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## TENDER PEDAGOGY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

**Abstract:** In this text, I develop and deepen the concept of tenderness (a spatial and affective phenomenon) and tender pedagogy in new theoretical contexts, drawing on metaphors and foundations of Olga Tokarczuk’s fourth-person narrator psychology. The ethical perspective in which Claudia Ruitenberg presents her “educational hospitality” as a challenge in the Anthropocene is extremely compelling. The idea of learning to inhabit the planet anew, embodied in the concept of the “common room” rooted in Jacques Rancière’s philosophy, was also inspiring. Understanding the Anthropocene primarily as a movement of thought seeking relational ontologies that could replace the still dominant idea of individual being, I propose tender pedagogy as a potentially promising area both for this exploration and for practicing a philosophy of relational being in a world that is more-than-human.

**Keywords:** tender pedagogy, Anthropocene, relational ontology, SDG 4

### 1. Introduction

With this text I make another contribution to pedagogical reflection in which tenderness plays a key role as a category working in a relational perspective, referring to both thinking in spatial and affective registers. Earlier, I developed this concept from the perspective of public pedagogy, emphasizing the importance of art and social work (Mendel, 2021, 2022, 2026). It is not easy to introduce the category of tenderness into pedagogy, traditionally grounded in humanism and the Enlightenment ideal of the rational man, different from and privileged among other beings by virtue of reason. However, I develop the concept of tender pedagogy with a sense of purpose, because firstly it is “an” answer to the urgent need to reconceptualize the foundations of education in the perspective of the numerous social, ecological and political challenges we face today, living in the Anthropocene. Secondly, it is my answer, resulting from an internal imperative to effect change in the new circumstances. The concept of tender pedagogy, which I develop here in new contexts (educational hospitality, etc.), feeds thinking towards decentring the category of “human” and supports a paradigm shift based on the assumption

of human “exceptionality” and privilege. All this in favour of a new ecological awareness, making room for every being, not just the human being.

I address a tender pedagogy to the audience understood in the broadest possible sense, to people at large, so that they may practice it regardless of their place of life, status, or age. Why? Following Olga Tokarczuk, I try to remember that

the Earth will be – with or without people. This image of the Earth without people always makes a huge impression on me – we are not necessary here. That is why the expression “doing something for the Earth” is a bit meaningless. By acting ecologically, we act mainly for ourselves and for the protection of the world we know. We act in defence of ourselves first and foremost, and only then in defence of coexisting species, our entire ecosystem (Gierlińska et al., 2024, n.p.).

Practicing tender pedagogy is meant to serve self-education and mutual education for a better habitation of the planet; like natural farming, permaculture, and other agroecological approaches are “meant to repair socio-ecological systems and to help people reinhabit them” (Centemeri, 2019, p. 104, I quote from: Ruitenbergh, 2022, p. 140).

In this respect, I would like to open or revive the circulation of pedagogical thought, doing so by placing emphasis on tenderness, present earlier in the conceptual apparatus of pedagogy only in traditional emotional approaches (e.g.: pedagogy of love known in Poland from the writings of Janusz Korczak, Maria Łopatkowa, and Pope John Paul II) and – recently – in concepts created within the affective turn (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). The affective approaches include e.g. categories of transformative education (based on Jack Mezirow’s assumption of man’s capacity for effecting a profound change and giving a new shape to his life), related to posthumanism or neohumanism as an idea. According to Kathleen Kesson, an author promoting “becoming one with the world” and “neohumanist theory of learning”<sup>1</sup>, neohumanist education strives for a harmonious balance between spiritual development and critical engagement with the world, in the belief that an awakened conscience translates into transcending differences and creating a sense of unity with all beings. Its main goals include cultivating love and connection with humans and nonhumans, freeing the mind from dogmas and limitations, and awakening the desire for eco-social and environmental justice (Kesson, 2024).

I locate tender pedagogy as a concept in the area of pedagogy of place (because being tender means the spatial relationships), which is inspired by the idea of affect

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<sup>1</sup> In Polish pedagogical thought, a similar approach can be found, for example: Obrycka, 2020; Kowalik-Olubińska, 2025. For inspiring re-conceptualizations of education and educational research in a posthumanist perspective, see, for example: Snaza & Weaver, 2014.

(in perspective of an affective turn) and in line with the postulates of neohumanist education, but with a specific understanding of educational relationships and experiences. On the one hand, this specificity is built by placing relationships and these experiences within the frame of the story and emphasizing the role of the fourth-person narrative, as proposed in the theory of the tender narrator by the Polish Nobel Prize winning author Olga Tokarczuk. On the other hand, it is about the specificity of understanding tenderness as an educational gesture in space, literally and figuratively “making room” (such as stepping back, giving up part of one’s own space to another, making an inviting gesture of open arms and hands, etc.).

Why am I presenting this concept as located “in the Anthropocene”? In explaining my understanding of the Anthropocene, I would like to point out that this is not a historical moment in which the agency of “humans” (or “capital”) has exceeded the great forces of nature, but an emergent effect of relations connecting humans with non-humans within nature-cultural assemblages (Szaj, 2024). The decisive argument lies in thinking about agency that emerges from entanglements, i.e. very specific, constantly reconstituting relations, called by Barad “intra-actions” (Barad, 2024). At the level of theoretical reflection (mainly in post/neohumanism) this means that the ontology of individual entities is being replaced by various forms of relational ontology, and this conceptual move is the condition for the possibility of properly understanding the Anthropocene. This is the way I follow regarding tenderness in the Anthropocene. I am looking for such relational ontology that could be a possibly sensible ecology of the planet. This could mean drawing from spatial and from affective register. Relations (connections, entanglements, contacts, frictions with surfaces) are first and foremost spatial (they all have their places; becoming takes place) and then affective (using ability to affect and be affected).

## 2. Conceptual perspective: Spatial affect

Following Anna Tsing, this text also is indebted to Donna Haraway “not only for the concept of ‘companion species’ but also for the permission she offers us all to be both scientist and cultural critic—that is, to refuse the boundaries that cordon nature from culture—and besides, to dare tell the history of the world in a single sentence, or certainly a short essay” (Tsing, 2012, p. 142). In just a few thousand words, I endeavor to tell the story of tenderness that has made the world common since the beginning of its existence. I want to argue that becoming (in ever-changing forms, or figurations), which is the condition of infinite, unlimited and living matter, *zoe* (Braidotti, 2013) is deeply relational through tenderness. It is tenderness that constitutes the *modus operandi* of autopoietic creations, in which all beings, although fleeting and ephemeral, because they exist in constant transformations, have their own subjective identity. They are recognized and identified in relationships in which tenderness is involved; tenderness as affect,

the pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act (Massumi, 1987, p. xvi). According to Brian Massumi's well known definition<sup>2</sup> of affect, it is not a personal feeling but rather a pre-personal ability "to affect and be affected".

The new readings of long-standing theoretical approaches and concepts through the lens of affect constitute the affective turn, which is significantly informed by the studies presented in the known book "The Affect Theory Reader" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010)<sup>3</sup>. Their focus is affect as internal forces working alongside or "under" and distinct from conscious knowledge. These forces can serve to direct us towards movement, including the movement of thought and ever-changing forms of relation. Therefore, affect theory describes and explains the interconnected spheres of aesthetics, ethics and politics, played out in bodies (human and nonhuman).

As I mentioned, the concept of tender pedagogy works within the framework of this theory, remaining in the area of spatial thinking. I further describe tenderness as productive affect, or Spinoza's *affectus*, an ability to affect and being affected (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 1987; Broadie, 2007) which opens onto relationships in a world that is more-than-human (e.g. Abram, 1997).

### 3. Basis: Tokarczuk's psychology of the tender narrator

Based on a kind of autoethnography regarding her own writing, Olga Tokarczuk, Polish writer and Nobel Prize winner in 2018, proposed the "psychology of the narrator", a fascinating theory that goes beyond the framework of studies on literary work (2020, pp. 147-179). Engaging the concept of "cicum" from the Jewish mystical tradition, Tokarczuk generally presents the narrator as one who withdraws to make room for infinite potentiality: "(p)sychologically speaking, bringing a narrator into life is a process of withdrawal, shrinking – the idea is to make room and leave space for the world that must be created in order to be told" (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 166<sup>4</sup>). Referring to psychoanalysis, Tokarczuk postulates the transformation of Freud's trinity into a tetractys, the arch-four forces. According to her, the ego, id and superego should be joined by the narrator, "a force that transcends the boundaries of the 'I' and communicates the other three with the world" (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 168).

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2 Brian Massumi, first in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) and later in many publications he developed the issue of affect (one of the most prolific authors contributing to the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences).

3 This book inspiringly opens vast theoretical possibilities for affect awareness, for example in considerations of "cruel optimism" (Laurent Berlant), shame (Elspeth Probyn) and the affective logic of public threat theorized by Brian Massumi.

4 All quotations from this book are presented in the text translated by the author.

Maybe the narrator is the communicative, socially oriented part of our psyche, without which it would be impossible to build any community (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 169). The narrator is the agent who tries to transfer one person's experience directly to another person's experience through the use of a story (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 170).

The author of the psychology of the narrator actually investigates the essence of community and commonality as the condition of beings existing in a common space, not only the space of the story. Taking into account the depth of Tokarczuk's thoughts, it can be said that her narrator's psychology is a socio-cultural theory, responsive to the crisis time in which it was created. In her opinion, we can overcome the current – mostly spiritual crisis of the world if we were able to practice fourth-person narrative. A new story is now needed and, in this context, Tokarczuk dreams of a new kind of narrator, a “fourth-person” one,

who is not merely a grammatical construct of course, but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time (Tokarczuk, 2019, part 6, n.p.).

She believes that this narrator's existence is possible and – which is not surprising in the light of the emphasis on “*cimcum*” in her narrator's psychology – the biblical example demonstrates the possibility of practicing fourth-person narration: “(h)ave you ever wondered who the marvelous storyteller is in the Bible who calls out in a loud voice: “In the beginning was the word”? (...) who knows the thoughts of God?” (Tokarczuk, 2019, part 6, n.p.).

What is extremely important from the perspective of my argument, the fourth-person narrator can be an approach according to which she steps back and gives space, “shrinks himself”, let the air out of himself, which in a culture where “packing the ego” has become a great value, can be very difficult (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 167). The *sine qua non* condition for this withdrawal is to “see everything” carefully, to keep a “perspective from where everything can be seen” (Tokarczuk, 2019, part 6, n.p.).

Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture “here” is connected to a gesture “there”, that a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable (Tokarczuk, 2019, part 6, n.p.).

The fourth-person narrative is therefore learning responsibility for the entire common world; an education towards the practice of “seeing everything” and a lesson in being responsible for “everything”. Such a narrative is extremely demanding, but possible when the narrator is sensitive to this “everything seen”, i.e. when she is a tender narrator.

The psychology of the narrator as developed by Olga Tokarczuk can be understood as an investigation into the conditions of possibility for the idea of a narrative that would not only be good for the times we live in, but would also tell the world differently, in a new way, so that the world could become better. In a broader sense, it is about the type of relationship between the subject and the world. A relationship that needs to be reformulated today, “seeing everything” in a fourth-person and universal way and opening up to every being and every existence. According to Tokarczuk, achieving such a relationship has its own *modus operandi*, which is tenderness; I will develop this topic further.

#### 4. Basis: Ruitenberg’s educational hospitality

Another foundation for my thinking about tender pedagogy is Claudia Ruitenberg’s ethical pedagogical reflection. This reflection emphasizes educational hospitality; as a spatial and affective concept, it is located very close to tenderness.

Hospitality remains to me a powerful ethic to guide education, and in the context of education I think of hospitality as the practices, actions, and gestures that enable a person to enter a space that was previously closed to them, to find a place where previously they had none or did not see any for themselves (Ruitenberg, 2025, p.112).

In her earlier work (Ruitenberg, 2016), she described this ethic as “one that ‘unlocks’ worlds for children and other newcomers” (Ruitenberg, 2025, p.112). Basing on Derrida’s work, she came to the following conclusion:

Hospitality is not an educational objective that students must meet, not an ideal or principle to be taught, not a form of moral education. Rather, it is an ethic to be enacted by the I who finds themselves in the position of educator. Put differently, an ethic of hospitality is about educating hospitably. [It] cannot be taught through direct instruction; it can only be enacted. While some might consider such enactment a form of modelling with the express hope that students begin to follow enactments of hospitality, I am wary of such hope. An ethic of hospitality is an expression of the educator’s responsibility and not a project to shape students into particular kinds of moral subjects (Ruitenberg, 2016, p. 138).

Recently, she has also described “educational hospitality”, doing so directly in the context of the unfolding climate catastrophe and the Anthropocene (Ruitenber, 2025, pp. 120-122):

I want to reiterate my emphasis on the enactments of hospitality by teachers and other adults, perhaps even more strongly in the current context of the climate crisis. If students do not see the adults in their lives—teachers, parents, political leaders—taking responsibility for climate change mitigation, if they do not see us enacting the common decency that makes some contribution to ensuring a livable future for generations to come, we have no credibility, and thus no authority (Ruitenber, 2025, p. 121).

The author grounds this concept of educational hospitality in the practice of “common decency”, especially in relation to “future others” (Ruitenber, 2025, pp. 116–120). Ruitenber seductively connects this to the story of “Family Hold Back”, which, as the philosopher admits, “may seem trivial but it appeals to me precisely because it is unglamorous and unspectacular: it is an example of hospitality as common decency” (Ruitenber, 2025, p. 116). She explains this example of “common decency” by reaching out to the tradition found in English-speaking countries in the 1960s and 70s:

some families had a tradition known as “FHB”. If enough food had been cooked for a family dinner, but unexpected guests turned up, the parents would discreetly whisper “FHB” to the children. The children knew that “FHB” was short for “Family Hold Back”, which meant that the guests should serve themselves first and should have as much food as they wanted. The family should take less than they might ordinarily do to ensure the guests are not lacking anything (Ruitenber, 2025, pp.114-115).

In conclusion, Ruitenber states that

“FHB” means accepting limits as opposed to expecting endless resources; it also means not considering oneself entitled to whatever one wants. When a child glanced at a parent to gauge whether they could help themselves to more, the reassuring opposite of “FHB” was “MIK”, More In Kitchen. Today, the “more” we want is often not in the kitchen, but across the planetary boundary or outside the edge of the donut. In other words, “more” comes from the kitchens of distant others and future generations (Ruitenber, 2025, p.116).

This conclusion, universalizing a tradition that is modest but so significant in terms of community (co)life (*co-vivendi*), seems to be a banner message for education in the Anthropocene. Becoming aware every day in our own lives

that “the ‘more’ we want comes from the kitchens of distant others and future generations” is the way to practice education in such a way that it is good not only in times of crisis, the Anthropocene, etc., but good always and everywhere, because it spreads common decency. It is a hospitable and tender education.

### **5. Vision: Living tenderly like the inmates in one room**

Returning to Olga Tokarczuk’s theory of the fourth-person narrator, tenderness is a tool that allows us to achieve a fourth-person position in the narrative; establish relationships based on “seeing everything” and giving way, making room for potentiality (“a miraculous tool” – Tokarczuk, 2019, part 7, n.p.). From the perspective of her own writing experience, Tokarczuk described this tool as follows:

I have to take a close look at each thing and person, with the greatest solemnity, and personify them inside myself, personalize them. That is what tenderness serves me for—because tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities (Tokarczuk, 2019, part 7, n.p.).

Interestingly, Tokarczuk emphasizes similarities, not differences. The common world and the condition of commonality are built on bond-forming similarities. Finally, describing tenderness, Tokarczuk states:

(t)enderness is the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels, no one swears by it, no one cites it. (...) It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our “self”. (...). Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead, it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself (Tokarczuk, 2019, part 7, n.p.).

It is thanks to this openness and empathetic work of searching for similarities in differences; thanks to the aforementioned gesture of giving a room, thanks to hospitality and tenderness, we can create different modes of *co-vivendi*, sharing the space of life.



Trying to photograph, to capture statically the social order that people sharing a room achieve in their cohabitation, it is difficult to describe it as ideal. This largely concerns the sense of social justice. One of the co-residents scattered his things and took up more space, the other less; only one tenant can use one bathroom, one computer and one armchair with a reading lamp, not both at the same time. Somehow, however, none of them moves out and they continue to live together. Why? The photograph I used here does not allow me to capture the essence of the order created by the co-residents. The residents, once, twice, use the equipment, wait for the bathroom to be free, and so, in conditions of mobility, intertwining the articulation of needs and their fulfilment, move, co-managing the space that in this way, always together, in a relationship that binds them, they have as their own. The essence therefore consists in movement, in constantly arranging themselves with each other in the space that we feel as ours. These are the conditions of harmony, the social order that we establish when we share a world just like inmates living in one room. Only when such a fit in the co-inhabited space is achieved, a fit that is an order for the co-inhabitants of the planet that “can be seen, heard, and felt” and to which they agree because it is sensible and therefore also worthy, only then can we speak of symbiotic configurations, agentic nature-cultural hybrids, etc.

I developed the metaphor of the “common room” in several research projects and publications (e.g. Mendel, 2019). The inspiration for this concept was the thought of Jacques Rancière, especially his concept of “the distribution of the sensible” (*partage du sensible*), a term that refers at once to the conditions for sharing that establish a “collectivity” (i.e. *partager* as sharing) and to the sources of disruption or dissensus of that same order (i.e. *partager* as separating). The sensible is, what is acceptable because it is considered to be sensible, and acceptable because it is sensually felt as worthy, fit for living, etc. In general, living in such a space is as if co-inhabiting a common room (Rancière, 2006). This has nothing to do with equality as sharing “equally” – everyone has the same amount of space, etc. It is equality based on mutual sensitivity, moving when necessary, making room, because then the other co-inhabitant will do the same. Such equality is sharing space with the feeling that it is fair, because sometimes one side of the relationship benefits, sometimes the other.

Before reaching any conclusions, let us end this paragraph with some questions. What is “educational hospitality” in “living as if in a common room”; what is tenderness practiced in this context? Can we see in the answer that tender pedagogies might become *modi co-vivendi* in a shared, more-than-human world?

## 6. Conclusions: Tender pedagogies as *modi co-vivendi* in more-than-human world

The analyses conducted in this text show that today we absolutely need education that responds to the challenges of the deeply crisis-ridden reality in which we live. This is about education that, abandoning the traditional framework of adult-child communication, would apply to everyone, regardless of age, position or social role. As Ruitenberg stated:

In light of research that suggests that the vast majority of the climate change damage was done in a very short period of time, namely that of roughly one generation, it is unconscionable for current adults to say to young people: Let us educate you to be better problem solvers and responsible ecosystem inhabitants; let us help you imagine how the world can become ecologically more hospitable again. Young people should respond (and are responding) to that message with anger and indignation at adults' disavowal of responsibility. In other words, adults are responsible for showing young people what we ourselves, individually and collectively, are *doing* to help make the world we are unlocking less ecologically inhospitable than it currently is becoming (2025, p. 113).

Adults are not and cannot be “masters” of the message, because they themselves, like children and young people, constantly construct its content and, together with children and young people, test the meaning of this content in everyday life. In this ever-becoming world, we need education that, being implemented in a new paradigm emphasizing the vitality of matter within the community of humans and non-humans, would become a practiced philosophy of life. Following Anna Tsing, understanding that “(h)uman nature is an interspecies relationship” (2012, p. 144), this education would not only break the nature vs. culture dichotomy, but would also powerfully emphasize the practice of commonality. Developing this reflection further based on Tsing's thought, let us note that “(f)amiliar places are the beginning of appreciation for multi-species interactions (...) Familiar places engender forms of identification and companionship that contrast to hyper-domestication and private property as we know it” (Tsing, 2012, p.142). Agreeing with this position, I inscribe such education in non-anthropocentric pedagogy of place, and the “property” that it develops I call a shared good; shared in more-than-human world, as in a common room whose space is shared by its fellow residents. This kind of education is about such a human being in the world that the humans' *co-vivendi* with all other beings would make a good which is shared with all of them; something that is achieved in hospitable and tender being together, because hospitality and tenderness provide us with Ruitenberg's the “more” we want, which comes “from the kitchens of distant others and future generations”.

This “more” means striving for the more-than-human world, a common good in a shared space, a good symbiotic community of equals.

Thinking at the end about a tender narrator and striving towards fourth-person narratives, let us repeat at first: a tender narrator is someone who can include both the perspective of each of the characters and the ability to go beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and more broadly, who sees “everything”, every being. A tender narrator speaks in/for the interest of the shared, common space. This is an expression of commonality in symbiotic community: all elements of this space are there in a meaningful way while retaining their full rights and independence and acting out of concern for the fragile common good that is being together. Their narrative becomes the “fourth-person narrative” that suspends the first-person narrative but not their own self, because only in their own self, through the lens of their own experience and logic can they make room for the other and really be together in common world, just like the inmates living in one room, shared, common room. Let us practice this; there are as many tender pedagogies as there are us.

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