

On Pedagogies of *Acolhimento*

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The following passages are patches of life-torn-to-pieces during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each asterisk marks a snapshot that brought into being the various pedagogies of acolhimento shared in this piece.

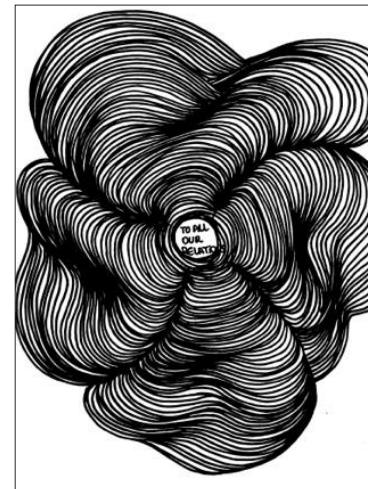
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The last two weeks of March felt disorienting. Though streets, parks, businesses, schools, clinics, and markets felt the haunting weight of absence, hospitals were filling up in accelerated ways. COVID-19 had come to stay and wreak havoc in our lives. Most of us spent the following months of 2020 attempting to mitigate the effects of the pandemic while trying to understand how to continue to move despite orders to shelter in place. Nothing about this experience was predictable or uncomplicated. The spaces, relations, and habitats that had kept us grounded in our bodies, communities, and land were suspended for an undetermined time.

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Just as the sun was setting across the Bay that afternoon in May, Daniela showed up at my door with a bouquet of lilies, a bottle of champagne, and a CD autographed by Fabiana Cozza. She had arrived by surprise with an enormous bag of kindness—a care package she had intuited I needed. We had just spent a good hour on the phone commiserating: we missed our circles of love, friendship, and intimacy. Dani understood—on a visceral level—how the pandemic had impacted me, us. Before I could open the door, she gestured for me to get close to the window and held a note against the window glass: “I wish I could hug you right now. I wish we could pop this bottle and dance to Fabiana’s music. I am so proud of you, Doctor Yô!! You did it!! I love you. And, also: fuck COVID.” We both cried. As a neurodiverse person, being utterly alone, isolated, and physically distant from family, friends, the classroom, places of *convivência*, and communities of *acolhimento* was terrifying. How were we to create life out of the impossibility of one as we once knew it? How could we walk over the abysses of isolation, grief, and loss? How were we to show up fully to these experiences, aware of their traumatic and compounding effects?

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The more I tried to journal to process thoughts, emotions, and trauma responses, the more distressed I became. My attempts at quieting the mind through breathing and contemplative practices were yielding a reverse effect. Mania. Psychosis. As I shuffled through my art supplies one morning, I came across a gift from my brother: two almost brand-new sketchbooks. I opened one of them and found the written phrase right in the middle of the page: *To All Our Relations*. I smiled. I touched the textured mixed-media paper and remembered Winona LaDuke’s book. Gosh, where is it? I look for it incessantly. I can’t find it. Never mind, it must be somewhere. On the shelf is Linda Hogan’s *Dwellings*. I remember crying when I read her writing on the eagle’s feather. Is Rubem Alves still here? Where is that children’s book, my home away from home for over thirty-seven years? What’s the title again? *How Happiness Was Born*? Oh, good, Anzaldúa is here. Where have all those tiny, majestic books from Krenak gone? Is the *Falling Sky* gone, too? I run my hands through the string of books until I find that silver hardcover I hadn’t opened in months. Ufa, Adélia Prado hasn’t vanished. Neither have Hilda, Gumbs, Lorde, Butler, hooks, and Alexander. Did I lend *Mud Woman*? To whom? Why do I always do this? I need a system. The thought of not locating these books asphyxiated me. They were both my root system and oxygen. They had been helping me weave webs of *acolhimento* and grounded-ness over unknowns for many years.

Gosh, what am I to do with this pile of research on Bathsheba? Did I submit the chapter already? Did I miss the deadline? I can’t remember. I need to remember to check my email soon. Did I take my meds yesterday? Why do I feel so dizzy? Am I nauseous again? Damn, did I take the meds twice? My body is dealing with so much inflammation. Nothing I feed it seems to be doing any good. I need to do groceries. I am scared. Am I at a greater risk of Covid? Yes, I am. Why do I have diabetes at this age? That article definitely kept me up last night. Was it all fabricated? Is this what bio-chemical wars look like? Whatever. There is a wave of evictions in the Bay. Are students safe enough? I will start an income redistribution page. Let’s get people donating. Folks have got to eat and sleep. I am so furious at all of this. Should we all just collectively scream? Are our animal siblings ok? I will put out water for the deer. Will they find water and shelter from all this smoke? Is my brain spinning out of control? I need to go for a walk. But. We can’t breathe outside the house. And my soul can’t seem to move like this, from trauma to trauma. Did I take my meds last night? I can’t remember. I feel so strange. I don’t even know what will become of the online classes, tbh. Classes start in what? A week? I wish I could talk to someone. Can’t remember the last time I was able to go to therapy. This is hellish. I need to get my act together.

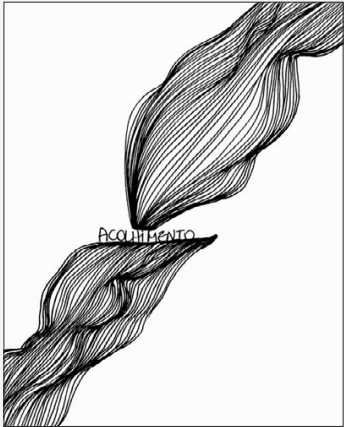
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As my mind spun out of control, I remembered why I was holding the sketchbook in my hands. Yes, that’s right, I was supposed to be drawing. Oh, my goodness, the shakiness again. I really need to breathe. Let me find a quiet place for this. I sat down with the drawing pad and opened to the page that read: *To All Our Relations*. I reached for a sharpie and drew a tiny circle around the phrase I must have written when a surge of creative electricity had run through my body, only to be distracted by another racing thought and those brain freezes and dizziness I get from time to time. Before I knew it, I was drawing waves and more waves. I was breathing deeply. With each line, a breath in and another breath out. After seeing a couple of lines on the page, the cadence of my thoughts had changed, and the contours on that sheet of paper gave rise to gratification. I kept coming back to this notebook. Each day, a different phrase, new lines, invocations, sensations, and declarations. The gifts, bags of kindness, the Sharpies, the phone conversations, the impromptu visits divided by wall, glass, windows, the books, meals shared through great distances, and the care packages all revealed aspects of our community’s capacity to conjure life, however fragmentarily. The act of drawing, breathing, journaling, and reinventing community became the very sites and sights for world-making, dreaming, rehearsing, and choreographing new possibilities of being and intervening in a world that COVID-19 had just undone at the seams.



This particular drawing gave rise to an intentional and daily art practice at the peak of the lockdown. It allowed me to metabolize grief, mitigate fatigue, and regulate my neurodiversity. I could sense how, day by day, I was counteracting the helplessness that so quickly shapeshifted into hopelessness. As the practice took root, I began to think of the lives and loves of those entering the classroom. What was sustaining them? What gave teacher-learners a sense of rootedness during those first weeks of lockdown? I wondered whether they were eating, sleeping, or finding a quiet enough spot to study, read, and be comforted. To those near and far, I wondered about their geopolitical contexts and whether they had access to technology as learning tools. Would they have access to healthcare should they need it? Taking my cue from the many decolonial, somatic, trauma-informed, experiential praxes, mentors, and teachers who had attempted to interrupt dominant and oppressive ways of learning and teaching, I began to incorporate creative practices into the classroom. The first gesture toward this shift was a series of Love-Lectures I wrote students during a course I co-taught with Jeff Chang entitled “Living Democracy: Image and Culture.” I closed each session with the epistolary practice, hoping each letter I had written longhand could provide a kind of connective tissue, a bleeding, a pouring from my heart to theirs.

From centering and closing moments to building sacred altars to engaging with artworks, teacher-learners were also invited to imaginatively co-create devotionals, rituals, meditations, art, embodied work, creative projects, spiritual practices, and much more. At that time, I was being responsive to Lama Rod Owens' call to embodiment as a coming home to our bodies, opening spaciousness that could allow us to respond to the wounds and wonders of the now. "Disembodiment," he writes, "is the primary strategy through which oppression is maintained," precisely because we become desensitized to the conditions around us and lose awareness of our inner and collective realities. By turning to creative practices, we were able to call back a pedagogy of *acolhimento* into the classroom.

Acolhimento is a word in Portuguese that has no translation to English. It is an act and an effect of receiving tenderness—the very opposite of isolation and loneliness. It is a manner of creating space with others where our whole selves are welcomed, considered, and regarded deeply. *Acolhimento* is a gratuitous shelter, a deep practice of hospitality. And it is so much more than that. It is an embrace, a soothing bath, and clean sheets after arduous travel. *Acolhimento* lives and breathes in the enfolding we receive when the load is unwieldy and when experiences are felt-with. It's an honoring of all that we are and have gone through. It is a deep and intimate welcoming. In *acolhimento*, there is no place for judgment and plenty of place for rest, reciprocity, joy, and tenderness. To *acolher* is to invoke the sacred into a space, it is the probing of each other's being, a profound act of presence, of saying: "I see the entirety and the miracle of you." It's an offer, a prayer, a gesture, a poem. It's a bundle of herbs that brush up against our soft skin and awaken the divine within. It's a reclamation of our collective right to be whole, to be healed, and to be here.



Such pedagogy of *acolhimento*, of meeting students as and where they were, engendered yet another bundle of kindness: the Spiritual Care Packages, designed based on each week's readings, the unfolding of the pandemic, the rise of anti-Black racism and anti-Asian hate, the wildfires of a boiling earth. It was a practice that my colleague and co-teacher, Dr. Aizaiah Yong, welcomed into our Spiritual Practices Class. They became a series of centering and creative exercises that invited us to meditate, embody, and create for about one full hour per week. The packages included prompts to draw, assemble elements from nature, rest, experiment with the senses, and have sensorial experiences that helped us to deal with what had been accumulating in our flesh, cognition, and senses. This also provided opportunities for creative embodiment, integrating what students learned in class with their lived experiences, somatic processes, spiritual traditions, and research. The Spiritual Care Packages ritualized and generated spaces that allowed us all to tap into the power of our spiritualities and creative vigor. In moments of pain, dis-ease, conflict, and unknowingness, these spirit bundles gave us a container to see, touch, and create in exuberant ways. After all, art allows us to become anchored in our bodies, access, re-member, and revive "what most links us with life."

Thanks to the support of Wabash Teaching Grants, I was able to understand the psychological impact of these exercises by holding conversations with Dr. Miriam Rosa dos Santos, a clinical psychologist and embodied healing facilitator from my home country of Brazil. Dr. Santos helped me understand how a heightened sense of anxiety, stress, and neurosis is very much present in contexts such as the ones where these activities took place. Not only was the pandemic looming large, but teacher-learners were navigating graduate studies, which placed tremendous demands on us psychologically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. These numerous pressures, she explained, tend to "stiffen" us as we try to minimize our pain and sense of vulnerability. By doing so, however, we also limit our ability to be creative, experience transformation, and perhaps even healing. To Dr. Santos, creative practices that can be sustained over time, such as the ones proposed in the Spiritual Care Packages give participants an opportunity to broaden and "soften" their view of themselves and their communities while

engaging in exercises outside of the demands of the classrooms. As a praxis of *acolhimento*, they can enhance our sense of compassion, confidence, and vulnerability, making us more adaptable and capable of undoing harm, stress, and trauma. Some of the critical reflections from teacher-learners at the end of the semester named the implications of having other learning modalities available to them. They reflected on both thoughts and feelings engaged in the readings and discussions, which led to a visible improvement in self-awareness over the course of the semester. Some students named that having the freedom to experiment with the format of final projects gave them an incredible sense of agency over their learning.

The careful curation of the weekly exercises was my attempt to open a space of *acolhimento* in the classroom, tracing the sensations, behaviors, and emotions that emerged in each moment. As Cornelia Elbrecht put it, these creative exercises help to implicitly trace discomfort, distress, and pain, to transform them in tangible ways. This approach, she writes, transforms passive suffering into active responses, which can move us "from survival to gradually feeling alive." Calling back the split-off parts of ourselves, she explains, these exercises "turn into a carefully titrated dance between what happened once, how the body responded at the time, and what the body needs to heal."

Pedagogies of *acolhimento* have allowed me to co-create and invent new ways to resist and exist in the classroom, even in the face of the most dehumanizing and traumatizing experiences. They have nurtured a creative becoming that establishes the learning community as a locus for returning to our bodies, cultures, ways of knowing, ancestral ties, spiritual traditions, and creative power. Through these practices and pedagogies, learner-teachers have met and supported one another, trusting our inner and collective courage to face the abysses as they open beneath our feet. They have allowed us to aerate the classrooms. And, by moving such stagnant air and energy, we have made space for the expansive, connective, and emergent collective, integrating what was once dissociated into a conjuring of new worlds.



About the Author

Yohana A. Junker (she/hers) is an Assistant Professor of Art, Religion, and Culture at Claremont School of Theology and Associate Dean for Strategic Planning. Her research probes the intersections of art, religion, and decolonial studies, with particular attention to contemporary art practices across the Americas. Her art practice is informed by an embodied poetics of resistance, justice, and healing. As an ongoing learner of healing modalities, she investigates how artists, spiritual seekers, and healers create sacred spaces that allow us to reclaim our sense of agency and wholeness even in the face of impossibility.