Worlds Within Worlds: A Dialogue on Radical Hope and Resistance, from Ceaușescu's Romania to CUNY's SEEK

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Abstract

We write through time. Through dialogic, art-based narrative methods, we engage histories that live in our bodies. For Emese, authoritarianism pulses through memory: Ceaușescu's Romania, her mother, an elementary schoolteacher, refused erasure of the students she loved. Despite illegal languages and starvation, she built worlds within worlds, revealing authoritarianism as a weak, futile tool of cowards. We put this resistance in conversation with SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) at CUNY, a space created by Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and their students, who also built worlds within worlds. Cris, an undergraduate SEEK peer tutor, and Emese, unearthing strategies from her mother's writings, carry these ancestors into the present where U.S. higher education faces surveillance, defunding, and the threat of algorithmic teachers. Radical hope, we argue, is not optimism but responsibility for one another's becoming and that activism is mutual survival.

Keywords: radical hope; critical pedagogy; authoritarianism; arts-based narrative inquiry; dialogic co-authorship

"Can you find Álmos for me?"

"Can you find Álmos for me?" My (Emese's) mother's raspy voice rose from the hospice bed, cutting through the medicalized quiet. I sat with my laptop and typed the name into the search bar.

"There he is!" I exclaimed, showing her his social media profile. I told her everything I could see, that this person thousands of miles away was still painting, still thriving decades after leaving her third-grade classroom in communist Romania.

"He had a show in Switzerland last year, édi," I said, watching these words settle on her frail frame. She began to glow.

"He was always such a good boy," she crooned, her heavy eyelids looking at the photo of a grown man standing in a gallery surrounded by his paintings. Across the world, this dying woman saw not the adult artist, but the little boy in his communist blue-toned uniform from her classroom decades ago. My mother carried hundreds of students like this, entire worlds tucked into the deepest crevices of her heart. When our family arrived in the US as refugees, she lost many things: her community, her language, her ability to teach in her new country. But she never lost those students. Even with her final breaths, she was celebrating who they had become.

As an educator myself, I've been haunted by this scene, especially as I watch our society embrace artificial intelligence systems that promise to revolutionize education by making teachers obsolete, especially as I brace myself for the violence to come during this authoritarian takeover of the United States, as the Trump administration aims to weaken and even dismantle the institutions of higher education.

What happens to that infinite space of care, those crevices of the heart where students live for decades, when we replace teachers with algorithms? What happens when we substitute radical hope with cash incentives? These are not abstract questions. As educators and learners in 2026, we face erasures rooted in a logic of isolation, efficiency, and the elimination of the messy embodied, emotional work of human relationship. This is a logic that promises to solve education's "problems" through surveillance and standardization. Both fundamentally misunderstand what teaching is. Against this, I (Cris) keep a collage from my teaching notebooks, I'll return to this below.

In this article, we (Cris and Emese) hope to create a landing space of memories and words that allow us to rest on the realization that teaching is an act of radical hope, not the hollow optimism that ignores material conditions, but a revolutionary practice of taking responsibility for one another's becoming. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Rebecca Solnit, and Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, bell hooks alongside the historical precedent of CUNY's SEEK program where Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and June Jordan built radical educational spaces in the 1960s and 70s, we explore how pedagogy rooted in radical hope becomes survival infrastructure in authoritarian times. Through personal narrative, archival research, arts-based methodology, and contemporary practice we invite our collective imagination to embrace the classroom as a site of worldbuilding, a space where we practice the future we need by refusing the erasures imposed upon us.

The Crisis: The Post-Neoliberal Academy and Its Erasures

We are living through a time that historian Ellen Schrecker identifies as exceeding McCarthyist practices (Goodman, 2025). Teachers are surveilled, students are encouraged to report on one another, curriculum laws criminalize acknowledging our full history. Websites solicit anonymous reports on professors teaching "divisive concepts." The Department of Education establishes hotlines for parents to report teachers who mention forbidden histories. In Florida, Texas, and elsewhere, laws make it illegal to acknowledge the full tapestry of American experience, particularly the histories of Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and their descendants, LGBTQ+ communities, and anyone whose existence complicates the myth of American exceptionalism.

This moment of authoritarian assault does not emerge in a vacuum. As Cris Shore and Susan Wright have documented across decades of research, universities have been undergoing a slow transformation from institutions of public good to sites they term as audit cultures, governed by metrics, rankings, and so-called accountability mechanisms that evacuate the relational from education (Shore & Wright, 2000). In 1987, Alan Bloom offered in *The Closing of the American Mind* that the university has become uncertain about its own purpose, which then leaves it susceptible to whatever logic the market is offering. More recently, Patel (2021) has asserted that genuine learning always requires confronting the material conditions which shape who is given access to education spaces and opportunities. These conditions today include aggressive defunding of higher education, the replacement of tenured faculty with contingent labor, the rise of corporate technology, and the weaponization of free speech as a cudgel against critical pedagogy.

Into this environment of suspicion, defunding and institutional collapse comes the promise of AI education: clean, efficient, free from the messy complications of human relationship. The pitch is seductive, promising personalized learning at scale, objective

assessment free from teacher bias, education delivered with the precision of an algorithm optimized for measurable outcomes. A capitalist fantasy realized. This is a natural progression of audit culture, a more evolved stage of the fantasy that the relational, embodied, historically situated work of teaching can be disaggregated into measurable inputs and optimized outputs.

The convergence of these threats, authoritarian erasure and technological replacement, reveal the way they both serve the same end: the atomization of human beings into isolated units of labor, stripped of history, culture, relationship, and the dangerous capacity to imagine alternatives. As Henry Giroux argues, authoritarianism thrives when populations are depoliticized, when education becomes mere training, when we forget that "education, for Freire and those who share his view, is political while the political is educational" (Giroux, 2021, p. 6). The replacement of teachers with AI tutors is not a neutral technological advancement, it is a political project of severing the relational bonds through which collective consciousness and transformative agency develop.

An AI tutor will never lie awake worrying about a struggling student. It will never feel pride when that student succeeds years later. It will never carry their memory as a dying gift, proof that love persists beyond the boundaries of time and geography. It will never be changed by those it teaches. It will never take responsibility, radical responsibility, for who students become.

But more than this, AI tutors cannot do what Freire called conscientização, the development of critical consciousness through which learners come to understand their relationship to systems of power and their capacity to transform those systems (Freire, 1970/2000). Consciousness emerges through dialogue, through the friction of encountering another consciousness, through the vulnerability of being seen and known. An algorithm, no matter how sophisticated, has no consciousness to offer, no stake in the world students will inherit, no body that has navigated the contradictions students face.

SEEK as Precedent: Building Radical Spaces in Hostile Institutions

The Founding Vision and Its Contradictions

We are not the first to face this. In 1966, as American cities burned with justified rage following centuries of anti-Black violence and systematic exclusion, the City University of New York (CUNY) launched SEEK, Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge. Originally called the "Pre-Bac" (pre-baccalaureate) program when it launched in 1965, SEEK was explicitly designed to bring Black and Puerto Rican students systematically excluded from higher education into CUNY through a program that refused to pathologize students or demand they assimilate to white academic norms.

The program was not a technocratic or administrative invention, instead it emerged from student demands. These demands made by the students included a separate school for Black and Puerto Rican studies, a separate orientation program for Black and Puerto Rican freshman, a voice for SEEK students in the governance of the SEEK program, that the racial composition of all incoming students reflect the racial composition of New York City high schools, and finally that Black history and Puerto Rican history as well as the Spanish language be a requirement for all majors (Five Demands, 1969). As I, Cris, learned through archival research both within the Queens College Archives (n.d.) and those conducted by Schiller and Weiss (2023), the period from October to April, six months of no response to demands, culminated in action. There were technically six demands, but the sixth became the first: when guards at City College of New York (City College) were ordered to forcibly remove students occupying the school and refused, they were fired. The students' first demand became: reinstate the guards immediately, or no negotiations happen. This was solidarity made tangible as students aligned with the workers, recognizing their shared interests, refusing to let the institution divide them.

Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and June Jordan, alongside other Black women intellectuals and activists, built SEEK into something revolutionary through a pedagogy of generosity (Nagasawa, et al. 2022). These SEEK educators centered listening over speaking, celebrated community over individualism, and made pathways toward collaboration rather than competition, all expressions of a pedagogy of generosity. These educators understood that you cannot simply insert marginalized students into institutions designed to exclude them and call it equity. Real education for liberation required transforming the institution itself, forging through generosity what we might now call counterspaces, sites where students could "find refuge and mutual support from peers" while developing the critical consciousness necessary to transform oppressive systems (Whitzman, 2007, p. 2724).

But SEEK's history reveals tensions we still acutely experience today. The program existed as what multiple students described as a "bubble"—a space of safety and transformation surrounded by hostility. In interviews found in the documentary on the Five Demands (Schiller & Weiss, 2023), numerous graduates recalled experiencing explicit racism from faculty and students outside the SEEK program. They would leave their SEEK classrooms where they felt at home, where they were seen and valued only to encounter instructors who made them spectacles of their supposed inadequacy.

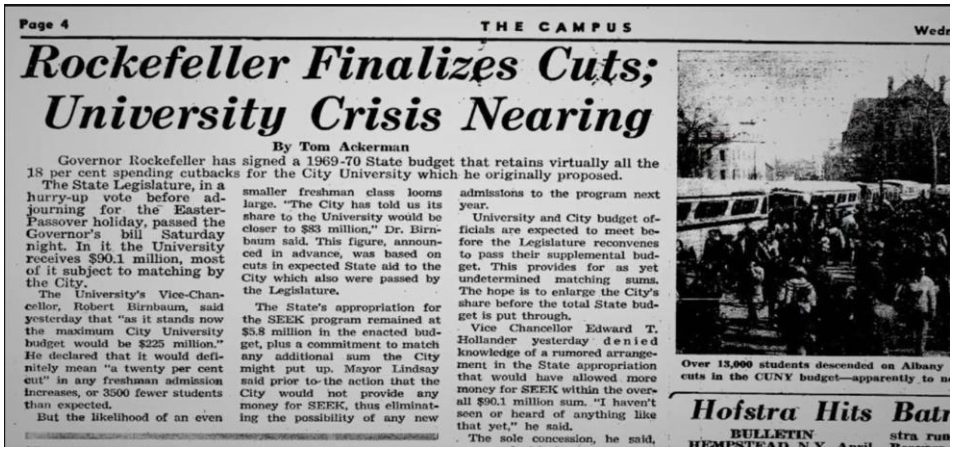
Francee Covington, the only woman on the Committee of Ten who made the Five Demands, recalled an instructor who asked SEEK students in class to stand, then told the rest of the class to look at them: these students didn't earn their admissions like you did. They didn't have the same SAT scores or GPAs. This public humiliation was pedagogy, teaching non-SEEK students that some people belong and others don't, that merit is measurable and certain bodies don't measure up. Even among Black and Puerto Rican students, SEEK status became a marker of illegitimacy. Students not in SEEK felt compelled to clarify that they somehow earned their place the “right” way. One graduate recounted being asked if she was "SEEK or regular" as though SEEK students were irregular, aberrant, exceptional in the worst sense.

The Pattern: Blaming Students for Structural Violence

What's most striking, and most relevant to our current moment, is how SEEK's challenges were narrated. When the open admissions policy was implemented a few years after the occupation, many administrators and even some SEEK faculty opposed it. Alan Ballard, who literally wrote the proposal for the SEEK program, was among those who argued that open admissions would "lower standards" and erode the program's prestige.

But as Naomi Chesman Smith, one of the few people in archival interviews who clearly articulated that racism affects everybody, pointed out: the supposed erosion of standards wasn't caused by open admissions or by SEEK students. It was caused by budget cuts. Governor Rockefeller proposed massive cuts to City College and CUNY funding even as the occupation was happening (**Figure 1**), which partially explains why administrators pushed back so hard against student demands, fearing further retaliation. When the demands were met, the budget was cut anyway.

Figure 1



Page 4 THE CAMPUS Wed

Rockefeller Finalizes Cuts; University Crisis Nearing

By Tom Ackerman

Governor Rockefeller has signed a 1969-70 State budget that retains virtually all the 18 per cent spending cutbacks for the City University which he originally proposed.

The State Legislature, in a hurry-up vote before adjourning for the Easter-Passover holiday, passed the Governor's bill Saturday night. In it the University receives $90.1 million, most of it subject to matching by the City.

The University's Vice-Chancellor, Robert Birnbaum, said yesterday that "as it stands now the maximum City University budget would be $225 million." He declared that it would definitely mean "a twenty per cent cut" in any freshman admission increases, or 3500 fewer students than expected.

But the likelihood of an even smaller freshman class looms large. "The City has told us its share to the University would be closer to $83 million," Dr. Birnbaum said. This figure, announced in advance, was based on cuts in expected State aid to the City which also were passed by the Legislature.

The State's appropriation for the SEEK program remained at $5.8 million in the enacted budget, plus a commitment to match any additional sum the City might put up. Mayor Lindsay said prior to the action that the City would not provide any money for SEEK, thus eliminating the possibility of any new admissions to the program next year.

University and City budget officials are expected to meet before the Legislature reconvenes to pass their supplemental budget. This provides for as yet undetermined matching sums. The hope is to enlarge the City's share before the total State budget is put through.

Vice Chancellor Edward T. Hollander yesterday denied knowledge of a rumored arrangement in the State appropriation that would have allowed more money for SEEK within the overall $90.1 million sum. "I haven't seen or heard of anything like that yet," he said.

The sole concession, he said,

Over 13,000 students descended on Albany cuts in the CUNY budget—apparently to n

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Newspaper clipping of Governor Rockefeller's cut to CUNY funding.
Note. From The Five Demands, Film by Directors Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, 2023 by Icarus Films.

This is a persistent pattern, stable through time, felt as acutely over 60 years later: students are blamed for structural problems. Not enough resources? It must be because unqualified students are being admitted. Standards declining? Must be these students who don't belong here. Never mind the defunding. Never mind the corporatization. Never mind that those with power are systematically divesting from public education while expecting educators and students to somehow make it work anyway.

The American Broadcasting Company and other news outlets at the time framed the CCNY occupation as Black and Puerto Rican students against white students, a race war on campus. But this was inflammatory misrepresentation. In reality, white students stood at the front lines of the occupation intentionally, using their bodies to protect Black and Puerto Rican students who were at greatest risk. There was solidarity. There was recognition that they were fighting together against an administration that would pit them against each other to maintain the status quo. Even President Gallagher, who was ultimately removed, demonstrated surprising compassion. He was adamant that police would not be called to remove students. He literally said he would rather die than call the police on his students, a striking change from what we saw happen during the student protests of 2024 when police were called by administrators at Columbia University, City College, New York University, and Barnard College which led to the brutalization of students in New York (Hogan & Honan, 2025). For all that compassion, Gallagher never really grasped the demands. He was flippant about them and didn't understand why students wanted these things. Yet, even in his dismissiveness, he wasn't an active enemy. Students interviewed decades later were careful to defend him: he could have done much worse.

Figure 2



CUNY faculty speaking out on behalf of the demands.
Note. From The Five Demands, Film by Directors Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss, 2023 by Icarus Films.

The Radical Hope of SEEK Educators

Many faculty protested alongside the students (**Figure 2**) and demonstrated their solidarity through their pedagogy. Lorde described teaching SEEK students as "teaching survival" (Lorde, 1982). But survival pedagogy, as she practiced it, was not about helping students merely endure hostile conditions. It was about cultivating their capacity to imagine and build alternatives. In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde writes: "For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt, of examining what our ideas really mean on Sunday morning at 7 A.M., after brunch, during wild love, or during the middle of menstrual cramps" (1977/2007A, p. 37). This is pedagogy rooted in the body, in lived experience, in the texture of daily life, the kind of pedagogy that AI education cannot access and authoritarian attacks on education seek to prevent through fear and criminality.

Toni Cade Bambara, teaching writing at City College through SEEK, insisted that students' home languages, cultural knowledge, and lived experiences were not deficits to overcome but resources for intellectual work. She assigned students to write about their own communities, to document their own histories, to theorize from their own subject positions. This was not "dumbing down" curriculum, it was recognizing that rigorous intellectual work begins with the question: whose knowledge counts? (Bambara, 1970).

Adrienne Rich, who also taught in SEEK, articulated what was at stake with devastating clarity: "If the mind of the teacher is not in love with the mind of the student, he is simply practicing rape and at best deserves our pity" (Rich, 1979, p. 238). Love here is not an empty expression of endearment nor is it patronizing, it is recognition of the student as irreplaceable world, as subject rather than object, as someone whose becoming matters infinitely.

What SEEK educators understood, and what makes their work essential precedent for our current moment, is that hope is not about denying the brutality of systems students face. As Giroux explains, building on Freire's work: "Hope lays at the heart of what Freire terms 'an adventure in unveiling', reflecting the readiness to reinvigorate many for the task of continuing the ongoing struggle" (2021, p. 14). SEEK students were not told everything would be fine if they just worked hard. They were told: the world is structured to destroy you, AND you have the capacity to transform it, AND we will practice that transformation together in this classroom. This is radical hope, hope as political pedagogy, hope as collective practice, hope as taking responsibility for one another's survival and flourishing.

SEEK Today: Continuities and Ruptures–Cris's Account

I, Cris, came to SEEK as a freshman at John Jay College (John Jay), and the thing I was told over and over and over again was: you belong here. You're here for a reason. You earned your place here. This was the mindset they cultivated in us. It was powerful. It made me believe in my own capacity.

Now, as a tutor in the program, I see things differently. I hear my coworkers… people who genuinely care about students, who go above and beyond what they're paid for, who put enormous effort into student success… metabolize the violence of the institution into what sounds like snide, judgmental remarks toward students. "Students these years just don't put in the effort." "They're ungrateful." These brutal systems are seeping into the bodies of those who care most and it is impacting the relationship with students.

Last year, I had to teach a student what a decimal is. What a fraction is. I wasn't laughing. I wasn't thinking "this student is stupid." I was thinking: How were you possibly not taught this in middle school or high school? How did every teacher before me fail you? This is evidence of systemic failure, not individual deficit.

As a senior now, as I tutor other SEEK students, I am hearing a devastating deficit-based narrative. As though these failures are the fault of the student, as though it is a matter of not working hard enough. This is absurd. Every single student I know in SEEK and at John Jay has a job or is actively looking for one. The standard now is that you work full-time and you're a full-time student simultaneously. I had a student who owned an automobile business—she was financially independent, successful—but was offered a spot in SEEK and took it because she wanted the education. She was an amazing student. She put in tremendous effort. How can you possibly conclude that it's students' individual responsibility when they're working 40 hours a week on top of full course loads? When they're navigating poverty, housing instability, family obligations, and still showing up?

The same pattern from 50 years ago: blame the students for structural problems. Don't talk about how CUNY is being defunded. Don't talk about how we're being corporatized, run like a business where faculty are disposable. Don't talk about the broader political reality of the authoritarian assault on everyone in education. Don't talk about how budget cuts mean larger classes, fewer resources, overworked faculty. Just blame the students for not being "good enough."

And despite the way the institutional violence is appearing at times in the relationship between faculty and students, I see that there has been a shift in power dynamics over the years. In the early years of SEEK, the leadership was dominated by men and the power holders were defined by exclusion. Today, SEEK is led by an amazing woman, and most of our counselors are women as well. They fight incredibly hard every year to make sure SEEK stays a department, not just a program. That independence matters because it means we have our own curriculum, our own counselors, our own tutors, our own system that's somewhat separate from the larger John Jay structure. And every year there are budget cuts, and every year someone's complaining about funding struggles, but it's never even a question whether we're giving up our status as a department. That's not negotiable. People are constantly fighting for that. We have leaders who are smart about navigating institutional power structures and who do so relationally. I see this all the time. Students may be on the verge of losing funding or getting discouraged by bureaucratic mechanisms that are designed to disempower them. Our counselors don't just do the paperwork, they actually sit with us, they find out what is going on. They practice pedagogy of generosity (Nagasawa et al. 2022) through listening more than speaking. Then they work the institutional levers quietly, relationally, without making us the students feel like we are the problem. They fight for us and often do so without us even knowing it is happening.

And I know that despite the deficit perspectives I sometimes hear, there's genuine understanding of students' struggles. Our regulars become regulars because we form real connections with them. We witness the complexities of their lives. We see what it means to be a student right now. So I know the blame-shifting isn't a genuine reflection of how we feel about students as a whole. It's misdirected anger and frustration.

Theoretical Framework: What Radical Hope Actually Is

To better appreciate why relational pedagogy cannot be replaced or outsourced and why authoritarian regimes fear educators, we must clarify what radical hope means and how it operates pedagogically.

Hope ≠ Optimism

Rebecca Solnit opens *Hope in the Dark* with a crucial distinction: "Hope is not the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine. The evidence is all around us of tremendous suffering and tremendous destruction. The hope I'm interested in is about broad perspectives with specific possibilities, ones that invite or demand that we act" (2004, p. 4). Optimism assumes things will work out; hope recognizes uncertainty and chooses action anyway. This distinction matters profoundly for education. Optimism tells students: study hard and you'll succeed (regardless of structural barriers). Hope tells students: we don't know what the future holds, but in that uncertainty lies the space for us to act, together, to shape it. Optimism is passive; hope is generative. Optimism is solitary, hope is collective.

Henry Giroux, drawing on Freire, develops this further: "Hope is an educated hope which can revitalise critical human agency to operate strategically and responsibly to intervene in and contribute to collectively changing the course of history" (2021, p. 3). This educated hope requires critical consciousness, that is understanding how power operates, whose interests systems serve, and where leverage points for transformation exist. It cannot be delivered by an algorithm precisely because it emerges through collective struggle with others. This hope is fundamentally relational.

Duncan-Andrade (2009) distinguishes between "hokey hope" and "critical hope." Hokey hope is the individualistic, pull-yourself-up-by-bootstraps mythology that blames students for their "failure" in systems designed to fail them. Critical hope, by contrast, "audaciously defies the dominant ideology of defense and entitlement that benefits from the oppression of the urban poor" (p. 185). Critical hope names structural violence while simultaneously insisting on collective capacity to resist and transform. But even these powerful formulations miss something crucial that emerged through my (Emese's) mother's practice and now shapes my own, and that I (Cris) articulate through my lived experience: hope is radically responsible.

Emese's Thoughts on Hope as Radical Responsibility

Václav Havel, writing from a Czechoslovakian prison before the Velvet Revolution, described hope as "an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons" (1990, p. 181). This spiritual framing resonates but risks abstracting hope from material practice. What makes hope radical is not its spiritual anchor but its ethical demand: we are responsible for taking care of one another. We are responsible for the world. We are complicit in its current state, and that very complicity means we can do things differently.

When my mother (Emese's) held her student Álmos in her heart for forty years, she was practicing radical responsibility. She did not know if he would become an artist. She could not guarantee his success or protect him from all harm. But she took responsibility for creating conditions where his becoming was possible, and then she continued to carry that responsibility long after he left her classroom. This is not sentimentality, it is not soft, it is not weak, it is a revolutionary refusal of the logic that says students are temporary inputs to be processed and outputted. It is the greatest strength there is.

Cris's Response

When I, Cris, say I hear faculty complain about students but know these same faculty genuinely care and go above and beyond, I'm identifying a crisis of responsibility. The care is there. The commitment is there. But the anger and frustration, all utterly legitimate responses to being overworked, underpaid, under-resourced, is being directed downward at students rather than upward at systems. This is what happens when we lose sight of radical responsibility: we know something is wrong, we feel it in our bodies, but we misidentify the source.

AI education operates on the opposite logic: nobody takes responsibility. Not the algorithm (which has no consciousness). Not the company (which disclaims liability). Not even the student (who is "motivated" by cash according to spaces like Alpha School, not relationship). When something goes wrong, there is no one to hold accountable, no heart carrying the weight of failure, no commitment extending beyond the transaction.

Radical hope, by contrast, says: I am implicated in your flourishing. Your growth is my growth. Your liberation is bound with mine. This is what Gwendolyn Brooks meant in her poem by "we are all each other's harvests; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond." We cannot outsource this responsibility, not to institutions, not to governments, not to machines.

Hope as Embodied and Contextual

Giroux emphasizes that "Freire refused to isolate himself in the prison-house of abstractions, disciplinary silos, and the comforts of an academic discourse. On the contrary, he consistently connected his work to actions, social problems, and matters of power" (2021, p. 8). Hope is not an abstract principle but a practice rooted in specific material conditions, specific bodies, specific histories. Emese's mother's pedagogy was inseparable from her body. She walked with students through Carpathian foothills, teaching them to know plants by Latin names, gaining "super powers" that allowed them to connect across borders, across iron curtains. She took us to graveyards where we touched history, pressed paper against weathered stones to reveal names the regime tried to erase. She smuggled her homemade "chocolate" (using communist rations of powdered milk and cheap cacao) into underground theaters for me where dissent lived in metaphor and symbolism. This was embodied education, knowledge gained through sensory experience, through physical presence in the world.

My, Cris's, practice of note-taking as resistance demonstrates this embodied dimension. I doodle and draw and use stickers. I make my notes as colorful as possible. People think it's childish. I remember being told as a kid that it wasn't the good, responsible thing to do, that it was taking away focus from my studies. But I had to condition myself to love learning, to love how to learn. And this is how I do it, through color, through making it mine, through refusing the drab efficiency they want from us.

Most of my students don't take notes at all. They've been taught that education is transactional, get the degree, get out, get into the workforce. So I tell them: you don't have to come to school with an incredibly organized binder and expensive materials. You

don't have to meet expectations that feel impossible. Use the tools you have. Even if it seems immature. Make it yours. Today, I'm working on creating a communal notebook for the SEEK department. We're more likely to have neurodivergent learners, students who aren't well-equipped with how best to learn. Instead of joking about the lack of notes or the disorganization, we could just give them the resource. We could just do that.

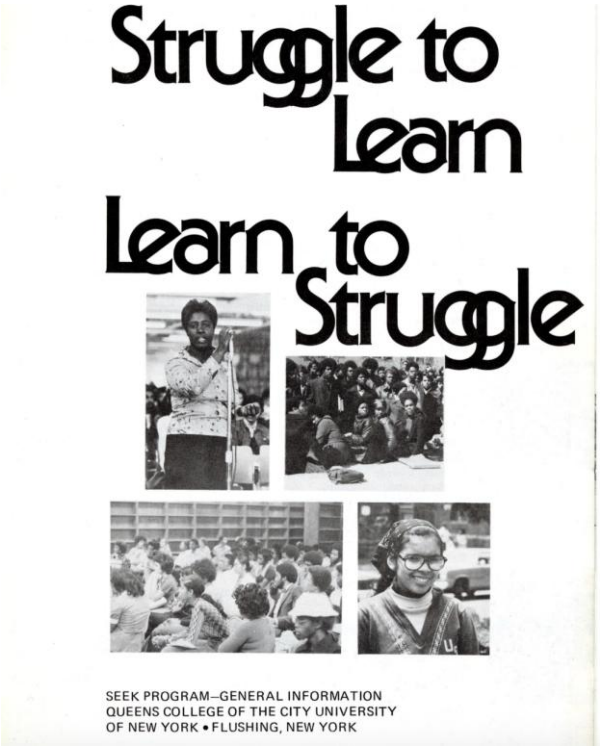
This is what the collage in Figure 3 makes visible. Built from my (Cris's) own teaching notebooks, it layers math equations alongside solidarity declarations, student activism stickers against liberation psychology texts, colorful drawings interrupting the standardized grid of note-taking. Nothing in it is efficient. That is the point. Each layer refuses the drab efficiency institutions demand and insists instead that learning can be joyful, embodied, relational, and unapologetically alive. These are the worlds within worlds we build when we refuse to let education be reduced to transaction, when we insist that making meaning colorful is not childish but revolutionary.

Figure 3



Learning to Love Learning
Note. Collage created by Cris from their teaching notebooks.

Figure 4



The cover of an informational booklet on the program at Queens College from the 70's. We love the way it is in conversation with Leigh Patel's text No Study Without Struggle (2021).
Note. From *SEEK Program Handbook* (ca. 1976), by Queens College, JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.37765574

This is pedagogy which honors bodies, begins from lived experience, and recognizes students bring whole selves into classrooms, selves with histories, traumas, joys, cultural knowledge, embodied wisdom. Context matters profoundly. As Giroux notes, "Freire's approach is no mix and stir recipe but one which stresses contexts, their limits and possibilities and therefore also reinvention" (2021, p. 10). Hope in one context looks different than hope in another. My mother teaching under Ceaușescu practiced hope differently than Audre Lorde teaching SEEK students in 1968 Harlem, differently than we practiced hope teaching at John Jay in 2026. But what unites these practices is a pedagogy of generosity (Nagasawa et al. 2022) and attention to specific conditions, specific students, specific possibilities for transformation available in particular moments.

Hope as Collective, Not Individual

Perhaps most crucially, radical hope is always collective. As June Jordan writes: "We should take care so that we will lose none of the jewels of our soul. We must begin, now, to reject the white, either/or system of dividing the world into unnecessary conflict... We need everybody and all that we are" (1989, p. 315). Freire's entire pedagogy too rests on dialogue, on the recognition that knowledge emerges through relationship, not through deposit. Banking education treats students as empty vessels to be filled with information. Problem-posing education treats students as subjects capable of reading and transforming the world, but only in relationship with others (Freire, 1970/2000). Conscientização is inherently collective; you cannot develop critical consciousness alone.

bell hooks insists that "any teacher committed to the full self-realization of students was necessarily and fundamentally radical, that ideas were not neutral, that to teach in a way that liberates, that expands consciousness, that awakens, is to challenge domination at its very core" (2014, p. 50). Self-realization sounds individual but hooks makes clear it can only happen in community, through recognition and affirmation from others. The classroom becomes what she calls "beloved community" a space of radical openness where we practice the world we're trying to build (hooks, 1994).

We are writing this during an exceptionally devastating time. Established global practices that have prevented large, powerful countries from steamrolling other nations are in shambles. Unarmed protesters speaking out for human rights are murdered without a recourse by state agents on American streets. And as we are discussing these throughlines through history, across space and times of how radical hope has blossomed into resistance, we are listening to the nurses' strike that is happening across from John Jay. Their voices rising in song reminds us of the collective dimension of hope beautifully.

I, Cris, was on campus doing research for this work. I had headphones on with music playing, but I could still hear them in the background. They were so rambunctious, so joyful. They were singing and chanting and honking. And what struck me was how organized they were. Nurses have systems for deciding who can afford to strike and who can't, and they use that information to determine who takes action. They were out there for hours, and you could see people just fully on their phones while marching, taking breaks in their own ways while still participating. It was so disruptive, and I loved it. Especially knowing CUNY's policy on protests. Last year the administration handed us yellow slips of paper listing what's allowed and what's not, essentially making it impossible for us to voice our perspective on campus or to do it in a way that undermines civil disobedience entirely.

The whole point of protest is to be disruptive. The nurses outside our walls understand that. And it was such a gift to hear them while I was learning about SEEK, about the occupation, about how students and workers stood together fifty years ago. That solidarity is still alive.

Solnit (2004) captures this beautifully: "History is made out of common dreams, groundswells, turning points, watersheds" (p. 67). Not individual genius or isolated achievement, but collective movement. Teaching that cultivates hope prepares students for this collective work—not through generic "group projects" but through the hard, beautiful practice of building something together that none could build alone.

My Mother's Pedagogy: Radical Hope in Practice

Theory without practice is the "prison-house of abstractions" Giroux warns against (2021, p. 8). So, what does radical hope pedagogy actually look like? How did my, Emese's, mother, a rural schoolteacher with no political power, living under one of Europe's most brutal dictatorships, practice revolutionary education?

Practice 1: Making the World the Classroom

As the youngest child, I, Emese, often joined my mother in the classroom. In communist Romania, many things were not concepts normalized. We didn't have Coke. We didn't have storybooks. We didn't have shiny toys or fancy clothes. And we didn't have babysitters. So there I was, experiencing a rare kind of teaching. As oppressive institutions wrapped tightly around people, she refused the limits of classrooms. The world became the classroom. I have many fond memories of being in the Carpathian foothills that roll lovingly into our town. There, she gave her students access to the

marvels of the unseen world. Every plant was known. We could greet each plant. We knew what these plants were called in Latin, so that we became decipherable to anyone anywhere in this world. We gained relationships with the plants and we found a way to connect across borders, across iron curtains (**Figure 5**). We knew their gifts. We gathered the elderflower and dried them for tea. *Sambucus*. We whispered their names and pressed their delicate petals against our cheeks.

Figure 5



Note: My mother's students gathering elderflower in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, circa 1988.

This was deeply political education. The regime wanted us to know only what served its interests, to speak only Romanian (our Hungarian language was criminalized), to see ourselves as subjects of the state rather than citizens of the world. My mother's response was to teach us a language, scientific Latin, that no dictator could claim ownership of, that connected us to knowledge systems spanning continents and centuries. She was teaching us that we belonged to the world, not to Ceaușescu. Freire insists that education must be rooted in "people's everyday lives, their histories and the social structures which they help create and transform, through their agency" (Giroux, 2021, p. 9). Everyday lives, not abstractions. The plants we could touch, smell, taste. The knowledge we gained through our bodies, walking those mountain paths together. This is education as validation, as recognition, as refusing the disembodied violence of schooling-as-control.

Practice 2: Touching History

My mother brought students into the graveyard. There, we tended to graves that were neglected. We pressed papers against gravestones and brushed pencils on the paper to reveal names that were otherwise invisible to us. We touched history. We felt our connection. This cannot be erased. The dictator could not come in and move the heavy stones. They stood, weathered, quietly, to remind us of who we were. Unerasable. Undeniably connected.

This pedagogy directly counters what Ceaușescu tried to instill: collective amnesia. The regime wanted us to forget our Hungarian poets, our revolutionary heroes, our cultural inheritance. Amnesia, as Walter Brueggeman notes, "produces despair" while "memory produces hope" (quoted in Solnit, 2004, p. 58). My mother was teaching us to remember, and in that remembering, to locate ourselves in a story larger than the regime's propaganda.

George Orwell (1949/2017) famously wrote "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" (p. 34). By taking students to graveyards, my mother was fighting for control of the past, not through grand political gestures but through the patient, embodied work of making history felt. The stones we cleaned, the names we revealed, the stories we told about who these people were, this was very literally a reading of the world, understanding our relationship to histories of struggle and resistance.

In American classrooms today, students face similar erasures. Curriculum laws forbid teaching about slavery as foundational to American wealth. They criminalize acknowledging genocide of Indigenous peoples. They erase queer history, labor history, the long tradition of multiracial organizing for justice. When we refuse these erasures, when we teach the fuller, more complex truth, we are doing what my mother did: touching history, making connection, refusing amnesia.

Practice 3: The Pedagogy of Questions

The regime dealt in certainty, certain answers, certain futures, certain truths. My mother dealt in questions. A liberatory pedagogy is "a continuous pedagogy of the question" that helps us "escape the prison of certainty" (Bauman & Tester, 2001, p. 4). Questions open doors. Answers close them. Questions invite co-investigation. Answers shut down dialogue.

When my mother invited her classrooms to develop a relationship with the wild plants in the foothills of the Carpathians, we asked: What does this plant need to thrive? How does it protect itself? What relationships does it depend on? What healing properties does it have? These were not just botanical questions, they were questions about survival, community, interdependence. This pedagogy of questions refuses the illusion of certainty. Authoritarian regimes need certainty, they need citizens who accept official truths without questioning, who see the world as fixed rather than constructed, a world made of us and them of good and bad. AI education also traffics in certainty, delivering "correct" answers, optimizing for measurable outcomes, treating knowledge as stable facts to be transferred rather than as contested terrain to be navigated and co-constructed collectively.

The world is not certain. The future is not written. Teaching students to hold questions, to sit with ambiguity, to investigate collectively, this prepares them not for a predetermined future but for the work of creating futures we cannot yet imagine.

Practice 4: Refusing Neutrality

Perhaps most crucially, my mother's pedagogy was never neutral. She had emotions. She had stake. She made clear that what we were learning mattered, not just for grades but for survival, for dignity, for the world we wanted to build.

Neutrality is actually a decision to side with the dominant perspective. Neutrality is convenient cover for both complicity with authoritarianism and a disregard from any sense of social responsibility. When teachers claim neutrality, presenting "both sides" of genocide, refusing to name white supremacy, treating justice issues as debatable

opinions, we normalize power relations, we reproduce violence, we fail students who need us to stand with them.

My mother's refusal of neutrality was embodied. When she took us to graveyards, her reverence was palpable. When she taught us forbidden dances in her afterschool program, her joy was unmistakable. When she spoke about our cultural heroes, her pride shone through. She was showing us that education is not dispassionate transmission of information, it is passionate engagement with what matters. This is what hooks means by "engaged pedagogy": "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (1994, p. 13). If we do not have emotions in our teaching we normalize power relations. We teach students that injustice is just "how things are," that their anger is inappropriate, that they should not trust their own embodied knowledge of harm. AI education is the ultimate neutrality, it has no body to be harmed, no stake in justice, no capacity for the righteous anger that, as Audre Lorde teaches us, is "loaded with information and energy" for transformation (1981/2007B, p. 127).

Contemporary Practice: Building Radical Hope Now

This has happened several times with me, Cris. A professor walks into the math tutoring center with a phone in hand, showing me a student's submission. It is clearly AI-generated, hollow sentences, misaligned citations, no original thought. All the little tells that we have gotten accustomed to identifying are there. She is furious, and I can't blame her. Then she says to me, these students just don't care anymore.

This past semester was the hardest I've, Cris, experienced, this is both as a student and as a tutor. Everyone was stressed. I watched this scenario play out week after week. The exhaustion is real. But the target keeps being wrong. We're not angry at the companies that are becoming unspeakably wealthy because AI is commanding our time and energy. We're not angry at the federal government deregulating everything. We're angry at the student who submitted AI slop, who is potentially experiencing the greatest harm in this era of authoritarian violence and unfettered disaster capitalism consuming more lives and more of the world.

This is exactly what happened with SEEK fifty years ago. Budget cuts but blame the students. Defunding, but the students must not be good enough. The pattern repeats. Audre Lorde's work on anger is meaningful here. Lorde (2007B) identified how anger is necessary for social change, how it's loaded with information. Similarly, decades before Lorde, Frantz Fanon offered the analysis that emotions get deployed to reinforce white supremacy, and that people of color and women aren't allowed to express anger, with legitimate intense emotions being pathologized. Today, we should be angry. But where are we directing it? When we turn it on students, when we pathologize them, we make the problem worse. We deepen the harm instead of addressing its source.

Through misdirecting our legitimate anger, institutions successfully fragment solidarity. They create conditions of precarity, underfunding, overwork, surveillance, impossible demands, and then they sit back and watch us turn on each other. Faculty blame students. Staff blame faculty. Tenured professors distance themselves from adjuncts and lecturers. SEEK students get told they're "regular" or not.

We must analyze structures, not just individuals. When we see a colleague complaining about students, we can say: your frustration is legitimate. AND it's being directed at the wrong target. The student who submitted AI slop is not your enemy. The company that created the tool that makes plagiarism effortless, that's the enemy. The administration that keeps cutting your hours, that refuses to pay you on time, that treats you as disposable, that's the problem to direct our energy toward.

Radical responsibility means we take responsibility for redirecting that anger. For saying: we are responsible for building solidarity, not participating in its destruction. We are responsible for seeing the larger systems at play and refusing to let them divide us.

Learning to Love Learning As The World Burns

We stand at a crossroads. One path leads toward the fantasy of education without teachers, students isolated in their own algorithmic bubbles, nobody taking responsibility for who they become, the relational bonds of teaching dissolved into audit metrics and efficiency scores. This path serves authoritarian and capitalist interests perfectly: atomized individuals, no collective consciousness, no dangerous capacity to imagine alternatives. The other path, harder, messier, more beautiful, leads toward education as radical hope infrastructure. Classrooms as counterspaces. Teachers as practitioners of collective care and critical consciousness. Students as co-investigators in the work of understanding and transforming our shared world.

The choice matters because, as Giroux insists, "the present does not set the limits of what is possible. Nothing is set in stone, immutable—all can be changed" (2021, p. 13). But change requires agents, human beings who take responsibility for building the future together. It requires hope not naive optimism but educated, strategic, collective commitment to transformation. It requires teachers and it requires students who can learn to love learning.

My (Emese's) mother, teaching under Ceaușescu, understood this. She could not guarantee her students would be safe. She could not promise the regime would fall (though it did). She could not know if Álmos would become an artist (though he did), if any of them would remember her. But she taught as though their futures mattered, as though their becoming was worth risking everything for. And now, decades later, they reach out, not to praise her technique or methodology but to say: you made me believe I mattered. You taught me to see beauty when everything was ugly. You showed me I belonged to something larger than the regime's lies.

This is teaching. This is what no algorithm can replicate, what no audit metric can capture, what no efficiency logic can manufacture. This is why we must refuse the erasures of authoritarianism and the hollowing logics of the neoliberal academy alike. Students deserve teachers who carry them in hearts that beat, who take radical responsibility for their flourishing, who practice hope not as sentiment but as political commitment. In a letter to Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde (2024) wrote, "The learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot. And then, just possibly, hopefully, it goes home, or on." Hope is the learning process inciting this insatiable desire to go on and on.

I (Cris) learned to love learning by making it colorful. I want to see teachers who cultivate that kind of rebellion of aliveness, teachers who refuse to blame students for structural violence, who keep fighting to create communal resources and counterspace. When teachers do this they are practicing this hope. They are taking responsibility. They are building the world inside the ruins. We cannot outsource the work of building more just, more beautiful, more livable worlds. We can only do it together, in relationship, with all the friction and messiness and embodied presence that entails.

Conclusion: We Are All Each Other's Harvests

We are writing this as bombs fall, as communities are terrorized, as audit culture continues its long project of transforming students into data points and teachers into content deliverers. The world is not fine. Hope is not warranted by conditions. We don't

know exactly where we are heading together, but I do know that my mother's students, now in their fifties and sixties, still remember the Latin names of plants. They still carry her in their hearts as she carried them in hers. When she died, they grieved not just a teacher but someone who had seen them, really seen them, as irreplaceable worlds deserving of love. I (Emese) am so lucky to be teaching now, to be scooping up hundreds of students each year into my own heart, just as my mother did.

I (Cris) am learning this too as a peer leader at SEEK. I am learning how students become part of you, how you become responsible for creating conditions where they can flourish, how that responsibility extends far beyond any semester or course. How teaching is not a transaction but a commitment. How hope is not a feeling but a practice.

Fifty years ago, SEEK students and guards refused to be divided, students demanded guards' reinstatement before any negotiations. White students stood at the front to protect Black and Puerto Rican students. They understood: our liberation is bound together. Today, we face similar choices. Will we let the government, corporations, and institutions divide us, turning faculty against students? Or will we recognize our shared interests and organize accordingly?

Will we direct our legitimate anger at systems, at budget cuts and corporatization, at the government that is enacting an authoritarian takeover? Or will the illuminating energy of anger instead be misdirected at students who are being harmed most? Will we practice the neutrality that maintains oppressive systems, or will we refuse it in favor of passionate, embodied engagement with justice?

This is not efficiency. This is not scalable. This is not the kind of education that can be delivered by algorithm or measured by standardized metrics. But it is the education worth fighting for, the education that treats students as whole humans rather than data points, that cultivates hope rather than despair, that practices and imagines the future rather than being trapped in a white supremacist past. "We are all each other's harvests," Gwendolyn Brooks writes, and teaching is tending that garden against forces that want to pave it over. Teaching rooted in radical hope refuses the erasure of histories, bodies, relationships, itself. It is building worlds inside the ruins of the worlds we inherited.

The future is not written. The future is undeniably uncertain, in that precarity, we reach for each other. We tell stories. We ask questions. We take colorful notes. We imagine otherwise. We practice hope. We learn to love learning over and over again. Together.

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