Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice
Issue 46.3 (2025)
Special Issue: Liveable Futures: Radical Imagination as Method // Radical Imagination as Survival Research

Dreaming Beyond a World on Fire: Radical Imagination as Research Method

by Amanda Watson

Abstract: Beginning in 2021 after two devastating climate events in British Columbia, *The Imagine Kin Project* sought to take the temperature of young people living in Metro Vancouver who were concerned about climate futures and economic insecurity as they imagined their future relations in this context. This pilot research involved a series of three focus groups and an arts-based workshop. Presenting original data from the focus groups, I argue for the use of radical imagination as a methodological tool to understand people's experiences of intersecting precarity, invite reflection on and validation of related anxieties, and foster the conditions for radical hope among participants. Further, I suggest that questions of kinship and critical caring relations are useful prompts for radical imagination as these personal subjects allow insights into intersectional precarity to be collectively politicized in perhaps less intimidating ways than would more direct questions about social movements. Findings from this research show that imagining the future through collective daydreaming can be painfully revealing of one's fears while simultaneously stirring life-giving visions for relationality and solidarity amid apocalyptic thinking and individualist responses to global crises.

Keywords: radical imagination; climate anxiety; daydreaming; resistance; social crises; collective struggle; qualitative methods; focus groups; birthstrike

Résumé : Ayant débuté en 2021, après deux catastrophes climatiques en Colombie-Britannique, *The Imagine Kin Project* avait pour objectif de tâter le pouls de jeunes vivant dans la région métropolitaine de Vancouver, qui se préoccupaient des futurs climats et de l'insécurité économique, tandis qu'ils s'imaginaient leurs relations futures dans ce contexte. Ce projet pilote de recherche comprenait une série de trois groupes de discussion ainsi qu'un atelier artistique. En présentant les données initiales des groupes de discussion, je préconise le recours à l'imagination radicale comme outil méthodologique pour comprendre les expériences entrecroisées de précarité des gens, pour susciter la réflexion à propos des inquiétudes connexes et les valider et pour favoriser des conditions propices à l'espoir radical au sein des participantes. De plus, je suggère que les questions relatives aux liens de parenté et aux relations affectueuses déterminantes sont des messages-guides utiles pour l'imagination radicale, puisque ces thématiques personnelles permettent de politiser collectivement l'introspection en matière de précarité entrecroisée par des moyens probablement moins intimidants que le seraient des questions plus directes à propos des mouvements sociaux. Les conclusions de cette recherche révèlent qu'un avenir imaginé dans le cadre d'une rêverie collective peut péniblement dévoiler les craintes d'une personne tout en stimulant simultanément un remue-méninges vivifiant en faveur des relations et de la solidarité dans un contexte de réflexion apocalyptique et d'interventions individualistes en réponse aux crises internationales.

Mots clés : imagination radicale; anxiété climatique; rêverie; résistance; crises sociales; lutte collective; méthodes qualitatives; groupes de discussion; grève des naissances

Author: Amanda Watson is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Simon Fraser University and Associate Member of the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. She is the current President of Academic Women at SFU.

"But nothing less than the most radical imagination will carry us beyond this place."

—Adrienne Rich (1979)

"What we cannot imagine cannot come into being."

—bell hooks (2020)

"We are in an imagination battle."

—Adrienne Maree Brown (2015)

Beyond a World on Fire

When I started teaching undergraduate students in Canada in 2013, some students were curious about the Occupy movement. "It didn't have a purpose," accused a young man near the front of a big introductory class, while others seemed to appreciate the power of hundreds of thousands of people across the globe engaging in struggle against economic inequality to change a story. A short decade later, most of my students have never heard of the Occupy movement but they recognize intersecting capitalist crises as common sense. They seem to know in their bones the problem of the 1%, easily offering a critique of a "world on fire" that has felt that way since they were born.

I used to research and teach about the world on fire, training students to understand and explain complex interlocking global crises in plainspoken terms. This was a core aim of the feminist pedagogy I was trained to replicate—encouraging students to position themselves and their desires, consumerist and otherwise, in the context of these problems and to critically interrogate the range of neoliberal schemes purportedly designed to help. But in the last several years, since before the COVID-19 pandemic but even more desperately since, teaching students to be critical of the violence they encounter in their daily lives and to connect them to crises that are global in scope has not felt, to me, good enough.

The Monday morning after a series of rainstorms battered the Pacific Northwest in November of 2021, I responded to a student message that they could not attend the day's lecture on global problems and the crises of capitalism because the highway to Burnaby Mountain from the low-lying areas of Sumas Prairie, formerly Sumas Lake before it was drained by settlers for private farmland a hundred years earlier, had been washed out. An unknown number of their family's animals had drowned in widespread flooding that would drown some 600,000 animals. This was the third state of emergency declared by the government of British Columbia in as many months, after wildfires burned the town of Lytton to the ground that summer, evacuating thousands of people across the province, and the Omicron wave of COVID-19 had threatened public health the previous winter and spring. Cultivating radical imagination and hope in ruin felt more dire than ever.

I had been studying anti-natalist responses to the climate crisis when, impelled by these local events, I recruited young adults for a pilot research project called the *Imagine Kin Project* (IKP). This pilot integrated research questions about family formation, population control rhetoric, and eco-anxiety. I aimed to interrogate the moral imperative to have fewer children in order to reduce one's "carbon footprint," an imperative which regularly circulated in classroom discussions with students and even among my academic peers. Drawing on radical imagination as a method, I sought to understand how young people, whose imagined futures feel particularly blurry in the context of climate anxiety (Hickman et al. 2021), were understanding climate crises and population control discourse as they experienced extreme weather events and skyrocketing economic insecurity in their own backyards. I also wondered how young people from different communities across Vancouver were understanding family formation with respect to kinship—being in relation to one another and themselves—

through these experiences. And, finally, I was hoping to foster radical imagination through discussion-based qualitative research with participants because both my students and peers admitted apocalyptic thinking in the context of racial capitalist violence.

This latter aim to foster radical imagination—the visioning work required for solidarity against oppression—through research stems from emancipatory ideals of non-violent anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-fascist social movements and the decolonial and feminist research ethic that our research and teaching should serve community and resist oppression (Smith 2012). US historian and author Dr. Robin Kelley writes that *dreaming* new ways of living together is and always has been vitally important for collective and personal transformation: "We must tap the well of our own collective imaginations [and] do what earlier generations have done: dream" (Kelley 2002, x). Kelley was finishing his book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination,* inspired by the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when he witnessed the World Trade Centre collapse from his bedroom window. In the context of that horrible event, and the subsequent bombing of innocent people in Afghanistan, he thought about cycles of violence begetting violence and asked: "How do we *produce a vision* that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals? How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing *dream of freedom*, especially in these rough times?" (Kelley 2003, x; emphasis added). In his public writing 20 years later, Kelley (2022) credits intersecting queer and trans liberation, Indigenous, disability, and climate justice movements with pushing his own radical imagination to conjure new analyses and ways of relating in response to ongoing oppressive nightmares.

For activist scholars of radical imagination, dreaming emerges in response to and against violent conditions in the present. In *Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity,* Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014) emphasize that our *collective* ability to imagine that we can live better together is necessary for our lives and movements. They explain that the radical imagination is more than the ability to think otherwise in terms of our own lives; the radical imagination also fosters our capacity for empathy—to imagine the needs and visions of others and build solidarity—that is required for inclusive social change. Thus, the radical imagination invites individual (though not individualist) resistance *for* collective resistance against, in the contemporary context, capitalist exploitation. It is a practice of world-making that resists status-quo harm, seeking to return to the roots of community for better ways of living together. Without this practice, we risk replicating violence in our social movements.

As research-granting agencies in Canada encourage researchers to engage communities so that research will benefit—i.e. make things better for—Canadians, those of us encountering apocalyptic thinking as we work across areas of social change weigh the meaning of *benefit* in this context. In the following sections, I detail the rationale and methods of the *Imagine Kin Project* and join others in this special issue of *Atlantis* to suggest that we consider radical imagination as a method more explicitly in our research design as we seek to advance caring and ethical research that benefits our participants and broader society. This idea grows from innumerable historical debates over the worth of one's imaginings, desires, and daydreams for collective struggle and whether desires so shaped by oppressive ideologies are worth considering. It also builds on the work that women of colour disproportionately do in and outside of the academy to share joy and prefigurative ways of being in relation while resisting capitalist violence (see Girvan et al. 2020). Emerging from the *Imagine Kin* pilot research, I remain convinced that building a *culture of daydreaming* is necessary to connect ourselves to desire in ways that plant seeds for future-thinking collectively. I suggest to those studying radical imagination as method that questions of kinship and critical caring relations are useful prompts for radical imagination as these personal subjects allow insights into intersectional precarity to be collectively politicized in perhaps less intimidating ways than would more direct questions about social movements or political ideology. Pertaining to the question of climate crisis and family formation—*how is anti-natalism affecting the ability of young people to imagine their futures?*—I offer methodological suggestions beyond this topic but based on this pilot research. Pseudonyms are used to identify research participants and comments have been edited for clarity.

Anti-Natalism and Climate Anxiety

> AW: Can you tell me what you're picturing?
>
> Lucy: Quite literally being on fire, because that's what we're used to in BC especially. Actually in a lot of parts of the world, […] there are wars happening [in places] I didn't expect […] It's just very unstable, everything's very unstable.
>
> Jin: I want the chance to travel somewhere [but] the Earth is burning and everything is uncertain but that's what I know I want to happen. […] I don't know if the world is gonna go into flames, but yeah.
>
> Marina: When I think about my future family, that gets even more complicated because the world is on fire.
>
> Karen: I am still feeling nervous and anxious about, you know, the state of what the world is and what that's going to look like going forward.
>
> Ray: Especially the world literally being on fire and the pandemic and everything being so segregated from my own family, I just don't foresee [my daydreams] happening, I guess. It's gotten very pessimistic in a way.
>
> Max: I do have like the daydream image, but I think what actually drew me to this study is […] I also have this just strong sensation of not being able to picture the future, of feeling like the world is such a tumultuous—like we're living through such tumultuous times, and it's like gosh, where will society be in 10 years, let alone me?

Young people, who are disproportionately experiencing *climate anxiety* in countries around the world (Hickman et al. 2021; Searle and Gow 2010), are thinking about climate change when they imagine their future families (Dillarstone, Brown, and Flores 2023). Reasons cited for climate anxiety now include "concern about possible future harm to one's children" (Hickman et al. 2021, n.p.). Complicating the ways in which young people can imagine becoming ethical adults amid global crises, the *moralizing* of individual climate behaviours *paired with government inaction* ensures a backdrop of disturbing incoherence within which to cope with overwhelming uncertainty. For young people most impacted by climate disaster—that is, girls of Indigenous and Afro-descent, LGBTQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, migrant children and youth, and those living in poverty (United Nations 2025)—cultivating radical imagination might alleviate distress and help shift popular conceptions of anxiety toward understanding the anxiety they personally experience as a rational, public, and adaptive response to a warming planet. As Hickman et al. (2021, 872) wrote in their alarming report for the *Lancet,* "Climate anxiety is a collective experience, and based on our results, children and young people would benefit from having a social discourse in which their thoughts and feelings are respected and validated." The IKP pilot aimed to find ways for academic research to contribute to this social discourse.

In 2017, Wynes and Nicholas published a report in *Environmental Research Letters* that identified "having one fewer child" as the highest-impact action individuals in developed nations can take to reduce personal emissions and contribute to systemic environmental change. The authors described this recommendation as an individual lifestyle choice and suggested that young people should be informed of the environmental consequence of family size as they become sexually active. The recommendation to have one fewer child immediately appeared in major news outlets globally. Summarised in the *Guardian* with the clicky headline "Want to save the planet? Have fewer children," anti-natalism mushroomed in commercial media and popular activist movements, primarily driven by white ciswomen in wealthy Northern countries with relative, though unstable, reproductive agency.

In 2018, for example, English activist Blythe Pepino founded BirthStrike, aiming to advance an approach to climate change that is inclusive across gender, race, and place. Contrary to the directive to "have one fewer child," BirthStrike rejected the notion that people should need to stop having children, since "babies don't make emissions, systems do" (Extinction Rebellion, "Babies Don't Produce Emissions"). The movement, which folded into an online support forum in August 2020 but whose name is now used to refer to this climate justice strategy, stated two main objectives: 1. Demand a more equitable and sustainable global economic system, and 2. Provide cohesion and solidarity to people who have fears about bringing children into a climate-ravaged world. This concern for the ability to raise children humanely is typically articulated by those who are most marginalized (see Davis 2019; Ross 2017) making BirthStrike—a movement represented in media as predominantly white, educated, and cisgender—unusual.

While media conflated BirthStrike's efforts with mandates to reduce birth rates, Pepino argued that such media coverage of BirthStrike mischaracterized the movement as concerned with population reduction when, in fact, it targets "consumption, inequality, and social justice" (Extinction Rebellion, "Babies Don't Produce Emissions"). Pepino, acknowledging her white Western privilege, called on the movement to dismantle structurally racist Western power through a comprehensive feminist response to the climate emergency. Pepino attempted to distance herself from what she described as the colonial violence of population control sentiments. She declared BirthStrike a strategy to visibilize the extent to which the climate crisis is foreclosing on the ability for young people to *imagine a future for their families*. With global media coverage on outlets from the CBC to Fox News, and high-profile support from the likes of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Duke and Duchess of Sussex, the BirthStrike movement and others (e.g., #NoFutureNoChildren started by McGill University student Emma Lin in 2018) attempted to draw attention to the systemic drivers of environmental harm. But in doing so, climate movements led by women that hinged upon their reproductive behaviours, strategically or not, were imbricated in the sticky grammars of responsible family formation.

Critique of population control and anti-natalism in the context of eco-anxiety is sharpening within a fledgling transdisciplinary literature on climate emotions and family formation (Dillarstone, Brown and Flores 2023; Sasser 2024; Schneider-Mayerson and Leong 2020). Those of us researching and teaching in the areas of critical family or care studies will be anecdotally familiar with these sentiments from our classrooms, and the extent to which anti-racist and historical critique is lacking. As one IKP participant conceded, "This world is so unpredictable, and I don't want to bring more people on this earth than necessary." The IKP thus responds to calls for more qualitative work in this area to understand the intersection of climate discourse and policy, family formation, and mental health (Smith et al. 2023). Issues of equity arise at this intersection given that we know that people are differentially impacted by both climate disaster and eco-anxiety, eco-behaviours are gendered, and population control policies and practices disproportionately target Indigenous, Black, people of colour, and disabled communities in Canada and the United States. In my exploratory pilot, I wondered about radical imagination as a method for inviting stories that would lay equity issues bare for future research. The section below describes how these research methods wrestled with issues of inclusion, intimacy, and hope when pursuing these questions.

Feminist Care Ethics for Research Practice

Designing research from a slate of possible research methods involves positioning one's questions and answers within debates over ways to produce and replicate knowledge in the world—ways that transnational feminist scholars have long criticised. Researching according to care ethics, as explained by Joan Tronto (2022), is to engage in a practice of world-making that values and supports care. Research for the project "Imagining Kin in Climate Crisis" was approved by the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board (#30000660) in March 2022 but researching according to a feminist ethics of care necessitates thinking ethically about promoting care beyond what ethics boards will insist (Brannelly and Barnes 2022). I recruited participants to the study from my home department and through snowball sampling. To avoid conflict of interest, students could not parti-

cipate in the study if they were supervised by me or enrolled in my classes. I reminded participants more often than required by the Research Ethics Board at my university that if they felt any pressure to participate or uncertain about the project, these were signs to not participate, since the desire to discuss the topic with a familiar professor is difficult to weigh against the inevitable power imbalance between professor and student and the possibility for ensuing vulnerability. At the same time, thinking through queer approaches to care and intimacy in research (Detamore 2010), I recruited from a known student body because I was familiar with their concerns, having facilitated class discussions where related anxieties are shared and debated; I wanted to make space for their voices to be heard, even to each other, and for my political project to represent their concerns as best as possible.

Aspiring to a care ethics approach to research that centres what matters to research participants (Brannelly and Barnes 2022), in the recruitment letter to participants, I stated that I was hoping to learn more about how young adults in Metro Vancouver are imagining their future families and how intersecting crises might shape their daydreams for the future. I made it clear that I wanted to recruit participants who were interested in having this open discussion with peers and with me as an attempt to research with care what matters to participants. I assumed this inclusion criteria would politically restrict the group that self-selected to participate to people who identify climate change as a crisis that directly impacts their futures and who think about this with respect to kinship formation and desire. This was my intention, inspired by the focus group analysis of Josee Johnston, Judith Taylor, and Krista Whitehead's (2016) study where young, self-identified feminists discussed Dove's "Real Beauty" Campaign and showed the possibilities of critical thinking in a climate of rampant cause marketing. I was curious if young people with a stated concern about climate change and imagining future relations would speak in terms of their "carbon footprint" or mention having fewer children. The diversity in background, politics, and desires of participants who signed up for IKP focus groups surprised me, perhaps indicating an implicit bias in the way I imagined people who are thinking about climate and other crises in their plans for family formation. The issues participants raised around intersectional precarity unrelated to but foregrounded by climate change also caught me by surprise. As recruitment for the project continued, I realized that I was not only hoping to spur validating social discourse around climate anxiety and family formation, or cultivate radical imagination at this intersection among participants, I was wondering if research, which places demands on participants' time, energy, and knowledge, can ever demonstrate care in a way that celebrates the knowledge of people who care.

Virtual Qualitative Method

Virtual qualitative research is a growing area of methodological concern (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez and Joffe 2022). Transnational research by Tungohan and Catungal (2022) presents the possibilities and challenges of Zoom focus groups, as their study, which was initially planned to include in-person discussion but was re-designed to be conducted virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, sought to understand the experiences of Asian-international students at Canadian universities amid rising anti-Asian racism in North America. They argue that virtual qualitative research necessitates new methods and methodological discussion, citing such examples as transnational participants' concerns about privacy and the ability to deepen engagement using chatbox memes and GIFs.

Like Tungohan and Catungal (2022), I was curious about how virtual methods would improve accessibility for participants, particularly since my target sample of young people in Metro Vancouver is known to experience time poverty and long commutes, and because I expected that privacy concerns with respect to gender and sexual identity might shape participants' willingness to discuss family plans openly with strangers. Virtual methods allowed participants to schedule 90 minutes of time for participation instead of up to a half-day including commuting to and from a meeting space in the sprawling Metro Vancouver Area. I was also explicit that participants could keep cameras off during interviews if they preferred, hoping to balance engagement, intimacy, and affect with including diverse perspectives. Only one participant elected to keep their camera off during a focus group.

Organizing focus groups for imaginative social research involves considering whether modes of participant homogeneity or diversity within groups will support a caring or validating environment—which involves assumptions about people and their experiences based on static categories and the biases of the researcher. After collecting demographic data by survey, I debated the composition of focus groups with research assistants and academic colleagues. We discussed whether factors like gender/sexual identities, citizenship, age, or household income would more strongly shape group cohesion or perceived vulnerability in the context of family formation and desire. After thoughtful and unresolved discussion, I clustered participants who identified as trans and nonbinary into one group when possible to reduce participants' sense of vulnerability to queer and transphobia since discussions of family formation often involve discussions of body, gender, sexuality, and, as it turned out in our groups, legacies of family violence and trauma. This meant limiting the possibility for more gender diversity across groups to generate discussion from different perspectives (for example, by queering heteronormative desire and assumptions), and perhaps it reduced conflict or tension, which some may see as foreclosing opportunities for research insights or education. But I felt uneasy about curating groups by gender diversity once I suspected that participant safety could be enhanced for a group of participants who are disproportionately targets of violence.

Designing focus groups around gender, however, created racial and transnational family minorities in each group, which likely limited the ease with which participants reflected on cultural expectations of family shaping their daydreams and desires. For example, one participant hesitated in a focus group discussion before mentioning that, in her culture, she would be expected to take care of her parents one day and therefore that factor significantly shapes how she envisions future kinship structures. Another participant, the only other person of colour in that group, enabled her mic to offer "same here" after which the first speaker seemed to relax her shoulders and speak more openly about how she, in fact, wanted to take care of her parents after all they have done for her. In hindsight, and if I had learned from Tungohan and Catungal (2022) prior to conducting focus groups, I may have anticipated the extent to which transnational family life would shape daydreams for future kinship formation in the context of interlocking global crises. This may have shaped my demographic survey to include questions about family of origin and culture, though I remain ambivalent about the extent to which researchers can or should attempt to manufacture particular dynamics in intimate qualitative social research as we attempt to cultivate radical imagination—that capacity to hold space for the experiences and desires of others as we collectively envision multiple future possibilities. Future research might follow up with participants to ask about their experiences of intimacy and vulnerability in daydreaming aloud with strangers. Participants whose families and homes were forged across borders and time zones and seasons in one place or another in these focus groups were not alone in their groups but they were still minority voices, no doubt shaping the extent to which these participants could articulate daydreams against each other, the way some others were able to do.

The online setting limited the depth of content analysis—to consider phrases, body language, and expressions more deeply as they revealed and concealed deeper meanings between participants. It also limited the extent to which we could offer validation or reciprocate vulnerability. But what was certainly lost online may have been balanced by the gain in accessibility to diverse perspectives. Particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when people with disabilities and members of other communities made vulnerable to illness through racial capitalism complied with masking and stay-at-home orders whenever possible, this research was able to include more people safely as a result of being online.

Apocalyptic Thinking

> Max: And crises, I think kind of like what other people said, like, it's really scary. I think I do want to own my own home in the future and not deal with landlords, but it kind of scares me. If I somehow manage to buy even just a small townhouse or condo in the Vancouver area, is it just gonna be underwater within 20 years? Like, am I just gonna have to […] you know, end up los-

ing the hundreds of thousands of dollars that it would cost me […] it would just end up being sunk underwater.

Christina: And if I managed to save up for retirement, is that money even going to be worth anything by the time I retire?

Noa: There's like a town […] that is a bit more affordable [than Vancouver], but it was built on top of marshland, so if Vancouver does flood, that's probably going to be the first area to go, so there's a few things I do, like looking up the maps that scientists predict will have floods and trying to pick an area to live that's not in that area.

Ray: Sometimes I feel like [we] should be preparing for the Apocalypse. There used to be this, like, [person who advocates preparing for the apocalypse] Youtuber that I followed, and he said […] to just worry about getting your finances together, even though you have all of these other preppers saying that you should buy gold or bitcoins. […] He said that it's still probably more likely that the system is going to continue as normal, instead of it all just like suddenly going up in flames. And like yeah, and you will most likely be better off just trying to save financially as if things will be fine. […] It kind of gets to a point where not much you can really do about it, but just keep trying.

Participants in this pilot widely anticipated cataclysm at such a scale that the future is impossible to envision. They did not seem to worry as much about not being able to earn money to secure their stability: this exceptional challenge was assumed in Vancouver. Their fears extended to money losing its worth as climate change caused system collapse and fears that the decline of their own mental health would outpace their capacity to desire life today, care for others or themselves, or envision future possibilities.

Anxieties were high across two out of the three groups in particular and, despite virtual conditions and the fact that people did not know each other, after daydreaming and writing, participants were open to articulating just how overwhelming these feelings had become in a way that moved far beyond my former classroom discussions on similar topics.

Lucy: The biggest feeling that comes from this? I—like, I am anxious. You can't quite tell, but I am—like I am all balled up and I'm tight and everything. Everything is just—it's just anxiety and the unknown and not knowing where it's going, and I believe that […]I get that feeling of the end of the world.

Marnie: I am pretty religious. […] I'm not super religious, I just believe in what the teachings are. So all the signs, you know, like the wars, the world being on fire […] I don't know I—it makes me think that something is going to happen.

Thea: The main thing that I wrote about was—sorry I'm all over the place—climate. Will there even be a future to consider? And I think that's the main thing that's been on my noggin recently.

Elsa: When I think about certain things like that, like climate change, etc., I just feel so depressed and apathetic, so I often just repress thinking about it at all. So feelings that come up when I do think about it, I would say a lot of dread and sadness and a lot of emptiness. I just kind of feel like I just shut down, and I'm like, "Wow, everything is just, like, so terrible," and I just feel very powerless. And I often get in a mindset of, like, there's actually nothing I can do about it, and I almost start to shut down, and I almost feel like I don't care. It's not that I actually don't care, it's just extreme apathy where I'm like, I don't feel like I have the energy to put into caring, because I feel like if I let myself really think about it and feel it and care about it, that I will—I'll be over-

> loaded. Especially because I also have my own mental challenges and trauma history and stuff that I have to kind of deal with daily, so I think, yeah, it's just kind of another added thing that I'm like, I don't know, I just almost block it out most of the time.

Strangely, the more participants in each group shared feelings of dread or anxiety, the more participants tended to communicate with each other in ways that seemed relaxed rather than agitated. I imagined that other topics or prompts may have heightened anxiety or tension between groups, but it seemed that the nature of asking about kinship—dreams and hopes for ways of being in relation and the barbed edges of reality that surrounded them—invited deeply political and personal discussion. People seemed to have no trouble bearing witness to each other's desires, expressing empathy, and building on and revising stories about this topic.

Culture of Daydreaming

Both imagination and daydreaming have long genealogies in global philosophy, activism, and art, as work on the radical imagination (Kelley 2002; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014) and the call for this special issue of *Atlantis* well demonstrates. Feminist engagement with psychoanalytic interpretations of dreaming and daydreaming have continually called for these imaginings to be taken seriously as practices and forms of resistance. Frigga Haug (1987), for example, who staged Freud's Western and relatively modern thinking on dreams alongside Ernst Bloch's thinking on "daytime longings," underscored the private thoughts and desires of women whose care obligations kept them from full political participation and economic autonomy. Haug wrote:

> To turn daydreaming into more effective resistance would require both breaking with the isolation [of women daydreaming alone at home] and retaining it as an important issue to be dealt with. So let us start with the production of these daydreams. Could we *produce a daydream culture together*? Should we meet in groups, write down our daydreams, and work on them collectively? (Haug 1987; emphasis added)

As a teacher, I wondered about this as I experimented with prompting students for writing exercises in classes on capitalism and resistance. What becomes possible through a culture of daydreaming that might be missing from our movements as we cope with endemic loneliness in uniquely contemporary ways? Does supporting a culture of daydreaming through our research and teaching on social movements and problems help to plant seeds of radical imagination?

Participants in the *Imagine Kin Project* were asked to daydream and write freely about their ideal lives in the future. They were invited to use as much or as little visual detail as they preferred but directed to do their best to keep writing to the end of each 5-7-minute session. After each writing session, participants were asked to share a synopsis of what they had written or what had come to mind. They were welcome to respond to or build on the comments of others, which proved fruitful and energising but I requested that they also try to represent what they had written before hearing the ideas of others. In discussion, some participants illustrated their daydreams with what Haug (1987) refers to as "simple wishes" for, say, a house or a car, though I would argue that in the context of extremely insecure housing and economic precarity in Vancouver, dreaming of a house is hardly a simple or frivolous wish. I think about Kelley's articulation of his mother's freedom dreams for "land, a spacious house, fresh air, organic food," (Kelley 2002, 2) and the complication of this desire for property in the context of violent Indigenous dispossession.

Almost all participants articulated visions that saw people and situations arranged and rearranged, giving the impression that versions of these visions have been replayed again and again. When materials gave shape to the dream, like a house with a picket fence atop a hill, these juxtaposed the economic reality of housing precarity and the widespread ecological systems threatening to flood these homes and burn these dry wood fences, inviting more nuanced analysis of materialist or consumerist desire as people repurpose imagery of yesterday's American Dream in ways that seem more indicative of radical hope today. In a similar way to Haug, who reflected on the daydreams of women homemakers for clues of radical social change, I interpreted these story

fragments, contextualised by personal narrative in our discussions, as indications of radical imagination in constant, private action, yet untapped for its collective potential.

Many participants across focus groups went quickly to the challenge of daydreaming an ideal future in such a precarious present. Their stories indeed connected family formation and climate anxiety but they also went further, as narrative and artistic representations so often do, to illustrate and make felt the ways in which multiple forms of precarity—e.g. the inaccessibility of trans healthcare, border violence, family abuse—punctuate the lives of young people. I quote Max at length for example:

> Max: I literally have no idea what to think, because I think there's a difference between daydreaming and then actually trying to imagine what your future might look like. […] I think that's definitely shaped by climate, my climate anxiety. I imagined that I'm going to be alive and I'm going to be fine, I'm going to make it even if things are sinking and the water's rising. I imagine, like, a big hill, because the water's rising and there's less land, and then a house kind of at the top, and I've somehow stayed alive, but everything around me is smaller. So I can kind of also see just everything in general, like my family being smaller because I have a big extended family in different parts of the world, like my mom's family is really big, but my immediate family is small. It's just me and my sister and both of us are really nervous about the idea of having kids. If neither of us have kids and all my mom's family gets older and they all die, then my family will be really small. So I imagine things being tighter and smaller, and it's kind of suffocating and scary, but then I also imagine that my nice small house is really cozy and comfortable. I wrote that I'd hopefully have maybe like three plants, because I really want plants but I'm bad at taking care of them, so I imagine I'm slowly getting better.

Max's vision, to which I have alluded elsewhere (Watson et al. forthcoming), exemplified the power of the daydream to represent intimacy and scale in ways that have the potential to spark individual daydreams into collective struggle. Crises legitimately threaten our futures but there is kinship among us. Some of our families are dispersed but we might slowly get better. As one participant (Wynn) explained:

> When I daydream about my future, there are very specific things that I like to think about. […] So I wrote when I daydream about my future, it's the very nuclear two kids, house with a lawn, dog, still with my husband sort of thing. I don't even know if that is my personal daydream, or if it's just what I think is my daydream. I don't know, I struggle with that. But then I wrote down the reasons that I have difficulties forming that as more of a reality for me, like the housing crisis, fertility issues, maintaining and succeeding in my career as a mom. Those things don't feel as compatible with that sort of very specific imagery.

In this example, Wynn reflects on what shapes desire as she articulates a dream vision and known obstacles to that life. Without prompting from me, many participants reflected this awareness that their daydreams borrow from cultural scripts that they have engaged with since they were born. Through these reflections, participants responded to one another, building a culture of daydreaming through revisions and extensions during our time together.

> Chloe: I guess when other people were talking, especially Noa…

> Sejal: I won't take up too much time here, but I'm jus —Chantel bringing up ADHD made me think of also mental health impact my feelings about family because, like, I am—I have some mental health problems.

Charlie: And as Chloe was saying, like, I know for sure that I'm going to be taking care of my mom in the future.

Elsa: I love having extended family and that imagery of the world getting smaller and everyone having smaller and smaller [families], like, on top of the hill that Max was talking about, I think really resonated with me.

Chantel: I actually have something to add on to Sejal's point.

Noa: I actually wanted to build off of what Thea and Chloe were saying.

With kinship as the foregrounding question, participants seemed to feel open to sharing stories and articulating visions that are often simmering in private.

Scared to Dream

Across focus groups, participants expressed ambivalence and sadness about the future and difficulty articulating deepest desires with respect to future family. This was, in part, my motivation for considering radical imagination methodologically.

Henry: I found it really difficult to even write it down on paper, because my daydreams are just so far from what the reality can bring right now.

Some expressed disconnection from their desires as they struggle to stay afloat in the present—a devastating dissonance that scholars of radical imagination hope these methods can resolve.

Estrella: It's really difficult for me to actually imagine, like daydream, like, well what what do I want?

Several participants across groups described a splitting of visions drawn across lines of possible and impossible, or realistic versus fantastic:

Jason: I immediately thought of three different paths. I have, like, what I want to do in the future versus like my dream future versus like an unrealistic, unattainable dream, if that makes sense.

Elsa: I ping-pong a lot just thinking of the future. Upon hearing the prompt, I was like, "Oh my God." I literally have no idea what to think, because I think there's a difference between daydreaming and then actually trying to imagine what your future might look like.

To no surprise to those working on radical imagination in practice, participants also reflected on the activity of daydreaming and reflecting on these as feeling childish or embarrassing:

Christina: I almost found that it felt, like, a little bit silly, or childlike, to come up with this dream.

Noa: It does feel kind of […] I don't want to say extravagant, but it does feel almost silly to, like […] "Oh yeah, like, it sounds so idealistic," I guess […] So I guess the feeling of, like, silliness is kind of […] immediately afterwards, I was like, "Why do I—why does it feel silly?" Because it's almost sad that I feel silly, because I'm thinking about the future in a hopeful way. Even if I'm feeling really hopeful and not limiting myself—I can't really explain it, but just the act of thinking in that way, and then feeling that it's silly, it's like it kind of uncovers, like, the underlying cynicism that is there.

Both Christina's and Noa's comments were met with many nods by other participants. The feeling that Noa expressed is telling of how precarity is experienced in the daily lives of young people. Teresa admitted to repeatedly playing through a simple dream of their future family in a way they framed as an unrealistic fantasy due to financial constraints:

> Teresa: I spend a lot of time daydreaming about my future with my wife and our ideal two kids. And in 10 years they'd be about seven and five, and we'll be living probably in a smaller town up the coast or, like, central-to-north island. And our two friends will be living either like neighbours or down the street from us with their own two kids.

This practice—describing and framing a scene with the caveat that it will never happen—was repeated by many. Revisiting Haug's (1987) insistence from the 1980s context that we take women's dreams of power seriously even though they are derived from within ideological systems, Teresa's daydream above exemplifies the clarity with which we can see the mythos of marriage, two kids, property ownership, friends with matching family shapes, and single-use residential zoning alongside social critique: the promise of property ownership was a lie and housing, which involves minimal choice, is unlikely to involve choosing a friend to live nearby. Moreover, property ownership is also likely to mean leaving one's community for whatever housing one can find. In this precarious present, what may have seemed frivolous or materialistic to Haug breathes new meaning into intersectional precarity as participants reflect on basic human needs as being out of reach.

My hope is that researchers who aim to mobilize radical imagination through method might generate potential for a culture of daydreams: diverse visions and hopes become collective. As someone in the focus group talked about a house on the hill, someone else detailed a field of golden retrievers, and someone else added that they will give up their academic dreams to live on the land. I wondered how virtual qualitative methods might facilitate or restrict these kinds of interactions, given the lag and lack of embodied social cues in a social setting that prompt someone to speak next. But behind our respective screens, participants showed patience and respect for each other, cuing up to speak and building on each other, validating and expanding in the process. Focus group discussion made space for participants to be stimulated by the articulations of others, sometimes, in this case, prompting revisions to their own daydreams or a more explicit reckoning with some of the boundaries that restrict these dreams.

Pursuing radical imagination as method, or the research aim of promoting a culture of daydreaming, assumes that what we imagine—or what we daydream, to shift the focus to these particularly fragmented practices of everyday life—becomes powerful when it is celebrated collectively (as a practice and for the content itself). Because the participants who self-selected to the study were critical of climate change and various forms of oppression (though participants ranged widely in terms of how they each defined and politicized the family, and related family formation to other forms of oppression), I did not feel anxious that the fragments of daydreams of some participants might make the space hostile to others. This is, of course, a risk.

Expanding Radical Imagination as Method

A future study might ask explicitly for *radical* daydreams of the future so that participants whose bodily and mental experiences have been hemmed in by, for example, the violence of borders or the failure to be read as fully human by colonizers and others, are encouraged to reject these limitations in their wildest dreams. As one participant articulated a lifetime of colonial abuse and interpersonal violence, they also articulated a dream that strove beyond what many other participants were willing to hope for. As many articulated anxiety or stress around the notion of having children in a climate crisis when they could not envision a future, two participants, both Indigenous and in different groups, rejected that neoliberal idea. Both also rejected narrow notions of Western motherhood or gendered labour when they clearly articulated their respective desires to be mothers and to reclaim what has been stolen from them and their ancestors. These comments represented obvious shifts in focus group dynamics, after which more vulnerability, intimacy, and honesty—perhaps even with one's self—appeared to follow.

Logistically speaking, this method of writing in focus groups would benefit from more time for writing and discussion components to reduce time pressure and allow for more inviting facilitation. Focus groups involved such rich discussion and intimate exchanges that I felt as though I were cutting dialogue short at 60-75 minutes. Three phases—independent writing, an online focus group discussion, and an in-person arts-based session—might allow more space for the cultivation of radical imagination and fostering a culture of daydreaming among people. Participants, many of whom were students, were keen to analyze their own data and read comments from other focus groups, an activity that I co-write about elsewhere (see Watson et al. forthcoming) and which prompted another rich set of conversations among participants. Part of prompting radical imagination came from vulnerable exchanges and validation from peers. More space for this, and extending these exchanges over time, may help to broaden the scope of this effect in participants' lives going forward. Future research might also follow up with participants to ask if they have thought back to these experiences or whether they think of daydreams or prefigurative politics differently in their own lives.

Citing poet Jayne Cortez, Robin Kelley acknowledges how difficult it is to imagine "somewhere in advance of nowhere," (Kelley 2002, xii) and yet this practice is urgent for antiviolent decolonizing and restructuring race and gender relations in our personal lives and worlds. I think of Corinne Mason's *Manufacturing Urgency* (2017) often when I feel compelled to make something urgent. Mason writes critically about global development initiatives that have advanced neoliberal economic development in response to the "urgent" crisis of violence against women. Thinking of urgency in another way, how liberating in the context of apocalyptic thinking to think about the *practice of freedom dreams* requiring our urgent attention. While constant emergencies are brought on by climate disaster (Wiebe 2024), what if we are also in an imagination emergency?

Radical imagination, across its diverse intellectual traditions, is a useful method for prompting future-thinking in times of crisis—the kind of future thinking that might be necessary for continuing our hopeful and caring practices in the present, particularly with people whose experiences and views diverge from our own. This is not to suggest a toxically positive approach to thinking collectively about the future, or even to insist on wanting to survive the present, nor is it to simplify the enormously complex practices of daydreaming differently and collectively in the midst of either/or capitalist/apocalyptic thinking. Practitioners of radical imagination ought to make space for the de-stigmatization of desires to *stop* articulating dreams in a social context—for example, for those experiencing suicidality or depression. In other words, these equally radical ways of thinking about the future for those experiencing intolerable suffering might also be de-stigmatized in political context. Thinking in memory of feminist and queer scholars who have rejected our cruelly optimistic relationships to some future good life (Berlant 2011), radical imagination as method wonders whether what we are doing together right now allows us to be read by another as fully human and full of desire, even for a moment. Even solemn fears articulated to another allows them to be read, politicized, and resisted in solidarity.

Works Cited

Brannelly, Tula and Marian Barnes. 2022. *Researching with Care: Applying Feminist Care Ethics to Research Practice.* Bristol: Policy Press.

Brown, Adrienne Maree. 2015. "Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) 2015 Closing Plenary Speech." Retrievable: https://adriennemareebrown.net/2015/06/12/balle-2015-closing-plenary-speech/

Detamore, Mathias. 2010. "Queer(y)ing the Ethics of Research Methods: Toward a Politics of Intimacy in Researcher/Researched Relations." In *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, edited by Kath Browne and Catherine J. Nash. London and New York: Routledge.

Davis, Dána-Ain. 2019. *Reproductive Injustice: Racism, Pregnancy, and Premature Birth.* New York: NYU Press.

Dillarstone, Hope, Laura J. Brown, and Elaine C. Flores. 2023. "Climate Change, Mental Health, and Reproductive Decision-making: A Systematic Review." *PLOS Climate* 2 (11): e0000236.

Extinction Rebellion. “Babies Don’t Produce Emissions, Our Systems Do.” *Extinction Rebellion* (blog). January 1, 2020. https://research.wou.edu/c.php?g=551307&p=3785498

Girvan, Anita, Baljit Phardesi, Davina Bhandar, Nisha Nath. 2020. “Poetics of Care: Remedies for Racial Capitalism Gone Viral.” *Feminist Studies* 46 (3): 717-728.

Haiven, Max and Alex Khasnabish. 2014. *Radical Imagination: Social Movement Research in the Age of Austerity*. Winnipeg: Fernwood.

Haug, Frigga. 1987. “Daydreams.” *New Left Review* 1 (162): 51-66.

Hickman, Catherine, Elizabeth Marks, Panu Pihkala, Susan Clayton, R. Eric Lewandowski, Elouise E. Mayall. 2021. “Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey.” *Lancet* 5 (12): 863-873.

hooks, bell. 2000. *All About Love: New Visions.* New York: William Morrow.

Keen, Sam, Martha Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Helene Joffe. 2022. “From Challenge to Opportunity: Virtual Qualitative Research During COVID-19 and Beyond.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21: 1-11.

Kelley, Robin D. G. 2002. *Freedom Dreams: Black Radical Imagination.* Boston: Beacon Press.

_____. 2022. “Twenty Years of *Freedom Dreams*.” *Boston Review*, August 1. https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/twenty-years-of-freedom-dreams/.

Mason, Corinne. 2017. *Manufacturing Urgency: The Development Industry and Violence Against Women.* Regina: University of Regina Press.

Rich, Adrienne. 1979. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978.* W.W. Norton and Co. Ltd.

Ross, Loretta. 2017. *Reproductive Justice.* United States: University of California Press.

Sasser, Jade. 2024. *Climate Anxiety and the Kid Question.* United States: University of California Press.

Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew and Kit Ling Leong. 2020. “Eco-reproductive Concerns in the Age of Climate Change.” *Climate Change* 163 (2): 1007-1023.

Searle, Kristina and Kathryn Gow. 2010. “Do concerns about climate change lead to distress?” *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management* 2 (4): 362-379.

Smith, Danielle, Javier Sales, Aleyah Williams, Sarah Munro. 2023. “Pregnancy Intentions of Young Women in Canada in the Era of Climate Change: A Qualitative Auto-Photography Study.” *BMC Public Health* 23(1): 766.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, 2nd ed.* London: Zed Books.

Taylor, Judith, Josee Johnston, and Krista Whitehead. 2016. “A Corporation in Feminist Clothing? Young Women Discuss the Dove ‘Real Beauty’ Campaign.” *Critical Sociology* 42 (1).

Tronto, Joan. 2022. Foreword. In *Researching with Care: Applying Feminist Care Ethics to Research Practice* edited by Tula Brannelly and Marian Barnes. Bristol: Policy Press.

Tungohan, Ethel and John Paul Catungal. 2022. “Virtual Qualitative Research Using Transnational Feminist Queer Methodology: The Challenges and Opportunities of Zoom-based Research During Moments of Crisis.” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21: 1-12.

United Nations. 2025. "How Gender Inequality and Climate Change are Interconnected." *UN Women*, April 21. https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-gender-inequality-and-climate-change-are-interconnected.

Watson, Amanda, Grace Kwan, Karlie Tessmer, and Sarah Law. Forthcoming. "On Rehabilitation: Poetic Practices of Care and Healing from Ecogrief." *Engaged Scholar.*

Wiebe, Sarah Marie. 2024. *Hot Mess: Mothering through a Code Red Climate Emergency.* Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing.

Wynes, Seth and Kimberly A. Nicholas. 2017. "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions." *Environmental Research Letters* 12 (7): 1-9.