonial capitalistic model that I so harshly criticised in my doctorate.

I found myself in a very paradoxical position and in a new ideology again. But I had no choice and the reasons were many: it was my first job after living on a limited student income for 4 years, our daughter

was 8 and with growing needs; my mother came all the way from Croatia to live with me as my father kicked her out of the house after 35 years of marriage; my husband didn't have a job at that time; his family in Bosnia was still caught in war conditions and needed our support. These were tough times and not easy to stick to my newly learned Marxist ideology, especially because students who enrol into business schools are rather interested in reaching high-flying management jobs fast. To become revolutionary leaders fighting for social equality and addressing issues of economic injustice is not something you have in mind when aiming for a business degree. You want to live in a big house, fly business class, drink champagne, be considered important by commanding other people and make huge decisions while sitting on business boards. But who was I to judge? I also loved the fact that I got this 'important position' at a prestigious university that suddenly elevated my social status, gave me economic empowerment and raised my self-esteem which I very much needed after years of struggle.

Tony Ward, a practitioner of 'transformative critical pedagogy', 'saved' me when I experienced these internal conflicts, as he captured this process vividly in his writings. He consoled me when I realised that I wasn't alone; the experience seemed to be more universal, hence he deserves to be quoted at length here:

Over the years I have witnessed ideological shifts, which have influenced my work and theoretical perspective. I have always tried to connect my personal and social experiences to the moral and programmatic bases of my work. In a socially stratified society those, like myself, from the lower rungs of the social ladder who wish to advance their positions must betray, to a greater or lesser extent, the cultural heritage of their origins (Sennet and Cobb, 1973). Hence the black student in a white academy, the woman entering a male-dominated profession, or the working class novice in an upper class discipline come to identify with and to some extent adopt as a right of passage the values, dress, vocabulary and modes of behavior of the dominant culture to which he or she aspires, even when these values disparage the aspirant's own culture. For these, the process of education involves coming to terms with one's own sense of self-betrayal, and correspondingly of self-understanding and self-forgiveness (1996:156).

In a similar vein, bell hooks (2003: 22) echoes Ward's words and experience:

As an intellectual working as an academic I often felt that my commitment to radical openness and devotion to critical thinking, to seeking after truth, was at odds with the demand that I uphold the status quos if I want to be rewarded... While much lip service is given to the notion of free speech in academic settings, in actuality constant censorship – often self-imposed – takes place. Teachers fear they will not receive promotions or that in worst-case scenarios they will lose their jobs.

So there I was. An immigrant woman who had escaped the war-torn Balkans was entering a high-status, male-dominated profession and she was very grateful for the given opportunity. And how hard she had worked to prove herself to deserve this! Long workday hours, evenings, weekends - writing papers, lectures, research applications, marking essays, and so on. There was no time for anything else but work. No time to play with my child. Not enough mind and life space left for anything else (it was all full with intellectual stuff). But I loved it. I got fully co-opted by it. I started to travel to international conferences. I was getting invited by my peers to collaborate on various projects in ‘exotic’ places like the South Pacific and China. I became an authority to speak on behalf of others. My students, my colleagues, my research community – they all listened to me. I had started to feel what it means to hold a position of power however limited that power was (in terms of the ‘real world’ politics and economics). And after all, my dream of travelling the world that I had set for myself when leaving my little island came through!

I wasn’t giving up on my politics either. I remained determined to work on the critical consciousness of my students, however mainstream business minded they appeared to be. I challenged them in the classroom and with their essays. I could not really use Marxist geography literature in my teaching so I had to write my own critical academic papers. I began searching for like-minded academics around the world. I wanted to believe that change could be achieved from within the system. I learned to reflect deeply on my internal conflicts and I looked for more inspirational writings. My embodied experience and self-awareness of being a woman in a male-dominated profession (especially in higher positions of power) grew. I turned to more ‘enlightening’ feminist literature that spoke to my woman’s way of being and they forged another revolutionary opening in my consciousness. They unravelled important aspects of how our academic knowledge is produced, legitimised and consequently deeply internalised. I was pointed to the Eurocentric, white male, patriarchal point of view that dominated academia since the time of the Renaissance and the birth of

modern science⁴ up until the late 1980s when the first woman/feminist academic writers started to hit the mainstream science. Sandra Harding (1987) and Donna Haraway (1988) have been widely cited for their insightful critique of the male impersonal, so-called ‘objective’, ‘god-trick’, ‘the view from nowhere’, by drawing attention to the partial and situated nature of all knowledge, produced as it is within a social, political and geographical context. Modern universities are indeed Eurocentric inventions and they play a key role in the process of knowledge legitimation because they have been able to establish an erroneous reputation for being ideology-free. However, that is far from the truth as many other ways and forms of knowing are excluded from formal recognition. The power of legitimating is inherent to the entire educational system, firmly established in both curriculum and hidden curriculum (in terms of history, social relations) yet disguised as masquerading consensus (Apple, 2004).

But this was not just a feminist question of whose knowledge was more important and/or valid. The implications were much deeper. What do we learn and how; which values do we embrace and what do we become through the process of education became crucial questions for me. The masculine values of competition, rationality, performance, measurement of achievement, effectiveness and productivity shaped my working life and I took them for granted. The destructive culture of lovelessness that gives you money and power easier than love and support truly became like an odourless gas for me. Universities, with their policies of celebrating the quantification of our outputs and their ego-driven bibliomatrix of quotation ranks, were sending out a clear message: ‘Publish or Perish’! If good at teaching you would get a nice pat on the back but that would never give you a promotion or a tenure track position. By chasing all those deadlines and counting my publishing outputs I was very much part of this whole game. Moreover, I tried to prove myself even harder. Some could say that I had become a man in a woman’s body, denying my other needs of motherhood, womanhood, selfhood, and teachinghood. Gloria Steinem, one of key early American feminists, in her powerful book: *The Revolution From Within* (1993) neatly captures this process of women’s excitement when they had been ‘allowed’ to study at universities and then subtly became co-opted by

⁴ This trait is actually thousands years old; since patriarchy has been established on the Earth as a dominant way to organise settler’s societies (e.g. Greek science and philosophy). For the full macroeconomic historical analysis of suppressing women and feminine values in societies see Riane Eisler, 1987)

the masculine system of academia which further denigrated the level of their self worth:

‘The first is that we get good grades, often better than those of our counterpart males. Since grades are the measure of academic life, they obscure the larger question of what is being learned; that a female student may be getting an A-plus in self-denigration. Second, many of the personality traits holding us back are seen as inherent in females. If self-sacrifice, a lack of personal will, living through others, fear of confrontation, and a need for approval are considered part of women’s ‘natural’ self, there isn’t much reason to search for other causes’ (1993:119).

And that was the point when I discovered bell hooks’ work. bell hooks was the most influential writer who completely shaped my future academic career from that point on. She captured all my deep observations and experiences that I had not even dared to share with myself. While in her critical feminist and postcolonial writing she elaborates on Paulo Freire’s notion of the ‘banking system of education’ within what she overtly describes as ‘white capitalistic patriarchy’, she does not stop at criticism only. She was amongst those writers who inspired me to go beyond cynicism and to engage with what she termed the *pedagogy of hope*. In her own words:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom," (hooks, 1994, p.207).

I still vividly remember reading these words in the summer of 2004 on a beach in Croatia. Her words echoed my deepest sentiments about what I considered to be the sacred aspects of my job. Her fully self-reflexive and personal writings as a black American woman and critical academic writer were so inspiring and real that they opened up invigorating spaces within me which pushed me towards many forms of critical actions to open up spaces of liberation and ‘my own’ academy of hope. She critically analysed bourgeois educational structures supporting compartmentalization and a rote, assembly line approach to learning concerned primarily with the mind.

She spoke about holistic education that promotes wholeness of the mind, body and spirit; about the importance of our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of our students; the joy of learning to live and to question; she spoke about teachers as healers who have a responsibility to be self-actualised individuals – if to teach in a manner that empowers students. She talked about the need for love and spirituality that brings us back to the sacredness of life. She urged us to reflect on our alienating practices; to bring passion, skill, and absolute grace to the art of teaching; to question the dominant values of patriarchal dehumanization; to engage with students in the state of communion; to unite our theory and praxis in education and to work on our own art of being and loving (hooks 1994; 2000; 2003).

In this process of what she terms ‘self-evaluation’ she continually describes her emotional and behavioural paralysing paradoxes of financial and status dependency and to which extent she can claim the power of her own agency. Despite her obvious commitment to hope and love (in her writing and her teaching), she admits how difficult it is to work on our own art of being and loving in the current context of rationalized economic, political and academic structures. Here her work also very much echoes Erich Fromm’s seminal writings *The Art of Loving* (1956); *To Have or to Be* (1976) and the posthumously published work on *The Art of Being* (1993). In performing his psychoanalytical critique of modern society (and education) that only teaches us the values of having, he was one of those pioneering academic writers to point to the importance of learning the art of being. Both hooks and Fromm represent an embodiment of academics who advocate the importance of developing self-awareness; of inner and outer liberation if one is to truly engage with the process of social change. They both inspired me immensely. With their ‘help’ I continued to engage in my processes of critical social reflections, self-love and self-forgiveness, prompting me to *transgress* within the system. The Alchemist’s journey of finding my personal legend actively continued.

Back to Europe: Promoting an academy of hope and teaching as a transgression of freedom

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1996)

In that same summer of 2004 (when I was reading bell hooks' work) I was offered a job at Wageningen University in the Netherlands with the Socio-Spatial Analysis Group at the Faculty of Environmental Science. I was finally able to go 'back home' to my critical geographers after eight years of teaching within various business schools, yet facing a new institutional framework, and new ideology again. I landed a job that I perceived to be perfectly fitting to my new visions of proactively acting within the system. Moreover, I would be teaching Masters programme focused on issues of environment and sustainability. I was extremely excited. After 12 years of living in New Zealand I moved to the Netherlands in the spring of 2005, by myself and with my teenage daughter as I got divorced 2 years earlier. I was back in Europe, empowered with my New Zealand citizenship, PhD credibility, and an exciting new job prospect.⁵

At the same time, my critical efforts of creating an international network of like-minded researchers began to shape a more closely knitted community of academics who shared similar sentiments about the extreme neo-liberalisation of universities. I spread my spark inspired by the works of bell hooks, which then brought us together through regular bi-annual conferences and many joint books and publications designed to legitimise our protests against masculine academic structures and the 'banking system of education'. Our little academy of hope, that numbered around 100 academics from 20 countries around the world, had been born and was getting bigger and stronger by the year. I was particularly thrilled for the fact that I took a lead in organising all our conferences in Croatia, a country that I so sadly and bitterly left twelve years earlier. I was slowly coming closer to my full circle.

I was in a full swing of excitement that we were truly *making a difference*. Many PhD students had begun to gather within our nurturing spaces of hope and encouragement to experience different ways of being and knowing. We had begun to use each other as examiners and co-mentors

⁵ I bring forward those personal details, as they can never be separated from issues of work and careerism; on the contrary they crucially feed into our dependencies and servings of the system. The traditional dualistic conceptions of mind/body; home/away; work/love; self/other, etc. need to be disrupted in order to reveal that they lead to limiting and suffering of both men and women under the global discourses of fear, stereotyping and alienation.

so to strengthen the creation of our little 'subversive' and mutually supportive international academic community. In my multi-cultural classroom of all races, classes and gender (I often had around 25 nationalities amongst 50 students because the Dutch government was very generous with scholarships at that time) I was determined to awaken the power of their individual agency to resist global injustices and work on social change. My academic writings moved from (post)modern pessimistic criticism into more transmodern, positive observations of hope and human potentialities. For a while, I convinced myself that I had truly engaged in the practice of hopeful pedagogy for a more sustainable and just world. However, 'something' had slowly begun to disturb me deep within. Firstly, I was getting extremely exhausted by all my efforts, as institutional frameworks had not moved much in terms of any serious recognition for that 'extra nurturing work' of mine. After all, it was my choice if I wanted to go beyond certain allocated hours for student supervision, consultations, and explorations into new pedagogical methods, etc. So, my already busy academic life was getting even more hectic. Secondly, I was trying to do my 'revolutionary' work within an institutional framework that still heavily relied on all those ideological forms of authority such as claiming, grading, comparing, theorising, engaging only mind, lacking the applied practice, and preaching about sustainability while the whole architectural organisation of the campus was built on the contrary. I challenged students to think about the power of their individual agency and to explore their human potentialities, but I had to still put them into the competitive, reductionist grade scale from D to A. I exposed them to unsustainable practices that destroy our planet; I could see the look of despair and resignation in their eyes of what kind of world we are leaving to them, and yet it all appeared that we must still continue business as usual. There was too much talking the walk and very little walking the talk (Ward, 1996). Evidently, these smart and observant students asked many critical questions: 'so what is your individual power in changing your system (ie. higher education) within which you operate?' I increasingly found that question difficult to answer.

Then the achievements with 'my' academy of hope were becoming disappointing too. I realised that after all those years of gatherings and joint writings, we still remained puppets of unstoppable university neo-liberalisation in which we kept on competing to be published in high ranking journals.. This was despite our critical writings on the pointless academic inflation (i.e. too many academic papers and no time to read). The management elite of our institutions did not seem to be moved much with

our efforts at any serious policy level but rather made it even tighter with all sorts of administration requirements and increasing numbers of controlling mechanisms and rigid evaluations for promotions and tenure tracks. Our 'critical' efforts on producing spaces of hope simply became our little comfort zones created to make us feel better (especially when we got together at our conferences), but with hardly any changes in our academic practice and our institutionalised lives. And yet we could not be blamed for remaining fairly tamed. We all have our fears and ontological insecurities, we all need to 'to eat' and have families to feed; the others have kids going to expensive private schools; some enjoy the lifestyle, the travel and the perks; and we all feel we deserved all this as we work(ed) hard to get there. Finally and consequently of all that above, I couldn't stay committed to my aspiration of looking after my own well-being and 'self-love' (as per bell hooks' guidance). 'Rat racing' combined with my aging, commuting, urban living no connection to nature, rushing, stressing about deadlines, constantly 'living in my head', theorising about the world hence disengaging my body and my soul, flying to the other side of the world for 2 day conferences, feeling confused by the opposing requirements of moral integrity and institutional acceptance, torn between own ambition and cooption with the 'great lifestyle' and guilt-ridden for it all, – the list of unhealthy practises was getting longer and longer. It all gradually begun to take its toll and I had come close to an emotional, mental and bodily burn out. A huge realisation came upon my whole being: 'we cannot bring balance and sustainability to the world unless we bring balance to our individual lives'. Something was seriously wrong. I was teaching about sustainability but I did not embody it. I had lost my equilibrium and sacrificed my health and my intuition in our materialist society where the supreme value is placed on what we *do*. I needed time to stop, to reflect and to feel myself again. I was sick of the constant deadlines, an interesting concept that basically suggests you drop dead when you reach the line and that is how I virtually felt it.

So the 'universe' interfered again. My teaching efforts were appreciated by students (always representing my key motivation after all) who continuously gave me the top evaluation scores, so my university rewarded me with a 3 month sabbatical in the winter of 2009/2010 (here I give the credit to Dutch universities who seem to be giving greater recognition to teaching as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon ones; but that is unfortunately changing in the Netherlands too as they are moving towards more American and British models). At this time I also gathered a group of beautiful inspiring students of mine who wanted to work with me on those

transformative modes of education and we were exploring various options of possibilities. These efforts led me to an academic gathering in Luxemburg that seemed to be another significant piece of my life puzzle. The symposium was focused on transformative and integral research and education and what made it different from the usual academic conferences was that it was emotional, disruptive, touching, and connective. The human, poetic touch was everywhere and I met many academics that seemed to be sharing similar sentiments and experiences like me. And they were mostly men! That was a very different experience from my usual patriarchal male colleagues. It was very encouraging to see that men had finally begun to resist to those masculine structures that seemed to have acquired a life on their own, that were making *both* men and women suffer. This wasn't a feminist question any more but rather a matter of saving humanity and reconciling between the two genders. That was where I first became acquainted with the University for the Future initiative.

I got excited again. Gloria Steinem's (1993:129) provocative words were echoing in my head: 'Where are the campuses as pioneers of the powers of self-esteem and human possibilities?' There may be hope after all. But it seemed to be that it had to be found out of the existing institutional systems of higher education. Deep intuitive thoughts that were bubbling in me for a while had surged to the surface. I deeply felt I had to step out of institutional academia and work on my own grounds of transformative education. Moreover, when I visited India where the pace and values of life are dramatically different from the West, I had time to reconnect with myself and with what I truly needed and wanted in terms of leading my life from that point on. In the process it occurred to me that if we really want to work on any serious change we need TIME, time to stop, reflect, to think and re-consider; time to communicate in a meaningful way; time to innovate and organize; time to focus on the quality of the process; time to grow, evolve and to be.⁶ In that space of silence and time, once I

⁶ That is what we all need at this point of history of the overwhelming economic, political, social and environmental crisis - to stop and re-think where are we going. As Robert Skidelsky, a renowned British economist, and the author of an award-winning biography of J. M. Keynes stated in the light of the last economic crisis:

...crisis also represents a moral failure: that of a system built on debt. At the heart of the moral failure is the worship of growth for its own sake, rather than as a way to achieve the 'good life'. As a result, economic efficiency - the means to growth - has been given absolute priority in our thinking and

had allowed my true voice to surface in the cacophony of other voices in my head (which got there through my social conditioning and colonisation of my psyche) the answer was clear. I had to get out of that mad rat race. I had to live a more natural life and dig my hands back into the Mother Earth. I had to work on something that I genuinely believed in. Yet it took me another year and a half to gather the courage to resign. After all, I was leaving a lifetime secured job in the current climate when so many people are desperate to find any job at all. Yet, I remained determined as if I had no other choice. I was terrified and thrilled at the same time.

Back to the olive tree: Manifesting a dream of meeting grounds for transformative education in Murter, Croatia

In June 2011 I had a very nice and warm farewell party at my department in Wageningen. They prepared a beautiful gift for me. Knowing how popular I was with the students, two female colleagues (who were also my former students) asked all alumni and current students to write me a message or create a drawing with wishes and memories they hold of me as their teacher. I got a box full of individual, colourful envelopes with the most amazing messages, poems and personal reflections that made me cry for hours as I was opening them quietly at home. Teaching is indeed a sacred profession when you take it to your heart. And it was not a full goodbye. My former professor was very appreciative of my impact on students (and also impressed by my courage of jumping into the unknown) so he offered me a visiting professorship post that would cover the cost of one to two annual lecture visits. And I liked that. I could still come back to system to be heard there, but free of regulations and more 'authentic' in my knowledge sharing.

policy. The only moral compass we now have is the thin and degraded notion of economic welfare. This moral lacuna explains uncritical acceptance of globalization and financial innovation...taking us back to the primary question: what is wealth for? The good life was one to be lived in harmony with nature and our fellows. Yet we destroy the beauty of the countryside because the unappropriated splendours of nature have no economic value. We are capable of shutting off the sun and the stars because they do not pay a dividend' (Skiedlsky, 2009:1-4).

So, all my furniture was packed and I was on my way back to Croatia to settle for good, after 19 years of being away. Moreover, I was back in my village and my father's house that I had left sad and poignant in the midst of that terrible civil war in 1990s. I have made my full circle or rather a spiral, evolving journey that makes you search for your own personal legend and to follow your heart. This was a journey that had let me travel the world, only to come back home a little wiser and more humble. I was more humble to appreciate the beauty and the wisdom of my grandmother and our land of olive trees and a little wiser to connect it with all together with my globetrotting experiences. To restore the love my grandmother instilled in me for the beauty of this land. And my island has appeared to be ready.

At the crossroads between continuing mass tourism and the loss of local control over their commons versus sustainable living that will revive cultural, social and natural heritage, creating a campus for the University of the Future seems to be an exciting vision. To stop the drift of young people who leave to cities, as they do not have any meaningful work prospects in a place that still hibernates over the winter months. The campus is envisaged to bring 'the world' to the village during the entire year so as to engage with locals in meaningful interactions. To bring students and volunteers who want to learn about local traditional practices of olive oil production, traditional boat crafting, medicinal qualities of local herbs, stone wall building and so on. To create a space for life-long education and transformative leadership programs catered to people of all ages and all countries, designed to encourage them to dream a different reality from the current distressing one in which we live. To create a space where the local and the global would meet. To facilitate inspirational interaction among change-makers that will lead to innovative ideas, actions and empowerment for the co-creation of viable sustainable ventures and the stimulation of human development potential.

It will become an experimental campus for the *University of Tomorrow* in which students would activate not only their minds, but also their hands and hearts. To work on an education that will give us grace and joy of life. We want to work on developing methods and experiential learning that can help us understand the sustainability of our own bodies; to learn the art of being and living in terms of developing our human capacity qualities: vitality, passion, coherence and alignment (between our mind, spirit and bodies); to find a balance between left and right brain abilities, feminine and masculine qualities; etc. To grow our own organic fruit and vegetable garden for campus consumption. To build facilities and flexible

classrooms in local, natural material powered with solar energy so that they fully exemplify sustainability theories. The centre would serve as a catalyst, facilitating community processes towards progressive, innovative and sustainable living and as such it would contribute to the material embodiment of such places, organizations and communities.

I am currently in the midst of manifesting this dream. I have set up an NGO with my two beautiful partners (and former students) Ana Raguz and Hermes Arriaga. They represent the world of that youth that has found the power of individual agency in order to work on social change for a better world. They are my huge motivation and inspiration. The local municipality has established us as their strategic partner and we now work on the project together. Yet the challenges are many with numerous political and administration hurdles to cross. There is former military land that appears to be ideal for the campus (on the top of a hill overlooking the whole village and surrounding islands) yet it needs to be obtained back from the political ownership of the central government. The municipality needs to change its spatial plan to get building consents from the regional government that overlooks strategic plans of the area. To complicate things further the local party of our municipality is not of the same party as the county, which does not put us in a very favourable position. We also need to find funding for the investment into the campus facilities. We need to work with the community to co-create with us, yet they still appear to be at the 'convincing stage'. We need to work on our international partners and collaborative programmes. The path is complex, and uncertain but it is exciting. One day I hope to write a story on how this dream has come through.

Deeply knowing that the process of pioneering is never easy, we have one story that reminds us of how important it is to stay with your dreams and visions even when the fruits to our efforts appear to be faraway:

'An old woman in the Middle East planted a date tree and described the process: When you plant a date, you know you'll never eat from the date tree because it takes about eighty years to grow roots deep enough to go to the scarce water. The date tree gets so buffeted in that time by windstorms and droughts that for the most part, the tree looks like it's dying. If you didn't understand its process, you could easily cut it down. But if you understand the process, you can make the commitment. You have to have an image of what will happen. Once you do, it makes all the difference' (Ray and Anderson (2001, p.64).

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QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

1. Summarize Ateljevic's criticisms of the academy in your own words. In what ways does this criticism resonate with your own experience of higher education?
2. What do you think Ateljevic means by the masculine structure of the university? How does this contribute to oppression? Have you encountered this aspect of the university? How has it affected your learning experience?
3. The critical education scholar, bell hooks, identifies the university as being dominated by "white capitalist patriarchy". Do you think that these sorts of labels are relevant and useful? Does this match your experience of the ideological undercurrents of the university? Do you have a felt sense of the oppressive result of this ideological orientation?
4. What possible solutions might exist to this pervasive ideology of oppression? What active steps can we take to create university which serve an emancipatory purpose? What could you do right now to begin making this change happen?
5. Ateljevic talks about the value of engaging the head, heart, and hands. What do you think is the value of connecting learning to real-life, work and service contexts (as is the case in the author's project in Murter)?