

## Book Review

# Action Research as a Hopeful Response to Apocalypse:

A Review of Bradbury, H. (2022). *How to do Action Research for Transformations at a Time of Eco-social Crisis*. Edward Elgar.

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When I first opened this book and saw Hilary Bradbury’s dedication “to land, culture and sustainable transformations” on the first page, coupled with her Blessing on Action Research for Transformation (ART) on page v, I knew that the book would resonate with my understanding of the importance of organizing research that is intentionally future forming (as Kenneth Gergen, 2015, succinctly puts it, and as he reiterates in his Foreword to the book). My own position on appreciating land, culture, and regenerative transformation—a positionality that the journal editors asked me to include in this review—was formed as I grew up in apartheid South Africa. I was defined as White in racialized social groupings, and over a period of time I came to recognize the privileges that this categorization affords. Eventually I came to define myself as “Indigenous-oriented,” appreciating the worldview of Ubuntu, which is domain to Africa (as a relational onto-epistemology). As I explain in my book *Responsible Research Practice* (2018):

As far as considering myself as Indigenous-oriented is concerned, what I mean is that I identify with the values which I see and draw out from authors writing about Indigeneity, including values which I draw out from my interactions and conversations with people Indigenous to Africa in particular. (p. 29)

And as I point out further:

...when we engage with traditions (such as traditions of Ubuntu) we can seek interpretations that offer options for revitalizing dialogue around the values by which we wish to live together with others (and with all life on the planet). (p. 29)

Bradbury's book is about ART and those committed to collaboratively engaging in contemporary action research toward transformation (ARTists) "at a time of apocalypse" (p. 60). It is about learning together through inquiry processes that deepen our understandings and possibilities for collaborative action. The book explains, with reference to Bradbury's personal involvement in a myriad of different arenas, how ART connects those who may be (partially) positioned in academia as "scholars" with citizens positioned in other social spaces. Bradbury explores how ART is a process of revitalizing social, and indeed natural, science away from its elitist pretensions. In her endorsement of the book, Lake Sagaris indicates that, considering Bradbury's role as "curator of crucial handbooks," here "we meet more of Bradbury herself." Indeed, through her narrations of how "science" can become citizen science, Bradbury gives substance to a broad definition of science as a future-forming and value-based enterprise that can be used in the service of social and ecological wellbeing. This is achieved as people become less self-centered (a legacy of the Western heritage of individualism) while becoming more relationally attuned to developing themselves in relational spaces with others (including with nature, from which much can be learned).

In Part I of the book, Bradbury offers what she calls Groundings. While explicating the groundings of ART, she locates seven "choice points" for doing ART—choices that we make about the ways we live our lives and our involvements with others. All of the choice points of ART are linked with fostering collaborative action as part of the "knowing" process (pp. 52–56). The choice points include: defining purposes collaboratively; developing partnerships; activating participative research methods; making explicit links to acknowledge the contributions of previous work; creatively thinking together about new ideas to guide action in response to the urgency of transformation; developing and widening spaces for practitioner engagement, including the voice of nature as a stakeholder; and practicing developmental reflexivity, which enables us to reflect on ourselves also in relation to what she calls larger "structural inertia," which carries patterns of social and environmental injustice (p. 55).

In Part II, Bradbury spells out how ARTists indeed work at the developmental edge, while creating friendships in which they and others can develop, addressing power relations toward more collaborative engagement and

action, and proliferating micro worlds, working on a range of “scales.” In Part III, she explicates how caring in the process of doing science can and should be made visible. Here she explains how science as conventionally understood (in Western-oriented paradigms of knowing) can be repurposed.

In the book’s dedication, she points out that she wrote the book manuscript in Portland, Oregon, “ancestral land of the Peoples of the Willamette River Valley.” She cautions us that the spirit that fed the genocide of these ancestral peoples has not disappeared. But in hope, she indicates that Portland has “become a sustainability leader, designing for the long term with attention to climate justice, and new energy and transportation infrastructure.” In the “Port chronicle” in Chapter 1, she recounts her involvement with a range of other actors in this process. She notes that in this “relational space” there was no “systems regulator” for the cooperative behavior that emerged—this depended on people (as stakeholders) “learning new ways of relating,” which became a “learning and development journey for all” (p. 13). As part of the process, those who can be classified as committed to Action Research for Transformation (ART) from the University of California Center for Sustainable Cities partnered with the Port of Los Angeles (and decision makers across the port’s cargo system) to “tackle air pollution implicated in childhood asthma increases” (p. 3). The intention was to find a way for the port to “balance the competing demands of operating profitably within nature’s parameters” (p. 3). Bradbury leaves in abeyance the definition of “profitability,” but indicates that profit-making at the expense of people and planetary welfare was not the way in which the port should be functioning—as admitted by the various decision makers (toymakers, shippers, truckers, retailers, waste haulers, etc.). Together the partners managed to find workable solutions, such as developing a carbon calculator from which less-polluting transportation routes could be chosen (p. 3). In a commentary in Chapter 8 on the “promise of microworlds proliferating,” Bradbury points out that “the success [of this port] with carbon-reduction strategies was shared through the “national port conference circuit.” This resulted in new policies and new practices up and down the West Coast of the United States and further at the ports of New York and New Jersey (p. 126); and these innovations then leapt in a new format across the Atlantic Ocean toward redesigning a large health clinic system that centered on the patients’ experiences, initiated by a Swedish physician who had heard about the system design of the Los Angeles Port (p. 126).

In addition, as part of her “dedication to land, culture and sustainable transformations,” she tells us that Ireland was her birthplace, and she remarks that it is also a land with an ancient culture that was “colonized and impoverished for centuries” but now is beginning to regenerate thanks to “revitalizing civil structures.” She states (performatively, also as a plea to promote further action on our parts) that “truth, goodness and beauty are interweaving to regenerate these [various] lands and cultures.” Of course, she implies that this regeneration requires continued dedication on the part of people committed to transformation. Her book is a plea for us to revitalize this potential

for social and ecological regeneration. She argues that as *homo sapiens* we are a species that can learn. But she also notes that sustainability and social justice require a large majority of “we the privileged” to “see it in our direct interest to take care of everyone” (p. 7). Here she positions herself as indeed part of “the privileged,” hoping to use her privileged social positionality in service of a common good and to encourage others to likewise see themselves as directly connected and interdependent with “others” who are no longer “othered” but are experienced as part of ourselves. Later, writing about “developmental friendship through community rupture and healing” (pp. 117–126), she explores in depth how she has tried to deal with her privileged position in relationships with others, recognizing that colonization and its dynamics “is not just a historical matter” or “something that happened in a faraway place” (p. 121). Later in this review I elaborate on her story around this (in a workshop encounter with a participant named Zee), which I found to be an excellent and honest account of how Bradbury came to recognize what it means for people to live and learn from a pluriverse of cultural options in the face of the power of dominant cultural expressions.

Notably, in her invocation of a Blessing on ART—and those practicing it—she indicates that she hopes the book will bring “light and encouragement” and “help us to recognize our interdependence deeply enough to transform our inability to collaborate” (p. v). She laments that collectively “we are making our beautiful planet inhospitable” (p. 2). That is, considered as a whole, we are creating chaos for ourselves and for “all our relations,” including all life forms (the term “all my relations”—which includes what various Indigenous authors call the more-than-human world [e.g., Ritchie, 2015; Mabunda & McKay, 2021]—conveys the suggestion that we are fundamentally related to, and interdependent with, all that exists). Drawing on and extending the wisdom of Indigenous seers and scholars grappling with current catastrophes, both social and ecological, she suggests that we need to (re)define ourselves as relational selves so that we can better harness our capacity to collaborate in an inclusive community, where community is not confined to any (human) group of people; nor does it exclude what we call “nature,” of which indeed we are part (p. 182).

As Gergen writes in his Foreword, the book does not offer “standardized rules” for what counts as ART and being an ARTist, but implores us to consider in the inquiry process what we are trying to achieve (via the research), who the stakeholders are (including the more-than-human ones), and what the social and ecological repercussions of proceeding in a certain way are likely to be (as experiments are also undertaken as part of this process). What is vital, he says, is that this book prioritizes action for a *sustainable world*, highlighting the current stage of eco-social crises, but recognizing that despite apocalyptic possibilities, there is still room for hope if enough people take up the challenge of becoming ARTists to confront our global challenges. And this, as Otto Scharmer points out in a second Foreword, requires building an awareness-based capacity both individually and collectively, where the two are seen as tied to each other,

as we broaden our horizons through creating developmental friendships based on “caring for one another’s highest aspirations.”

One of Bradbury’s chronicles that expresses well her own experience in dealing with conflict, also in full recognition of the impact of racism and colonialism on our social relations, is her account of a workshop with around 50 participants that she and ARTist colleagues facilitated in Europe. It was titled “Developmental Leadership for Transformations: Responding to Social-Ecological Crisis.” The way the workshop proceeded indicated to her that they had not adequately prepared for “inherited structures of racism” and issues of systemic power and privilege (p. 118). In brief, during the workshop a person named Zee (from a US protectorate in Asia) shared an account of her culture of island leadership, where she was recognized as a leader. She spoke in a very soft voice, which Bradbury and others had to strain to hear. After Zee spoke, Bradbury chose not to ask Zee or her colleagues to share more in the session. She simply said, “thank you” (without further comment) and declared that it was now time for lunch. Later, while gathering her belongings, she noticed that Zee was close to tears. Zee told Bradbury that she felt Bradbury had not shown sufficient respect for Zee and what she had shared (and could further share) during the session: the islanders interpreted Bradbury as having turned her back on their culture—in white-supremacy fashion. They suggested that Bradbury should organize a session where everyone would participate in the island community’s practice of conflict resolution; they insisted that all program participants should be present. Bradbury and colleagues proceeded to “retrieve those who had left,” and Zee selected two facilitators to facilitate the session. During the session they clarified why Bradbury’s response to a senior leader in the community had been disrespectful and explained that this had been very hurtful. Thereafter they demonstrated their leadership skills by adeptly facilitating the session.

As Bradbury summarizes, she learned from this workshop encounter that Zee’s experience of embodying the role of teacher and leader on this occasion “liberated my and our collective awareness that colonization had marked Zee’s life. Feeling colonized is not something that others did in the past. It is alive in spaces where we learn” (p. 121). Bradbury also learned that, going forward, “I and co-facilitators [must] pay more attention to preparing and convening relational spaces by bringing awareness of historical context and institutional patterns of power” (p. 122). In the meantime, “listening and appreciating the deftness of Zee’s leadership” taught her to listen better. Bradbury notes that that the learning that took place also rippled forward when, for example, one of the participants working with refugees realized how he could seek out leaders among the refugees as “resources for solving problems associated with their resettlement” (p. 113).

In Chapter 13, Bradbury reflects on her “personal growth work,” admitting that when she came across the Indigenous practice of “vision questing in the wilderness” she found this profound but would be “unable to teach” it. She wonders if, in her list of growth options, she would include what she considers to

be an “unusual capacity such as attunement with deceased ancestors” (p. 197). Hailing from Africa myself, where attunement with ancestors is common, I do not find this an unusual practice. Perhaps Bradbury (and others) could expand their “developmental friendships” by drawing on the wisdom of those who experience a spiritual connection with the wisdom of the ancestors, whether or not as part of “conflict resolution practices” among the Zulu, which she cites Burt Hellinger as adopting to bring to “The West” (p. 198). Bradbury is not sure how long her list of options should be, but she does note that her list grows and then gets pruned. Yet swapping potential lists with others is also part of the “enjoyment of time spent with developmental friends” (p. 198) who can help one to learn new ways of being and of tapping into creative energies.

What struck me about the book as a whole is that although it is about a fundamental repatterning of relations, and expanding conceptual spaces as part of this process, Bradbury seems to be interpreting financial accounting in sustainability performance as still allowing a mindset of “maximizing profit” as a goal (p. 26), along with caring for the land and the people (the so-called triple bottom line). But what I regard as important is that economics itself becomes (re)interpreted so that an inclusive wellbeing (including people and planet) is given priority (see, for example, Akena et al., 2022).

Chronicling her involvement with the designers’ association Golf and Garden Growers, Bradbury tells of meeting, during a video call, a “charming, conservative man who made it clear there would be little room for discussing climate change” (p. 25). Although climate change terminology was therefore off the agenda for discussion, the charming man did care about beautiful spaces, as she did. When the team was due to meet, she suggested inviting a leader from the Federation of Indigenous Nations because “they’re the real experts on how to treat the land” (p. 25). This proposition was accepted. And they subsequently all agreed to spend two days learning how sustainable development changes how the land is treated. Finally, with a range of stakeholders, including immigrant laborers who work with the chemicals and deserve health precautions, Bradbury did “casually mention” huge fines that had been levied in the past against producers of lawn chemicals, hoping that this too would help clarify what she calls a broad intention—namely, that the Golf and Garden Growers Association “had to care for the land and the people to maximize its profits—the triple bottom line of sustainability performance (economy, society, and environment)” (pp. 25–26). As I see it, however (along with many Indigenous seers and scholars hailing from colonized areas), the idea of maximizing profit within a supposed triple-bottom-line approach is not conducive to advancing Indigenous values of relationality (or what Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, call the four Rs).

When Bradbury refers to the *people* in the triad of triple-bottom-line accounting, which she believes is being improved by “sustainability accounting” (p. 32), she speaks of the “skills and competencies that companies are trying to master,” but this says little about a sense of caring for people (workers and others in the community). And her reference to the planet, taking into account

what she calls “pollution emissions and natural resource impact,” also does not include recognizing the requirement to care for nature not as a resource but as a *relative* (as Indigenous leaders would suggest); the idea of caring for all our relations is lost in this definition of the triple bottom line. Bradbury recognizes that “we have short term capitalist economies in which we need to be radically different” (p. 32). But I did not find that her chronicles showed sufficiently how ARTists might shift the dynamics of capitalist economies, where massive profits are being made while the vast social inequalities within and between countries attendant on the “big economic system” remain (and are worsened), while the costs of continued environmental devastation and disasters are borne disproportionately by those most marginalized.

As part of Bradbury’s storying around the possibility of “tackling the power relations and economics that help keep current systems unsustainable,” she states: “If acting unsustainably is the most profitable or economically sensible approach, people will mostly act unsustainably. In that sense it is not about power structures between stakeholders in the room as much as the big economic system that surrounds the room and *within which everyone must live*” (p. 29, my emphasis). She gives an example of some changes that may occur in the “payback time” for a sustainability investment (toward future profitability), which can be extended by a company (p. 29). But does this amount to a repatterning of mindsets (and attendant practices) toward creating enterprises that prioritize care for workers, care for the community, and care for nature? An (additional) good book worth reading in this regard is *Pluriverse*, edited by Kothari et al. (2019), which contains many chapters by authors from across the globe criticizing the dominant way of interpreting “economics” and offering options for operating outside of the “big economic systems” that currently dominate.<sup>1</sup>

Although Bradbury suggests in her final chapter that “all experiments that reduce energy consumption, expand a community, opt for cultivating productive land and make for sustainable food choices” (along with restoring land rights to Indigenous people) can be “done at scale” (p. 196), I wondered whether her chronicles revealed sufficient options for repatterning at scale as a way of interrupting the “big economic system.” But perhaps indeed all the experiments she mentions for repatterning agricultural industrialism (as also advanced by Vandana Shiva, whom Bradbury names as important) can indeed make an important difference (see also Libsker, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> The initiatives of the Action Research Network for a Wellbeing Economy in Africa, WE-Africa: [www.we-africa.org](http://www.we-africa.org), are also noteworthy here. And the activities of Dzomo la Mupo in South Africa [Venda], an organization that nurtures learning processes and practices operating outside of the overly pervasive “big economy mindset,” is another example. See, for instance, the write-up by Jay Naidoo [a former minister in Nelson Mandela’s cabinet]: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-29-indigenous-voices-speak-the-truth-that-can-help-save-our-planet/>.

Bradbury patently offers insightful chronicles of her own and other ARTists' efforts to co-create new futures in acknowledgment of our eco-social crises. I recommend it (and the other works I mention herein) as crucial reading for those wishing to partake in what Danny Burns (in his endorsement of the book) calls "an erudite and passionate articulation of pathways to action at a time when the world urgently needs to nurture the 'proliferating micro worlds' that she describes."

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