

# Building Just and Resilient Communities: New Foundations for Ecopsychology

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## Abstract

*The dynamics, patterns, and history underlying our ecologically unsustainable relationship to the Earth are fundamentally intertwined with historic and current dynamics of racial and social injustice. The culture of denial and separation we have constructed in order to forget this painful history stands in the way of our society rising to the urgent challenges we now face. The story of the African American Burial Ground near Wall Street illustrates the way in which collective memory of our painful past is suppressed and buried, and its discovery serves as an entry point for the hidden narrative of race in the United States. The history of the slave trade in the 16th–18th centuries provides clues to how social and environmental devastation are intertwined, when particular people or lands are designated as separate and disposable. These dynamics are still playing out today, in continuing environmental injustices, in the school-to-prison pipeline, and in the spatial apartheid of our metropolitan regions: We damage ourselves and our planet as we continue the cycle of denial and fragmentation. This demands a new vision of ecopsychology that provides solutions for healing these deep-seated patterns, incorporating individual and collective transformation, as well as reflection and action. We offer an ecopsychology tool that facilitates this ongoing transformation of self and world—the Breakthrough Compass. A potent site for this work is in metropolitan regional organizing for environmental sustainability and social equity, where we re-integrate our fragmented social systems and our fragmented psyches while winning real changes for a better world.*

Key Words: Sustainability—African American—Climate change—Urban—Qualitative research.

We are living in a historic moment. We are each called to take part in a great transformation. Our survival as a species is threatened by global warming, economic meltdown, and an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor. Yet these threats offer an opportunity to awaken as an interconnected and beloved community...

Here in South Africa, interconnectedness is described by the concept *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is the philosophy and belief that our humanity is inextricably bound up in one another, and any tear in the fabric of connection must be repaired for us all to be made whole. This interconnectedness is the very root of who we are. Thus, compassion and service to others enhances the humanity of all, including oneself.

—Desmond Tutu, foreword to *Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty* (Herbert & Pavel, 2014)

The success of ecopsychology will depend not only upon its ability to help us hear the voice of the Earth, but to construct a genuinely multicultural self and a global civil society without racism.

—Carl Anthony (1995, p. 264), quoted in *Ecopsychology* by T. Roszak

**W**e are living in an unprecedented moment in planetary evolution, where global warming threatens our communities and the planet with the sixth great extinction. Our global economy, structured on an untenable assumption of limitless growth, is careening toward collapse (Meadows, 1972). Our communities are threatened by ever-increasing inequities in income, employment, education, incarceration, and access to resources that sustain life. Yet this triple breakdown of environment, economy, and equity also presents a triple opportunity to reimagine and co-create a just and sustainable world and to heal ourselves and our relationships with one another (Pavel, 2009). This is the Great Work of our time (Berry, 1999) and offers a new horizon for ecopsychology. In this article, we will explore how the dynamics, patterns, and history underlying our ecologically unsustainable relationship to the Earth are fundamentally intertwined with the dynamics of historic and current

racial injustice. We will then offer solutions to confronting these systemic challenges, solutions that lead with social equity, for a more just, resilient, and sustainable world.

Our interpretation of Kunstler's "long emergency" (2006) is the period in which it is no longer possible to ignore the damage done to our planet's support systems or to avoid the resulting disasters and scarcities. Yet many of our communities have never had the luxury of ignoring the damage of this unsustainable global system. The threats associated with the long emergency—including displacement and uprooting, toxic pollution, destruction of homes, poverty, hunger, lack of access to clean water or health care—are already familiar to our vulnerable communities in the United States and a majority of the world's populations. A global Climate Justice movement is emerging, led by frontline communities—low-income communities and communities of color who will be hit first and hardest by climate change—from whom powerful solutions to the challenges of our lifetime are arising.

Now that these global conditions threaten the well-being of all, people are beginning to ask how we can build resilience in the face of climate change. Yet if resilience can be considered the capacity of a community or organism to bounce back to normal within a certain period of time, we must ask ourselves: What is the normal to which we hope to return? Over the last 500 years, "normal" created societies dependent on destroying natural resources and on exploiting other societies. What would our normal be if we did not have the slave trade, colonization, genocide, fossil fuels, and dependence on consumption and waste? How do we calibrate? And most importantly, how do we prevent further trauma so that our communities do not have to keep bouncing back?

To lay the foundations for answering these questions, we invite you on a journey to trace a hidden narrative of our modern world. As we travel from Ferguson, Missouri, to Wall Street, to the Middle Passage, to Oakland, California, we will uncover the intertwined legacy of environmental degradation and human exploitation. Next, we share stories and strategies from our work with Climate Justice movement leaders, demonstrating that social justice is key to an ecologically sustainable society for all. These same strategies provide new applications of ecopsychology and offer grounding for a radical transformation of self, culture, and world.

### We Can't Breathe

March 2015, Ferguson, Missouri. Our national attention is turned to the brutality of policing practices and the surfacing of numerous cases of wrongful harassment, abuse, and execution of African American residents at the hands of the national, state, and local police and criminal justice system. The death of Michael Brown, like

the deaths of Amadou Diallo, Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Rumain Brisbon, and many others are not isolated incidents but indicators of a more pervasive culture that categorizes people as criminal based on race. "Hands up: Don't shoot," "I can't breathe," and "Black Lives Matter" have become iconic phrases, calling forth a truth that has been repressed. Our culture is now structured in such a way that relies on certain people, places, and things being disposable. Disposable communities are pushed into environmental sacrifice zones, and vice versa, where they suffer toxic effluent from adjacent polluters. We are in the midst of a disposable culture where we casually throw away bottles, tin cans, neighborhoods, and now whole cities. How did we get here? And how does a new vision for ecopsychology provide a pathway forward?

The widespread movement in response to Ferguson is a hopeful and life-sustaining feedback from a deeper source of wisdom within us, evidence that our amnesiac culture is waking up to our collective stories and history, to make way for a restorative justice and collective healing that includes a broader context of land and people. Ecopsychology can be a resource for responding to this call as we reclaim, excavate, unbury, rediscover, and honor our lost connections. We are waking up to the fact that, even as we consciously address the accumulation of wealth in capitalism, we recognize and reclaim a history that has been ignored. Reclaiming this history is key to our ecological, psychological, and community healing in the present.

### Excavating the Ecological Self: The Hidden Narrative of Wall Street

September, 1991. Near Wall Street in New York City, a foundation is being excavated for a new government building. The construction team is unprepared for its discovery: Buried within a 6-acre area are 20,000 people of African heritage (Hansen & McGowan, 1998). An entire population of Manhattan residents from the 17th and 18th centuries had been buried in unmarked graves and all but forgotten for two centuries (Anthony, 2015a).

The wall that gave Wall Street its name was built by slaves under the direction of Peter Stuyvesant for the purpose of protecting the European settlers from indigenous Lenape people living on the island of Mannahatta (Manhattan), after the Dutch had broken their peace treaty in an ambush massacre (Sidis, 1935). The other side of that wall soon became a toxic dumping ground for chemicals from the tanning industry and for refuse of all kinds (Burrows & Wallace, 1999; Hansen & McGowan, 1998). Over time, the African American population, who made up one third of the city, were no longer allowed to be buried within its boundaries or within the wall that they had built (Ottley & Weatherby, 1967). The toxic site outside of the wall became

a burial ground for a human population who had contributed to the building of the city's infrastructure and its prosperity, yet who themselves were ultimately separated from it.

The African American Burial Ground illustrates the way in which issues of social injustice and the destruction of the environment come together as a common story, a hidden legacy that we ignore to our peril. This discovery is also an invitation to reclaim, restore, and reunite fragmented parts of our own buried psyches writ large on this landscape. Our cities and their surrounding regions continue to build this legacy of inclusion and exclusion into their structures.

While the dominant narrative of our modern world frames the last 400 years as a mostly White, European venture in progress, it discards and buries the contributions of people of color. The hidden narratives of marginalized communities represent parts of ourselves, our earth, and our society that are repressed and neglected (Anthony, 2015b). As we trace any thread, our memories uncover a hidden story of race that is important to our individual, cultural, and ecological healing and provides pathways for going forward toward health. As we begin to imagine a landscape of freedom, and a geography of hope, it is valuable to remember our roots.

### **Built on the Slave Trade: Western Prosperity and the Culture of Denial**

June 1775. The slave ship *True Blue* is departing from the Bight of Benin, with a cargo of 200 African prisoners. An average of one in seven African prisoners will die on the Middle Passage, totaling two million over the course of the slave trade. The *True Blue*'s surviving prisoners will be sold into slavery to the British colony's sugar plantations in Jamaica and exchanged for rum, tobacco, and sugar to sell in Europe on the ship's return (Rediker, 2007). These substances are highly lucrative, their demand driven by addictive qualities. Transplanted to the Caribbean, the displaced Africans will work on the sugar plantations that have arisen where the islands have been stripped of indigenous people by massacre and disease. The "New World," viewed as "empty" of civilization, offers colonizers the potential to create vast, efficient monoculture farms of cash crops of a size and scale never before seen in the dense and depleted "Old World." The islands have also been stripped of their forests to make way for these plantations. The trees have been felled by slave labor and sold as wood to the European shipbuilding industry that supplies the slavers with transport. Thus the global market for the ruthless institution of slavery developed in tandem with the emergence of a ruthless new pattern of exploiting the land. This is not a coincidence.

The same mind-set that dehumanized and exploited human beings also enacted sweeping ecological damage on two continents with just

as much cruelty, shortsightedness, and greed in pursuit of profit. These centuries set into motion patterns we are still playing out today, that continue to shape our consciousness. The system of Race was invented to designate disposable people *and* disposable land, to be exploited, extracted, depleted, stripped bare, thrown away, and used as a dumping ground. This system still organizes our cultural and physical world today, as the Environmental Justice movement has been telling us for some time. Now, however, our wider culture is awakening to the truth that *there is no away*, for land, things, or people.

Although this is not documented or mentioned in our sense of global ecological history, we are now living with the legacy of this grave error in human consciousness, in our unsustainable agricultural practices, in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, in toxic and nuclear waste dumping, in our relationship to addictive foods that cause malnutrition and obesity, and in our current crises of equity, economy, and environment. Our suppression of the history of our modern global expansion prevents us from thinking clearly about how to face these ecological challenges and truly acting in response to our current crisis. To imagine real solutions and take action, we must first wake up to the hidden narrative of our time.

### **Current Challenges: The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

April 2015, Oakland, California. Only 38% of Oakland School District third graders can read at grade level (Grady, 2014). Almost 40% of youth are dropping out of high school (Oakland Local, 2013). The year 2014 saw 80 homicides (City of Oakland, 2015). Communities of color have been pushed into ghettos over decades of redlining, discriminatory housing and development practices, disinvestment, and white flight. These communities are now being over-policed and under-resourced in education and jobs, funneling youth of color into the prison system<sup>1</sup> These same communities are also used as toxic dumping grounds: industrial West Oakland, the Chevron refinery presiding over "Cancer Alley" in Richmond,

<sup>1</sup>Scholars trace direct historical links between the United States' current system of incarceration and criminalization and the former institution of slavery and its antecessor, Jim Crow. After the Emancipation Proclamation came into effect, the Black Codes followed, criminalizing freed black people for "vagrancy," "loitering," and other such minor and ambiguous charges. Once labeled criminals, former slaves were farmed out as prison labor to former plantation owners—often ending up back at work on the same plantation where they had previously been enslaved (Davis, 2003). Michelle Alexander describes similar direct historical links between Jim Crow and our current prison industrial complex (2011), tracing the lineage of racist rhetoric and policies through the mid-20th century, from segregation to the War on Drugs.

causing health inequities and gaps in life expectancy. Tobacco and alcohol industries prey on economically depressed neighborhoods, while grocery stores refuse to invest, leaving food deserts, malnutrition, obesity, and addiction. Schools are underfunded, and jobs are scarce, while access to both is restricted by lack of public transit infrastructure, resulting in long commutes to job centers and opportunity structures. These long commutes from economic wastelands increase greenhouse gas emissions and further damage to our climate. The compulsion to be separate is reinforcing our unsustainable way of living on the planet.

### Overcoming Fragmentation in Society and in Ourselves: A Learning-Action Agenda

No other animal would poison its own habitat, its own air, its own water systems; but our cultural state of disassociation, a response to the trauma and atrocities enacted on people and land in the name of shortsighted profit, allows us to continue this self-destructive cycle. We can be released from this cycle when we uncover the hidden narrative we have been repressing and create a new story where we come home to ourselves (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009). As we face and heal our deep fear of one another, we become more willing and capable as multicultural allies and symbiotic beings on the planet. This provides an essential and profound role for ecopsychology, to facilitate healing of the culture of separation, by moving us into action together.

In order to reintegrate ourselves, our society, and our connection to the planet, we offer an ecopsychology model that is grounded in the multicultural narrative of our time, which includes both individual and collective reflection and action. This is a potent resource we have been discovering in our work over the last four decades on the front lines of the Environmental Justice movement, linking the transformation of consciousness and depth psychology to community organizing. We offer this as a critical counterpoint to the medical model of delivery of services that dominates psychology today, which, embedded in the capitalist context of our time, has reinforced the mind-set that our struggles with isolation and separation are an individual problem with individual solutions (Hillman & Ventura, 1993). We seek to move beyond individual-internal reflection (Wilber et al., 2008), integrate community psychology (Watkins & Shulman, 2010), and incorporate collective action as part of the process of individual, community, cultural, and planetary healing.

### A Breakthrough Compass for Ecopsychology

The Breakthrough Compass is a grounded theory that has undergone several rounds of testing and shows promise as a robust and accessible tool for personal and community transformation through

both action and reflection. We developed this learning-action model in a research process over 10 years in 12 regions of the United States. The results are documented in *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis*, published by MIT Press (Pavel, 2009). The Breakthrough Compass allows us to see the interplay between individual and collective transformation and can be used diagnostically to orient ourselves to where we are allocating our current energies as well as strategically to chart a course toward the next stage of our transformation. The five stages of the Compass (Fig. 1) include its spiral center (Waking Up), as well as both an action axis (Horizontal: Saying No, Saying Yes) and a learning axis (Vertical: Getting Grounded, Exploring New Horizons) (Pavel, 2009). Following the spiral outward from the center, we begin by Waking Up to a situation threatening our communities. Then we take action by Saying No and fighting back against immediate threats or injustice. Next, we Get Grounded, learning more about the depth, breadth, and history of the circumstances. This knowledge enables us to Explore New Horizons, taking new actions, stepping into new roles, and forging new alliances. Finally, we can Say Yes, advocating for the future we want to co-create. We continue to find the Breakthrough Compass resilient and versatile as a fractal theory (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Wheatley, 2006), applicable to individual leaders as well as their groups, organizations, and coalitions.

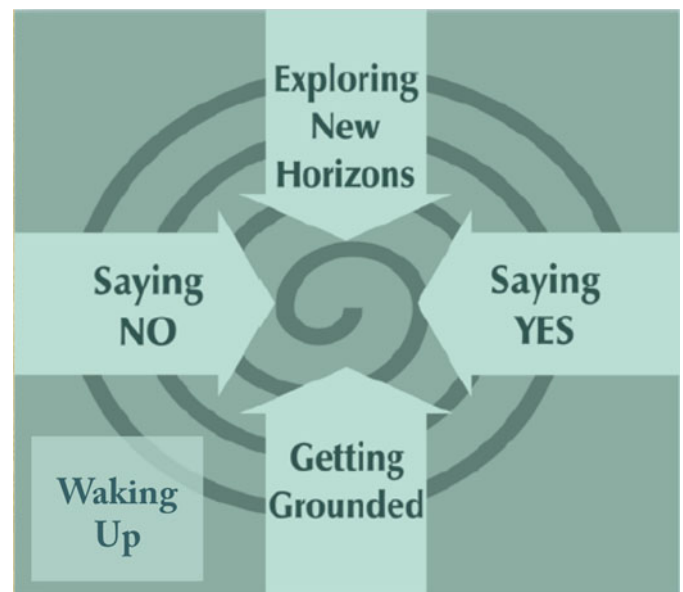


Fig. 1. The Breakthrough Compass.

As a demonstration of the principles outlined in this article so far, we would like to share the groundbreaking success stories at the intersection of environment and social/racial justice that we have gathered from the regional Climate Justice movement. Metropolitan regions, which are systems that include central cities and their surrounding suburbs and rural areas, are a potent scale for achieving both personal and community transformation by applying an interwoven learning/action process. We find that Climate Justice action at a regional scale is large enough to affect global sustainability issues but also local enough for participants to claim the region as home (Pavel, 2015a). The transformative power of our metropolitan regions is due to their encompassing many neighborhoods, cities, and areas that have been separated from one another yet exist in interdependent relationship: ghettos and gated communities, toxic waste dumps and pristine greenspaces, prisons and financial districts. Regional coalitions work together across these social/geographic boundaries and across divisions of race, class, and ethnicity that have fragmented our society and our psyches. This work not only wins real policy changes for more sustainable regions and greater social justice but also transforms individuals and communities in the process.

One such success story is our Climate Justice coalition, the Six Wins for Social Equity, here in the San Francisco Bay Area region. We have heard many stories from our coalition partners, coming from diverse sectors (public health, community organizing, affordable housing policy, academia, and many others) and diverse backgrounds, about how they were personally transformed through this work (Pavel, 2015b) while winning real victories for climate justice. We will introduce the Breakthrough Compass as a diagnostic tool by describing the Six Wins progression through the Compass's five stages.

### *Stage 1: Waking Up*

Community leaders wake up to the connections between climate change and social equity in their region, realizing that global warming is not only about polar bears on an iceberg but is connected with the spatial apartheid that causes sprawl, greenhouse gases from long commutes, and disinvestment in low-income communities and communities of color.

### *Stage 2: Saying No*

A coalition of social justice and environmental justice groups from both community organizing and professional policy come together to work across racial and social divides and *say no* to disinvestment in public transportation. In Oakland, \$70 million in federal stimulus funds that were earmarked for public transportation and that were intended to address the urgent needs of the most vulnerable popu-

lations are being funneled toward an exclusive, expensive "airport connector." This project will prove virtually useless for the daily transportation needs of the low-income neighborhood it is slated to be built through, with no local stops. The new coalition files a civil suit under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, redirecting that money to flow back into desperately underfunded public transportation relied upon by low-income communities. This unprecedented victory gains national attention and lights a fire of courage and determination for these Climate Justice advocates.

### *Stage 3: Getting Grounded*

Realizing that the problem is bigger than a single lawsuit can solve, the new Climate Justice coalition gets grounded by researching root causes and systemic problems in the Bay Area region. They find the intersection of many environmental and social justice issues—health, public transit, affordable housing, quality jobs, anti-displacement, and community power—and form the Six Wins coalition. Now armed and confident with a deeper understanding of their regional context, they explore new horizons of organizing and advocacy.

### *Stage 4: Exploring New Horizons*

Leaders from vulnerable communities take on new roles in regional planning processes, becoming steering committee members of regional working groups, testifying at public hearings, and meeting with regional agency heads one on one. They also make new alliances, working closely with university research facilities to translate community voices and needs into the language of regional planning.

### *Stage 5: Saying Yes*

These forces combine to produce a positive, proactive, innovative vision for the future. The Six Wins coalition produces a revolutionary community-based model for regional transportation and land use planning that, when tested alongside the agency's professional models, outperforms on metrics of both social equity *and* greenhouse gas reductions (Marcantonio & Karner, 2014). The regional agencies subsequently enact several of our coalition's recommendations, protecting the environment and vulnerable communities in the Bay Area.

As well as a huge victory for climate justice, the process itself was transformative for all involved. Community and youth leaders from marginalized communities, who had not been represented in these decision-making agencies, stepped into their power as regional citizens and won a permanent seat at the table. Academics who had been relying on complex transportation modeling processes discovered the depth of frontline community knowledge for solutions to global warming. Regional decision-makers who heard the voices of

vulnerable constituents speak powerfully for their communities were affected in their hearts, minds, and in their approach to serving the region (Pavel, 2015b). These personal, community, and regional transformations, through collective learning and action across boundaries of separation, are one of the ways forward out of our climate crisis. By acting together to counteract the fragmentation of our regions, we also heal the cycle of isolation, fear, and apathy and find the capacity to build resilience, sustainability, and justice in the face of the long emergency.

### Navigating With the Breakthrough Compass: Tools for Ecopsychology

In the following section, we offer tools and strategies at each point of the Breakthrough Compass for catalyzing each next phase of individual, organizational, and community transformation through learning and action.

#### *Waking Up*

The climate crisis provides and will continue to create an opportunity for us to wake up to our reliance on one another and a larger ecosphere. We recommend beginning with a practice in gratitude, a time-honored cross-cultural practice (Arrien, 1993; Macy & Brown, 1998). It is a simple question: “What do you love about the place where you live?” As Alice Walker boldly states “Anything we love can be saved” (Walker, 1997). Charting these answers in a group context offers a powerful opening move that strengthens racially and culturally diverse collaboration.

#### *Saying No*

There are immediate destructive forces that need to be slowed and, where possible, halted that will buy us time and enable us to have more options. Learning to act together, even in targeted campaigns on single issues, enables disparate, even conflicting organizations to work together. In this way, we can buy time for deeper strategic thinking and more long-term action. Tools at this stage include public comment, sign-on letters (multiple organizations come together and “sign on” to a single advocacy letter, directed at public officials), use of lawsuits and other legal actions, petitions, protest, and direct action.

#### *Getting Grounded*

Big History and the Universe Story provide a useful resource for this stage (Berry, 1999; Swimme & Tucker, 2011): How did conditions in our regions come to be? Deepening our understanding of the biological support system of the planet is an important grounding to understand the interplay of human and “natural” systems. A potent

technique for getting grounded in our movement experience has been the Deep Time map, beginning with the Big Bang (Anthony & Pavel, 2015). We have also found the use of one-on-one interviews valuable in a multigenerational context, tapping the rich cultural wisdom of a place through its elders.

#### *Exploring New Horizons*

Communities are discovering new allies, including university-community partnerships, and new roles, including seats on regional working groups and initiatives, and are designing new technologies, including GIS-mapping handheld devices for residents (Pastor et al., 2009). Film, theater, arts, and culture are timeless and treasured resources for liberating community resilience and imagination (Fullilove, 2013).

#### *Saying Yes*

Communities are changing the rules of the game. Regional organizing secures a permanent place at decision-making tables for vulnerable communities. Policy opportunities and demonstrations include producing a regional equity scenario, building policy platforms, and creating opportunity-based planning documents that guide growth in a region. Land-based examples include community gardens and rezoning for creating a local agricultural economy, gray-water systems, and community choice aggregation for energy.

### Conclusion

Our reckless and unsustainable relationship to the Earth has a history that is intertwined with the history of racial and social injustice, and we are still playing these patterns out today in our cities and in ourselves. In order to face the challenge of the current climate crisis and the long emergency, we must deconstruct the culture of denial and separation that keeps us from claiming all of our planet, our human community, and all of ourselves as worthy of care and protection. Like the 20,000 African American people buried and forgotten outside the physical boundary and collective memory of a city that was built by them, there is shared pain we must remember, but also hidden resources and treasures in these forgotten places.

In order to create an equitable and sustainable future, we need to rethink the destructive and divisive dominant paradigm that has shaped our world and discover the hidden narratives that allow us to awaken as a global Earth community. This long emergency is also an opportunity that provides a new essential and profound role for ecopsychology in our time, with which we can reexamine our ways of understanding our world. The fragmentation in ourselves, between

each other, and between us and nature has the opportunity to be overcome in the action and reflection we are proposing, diving deep in our own stories and taking action with others. When we move our green psychology to a sense of the self as embodied in the region, we reclaim parts of ourselves and parts of our history that have been disowned and fragmented in our cities. When we see the land and community around us as part of our self, we can find our place in the world and step into responsibility for caring for our home.

The steps we take now make new earth grow beneath our feet.  
The steps we take now decide what kind of earth that will be.

—*Random Kindness and Senseless Acts of Beauty* (Herbert & Pavel, 2014)

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