Atlantis
Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice

Image: Helen Yao

Liveable Futures:
Radical Imagination as Method // Radical Imagination as Survival

Issue 46.3 (2025)

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Editorial

Liveable Futures: Radical Imagination as Method // Radical Imagination as Survival

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It feels as if we are living amid the ruins of liberal democratic capitalist technocracy with nowhere to go. In the face of an increasingly crisis-prone and hollow world order, calls for resistance have become more frequent while efforts to build alternatives have faded. Spectacular moments of dissent continue to erupt globally but they seem atomized rather than part of a building wave. Existential dread and an ironic pessimism have become defining characteristics of mainstream online discourse. Worry about creeping fascism has given way to the reality of authoritarian populism in the very heart of liberal democratic order. The failures and disappointments of liberal democratic capitalist technocracy have never been clearer. Against this backdrop, horizons of political possibility feel more remote than they seemed less than a decade ago.

In this context of fear and hopelessness, the imagination is endlessly invoked, evoked, and appealed to as if, like a spell being cast, it could summon into existence fully formed socio-political alternatives to our painful status quo. Many have observed that the imagination is a generative and quotidian force integral to human experiments in sociality (Anderson 2006; Appadurai 1996; Bakhtin 1981; Castoriadis 1997; Graeber and Wengrow 2021; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Kelley 2002; Taylor 2004). Critically, exploring imagination as a constitutive force of human social life across time and space reveals it as a lived, embodied experience rather than an abstract force. Imagination is a collective activity, something that people do together, not a rarefied individual possession. It is at work in every iteration of human sociality, even the most mundane, and underpins the rich symbolic economy that makes human communication possible. It is conspicuously at work when robust and powerful social movements emerge since every struggle for things to be different requires a notion of

how they might be so. The form of anticipatory consciousness that theorist Ernst Bloch (1986) described as the "Not-Yet" is deeply at work in every attempt to envision and build society as it might be otherwise.

Crucially, understanding imagination this way means that the best way to study it is to locate oneself amidst the action as it sparks between individuals, collectives, and movements. Such a methodology allows us to move past the question of what imagination is to the much more important one of what it does. Imagination is what makes all experiments in how we might live and arrange ourselves possible. This means it can be fascist, conservative, reactionary, liberal, progressive, radical, and much more. It has no necessary disposition toward or against collective liberation, toward or against domination and exploitation. What it is and does can only be understood by examining it relationally in context and in action. This is the task we set ourselves for this special issue of Atlantis.

Welcome to "Radical Imagination as Method," Issue 46.3 of *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice*. Like imagination, this issue comes to you out of a lived, material, and relational encounter. In May 2023, we convened a series of panels at the Canadian Sociological Association Annual General Meeting to facilitate a dialogue about the radical imagination as a territory and method. We strongly feel the necessity of a social science and community praxis that engages the imagination, an approach that requires us to reach beyond the boundaries of our disciplines, academic institutions, and methodological traditions.

The works included in this issue began as conference papers and became something else through the submission, review, and editorial process. They include creative, interdisciplinary, community-based work and works-in-progress that draw on "radical imagining" as a method for co-creating liveable futures in the university and beyond. The work we received blurred boundaries between fact and fiction; past, present, and future; and art, activism, and scholarship. We begin this issue with a creative submission by Fazeela Jiwa and a dialogue between Billy Ray Belcourt and Jeffrey Ansloos. In "Shitheads and Revolutionaries," Jiwa reflects on displacement, settlement, colonialism, and embodied memory. Belcourt and Ansloos discuss Belcourt's new work *Coexistence: Stories* and reflect on Indigenous queer life, love, grief, and the ways in which art and intimacy might conjure desirous worlds. These pieces are followed by three small collections of works that explore art-making as insurgent method, intergenerational solidarity, and kinship relations as generative space for world (re)building, and, finally, two pieces on Black Feminist Afrofuturism challenging the perceived inevitability of colonial expansion into our futures and worlds beyond our planet.

Our first collection of papers features contributions from three writers who use arts-based and storytelling methods to re-imagine the past, present, and future. Helen Yao's work positions research-creation as a method to overcome the dominating force of carcerality in the public imagination. Informed by abolitionist feminism, Yao's artistic practice sketches a window from the world of the prison into other possible futures, breaking with methodological conventions in criminology and public safety research. Sadie Beaton shares a handful of seeds from her larger body of research-creation work exploring settler ancestry, memory, storytelling, and embodied barriers to sovereignty on un-ceded territory. Beaton's attention weaves between past and present, in and through archival objects, to disrupt the "pioneer lie" underpinning settler land theft. Finally, we include the work of Nicole Santos Dunn and Jeffrey Ansloos who use narrative inquiry and life history methods to conceptualize the ecological dimensions of suicidality. Their works urges us to consider how we might include those who don't see a liveable future for themselves, as we seek to build a world beyond the insecurity and violence of contemporary life in settler colonial societies.

The second collection of papers explore intergenerational solidarities and kinship relations as generative spaces for world-building. Amanda Watson shares her work with the Imagine Kin Project, revealing the relationship between climate crisis, economic insecurity, and reproductive decision-making for young adults in Metro Vancouver. Watson shows how "apocalyptic thinking" in youth impacted by climate catastrophe poses a barrier to fostering research relationships geared toward improving futures for youth in Canada. Magdalena Olszanowski's creative reflection considers her children's experiences participating in protest action in the streets of

Montreal to free Palestine from Israel's genocide. Olszanowski questions where we might draw a boundary between protecting children from the horrors of the world and reproducing myths of childhood innocence that are deeply problematic. She tunes into children's experiences and the work of James Baldwin and Merleau-Ponty, asking us to consider where children belong in protest and as active participants in the worlds we are fighting to build together. Finally, May Chazan and Megan Hill share a reflection from an arts-based workshop on queer, crip, and decolonial futures as part of the Aging Activisms project. They demonstrate the catalyzing effects of intergenerational solidarity between youth and elders, arguing that these spaces of solidarity can effectively open doors to imagining futures that are beyond reach otherwise.

In our final collection Amy Foley and Nevandria Page offer Black Feminist Afrofuturism as a framework to create fiction out of fact and fact out of fiction and disrupt the perceived inevitability of colonial expansion in space. Foley ushers us into the work of Janelle Monáe and Ruha Benjamin to inhabit "new fictions" as resistance to the forces of technological surveillance and domination in worlds structured by white supremacy. Foley encourages us to experience the "fiction" of Black Feminist Afrofuturism as fact and resist the fictitious trickery of white supremacy and the worlds it works to create. Finally, Page draws our attention to the expansion of technocratic colonization in worlds beyond our own and proposes three aspects of a Black Feminist Afrofuturist methodology: countermemory, interdisciplinarity, and worldbuilding.

We came together in May 2023, and through these pages, to ask:

How can we find the footing to imagine an alternate world, when the one we are standing in is on fire?

How can we envision futures that are safe when many of us are under attack by transphobic, homophobic, racist, and misogynistic political movements in Canada?

How are our imaginations enclosed, suppressed, and conscripted? By whom? In whose interests and with what consequences? And what is the role of research and scholarship in co-imagining liveable futures?

More than two years after our first meeting together, we remain compelled to keep asking these questions, of ourselves and our co-conspirators. We are inspired by the work of the authors in this issue and we are deeply grateful, dear reader, that you have joined us in exploring these critical questions with us.

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Literary Work

On Shitheads and Revolutionaries

by Fazeela Jiwa

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Some days I look around lonely, my memory a shallow well. This alienation I pin partly on colonial machinations that have twice displaced my ancestors over the last four generations. I cherish Mama's stories and the memories sometimes offered by my living kin. But who were the ones before? Because of these displacements—their quick succession and mortality's innate brevity—the lives and stories of my people are obscured.

I often wonder about those ancestors, the ones compelled to leave their homes to settle someone else's. It wasn't that long ago, probably around 1900-1920. When the rickety house I now live in was being built in Kjipuktuk, Mi'kma'ki (colonially known as Halifax, Nova Scotia), my kin could have been leaving India for Uganda or Tanzania or Kenya. The Brits moved Indians they had already colonized around the empire, sometimes through indentureship, and my kin came from India to East Africa as settlers—railroad workers, labourers in resource-extraction projects, merchants, and a brown managerial class installed as a buffer between Black and white. Then, in the 1970s, my relatives came to Canada as refugees; during the Black nationalist independence movements in East Africa, Uganda's Idi Amin and others understood people of Indian descent to be part of the British colonial apparatus, which of course they were. Postcolonial independence in Uganda came with the expulsion of the Indians brought to Africa on British ships. It's a complicated lineage: we were displaced from India, settlers in East Africa, refugees from Uganda, and settlers in Canada.

I have no available grounding story older than the one of movement. Yet, living in the era of state-sponsored, essentializing multiculturalism in Canada, I am variously asked to explain my identity. I can essentialize too: all second-gen people in Canada carry immediate answers in their bodies, from eye rolls to practised explanations, for "Where are you from? No, FROM-from. Like really from."

Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) has said when she uses the word "identity" she puts it in scare quotes because it "is a poor substitute for relations": "It leans toward the individual and choice more than the collective, and it implies a property interest in said identity rather than necessarily requiring relations to exist" (TallBear 2021). This moves me to think about my own ancestry; I am hardly ever asked by Canadians to explain my relations. Maybe a good thing? The identity question has always been hard to answer, but the relations one even harder.

I thought the other day, maybe displacement is my identity. It's what I think of first, estranged from the other common aspects of "culture." I don't really have language, as the Gujarati we speak at home has been broken and poetically mended with Swahili, Hindi, and English. My digestion can't handle the traditional foods Mama cooks; each sushi roll I bring home earns me a swat. I'm estranged from religion, so I have no occasion

for the music, dance, and clothing so inextricably linked with it. The elders hold on longer to the bits they have so painstakingly gathered even while moving with nothing, the young'uns try to straddle what they've left and adapt to where they're going, and everyone who's here carries some sort of alienation from all the locations that have marked our bones.

Aside from these bits, I have no other hints about my ancestors who lived in India. Colonization erases collective memory. Its project is to disrupt lineages, and sometimes I feel like it has succeeded in my family. And yet my melanated skin certainly feels the absence of the abundant sun my ancestors could claim; I often wonder if this absence is related to my multiple sclerosis, a disease for which vitamin D deficiency is mysteriously a major factor. Displacement—what I am missing and what I don't know I am missing—is built into my system.

Are my ancestors, too?

Their story, and my identity, is importantly not only one of displacement. It is also one of settlement. Both of these processes connect me to my kin. For this story, displacement and settlement need to be considered together.

Displacement

"Displacement" feels easier to claim than settlement because the colonizers are to blame for the movement of people that bereft us of our lands and cultures. It's not me that chose to be born on stolen land, right? Phew! It's just that matter of structurally forced displacement through the theft of land and resources, calcified far into the next century through military might and famine. It's just that ongoing global atrocity of border imperialism, a term organizer Harsha Walia defines as "the processes 'by which the violences and precarities of displacement and migration are structurally created as well as maintained,' including through imperial subjugation, criminalization of migration, racialized hierarchy of citizenship, and state-mediated exploitation of labour" (Walia 2021, 2). My dad heard a story from another relative about why his grandfather jumped on a boat to Africa: he and his sister were impoverished children begging on a dock, no parents and no land under the British. This burning hunger and loneliness, if I take time to find it, still lives in my skin. Its memory passes on through generations in the way we treat each other: all my living Jiwas are impatient and opportunistic but brave, generous, and quick to laugh. My father's grandfather's sister coveted a passerby's bangles. He said—so audacious—"I'll bring you some bangles. I'll be right back," and found work on a British boat. Which then left for Africa.

As the story goes, more than half a century later he returned to India, used sketchy gossip networks to find his sister, and put gold bangles on her wrinkled wrists. It's told as a victorious story, almost pioneering in tone, but all I can feel are the gaps: Why were they impoverished? Where were their parents? Did he know what he was agreeing to? What did he endure during the long journey over kala pani? And what happened to her, a skinny little girl left on a dock? I imagine her sitting on mouldy wooden planks among countless other strangers, watching suited, booted legs pass day and night. I imagine him, fronting in languages he doesn't know. My imagining is informed by horrifying facts about imperial displacements, which I learned from books. But she survived into old age despite everything I can imagine. And so did he.

That kind of structured, global, forced displacement seems to leave little room for agency, which I understand as exercising power through choice. But that power is crucial to look for, especially when the available choices don't seem in any way related to freedom. Trying to find their agency in the choices they made humanizes those vast numbers of the dispossessed. They are not rendered powerless even while they are exploited due to their conditions; agency has always been practised by the oppressed, even up against the wall. It can be as monumental as running away; it can be as everyday as not speaking. It all matters, because agency is an exercise of inherent power. So, I am sure my ancestors practised agency in the process of displacement even under con-

strained choices. The stories of Indians leaving for other imperial outposts, the Caribbean, other parts of Africa, they animate the possibilities of my ancestors' choices that brought my body here today. Maybe one of them sold the land their parents grew up on for a piece of gold. Maybe they wore that legacy around their neck or hid it in their undergarments when they made the passage across vast waters to something new. Maybe they traded their homeland in that piece of gold for a dusty coffee plant, and maybe they made it grow in elsewhere's soil that they got to know over decades.

Other stories I know from living kin also only fit around the gaps that always fill them. My grandmother's friends—sometimes Black, sometimes mixed, and sometimes Indian, depending on when she tells this story and to whom—sheltered her in their hair salon when Idi Amin announced that Indians had ninety days to vacate, a single mother with nothing but her baby. On day ninety, she left on the very last Red Cross plane out of Uganda to Canada. Some Indians stayed regardless of the danger posed by racial violence, because their identities were tied to lands on which they could claim no ancestry but where they forged relations. Other lines of my family left earlier, because they could, their life in gold on their necks. Though these kin were well-off enough to employ Black "servants" in their homes, they saw collective anger against Indians building alongside resentment for the British imperials and they left, some back to South Asia and some to the UK or US. Some of these Indo-African migrants and refugees built community in Canada, like the one I grew up in. Some of them still feel wronged by Black people "back home" and they carry this into today. I know this anti-Black racism comes from embodied hurt with no historical or structural analysis, because it's also apparently okay and normal to love the royal family. Somehow the British Empire is not to blame, but those revolting against colonialism are. The hurt is a shade closer.

M.G. Vassanji has written a moving ouvre on this question of disasporic Indian-African identity, and Mahmood Mamdani has famously questioned a state of identity that is tied to states and their problematic nationalisms in his phrase "neither settler nor native" (Mamdani 2020). There is fierce debate among intellectuals, artists, and my uncles at the dinner table about whether we are Indians, Indo-Africans, Canadians, refugees, settlers. This is the diasporic condition: an identity that is always in between. But as Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker thoughtfully posit in their discussion of settler as a useful identity formation: "We want to focus on identity as something lived and embodied every day, and simultaneously something that can be mobilized to shape everything from states to systems of capital" (Battell Lowman and Barker 2025, 28). Identity is complex and is best used toward accountability in the present moment. I think there is some agency in that kind of imagining.

Settlement

Even in displacement, agency exists. However, there seems to be more agency connoted through "settlement" with its implication of an ongoing, purposeful violence. For many Canadians, it's a difficult reckoning to trace the movements of our ancestors that brought our bodies here to participate in settler colonialism on Indigenous lands. And for racialized refugees and coerced migrants, it may not be as easy to accept as part of the story of displacement.

Forced migration complicates the term "settler" for many folks, because it can eschew the important nuances of how people got t/here. I can easily imagine the defensive bristle of my living kin if they were to read this—what agency would they readily claim in the process of their displacement from East Africa? That bristling is self-protection, understandable when there is so much hurt and loss in the recent past. Movement often continues, and is continuous, for so many migrants.

It's worth thinking through how to encompass the nuances of movement in words that describe identity; for example, Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel uses "non-Black people of colour" because "non-European migrants do not have the power to bring with them their laws and customs, which they then apply to the rest of the

peoples living in Canada" (Vowel 2016, 16-17). She uses settler as shorthand for settler colonials, while acknowledging Black descendants of kidnapped and enslaved Africans fall outside of this categorization. Similarly, Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck uses "immigrant" because only settlers can "implement their own laws and understandings of the world onto stolen land" (Tuck n.d.). Métis scholar Emma LaRocque uses this language in a very different way: "Native peoples were the original settlers, in the sense of being a deeply rooted and settled Indigenous presence on this land we now call Canada" and as such, she refers to everyone else as "immigrant 're-settlers'" (LaRocque 2010, 7). A Palestinian friend told me when she identified as a settler in Cree-Métis law professor Tracey Lindberg's class, she was asked to consider the language of "treaty beneficiary" to describe herself because Palestine is also currently under settler occupation. Another thoughtful term comes from Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite and Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd: "arrivants" differentiates settler colonials from forced migrants, either through enslavement or other ongoing imperial violences, but also highlights the arrivant's necessary complicity in the system of settler colonialism (Brathwaite 1973; Byrd 2011).

What does that mean for those of us with no available grounding story other than the one of movement? Movement is built into my system now too, just like the absence of vitamin D. Maybe more sunshine would make me a healthier person, keep multiple sclerosis at bay, protect my brain from more scarring—but MS symptoms also flare with exposure to heat. I've been to India only once and, heartbreakingly, it was incredibly difficult for my body to be there. I thrive in cool Northern crispness, as does my child. My mother who grew up in Uganda, however, will only spend time outdoors during August heatwaves. Each of the many coats she wears reminds her of the first one, a red puffer handed to her when she arrived in snowy Montreal over fifty years ago.

To hold the intricacies of displacement and settlement together, perhaps the right term for us would be "non-Black im/migrant-settlers." The migrant pays tribute to the centrality of movement. And I'll still keep settler centrally in there because Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice's discussion of why he uses the term settler, despite its numerous complications, is compelling in how to describe my fraught lineage: regardless of forced migration, indentureship, legitimate alliances, and even strong relationships built over time with Indigenous people, groups of settlers "very often displaced Indigenous peoples and, in many cases, laid claim to the land and took its resources for their own" (Justice 2018, 11). This feels like an undeniable fact, as it's still happening today. I understand settler as descriptive of where we collectively are now, regardless of how we came or where we will go. For my family, I think that applies to both Uganda and Canada. Simply by living t/here, my family and I participate in settler colonial systems even if they do not serve us, even if they oppress us, and even as we work in various ways to dismantle them and rebuild alongside Indigenous Peoples.

Complicity

I'm careful of claiming displacement as the sole identity, because I don't want it to support a move to innocence (Tuck and Yang 2012)—alleviating my own sense of complicity in settler colonialism does nothing to meaningfully mitigate ongoing harm to Indigenous communities. I am descended from victims of colonial processes with which we are also complicit, which continue to oppress us in various ways, and from which we continue to benefit on stolen lands. After a thoughtful engagement with the terminology of settler, social work professor Elizabeth Carlson-Manathara and Muskego Inniniw scholar Gladys Rowe observe, "It is true that we exist in multiple matrices of privilege and oppression. It is also true that being oppressed in one area does not necessarily exempt one from experiencing colonial privilege and benefiting from Indigenous dispossession" (Carlson-Manathara and Rowe 2021, 36). I think this is doubly applicable for my lineage, displaced twice but also participating in the same British imperial project in Africa and Turtle Island. Their movement was not their fault and probably would not have been their choice given other options, but when displacement is connected so intimately with settlement for us, it gets complicated.

My position as a refugee settler's child is fraught. How can I work against a sense of entitlement to someone else's lands and cultures just because I can't know mine? After all, I have lost them due to the same processes that brought me here.

My people came from Gujarat, I think, the Indian state that might be associated with both Gandhi and anti-Muslim violence. What was it like to be there then? The British colonizers strategically deployed divide-and-rule tactics, and this is how I understand their moving my kin from already-occupied Gujarat to East Africa, which they were newly colonizing. My ancestors and their communities were moved in as scaffolding to the racial structure of imperialism and capitalism. When I say racial capitalism, I'm referring to the thinking of Black Marxists like C.L.R James, Eric Williams, and Cedric J. Robinson who documented the exploitation and colonization of racialized people as the foundation of industrial capitalism. Robinson makes a point that's directly pertinent to our displacement from India: "British imperialism required the organization of colonial subjects for their own subjugation and that of others" (Robinson 2019, 30). Scaffolding, then—we helped prop up the tenuous project of British imperialism. This is how tension between browns and Blacks was purposefully sown. And even years later, anti-Black racism is rampant in South Asian diasporic communities, especially those once installed on African or Caribbean lands.

How did my father's grandfather end up on that dock? What were the conditions of colonial rule under which my kin lived in India? Were any of them happy to move, was movement liberating? Did they believe they were better than those only just browner than we are in East Africa, possibly informed by pre-existing hierarchies of caste and shadism? Did they believe the lies about the "Red Indian" being uncivilized, so Turtle Island was indeed *terra nullius* for the Europeans? Were there stories of when the same colonizers came to their own land in India? Did they resent the whites? Did they want to be white?

This last question is one I have struggled with in my own body. Wanting to be white, or at least emphasizing being less brown, is a condition through which South Asians become a "model minority" under multiculturalism in Canada, which is to me at once completely understandable and palpably scab behaviour. Their working hard to survive and succeed in racial capitalism is both the reason for my existence and, at the same time, can work to thwart solidarity among non-whites. It's a well-understood joke these days how postcolonial or immigrant parents wanted us to be lawyers and not artists, but it's not really funny; it demonstrates in a nutshell how colonially informed ideologies of "progress" and "civilization" have been deeply engrained over generations as the only way to succeed. Sometimes it feels like my ancestors have been pawns co-opted into the occupier's project, historic and contemporary, imperialism outright or the same in the form of official multiculturalism. One requires a managerial class; the other a model minority. Indian historian Vijay Prashad has questioned this complicity in *The Karma of Brown Folk* when—in response to W.E.B. Du Bois's question "How does it feel to be a problem?"—he asks Asians, "How does it feel to be the solution?" in the context of being used as a "weapon" against Black liberation struggles in the US (Prashad 2000).

But Prashad's book also spends much time celebrating Black and Asian alliances throughout history. I also know from the few stories available to me that some Indians resisted colonial oppression alongside their Black neighbours in Uganda, as some South Asians have resisted alongside Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island. And while often mired in precarious, low-wage labour under racial capitalism, migrants and refugees globally are some of the most prominent voices calling out the overlapping injustices of border imperialism while seeking emancipation from these oppressive structures.

I might also choose to draw kinship from these tangible histories of deep solidarity between racialized peoples. I might remember the hair salon in which my grandmother's friends hid her, where she swept up, made food for breaks, and eventually learned how to braid kinky curls before taking an airplane to a colder land.

When these multiplicities fill my brain, and with obscured access to embodied answers, I get stuck on the central, troubling question: Were my ancestors complicit with settler colonialism, or did they resist and practise solidarity?

An awareness of complicity can be a generative condition if one can move past the paralyzing performance of it, often expressed as guilt. An old mentor once told me, "Guilt is not a feeling; it is a judgement." I often return to this observation. While guilt as a feeling reveals no path forward, guilt as a judgement is something I can work with. It's useful in determining my position and my next actions. In this way, as poet and scholar Smaro Kamboureli theorizes, "Identifying complicity is not about moralizing, but about the possibility of creating productive sites" (Kamboureli 2008, 31-48). What can I *do* with all of these considerations? Here in Mi'kma'ki, I'm far away from my living kin. Complicity with the colonial condition looks different here than it does where most of my family lives now, on Coast Salish land, or where our ancestors were brought to, on African land, or where we came from in India, which is complex in its own myriad ways. There's complicity in all of these conditions because colonialism and racial capitalism has structured everything about how we live for at least five hundred years—even something as simple as feeding myself is caught up in this web of oppression. I'm not sure that my awareness of this makes me any less complicit than my kin, even if I support the Grassroots Grandmothers defending the Sipekne'katik River (Waldron 2018) while my relatives buy investment property.

Claiming My Displaced Kin

Feminist philosopher Alexis Shotwell talks about the importance of "claiming bad kin" as a way of owning the uncomfortable but generative space of complicity. She asks, "What could it mean for those who benefit from oppression—white people, and settlers more generally—to claim kin with oppressors? If we are complicit in the pain of this suffering world, how might we take responsibility for our bad kin?" (Shotwell 2019, 8-11). While she speaks specifically to white people as beneficiaries of white supremacy and colonial displacement, her question moves me to think about the nuances of who benefits and supports this structure. I don't know if my ancestors or my living kin are "bad," but I do know that racial capitalism and settler colonialism draw every kind of person into their net, and some of us fall for its false promises of comfort at the expense of a multitude of other beings and, in the end, our own collective survival.

I have to remind myself constantly and against my Eurocentric training: while binaries may initially be a useful way to trace the contours of a complex thought, they are a very limited way of understanding the depth of the problem. Did my kin resist colonial structures or did they uncritically benefit from them? Were we "good" imperial subjects or "bad" ones? On the flip side, were we morally "good" because we resisted or were we "bad" because we didn't? There are in-betweens to these central troubling questions, and a "both-and" answer will always be more generative and useful: my ancestors were likely *both* desperate due to colonial conditions *and* complicit within colonial conditions. While desperation breeds complicity sometimes, perhaps desperation breeds resistance, too.

While ruminating on the connections between displacement and settlement and incessantly repeating so many tender, unanswerable questions, I have begun experimenting with a thought that feels okay: maybe I don't really need to know the answers to these questions to know what to do now.

In not knowing, I can own complicity in the "bad" and solidarity with the resistance that must make up the "good." I can focus on white supremacy and ongoing settler colonialism as the central problems to address, rather than judging with incomplete information the limited choices dispossessed people of colour might make.

Maybe it's enough to just ask those questions about my ancestors, not necessarily seeking the answers, because asking those questions creates the condition for being a non-Black im/migrant-settler here on Turtle Island, both complicit and resistant. Yet again, at least a second time, living on someone else's land, again conscripted into racial capitalism, and probably again trying to find a way out of it through relationship. Relating—that's central to how complicity can be generative; it can inform my responsibilities in many different kinds of relationships. It stays as a principle even with the possibility of further movement.

Not knowing but claiming in my kin the probability of shitheads *and* revolutionaries, and probably everything in between, is a condition from which I can seek answers to a more present question—not what is my heritage, or what is my identity, but how am I relating, now? To this land I find myself on, these Peoples, and the descendants of all those who were and continue to be dispossessed, displaced, stolen, and settled here through imperial movements. To my child, my future ancestors. To our future movements.

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

"It made you ache to be alive": A Conversation on *Coexistence: Stories*

by Billy-Ray Belcourt and Jeffrey Paul Ansloos

Billy-Ray Belcourt is a writer and academic from the Driftpile Cree Nation. He is an Associate Professor and the Canada Research Chair in Queer Indigenous Cultural Production in the School of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of five books: *This Wound is a World*, *NDN Coping Mechanisms: Notes from the Field*, *A History of My Brief Body*, *A Minor Chorus*, and *Coexistence*.

Jeffrey Ansloos is a writer, academic, and psychologist. He is a member of Fisher River Cree Nation. He is an Associate Professor and the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Studies of Health and Environmental Justice at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

Introduction

Billy-Ray Belcourt has emerged as one of the most vital literary and intellectual voices of his generation, whose work moves fluidly across poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and theory with remarkable precision and emotional force. Across five acclaimed books—*This Wound is a World*, *NDN Coping Mechanisms, A History of My Brief Body*, *A Minor Chorus*, and *Coexistence: Stories*—he has redefined the contours of contemporary literature in Canada and internationally. His debut, *This Wound is a World*, earned him the Griffin Poetry Prize, making him the youngest recipient in the award's history, alongside the Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton Book Prize and the Indigenous Voices Award for Emerging Indigenous Poets. Subsequent works have received the Hubert Evans Prize for Non-Fiction, the Stephan G. Stephansson Award for Poetry, and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. Belcourt has also been named a finalist twice for both the Governor General's Literary Awards and the Lambda Literary Awards, and he was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. His writing does not merely contribute to Indigenous literature; it reshapes its centre of gravity, expanding its lyric, political, and philosophical reach in bold and transformative ways.

In this dialogue, Billy-Ray Belcourt and Jeffrey Ansloos explore the creative vision behind his most recent work, *Coexistence: Stories* (2024), tracing Belcourt's literary path, artistic process, and evolving thematic concerns. Their exchange moves through the affective textures of queer Indigenous life and the intergenerational currents of love, grief, sexuality, desire, and kinship. Along the way, they confront the layered scales of ecological change, the violences of settler colonialism, and the shifting grounds of sovereignty, asking how art might conjure more livable, inhabitable, and desirous worlds. Storytelling emerges here as a practice of survivance and intimacy, a method of possibility, a way of holding contradiction, and a means of imagining futures rooted in reciprocity and care. The title *Coexistence* gestures not toward harmony but toward the difficulty and necessity of living in relation–with others, with history, with the land, and with all that resists resolution. Belcourt reflects on the dense and felt interrelation of the personal and the structural. Desire, particularly queer Indigenous desire, threads throughout the conversation as both a haunting and a horizon, exceeding colonial con-

tainment and positioning love and intimacy as sites of world-making resistance. These stories, the conversation reveals, do more than represent; they generate a felt sense of possibility, an ache toward life that insists another world can still be written into being, and indeed, already is.

The following is an adapted transcript of a conversation that took place during the *Coexistence: Stories* book launch on May 21, 2024, at the Toronto Public Library. With permission from the Toronto Public Library, the interview has been edited and shaped for publication in Atlantis by Jeffrey Ansloos and Billy-Ray Belcourt.

Conversation

Jeffrey Ansloos (JA): Shall we begin?

Billy-Ray Belcourt (BRB): Yes, you know, we are dressed the same.

JA: Oh… you're right, we are.

BRB: We didn't coordinate that, but it's giving "queer Cree professor." This is the general look.

JA: That's a read! The library is open. [laughter] What is that line you say? "What do you call a handful of Crees?

BRB: A laughter. [laughter]

JA: A laughter, yes. Reading your new book, *Coexistence: Stories,* I laughed, and cried. You have so many important stories to tell, and in each of them, deep felt knowledges to sit with and learn from. *Coexistence: Stories* is your fifth book in a series of field-defining—and in some contexts, redefining—contributions to literature from and across Turtle Island. It includes poetry, essays, novels, among many other contributions, both academic and otherwise. And with *Coexistence: Stories*, it's your first collection of short stories. I'm curious what inspired you to move toward this approach and format, and maybe what you hope to achieve with these short stories that connects to or extends beyond the work you've done so far.

BRB: I had the initial idea to write a novel about those two characters. Their names are Tom and Will. And I wrote the first story, *Lived Experience*, which is about 30 pages. And I thought once I had finished those 30 pages that I had said most of what I wanted to say. And so, a novel felt unnecessary. I put those characters aside, then thought about what other characters could populate a similar world. And I was still thinking about one of the characters from my novel who makes an appearance in the short story collection. And then I had this multi-verse of Cree men and Cree women. And I saw where their lives intersected and where they didn't. And the short story collection made the most sense to me as a place to put them in proximity to each other without having to think all the time about plot or causation. But what I learned writing these stories is that there's a certain pressure that the short form requires of me that I was used to from writing poetry. So, when I'm working on a poem I'll spend, if I can, an entire day just working through it. And I'll stop when I feel like I have something that I could move on from or that I could eventually go back to. And my process was the same for these stories. I would spend two to three days… I don't have many hobbies. And in the summer when I'm not teaching, I have a lot of downtime. So, I was working on these, I'd spend like two to three days doing only that and then move on. And through that rhythm the book came into being.

JA: In this book, you take us into incredibly poignant stories, transporting us all over the world. We journey to England, Edmonton, Vancouver, and Toronto. We traverse from Boreal Forests to northern reserves in Alberta, from lakes to universities, from art galleries to the kitchen tables of aunties and kokoms. We visit the former

housing of residential school staff and the living rooms and bedrooms of queer and 'sometimes queer' folks. As diverse as these settings are, there's an important connection between each story. You named the book *Coexistence: Stories.* I'm curious, why "coexistence"? What prompted this title?

BRB: There's a line in one of the stories about a poetry professor, a sad poetry professor. Not me because this guy's 40 years old. It's not autobiographical. But there's a line in there where he's talking to his students and he says something like, to be a poet you have to believe in the coexistence of some contradicting truths. And so, I was thinking about that line. I was thinking also about the difficult work of living with each other, about the way that people make each other's lives more possible. I think literature often has that effect at least it did for me as a youngster. And in my down time, I do think about the ways that even the most fleeting encounters with men, sometimes men whose names I don't know, those small encounters which made my life more possible, added up over time. And those all seem like ways that we coexist with each other. And of course I was talking to one of my friends and a fellow writer Tsering Yangzom Lama,[1] she was telling me that the title just felt evident to her because that's really where we're at, like coexisting with history, confronting the atrocities of the 20th and 21st century as well, living with it in ways that don't diminish its violence but rather enable us to build otherwise, build differently, imagine differently.

JA: You open the book with an example of what living with contradictions means for many people, through a poignant conversation about religion, or at least a nod to the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of Indigenous peoples. Throughout the book, from confessional booths to the home of a local medium—who offers some pop psychology and clichés, healing as they may be, about the ancestors—you trouble some of the ways that religion and spirituality are reflected upon in certain contexts. For instance, there's a story where a university-educated son has an ethical objection to staying in a house formerly occupied by, and perhaps haunted by, nuns who taught at a residential school, while his Cree mom has smudged the place and now lives there without a worry. As I read, your story contrasts with the often-flattened portrayal of Indigenous peoples' relationships with these concepts in other writings. Could you read us a section from "One Woman's Memories"

BRB: "There are three portraits of Jesus in Louise's home. In all of them Jesus's gaze is both sincere and unspecific. It evokes whatever the onlooker needs it to but always with deep seriousness. Today his gaze reflects Louise's somberness. Because it feels good to have one's emotions acknowledged without judgment, she hasn't taken down the portraits. Jesus represents for her a force in the world that nourishes, like motherhood. To be a mother is to represent for someone else life as an abstract quality" (Belcourt 2024, 1).

JA: That's gorgeous and complex. There's a line shortly thereafter where you write, "Louise isn't actually a practicing Catholic, but she believes in heaven and in the transmutability of suffering" (Belcourt 2024, 1). This notion of suffering's transmutability, and how we struggle to live differently, strikes a deep chord. Could you unpack that a bit for us—both in terms of what it reveals about the contradictions in Louise's life, and what it means to you within the context of these stories?

BRB: Well, where I grew up the footprint of Catholicism is everywhere. The hamlet I went to school in primary school is named after a French Catholic priest and, nearby towns are named after other French people from various religious factions. It wasn't until as I was writing these stories that I realized that I was grappling with the effect of the intense christianizing project of colonialism, how it shaped my life, my family's life, the larger lives of various communities in that area. And I had this image of a woman whose sense of spirituality is infused with both Cree and Catholic influences, to the extent that they can't really be distinguished. They sort of become this other third thing and how it's never a point of discussion that that's contradictory because people have had to make do in the historical positions they've been put in. But I also wanted to not turn away from the dispossessive force of Catholicism in northern Alberta. How religion moves in at the same time as westward expansion—in a totalizing way. It's difficult to try to portray people whose lives are circumscribed by history but wouldn't necessarily own up to that or don't have the language to understand themselves as such. Again, that's a contradiction that I was interested in.

JA: As I read it, I saw my aunties, my mom, my family reflected in your stories, and I've never encountered an account of their lives like this before. It was powerful to critically confront how our history is reproduced in our lives and how it refuses simplification. Let's shift from religion to sex. In your work, both in this collection and in other writings, sexual desires across a wide range of relational structures and contexts are portrayed as an arena where colonial politics are both reproduced and reimagined. At one point in this book, one of the characters describes this as being a part of "erotic possibility" (Belcourt 2024, 17). Interestingly, there are moments when your characters experience or are made to feel immense grief or shame in these expressions and experiences of sexuality. For example, in "Lived Experience," Tom, while discussing sex apps and a hookup with a settler, says, "Shame is a flickering streetlight in the middle of the night. And shame has turned me into a flickering man in the middle of my own life" (Belcourt 2024, 18-19). In Indigenous literary studies, there is concern about a preoccupation with damage and shame. In your work, you've written against this preoccupation with queer Indigenous trauma, yet you're writing about experiences that some might misunderstand as damage or a focus on pain. How do you disentangle the two, and what distinctions do you see here?

BRB: I put it this way in relation to my novel, which is that a traumatic event or something difficult in one's life is never the central focus of the work. I'm often more interested in how people survive, how they insist on their flourishing in the face of trauma or oppression. But in this story "Lived Experience," it opens with this scene that amounts to some kind of shame. And I was thinking about, I mean, no one really prepares you. Like when you're newly out and you've logged on the Grindr for the first time, no one really prepares you for those experiences that you have, that in the middle of them or even before they happen, you realize you don't want to be a part of it, but you persist anyways. And so that's what's happening in that story. And it's a bit of a turning point for the character because he realizes that he desires specific kinds of relationships that aren't being provided for him; he wants to love but the people he's meeting aren't interested in loving him. That becomes the catalyst for the rest of the story, which is more so a wish fulfillment of a form of love that is Indigenous and world making.

JA: It's true... reading the second half of this story, it's beautiful. In many respects, you offer up the aspired life and fantasy of some Cree, queer youth. It was quite startling to read, partly because it's a narrative I have rarely encountered on the page—this depiction of young queer Indigenous love. Later in the book, after receiving criticism in an arts class, the character Will says, "I'm attempting to offer up a new grammar of Indigenous life" (Belcourt 2024, 85-86). I'm fascinated by that language, which you've also used elsewhere.[2] What kind of grammar for queer Indigenous life are you trying to offer us here, in a love story that is as idyllic and tender as the one you write?

BRB: The first thing I'll say is that it is still relatively rare for a queer Indigenous book to publish. And some people might not grasp that because, for example, like between Joshua Whitehead[3] and I, there are eight books. So, people are like, oh, there's a lot going on. We have these eight books, but that's literally just two people. And we need more. We need other people writing, publishing in prose, in particular. In poetry, there's a bunch of us. Secondly, as a young queer Indigenous person, when I was reading or consuming queer media, it wasn't necessarily my own life I wanted reflected back to me, partly because there was never any kind of indication that that was something I would be afforded. I always had to understand my own life through someone else's subject position. And of course, that can be psychically destabilizing because you're always having to think about yourself through its negation. But that has compelled me as an adult writer to think about what kind of stories would I wanted to have read at that age. Like what would've felt transformative to me? It's not just self-serving because I'm not that young person anymore, but I'm hoping that it will serve others who, in the queer media landscape, only see themselves in bits and pieces. I guess the grammar that I'm interested in is one of possibility and complexity. And I've been thinking a lot with Avery Gordon, who's a cultural theorist, their conception of complex personhood (Gordon 2008), which is that we're all people with enormous emotional subtlety, and we do things that might seem contradictory. Sometimes we aren't always performing our values, but we're always full of complexity. I'm interested in queer Indigenous complexity, what it means to depict it but also to encourage people to operationalize that as a framework.

JA: It seems you're refusing and moving away from a neoliberal representational approach to narrating queer Indigenous life, by embracing complexity. We don't just receive one story or one version of queer life. As Avery Gordon suggests, we are haunted by things "we sometimes have names for and sometimes do not" (Gordon 2008). This is evident as your queer, Cree characters navigate their realities, often finding truths about themselves that differ sharply from conventional narratives imposed by settler society. For instance, in "Lived Experience," Tom muses, "it occurs to me that one also has to love despite the geographical violence of colonialism. And I want to love in a way that has geographical consequences; can love undermine a settler state? It's likely that my happiness depends on it" (Belcourt 2024, 38). This resonates with bell hooks' view that to love well is the central goal of any and all meaningful relationships, not solely romantic ones (hooks 2000). This prompts a question about your views on the transformative power of love in relation to settler colonialism and other structural violence. Do you believe that love can genuinely undermine the settler state?

BRB: It has to. There are so many ways that we are encouraged to not love ourselves as Indigenous people, to not love one another as Indigenous people, both platonically and romantically. I have a friend... I basically just paraphrased my friend in the book, where a character says that Indigenous love is the most chaotic form of love. And I'm sure any Indigenous person has anecdotal evidence of that, that it's this intense, all-consuming thing. But I think it is precisely because of the history that we've been born into. And if colonialism is both the theft of land and the attempt to eradicate Indigenous people and Indigenous ways of being, it makes sense to me that love, capaciously understood, can be a way to safeguard our ways of being in our bodies and to make our bodies inhabit the world, especially when the world is not meant to be easily habitable for Crees.

JA: It reminds me of the extraordinary poem "I Douche while Kesha Praying Plays for my iPhone on Repeat." One line from that poem really resonates here: "What I want from love is what I want from revolution" (Belcourt 2019, 27). It seems you're describing a revolutionary concept of love—love as both a method and a medicine for our times.

BRB: I will say about that poem, I wrote it after breaking up with this Australian guy I was dating.

JA: It's always the Australians.

BRB: It's always an Australian guy. He was here on a visa working at a summer camp. And I was so young and in love that I was like, I'll go back to Australia. I'll do a PhD at University of Melbourne. But he was not a good person, and didn't love me.

I was in my feelings listening to Kesha and back on Grindr and all that. But I've later reflected on that relationship as one of those moments in my life where I realized some men were going to desire me in ways that could only be marginalizing. It's as if we only exist in certain ways to them. And there's also a line in "Lived Experience" where the character says "some men wanna kill me more than they wanna sleep with me" (Belcourt 2024, 15). I've genuinely felt that in my life. So that sucks. But I think all those experiences have empowered me to think about the kinds of love that are transformative, that feel revolutionary, that in some small way helped me see myself in the future.

JA: There's a line in "My Diary" where you write, "whenever I write homeland, I see the ghostly possibility of the non-word homoland. I wish my homoland or homeland was queerer" (Belcourt 2024, 130). I relate to that deeply. We both hail from different parts of the Great Cree homelands, now in diaspora. I know that working with Indigenous queer young people in First Nations communities is often a crucible of survival. In that story, you narrate the journey of a grieving son returning home, reuniting with a long-lost lover, all set against the backdrop of the climate crisis and the vanishing Boreal Forest in Northern Alberta. And you talk about the possibilities of sexual connection. You describe what sounds like a fantastic shag, the kind that "collapses time" (Belcourt 2024, 144-145). And in the afterglow, your protagonist observes, "I can see the shape of everything around me this after sex. The forest conversely is dense with night in bed with tea. I feel dense with

the desire to live longer. If nothing else I know that it's rare to feel as desperate to see you what the future holds as I do now, as I did after the first time, he and I had sex. I didn't realize I had a degree of desperation in me. It's a relief" (Belcourt 2024, 145). I mean, this is gorgeous. It is gorgeous and terrifying. The stakes of queer desire are truly not messing around. I want to hear more about what you think about what sex and desire—specifically Indigenous queer desires—offer up in terms of the possibilities of staying alive.

BRB: I'll say growing up there were no queer people around me. And I had one openly gay cousin, and he was openly gay because he had no choice. He was just classically flamboyant. And God bless his soul. But I think things are changing nowadays. I was talking to my sister on the phone the other day and she's a mostly heterosexual woman, and she was like, 'Yes queens slay.' And I didn't say anything that necessitated that response, nor am I a "queen" necessarily, but that suggests to me that queer pop culture is now so infused everywhere.

In the story "My Diary," I wrote of a character who moves from Toronto back to Northern Alberta after this long, mostly successful art career. And he moves back too late because his parents already passed away. That would have been the reason he would have returned. I think this gets at something that a lot of queer Indigenous people contend with. I know I do. We have our homelands, we're territorial people. We have a connection to place. Our philosophies and worldviews are entangled with where we are. But if you're queer, you're usually called elsewhere. You usually have to bring yourself into being in a place that's more urban. Of course, there's exceptions to this and people figure it out, as my cousin did. But, that's just deeply difficult to do, to leave your homeland, to leave your territory, and to only go back sometimes, to lose the people that matter in those places. And this character thinks that there's nothing erotic about Northern Alberta, then this guy arrives from his past. I guess it was my attempt at showing that even these places that we have come to think of as non-queer, homophobic, transphobic spaces, still make something of our queer and trans lives possible.

JA: And you don't confine that possibility just to queer love. There's a story between Jack and Lucy that I would describe as an ode to Indigenous fathers. There is this beautiful line you wrote: "Lucy's love opened space inside his mind for different memories. That was how love changed people. It made you want to give yourself over to new pasts, to future emotional histories. It made you ache to be alive" (Belcourt 2024, 119). This portrayal makes the prairies sound like a place of possibility.

BRB: That story is also a heterosexual love story. I didn't realize till afterwards that there's no graphic sex scene in that story. And yet all the other queer stories are incredibly graphic. I couldn't figure out how to write a graphic heterosexual sex scene. That's my failing, I own up to that. And maybe in the future I'll go there.

The main question is about fatherhood. There's a line in that story where the character is like, "I only understood native fatherhood through its absence. I knew it as the shape of what I didn't receive." So, this character [Jack] is trying to turn the tide generational pattern, and be a good father. The question of how to be a good father, how to be a good native father, I think is a huge one. And this story was my small attempt at providing some kind of answer.

JA: "It made you ache to be alive" (Belcourt 2024, 119). Reading your stories, I feel that call to be and to live in a way that embraces such generative possibilities in the lives of people I know. In "Literary Festival," you tell the story of a depressed poet on tour in a small prairie city. At one point, while presenting to his prairie audience, he explains that "poetry is not merely a method of self-reflection, but a tool for collective struggle" (Belcourt 2024, 100). Later, the same poet confesses to the reader that poetry has enabled him to stay alive, beyond mere livelihood. In a time when we see Palestinian poets targeted, and multiple scales of genocidal violence livestreamed to our phones, I'm curious about your views on the role that creative practices, poetry, these stories, and your work play in resisting death and enabling life, not only in Northern Alberta or in the lives of queer Indigenous people, but also in places like Gaza.

BRB: When I teach poetry, I always start with Audre Lorde's (1985) "Poetry is not a Luxury," which is an essay in which Audre Lorde is making a case for poetry as the way that, in her case, black women insist on their freedom, insist on their ability to live in excess of violence. And it seems urgent to me that we foreground that conception of poetry, because as you now as you've said, there are so many "living structures." That's what Audre Lord calls them, "living structures," that inhibit freedom for oppressed people across the globe. And so, we, with poetry, can anchor ourselves to other ways of being that make freedom possible. Whenever I think of poetry and freedom, I always think about Dionne Brand. And in my memoir, I cite two lines of her poems: "they hate our freedom" (Brand 2006, 26) and then "only freedom matters. They hate our freedom. So, only freedom matters" (Brand 2018, 227). I'm constantly thinking about poetry as a tool for collective struggle, because we also exist in a literary culture that has essentially written off that tradition of poetry. We are descendants of people who were not expected to survive. Dian Million (2009) has this great essay about how native women turned to fiction and to autobiography in order to create a new language, because there was no kind of space, public or otherwise, for them to describe their experiences. We have to hold onto that, to that tradition of poetry and writing as one of the ways that we insist on our freedom.

JA: Thank you. I agree. And as I read your poetry and your stories, it makes me ache not just for that life, but for that freedom as well. I believe we will be free, and that Palestine will be free. Your poetry seems to ask us to hold that kind of faith, and for that, I'm very grateful. Connected to this, I wanted to ask you about land. You write about wanting to make art for the land, and about returning to the homeland. I wonder what queer Indigenous art for the land might look like, especially in your vision for the future.

BRB: I don't know if I have the range. The character in that story is thinking about how he's in the Boreal Forest, which climate change scientists are noticing is diminishing, and which I think is tragic and is a tragedy for Cree people in particular in North America. He is thinking about what it would mean to make art that acknowledges the effects of climate change. And it's not so much to say just writing a poem and burying it in the soil. But, more conceptually, can an art practice have as its main objective the sustenance of the Boreal Forest? I don't know, I don't feel like my writing practice does that. But I want to believe in the possibility of a writing practice that can sustain the Boreal Forest. I don't know what it is, but I want to believe it can exist.

JA: Well, it seems like part of what your work does—by foregrounding the land in all of your stories, when you write about the lake, the trees, the ground, and the water—is to remind each of us that this kind of freedom, the kind of aching for living that we talk about when we speak of resistance to colonialism, the defense of, protection of, and love of place, is something that is deeply connected to the love of life.

Endnotes

1. For further reading, see Tsering Yangzom Lama's debut novel, "*We Measure the Earth with Our Bodies*" (2022).

2. This concept first appears in Belcourt's (2020) essay in *The Walrus*, "How Do You Write About Joy in a State of Emergency?" where he writes, "we require a new grammar of living, one that foregrounds the fact of our utopian modes of being" (line 2, para. 2).

3. For further reading, see Joshua Whitehead's works: "Jonny Appleseed" (2019); "Full Metal Indigiqueer" (2017); "Making Love with the Land" (2022); "Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction" (2020); and "Indigiqueerness: A Conversation about Storytelling" (2023).

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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

Images, Imaginaries, and Insurgencies: Abolition Feminism and Research-Creation

by Helen Yao

Abstract: This article explores the relationship between research-creation, abolition feminism, scholar-activism, and emancipatory pedagogy. Research-creation, as a scholarly practice that transgresses disciplinary boundaries and institutional classifications, rejects dispossession and alienation. The abolition feminist notion of a "jail-break of imagination" (Kaba 2021) is exemplified in the ontological and epistemological foundations of research-creation. Reflecting upon my experiences producing and publishing abolition feminist research-creation projects, I use this article to demonstrate the synergistic potentials between the two bodies of scholarship. As I narrate how abolition feminist scholarship takes form through research-creation, I strive to articulate the possibilities and limits that come with creating an abolition feminist method.

Keywords: abolition feminism; prison abolition; transformative justice; new methods and methodologies; feminist methodologies; socially engaged art; research-creation; arts-based methods

Résumé : Cet article explore la relation entre la recherche-création, le féminisme abolitionniste, l'activisme académique et la pédagogie émancipatrice. La recherche-création, étant une pratique universitaire qui transgresse les frontières disciplinaires et les classifications institutionnelles, réprouve la dépossession et l'aliénation. La notion féministe abolitionniste d'une « évasion de l'imagination » (Kaba, 2021) est illustrée dans les fondements ontologiques et épistémologiques de la recherche-création. Dans le cadre d'une réflexion sur mes expériences de production et de publication de projets de recherche-création féministe abolitionniste, j'utilise cet article pour démontrer les synergies potentielles entre ces deux instances de recherche. Au fil de ma narration de la façon dont la recherche féministe abolitionniste prend forme dans le cadre de la recherche-création, je m'efforce d'énoncer les possibilités et les limites qui accompagnent la création d'une méthode féministe abolitionniste.

Mots clés : abolition des prisons, justice transformatrice, féminisme abolitionniste, nouvelles méthodes et méthodologies, méthodologies féministes, art socialement engagé, recherche-création, méthodes axées sur les arts

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It begins with despair. Black and blue and rusty red.

This is how I started my narration of *Tethers*, a project I created for a class on prison abolition. *Tethers* is comprised of three paintings interwoven with written prose. I produced the paintings first, using personal reflections about abandonment and belonging as inspiration. Then, I added written prose, incorporating autoethnographic accounts and abolitionist literature. The interweaving narratives invite the audience to observe a journey of becoming grounded, both personally and politically.

As a student, I was quite viscerally drawn to the notion of abolition because it not just articulates the *absence* of prisons but the *presence* of life-affirming networks of support (Petitejean 2018). Abolition was a radical theory of transformation, yet it was clarifying to me because, at a time where it felt impossible to survive the world, abolitionists said: This world is not permanent. As Robyn Maynard and Leanne Simpson proclaim, not all world-endings are tragic (Maynard and Simpson 2022). I wanted to explore this entanglement of pain, grief, hope, and catharsis that accompanied becoming an abolitionist. All the messy, personal, and affective aspects of abolition that I could not fit neatly into a research paper found their expression in this project.

Tethers was my entry point into research-creation. The term "research-creation" describes a conjunction and a relation (Manning 2015, 65). It refers to entangled forms of artistic and theoretical methods that transgress disciplinary boundaries. This is exemplified in projects like *Tethers*, where I have set out to describe the affective phenomenon of abolition by combining visual art, abolitionist theory, and autobiography. Loveless argues that research-creation, emerging from critical interdisciplinarity, embodies queer, feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial inquiries into how power constructs knowledge (Loveless 2019). Research-creation favours the creative/inquisitive process over assessable results, often breaching the divide between the emotional/rational, the subject/object, or the artist/theorist (Loveless 2019; Manning 2015). The open-endedness of the method should not be mistaken for theoretical or ideological ambiguity. In fact, by attending to knowledge "from the margins" (hooks 1989, 20-21), rendered unintelligible in the academy, research-creation articulates a resistance to epistemic violence (which is inseparable from other forms of structural violence).

Social movements exercise "radical imagination" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014) in tandem with material struggle. The world-making process takes place with the assumption that it is impossible to conclusively know the result, yet the process itself is intrinsically valuable and transformative. In this paper, I delve into the interconnections between research-creation and abolition feminism. Abolition feminism, as a body of knowledge, a liberatory practice, and a theory of change, calls for a "jailbreak of imagination" (Kaba 2021). I suggest that the speculative nature of research-creation reflects abolition feminist exercises to construct a world beyond colonialism, racial capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. Thus, research-creation can become an abolition feminist practice. Reflecting on two of my projects, *Tethers* and "Abolitionist Imagination: Re-Mapping Canada's East Coast Prisons" (Yao 2023), I strive to demonstrate the potentials and challenges of the synthesis between research-creation and abolition feminism.

Figure 1. The first part of *Tethers*. In two mirroring illustrations, a figure is shown to be falling, as if a series of strings holding it has been severed. It then floats in an icy void, unmoored and lifeless. The strings embody the series of relations grounding a person in this life and this world. The image portrays a personal experience of abandonment and alienation as the string are cut. This accompanies my written review of abolitionist works about structures of organized abandonment and social death (Kaba 2021; KODX Seattle 2017).

On Obscurity: Tracing a Path to Abolition

I am painting an explosion. Yellow and gold and vibrant red.

As my first exercise in research-creation, *Tethers* demanded me to consider all the overlapping, visceral ways through which abolition resonates with me. Abolition is a social movement rooted in the Black radical tradition and the struggle against slavery (Robinson 1983). The contemporary abolitionist movement in the United States and Canada draws parallels between the institution of slavery and the prison industrial complex (Alexander 2010; Davis 2003; Maynard 2017). Davis et al. (2022) use Du Bois's notion of abolition democracy to suggest that emancipation requires not only the abolition of slavery but also the creation of new democratic institutions for social and economic integration. Similarly, the abolition of prisons entails not just dismantling the prison industrial complex (Davis 1995, as cited by Davis 2003, 36) but also radically transforming structures that facilitate violence, such as neoliberal austerity, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy (Davis 2003; KODX Seattle 2017). Thus, Harney and Moten emphasize that abolition is "not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society" (Harney and Moten 2013, 42).

Figure 2. The second part of *Tethers*. Across two pages, tendrils of vibrant red and yellow hues explode against a black background. Their shapes resemble arteries, roots, or rivers. The bright colours serve as a contrast to the previous scenes, providing a visualization of how abolition constitutes the antithesis of abandonment. This echoes Davis' assertion that abolition entails "exploring new terrains of justice" (Davis 2003, 21), and to develop a "continuum of alternatives to imprisonment" (Davis 2003, 107).

Abolitionist theory reminds me: even in places of total control, resistance is possible; even when another world seems unimaginable, we owe it to each other to struggle towards it. In the introductory section of *Tethers*, I assert that abolition encompasses more than theoretical critiques of the prison industrial complex. By showing a figure that ultimately becomes *tethered* in a caring way, I explore how abolition takes the shape of life-affirming networks. It is a kinship with all who struggle towards freedom, an insistence that life is precious, and a refusal to abandon each other. These sentiments of faith and care, which to me constitute the lifeblood of the abolitionist struggle, cannot be neatly articulated by an academic paper. Manning (2015) posits that academic method typically aims to make order and reason out of knowledge, leading it to discard the fullness of human experiences. When I created the project, I did not want to write another impersonal research paper, I wanted to think about what made *me* an abolitionist. The result spilled out of disciplinary boundaries, too raw and messy to be contained.

Reviewing alternative archival practices as research-creation, Springgay et al. propose that within conventional knowledge validation processes, certain forms of experiences are legitimized over others. They state: "Research is the active making of an archive that organizes social and political values and systems of knowledge, rendering particular bodies, subjects, histories, memories, and affects absent" (Springgay et al. 2019, 905). A subversive archival and research practice attends to what lies beyond the text—the memories, the performances, the bodily sensations, etc. This challenges the Cartesian logic[1] that remains influential within Western intellectual thought and the Westernized academy (Grosfoguel 2013). This also constitutes a major part of critical feminist scholarship, which insists that knowledge is inextricable from its social, material, and historical context (Hill Collins 1989; hooks 1989; Simpson 2017; Wilson 2008). As Grosfoguel (2013)[2] and Simpson (2017) point out, the dismissal of alternative bodies of knowledge is a metaphorical and literal apparatus of capture. Research-creation, derived from these critiques, invites situated, insurgent knowledge that may be marginalized under dominant paradigms (Loveless 2019). Attending to obscurity (in a context where being rendered unknowable has violent consequences) is an act of care and a disavowal of dispossession.

Truman (2023) suggests that the hyphenation in research-creation compels her to consider how concepts are tethered together, both organically and forcefully. In extension she asks how academics tether themselves to certain concepts, groups, and social movements. This is a question I reflect on in my own project: what is the difference between *knowing* abolition and *knowing one is* an abolitionist? Between the page and the brush strokes, the text and the stories, I map out my answer through the tethers.

On Speculation: Abolition Feminism and a Jailbreak of Imagination

There is a hole etched into the cinderblock wall. A fissure in the enclosure.

The prison, which has been positioned as inevitable in our social landscape, is ultimately not indestructible. Kaba (2021) uses "a jailbreak of imagination" to articulate the ideological task of imagining the world beyond carceral institutions. Davis (2003) argues that, like prisons, slavery and segregation were once considered to be prominent and inescapable features of North American societies. However, generations of emancipatory struggle have chipped away at their legitimacy, building the conditions for their obsolescence (Maynard 2017; Robinson 1983). Thus, a crucial part of an abolitionist consciousness is the belief that there *can* be a world beyond prisons, even if the struggle may extend beyond one individual, one movement, or one lifetime (Kaba 2021).

Figure 3. An image of a typical cell in the segregation unit at Springhill Institution before (top) and after (bottom) being altered as part of the "Abolitionist Imagination" (Yao 2023) project. The quote, "I know a man who stabbed a man and got sent off to the SHU/ But he says when somebody comes after you, then what else do you do?" is taken from Jones' (2022, 136) poem about solitary confinement. The narration draws attention to the human experiences a cell like the one depicted can contain. Additionally, the altered image depicts a physical destruction of the prison walls, which allows various forms of life to thrive.

A jailbreak of imagination entails challenging all the ways through which carcerality infiltrates our lives, including how it has captured our capacity for envisioning an alternate world. In my project "Abolitionist Imagination: Re-Mapping Canada's East Coast Prisons" (Yao 2023), I use art and written word to pose as a disruption of the prison. The project stemmed from a Senate of Canada (2018) report titled "Photo Essay: Inside Canada's East Coast Prisons," featuring pictures from carceral institutions in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. I selected images from this report and other media articles to be altered artistically. I arranged the "before" and "after" products in between autobiographical reflections, news media articles, and abolition feminist writings. The intention behind "Abolitionist Imagination" was to re-map and re-imagine the carceral landscape. In the context of a new jail being proposed to be built in Fredericton, New Brunswick (Budhathoki 2022), I wanted to articulate a rejection of carceral expansion. Referring to anecdotes such as those featured in Jones' (2022) *Abolitionist Intimacies*, I attempted to generate a "counter-archive" (Springgay et al. 2019, 899-901) that contrasted with the sterile imagery presented to the public, often devoid of the bodies that inhabit them. Furthermore, I wanted to contest the prevailing notion within Canadian penal reform, which is that it is possible to build new, "humane" or restorative institutions (Piché 2016). Ultimately, the counter-archive formulates a refusal to accept that rehabilitation can be found at sites for social death. Colouring inside the walls, slicing the pen across the bars, and cracking the cell doors with ink, the artwork compels the viewer to imagine forms of life-affirming care and justice that renders these institutions obsolete.

To Loveless, research-creation explodes "the inherited binary between the artist-object and the theorist-subject" (Loveless 2019, 44). "Research" and "creation" are viewed as antithetical because artistic output is typically considered excessive, affective, and ambiguous, while scholarly research is rational, predictable, and conclusive. Research-creation explores how art *can* be mobilized to make an argument in a rigorous, theoretically grounded manner. For "Abolitionist Imagination," I explicitly assert that the project does not advocate for a kinder form of prisons (Yao 2023). It calls for the end of prisons and the end of *this* world (Maynard and Simpson 2022). The project refers to various forms of abolitionist action, such as the #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth campaign (Free Them All for Public Health n.d.), the filing of a Habeas Corpus application by four patients at the East Coast Forensic Hospital (Jones 2019), Prisoners' Justice Day organizing at Burnside Jail (Jones 2018), and Randy Riley's fight against his false prosecution (Jones 2022). This serves to make a conclusive argument about the necessity for abolition, directing the reader towards various forms of organizing taking place in Atlantic Canada and beyond.

Notably, research-creation is not reducible to arts-based method or qualitative research. In discussing their method for *WalkingLab*, an online collective of "Queer Walking Tours" aimed towards challenging dominant narratives of place, Truman and Springgay note: "While many arts-based approaches to qualitative research use the arts as a way of representing research findings, in research-creation the process of creative practice is understood as an empirical and theoretical practice itself" (Truman and Springgay 2019, 528). Research-creation is described as "thinking-in-event" because it subverts the conventional notion that the value of pedagogical encounters lies within conclusive, measurable results. Instead, it attends to the very *event* of learning and creation (Loveless 2019, 51). For Truman and Springgay, the Queer Walking Tour, which features pop-up lectures and artistic presentations, encourages researchers and participants to engage critically with their environment and with each other (Truman and Springgay 2019, 529–531). Thus, its pedagogical contribution lies within the journey, not the final destination.

The analogy of a trek without clear destination, which invokes sensations of the space between knowing/not knowing, belonging/not belonging, aptly describes the trajectory of social movements. Similar to the conjunction between "research-creation," the combination of "abolition" and "feminism" entails "a dialectic, a relationality, and a form of interruption" (Davis et al. 2022). Instead of being a static identifier, abolition feminist values are embodied through collective practices emerging from points of contact between the two social movements.[3] It maintains that the abolitionist struggle is inextricable from feminist organizing and that feminist goals are impossible without abolitionist imagination (Davis et al. 2022).

An abolition feminist theory of change entails a "both/and" approach (Davis et al. 2022, introduction)— attending to the personal *and* the structural, the local *and* the transnational, caring for each other in the immediate moment *and* organizing for long-term liberation. As a world-building practice, it requires a principled acceptance of ambiguity. There is no clear-cut, catch-all replacement for prisons. Instead, abolitionists must develop a constellation of strategies to address violence and harm, thus rendering prisons obsolete (Davis 2003). Gilmore articulates abolition not as the absence of prisons but as "presence, and also process" (Gilmore 2022, 2). It is the daily practices of caring for incarcerated kin, of mitigating conflicts, of feeding and caring for each other, that constitutes the building of an abolitionist world (Jones 2022, 196).

A jailbreak of imagination reckons with the unintelligibility of emancipation but remains committed to ongoing practices of care and creation. Kaba (2021) characterizes hope as not an emotion but as a discipline for an abolitionist because it involves coming to terms with one's place in an internationalist struggle that lasts beyond a lifetime. Abolition feminism is kinetic—it lives in the countless experiments with freedom across time and space, in radical acts of care that strive for immediate survival and long-term liberation. We do this work not because we believe we will win but because our collective survival demands it. Thus, it is as much an ontological commitment as it is a material struggle.

On Legibility: Insurgent Knowledge and the Academy

To do research-creation means accepting that one will encounter illegibility in institutions that fail to contain all the ways through which we understand and transform the world (Freire 1970). When I submitted "Abolitionist Imagination" for publication in an interdisciplinary journal, I think the not-quite-research-paper and not-quite-art nature of the project presented some difficulties for the editors. I had to clarify that this project is not a research essay with pictures, or a purely artistic/personal piece. All parts of the project, from the drawings, to the anecdotes, to the quotations, to the news stories, to the research, are significant and in relation with each other. The mess and the incommensurability that the project generates are part of its design because, for me, abolition can never be anything other than this entanglement of academic interest, personal purpose, introspective reflection, embodied experience, and creative outlet. "Abolitionist Imagination" was ultimately peer-reviewed in a "less critical" manner as a personal/creative piece.

The process of publishing "Abolitionist Imagination" illuminates to me what Loveless means when she describes research-creation as something that is never "at home" (Loveless 2019, 50). Research-creation is unsettling because it does not neatly belong to any academic discipline. Even when interdisciplinarity is celebrated, research-creation must be recognizable as *either* research *or* creation. Although "research-creation" is defined on the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (2012) website, institutional recognition does not necessarily translate to broader knowledge and adoption of the practice. Instead, doing research-creation in the academy may entail constantly having to assert oneself and one's project. Loveless states that research-creation brings to question "who gets to participate and whose labor gets to count but also which modes of address are permitted scholarly status" (Loveless 2019, 55). Therefore, this incommensurability is not incidental but rather demonstrative of how certain forms of knowledge validation prevails in academia. Thus, it is imperative for academic publishers to make a conscious effort to challenge conventional framings of creative/academic expression.

Moreover, the attempts and failures to discipline research-creation must be situated within broader dynamics of marginalization and containment. It is impossible to reckon with how hegemonic knowledge validation processes have alienated oppressed peoples without confronting carcerality. Prisons routinely deprive those labelled as criminal of their agency and autonomy (Alexander 2010). In Jones's re-telling of the fight to resist Abdoul Abdi's deportation, Abdi remarks to her that being detained is comparable to sitting in a grave and being deported is to be sent "beyond death" (Jones 2022, 56), into oblivion. Reflecting upon the words "the victim had no injuries" in a police incident report after the death of Breonna Taylor, Fuentes suggests that the

omission of Black testimonies from state archives is an epistemic violence that "is necessary for the persistence of injustice and Black precarity" (Fuentes 2020, 121).

Archiving carceral institutions and generating a cartography of carnage is to tell an impossible story. Writing about critical fabulation as method, Hartman describes the impossibility of recovering the full humanity of those captured in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the necessity to nevertheless attempt to narrate these lives, which have been obscured in the colonial archives (Hartman 2008). Thus, there exists "a productive tension and one unavoidable in narrating the lives of the subaltern, the dispossessed, and the enslaved" (Hartman 2008, 12). The necessity to contend with being rendered unintelligible exists alongside the impossibility of producing any representation that sufficiently offsets the violence of incarceration, enslavement, and genocide. The purpose of "Abolitionist Imagination" is not to merely bear testimony but to point the reader towards the ongoing abolitionist organizing in Atlantic Canada. Yet the tension Hartman (2008) describes remains as one attempts to make one's work legible to the academic institution. James argues that the ways through which "imprisoned intellectuals" such as George Jackson are reduced to icons and academic studies, while their language remains censored and their bodies remain captive, constitute another form of containment (James 2003, 5-6). Thus, Jones writes: "Our praxis of the archive cannot be limited to paper" (Jones 2022, 51). The refusal to surrender the living to obscurity, to not only recover hidden narratives from the past but fight to preserve someone's humanity *in the present*, is how one strains against the limits of legibility.

Contesting oblivion means making forgotten places like the prison—including all the violence they inflict and all the resistance that persists—visible. This work extends beyond the academy. On *Black Power Hour*, the radio show Jones (2022) co-hosts, incarcerated people call in and request for songs to be played between the political commentary. Jones observes that, often, to request a song and to hear it played is one of the only ways a prisoner can exercise agency. The hip-hop songs caused white listeners to complain about the glorification of crime. The local jail attempted to block prisoners from tuning in (Jones 2022). The efforts to censor, contain, and eliminate spaces where prisoners can express their desires is demonstrative of how a carceral logic infiltrates every aspect of social life. However, Jones' accounts also illustrate how abolitionist work occurs in the spaces generated through hip-hop songs, romance books, care packages, creative writing workshops, etc. Thus, it exceeds the boundaries of the text and the academy. As institutions attempt to discipline and contain insurgent knowledge, fugitive spaces also emerge to foster it for survival and transformation.

Conclusion

The cement gives way to the weeds, the barbed wires yield for the sky.

It is ultimately not my priority to make research-creation and abolition feminism legible to the academy. Jones elucidates: "Our duty to the living, first" (Jones 2022, 56). As James points out, it is the entrenchment of abolition in academic institutions that dilutes its radical potential and shifts the focus away from the site of the struggle (James 2021). A jailbreak of imagination demands us to think of our work beyond academic credentials or performance metrics. The value of research-creation lies with its capacity to make academic research accessible to the broader public, placing it in conversation with material struggles. The task at hand is not about expanding the boundaries of academic research to encompass creative methods but to consider how research-creation forges pathways *beyond* the institution, allowing us to redirect our knowledge and resources towards the liberatory praxis. Just as research-creation allows the intellectual inquiry to *lead* the application of disciplinary skills, abolition feminist scholarship must begin with the question of *what will preserve life, knowledge and resistance in the present* and use the answer to guide our method.

Endnotes

1. When Descartes proclaims, "I think, therefore I am," he describes an asocial process of knowledge acquisition: the mind, independent from the body and the context it inhabits, produces knowledge that is objective and universal (75–76). In contrast, knowledge "from the margins" (hooks 1989, 20–21), which is situated within particular bodies or geographies, is dismissed as biased and inferior.

2. Using the term "epistemicide," stemming from "episteme," Grosfoguel explores the destruction of alternative knowledge systems as a result of genocides (particularly due to colonization). Thus, he argues that the centrality of Westernized knowledge is constructed from the *material dispossession and physical elimination* of bodies that house alternative knowledge traditions (Grosfoguel 2013, 86–88).

3. Although mainstream feminists often call for criminal legal interventions in response to patriarchal violence, feminists-of-colour have asserted that intensifying surveillance and criminalization of marginalized communities fails to effectively prevent this (Harris 2011; Kaba 2021). Not only does incarceration exacerbate cycles of destructive masculinity (Harris 2011), it also constitutes a form of state-sanctioned gender violence itself (Davis 2003; Kaba 2021). Due to the intersection of class, race, and gender-based discriminations, poor racialized women are vulnerable to both interpersonal and state violence (Crenshaw 1991; The Combahee River Collective 1978). Thus, various configurations of queer, abolitionist, and race-radical feminist organizing reject surveillance and criminalization in favour of developing non-state responses to harm (Kaba 2021; Kim 2018; Palacios 2016; Third Eye Collective 2021). This becomes the foundation through which an abolition feminist understanding emerges, framing gender violence and carceral violence as parts of the same oppressive circuit (Davis 2003; Harris 2011; Kaba 2021).

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

It Flows/Runs Wildly/Crazily: Unravelling Settler Legacies on Stolen Mi'kmaq Land

by Sadie Beaton

Carrying many generations of settler land relations in Mi'kma'ki, Sadie Beaton is a listener, activist and PhD candidate currently living in Mtaban (Wolfville). Drawing on her own ancestral histories, her research engages with embodied archival practices, Indigenous politics of water, and collaborative storytelling to trouble the pioneer lies that stifle settler imaginations about what kinds of relations and futures are possible on these lands and waters. Her practices yearn in the direction of repair, responsibility, and liveable futures here.

My mother went into labour in a crowded gym at Canso High School. Folksinger Stan Rogers was playing a kind of hometown show in a place long called Kamsook, in Eskíkewaq. Though he'd been born in Ontario, Rogers spent summers on this shoreline with extended family, absorbing stories of hard-working fishermen and woodsmen. I bet half the audience was in tears, hearing their stories of blood and toil transfigured into folk hero ballads like "Make and Break Harbour" and "Fogarty's Cove." It was into these minor chords, wistful for an already fading lifeway, in an already dying town, that my mother's water broke and I was stirred into life in Mi'kmaq territory.

For most of my life, I didn't wonder what it meant to belong on the lands where my white, settler family have made their lives and told their stories over many generations. I spent my childhood feeling deeply connected to this rugged territory on the edge of the Atlantic, chasing mte'skm (snakes), picking klitaw (raspberries), catching aboodawejit (sculpins), and building forts out of moss and deadfall. Like many who grew up in in Eskíkewaq, I also inherited a nostalgia for the hard-scrap livings so many of us must eke out in order to "belong." And I spent almost two decades at an environmental organization advocating for the kinds of fisheries, forestry, and climate polices that I hoped might secure sustainable futures here.

Until recently, I didn't recognize my home as Mi'kma'ki, the unsurrendered territory of the L'nu (or Mi'kmaq). I didn't associate the ever-expanding clearcuts or spectacular collapse of the cod fisheries that shaped my Eskíkewaq childhood with broken treaty relations. For most of my career, I didn't even know that there *were* Peace and Friendship Treaties, let alone how the social and environmental crises raging around me related to Mi'kmaw people being hindered from their relational obligations.

Mi'kmaq rights and responsibilities are affirmed by the Peace and Friendship Treaties, which never ceded legal title to their lands and waters to the British crown or the Canadian state and guaranteed L'nuk the liberty to hunt, fish, and trade as they had always done (Battiste 2016; Henderson 2001; Paul 2022). In 1720, Mi'kmaq Nation entered into a Treaty relationship with the arriving British settlers with an intention to extend a familial alliance and share Mi'kma'ki's bounty (Pictou 2019; Battiste 2016; Wicken 2012). Negotiated before Britain had secured a strong colonial foothold here, these agreements make no mention of land surrender and required the crown to obtain Mi'kmaq consent before building new settlements (Henderson 2001; Pictou 2017; Steigman and Pictou 2023; Wicken 2002).

Treaty scholars insist that the full significance of these agreements is not found in the static text but in what L'nu legal scholar Tuma Toung (2016) names as the L'nuwey Tplutaqan, the laws or justice systems of the Mi'kmaq. The Tplutaqan derives from "the sounds and sights of the sacred L'nu ecological spaces" and is fully expressed in the language, stories, and ceremonies that include the foundational concepts of M'sɨt No'kmaq, Netukulimk, and Tpi'tnewey (Denny and Fanning 2016; Henderson 2001; *M'sɨt No'kmaq* et al. 2022*,* 839; Prosper et al. 2011; Young 2016). These embedded Mi'kmaq philosophies express a generous and deeply relational way of knowing, co-created by an extensive web of human and more-than-human relationships that includes the lands and waters, as well as ancestors and future generations (Bernard 2018; *M'sɨt No'kmaq* et al. 2022*;* Sable and Francis 2012; Young 2016). As a settler, it is important both to acknowledge and to stay humble about these L'nu concepts because, as Young (2016) cautions, a full understanding of Tplutaqan is impossible without understanding Mi'kmaq cosmologies, which are embedded in the language.

Robin Cavanaugh and Alfred Metallic (2002) describe the relational basis of the treaties as an "extended family system ideology whereby we enter into sacred agreement for the purposes of extending our interconnectedness and interdependency with each other" (quoted in Pictou 2019, 51; see also Battiste 2016; Henderson 2001; Young 2016). As L'nu scholar, activist, and Honorary District Chief, Sherry Pictou (2019) explains that Mi'kmaq practices of treaty-making, which long precede colonization, have long been "informed by principles of mutual responsibility, obligation, and interdependence" (51; see also Battiste 2016; Henderson 2001). These relational blueprints allowed for settlement to occur, bringing settlers into a wider web of existing relationships and responsibilities (Battiste 2016; Pictou 2019; Young 2016). As Mi'kmaw Water Protector Kiju Kukuwes Wowkwis has summarized, "We made Treaties for you [settlers] to live off the land and for all of us to live together in harmony and peace, as long as you don't mess with the environment, plain and simple" (in Beaton 2018).

It was only after I became involved in the Treaty Truckhouse Resistance, a Mi'kmaw-led struggle against a proposed natural gas storage project, that I began to understand Mi'kma'ki as "a space of multiple and overlapping colonial violences since 1604" (Wysote and Morton 2019, 480). The more time I spent in this resurgent geography along the Sipekne'katik River, the more I began to suspect that my inherited settler worldviews were not equipped for sustaining life here (Estes 2019). Mi'kmaw Water Protectors up-ended everything I thought I knew about caretaking the lands and waters. They showed me that what threatens "the environment" is not just broken policies but broken land relations that stem from settler colonialism, an invasive structure that requires ongoing dispossession of Mi'kmaw lands for settler use (Coulthard and Simpson 2016; Pictou 2019; Veracini 2011; Wolfe 2006).

I've started bringing my mother to visit places where our settler ancestors once walked. Recently, we followed my great grandfather's steps to Sheet Harbour, where dark mineral waters from the East and West River churn through Eskíkewaq's rocky topography, traversing a provincial game sanctuary, around the ruins of old mills and dams built for driving logs and through newer dams built for generating electricity for Nov Scotia Power. According to the Community Museum, the Mi'kmaq call this place where the two rivers meet to flow together Weijooik, meaning, "flows/runs wildly/crazily."

"Settler" is a relational term for someone who makes Indigenous land "their home and source of capital," most often describing those of us from "the European-descended sociopolitical majority" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 5). Scholars trouble over this imperfect label, which arguably either obscures or make overly special the role of whiteness, social class, modes of arrival, and other complex factors (e.g., Byrd 2011; Fung 2021; King 2016 Phung 2011; Razack 2002; Trask 2000; Ward 2015). But the term generally sums up my lineage in Mi'kma'ki, situating me into both a set of predictable behaviours and a tight relationship with ongoing land theft (Macoun 2016; Tuck and Yang 2012; Whyte 2020).

My mother is taken by Weijooik's dark eddies and asks to stop roadside several times. She wants to look, to smell, and to remember. We even trespass onto an old camp property where her grandfather worked. I'm glad to stop and listen to the memories the water provokes. Some of it is reverie, like reckless play at the hydropower dam. But there's painful memories too.

Anishnaabe-Ukranian writer Patty Krawec reminds us that "being a settler is not something you are, it is something you do" (Krawec 2022, 178). But I'm learning that settlers like me continue to be appalling relatives, not so much because of any conscious choosing but because colonialism depends on us to continue betraying relationality (Shotwell 2016; see also Tallbear 2019). Settler land relations are contingent on a continued reproduction of what settler and Mi'kmaq researchers Travis Wystote and Erin Morton (2019) have dubbed the "pioneer lie," a deeply embodied structure of feeling that cuts off settler curiosity and obscures Indigenous jurisdiction, effectively normalizing exclusive settler entitlement to the lands and waters (Mackey 2016; Rifkin 2011 after Williams 1958).

Navigating potholes and roadkill, and my mother's childhood anecdotes, there are moments I feel something of the violence of ongoing dispossession ripple through me. The clearcuts everywhere. The abandoned camps. And something mom said about why her brother could never shoot a deer. What he had seen and the ways he felt responsible.

The car radio reports on massacres in Palestine. There is silence in the car.

Feminist writer Donna Haraway contends that for those of us concerned with broken relations, "our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places" (Haraway 2016, 1). Responding to nudges from Mi'kmaw comrades and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I have begun disturbing the surface of my own family's story of colonial settlement. Considering that my broke-ass "pioneer" heritage is typical of many white settlers making home here, my re-

search traces the emergence of settler land relations in Mi'kma'ki through my own family lore. I'm wondering what becomes possible when we tease out stories that highlight rather than obscure the deep mess of choices we're entangled with: stories from the archive, the land, and our everyday relationships, stories that deflate the entitled pioneer lie of *terra nullius* (Wysote and Morton 2019*)*.

This essay attempts to share some of my emergent practices—some academic and some not-so-much—that tug at the tight mechanics of my inherited settler logics. I've been informing myself with anticolonial research practices across many disciplines and landscapes as "a practice of affirmation, repair and resurgence, looking upstream to see structures of violence" (Liberion 2021, 137). But I'm also kinda making it up as I go along because there is something that beckons beyond the .pdfs, reels of microfiche, and even the Truckhouse teachings. There is spooky magic to consider, too, when I get lost on the way to museums, encounter animals on moonlight paths, or visit graveyards with my mom. And I'm becoming convinced that noticing this is part of contending with the colonial archives stored in storied settler bodies like mine.

I lay tobacco at the Weijooik's edge, as requested by my friend and mentor Cathy, whose Mi'kmaw ancestors long hunted and trapped around here. Through and despite ongoing colonial violence.

Atop E'se'katik: Locating My Settler Ancestry

Indigenous peoples often distinguish themselves from settlers as "those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how they came to be in a particular place" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 6). My "colonization story" begins with emergence of settler land relations and accompanying narratives of entitlement in Mi'kma'ki, the unceded territory of the L'nuk, or Mi'kmaw people, which contains seven districts ranging through what is now called the Canadian Maritimes, along with parts of Quebec and Maine, to Newfoundland. For the Mi'kmaq it is weji-sqalia'tiek, which means something like "we arose from here" (Sable and Francis 2012).

Coming home in grade six with family tree homework, I had questions. But my mother had evasions. "My family doesn't have a tree," she explained. "It's more of a bush." I remember adding a flourish of coiled branches and getting a bad grade. I was surprised, then, when mom got a subscription to Ancestry.ca a few years ago. The digital tree was bushy with question marks, too, but this time she was ready to look for some answers.

Nova Scotia is a place my ancestors surely did not sprout from but rather landed roughly into, after eighty-six days and several deaths, on a sailing ship called *The Pearl* (Bell 1961; Hebb 1974). The first of them to arrive were born into hereditary serfdom in a Germanic region of the dwindling Holy Roman Empire (DesBrisay 1895; Teal 1994). The lands they lived and worked on were under the feudal control of whatever baron, prince, or bishop had most recently wrested control of these contested agricultural "dukedoms" along the Rhine River (Bell 1961, 87-97). There had been a century of constant war and the birth throes of the modern state increasingly squeezed my peasant ancestors. Historian Winthrop Bell describes the region as one "sacked and burned and reduced to… misery" in the 1700s, as landed gentry were escalating both the enclosure of common lands and the exploitation of enserfed farmers attached to these lands (Bell 1961, 96; see also Federici 2004, 21).

Our first ancestor-hunting trip brought us to the World Heritage town of Lunenburg, once known as the clamming area of E'se'katik, now preserved by the United Nations as "the best surviving example of a planned British colonial settlement in North America" (UNESCO, n.d.). Mom and I visited museums and a genealogical archive, learning that our earliest ancestor to obtain land-as-property in Mi'kma'ki was a twelve-year-old Germanic "foreign protestant" named Adam, part of a settler cohort well documented and celebrated on Nova Scotia's south shore as pioneering heroes.

We learned that Adam first arrived at the great harbour of Kjipukuk, long known as an abundant hunting and fishing area and sacred L'nuk gathering place (Bell 1961; Hebb 1974; Paul 2022; Teal 1994). Governor Edward C---wallis had unilaterally "founded" the British settlement of Halifax there just two years prior, an act of colonial aggression that betrayed the 1725/26 Peace and Friendship Treaty, a legal agreement premised on a mutual recognition of sovereignty that did not cede title, and required Mi'kmaq consent before building new settlements (Paul 2022; Pictou 2015).

Adam was indentured for his passage by John Dick, a Swiss recruiter contracted by C---wallis on behalf of the British crown to attract "productive" Germanic serfs to help build the new colonial settlement of Halifax (Bell 1961; Sable and Francis 2012). Dubbed a "soul seller" by competitors for his failure to mention the sovereign Mi'kmaq, Dick's handbills made use of *terra nullius* to hone in on the aspirations of landless, war-weary serfs, promising not only land-as-property but an escape from religious persecution and from ongoing conscription into seemingly never-ending battles (Bell 1961). As my ancestors disembarked, touching Mi'kma'ki for the first time, their "pioneer" bodies were already conscripted into both physically dispossessing Mi'kmaq from their lands and embodying and reproducing the emotional logics of *terra nullius* that were key to fortifying Britain's colonial claim (Mackey 2016; see also Coulthard 2014).

> *Terra nullius* is a Latin term meaning "land belonging to no one," historically used to justify the colonization of lands that were perceived as uninhabited or uncivilized by European powers. Using this doctrine, colonizing nations including Canada claimed sovereignty over territories without recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples who had lived on the land for millennia. The doctrine was historically applied in Canada, to justify the appropriation of Indigenous lands by European settlers. The *terra nullius* framework has now been explicitly rejected by Canadian courts, most notably in the 1973 *Calder v. British Columbia* case, which recognized Indigenous land rights predating European settlement. This legal shift paved the way for further recognition of Indigenous rights to land, culminating in the landmark *Delgamuukw* (1997) and *Tsilhqot'in* (2014) cases, which affirmed the legal status of Indigenous land titles and sovereignty. While *terra nullius* is now widely considered an invalid legal concept, Canada has yet to uphold the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to govern their territories.

Survivors of *The Pearl* arrived to a colonial outpost at war. They were likely shocked to learn that L'nuk sovereignty was being asserted through expressive and deadly raids (Wicken 2002; Bell 1961). Governor C---wallis had declared the Mi'kmaq as "Rebels of His Majesty's Government or as so many Banditte Ruffians," two years earlier, instructing newly arrived settlers to "annoy, distress, and destroy the Indians everywhere," and placing a bounty on their scalps (PANS RG1, vol 209, Oct 1, 1749; see also Paul 2022). These foreign protestant newcomers were directed to pay their debts to the British crown by building government works, which turned out to be military fortifications to defend the outpost from ongoing L'nuk attacks (Bell 1961).

Sipekne'katik Warrior Chief Jim Maloney generously states that my ancestors "came here broken people, they had nothing, they were running away and promised a different place. But they didn't realize there was theft involved, and mayhem and genocide" (in Beaton 2018). Critical whiteness scholar David Dean describes this as a typical colonial "set-up" where "a small Western European ruling class found manipulative and violent ways to dislodge the European masses from their traditions of political, cultural and religious resistance to domination, and enlist them as foot soldiers of a growing capitalist empire" (Dean 2023 n.p.). Pioneer shares etymological roots with words like "pawn," "pedestrian," and "peon," denoting a foot soldier or serf held in servitude that was typically sent ahead of more high-ranking units to cut down forests, dig trenches, and clear trails through "enemy territory."

Detailed archival records led us to the specific addresses of properties first granted to Adam in E'se'katik—a town, garden, and farm lot. Later that afternoon, we found his final resting place, on lands he had cleared himself on a placid elbow of the Pijinuiskaq (Lahave River), which means "having long joints or branches." The graveyard is encircled by ancient oaks, which I noticed mostly because we kept getting beaned by their acorns. Mom felt these falling acorns were a sign of malevolence.

I wonder how my ancestors would have coped emotionally with the soul-seller's lie. Many scholars point to this jurisdictional dissonance as the crux of settler land relations: anxiety, denial, and entitlement (Slater 2020; Mackey 2016; Barker 2012). Macoun and Strokasch state that "settler colonialism operates as a fantasy, in the sense that it endlessly merges together its desires and reality. For example, settlers simultaneously assert colonialism to be finished while seeking to finish it, and proclaim the land to be empty in the same moment they confront an Aboriginal person" (Macoun and Strokasch 2013, 433-34). Vigorous and ongoing Mi'kmaw resistance to dispossession serves as a potent and uneasy reminder for settlers that the colonial fantasy is far from realized.

During a solemn moment, I tried to photograph my mom contemplating Adam's headstone. But as I steadied the camera, there was a loud bang. The photo shows thick black smoke unfurling directly from our ancestor's grave, though it was actually coming from a burning shed across the Pijinuiskaq. We laughed nervously as sirens began to wail and Mom said flatly, "Well of course something blew up."

Haunted Cards: Exorcising Colonial Archives in Mi'kma'ki

When I first visited the Nova Scotia Archives, I didn't know what I was looking for or how to use the finding aids. I flipped aimlessly through a deep drawer of index cards when one lingered. In cursive, it said: "*Playing cards used to divide land lots."* As I pencilled down the reference, a spectral whisper shivered through my spine, advising me that these cards would need shuffling.

As settler archivist Avery Gordon asks "How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?" (Gordon 2018 18). Gordon defines haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (Gordon 2008, xvi). Irish ethnographer Fiona Murphy notes that while "we primarily see the archive as a storehouse of memory and fact," they serve a further function, "where unpacified ghosts with unfinished business await, yielding stories and letters different from expectation" (Murphy 2011 481). Murphy's archival practices detect "little stories lie in waiting to challenge the master narrative of the nation-state" where as psychoanalyst Nicholas Abraham states "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (Abraham 1994, 493; in Murphy 2011, 171).

Put another way, settlers like me were made to disregard treaty relationships and invest in settler-defined nation-state futures (Tuck and Yang 2012). Maintaining settler occupation here requires me to nurture the twisted fantasy of *terra nullius* that denies ongoing Mi'kmaq sovereignty through asserting banal, everyday settler activities (Tuck and Yang 2012; Mackey 2016). Settler historian Renée Bergland (2000) calls this "spectralization," an iteration of the pioneer lie that simply vanishes Indigenous people from their lands and the historical record, transforming them into ghosts who live on in white settler imaginations (see also Ghaddar 2016; Gordon 2008).

Increasingly, I'm understanding the emotional logics of the "pioneer lie" as structures of settler *un*-feeling and *un*-relating. Former TRC research director Paulette Regan (2010) contends that because it is nearly impossible to ignore evidence that Canada was built through colonial violence, settlers choose instead to deny their complicity (see also Macoun and Strokasch 2013). This elaborate charade is maintained, often subconsciously, in an attempt to resolve our "uncomfortable and precarious dis-location as usurper, and replace the Indigenous people as the natural, historical, rightful and righteous owners of the land" (Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández

2013, 77). The acrobatics required to avoid feeling implicated in colonial violence (and feel entitled to the land) entails denials of relationality that are necessarily disembodied, leaving us haunted (Slater 2020, 818).

My great grandfather helped out at a hunting and guiding outfit in Weijiook. It hugged the border of the Liscomb Game Sanctuary, a gated landmass where hunting was prohibited but settler clearcutting was licenced by the government. As elsewhere in Mi'kma'ki, treaty-affirmed Mi'kmaw jurisdiction over these hunting territories was ignored by wardens, leading to arrests and worse for L'nuk who "trespassed" (Parker 1994). The retired game warden avoided my eyes when I asked about relationships between settler and Mi'kmaq hunters. He had nothing to say about the many laws that not only prohibited Mi'kmaq from hunting on their own territories but also made legal representation illegal until 1951 (Paul 2022). He didn't mention anything about burning down Mi'kmaq camps in the sanctuary.

Paulette Regan's experience with the TRC informs her contention that before anything like "reconciliation" can begin, settlers must "unsettle the settler within" by renouncing the persistent national "peacemaker" myth that idealizes the pioneer lie, imagining settlers as benevolent and innocent rather than perpetrators of violence. She urges settlers to redirect the substantial energy we spend on denial towards acknowledging the trauma we sustain through denying our relationality with the land and the Indigenous people who rightfully govern it (Regan 2010, xx).

But settler modernity continues to nip our decolonial curiosity in the bud, harming the ability of settlers like me to imagine settler-Mi'kmaq relations beyond narrowly conscripted storylines (Mackey 2016; Ahenakew 2023). When I asked the warden about my great-grandfather, he chose his words carefully. He drove me to see his gravestone at a small churchyard deep in the woods, carved with a spitting image of the church. "I doubt he ever stepped foot in it though," he chuckled. A memorial quilt hung inside the church, with custom squares honouring community members, embroidered with fishing rods, wildflowers, eight-point bucks in the crosshairs, sewing needles, and all-terrain vehicles. My great grandfather's square stood out to me: a losing hand of cards.

Unravelling the pioneer lie that twists through my family line has begun to feel a little bit like an exorcism. The more I ask spooky questions, the more I recognize a disembodied *terra nullius* in the form of nebulous untold stories that insist on replicating into the present, haunting settler archives and settler bodies. Riffing on Rae Spoon, settler philosopher Alexis Shotwell reminds us that "colonial ghosts live in the bones of their descendants and inheritors" (Shotwell 2016, 23). Or as Mi'kmaw scholar Tiffany Morris puts it, "if the history of relationality to the land is made ghostly through settler colonial occupation, that history is necessarily disembodied" (Morris 2023, 30). In other words, the land is haunted because it is stolen (Bergland 2000).

Sanctuary as Dispossession: Violence in the Borderlines

The tattered playing cards that first conjured my family's settler land relation show up in the archives as neutral, even playful, objects. But holding the actual cards in my hands felt uncanny, thick and heavy with the frivolity and the violence of British colonialism. I shuffled them clumsily, waiting to understand what was to be done—or undone.

One spring morning in 1753, each foreign protestant man in Halifax, including 14-year-old Adam, was invited to draw a playing card from this deck, which had been marked to correspond to a parcel of land in E'se'katik, It was a simple game that dealt my family out of indentured servitude to the crown and into settler land relations (Bell 1961; DesBrisay 1895). But it was not played in cooperation with the Mi'kmaq, an act of *terra nullius* that broke the terms of the recently brokered 1752 Peace and Friendship treaty (Paul 2022; Wicken 2012; Bell 1961). This was a moment of settler colonial dispossession, where the intimate land relations that had long governed Mi'kma'ki were obscured through a simple game of cards into relations of domination, also known as "property law" (Nichols 2020).

Mi'kmaw law both sprouts from and emphasizes the deep flux of Mi'kma'ki's ecology, where an astonishing abundance of beings have long co-existed in elastic, overlapping jurisdictions held together by treaty agreements (Cavanaugh and Metallic 2002; Lewis in Beaton 2018; Sable and Francis 2012; Young 2016). But the imported settler land relation that my ancestors came to embody stems from a peculiarly British method of claiming territory that might be summarized as "finders keepers," but is also shaped by a fixation on "certain boundaries" (Mackey 2016, 45-46). It is a system both politically and emotionally predicated on "an illusion of permanency and inevitability" that not only interrupts L'nuk responsibilities but also collective forms of ownership, which aim to dissolve the Mi'kmaq nation into individual subjects (see Waziyatawin 2012, 76; Lelievre 2017).

In settler colonialism, "colonisers move to a new setting and establish their ascendancy" through the theft and exploitation of Indigenous lands (Veracini 2011, 1). Tuck and Ree underscore the ongoing violence of this land relation, describing it as "the management of those who have been made killable, once and future ghosts" (Tuck and Ree, 2013, 642). My ancestors established themselves by clearing large tracts of land of both trees and Mi'kmaq presence as required "improvements" to retain land as property in the new colony (Bell 1961). Because it turns out that the "pioneer lie" of *terra nullius* didn't legally require believing Mi'kma'ki to be uninhabited by people at the time of colonial contact—but only of so-called "productive people" (Mackey 2016).

The colonial card trick summoned several generations of farmers in my lineage, characters like "Big Lem," famed for his ability to knock men out with a single punch. Many are buried at the foot of a large sixth-generation operation called "Indian Garden Farms," a name that conjures the L'nuk caretaking relations that my ancestors helped replace with the violence of "productive" property relations. But my great grandfather jags the ancestral line, eluding the archives, obscuring even his mother's name. He runs away in his teens, eventually abandoning his generational claim to land along with his plot in the family cemetery.

Mi'kmaq partners continue to extend settlers an invitation into the treaty relationship (*M'sɨt No'kmaq* et al. 2022; Pictou 2019; Wysote and Morton 2019; Battiste 2016). But after centuries of violent settler relations, Mi'kmaw legal scholar Tuma Young first urges a "'radical and daunting' transformative shift for the dominant culture, requiring 'deep changes in how knowledge and reality are constructed and experienced" (Young, 2016, 82). It's a tall order but as Mi'kmaw and settler research partners Travis Wysote and Erin Morton offer, "if these shared agreements could lead to a mutual understanding of peace, one defined apart from white possessive logic, the treaties could also lead to a return to Mi'kmaq governance and law on Mi'kmaq land" (Wysote and Morton 2019, 493; see also Moreton-Robinson 2015).

The Peace and Friendship treaties are clear that settlers have no role in governing Mi'kmaq lives but rather an obligation to ensure that Mi'kmaq partners are not hindered from their own responsibilities to the lands and waters here (*M'sɨt No'kmaq* et al. 2022; Wicken 2002; Young 2016). But Canada has not upheld this relationship, redirecting demands for Mi'kmaq sovereignty towards shallow cultural recognition or "reconciliation without land" (Alfred 2023; Coulthard 2014; Pictou 2019 and 2015; Simpson 2017). For this reason, Mi'kmaw legal scholar Sherry Pictou points away from state negotiation processes, towards the potential for informal "small-t treaty partnerships" between Mi'kmaq and settler groups—and the land itself—and to shift relational understandings and further Mi'kmaq resurgence (Pictou 2017, 144-45; see also Pictou 2019, 57).

H(a)unting Beyond Historical Legacies and Settler Self-Absorbtion

I've been sharing tea and stories with my friend and mentor Cathy for about a decade. In the early days, I couldn't get enough of her "Mi'kmaw stories." Punctuated with jokes and riddles, she patiently outlined the ongoing genocide, from the violence of British contact, to centralization, residential schools, missing and murdered relatives, to the constant violations of hunting and fishing rights. But when the tea was gone, she would always refrain, "Your people have stories, too, Sadie. What do you know about them?"

A few years ago, I found a map of traditional Mi'kmaw traplines spanning Eskíkewaq. Just upstream of the Weijooik in and around the sanctuary, I traced a tangible intersection of our family stories, where my great grandfather and Cathy's grandfather both likely hunted. Yearning to re-configure relations with Cathy beyond these historical legacies has compelled me through debilitating settler awkwardness to explore this confluence, but I'm also terrified of replicating exploitative patterns. I am deeply suspicious that this research remains driven by an embodied *terra nullius* that swerves away from my own ancestral wounds to justify an innocent, comfortable life on stolen territory (Morgenson 2009). As Potawatomi scholar and organizer Kyle Whyte underlines, "consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity are qualities of relationships that are critical for justice-oriented coordination… yet they are precisely the kinds of qualities that take time to nurture and develop" (Whyte 2020, 2). And with this kind of colonial violence between us, I am thinking this means generational time.

While the toxic pull of white saviourism is familiar, I'm relatively new to academia's embedded rewards for white settler scholars studying white supremacy and colonial violence (Tuck and Yang 2012). I'm too-slowly realizing that my proximity to Mi'kmaw water protectors attracts extractive academic "invitations to collaborate." As Métis thinker Zoë Todd warns, "not only do many universities across the country occupy unceded territory, they also currently mobilize the white possession of unceded knowledge" (Todd 2017, n.p.). But I'm also haunted by black abolitionist scholar Tiffany Lesotho King's stunning observation that when white people begin studying settler colonialism, "an actual discussion of Native genocide is displaced by a focus on the white settler's relationship to land rather than their parasitic and genocidal relationship to Indigenous peoples" (King 2016, 4).

Indigenous scholars often encourage reconsidering research as a process of genuine relationship building (Absolon 2022; Tallbear 2014; Wilson 2008). I wonder what it would look like to embrace what Indigenous-and-settler scholar duo Jones with Jenkins describe as an inevitable "struggle between interests, and between ways of knowing and ways of resisting… to create a research and writing relationship based on that tension, not on its erasure" (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 475). While I recognize these relational contours from the Treaty Truckhouse resistance, I've struggled to replicate it within the halls of academia.

Pursuits of innocence not only echo *terra nullius*, they also "shut down precisely the field of possibility that might allow us to take better collective action against the destruction of the world" (Shotwell 2016, 9). In what I imagine as a nod to my great grandfather's losing hand, settler scholars Adam Barker and Emma Batell-Lowman advise settlers to practice the fine art of failure, "to fail to uphold settler colonial relationships, to fail to properly inhabit and embody settler colonial structures, systems, and stories, and by necessity find ways to build relationships differently" (Batell-Lowman and Barker 2016, 199). Because this loser orientation requires us to relinquish our designs on Mi'kma'ki's future, and the myth of white benevolence that keeps us believing we have a role in managing Indigenous lives (Slater 2020).

When it comes to settler colonialism, Tuck and Ree say that "haunting is both acute and general; individuals are haunted, but so are societies" (Tuck and Ree 2013, 647). Exorcizing the centuries of colonial violence that flows through my veins and ongoing structures of oppressive relations requires so much more than family fact-finding, journalling about my feelings, and whatever amateur necromancy I'm calling a research method. It will require settlers like me to ditch the kinds of belonging we've come to understand as delineated through the certainty of fences and borderlines in favour of what Leanne Betasamoke Simpson describes as relations of "deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment" to land (Simpson 2017, 43). It is a process of recognizing and learning to practice, however imperfectly, the mutual and plural responsibilities so clearly outlined in the Peace and Friendship Treaties (Wysote and Morton 2019; Parasram 2023).

As Donna Haraway reminds us, "We are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories, and sometimes joyful histories too, but we are not all response-able in

the same ways" (Haraway 2016, 29). Living in peace and friendship in Mi'kma'ki means that people like me must learn to relinquish our heroic pursuits of "liveable futures," embracing instead a kind of failure to belong in settler structures that Shotwell describes as "life without the promise of stability" (Shotwell 2016, 92).

Cathy has witnessed each of my settler moves to innocence from hungry listening to white saviourism, to whatever we might call the awkward stage of scholar flailing I'm embodying now (Robinson 2020; Tuck and Yang 2012). She doesn't owe me patience, as I slowly untangle secrets and silences from the folk ballads and pioneer lies that obscure our ancestral entanglements. But it is my tentative hope that the small intimacies built through this kind of stumbling along might help unravel the restless settler entitlement that prevents people like me from becoming capable of relating to Mi'kma'ki's lands, waters, caretakers, and phantoms beyond the violence of possession, and from enacting solidarity with the humility and reciprocity that living in treaty requires.

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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

Living Through the Chaos: Rethinking Ecological Dimensions of Suicide with Young Women and Femmes Facing Housing Injustice

by Nicole Santos Dunn and Jeffrey Ansloos

Abstract: Suicidality among young women and femmes facing housing injustice is an urgent yet under-explored public health issue in Canada. This study highlights the invisibility of "hidden homelessness" and moves beyond individual risk factors to examine how structural, relational, and political forces shape distress. Using narrative inquiry and life history methods, the research identifies four key themes: 1. When a Non-No is a Yes, 2. Unsavoury People and Other Ruptures, 3. Inconsistency and Bouncing Around, and 4. Organized Abandonment and Chaos, Chaos, Chaos, Chaos. These themes elucidate the intersections of gendered violence, systemic neglect, and organized abandonment in shaping suicide risk and survival strategies. The study advocates for justice-oriented, non-coercive approaches to suicide prevention, and emphasizes relational trust and policies that address housing injustice. Strengths, limitations, and future research directions are also discussed.

Keywords: housing injustice; youthhood; suicide prevention; women; girls; femmes

Résumé : Les tendances suicidaires, chez les jeunes femmes et fems qui subissent une injustice concernant leur logement, constituent une question urgente de santé publique au Canada, ayant cependant fait l'objet de peu d'études. Cette étude met en évidence l'invisibilité de « l'itinérance cachée » et va au-delà des facteurs de risque individuels pour examiner comment les forces structurelles, relationnelles et politiques façonnent la détresse. Ayant recours à la méthodologie de l'enquête narrative et des histoires de vie, cette étude détermine quatre thèmes clés : 1. Quand qui ne dit mot consent; 2. Personnes peu recommandables et autres ruptures; 3. Inconstance et se faire trimbaler dans tous les sens; 4. L'abandon organisé et du chaos, encore du chaos et toujours plus de chaos. Ces thèmes élucident l'entrecroisement de la violence fondée sur le genre, de la négligence systémique et de l'abandon organisé ainsi que son incidence sur le risque de suicide et les stratégies de survie. Cette étude revendique des approches non coercitives et axées sur la justice en matière de prévention du suicide et met en évidence les relations de confiance et les politiques qui s'attaquent à l'injustice relative au logement. Les forces, les limites et de futurs axes de recherche sont également abordés.

Mots clés : injustice relative au logement, jeunesse, prévention du suicide, femmes, filles, fem

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Introduction

Suicidality and Gender in Context

Suicidality among young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice is an under-explored and urgent issue within public health (Eynan et al. 2002; Schwan 2020; Smith et al. 2007). In this study, suicidality refers to ideation or intent to die and is differentiated from non-suicidal self-injury. "Young" or "youth" refers to individuals whose age falls between 13 and 24 which is the Canadian Observatory on Youth Homelessness' age bracket for youth homelessness. However, we wish to recognize that there are tensions around how youthhood is defined. For example, is youthhood a developmental category or structural one? (Yang and Tuck, 2014). "Women" and "femmes" refers to individuals whose gender identity or expression aligns with femininity, whether they are cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, or gender nonconforming. The term "femme" encompasses a broad spectrum of gender identities that express femininity, often existing outside gender binaries. This distinction is crucial because femininity, particularly when expressed by those seen as violating traditional gender norms, invites intensified forms of misogyny, transmisogyny, and structural violence. These experiences, compounded by intersecting factors like race, class, and housing status, contribute to what is often called "hidden homelessness."

This study seeks to move beyond predominant, individualistic understandings of suicidality, recognizing that distress is not a private issue but one shaped by what we term *ecological dimensions*—the interlocking social, political, spatial, and affective forces that contour the lives of young women and femmes. While existing literature on youth suicide prevention tends to emphasize individual risk and protective factors (Flores et al. 2022; Fraser et al. 2015; Molock et al. 2021; Wallace et al. 2024; Walsh and Eggert 2007), such approaches often overlook the deeper systems of exclusion and violence that structure vulnerability. In contrast, we centre the lived experiences of young women and femmes to explore how gendered, racialized, and economic marginalization—in concert with housing injustice—gives rise to distress, while also shaping practices of survival and resistance. This ecological orientation aligns with calls to reimagine possibilities for care, solidarity, and justice within suicide research (White 2017).

Hidden Homelessness and Its Mental Health Impacts

In Canada, it is estimated that on any given night, 7,000 young people aged 13–24 are without stable shelter, with 36.4% identifying as female and 60% reporting at least one suicide attempt (Gaetz et al. 2016; Schwan et al. 2020). Many fall into the category of hidden homelessness—precarious living situations such as couch surfing, sleeping in cars, or exchanging work for shelter (Schwan et al. 2020). These invisible housing arrangements elude conventional definitions of homelessness and are often overlooked by public health measures, rendering the distress experienced by young women and femmes statistically and politically invisible. As Schwan et al. (2020) emphasize, hidden homelessness is "largely immeasurable" within traditional public health frameworks that fail to account for informal, unstable, and frequently unsafe spatial arrangements. This invisibility is not simply a matter of measurement, but part of a broader ecology of neglect where material conditions of instability, affective dislocation, and institutional abandonment converge. The young women and femmes at the center of this study are navigating not only housing insecurity but also the compounding effects of psychological distress, often without reliable access to care. These interwoven spatial, social, and affective ecologies structure both their suicidality and survival. By attending to these hidden experiences, this study seeks to make visible the entangled systems of harm that shape the lives and life chances of young women and femmes on the margins of public concern.

Limitations of Existing Youth Suicide Research

Mainstream research on youth suicide is predominantly quantitative, relying on biomedical frameworks that treat suicidality as an individual pathology (Hjelmeland 2016). While these approaches have provided important insights into behavioural trends, they often fail to consider how broader social, political, and ecological conditions—such as misogyny, poverty, and housing injustice—create and exacerbate distress. These structural forces not only intensify immediate crises but also limit young women's and femmes' ability to envision futures beyond mere survival. As Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010) argue, a deeper understanding of suicide requires accounting for the social, political, cultural, structural, and environmental contexts that shape everyday life.

Contemporary approaches to understanding youth suicide have begun to consider factors such as exposure to violence and bullying (Peter, Roberts and Buzdugan 2008), abuse and victimization (Flach and Razza 2021), the availability of material supports (Gauvin et al. 2019), and the importance of secure attachments and social supports that validate worth (Labelle et al. 2021) as relevant to suicidality. Yet, even in these more holistic accounts, such factors are often presented as discrete influences rather than as interwoven within complex, relational, and spatial ecologies. These ecologies are not only structural but also affective—shaped by dislocation, instability, and abandonment—and they form the broader terrain in which suicidality emerges.

Our research responds to Hjelmeland and Knizek's (2010) call, moving beyond individualistic and biomedical models to offer a more textured understanding of suicide. By grounding our analysis in the lived experiences of young women and femmes, we aim to highlight how their suicidality is deeply intertwined with the structural conditions of exclusion, violence, and instability they face daily. Their stories show that suicidality is not merely a personal crisis but a reflection of the ecological dimensions of structural violence–manifesting in the spatial, relational, and emotional realities of lives shaped by systems that routinely fail to meet their needs for safety, shelter, and care.

Towards a Critical Suicidology

The emerging field of Critical Suicide Studies offers a framework for rethinking how we approach suicidality. This field challenges the prevailing focus on quantification, medicalization, and individualization in suicide research, pushing instead for a broader exploration of the socio-political contexts that shape distress (White 2017). Critical approaches disrupt dominant frameworks by prioritizing lived experience and focusing on the ways structural inequalities produce and exacerbate suicidal distress. Our study aligns with this critical turn, focusing on how suicidality among young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice is not an isolated pathology but a symptom of structural violence and abandonment.

In centering the voices of these young women and femmes, we aim to decenter traditional forms of expertise that often dominate suicide research. Narrative inquiry allows us to foreground their lived experiences, acknowledging the ways in which their distress is shaped by complex and intersecting systems of power. By doing so, we push against psychocentric approaches that depoliticize suicidality, positioning it instead as a sociopolitical phenomenon that reflects broader patterns of exclusion and marginalization.

As White advocates, there is a need for suicide research to be "more diverse and creative, less psychocentric and less depoliticized" (White 2017, 472). Our approach to this research follows that call, using narrative inquiry to explore not only the ecological dimensions of distress but also how young women and femmes navigate survival, and how they imagine and reimagine futures in a world that routinely denies them the resources needed to thrive. This rethinking of suicidality urges us to move away from seeing these young women and femmes as passive recipients of care and instead recognize their agency in navigating systems of oppression while seeking spaces of possibility and survival.

Through the stories of young women and femmes, we explore the ways they resist, challenge, and endure in the face of overwhelming structural violence. Their suicidality cannot be understood in isolation from the socio-political contexts in which they live—contexts marked by misogyny, transmisogyny, poverty, and housing injustice. As they navigate these overlapping forces, they demonstrate strength, carving out spaces of survival where few resources exist. By centering their voices, we not only gain a deeper understanding of suicidality as a socio-political issue but also begin to reimagine what care, solidarity, and justice might look like for young women and femmes on the margins.

Methodology & Method

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a social constructionist framework, emphasizing that meaning is created through social interactions rather than discovered as a fixed truth (Chen et al. 2011). Unlike positivist traditions that prioritize objectivity, social constructionism privileges the knowledge generated from lived experience, especially within marginalized groups. Hoshmand (2005) notes that this approach values "tacit knowing," which helps to understand how individuals navigate structural inequalities. For young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice, the search for meaning in their lives cannot be reduced to individual pathology or risk. Instead, it must be understood as emerging from ecologies of dispossession and of care—networks of social, political, cultural, and affective forces that shape how young people live, relate, and endure within hostile environments (Chen et al. 2011). This framework allows us to explore how these individuals construct meaning from their experiences, seeing their struggles as part of larger systems of exclusion and abandonment, rather than isolated incidents. Through this lens, the study considers how survival is not only about navigating the present but also imagining alternatives beyond immediate crises.

Research Team Positionality

Our identities as scholars and mental health practitioners shaped how we interpreted the stories shared by coresearchers' (our term for *participants*; see below). The first author is a white settler, queer femme, and of Portuguese and Irish ancestry. She has worked with young survivors of violence and understands how care and survival are often entangled with harm. The second author, a Cree and English queer man, has worked extensively in suicide prevention, particularly within urban homelessness. Though neither of us has experienced houselessness, our positionalities—shaped by differing relationships to colonial systems, privilege, and gender—affected how we engaged with the study.

Recognizing the violence inherent in colonial and capitalist systems, we were committed to resisting the reduction of coresearchers' experiences to individual pathology. Instead, we understood housing insecurity and suicidality as structural conditions. As mental health researchers, we critiqued psychological theories that isolate distress from broader systemic forces, reducing complex realities to risk factors. Our approach framed survival as deeply political, inseparable from the conditions that produce harm.

We continuously reflected on how our positions within systems of privilege influenced the way we navigated the research and interpreted the coresearchers' narratives. This reflection allowed us to engage with the stories of harm, vulnerability, and survival in their full complexity, without seeking to categorize them neatly. Ultimately, we aimed to contribute to a reimagined approach to research on suicidality and housing injustice—one rooted in an awareness of structural violence and in the coresearchers' capacity to envision futures beyond systems of exclusion.

Methods

We employed narrative inquiry as the primary method because it deeply engages with the stories of marginalized individuals (Creswell 2013; Polkinghorne 1995). This method allows us to see how young women and femmes co-create their realities through language and link their stories to broader social structures. Narrative inquiry aligns with social constructionism's focus on relational knowledge, resisting the reduction of coresearchers' experiences into fixed categories. It highlights the ongoing processes through which meaning is created in contexts of precarity and exclusion.

Additionally, we used a life history approach within the narrative framework to emphasize that suicidality and housing injustice are not discrete events but are interconnected experiences shaped by coresearchers' interactions with systems over time. Coresearchers were invited to organize their stories through life chapters and critical events, allowing them to situate their narratives within larger societal ecologies. The interviews were semi–structured to provide coresearchers with the agency to shape their stories while also reflecting on the narratives they shared. This approach created space for imagining alternative futures, where survival involves continually reimagining what is possible.

Social Engagement and Data Collection

To maintain engagement with the communities this study sought to represent, we incorporated a method of social engagement throughout data collection. We reached out to 75 organizations that provide social and health services to young women and femmes, with 17 agreeing to support recruitment and offer feedback on the ethics and methods used. Several organizations made direct referrals while others offered to advertise study fliers. Coresearchers were compensated $100 for their time and insights, with payments delivered through their preferred method. This compensation was not merely procedural; it acknowledged the emotional labour and expertise coresearchers brought to the study, reinforcing the collaborative and respectful nature of the research.

Coresearchers

The study sample comprised eight coresearchers. All coresearchers were between 18 and 24 years old, which reflects the boundary of state-defined adulthood in Ontario and the recognized upper age limit for youth homelessness (Canadian Observatory on Youth Homelessness 2016, 1). Each coresearcher had experienced housing injustice in their lifetime such as renoviction, couch surfing, shelter living, sleeping rough, and/or engaging in survival sex, and each had self-identified as experiencing suicidality no sooner than two years prior to the interview. Anonymity was ensured by allowing coresearchers to choose pseudonyms or assigning one. This focus on self-identified young women and femmes was a deliberate choice to center the voices of those most affected by intersecting forms of marginalization. Quotations from coresearchers have been edited for readability.

Why Coresearchers, Not Participants

We used the term coresearchers instead of participants to reflect the collaborative ethos that guided our study. Grounded in feminist and social constructionist approaches, this decision challenges the hierarchical dynamics in traditional research settings. Referring to the young women and femmes as coresearchers acknowledges their agency and the role their lived experiences played in shaping both the inquiry and the emerging themes. However, this choice of language also reveals certain tensions. While we aimed to disrupt researcher-subject hierarchies, coresearchers were not involved in every stage of the research, particularly the formal analysis. Their input shaped the formation of themes, but they did not co-analyze data or fully determine the study's interpretations.

This tension between the intent to honour their roles and the practical limitations of research timelines, reflects a limit to the collaborative framing. Calling them coresearchers is an intentional commitment and an aspiration, reflecting their agency while acknowledging the challenges of deep collaboration. This invites broader reflection on dismantling power imbalances in research and creating more collaborative methodologies.

Analysis

The two authors of this paper conducted an analysis of narratives using Polkinghorne's (1995) paradigmatic method, which integrates both inductive and deductive categorization. Coresearchers' stories were organized into themes informed by theoretical frameworks. The analysis began with a detailed reading of each interview, treating it as a complete narrative and documenting reflections through memos (Birks, Chapman and Francis 2008). Line-by-line coding followed, with multiple readings allowing for nuanced interpretations of the data. From these readings, themes were identified based on their relevance to the research questions. The process of refining these themes involved repeated engagement with the data, ensuring clarity and consistency, and seeking intercoder agreement where necessary. Finally, a comparative analysis across narratives explored patterns of similarity, difference, and contradiction.

This iterative process enabled a deep engagement with the complexity of coresearchers' experiences, avoiding reductive explanations. The analysis illuminated how their stories reflected broader systems of abandonment while also highlighting acts of resistance and future-making, detailing both their present realities and their imaginative efforts to navigate survival under precarious conditions.

Results

When a Non-No is a Yes

This theme highlights the violations of autonomy and self-determination experienced by young women and femmes as they navigated care systems. These systems, often presented as protective, became mechanisms of control that silenced their voices and perpetuated harm. The stories shared reveal how their decisions were frequently overridden by those in authority, turning spaces of care into sites of coercion.

Ivy, an unhoused young woman, shared a harrowing experience with her therapist, who forced her to expose her self-harm despite Ivy's warning about how this could worsen her condition:

> ...so I told [REDACTED—therapist] that it's gonna escalate my severity and she said, "No, we have to see the cuts." That was the first time I cut the same cut more than once.... I only started doing it because she forced me to show the nurse.

This incident is emblematic of a broader pattern in which care systems impose gendered control over young women and femmes. The therapist's insistence on seeing Ivy's wounds reflects a paternalism within mental health systems, which often pathologizes and infantilizes young women, particularly those with intersecting identities related to gender, sexuality, and race. Instead of listening to Ivy's understanding of her distress, the therapist was focused on quantifying her pain. This disregard for her voice reflects a societal tendency to treat young women's pain as something external authorities must control, rather than respect and understand.

The violation didn't end there. The therapist's decision to escalate the situation by involving emergency medical services only deepened Ivy's distress:

> ...they took me in an ambulance to flipping [REDACTED—hospital]. And then there was a $40 ambulance bill. But the worst part is that the hospital bill came in the mail to my house. So, then my mom saw it. Then I had to lie and make up an excuse.... But I knew after that point I couldn't be in therapy with [REDACTED—therapist] anymore.

Not only was Ivy's autonomy violated in the moment but the decision intruded on her home life, exposing her struggles to her family. This led to further emotional labour, as Ivy had to lie to shield herself from additional scrutiny. Instead of care, her therapeutic relationship became a site of surveillance, where her choices and privacy were consistently undermined.

Ivy also described a traumatic experience with a psychiatrist during a hospital stay as a young teen. The psychiatrist was intent on probing her home life for a social service risk assessment:

> ...I dreaded every meeting with the psychiatrist [REDACTED—name], cuz it was an interrogation. She was trying to figure out what was going on... they had me talk to like CAS[1] people, you know CAS? And they had me talk to... a police investigator. And it's like I said, "No," why police?... I'm pretty sure I didn't say yes to this. Or maybe like they're taking my non-no as a yes? But I didn't know in that position I could say no.

Ivy's phrase, "non-no as a yes," encapsulates how systems of care often fail to recognize implicit refusal, especially when young women and femmes are unsure of their right to decline. The psychiatrist's relentless questioning and the involvement of police exacerbated Ivy's sense of violation and stripped her of agency. To resist divulging information, Ivy resorted to self-harm, highlighting how these systems perpetuate harm by disregarding autonomy.

Mavis, a post-secondary student who had experienced precarious housing, shared a similar dynamic from her teenage years when a nurse at summer camp violated her privacy by informing her mother about her health concerns despite Mavis's request for confidentiality:

> ...I wasn't getting any better and the nurse told me that she called my mom, and they decided to take me to the hospital. And I just started crying cuz I was like, "I can't, I can't go back with her." And the nurse just wasn't understanding.... She's like, "Your mom loves you so much and your mom's so concerned about you." And yeah. I'm like, "No, my mom's gonna be mad at me."

Mavis's story reflects the broader issue of how care is weaponized against young femmes. The nurse's decision to inform Mavis's mother, despite her explicit wishes, highlights how these systems assume they know what's best, often disregarding the expressed needs of the young people in their care. This paternalism is steeped in gendered power dynamics, where young femmes are viewed as incapable of making informed decisions about their well-being. The nurse's actions forced Mavis back into a situation she was trying to escape, showing how "helpful" interventions can perpetuate harm.

Similarly, Stardust, a young white queer femme accessing an urban drop-in center, described being pressured by a shelter worker into a decision that disregarded their need for autonomy. Despite expressing a desire for space and time before making decisions about where to shelter next, their worker insisted on placing them in a group home:

> My worker was determined to get me into a group home even though I did not wanna be in a group home. I was like, "I just need a break right now."... I was hanging out with only guys, the older ones. They would get alcohol for me. And I was like, "No, I'm gonna stay here for a bit.... Like, I need just to calm down and like do my own thing before I, you know, make another life choice."

Stardust's request for time was overridden by the worker's insistence on what they believed was best. When asked what would have been more helpful, Stardust provided the reflection: "Probably ask me why I'm here." Their reflection points to the broader failure of care systems to engage in meaningful dialogue about the causes of distress. Instead of respecting their expressed needs, the system imposed decisions for them, alienating Stardust further from future systems of care.

Across these narratives, the phrase "non-no as a yes" speaks to the widespread disregard for the autonomy and self-determination of young women and femmes in care systems. Their experiences show how gendered and classed dynamics intersect to create further harm, often in the name of protection. Instead of offering support, these systems impose coercion, leaving young people like Ivy, Mavis, and Stardust to face the emotional and physical consequences of decisions made for them, not by them.

Unsavoury People and Other Ruptures

This theme highlights the deeply personal and often painful ruptures in relationships that young women and femmes described as defining moments in their lives. These ruptures—whether with parents, caregivers, siblings, or authority figures—marked pivotal moments of betrayal, loss, and abandonment. The term "unsavoury" takes on new meaning here, describing not only dangerous or harmful individuals but also those relationships where the promise of care, safety, or love was met with mis-attunement or neglect. These fractured relationships left lasting wounds, eroding the coresearchers' ability to trust and rely on others.

Dee, a young Black woman accessing an urban drop-in center, spoke with raw honesty about the pain caused by her separation from her twin sister, a consequence of the child welfare system. The system's intervention, which meant to protect, instead drove a wedge between Dee and the one person who could have been her anchor:

> And then, I mean, around age 12, that's when [REDACTED—region] Children's Aid started to get involved again. And then, I was the first one to go back into foster care. And then a year later my sister did.... So, me and my twin sister, we don't have a great relationship. That's cuz of foster care. Because of foster. Yeah. If we were never separated. We would've been like this [fingers crossed], you know?

The pain in Dee's voice is unmistakable, reflecting the long-term impact of a system that was supposed to offer protection but instead created emotional estrangement. Her story underscores a painful truth: even well-meaning interventions can introduce profound instability, breaking apart relationships that might otherwise have provided comfort. In Dee's case, the foster care system facilitated the very rupture it sought to prevent, leaving her to navigate life without the foundational sibling bond she needed.

Dee's experience also exposes the racialized dimensions of these interventions. Black families, already marginalized by systemic disinvestment, are disproportionately impacted by child welfare surveillance and control (Edwards, Clark and Laylor 2023). The separation of Dee from her sister is emblematic of a broader societal pattern that views Black familial bonds as fragile or problematic, justifying further harm through forced separations. This dynamic of organized abandonment operates on multiple levels, intensifying emotional and relational instability.

For Dorothy, a young queer woman couch-surfing, the rupture came in the form of a strained relationship with her mother, exacerbated by her mother's refusal to acknowledge Dorothy's mental health struggles. Her mother's denial deepened Dorothy's isolation, leaving her to confront her distress alone:

> My mom and I don't terribly get along. We never have, and I don't think we ever will... her first response [to my distress] was almost like, for the first few years up until I was about 15, I think was when I properly got into therapy, um, was sort of denial for her. Like she didn't want to believe that I was feeling suicidal and didn't wanna believe that I was hurting myself and didn't wanna believe that I was starving myself. It's a lot of denial for her and a lot of me just sort of ignoring it.

Dorothy's words reveal the silent suffering that so often accompanies familial mis-attunement. Her mother's inability to confront Dorothy's distress not only denied her access to care but perpetuated a cycle of silence and neglect. The pain of being unseen and unheard becomes palpable here. This dynamic is not simply a personal

failing; it speaks to a broader societal tendency to dismiss or downplay the mental health needs of young women, particularly when their struggles are uncomfortable or inconvenient for those around them.

Jay, a Black femme who experienced homelessness, described the confusion and disillusionment that came with trying to discern who could be trusted. They reflected on how the people who appeared trustworthy often turned out to be the most dangerous:

> Uh, probably, uh, the whole, be careful who you trust. Cause a lot of people treated me different because I hang around unsavoury people. However, the good people that I would hang around with were more dangerous to me than these dangerous people.

Jay's revelation about trust flips societal assumptions on their head. The people society labelled as "good" or trustworthy were, in Jay's experience, far more dangerous than those judged as "unsavoury." Their words speak to the disorienting nature of navigating marginalization—where the very individuals meant to offer help often cause the most harm. For Jay, this realization led to a profound rupture in their ability to trust anyone, further isolating them in an already precarious existence.

Stardust echoes this sentiment of betrayal. As a child, they confided in a teacher about the violence they were experiencing at home, hoping for protection. Instead, the teacher relayed their disclosure back to their parents, which only worsened the abuse:

> Yeah. I think I was five or six. It was my grade one teacher. So I was five turning six in that year. Um, yeah. And she like shut me down and like, told everything to my parents and then everything got worse at home.

The weight of this betrayal is clear. Stardust's trust in an adult figure, someone they believed could protect them, was shattered when that trust was met with misunderstanding and negligence. Instead of receiving support, Stardust's situation became more dangerous. Their reflection about their teacher—"I can't actually go to you for anything"—reveals how moments like this fundamentally shape young people's willingness to seek help in the future.

Across these narratives, the notion of "unsavoury" expands to encompass not just individuals but the broader relational dynamics young women and femmes are forced to navigate. In a world where relationships are fraught with instability, betrayal, and harm, these young people learned early that trust is not something to be given lightly. Whether through systemic interventions or personal relationships, they experienced repeated ruptures that disrupted their ability to form meaningful connections, making them even more vulnerable to further harm.

These stories also highlight how the intersections of race, gender, and class compound relational ruptures. Dee's experience in foster care, for instance, was shaped not only by her status as a child in need of protection but by her identity as a Black girl. The system's failure to maintain her connection with her sister reflects a broader societal undervaluing of Black familial bonds. Similarly, Jay's realization that those perceived as "good" were often more dangerous than those deemed "unsavoury" speaks to the racialized judgments that frame Black youth, especially Black femmes, as inherently suspect, even when they are the ones most in need of protection.

These relational ruptures aren't isolated incidents. They are shaped by systems of exclusion, surveillance, and control. Child welfare, education, mental health services—all these systems failed these young people, leaving them to navigate a world where safety and support were elusive at best.

Inconsistency and Bouncing Around

This theme explores the profound sense of instability that shaped the early lives of the young women and femmes in this study. The instability they experienced—through frequent moves, family conflict, systemic in-

terventions, and exposure to trauma—was not circumstantial. It was the product of socioeconomic precarity and structural violence that marginalized their lives. Rather than growing up in nurturing environments, they were forced to navigate a world of constant uncertainty and upheaval, where stability was a distant, often unreachable, concept.

Caroline, a young white woman who had been living in AirBNBs, recounts the experience of frequent moves during her childhood, driven by her family's financial insecurity. Her story reflects a broader pattern of disinvestment in low-income communities, where access to stable housing is undermined by market forces and policies that prioritize profit over people:

> First two and a half, three years of my life we moved a lot, like eight times or something. Crazy amount, obviously, I don't really remember it, but we were back and forth.... My parents were broke so we were going where they could afford to live.... There was a lot of inconsistency that I think shaped a lot of my childhood.

Caroline's narrative speaks to the psychological toll of constant displacement. The lack of a stable home didn't just create material instability, it shaped her identity. Each move brought a sense of uncertainty, where stability felt impossible. Over time, Caroline began to attribute many of her struggles to this early instability, reflecting how deeply the economic precarity of her family impacted her sense of self and security.

Dee shared how her early life was marked by instability caused by family incarceration and child welfare interventions. She reflected on how her mother's imprisonment when she was two years old led to her and her sister being placed in foster care:

> Honestly, I went through foster care at a very young age. Like the age of two. 'Cause I was born in [REDACTED—city].... So me and my sister both grew up in foster care at a very young age.... My mama, she went to jail. So that's what resulted in us being in foster care for a while until my aunt adopted us.

Dee's story highlights how personal experiences of instability were compounded by institutional failures. The early separation from her mother, combined with frequent moves between foster homes, made it nearly impossible for her to form secure attachments. The very systems designed to protect her instead introduced new ruptures. Dee's sense of "bouncing around," with no fixed points of stability, shows how systemic responses to family crises can deepen trauma, particularly for marginalized families.

For Jaime, a young Indigenous woman, instability began even before she was born, rooted in the intergenerational trauma experienced by her parents. Reflecting on her early childhood, she described her life's beginnings as a "rocky start," shaped by her parents' unresolved trauma and substance use:

> I'd say before I was even born, things were off to a rocky start. My mom was 15 when she conceived me. She wasn't in a relationship with my dad. My dad was actually a drug dealer.… He had some usage issue with cocaine and a lot of unprocessed trauma on his part.... My mom hadn't processed the trauma of being repeatedly molested as a kid in her adoptive family.

Jaime's experience exemplifies how intergenerational trauma fuels instability. Her parents' struggles with addiction, violence, and unresolved trauma meant that Jaime's life began in chaos. She elaborated on how frequent moves shaped her sense of stability:

> The first five years, from what I remember, and corroborated by stories from my mom, and random people, I bounced around quite a lot.

Jaime's story illustrates how cycles of trauma and socioeconomic precarity create a deep sense of dislocation. Her early years, shaped by her parents' unresolved pain and addiction, led to a life of "bouncing around"—moving between homes, families, and schools. This instability, rather than being addressed, was often reinforced by systemic failures.

These narratives of instability—of "bouncing around" from home to home, family to family, place to place—are not just personal stories of hardship. They reflect broader systems of abandonment and neglect that disproportionately affect young women and femmes. The instability they experienced was not the result of individual failings but systemic inequalities: economic insecurity, incarceration, and the failure of social services to provide consistent, supportive care. These conditions shaped their lives, making it difficult to form lasting relationships or feel secure, further marginalizing them.

What emerges from these stories is a portrait of instability not just as a personal experience but as a structural condition. The "bouncing around" described by Caroline, Dee, and Jaime reflects how economic precarity, family separation, and intergenerational trauma intersect to create a world where stability is out of reach. These young women and femmes highlight how systems of care—whether child welfare, foster care, or the broader economic system—fail to provide the consistency and support they need. Instead, these systems often perpetuate the very conditions they claim to remedy, leaving young people to navigate lives marked by constant upheaval and uncertainty.

These stories also offer a broader critique of how society responds to marginalized young people. Rather than addressing the root causes of instability—poverty, trauma, and systemic inequality—social systems often entrench their precariousness. For these young women and femmes, the constant movement and lack of stable homes or relationships aren't just backdrops to their lives. They are central to their experiences of distress, shaping how they navigate the world and limiting their ability to imagine futures beyond survival.

Organized Abandonment and Chaos, Chaos, Chaos, Chaos

This theme delves into the realities of organized abandonment, a term Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022) uses to describe the deliberate withdrawal of resources and services from certain communities, leaving individuals to navigate systems that perpetuate instability and marginalization. These systems form a part of a broader ecology of abandonment in which care is unevenly distributed and chaos is naturalized as a condition of life for the structurally dispossessed. Organized abandonment exacerbates social inequalities, leaving chaos, confusion, and unpredictability in its wake. For the young women and femmes in this study, this chaos wasn't incidental but systemically produced by the very structures meant to provide support. The withdrawal of state and institutional care left them struggling to meet basic needs like housing, financial stability, and healthcare, all while managing personal crises. This chaos, born from structural neglect, compounded their vulnerabilities and made it difficult to imagine a future beyond mere survival.

Caroline's story is a striking example of this economic precarity. Despite her efforts to maintain employment, she faced exploitative labour conditions. She recounts her experience with employers who refused to pay minimum wage:

> Then I worked at [REDACTED—café]… I quit cuz they were awful. They wouldn't pay anyone minimum wage. They sucked. I had to file a whole labour board dispute claim against them, which I did win. Then after that, I got the [REDACTED—food services] job cuz it paid more and they were better.

Caroline's narrative reveals how precarious employment, shaped by broader systems of economic disinvestment, created a constant state of instability. Even though she won the labour dispute, there was no lasting change. Her need to constantly find new work reflects a life of pervasive uncertainty, where securing income is a fraught and uphill battle. The exploitation of labour in these systems keeps marginalized individuals like Caroline trapped, forced to navigate under-resourced, extractive conditions that perpetuate their instability.

Similarly, Dorothy spoke to the difficulty of maintaining financial stability while working in childcare and relying on insufficient government support. The pandemic, which disrupted the childcare sector, worsened her situation:

> I've been working childcare since I was, I think 12 or 13 when I very first started. And obviously with COVID, childcare wasn't a thing. So, I was living off government payouts, but they weren't enough to absolutely keep me afloat. Being able to share an apartment with my ex was what I was able to do.

Dorothy's experience reflects how organized abandonment forces young people into precarious living arrangements simply to survive. Living with her ex-partner wasn't a choice based on emotional or relational safety, but made out of necessity driven by financial instability. The collapse of the childcare system during the pandemic left her scrambling and government support was simply not enough. Her story highlights the broader inadequacies of public safety nets, which fail those already living on the edge of precarity.

Dorothy's reliance on undervalued care work and insufficient support also speaks to the intersections of capitalism and care. The systemic devaluation of care work, especially done by women and femmes, reinforces cycles of dependence and instability. Organized abandonment isn't just about the withdrawal of public services but about how capitalist systems exploit marginalized communities while offering minimal support in return.

Jay also described how the chaos of homelessness reshaped their ability to dream beyond mere survival. The pressures of houselessness and low-wage work led them to become complacent about their future:

> When you're put into a high-stress situation from being homeless to getting a place, you become complacent, and you kind of go off on all the things you wanted to do. At least for me, that's what happened. I became complacent. I became okay with the little job that I had. I worked at Starbucks and it's not a little job, but it's like, you know, it's not much. I became okay with that. I became okay living in a really tiny bedroom. I gave up on wanting an apartment or like, not necessarily higher education, but like a higher point in my career.

Jay's reflection on becoming "complacent" shows how the stress of navigating homelessness narrows one's ability to envision a future. The energy required just to survive meant their ambitions felt distant and unattainable. Their survival, while necessary, meant surrendering aspirations for something more. This is a clear example of how chaos and organized abandonment shrink the horizons of possibility for young women and femmes.

Jay also shared their frustrations with navigating social services while trying to pursue higher education. The bureaucratic contradictions between OSAP[2] funding, government assistance, and housing left them disempowered and trapped:

> I told my team leader that I'm trying to work through this thing with my mom, and I just found out that I've technically been abused, I'm going to school, I don't really have time to look for a job, and I don't have the income for a place. She told me, "Well, you have a month because you do have the income, you get OSAP." I'm like, "But OSAP is for school, and it's not enough." "Well, you have OSAP, you could use that to pay rent. You could get OW."[3] I told them, "I can't get OW 'cause I'm on OSAP."[4]

Jay's struggle to navigate these services reflects the larger dysfunctions within social systems meant to provide support. Instead of offering a clear path forward, Jay found themselves juggling contradictory demands from different systems, each reinforcing their instability. As Jay summed it up, their life was marked by "chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos."

Ivy's story adds another layer to this narrative of chaos. As a high school student living without a fixed address, she faced daily uncertainty about where she could safely sleep:

> I slept wherever I could sleep, but it was never good sleep. Not a good sleep for sure. I would sleep in school. I was doing an extra semester. Like I was 18, but I was doing an extra semester. I would sleep in class and put my head down. I was barely awake during the classes. Of course. But

> what I did was I shifted my sleep schedule. So during the night, because I was awake, I would study. During the day, I would be in class, but I would have my head down to sleep.

Despite the chaos Ivy endured, her determination to continue school and find spaces to rest—even if precarious—speaks to an incredible resilience. Yet this resilience isn't simply an individual triumph; it's a testament to how young women and femmes are forced to navigate systems designed to abandon them. Ivy's life was consumed by survival, leaving little room for anything beyond the immediate need to find safety.

In each of these narratives, we see how organized abandonment breeds chaos. Public and private systems that should provide support instead intensify precarity, trapping young women and femmes in cycles of underemployment, housing insecurity, and bureaucratic confusion. The chaos doesn't just make their lives difficult, it systematically erodes their ability to imagine and pursue futures beyond mere survival. These stories are not just individual critiques but a broader indictment of how society's organized abandonment produces chaos as a defining feature of marginalized lives.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to explore the ecological dimensions of suicide risk for young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice. Through the narratives of Caroline, Dee, Dorothy, Ivy, Jaime, Jay, Mavis, and Stardust, it became evident that suicidality cannot be understood as an isolated, individual pathology. Instead, it is deeply embedded in a matrix of intersecting social, economic, and political forces. These forces manifested through housing instability, precarious employment, gendered violence, and systemic neglect. They not only shape the conditions in which suicide risk emerges but also influence how young women and femmes navigate, resist, and make sense of their distress.

Reconceptualizing Suicide Risk: Care as Coercion, Trust as Survival

A central insight from the coresearchers' narratives is their ambivalence toward care systems. Traditional models of suicide prevention, rooted in risk management and institutional interventions, often assume that care is inherently protective. However, Ivy's and Mavis's experiences illustrate that care can also operate as coercion, with institutional power overriding the autonomy, needs, and desires of those most affected. Ivy's experience of being forced to disclose her self-harm, despite her warnings of the further harm it would cause, exemplifies how care systems, particularly those aligned with carceral and medical logics, can perpetuate the distress they aim to alleviate.

This finding raises a conceptual issue within mainstream suicide prevention: the assumption that intervention, especially through coercive or mandatory reporting mechanisms, is always protective. As Ivy's experience shows, such systems often exacerbate distress, particularly when coercive interventions override young people's autonomy. Carceral logics in mental health care may inadvertently repeat and reinforce histories of psychiatric oppression related to classism, sexism, ageism, saneism, racism and other forms of discrimination (Krebs 2020). Research shows that involving young people in their care leads to better health outcomes (Vijayaraghavan et al. 2022). Trust, in this context, becomes essential, not just as an ethical component of care but as the very foundation of survival. When that trust is broken, as in Ivy's case, the consequences often extend beyond immediate harm, pushing young women and femmes further away from care systems and into isolation.

To address this, alternative models must be explored. Peer-led mental health initiatives, community-based support networks, and restorative justice frameworks offer non-coercive approaches that foster trust by giving individuals agency in their care. These models emphasize mutual support over control, offering more responsive, humane forms of care. For example, peer-led programs can create safe spaces where distress is met with com-

passion, not judgment, while community-based models often integrate cultural knowledge and collective support. Restorative justice practices provide healing frameworks that resist punitive responses, focusing on repairing harm through dialogue and relational accountability. Such approaches, grounded in trust and autonomy, challenge the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in conventional care systems.

As researchers, it is crucial to question how our methodologies, interpretations, or well-intentioned emphasis on "risk" might replicate the logics of control and surveillance critiqued by coresearchers. Baril's (2020) suggestion that suicide prevention must involve "staying with the pain" and creating space for dialogue about the desire to die without imposing guilt or coercion is particularly relevant. Our role is not just to analyze but to critically engage with and advocate for care frameworks that genuinely prioritize trust, consent, and relationality. This is essential to supporting the needs of marginalized young women and femmes in a way that aligns with their lived experiences and struggles for survival.

Relational Ruptures and the Politics of Abandonment

Another key insight concerns the relational dimensions of vulnerability. Coresearchers like Dee, Jay, and Stardust vividly described how relational ruptures—family separation, caregiver neglect, or mistrust of authority—shaped their suicidality. The breakdown of relational bonds exacerbates feelings of alienation and dislocation, especially for young women and femmes navigating housing instability (Gaetz et al. 2016; Schwan et al. 2020). Their disclosures are in line with existing literature that links suicidal ideation to attachment disruptions, profound isolation, and exclusion thereby producing remarkably painful affects like anger, shame, and self-hatred (Ezquerro 2024; Sheftall et al. 2013). Addressing these ruptures requires interventions focused on repairing relationships and building trust before significant vulnerability or crisis occurs (Syeda et al. 2021).

These ruptures are not merely personal crises but reflect the social fallout of larger systems of organized abandonment (Gilmore 2022). For young women and femmes navigating housing precarity, the breakdown of relational bonds compounds their sense of alienation. Jay's observation that "good people" were often more dangerous than "unsavoury" ones highlights the racial, gendered, and classed dynamics framing relational trust in precarious environments. This unpredictability contributes to feelings of chaos and mistrust.

This finding raises critical questions about how relationality is structured under systemic violence and neglect. How do we build systems of care that repair rather than rupture relationships? Interventions must focus not only on addressing immediate distress but on rebuilding trust, providing long-term support, and acknowledging the political dimensions of relational abandonment. This requires addressing social conditions—poverty, racism, gendered violence—that fracture relationships in the first place.

Instability as Trauma: Bouncing Between Systems of Precarity

The coresearchers' experiences revealed that instability and "bouncing around" between homes, schools, and systems of care are central to understanding how young women and femmes experience dislocation. Caroline and Jaime's story of being uprooted due to financial instability reflects the broader pattern of instability that defines the lives of many navigating housing injustice. This constant movement creates a sense of ungrounding that becomes a defining feature of their emotional landscape.

Instability can be understood as a form of trauma, an ongoing, cumulative condition that shapes how young people experience the world. Unlike traditional trauma models that focus on singular events, the instability described here aligns with Mills & Pring's (2023) analysis of "slow violence"—a persistent form of harm eroding well-being over time. The coresearchers' stories challenge the distinction between "big T" trauma and "little t" trauma, showing that experiences like housing instability and family disruption are deeply traumatizing. This instability is consistent with research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which show how early dis-

ruptions can have lasting impacts on well-being (Felitti et al. 1998). However, unlike conventional ACEs, the experiences described here—such as caregiver mis-attunement and frequent moves—show that even more nuanced forms of instability contribute to long-term distress, complicating how we understand trauma and its impacts. This calls for a reframing of how researchers and practitioners conceptualize trauma and instability. Pain (2019) offers the terminology of "chronic urban trauma" to describe the "subvisible temporalities and spatialities of slow violence" (Pain 2018, 386). In relationship to attachment trauma, Pain's conceptualization helps describe the causes of the ruptures our coresearchers described in context and explain why they become invisibilized in systems. By focusing only on clearly defined, recognizable forms of trauma, we risk overlooking the subtle but damaging forms of violence that structure the lives of marginalized young women and femmes. We must account for the cumulative, relational, and structural harms vividly described by the coresearchers.

Organized Abandonment and the Politics of Survival

This study also highlights the structural conditions perpetuating housing precarity, underemployment, and poverty. Coresearchers like Jay and Dorothy described how chaos becomes a mode of existence under conditions of systemic disinvestment. Their experiences navigating housing systems, welfare programs, and precarious work illustrate how survival itself becomes a full-time job, leaving little room for imagining futures beyond mere survival.

Gilmore's (2022) concept of organized abandonment provides a lens through which to understand this chaos. The chaos experienced by the coresearchers is not random, it results from political decisions that divest from public welfare, housing, and education. This systemic neglect makes suicidality a logical response to structural violence and is supported by research. For example, Raifman et al. (2022) found increased suicidal ideation for people struggling to pay rent, people who were let go from their jobs, and experiencing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to years prior. If suicidality is partly a reaction to organized abandonment, then prevention efforts must extend beyond individual interventions into the realm of social justice. Prevention must include policies that alleviate poverty, provide stable housing, and ensure young people have the resources to live with dignity.

Reimagining Survival and Radical Futures

The narratives of young women and femmes in this study reveal that survival is not just about enduring present hardships but navigating complex systems that perpetuate instability and violence. Survival, in this context, is a political act of resistance–reconfiguring life in ways that challenge systemic abandonment. Despite profound precarity, these young people continue to imagine futures that resist the chaos imposed by systemic neglect.

Their survival is grounded in care, resistance, and creativity. For example, Ivy's ability to continue her education despite housing instability and Jay's reflection on navigating homelessness show that survival is an ongoing process of reimagining possibilities. These young women and femmes are continuously reconfiguring the conditions of their survival, even as those conditions are shaped by violence and exploitation.

Reconceptualizing Prevention: Toward Justice and Relational Autonomy

This study re-narrates the ecological risk of suicide for young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice by centering the political, relational, and affective dimensions of their lives. Suicide prevention must be rooted in collective action, relational autonomy, and justice. Prevention efforts must move beyond institutional interventions and embrace relational approaches that prioritize trust, dignity, and agency. Relationships—both personal and systemic—are at the heart of suicidality and survival. To address suicide risk meaningfully, we must build systems of care that repair relational ruptures, confront systemic abandonment, and provide the conditions for young people to thrive.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

One of the key strengths of this study is its ability to reconceptualize suicide risk through an ecological, relational, and structural lens, rather than reducing it to individualized pathology. By drawing on the rich, complex narratives of young women and femmes experiencing housing injustice, the research moves beyond conventional public health frameworks that dichotomize proximal and distal risk factors. Instead, it advances a more nuanced understanding of suicide that recognizes the political, social, and affective dimensions of risk. This shift invites new ways to think about suicide care, the relationality of suicidality, and what Cardon calls "suicide justice" that is, "the poetics of the possible" (Cardon 2022 75).

The narrative inquiry approach allowed for deep engagement with the coresearchers' lived experiences, emphasizing the significance of relational autonomy and collective struggle in understanding suicide risk. Reflexivity was central to the study, accounting for the positionality of both researchers and coresearchers, ensuring that power, identity, and context were acknowledged throughout. This reflexivity helped the study avoid replicating harmful logics of surveillance and control, instead centering the voices and agency of those most affected.

However, the study also wrestled with tensions around insider/outsider positionality. While the researchers sought to engage empathetically with the coresearchers, differences in identity, privilege, and power could influence both the research process and interpretation of findings. This raises the risk of perpetuating outsider perspectives, which might obscure the coresearchers' lived realities. Additionally, the study grappled with the challenge of understanding risk without centering damage, a concern raised by Tuck (2009). Focusing too much on harm can inadvertently re-inscribe marginalization, turning coresearchers into subjects of pity rather than agents of survival and resistance. Future research should continue to navigate these tensions carefully, ensuring that narratives of risk are counterbalanced with stories of resilience, creativity, and radical possibility.

Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes suicide risk as an ecological and political phenomenon, challenging narrow, individualistic frameworks. Through the stories of young women and femmes navigating housing injustice, we see how suicidality is shaped by intersecting forces—economic precarity, gendered violence, systemic neglect, and relational rupture. These are not simply external stressors; they constitute interlocking ecological conditions that saturate space, time, embodiment, and affect. These ecologies of harm—material, social, and affective—are embedded within the very structures that govern their lives, deeply shaping their capacities for survival and resistance.

A critical insight from this research is that survival itself becomes an act of radical imagination. The young women and femmes in this study enact everyday practices of resistance that are profoundly ecologically transformative—resistance that is relational, spatial, and improvisational. They reconfigure survival through the reassembly of disrupted geographies of care: forging trust amidst betrayal, carving out place in the absence of home, and cultivating meaning in conditions of abandonment. Understanding suicidality ecologically compels us to rethink prevention not as a psychological intervention into individual minds, but as a collective and material transformation.

Rethinking suicide prevention in this way requires confronting the systems that produce harm and constrain life. It means shifting the focus from managing individual risk to fostering relational, political, and material conditions that allow young people to imagine and build futures beyond racialized, gendered, and class-based oppression. It calls for policies that address the slow violence of disinvestment, infrastructures of care that prioritize relational autonomy, and practices of solidarity that recognize how survival itself is a form of resistance.

What emerges is a call to transform suicide prevention into a collective, politicized, and ecological practice, one that not only refuses the systems that reproduce harm but also cultivates the grounds for flourishing. By embracing radical imagination, we can prefigure futures in which living through the chaos is not the limit of possibility, but the foundation from which lives of dignity, autonomy, and collective power can grow.

Endnotes

1. CAS refers to Children's Aid Society and is a non-governmental child protective service in Ontario.

2. OSAP refers to the Ontario Student Assistance Program which provides financial support through grants and loans to post-secondary students.

3. OW refers to Ontario Works and it is a social assistance program for those in financial need.

4. In Ontario, you cannot receive both OSAP and OW at the same time.

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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

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"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.

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

Moving at their Pace: Activism with Children[1]

by Magdalena Olszanowski

Magdalena Olszanowski is a writer, artist, and educator in Montreal. She received her PhD in Communication Studies from Concordia University where she is now part time faculty. She also teaches at Dawson College. An exhibiting new media and video artist as well as a writer, she has written for, or been featured in, publications such as CBC, esse, Feminist Media Studies, Visual Communication Quarterly, n+1, nomorepotlucks, and showcased her work at SXSW and ISEA among others. Currently, she is working on a bildungsroman about a Jewish filmmaker set in 1970s Poland. She was born in Warsaw, Poland and now lives in Montreal, Canada with her partner, two children and neighbourhood cats.

"Is that child dead?" S, my seven-year-old asks me, their eyes wide, pointing to a placard someone is holding. The cardboard placard is covered with an oversized photo of a child lying on the beach in their blood and a verse about genocide: 9,000 children under ten killed.

"Yes," I answer. "Yes."

"Oh." S looks at me, looks back at the placard and tightens the grip on their own as we march down the southbound lanes of Parc Ave. in Montreal under the abundant October sun. We're surrounded by other placards highlighting Palestinian artifacts: keffiyehs, tatreez, watermelons, thobes, pictures of *Anemone coronarias*, Arabic letters, olives, keys, Jaffa oranges, maqluba, and everything in red, white, green and black.

It's a few weeks after October 7, 2023, and our first of many marches for Palestine. It's also the first time S sees a dead child and is confronted with its possibility. The placard: a symbol of wit(h)nessing, to imagine what death might be like for someone like them.

Their eyes move towards and away from the poster and their pace slows down, fumbling into some people behind us. My body tenses and I'm queasy. A mom's guilt, a mom's pride: I will not coddle my child. I will not pretend that we can live as usual during a genocide. I will not make excuses that they are too young or too sensitive or that it's too complicated. I will pay attention reading about the Nakba, how Zionism's ethnic cleansing already began in the 19th century and how Zionism threatens our livelihood as Jews. I will keep at it to accumulate a language that makes sense for our children, in hopes to save all our children.

"How are you feeling, seeing that image?" I ask.

"It makes me angry and sad because I can't do anything about it. I can't just show up at Netanyahu's house. But I also feel good when we do things for Palestine. I want to do things for Palestine."

It's not long before we run into some friends and are swept up in another part of the crowd.

I decide to start wearing my keffiyeh.

***

"Free, Free," the packed crowd calls along another closed road.

This time we are downtown walking towards a media company building that protesters will poster in red paint after we leave. We attend marches regularly now, a collective performance among others wanting an end to genocide. Marches are not direct actions, but they are important too. They allow us to release our rage and anger in clapping and singing as loud as we can, to have our voices echo through the downtown buildings that wish to regulate us and keep us quiet. The marches fuel us for the difficult work we do elsewhere.

Liora, my two-year-old daughter looks up, and in response, bellows, "Palestine!" She skips ahead cocooned within the other bodies, and proclaims in her Frenglish, "Baby, ici! Baby, ici! Look, mama," when she sees another toddler like her.

Liora wants me to be with her joy and simultaneously witness her recognition of being-in-the world with others. "Look, mama" is performative—a directive of relational collectivity in which she wants me to see what and how she sees. I need to look and respond both to the object of inquiry but also to her reaction to the object. Tuned into my children's rhythms and desires, I can re-orient my own assumptions about activism.

We are all marching for a liveable future.

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With their profound imagination, children recognize their place in a world crumbling before their eyes: "We are on the right side! It's time to be political. Stop capitalism. Our brains have not been washed," our nine-year-old friend Lola proclaims. Lola and her mom Marianne, Stasia, S, and I, are sitting at Lola's house in front of a faded framed poster of Jerusalem from the early 20th century. I had asked Lola and Stasia what we should say to other kids who don't know what's happening in Gaza. S tilts their head and their eyes drift, mulling over Lola's words and the tension of wonder and outrage in her conviction. S eagerly discusses it when we arrive back home.

Many of my parent friends also bring their children to the actions. Homemade flags and placards tucked into strollers—signs for public consumption. Like the sign that S, hunched over at their desk, has spent the morning making. Our voices matter, it says between the lines.

Activism in this sense is a felicitous childhood activity that reframes children's and their parent's being-in-the-world, interrogates childhood innocence, and cultivates intersectional justice as a way of life. "The insights of children are an important window into larger collective and social traumas and the political economy of suffering in which they are embedded," Palestinian scholar Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019, 13) writes. I spend my early summer fielding eager questions from kids involved in Palestinian organizing in Montreal. These conversations stress how much all kids should be listened to and how they want to "do loads of ginormous actions" so that adults will take their opinions seriously.

"What if it was their parents or sister or brother that were bombed? What if it was them? That's what I think in my head a lot," Aviva, who is seven and Jewish, tells me.

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Naomi Klein (2024), reviewing Jonathan Glazer's *The Zone of Interest* (2023) as an inadvertent "too-timely" parallel to Gaza, writes "It's not that these people [the Hoss family] don't know that an industrial-scale killing

machine whirs just beyond their garden wall. They have simply learned to lead contented lives with ambient genocide." The familial pro-Palestinian activism in Montreal is a practice of refusal to become habituated to the ambience of genocide and a way for children to "occupy the position of the witness … who are ultimately heard—even if it is just as a storyteller" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019, 37). Shalhoub-Kevorkian is referring to the children in Palestine. The same is true here: we do our best to recognize and amplify Palestinian children's stories and help our children to share their witnessing.[2]

Children's experiences are often translated through an adult's point of view or treated as an appendage, but they needn't be.

In the late fall of 2023, there were various high-profile protest actions at Indigo bookstores in response to CEO Heather Reisman's longstanding financial support of the IDF through her charity. Ala, child of an activist mother in Montreal, questioned the absence of children at these actions and suggested a child-led reading at the store. Her parents listened, send out a call to trusted friends, and planned a direct child-led action—a read-in at Montreal's flagship Indigo location. After all, what is a bookstore if not for reading?

It's the bustling holiday shopping season. We pool into the Eaton Centre's food court, many of us meeting for the first time, and self-organize like a mushroom network. We easily step in line, powerful as a collective, and make our way to Indigo. We set up on the second floor with a large hand-painted banner, *Families Unite for Palestine*. The children are buzzing and some manage to sit in a semi-circle with Palestinian books, ready to read. Apprehensive security is mingling around. Given the robust police retaliation at other Indigo stores, I am sure we will be shut down before anything starts despite the action's wholesome nature. We don't get shut down, not even after the children and parents take turns reading several books, not after a speech on a megaphone, and not as we saunter down the stairs towards the exit holding hands. The children, used to many of the chants, are the loudest.

"The people, united, will never be defeated!" The sustained chanting unifies us into a collective, *Familles Montrealaises Pour La Palestine*.

Days after, I talk to S about the weaponization of Judaism, antisemitism, white supremacy, and relate it to the importance of independent bookshops. They ask to buy books about Palestine, like *Sitti's Bird*, which we later read to Liora.

The group's members go on to facilitate and support many other family-oriented events. The collective is non-hierarchical, and in some ways ad-hoc, as people's involvement oscillates; doing things with children is unpredictable and often beholden to nap times. We do not have a basis of unity and there is no leader. A member has an idea and asks if others can help; a subgroup forms for that action and executes the idea. We don't attach our names to the actions, unless necessary for safety, because the work is always collective. Individualizing can create the hierarchies we want to avoid. For an Op Ed in *La Presse* I co-wrote about the need for action in the face of passivity by Canada's elected officials, we took time to figure out who would write it and who would be in the byline (Heap-Lalonde, Olszanowski and Rowell-Katzemba 2024).

To ground my own activism, as well as the collective activism with other families, we do our best to listen and center Palestinian voices; a messy decolonial practice in which the tensions of working through the paradoxes —many of the parent activists in Montreal are not Palestinian and several are Jewish—are profound and necessary. As such, our safety and vulnerability, as well as our children's, are not put to the test in the way that they are for diasporic Palestinian activist parents. Aware of this, and learning from scholars like Julie Peteet (1997), we step in as necessary. We fundraise for Summer Alkhdour and many join her daily sit-ins outside Federal Immigration Minister Marc Miller's office, managing a steady share of Zionist and police harassment. Summer came to Montreal with only some of her family and children. Janna, her disabled child, was not allowed to leave Gaza then died from lack of healthcare while waiting to come to Canada.

Lola believes that events and actions are necessary because she thinks that they will pressure the Israeli and Canadian governments. On a late winter day, outside the Montreal Jewish library, we join other families, including many Jewish ones, in protest after the books of esteemed and prolific Montreal children's author Elise Gravel were banned because she posted support for Palestine on her social media. The children's frustration is palpable. Many media outlets are there too, later penning articles mostly in support of Gravel and against the fruitless censorship. Gravel donates dozens of her books, including *Pink, Blue and You: Questions for Kids about Gender Stereotypes* and *What is a Refugee?,* to distribute. As we walk up and down the block with our placards featuring Gravel characters and slogans, children sit on the rampart reading the donated books. Through first-hand action, what us academics would call praxis, our children learn about censorship, book banning, and the potential of public pressure: the library rescinded and brought back Gravel's collection.

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What role does the family play within larger modes of political participation? How do these activities make children witnesses?

As always, I turn to philosophy. My graduate studies make the most sense when applied to my parenting. Not in some pretentious way but in a pragmatic way: a way to see my children more clearly in their *always-becoming* and connect with their process.

For Merleau-Ponty, the ontological question of seeing was one of perception—an embodied sense that makes us beings-in-the-world. He argued that our body is the condition and context through which we can have a relation to objects with the world (cited in Grosz 1994, 86). This perspective posits an interrelation between the subject and the world—the body as I live it, experience it, and how I am shaped by my experience. This phenomenological frame sets up the mediation between the subject and the world, the body and the subject, the body and the world, and how children perceive this balance via activist practices. In other words, the children come to understand what it means to witness injustice.

In one of Lola's classes, they talked about children's rights: emphasizing that kids should be allowed to express themselves. When Lola's white teacher told her she was no longer allowed to do any arts and crafts related to Palestine in the class, Lola knew exactly what it meant: "I'm not allowed to express myself." My friend's daughter Asma attends the same school and was prohibited from wearing a headscarf because it "incites politics." Asma is Palestinian. Lola points out the obvious anti-Arab bias and double standard where certain cultures and religions are taken as de facto innocent and given the space to be in the world.

For Foucault (1981, 55), "the persistence of childhood innocence as an untouchable construct and 'true' discourse is 'both reinforced and renewed by a whole strata of practices, such as pedagogy, of course; and the system of books, publishing, libraries; learned societies and laboratories." This is why fighting for Gravel's books not to be banned at the Montreal Jewish Library and involving children in the fight was so necessary.

The effort to construct the innocent child emerged out of a will to create dominant schemas of observable, measurable, classifiable knowledge (Foucault in Garlen et al. 2021, 655).

To uphold this antagonistic world, the child needs to be understood and treated as a *tabula rasa* for the adult's expectations and projections, contrary to the way children grow into the world, as Maria Montessori (1995) notes. This fallacy affirms a hierarchical dichotomy between adults and children, in which the adults "know best" and must "regulate" children. It also allows for the positioning of some children as innocent and others as *a priori* transgressed. The clearest indication of this schema is how Israel's Prime Minister, Netanyahu, describes the Israeli children versus the Palestinian ones: "This is a struggle between the children of light and the children of darkness, between humanity and the law of the jungle" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023).

What is an appropriate boundary between a genuine shielding of our children from the brutality of the world and the reproduction of this myth of innocence? The ambivalence about my child's encounter with the placard only holds when I also position them as innocent. They bore witness to it. There is no going back. There is the opportunity to observe what has changed inside them and to recognize and challenge the role of white sight. Here on the placard was a photo of a kid that could be their age—martyred. Most children in the world have no choice but to look.

Is the age of innocence bound to geography?

Two of my most engaged friends in Palestinian activism bring their seven- and four-year olds to many events yet they attempt to be more careful in what they expose their children to. One of their main fears has been that highlighting their dedication and militancy will have the opposite effect on their children; they will rebel. They have a few friends who look askance at how their own parents' activism (albeit about different struggles) affected them.

I try to assuage their fears. "But activism is a spectrum, your actions are shaping your children's beliefs, without dictating them, and it's so beautiful. To them, this, all that you do, is living." To punctuate my stance, I look up a paragraph of Baldwin's (1980) essay on my phone to read out loud. An excerpt that has been turned into a poem quoted and requoted on social media as we grapple with the murder of so many Palestinian children.

> The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality. Or, I am saying, in other words, that we, the elders, are the only models children have. What we see in the children is what they have seen in us–or, more accurately perhaps, what they *see* in us. (Baldwin 1980)

Marianne tells me that Lola, five at the time, was very scared after they talked about the death of George Floyd in 2020: "I hope it was the right thing to do. Now, she is connecting Palestine to BLM, so maybe that's my answer."

It is essential to ensure that children's perspectives are not merely an afterthought but a central focus. Sustainable activism with children is not about bringing them along and giving them busy work, as if they are an appendage to our engagement. While this may be okay sometimes, as it is still surrounded by the ambience of organizing, our activism must integrate their pace, needs, interests, and feelings into engagement. Our sustained activism normalizes Palestine for our children, something my Palestinian colleagues say was visibly absent before October 7th.

Activism allows us and our children to pay attention.

"I always listen to them [the speeches at the marches/events]. I know every single lyric and every single song that I hear. I hear every single word that every single person says, even if it's a whisper," Lola tells me.

How should adults listen to children?

"Just listen! That's a start," S declares. They believe I protest because I want to be a good influence on them and their baby sister. I want them to absorb the various ways one can fight for justice, like the postcards we send out to government officials, or the zines we make to tuck into the Little Free Libraries in our neighbourhood.

***

Dozens of us huddle, preparing our kites, in the biting cold of Montreal's mid-January under Parc Jarry's gazebo with hot coffee and food donated by local restaurants. We are part of World Kite Flying Day for Gaza

—a day for celebrating how, in 2011, Gaza's children broke the record for the most kites flown simultaneously. We run across the swaths of snow-covered ground with our homemade and store-bought kites remixed with Palestinian colours and watermelons.

"The whole world is flying its kites for the children in Gaza," I tell S.

"Do you think they can see us?"

"Yes, they know we are running with them," I assure both of us while unravelling twine from our paper kite stuck in a bush.

We almost didn't make it because I had been up all night with my toddler, yoked in the quiet of our home. But I needed to show up for the children in Gaza who have no reprieve. A friend tells me it's easier to not feel completely beat down when you are engaged in activism; in any capacity, activism feels forward momentuming.

Two months later, in March, *Familles Montrealaises Pour La Palestine* organize a successful event at an art gallery during Nuit Blanche—a gathering to commemorate the children of Palestine. The dance component is S's idea. They wanted to dance for the children of Gaza after the parents in their break-dancing class vehemently rejected the same idea from their teacher. S's enthusiasm was quelled by the parents' assumptions that it's inappropriate for children to know what's going on in Gaza. Channelling the anger of that silencing, I watch them move a dance floor of kids, this time as a response to the steadfast Camps Breakerz in Gaza, the dance crew born in 2004 and still moving through siege and rubble. We see you, we're trying, we won't forget you, the dancing says. As do the dozens of Birds of Gaza affixed to the walls, coloured in by children and their attentive parents.

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Under what conditions are children appropriated for state power and domination? And how must we teach our children that this not ok? When we march with our children, we do so as settler immigrants on unceded territory. It has been over eight months since the first march with S and the haunting placard. They are eight and a half now and have not seen the endless real-time stream of images of human suffering from Gaza as the adults in their life have. But phrases about children being bombed, killed, and starved are their parlance about Palestine now. So is placing Palestine on a map when its name has been deliberately erased, placing its delicious food and rich culture outside of victimhood—orientations white sight prefers we singularly perceive. S now knows how dedicated its people, including the children, are to preserving their land and their history, and how that relates to Indigenous communities; how the fight for a free Palestine connects with the militarization of our everyday, the climate crisis, racism, and capitalism.

"Activism is hard and nerve-racking because we are risking things for ourselves," Marianne reveals. Indeed, when we take risks for more just and humane ways of life that extend empathy to all, that is what the children see in us. They perceive a more just future that requires risk to achieve.

Lola laughs when I ask her if she plans to keep protesting for Palestine, "Of course I will! Why would anyone you ask say no?"

S chimes in, "We should go and help rebuild it when it's free!"

It will be free. We will go. They agree.

Endnotes

1. Minor parts of this essay appeared in my personal Substack (Olszanowski 2024). All names have been changed.

2. The encampment newspaper, *The Palestimes*, is one such example, facilitated by a parent and professor.

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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

Making Intergenerational Otherwise: Kids Enacting Decolonial, Queer, Crip Futures

by May Chazan and Megan Hill

Abstract: In this paper, we reflect upon the lessons learned in an intergenerational arts-based research workshop held in 2023 on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory. The workshop brought together activists ages ten to one hundred, meaningfully including children and older adults as equal participants. Bridging writing on queer, crip, decolonial futures with scholarship on critical aging studies and childhood studies, we argue that radical intergenerationality is central to reworlding, or to imagining and making livable, liberatory futures. Centered around three vignettes from the workshop, this article explores how the presence of children and their intergenerational interactions offered teachings about accountability, joy, and honouring diverse body-minds. We conclude that, in a process of radical imagination, the youth offered us a glimpse of the intergenerational, decolonial, queer, crip futures we dream of and helped to create them in the space we shared.

Keywords: queer futures; crip futures; aging futures; decolonization; intergenerationality; child studies; aging studies; futurity

Résumé : Dans cet article, nous réfléchissons aux enseignements tirés d'un atelier de recherche artistique intergénérationnel organisé en 2023, sur les terres des Michi Saagiig (Anishinaabeg de Mississauga). L'atelier rassemblait des activistes âgés de 10 à 100 ans, intégrant concrètement la participation équitable d'enfants et de personnes plus âgées. En rapprochant les écrits relatifs à l'avenir décolonisé, queer, et crip avec l'érudition des études primordiales portant sur le vieillissement et l'enfance, nous soutenons que l'intergénérationnalité radicale est indispensable pour reconstruire le monde ou pour s'imaginer et concrétiser un avenir viable et libératoire. Centré sur trois vignettes abordées dans l'atelier, cet article explore la façon dont la présence d'enfants et leurs interactions intergénérationnelles ont proposé des enseignements relatifs à la responsabilisation ainsi qu'à la joie et rendent hommage à la diversité de corps-esprit. Nous concluons que, dans un processus d'imagination radicale, les jeunes nous ont fourni un aperçu de l'avenir intergénérationnel, décolonisé, queer, et crip dont nous rêvons et nous ont aidés à le concrétiser dans l'espace que nous avons partagé.

Mots clés : avenir pour les personnes âgées; avenir pour les personnes queers; avenir pour les personnes crip; décolonisation; intergénérationnalité; études de l'enfant; études de la personne âgée; futurité

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Megan Hill graduated from Trent University's Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies Masters program where she conducted arts-based participatory research exploring experiences at the intersections of queerness, disability, and old age. Megan is a research assistant with the Aging Activisms Collective as well as Pride/Swell+ and is currently pursuing a PhD at Concordia in Education. Hailing from the East Coast, Megan currently lives in Tiohtià:ke with her cat, partner, and many houseplants.

Introduction

In the spring of 2023, Aging Activisms hosted our first in-person research gathering since 2019, after four years of disruption and trauma (see Chazan 2023). The energy in the room was a familiar mix of anxiety and excitement, punctuated by the grief and awkwardness of re-learning how to connect in pandemic times. The room also buzzed with youthful energy as we had invited children to take part for the first time. Members of the local Youth Climate Action Club (YCAC), aged ten to fifteen, took part in this two-day intergenerational research workshop at Sadleir House, a student and community centre located in Peterborough, Canada, on Michi Saagiig Anishinaabe territory.

Aging Activisms (www.agingactivisms.org) is a program of community-based research and an activist-research collective comprised of a diverse intergenerational community of activists, artists, and organizers. Our research includes imagining our collective futures into being through storytelling, art-making, and relationship building. We seek to unsettle dominant colonial, capitalist, ableist, and heteronormative narratives of futurity and aging by centering those stories most often marginal within dominant cultural imaginaries of futures, aging, and social change (Chazan and Whetung 2022; Chazan and Baldwin 2021a; Chazan 2019). We have recorded a collection of "lesser-told" activist stories in our community (https://digitalcollections.trentu.ca/collections/stories-resistance-resurgence-and-resilience-nogojiwanong-peterborough) and curated an interactive public installation of our visions for livable and just futures on Michi Saagig territory (https://www.agingactivisms.org/about-3). Curious how the presence of children might grow our work, we titled our 2023 workshop "Youth Stories of Reworlding." We sought meaningful intergenerational exchange through drama, collage, and creative writing exercises that explored the central questions of this project: (1) What do you imagine the most beautiful and socially just future could look or feel like? (2) What would make this community a good place to grow old(er)? (3) How do we get to the futures we want?

Dr. May Chazan, co-author on this paper, leads Aging Activisms alongside a dedicated team of academic and community organizers, including co-author Megan Hill. Aging Activisms is based at Trent University and funded by the Canada Research Chairs program (2013-2024). May is a cisgender, queer activist, community organizer, and white settler of Jewish ancestry, in her late forties at the time of writing, and parent to two amazing queer kids. At the time of the research, Megan was a graduate student at Trent, supervised by May; she is a queer, white settler, disabled community organizer, and academic in her mid twenties.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, this paper seeks to extend academic-activist writing on the theme of reworlding, or what it means to make liberatory futures in the present-moment through grounded, relational, creative praxis (Carter, Recollet, and Robinson 2017). We build on the writing of scholars working towards desired futures in queer studies (see: Edelman 2004; Muñoz 2009), Indigenous and decolonial scholarship (see: Maynard and Betasamosake Simpson 2022; Ansloos et al. 2021) and disability/crip studies (see: Kafer 2013; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022), specifically the ways in which they imagine futures beyond, resistant to, and outside of dominant power systems with their compulsory heteronormativity, colonial normativity, and able-bodiedness. At the same time, we recognize that intergenerationality is not often included in this work of imagining altern-

ative futures. We also build on aging studies scholars (see: Sandberg and Marshall 2017; Changfoot et al. 2022; Chazan and Whetung 2022) who are rethinking aging futures, noting that children are not often considered in their analyses. Thus, we bridge critical writings on decolonial-queer-crip futures with aging and childhood studies, exploring the roles of radical intergenerationality and the centrality of children in conceptualizing and creating the worlds we desire.

We are inspired by artist-scholar Syrus Marcus Ware's reflections on the inherent value of both children and older adults in reworlding efforts:

> That is what capitalism does; it says that your main value is in the 18-35 year-old range when you're able to just consistently work and produce in order for somebody else to make money. So instead, we could say, "Oh, children are valuable just as they are, actually! Not as future workers but actually as they are. And our elders are valuable, you know? Not as former workers, but as inherently just as they are." ... So intergenerational movements are where it's at. And I think that will be a big thing as we move forward into our futures. (Kadoura, Besse, and McMullin 2020)

Following Ware and others, we examine some of the teachings brought forward by the YCAC youth as they interacted with a diverse group of adults, including Elder Alice Williams. Alice is a quilt artist, educator, and Anishinaabe Elder who resides at Curve Lake First Nation. In the role of "workshop Elder," Alice offered an opening for the workshop, ensured that our processes throughout the workshop aligned with our intended goals, and participated in research activities. (For Alice's contributions to other Aging Activisms workshops, see: Chazan and Baldwin 2021b; Chazan and Cole 2020). We explore the children's knowledges and ways of being as a praxis of radical imagination toward the intergenerational queer-crip-decolonial futures we desire.

We draw on a long history of scholar-activists who have positioned imagination as a critical skill in social justice efforts. Angela Davis (2006), for instance, explains that change only happens when regular people adopt "critical habits" of the mind, to imagine what might seem impossible in the present (7:42). Robin D. G. Kelley's seminal work *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* argues that "the catalyst for political engagement has never been misery, poverty, and oppression, but the promise of constructing a new world" (Kelley 2022, 16). Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014) have taken up "radical imagination" as a collective practice of imagining the world otherwise, what other scholars have called "speculating" (Cavanaugh 2023). While social justice movements are often oriented around fighting *against* systems of oppression (unmaking), activists and scholars are increasingly building *towards* better futures (making) (Scurr and Bowden 2021; Chazan, Baldwin, and Evans 2018). Kelley reminds us, "without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down" (Kelley 2022, 46). As Khasnabish explains, "radical imagination is a collective process of mapping what is, what was, and what might be" (Khasnabish 2020, 1720). Drawing from the past to build beautiful futures in the present is a "praxis of preconfiguration" (Scurr and Bowden 2021, 318). Ivy Scurr and Vannessa Bowden's analysis of anti-capitalist environmental justice activism argues that "the future is constantly being constructed through the here and now rather than being the result of a hoped for but never arriving revolution" (Scurr and Bowden 2021, 322).

In age-segregated, capitalist, colonial societies, seniors and youth are marginalized and deemed less economically productive (DeJong and Love 2016), yet given few opportunities to interact (Sifuentes 2022). Educational research has demonstrated the benefits of learning across generations for wellbeing, social integration, and social justice (Faulkner, Watson, and Shetterly 2023; McAllister, Briner, and Maggi 2019). In this article, we reflect on ways in which radical intergenerationality emerges in our own research processes as a core offering for those committed to reworlding research and praxis.

Specifically, we explore how, through intergenerational interactions, the YCAC youth modelled: (1) decolonial accountability without recourse to settler moves to innocence, undue shame, or guilt; (2) unfettered joy as anti-capitalist and decolonial practices; and (3) honouring of their own diverse bodyminds as roadmaps toward queer-crip future-making. By examining these three reworlding teachings offered by children and youth-elder

exchanges, we argue that radical intergenerationality should be conceptualized as core to decolonial, queer, crip futurities. Like Ware (2020), we concur that both older adults and children hold innate, inherent value in liberatory praxis.

In what follows, we outline our methodological approach. We then centre our article around three vignettes, interwoven with participants' words, images, and artwork, that demonstrate the three themes described above. Finally, we discuss what these findings offer to reworlding scholarship and practice.

Methods

Over the past decade, Aging Activisms has focused on developing intergenerational methodologies, recording hundreds of stories, with an emphasis on older activists. One of the core goals of the 2023 research workshop was to expand our methodologies to engage children, their ways of being, and their knowledges within an already intergenerational process, exploring the implications for scholarship and activism. Participants included seven YCAC youth (ages ten to fifteen), eight facilitators (in their twenties, thirties and forties), and fifteen additional adults (returning participants, aged thirty through one hundred). Participants included racialized activists, LGBTQ2IA+ organizers, disability activists, Raging Grannies, and Indigenous Elders and knowledge holders.

The YCAC began their climate justice work together in 2022 at the height of the "Omicron" wave of lockdowns, when some in the group were only nine years old. They initiated rallies, spoke and performed at climate events, and organized park clean-ups (kawarthaNOW 2022). We chose to partner with this group for several reasons. First, the YCAC is grassroots, youth-led, and not institutionally affiliated (i.e., not a school club or similar); the children self-organized, approaching adults in their families/community to support their efforts. Second, May's children were part of the group, as were the children of other research team members. These pre-existing relationships simplified the process in some ways, while also requiring us to attend even more critically to the ethics of full and informed consent. Finally, the demographics of the YCAC youth align with Aging Activisms' goals of centering diverse and lesser-told activist stories. The three founding YCAC members are, respectively, of Anishinaabe, Jewish, and Latinx backgrounds; all three identified as queer, and at least two with some form of neurodivergence/ learning disabilities. Among the larger group, many YCAC youth identify as queer or were raised in queer families and several are disabled or neurodivergent. We note, however, that at the Youth Stories of Reworlding workshop, seven of their group of ten attended, and all youth participants were white settlers.[1]

All workshop activities were designed to support both youth and adults to gain a sense of agency and build community around their work, guided by resources on youth climate anxiety and grief (Davenport 2021). As with all Aging Activisms research, our process revolved around relationship-building. Bringing in children added the creative methodological challenge of incorporating children, not just as equals, but as uniquely positioned knowledge holders with diverse and divergent needs and bodyminds (Cavanaugh 2023). Much thought went into the accessibility, safety, and inclusivity of protocols, practices, and spaces. Drawing on decolonial, crip, queer, feminist methodological practices (Rice, Jones, and Mündel 2022; Changfoot et al. 2022), organizing components of the workshop included: a large and diverse co-facilitation team; beginning, ending, and carrying many activities in circle; Indigenous leadership for openings, closing, active contributions, and feedback on processes; group contracting to shape our protocols (what became known as our "Ways of Being (Together)"); providing sensory kits; encouraging movement and fresh air outdoors; continual invitations to move freely and attend to our bodies; and offering chair-based modifications for every activity. We also attended carefully to mobility, food, and COVID safety needs, with facilitators explicitly dedicated to each of these tasks.

We undertook most of the research activities as a full intergenerational group, where adults, youth, and facilitators co-created and contributed. Research activities included drama games, collaging, creative writing, and

creating a wall of sticky notes with key words and images about our desired futures. On the second day, we invited youth to share stories and reflections on social change work in their communities. In a flip of conventional age roles, older participants interviewed youth. These interviews were recorded and edited into short media capsules, which have been shared online and in community (https://www.agingactivisms.org/youthstories).

In terms of documentation, we recorded facilitator debriefs at the end of each day. We also shared extensive, written observations and thoughts on a shared online document for a week after each workshop day, which acted as a form of collaborative analysis and debrief. We recorded group conversations throughout the workshop and photographed artwork, creative writing, and sticky notes. We also recorded and transcribed lengthy interviews with each youth before compressing these into shorter media capsules. Thus, the workshop produced far more research material—"data"—than we can discuss in this paper. (We have, however, offered shared knowledge produced in this workshop with wider communities via media screenings, and art installation at the public library, and on our website.)

Following a rigorous review and thematic coding of our collaborative analysis documents, as well as close readings of workshop transcripts, we decided to focus this paper on three emerging themes, which together begin to respond to our methodological question: what might children's participation in intergenerational research offer reworlding scholarship and activism? We have selected three pivotal moments from the workshop, along with artwork, photographs, and participant remarks to illustrate these themes throughout. Furthermore, for each theme, we connect to and extend key scholarship at the intersection of futurity research, childhood studies, and aging studies.

Doing Accountability Without Guilt and Shame

We began the first day of the workshop with welcomes from Elder Alice and from May Chazan. Following this, Velvet Lacasse, a white research team member, local teacher, and facilitator of YCAC, brought together our voices and bodies through song, play, and movement. She explained the importance of tracing the source of art and music and explained that the first song she was sharing came from West Africa, the Yoruba language, and a Liberian dance form called Funga. We sang the song, "Funga Alafia," with harmonies and clapping. Participants seemed engaged, if a little nervous.

Afterward, Alice spoke up: "Well, I'm sorry to bring this up, but I didn't like the first song that we did that was from Africa. And I wanna say how I see that. I see that as appropriation and I want to know, did anybody else think that?"

The room became tense. One participant immediately agreed with Alice. The rest of the room remained silent. Another participant, a white climate activist and former teacher in her late eighties, then chimed in: "I, uh, disagree with you." She went on to describe her belief that songs transcend appropriation and help establish a global consciousness and that, like the smudging we had started the day with, she could participate in them to create a sense of oneness.

May thanked Alice for her important intervention, said that in these moments we are all always learning, and suggested we take some time to talk this through more fully. A few more adults offered replies; none explicitly naming the issue as appropriation or our collective complicity in it. Most participants, despite being familiar with activist spaces and well versed in conversations about appropriation, seemed confused. Velvet listened actively, hands open in her lap, openness on her face. The overall feeling around the circle was heaviness—what the facilitators later named as shame.

Then, Alex, an eleven-year-old YCAC member, said: "Um about the song thing? I think that if it was taught by someone that learned it from their [own] culture, it would [...] make people more comfortable, because if

there's people teaching stuff that they've learned, then it's different […] it's not their culture." Alex brought clarity to the issue with a sense of lightness—not laden with shame, but rather imbued with genuine curiosity while holding Velvet and the group accountable in light of Alice's teaching. Alex's words shifted the conversation; nods and mumbles of approval around the circle suggested that everyone, including the person who initially defended the choice of this song, seemed to align with her words.

Ziysah von Bieberstein, a member of the research team, then offered to facilitate this unplanned conversation further, which continued for another twenty minutes, with contributions from many around the circle. Velvet continued to listen intently, modelling genuine humility and openness to learn from this moment. Alice, also listening carefully and with curiosity, asked the group why no one else spoke up about the song if they also felt uncomfortable. She asked for accountability particularly from the adults in the room, mostly settlers, but despite everyone trying very hard to remain open and present, our sense was that even one hour into the workshop, Alice's ask was largely met with heaviness. Indeed, this remaining heaviness was raised by many in our debrief that afternoon and throughout the following week.

Ziysah then suggested an unplanned break. As the adults took time to collect ourselves, checking in with each other, the youth modelled something else: they immediately left the room, grabbed snacks, and ran outside to play. This research moment offers a glimpse into the contributions that kids and older adults can make when they are brought into the circle as equals (Sifuentes 2022). In this interaction, we observed a flipping of age scripts and power dynamics: It was a youth who offered the group clarity around cultural appropriation; and it was an Elder who made herself vulnerable by insisting on settler accountability. In their notes and reflections after the fact (see figure 1), youth participants depicted this as a positive moment of learning. While many of the adult facilitators reflected that they felt the need to "solve" the tension, and to worry about Alice, Velvet, and the youth, the youth themselves did not appear stuck in such feelings. They engaged the discomfort with curiosity, learned from it, and then let it go.

Figure 1: A colourful page from Alex's workshop journal which reflects the conversation discussed above. It features words like "youth," "love," and "peace" as well as the phrases "conversation is key" and "honour others' words and thoughts."

This moment of tension and intergenerational collaboration taught us about the decolonial futures we desire. We recognize that the heaviness felt by the adults was a reflection of our care and dedication to accountability. And yet, our own shame and defensiveness had the potential to hinder our capacities to fully learn from that moment of conflict. The youth, conversely, were able to offer us a clearer way to think about appropriation, while moving towards accountability with more curiosity and less emotional, colonial baggage (Tuck and Yang 2012; Mackey 2016). We will return to this theme of doing settler accountability as part of our collective re-worlding work in our discussion.

Unfiltered Joy and Pleasure as Decolonial Future-Making

In the next session of the day, we asked participants to write about the world as they wanted it to be in twenty years. When the exercises were complete, there were about fifteen minutes left in the schedule before lunch. Ziysah suggested an unplanned go-around, inviting participants to share what was on their minds. The circle conversation began with reflections from adults about the writing exercise. But when the microphone reached the part of the circle where the youth were sitting, thirteen-year-old Mataeya said: "The only thing that comes to mind right now is that I love to climb trees and it is my favourite activity in the world besides swimming and I always wish I was up a tree rather than on the ground" (see figure 2).

The group laughed as the mic was passed. "I'm Marvin, my pronouns are he/him, and I like pizza."

"I'm Leif… I'm just gonna say one or two things I love. I love to write and I really love to swim…"

"My name is Haron, my pronouns are they/them, I also really like swimming and my favourite colour is blue. I just like to say my favourite colour, I don't know why."

Figure 2: Two YCAC youth pose smiling in a tree during one of the breaks at the workshop.

No one had asked the kids to share what they liked doing or their favourite colours; they spontaneously chose to share what they loved. The adults continued with more serious reflections about our process so far. When the microphone got to Alice, she reflected back on the youth's contributions: "I really like the way the younger people expressed how they love doing the things they love. I grew up in an era where we were taught duty before pleasure, If you don't keep your hands busy, Satan will find work for you. So as old as I am, I still prevent myself from doing the things I would like to do or love to do."

Later that day, after debriefing this moment with the research team, Ziysah unpacked what made this moment so significant: mycelial learning was happening across ages, across the room, in all directions. Alice offered teachings about smudging, medicines, and the four directions. Gender diverse youth unexpectedly taught her about decolonizing her own ideas about joy, pleasure, and childhood. Ziysah also reminded the group that, prior to agreeing to joining the workshop, Alice had asked about how we would ensure the children would behave, partly informed by her years as a schoolteacher; this suggested to us that she had not anticipated the kind of reciprocal learning that was taking place. We witnessed Alice, who was carrying around decades-old beliefs, shifting her thinking in real time by being around these children.

This second moment offers another lesson about valuing children's knowledges and ways of being in intergenerational social justice work. They brought an embodied knowledge of love and joy in the face of tough experiences of climate grief, injustice, and hate that they shared later on. While we consider how privilege may be at play in this particular group's ability to approach issues with positivity, it is also resonant with literature on decolonial joy and love (see: Simpson 2016; Sumac 2018). Alice received a teaching from the youth about permissiveness to love what you love and to embrace joy and pleasure toward decolonial futures. At the same time, she expressed sadness about her own childhood conditioning.

Attuning to Embodied Knowledges as Crip Reworlding

In planning, the research team was keenly aware of our tendency to suspend our own embodied needs in service of caring for participants. We discussed how we might create more easeful spaces for everyone involved, building care for ourselves and crip methodologies into our processes, but did not arrive at full solutions. During the workshop, the youth, again, offered important insights into honouring our diverse bodyminds.

In being themselves and honouring their needs, youth participants consistently reminded us that we all have bodies. They did not suppress their embodied knowledges about needing breaks and movement. Throughout the entire workshop, they felt free to sit on the floor, doodle, fidget, play, and move around. After wolfing down lunch, they would immediately make their way outside to climb trees, skip rope, and ride bikes. Throughout the workshop, the youth were not afraid to interrupt "serious" research activities; they did not feel the need to perform their respect of the research process in the same way we adults have been conditioned to.

Through their actions, youth reminded adult participants that we could also wiggle, change positions, and divert attention when needed. The research team noted many ways adults were learning a crip way of reworlding from these interactions. For instance, during the creative writing workshop, Cam, a neurodivergent, trans, fifteen-year-old, began the session by eschewing their chair to sit on the floor. Within minutes, facilitators Megan and Melissa Baldwin, both in their twenties, mirrored this position (see figures 3 and 4), experiencing an instant sense of bodily relief. Both felt they only thought to do this due to Cam's modelling.

Figure 3: Cam sits cross-legged on the floor, writing, during a workshop, while a group of YCAC sit behind them sitting in their chairs.

Figure 4: Megan (co-author) and Melissa sitting on the floor, writing. Melissa is bent forward, book on floor, while Megan leans back against her chair, writing on her lap

We also noted these crip teachings emerging in participant artwork. After lunch on the first day, we collaged in response to the question: "What do you imagine you will need to make this community a happy/healthy/good place to grow old(er)?" The tables were arranged in a large square and covered in old magazines, paper, scissors, and glue sticks. Participants sat along the outer edges of the tables, facing each other, young and old side-by-side. This was a relaxed social activity, where connections were forged through sharing art supplies and magazine images. Some adults took time to think through the prompt, while youth quickly began cutting out images of ice cream cones and cats. Melissa later reflected: "One great gift of intergenerational spaces with

youth is that they encourage us adults to get over ourselves and have some fun and think through doing rather than just before doing."

Despite the collage session being fairly short and lighthearted, we noticed teachings from the kids in some adults' collages. We were especially touched by Alice's collage (see figure 5), which centers a large soaker tub. Below this image, and over a lined cue card, in thick blue ink, she wrote: "Someone to run my bath—someone to clean me up—rub, scrub, wash my hair. Help me out of the tub. Dry me up. Comb my hair—put beautifully smelling stuff on me. Dress me beautifully. Clean up after me." At the bottom, in pencil, she added: "Pamper me. If I had a rocking chair." Here, Alice imagines what she needs to grow old(er) is having her bodily needs cared for, experiencing rest and pleasure in her aging body.

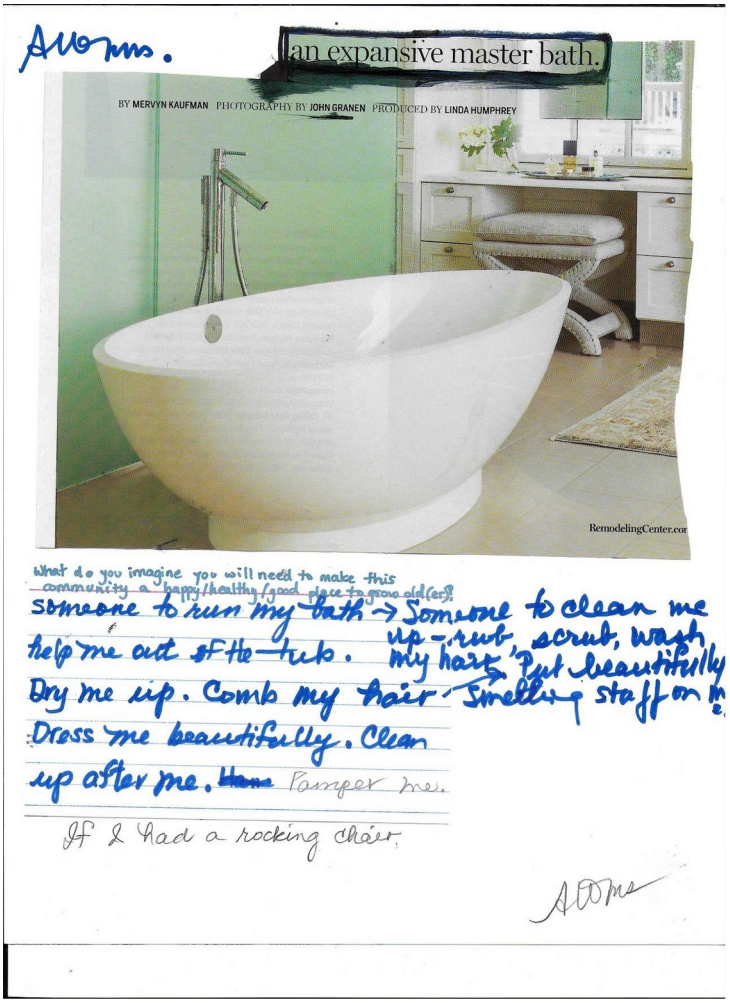

Figure 5: A scan of Alice's collage, an image of a soaker tub in the middle, and her written description around it. Alice has signed her name in the bottom right corner.

This expression of vulnerability, bodily desire, and care for her aging body was received by many of the research facilitators, and indeed by many of the youth, as a change in how Alice initially entered the workshop, one which very likely was influenced by the youth reminding her to love what she loves, and to embrace pleasure without shame. In a show of reciprocity and in response to her collage, the youth gifted Alice a basket of bath products at the end of the second workshop day.[2]

Thus, the children and adults together reminded us that movement, play, and rest are the work of reworlding. By honouring embodied knowledges, youth made futures in the present that include diverse bodyminds and

bodily desires. These lessons were received by adults who then reflected back messages about embracing care, rest, and unique needs. Pushing back against ableist and capitalist-colonial norms of conforming and enduring, these intergenerational exchanges imagined and created caring, crip, queer otherworlds (Kafer 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022).

Discussion

We learned much about queer-crip-decolonial futures from bringing children and older adults together to imagine socially just futures in an environment where all were well-supported and respected. By being themselves in this space, the youngest participants taught the rest of us about ways of (1) doing settler accountability, (2) centering joy, and (3) honouring diverse bodyminds. Their ways of being offered us glimpses of the futures we desire and helped us build these futures in the space we created, in a process of radical imagination (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; Kelley 2022). In this section, we discuss each of these three themes or reworlding teachings in more detail and in conversation with existing scholarship.

First, we turn to the moment when Alice called for accountability. Although many adults were actively working to remain open, most were also experiencing feelings of shame for participating in and not recognizing appropriation, working through whether we were really complicit. As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang explain, grappling with being a benefactor and participant in settler colonialism is uncomfortable and, in an attempt to "reconcile settler guilt and complicity and rescue settler futurity," settlers take part in a variety of evasions, known as "settler moves to innocence" (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1; 9). This also resonates with the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective's (2020) descriptions of settler denials that restrict our ability to imagine otherwise. Robin D. G. Kelley explains that radical imagination is constricted by the colonial conditions of daily life: "We are constantly putting out fires, responding to emergencies, finding temporary refuge, all of which make it difficult to see anything other than the present" (Kelley 2022, 56).

The youth in the room offered something different. Rather than becoming preoccupied with settler guilt or mental gymnastics, they accepted discomfort, expressed genuine curiosity, and were grateful for the learning. In a moment of uncertainty, it was the Elder and the children that led the way. In other words, when kids and older adults were brought to the circle as equal co-learners and co-carers, we witnessed mutually beneficial relationships. Jamila Lyiscott and her colleagues (2021) call this the "validation loop" of intergenerational relationships, where support, respect, and trust are looped back between children and adults. These intergenerational relationships may offer a way to create long lasting change, "co-creating a future that is local, decolonial, and autonomous" (bergman 2022, 8). Everyone in the room learned about moving through colonial discomfort with grace and curiosity when Alex and Alice spoke up, co-building futures based on authentic accountability in the here and now.

Second, our research highlighted the role of children in bringing joy, love, and pleasure to the forefront of activist-research spaces. While there was very clear energy and happiness surrounding the youth's actions (skipping, tree-climbing, stating what they love), there was also a complexity in this intergenerational space that we can perhaps learn from in our re-worlding efforts. We recognize, for instance, the contrast between the experiences of childhood for these well-supported white, settler youth and the childhood depicted by Alice, who was taught from a young age to connect joy to evil. The carefree approach of these youth emerges as a function of their privilege, at least in part, resonating with scholars like Rebecca Epstein, Jamila J. Blake, and Thalia González (2017) and Jessica Lu and Catherine Knight Steele (2019) who note that Black children are often deemed adult-like and not afforded the same innocence of non-Black children.

At the same time, the teachings of young joy were also punctuated with grief. We witnessed Alice expressing grief for not allowing herself to "love what she loves." On our second day together, when the children were interviewed by adult participants, they told stories of grief over the global climate crisis, over the housing,

poverty, and addiction crises in their community, and over personal experiences of pandemic isolation and homophobia, transphobia, racism, and antisemitism in school. This grief was clearly fuelling their activism and desire to band together; in many ways, their unfettered joy was despite their grief and part of their activism.

This intermixing of joy and grief as part of reworlding practices resonates with Smokii Sumac's (2018) poetry collection in which he writes about the importance of Indigenous, Two-Spirit joy, resilience, laughter, and love, alongside trauma and oppression (Sumac 2018; Sumac 2020). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2016) also writes about finding moments of love and strength in the face of tragic circumstances, often found in land, language, and resistance to colonialism. Similarly, Karen Morris, Adam Greteman, and Nic Weststrate (2022) suggest that queer joy is almost always intertwined with heartache. Morris and her colleagues (2022) and Burkholder et al. (2024) argue that queer joy and euphoria are punctuated by an underbelly of grief, heartache, and ambivalence. Thus, we come to understand that the joy of the youth in our research exists alongside and in resistance to their own grief in/for the world. Their insistence on pleasure and love is emphasized in contrast to Alice's colonial upbringing and in-the-moment unlearning. Insisting on joy allows us to make the futures we desire, even while confronting the grief that is present.

Finally, the interactions of children and adults in our research revealed the queer, crip, and aging embodied knowledges that can emerge in intergenerational spaces that value bodily autonomy and diversity. Such knowledges, we believe, are urgently needed as we work to make liberatory futures through and in our research practices. In planning for this intergenerational space, we drew on the works of scholar-activists working to challenge dominant narratives of disability and aging as deficiency—instead positioning diversity of age, bodily ability, neurotype and ways of being as collective wisdom. We consulted the writing of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha who asserts that disabled people develop crip emotional intelligence with their own unique skills, sciences, and technologies (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018, 69) and that of Linn Sandberg who recognizes the potential of aging embodiment with her concept of "affirmative old age" (Sandberg 2013, 19).

We recognized that our invitations to fidget, move, take breaks, get snacks, and use the washroom freely pose a deep contrast to youth's daily experiences of our colonial school system. As bergman (2022) explains, our current education system is built to serve white, middle-to-upper class, neurotypical, able-bodied, cis children from hetero-nuclear families; kids are made to quiet themselves and their individuality in schools. Children are denied bodily autonomy by restrictions in restroom use, dress, movement, expression, and activity (Sifuentes 2022; Desmarais 2022). Rather than celebrating and centering the inherent knowledges of children, schools often act as what Bettina Love (2019) calls "spirit-murderers," particularly for Black, Indigenous, racialized, queer/trans, and otherwise marginalized youth.

When encouraged to honour their own needs and autonomy, we witnessed how the spirits and embodied knowledges of youth flourished, contributing to crip reworlding in real-time. Together, the kids and adults in this research modelled self and community care and knowledge of their own bodyminds by honouring their embodied needs through interrupting, moving, and taking breaks. Coming to the space with a variety of neurotypes and physical abilities, participants envisioned and enacted crip futures in their artistic contributions, storytelling, and everyday actions. These real-time futures did not eliminate disability, aging, or difference; instead, they valued and centered our multiplicity of needs, making room for all of us (Chazan 2023; Kafer 2021).

Conclusions

Many Indigenous and Black communities have long honoured the teachings children offer to movements for social change and to resurgence and reworlding work. Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamoke Simpson (2011) explains:

> In the pre-colonial Nishnaabeg nation, children were highly respected people, valued for their insights, their humour, and their contributions to families and communities at each stage of their lives. Children were seen as Gifts, and parenting was an honour. Coming from the spirit-world at birth, children were closer to that world than their adult counterparts, and were therefore considered to have greater spiritual power—a kind of power highly respected amongst the Nishnaabeg. Adults had a lot to learn from these small teachers. (122-3)

Black scholar-artist-activist, Syrus Marcus Ware, based in Tkaronto, likewise explains that the Black Panther Party described children's right to autonomy and self-determination in their 1970s treaty on the rights of children (Kadoura, Besse, and McMullin 2020). In our introduction, we cited Ware asserting that "children are valuable just as they are" and that "intergenerational movements are where it is at." As two white-settler academics, we wish to honour these long-held conceptions of children's wisdoms as we, too, explore and support the teachings youth and intergenerational exchange bring to the collective work of radical imagination and reworlding.

The child-Elder knowledges emerging in this research offer specific examples of how well-supported and critically-conceptualized intergenerationality might contribute to the work of imagining and building decolonial, queer, crip futures. The young people in this research offered core teachings for all of us engaged in reworlding research and practice. Perhaps these teachings were possible because the children had spent less time than adults being conditioned by the oppressive workings of colonialism, capitalism, and ableism; because of their privileged childhoods as white-settler, middle-class kids; and/or because our research protocols permitted them to draw on the inherent intelligence of their queer-crip bodyminds and their own experiences of grief and marginality. Through their embodied knowledges, ways of being, actions, and interactions, they taught us about settler accountability, joy, and diverse bodyminds, reminding us of the futures we want most, and helping to build these futures together in the present moment. Our research, thus, offers a call for radical intergenerationality to be more widely taken up as core to imagining and making decolonial, queer, crip futurities.

Acknowledgement of Support and Funding: We thank all of the participants and researcher-facilitators in the 2023 Youth Stories of Reworlding Workshop, especially the members of the Youth Climate Action Club and Elder Alice Williams, whose words and stories are shared in this article. We are grateful to Ziysah von Bieberstein's brilliant editing on our initial drafts. We also extend deep gratitude to Michi Saagiig territory, land, and water for sustaining this work, to Sadleir House for hosting us, and to all past Aging Activisms participants, who have shaped this work and our analyses. The project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council through the Canada Research Chairs program and supported by Trent University.

Endnotes

1. Of interest, 6 of the 7 youth participants were also Jewish, which, in the context of Peterborough, Canada, is very much a minority/marginalized identity. Several mentioned never having had another Jewish friend in their classes at school.

2. It is standard in Aging Activisms research for May to offer gifts to participants. The idea for this gift came in conversation between May and Alex, as we looked through the collages from the first week. May procured the products and Alex asked if it could be given from the youth as a thank-you.

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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

"Where the Computer Cannot Reach—Is Dreaming": The Imaginary & (In)visible Worlds

by Amy Foley

Abstract: This article explores the work of Janelle Monáe through, and with, the words and images offered by Ruha Benjamin in *Imagination: A Manifesto*, arguing that these and other Afrofuturist texts provide us with tools for reconceptualizing the visible world as dense, textured, and never wholly legible, consumable, or commodifiable. This essay asks us to dwell, to practice a temporary suspension, in the visualizations offered by these artists, as they invent new fictions for us to inhabit – fictions that work against the dominant narrative of visibility that says we can be made fully readable and comprehensible to power through proliferating mechanisms of technological surveillance. This false but enduring narrative, which often feels deceptively natural and inescapable, works to infantilize and depoliticize imagination, to thwart creative disruption, and to produce collective despair. While this essay acknowledges the very real, violent power entwined within this fiction – and the need to, at times, use this very narrative as a shield for survival in the present – it also argues that we must simultaneously recognize this *as fiction* and create *new fictions* so as to open ourselves to a future in which survival and flourishing are not contingent on complicity in the constrictive narratives that frame us today. As we are shaped in both the real and the imaginary, this essay contends, projecting new fictions is a crucial practice for making more liveable futures.

Keywords: politics of visibility; fictions of legibility; imagination; surveillance capitalism; technocracy; futurity; Afrofuturism; social imaginary

Résumé : Cet article explore l'œuvre de Janelle Monáe par l'entremise et au moyen des mots et des images proposés par Ruha Benjamin dans son livre, intitulé *Imagination: A Manifesto*, en soutenant que ces récits ainsi que d'autres textes afrofuturistes nous fournissent les outils pour conceptualiser le monde visible de nouveau, sous une forme opaque, texturée et qu'on ne peut jamais lire, ni consommer, ni commercialiser dans son intégralité. Cet essai nous demande de nous attarder sur les visualisations offertes par ces artistes, de nous arrêter temporairement pour ce faire, tandis qu'elles conçoivent de nouvelles fictions que nous pourrons vivre, des fictions allant à l'encontre du discours dominant de visibilité qui stipule qu'on doit nous rendre lisibles et compréhensibles de façon intégrale pour alimenter les mécanismes de surveillance technologique qui se multiplient. Ce récit inexact, mais immuable, qui nous semble souvent naturel, de façon trompeuse, et inévitable, s'efforce d'infantiliser et de dépolitiser l'imagination, d'entraver les perturbations créatives et de générer une impuissance collective. Bien que cet essai reconnaisse le pouvoir bien réel et violent, qui est inextricablement lié à cette fiction, et la nécessité, par moments, d'avoir recours à ce même récit comme bouclier pour survivre à la situation actuelle, il soutient également que nous devons simultanément reconnaître *qu'il s'agit d'une fiction* et créer *de nouvelles fictions* afin de nous ouvrir à un avenir dans lequel la survie et la prospérité ne sont pas conditionnelles à la complicité dans les récits contraignants qui nous encadrent aujourd'hui. Puisque la réalité et l'imaginaire nous forment de façon conjointe, cet essai soutient que prévoir de nouvelles fictions est une pratique primordiale pour concrétiser un avenir où il fait mieux vivre.

Mots clés : politique de la visibilité; fiction de la lisibilité; imagination; capitalisme de surveillance; technocratie; futurité; afrofuturisme; imaginaire social

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> Like fungi that seem to spring out of nowhere after a hard rainfall, social uprisings often appear spontaneous and spectacular. But as with mushrooms that grow out of a vast structure of mycelium threading, branching, and rooting beneath the forest floor, so, too, do revolutions rely on the long-term, often invisible networks of people working under the radar. Like mushrooms, the kind of imagination that can potentially transform toxic environments into habitable ones relies on a vast network of underground connections – with people, organizations, and histories.
>
> —Ruha Benjamin, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024, 122-123)

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Politics of Visibility in the Social Imaginary

In the early moments of Ryan Coogler's 2018 *Black Panther* film, viewers are introduced to the spectacular vision of Wakanda as T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye return to their beloved country. As the ship and its inhabitants pierce through the hologram exterior, the hidden-in-plain-sight Wakanda appears, with its lengthy stretches of skyscrapers immersed in a solarpunk dream of silver and green, unfolding before characters and audiences alike. Wakanda's invisibility to the outside world plays an integral role in the 2018 film, the 2022 *Wakanda Forever,* and their comic antecedents. In order to successfully hide itself, the holographic projection that protects Wakanda from the outside forces of colonialism and white supremacy uses to its advantage the reiterated narratives of African otherness disseminated through those same channels of power. On the surface, Wakanda appears to be another "third world nation" and the landscape within which it is embedded is neither industrialized nor urban. The Wakanda that escapes visibility, instead, functions as a technological mecca forged by Shuri – creative inventor and genius sister to the Black Panther.

The space occupied by Shuri is one that has been violently, historically absent from the screen. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack describes "the quest to see myself or browner people" (Womack 2013, 5) in the *Star Wars* trilogy, lamenting the brevity of Lando's screen time and the unmasking of Darth Vadar as not-James-Earl-Jones. Similarly, N.K. Jemisin's stark remembrance of watching the Jetsons and seeing a future in which Black people were entirely absent is not only about inclusivity but about the very perseverance of Black life into the future. Jemisin writes, "Thing is, not-white-people make up most of the world's population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show's creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo? I'm watching the Jetsons, and it's creeping me right the fuck out" (Jemisin 2013, n.p.). Jemisin illuminates the sinister, threatening nature of said futuristic depictions, which of course are culturally abundant. Shuri's place within Wakanda offers an alternative vision to what Ruha Benjamin refers to in her 2024 *Imagination: A Manifesto* as eugenics and "carceral" social imaginaries, which aim to expunge or arrest not only bodies, but result in the policing (including self-policing) of imagination itself. Shuri's presence—and her use of technology in playful, exuberant, and healing iterations —offers a vision of the future not premised on the present dominant fictions, which aim to contain or obliterate or police the Shuris within our collective imaginations.

Benjamin's manifesto also argues that an image has the capacity to "animate" the imagination and (de)naturalize (Benjamin 2024, 102) these eugenics and carceral fictions. The image of a Wakanda unfolded also offers viewers another story of the visible world, one that challenges notions of singular readability that have long

dominated the United States imaginary. The invisibility of Wakanda to the outside world is an exhortation to rethink resistance in a surveillance capitalist society, as its ability to evade surveillance insists that not everything can be visually captured and commodified by those who currently wield power. This is what Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes call "fugitivity," which "finds its energetic potency in remaining illegible to power, incommensurable with colonialism, and opaque to appropriation, commodification and cultural theft. That which is fugitive proposes an insurgent force of dissident visibility; it is the hidden that reveals itself in motion" (Ritskes and Martineau 2014, V). Wakanda, like many Afrofuturist imaginings, bustles beneath the hologram of the visible and, in doing so, asks us to consider the politics of visibility as they pertain to other formative social imaginaries such as those articulated so beautifully by Benjamin in her manifesto.

The fiction that all that is true or real can be made visible on surfaces manifests in all our systems. It impacts the construction of borders, with statistics and cartography itself working to make bodies "visible to the state," making "a land's natural and human resources known or 'legible' to officials" (Ervin 2009, 156). These extend into other perceived threats to legibility and composition of the "face of the nation" more generally speaking, and the hearkening back to pure states of readability. We see this imaginary in operation whenever bodies are especially "ambiguous," hence decades of coercive and often secretive, literal re-shapings of bodies in the instances of infants born intersexed. This focus on the visible is what Elizabeth Grosz calls "biologically unwarranted," since biological sex, "is a much more complicated matter than the information afforded by vision" (Grosz 1996, 60). We can hear its resonance in the one drop rule, in the fears of "passing," in the Red and Lavender scares that sought to use visual signifiers to determine the truth of whether or not there were Communists or homosexual politicians and citizens "camouflaging"—a term used by J. Edgar Hoover in 1950—with the "normal" body politic. In 1950, one senator asked, "There is no quick test like an X-ray that discloses these things?" (quoted in Paton 2010, 58). These few but telling moments are emblematic of the social imaginary of the visible, inherently connected to what Benjamin characterizes as eugenics and carceral imaginaries, since in order to make visible or legible, the body cannot be in motion and must not threaten the supposed "pure" body politic. Visual distinction, so the story goes, is not only possible but necessary for the supposed "protection" of the readability of the surface of what is considered to be the "American body." The currents of this fiction run deeply through the United States and into the current political landscape in its rhetorical and imaginary constructions of otherness, in current-affairs language around immigrants, around trans identity, around protesters, around individuals born with autism—among so many other "others."

There is very real violence and coercion done in the name of this social imaginary of the visible world, and while we must combat these present violences in the forms of strategizing and organizing (Benjamin 2024, 16), work to transform the imaginary is also pressing, since these real harms are often perpetuated precisely through it. Benjamin's *Manifesto* argues that while the imagination should not be fetishized, it is to be taken seriously in working towards more liveable futures. While acknowledging we cannot "imagine ourselves out of the death-making machinery humming in the background," Benjamin also contends that, in attending to the harms themselves, "we may overlook the ideas and ideologies that continue to give rise to those harms again and again" (Benjamin 2024, 26-27). Thus, the work in, around, on the imaginary does not mean neglect of the "real" but means acknowledging that the real is very much framed within and executed through the fictions that are produced and that we, knowingly or unknowingly, inhabit. In Wakanda's world within a world, the motility within its surface is an alternative politics of visibility, one that appears across other Afrofuturist works as well. This politics has the capacity to contribute to a social imaginary not monopolized by those who currently monopolize (Benjamin 2024, 21) the means of production and distribution of resources in the present.

Images by which to "animate imagination" towards more liveable futures through a new politics of visibility are present in other Afrofuturist works beyond Wakanda and are especially apparent in the recent work of Janelle Monáe. In her short fiction collection *Memory Librarian*, Monáe insists that "the world we see is not the only one" and that "the escapes we yearned for might not exist in this one line of time, in this single, part-seen world" (Monáe 2022, ix), further insisting that "beyond time and memory—where the computer cannot reach

is—dreaming" (ix). This declaration refuses the idea that all can be made visible to power. It is also a reclamation of imagination and a glimmer of what bell hooks, in 1989, called "radical openness." hooks explained: "If we only view the margin as sign marking the despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost" (hooks 1989, 20). Janelle Monáe's written, musical, and cinematic compositions and the theatrical roles take hooks' motion as instructive, as seeking and making queer non-singular spaces in which to desire, dream, and live. Furthermore, Monáe's work offers us a new vision of vision itself, crucial to the work of rethinking and re-envisioning possibilities. The use of imagery—within literature, film, music, or amalgamations and transmedial interactions within these and other genres—that offer a more plural politics of visibility (such as in Monáe's work) can reshape not only on how we understand each other, ourselves, history, and memory, but how we can envision possible futures.

A Brief Introductory Note on the Artist's Vision: Living in the Rabbithole

Before delving into the recent book and cinematic appearance made by Monáe, it is worthwhile to take a moment to explore the artist's queer sense of time and space more broadly. "The Memory Librarian," the first full story in the collection of the same name—*The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022)—world-builds across multiple story lines and through various co-authors writing alongside Monáe. The collection intersects with the narratives portrayed in Monáe's 2018 album likewise bearing the title *Dirty Computer* and its accompanying emotion video, a film of approximately 50 minutes (matching the album length) in which each song possesses its own video but also works to develop a shared world – the same world (but also not) which in turn presents itself in the 2022 literary collection. It would not be quite accurate to use the words *enrich* or *enhance* to describe what happens with the meaning(s) of the narratives as one turns back (and/or forward) from the book to the album, or from the album to the emotion video, or from the emotion video to the book, or whichever direction one is looking. Especially in its heterogenous formats, Monáe's work also fits the world-building model of transmedia, which tends to be associated with mammoth franchises such as *Star Wars* or even the Marvel multiverse where the storytelling across multiple genres directly benefits massive corporations, though simultaneously functions as a creative and decentralizing, potentially more participatory, means of engaging with or producing narratives (Jenkins 2024). Hassler-Forest (2017) uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" to characterize the incessant shifting between personas in Monae's storytelling and inability of the audience to pin down an authoritative or stable centralized narrative, as one can often do in the case of large franchise narratives. This significantly differentiates Monáe's work from said franchises in a decolonizing practice.

While Hassler-Forest characterizes Monáe's work as intentionally troubling the authoritative narrative usually locatable within transmedia consumption, and therefore also opening a "modest" (Hassler-Forest 2017, 389) potential for more imaginative modes of being, he also depicts an ambivalent relationship between Monáe's work and capitalism. Noting the intentionality in crafting and packaging an image that results in her "successful circulation as a pop icon" (Hassler-Forest 2017, 386), Hassler-Forest criticizes the artist's statements as lacking any substantial criticism of capitalism. Monáe's newer work in *The Memory Librarian*, however, is decidedly less ambivalent, taking direct aim at the capitalist machinery that would suck the very dreams from its constituents – if only it could.

Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as "a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (Freeman 2010, 3). This echoes Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and Sara Ahmed's later characterization in which the repetition of the labour to (re)produce certain lines of history and modes of being is, in the repetition, what "makes the work disappear" and come to feel like somatic truth (Ahmed 2006, 56). Monáe plays endlessly with undoing this *seeming* or this *feeling* like somatic fact. Refusing to present a singular "character" or public persona, the artist inhabits and builds in both imaginary and real spaces, at once deconstructing the line between them. Monáe has infamously dressed as numerous

Alice in Wonderland characters for public events and her own studio is called Wondaland. Further, Wondaland itself embodies this anti-chrononormativity: "The label's headquarters feature red-painted walls with clocks stuck in different hours" (Monday 2018). This whimsical transformation of the physical space reinforces the transmedial elements of Monáe's storytelling and her ways of being *in* and *out* of characters, refusing to be a one, singular "Janelle Monáe," and concretely manifests the imaginative act of being and dreaming other than the ways deemed normatively possible. Monáe's visions encourage the audience to experience what feels like fact, as feeling less factual, a decolonizing practice essential to combatting authoritarian and oppressive forces that lead only to an obliteration of futurity and livability. The "somatic fact" of chrono (and other forms of) normativity is no less invention and fiction than Alice's white rabbit, "lest we forget, designing cruel, oppressive structures involves imagination too" (Benjamin 2024, 39). But believing or remembering this requires practice. Engaging the work of Monáe is just one means of participating in this practice.

By following the artist down the rabbit hole, Monáe's audience might find themselves in a state of disbelief, as what we deem "real" and believable are predominantly a product of state-sanctioned conditioning. Entering Monáe's imaginative canvas, we might also suspend our disbelief (in other ways of being)—as fictions also call us to do—and then linger in this suspension. Like the many iterations of *Alice in Wonderland*, themselves transmedial in nature, we might arrive somewhere we cannot yet quite imagine or articulate. As Alice is asked repeatedly—"Who are you?"—we might call to mind an answer given by Monáe when asked about her sexuality: "I'm nonbinary, so I just don't see myself as a woman, solely. I feel all of my energy. I feel like God is so much bigger than the 'he' or the 'she.' If I am from God, I am everything" (Monáe 2022). Monáe engages the audience in this inquiry: what if we practice suspending our disbelief that we could be, that we in fact are, "everything"? Alice is both in the real and present and within the imaginary outside normative space, time, and perception. As Monáe's vision so wonderfully reveals, so are we all.

"All the Brilliant Bugs . . . Under our Surveilled Surfaces": A Textured Politics of Visibility

The introduction and first two stories of the sci-fi collection of short stories *Memory Librarian* establish the world of The New Dawn, a state aiming to see and control all behaviours, thoughts, and desires through the implementation of pervasive visual and memory surveillance technologies. New Dawn separates "clean" citizens from "dirty computers," whose memories require erasure, a process called "torching." New Dawn enforces conformity by tracking down "deviants" and "cleaning" them with the memory-destroying drug "Nevermind." The 2018 video narrative of Monáe's album *Dirty Computer* also features several depictions of the drug Nevermind, an indispensable technological tool of the authoritarian government regime. Nevermind serves as a memory eraser, illustrated in the form of a literal fog as it is administered in the music video (Monáe 2018).

While the drug is an essential component of the totalitarian regime that seeks the death of the human subject (hence referring to humans as "computers"), its use is only one means of executing surveillance capitalist practices in the New Dawn world. Memories can be sold at what are essentially ATM machines and drones collect memories in most public spaces. Ultimately, upon giving up these memories, the population becomes "more 'clean,' computerized, and tractable" (Riggins 2020, 2). In an imagined future where memories can be exchanged for cash or food, the multiple gathering and surveillance technologies are brought together by the state to create a repository of these memories, over which "Head Librarians" preside. This is the ultimate dream of surveillance capitalism: humans reduced to useable data, converted into sellable information. There is no apparent escape. Everything can be mined, from even the deepest parts of us, for consumption. For many today, this too feels like an embodied truth. However, Monáe insists the reader imaginatively engage the senses to wrench this "truth" from the body. Foucault's notions of panopticism as they circulate today often centralize the successful functionality of the disciplinary mechanism even without complete or absolute surveillance, resulting in passive conformity to the status quo. However, Foucault insists in his description of the panopticon that "a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (Foucault 1977, 202), thus pointing out

the relationship established is in fact a *fictitious* one: the inmates are not always visible to the guard; their actions *are* discontinuous; the surveillance itself is never complete. The guard cannot always be watching, even if he is no longer a singular person but a host of big tech companies and other corporate tentacles of the neoliberal creature. The promises borne in the nature of this relationship *as fictitious* are essential for imagining a future in which we don't "buy" that all we can do, want, and dream can be both constructed or designed for us and then made visible and thenceforth bought or sold into the flow of capital.

In *Memory Librarian*, readers are likewise assured that surveillance and control are always incomplete. Memories are entered into the system of capital, bought and sold; however, they are also hidden and squandered. There are "memory hoarders" who avoid the city and drones and seemingly omnipresent surveillance technologies. Head Memory Librarian—Seshet, who holds the occupation of custodian of "repository of memories" for the citizens of Little Delta—likewise mystifies her superiors. Seshet, a Black woman who finds herself uniquely in power in a world still dominated by white, male, cis-hetero, able-bodied power, takes a trans lover, named Alethia, and thus deviates in a world where "deviants" are marked with codes intended for "cleaning." While Seshet's queer deviation is noted by her superiors and remarked upon as a deviation that can be overlooked, those surveilling her still don't see *everything*. Seshet muses that her supervisor "cannot know what truly happened last night, just the outward appearance of it [. . . .] He cannot know the *feel* of what has happened to her, that explosion ongoing beneath her breast, the way her fingers itch to call Alethia" (Monáe 2022, 23). The outward appearance is part, but not all, of the real. Like Wakanda, there is something that cannot be confiscated by the white, heteronormative, colonial machine of capital. Philosopher of perception and embodiment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty declares, "What we call the visible is [. . .] a quality pregnant with texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being" (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 136). Merleau-Ponty's assertion of density and depth is a countercurrent to America's dominant narratives of itself and its constituents, which rests on the primacy of a visible surface that is (or was once, at some prior historical point) readable and should, if morally "good," be made readable (again). Seshet's claim over her memory (as textured) is likewise a claim over herself (as textured) and defies this dominant "logic" (and politics) of visibility. Readers in the process are too pulled inextricably into this textured world and compelled into a practice of disengaging from said "logic."

Ana Dragojlovic and CL Quinan identify a related, significant connection between the politics of visibility and (under)representation in history and narrative. They suggest that there is essential memory work to be done in aiming to give voice to those who have been silenced across history but that there must be caution taken in that "investments in unmasking archival silences might be trapped in a romance of making visible," when, in fact, full representation and visibility are "inevitably partial" (Dragojlovic and Quinan 2024, 5). Thus, while troubling the surfaces of history and attending to its concealments is necessary work, so at once is the repudiation of the fiction of visibility also necessary work in making space for more ways of being. While we can acknowledge that Seshet's memory of Alethia is queer in that it makes visible a narrative of queer desire, we must still acknowledge that even Seshet's memory can never be complete. It too is only partial, only a "cross section upon a massive being" in Merleau-Ponty's prior words, and the reader's relation to the text in the queer remembrance itself forces readers into a queer relation. This is an act of practice that destabilizes the habitus that tells us memory, narrative, visibility, embodiment, or identity can be made whole unless, of course, this also queers our associations with wholeness, as in Monáe's aforementioned assertion that, "if I am from God, I am everything," and thus, impossibly always and never "whole," infinitely textured.

The exposure of the fictional relation between the see-er and the seen echoes throughout *Memory Librarian*, with the initial illustration of the New Dawn exposing its limitations and insisting on the existence of "those parts of us we encrypted—the clandestine networks of love and expression, curiosity, and desire. All the brilliant bugs, the dirty circuitry, under our surveilled surfaces" (Monáe 2022, X). This visual, poetic claiming of something that cannot be owned or seen by the state echoes the assertion of identity and visible surfaces themselves as dense, as complex, as not fully decipherable. When Seshet leaves the "Obelisk" at the center of Little Delta, venturing into the downtown, she finds herself in "the dirty thick of it"—a space which is not visible

from the central tower observing Little Delta: there are teenagers as there are septuagenarians; women don suits and men sport dresses and many defy any visual identifiers of gender; people of black, brown, and beige hues bustle about. Further, "the new crowd is high on some kind of drug, singing songs she's never heard of in harmony, finishing one another's sentences" (Monáe 2022, 14-15). Outside the city center of surveillance and memory theft, life pulses and spaces of non-conformity not only exist but thrive and flourish and make space for passion and laughter and love.

Monáe's gorgeously eclectic and flourishing communities disrupt the panoptic model that cannot successfully force them into line, and into the line of sight. They are in more than one world at once, in the "opening" (hooks 1989) where both oppression and resistance cohabitate. This is echoed again when Seshet visits the "upside-down kingdom" run by Doc Young, grand master of underground parties featuring "Nevermind-remixes," forms of co-optation which queer disciplinary mechanisms of the state in order to share memories, create dreams, see sound, and hear colour (Monáe 2022, 24). Here, Seshet witnesses (and later partakes in) a sort of joyous "radical opening" of tech: "Three people wearing VR headsets lie beneath the screen on thin pallets. Seshet pauses to stare at the projection, which looks like a memory but must be a lucid dream, somehow shared between the three people on the floor" (Monáe 2022, 58). If most canonized science fiction has reinforced future dreams of the fully dystopian surveillance capital state, thereby projecting the structures *and fictions* of the present into the future, this captivating visual image of shared lucid dreaming reminds readers that we can and *must* work together to project futures otherwise. While the New Dawn value system of currency dictated by the "surface" world (which, in fact, is the same world) insists that only memory extraction is valuable, Doc Young informs Seshet that she cannot sell her memories there, in the "upside-down kingdom," as they only "deal in dreams" (Monáe 2022, 52). Thus what Seshet witnesses is much, again, like that of Alice, where worlds exist within worlds. The vastly different value systems and rules by which these worlds operate are emblematic of the real and imaginary worlds that Monáe calls us paradoxically to inhabit, so as to uninhabit—or dis-embody—the "habitus" and to "decode the imaginative justifications that make those social hierarches seem natural, durable, and deserved" (Benjamin 2024, 64), hierarchies that are at least partly perpetuated by the stifling of the imaginary within the real.

In addition to creative remixes, authorities in Monáe's story face another enormous obstacle in the "exponential growth" of "false memories gumming up the collection" (Monáe 2022, 23) and "half-dreams clogging the system" (Monáe 2022, 61). These turn out to be not just the result of drug-induced dreaming but also the deliberate obfuscation of memory as product by learned practices of memory falsification, doctoring, duplicating. These practices are leaked through a rogue AI and Library employee, contributing to the vision of a future in which the fictional relation of the panoptic machine can be imaginatively, creatively undermined by the creation of new fictions. Furthermore, it is ultimately revealed that Alethia, Seshet's trans lover and infamous Nevermind remixer, is currently working on a concoction that is in fact not remix at all but something "completely new," an "antidote" to the memory-washing and white-washing of histories employed by New Dawn in order to sanitize and make for docile citizenry. This resonates with how Cover and Prosser characterize spaces of queer memory in the form of formal and informal, personal and community archives (Cover and Prosser 2024, 3) that challenge authoritative and singular narrative and memory of the past. Both the remixing and the confounding of the memory-collecting make it impossible for authorities to determine which memories are "real" and which are fabricated for the purposes of "clogging" and "confusing" the system. The invention of new fictions thus trouble the persistence of the "old" fiction that memories are ultimately intelligible and readable. The memory archives in this science fiction are typically controlled by authorities who wipe out history when it is beneficial to them—much like we see the attempted erasure of much of US history today in order to perpetuate a "clean" version of the past. In the disruption of those archives, the remixes make the human-information-collection process illegible and therefore also not available for commodification. Furthermore, it creates *new* fictions as part of this mechanism of resistance while simultaneously gesturing to the audience for the proliferating *more* new fictions.

Monáe's insistence that there is thriving, pulsing life beyond what can be surveilled asks us to imagine ourselves with the complex, dense, and networked selfhood that cannot be ultimately extricated, shored up, made "pure" or fully comprehensible—either to outside surveillance, or even to our own eyes (or within our own narrative of self). Again, it beckons readers to engage in a practice of suspending disbelief in all of us as "everything." As with *Memory Librarian,* Monáe's role in the film *Glass Onion* refuses to neatly package itself and become readable – again asking viewers to engage in practices of challenging that which feels like "somatic fact."

Glass Onion: Queer Memory & the Inscrutable Gaze

In Rian Johnson's 2022 Netflix film *Glass Onion: Knives Out*, Miles Bron—a white, cis, able-bodied, male, Silicon Valley mogul—at first appears to be a creative tech genius. However, it turns out Miles has stolen all the ideas and products that have brought him wealth and fame. Most prominently, Miles stole the very idea for the tech giant Alpha from Andi, played by Monáe. Furthermore, he pays others to come up with supposedly imaginative puzzles and designs then passes them off as his own. Nothing of his is original—only bought or stolen. This story line speaks not just to the long history in the US of cultural appropriation but to technopreneurs the likes of Elon Musk who have taken via exploitative buyout or outright theft. For example (and this is just one), the April 2022 issues of both *Entrepreneur* and *Afrotech* expose the exploitation of Riz Nwosu, who brought his idea of the Cyberbackpack to Musk, who then turned around and immediately trademarked it for his own company and profit (Rodgers 2022).

While this is a recent example of a Black man whose imagination was exploited for the profits of a white man, this exploitation reaches back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade during which "as noncitizens, enslaved Black people could not own property, including intellectual property, and were denied related opportunities for compensation" (Bethea 2021, 23). History is likewise rife with stories of Black women such as Ellen Eglin, a domestic servant in Washington, DC, who sold her clothes wringer—essentially, an early technological iteration of the washing machine—to an agent for just $18 in 1888, which resulted in great financial gain to the agent (Peterson 2019). When asked about why she sold, in an inquiry made by a short-lived publication called *The Woman Inventor*, Eglin stated: "You know I am black and if it was known that a Negro woman patented the invention, white ladies would not buy the wringer; I was afraid to be known because of my color in having it introduced in the market, that is the only reason" (quoted in Peterson 2019).

Whether through coercion, manipulation, or more obvious theft, white "technopreneurs" have historically and repeatedly profited from the often-hidden imagination and creativity of non-white people. While the 2016 film *Hidden Figures* problematically holds up a white savior as the real civil rights activist (Hassler-Forest 2022, 33), Monáe's presence in this film alludes to what viewers encounter in *Glass Onion*: the hidden (often deliberately) or stolen labour and invention of Black people over the course of US history. This calls to mind Ahmed's assertion: "History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories" (Ahmed 2006, 41). This offers a powerful reflection on dominant ideologies of history, visibility, and identity as they interconnect to perpetuate systems and values that seem to have simply "appeared" but instead hide embedded labour—and this includes the labour necessary to trivialize and police the imagination.

While the false narratives in *Glass Onion* perpetuated by Bron, the white Alpha "owner," recall these acts of historical and violent theft of bodies and labour, Bron's pretentious nature is also repeatedly pointed out to critique the Silicon Valley rebranding of dehumanization, theft, and exploitation under capitalism as genius and creativity—as the product of a true "dreamer." Monáe (as Andi, as Helen) challenges this narrative directly in the film with a dexterous handle on what Benjamin calls the "ability to detect bullshit [. . .] the difference between New Stories of collective well-being and Faux Fables deciding our collective fate" (Benjamin 2024, 21). Helen (as Andi) discerns that what Bron and his fellow "disruptors" are selling are Faux Fables that offer

no real alternative to the capitalist nightmare that extracts from, and obliterates, humanity. Bron's misuse of words such as "reclamation," his invention of words that sound smart but are not in fact words, such as "inbreathiate," the information that he paid someone not only to design the invitation puzzle boxes sent out to the "disruptors" but also the murder mystery itself: these revelations all reflect how capitalism and neoliberalism package themselves as more complex than they are, engaging the public by presenting the various technological products of a surveillance capitalist society as beneficial, as breaking the status quo, as progressive, even as humanitarian. They are Faux Fables of freedom and "breaking the status quo" that clamor to turn people into products through unchecked data mining and advertisement. This neoliberal trick of surveillance capitalism also turns these products into supposedly dense objects (offering individuality or expression for instance) while reducing people to readable singularities (in the imaginary). Bron's "inner circle" of what he terms "disruptors" demonstrate likewise neoliberal re-packaging of status quo reiterations – for instance, a misogynistic social media influencer who claims he is "radical" because he believes that the "breastification of America" is leading to a breakdown in the "natural order." The wielding of technological and rhetorical weapons to convince the masses that the extent of dreaming is what can be bought, sold, and repackaged may cause great despair in viewers, as this mirrors what we see today. There is no real "breaking with the status quo." Yet, this despair is broken by Monáe's presence in *Glass Onion*.

While there is much to unpack in this beautiful and imaginative film, it is worthwhile for the purposes of this particular inquiry, to sit with the complexities of "willful eccentricity" and the queerness of space and time that characterize Monáe's characters' (plural) complexities within the film. At the beginning, the audience (and other characters) believe her at that time to be Andi, the co-founder of Alpha who was cheated out of her company share in spite of the fact that the company was actually Andi's idea. The audience and characters are introduced to Monáe as Andi and it is not until about halfway through the film that the onion starts to unravel. Viewers find out that Andi has been dead since the film opened and that the character presented as Andi was in fact her twin sister Helen, who has been masquerading as Andi unbeknownst to the majority of partygoers at Bron's private island and unknown to film viewers. As the past is then re-remembered later in the film, Monáe also plays the role of Andi, since there are flashbacks to Andi's murder at the hands of Miles Bron. In Monáe's own summary: "I played Helen, I played Andi, and I played Helen pretending to be Andi. And then I played Helen being Andi and the audience not knowing that there was any difference—so essentially four characters, or four different energies. And I knew that it was going to be the greatest challenge in my film career thus far" (quoted in Schulman 2023).

This speaks back to the opening image noted in this essay – the moment in which Wakanda reveals itself, reinforcing the notion of a "part-seen world." Not only does the visible prove to hold a much greater complexity in the identity of Andi/Helen/Monáe but also within the film structure itself, where the latter half of the film literally shows us that the world we just saw was not the only one, that other narratives were embedded, enfolded, yet to be told, not visible on the immediate surface. Like the Nevermind remix, Helen's recasting of the audience and character memories thwart the systemic telling of history that leave out the theft, the violence, and the silencing of those who seek to present history in its less "clean" version. Helen's retelling is a form of queering memory in that the memories themselves possess "a unique capacity to reverse the flow of time and to undo expected chronologies, thereby queering temporality" (Dragojlovic and Quinan 2023, 4). This queering happens likewise in *Memory Librarian* when, for instance, Seshet recalls her own queer memory with Alethia—in which the memory recording cannot capture the "explosion" beneath her breasts or the itch of her fingers—and thus queers the memory, both a noun and by extension a verb, as an act of remembrance and an undoing of the present. While this queering unfolds in the reading and in the film, the audience must engage in history, memory, and visibility queerly as well, a valuable practice in unearthing our perceptions of being in the world.

The final shot in *Glass Onion* refuses resolution. The cinematic moment features Andi/Helen/Monáe peering directly, unflinchingly, at the viewer, her look inscrutable. There is a deep perplexity inherent to this moment. In some ways it echoes the Mona Lisa's gaze, a visible that holds texture and depth, capable of appearing as one

world and then as another, as directly referenced in the film, when the painting is acquired on loan by Bron and admired by Monáe's character(s). Yet, it is also more, or rather something else; the look is not only the making of Monáe into a modern Mona Lisa. Fixed on viewers, the look forces the audience to wonder what Monáe knows that they do not know. While the viewer has been given the "real identity" of the character at this point, how sure are we? Given the queer accountings of time(s) and space(s) already encountered in viewing, which disrupted notions of who was who and what actually unfolded, there could be great density to what might be withheld or unknown as Monáe peers out mysteriously. Maybe she is not, as promised, Helen? Or is this actually Monáe, directing her gaze straight (queerly) at us? Monáe's final look in *Glass Onion* is a call towards the artist's vision: the vision of a world whose structural disruption is possible through both a recognition of the visible world as textured and as always part-unseen, and through a radical imagination that thrives in the space of this recognition. Like the nature of the artist's transmedial work, or her character's reclamation of dreaming, it is a deliberate ask to practice living in the suspended disbelief, to live in the "everything" of identity and visibility that cannot be shored up and made into a singular thing that possesses an authoritative locus of truth. While the practice of lingering within these suspensions of what has been made to feel like truth may seem merely a philosophical thought experiment, there are significant material consequences to how both visibility and identity are understood.

Conclusion: Dreaming in Fiction(s) of the Real

As the US currently faces potentially unprecedented levels of authoritarian control, protecting oneself within the dominant fictions will surely be necessary, at least at times. Yet even in these moments, the fictions themselves must not be protected; their disruption will need to be ongoing. Political power in the United States has consistently, historically leveraged itself through not only surveillance but through a mythology that the visible can be an ultimate teller of truth. Ways of being that contest this mythology are often violently expelled in some fashion because they jeopardize the way bodies themselves might be understood as complex, as inextricably connected to other bodies or histories, as identities that are in their very nature all in states of constant flux and change—of transition. Hence we see the vile and violent backlash against individuals who identify as —or, for that matter, those who appear they might be—trans. While it is necessary to use the dominant fictions of visibility, memory, and identity for physical safety or for a sense of belonging and community in the present, it is also necessary to engage in the practice of radical imagination of a world in which that fiction no longer feels like the real. As Cover and Prosser point out, identifying memories of "being queer" as an essentialism is often a trope that functions "as an effect of cultural demands for coherent, intelligible and recognizable identities (Cover and Prosser 2024, 18). Partly, the concept of being hidden-in-plain-sight also makes room for the present *use* of these fictions while also, in the "corpuscles" beneath the surface, working to decolonize and destabilize the power the fiction holds over our bodies in the world.

To enter into, to experience, the deconstructive work of Monáe and other Afrofuturists—to play within the destabilization of the current politics of visibility—is not to ignore the power that does exist: the power to deport, to revoke rights, to obliterate funding, to limit access, to confiscate desperately needed resources, to censor, to imprison (and to pardon), even to kill. It is not to disengage with the dangerous scope of what *is* visible and surveilled, nor to ignore the eugenics and carceral imaginaries at work in politicians and technocrats who seek to extract copious amounts of data about taxpayers, immigrants, those with autism, and so many others. This is not to trivialize the real threats posed to non-conforming bodies and identities during this (or any other) administration. Rather, it is to say that, while acknowledging the violent potentials and realities of this political power, we must also refute the lies that claim it is capable of making all that is inscrutable or unreadable into something legible. While the push back against these present violences *must* be pushed back against in the present, we must also push back against the fictions that drive and permit these actions to persist in the first place: narratives that have long attempted to shore up a coherent and cohesive "America" that is pure, clean, a priori ("great again"), and something fully intelligible.

This likewise returns us to the image that frames this essay, yet another image in which to let our imaginations dwell. Benjamin's (2024) imaginative manifesto gives us the lush visual of the mushrooms and its threaded roots and branches. The capacity for fungi to thrive—to turn inhospitable environments into ones where life can flourish—is borne out of that which is out of sight. In addition to characterizing the networks of the imaginary as invisible yet necessary and real, this dazzling, mystical, yet concrete description also *does* what Benjamin call for: it contributes to a body of new images and, with it, has the capacity to "animate" the imagination and denaturalize dominant fictions that insist on the visible as the only real. Monáe's work likewise does what Benjamin calls for: it creates new fictions and offers literary and cinematic snapshots to linger on and within, snapshots that invite us to denaturalize the fictions that aim to eradicate and "purify," that aim to arrest and categorize and make legible to power. These snapshots invite us to denaturalize our vision of the visible world: Wakanda's holographic surface; Wondaland's painted clocks stuck in different hours; the queer memories that cannot be captured; the collective dream projection; the inscrutable gaze of Janelle Monáe; the mushroom's branching interconnected network not visible on the surface. We desperately need images that ask us to re-orient ourselves to our bodies and identities as complexly textured and inherently unstable. We desperately need art that asks us to practice reimagining what have come to feel like embodied truths. We desperately need new fictions to live by and in such that the fictions we inhabit—and feel inhabited by—are not, in the future, those that constrain and threaten bodily integrity in the present. We are always living in both the real world and in the fictions that bind our existence in that world. Thus like Alice, we at once inhabit multiple worlds. This is a political time, for so many, of intense despair. As hooks (1989) astutely reminds us, our minds and imaginations are at stake in this "space of collective despair" and the possibility of liveable futures hangs in the balance. Working to create new fictions is as consequential now as ever.

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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

Seeds of Change: Sketching a Black Feminist Afrofuturism for the New Space Age

by Nevandria Page

Abstract: The rapid advancement of human knowledge and technology has positioned us to realize a new colonialism in outer space. Those with a concern for the future cannot afford to refuse outer space altogether, but must actively devise alternatives to the colonial or capitalistic, imagining a just and peaceful future for humanity beyond the Earth. In this paper, I present Afrofuturism, specifically a Black feminist Afrofuturism, as not merely an aesthetic, but a scholarly methodology capable of disrupting the supposedly inevitable and damned futures awaiting humanity in a colonized outer space. I propose three practices comprising a methodology of Black feminist Afrofuturism. Countermemory involves a willful act of refusing dominant colonial, patriarchal, or white supremacist myths, challenging their hegemony and excavating Black knowledge and experiences from beneath their desolate surface. Interdisciplinarity refuses the practice of knowledge generation in isolation and demands direct collaboration—knowledge created in community—to derive new insights and perspectives from the convergence of disparate practices of countermemory. The third practice, worldbuilding, is a speculative exercise undertaken through the deliberate action of imagining or engaging with new visions of the future through a Black feminist or similar critical lens. These imagined worlds of Black feminist Afrofuturism reveal themselves as the muse for the acts of creation which might influence the trajectory of humanity's future in outer space, whether in the arts, academic research, public policy, or community organization.

Keywords: outer space; Black feminism; Afrofuturism; radical imagination; interdisciplinarity; worldbuilding

Résumé : Les progrès rapides des connaissances humaines et des technologies nous ont permis de concrétiser un nouveau colonialisme dans l'espace. Les personnes préoccupées par l'avenir ne peuvent pas se permettre de refuser catégoriquement tout ce qui concerne l'espace, mais doivent activement concevoir d'autres solutions à celles de nature coloniale ou capitaliste, en imaginant un avenir équitable et paisible pour l'humanité au-delà de la Terre. Dans cet article, je présente l'afrofuturisme et, plus précisément, un afrofuturisme afroféministe, comme une méthodologie ne se limitant pas seulement à l'esthétisme, mais comportant un aspect académique également capable de perturber les avenirs prétendument inévitables et condamnés qui attendent l'humanité dans l'espace colonisé. Je propose trois pratiques constituant une méthodologie afrofuturiste afroféministe. La contre-mémoire implique un acte volontaire de refus à l'égard de mythes coloniaux, patriarcaux ou suprémacistes blancs dominants, en remettant en question leur hégémonie et en mettant au jour les connaissances et les expériences de personnes noires qui étaient enfouies sous leur surface désolée. L'interdisciplinarité réfute la pratique de la création isolée du savoir et exige une collaboration directe, soit une création collective de savoir, afin de dégager de nouveaux points de vue et perspectives de la convergence de différentes pratiques de contre-mémoire. La troisième pratique, la construction d'un univers, est un exercice d'ordre spéculatif qu'on entreprend en agissant de façon délibérée pour s'imaginer ou discuter de nouvelles conceptions de l'avenir dans une optique afroféministe ou selon une approche analytique semblable. Ces univers imaginaires issus de l'afrofuturisme afroféministe s'avèrent une source d'inspiration pour les actes de création qui pourraient avoir une incidence sur la trajectoire que prendra l'avenir de l'humanité dans l'espace, que ce soit dans les arts, dans la recherche universitaire, dans les politiques publiques ou dans les organisations communautaires.

Mots clés : espace; afroféminisme; afrofuturisme; imagination radicale; interdisciplinarité; construction d'un univers

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Human exploration and activities in outer space increasingly replicate the discourse and devices of European colonialism. While technological advancements of the twentieth century empowered humans to foray into a previously inaccessible domain, the astonishing advances of the twenty-first century have created the conditions for a truly colonial epoch—continuous human habitation, resource extraction, warfighting, and, perhaps soon, migration. In a 2020 address, US President Donald Trump directly construed space exploration as a settler colonial project:

> We are a nation of pioneers. We are the people who crossed the ocean, carved out a foothold on a vast continent, settled a great wilderness, and then set our eyes upon the stars. This is our history and this is our destiny. Now, like our ancestors before us, we are venturing out to explore a new magnificent frontier. It's called space. (Rev 2020)

The mass proliferation of the same colonial myths invoked by President Trump and common to most settler states—manifest destiny, the frontier, terra nullius—has had horrendous and well-documented consequences. These myths inspired the colonial powers' unprecedented societal projects of dehumanization, violent exploitation, and genocide, especially in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the systematic erasure of Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Much like early European colonial powers in the Americas and elsewhere, the United States and Soviet Union's race to explore outer space in the mid-twentieth century was a way for rivalrous powers to flex their muscles, demonstrating the prowess of their respective regimes. Myths of manifest destiny, the frontier, and *terra nullius* were at times invoked by political leaders and other advocates of space exploration to galvanize the public around spacefaring initiatives. President Kennedy often embraced a language of adventurism and exploration when articulating why the United States would travel to the Moon: "As we set sail we ask God's blessing on the most hazardous and dangerous and greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked" (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum n.d.). Of course, these narratives did not go uncontested. Contrasted against the grandiosity of space and the rhetoric and resources channelled toward it, the lived experiences of marginalized peoples gestured to the primacy of one particular vision of the future populated by one construction of the human. That criticism, synthesized famously by Gil Scott-Heron's "Whitey on the Moon," remains as potent now as it was then (Scott-Heron 1970).

Only now, however, has our knowledge and technological sophistication progressed enough to truly realize a new colonialism in outer space, complete with the settlement of other worlds and the reaping of their natural bounty to sate the evolving desires and anxieties of the novel metropole, Planet Earth. Much as in the days of the colonial powers, today's spacefaring actors are a collection of government agencies, militaries, and, in much greater measure than the original space age, powerful corporations. All scrape together to capitalize on the opportunities presented by outer space. Likewise, outer space is today varyingly viewed as a repository for our polluting industries (Wattles 2021), a refuge to which we might flee in the event of complete environmental degradation (Rincon 2021; Bender 2021), a solution to resource scarcity, a playground for celebrities or stage for the performance of a commodified feminism (Khan 2025), and, perhaps most alluring with the prospect of visiting other planets, a vista for exploration (Dunbar n.d.; National Aeronautics and Space Administration

2020). A new and arguably irreversible space age has begun with little consideration for the colonial myths driving it or the violence, racism, and environmental destruction which such thinking inevitably yields.

For those who fear such a future, there is opportunity within our seemingly dystopian discursive landscape. As we navigate humanity's disparate intentions in outer space, we may imagine something beyond the colonial or the capitalistic, and certainly beyond a feckless refusal of outer space altogether. In this paper, I aim to present Afrofuturism, and specifically a Black feminist Afrofuturism, as not merely an aesthetic but an academic and mythmaking methodology capable of disrupting the supposedly inevitable and damned futures awaiting humanity in a colonized outer space. Working alongside each other, Black feminism and Afrofuturism offer a promise of a methodology stretching beyond a theoretical lens for viewing our world to something intentionally "curious" (McKittrick 2021a, 44), radical, embodied, and experienced individually and in community together. The methodology I propose is rigorous yet personal—one that cares most about the possibilities situated in Black life and liberation, joy, and hope. The shape of that methodology, of Black feminist and Afrofuturist thought and expression, may be found in three radical practices: countermemory, interdisciplinarity, and worldbuilding.

Theoretical Lens: Black Feminism and Afrofuturism

Having already invoked "myth," I should clarify the sense in which I employ the term through the rest of this paper. I refuse any colloquial understanding of myth as something fundamentally untrue. I adopt a definition of myth as "stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure" (Frye 1983, 33). That is to say, a myth is "the opposite" of an untruth, signifying a story conferred with "special seriousness and importance" (Frye 1983, 33). Though Frye is by no means an affiliate of Black scholarship, I choose his definition for its utility, depth, and palpable resonance with Sylvia Wynter's writings on the powerful entwinement of storytelling and our understanding of the human. Wynter posits a hybrid humanist construction that sees humans as a "biomutationally evolved, hybrid species—storytellers who now storytellingly invent themselves as being purely biological"(Wynter and McKittrick 2014). This idea is the theoretical bedrock of this paper's thesis. Wynter provides a framework for confronting the widespread modern understanding of humanness "that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systemically excise the world's most marginalized"(Wynter and McKittrick 2014, 9). Wynter's hybridized human—an equal product of biology and story—affirms the possibility of emergent myths that can reorient our shared trajectory forward, outside of and beyond the colonial and the white supremacist. Wynter, like myself, is interested in "the possibility of undoing and unsettling—not replacing or occupying—Western conceptions of what it means to be human" (McKittrick 2014, 2). The shared belief in this possibility remains at the heart of my argument, but where I depart from Wynter are the devices I choose for fomenting what McKittrick (2021a) might call a disobedient and rebellious methodology: Black feminism and Afrofuturism.

With respect to theory, I rely on a feminist tradition that was born in response to the lack of representation of Black women in traditional white feminist spaces and discourses. Though only one of many distinctly "Black" feminisms, the Black feminist tradition with which I engage, and to which I feel I belong—among others, the writing of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, Katherine McKittrick, and Chanda Prescod-Weinstein—seeks to address how race, sex, and other domains of power interact to produce experiences which "traditional" feminisms failed to consider. This particular Black feminism has blossomed into a sprawling tradition permeating many disciplines (most notably Kimberlé Crenshaw's introduction of intersectionality in legal studies). Black feminist scholars like Caitlin O'Neill note the convergence of Black feminist practice with Afrofuturism in the work of Black women and gender diverse people who "imagine themselves as thriving, creating spaces where they are celebrated, engaging in an act of time travel and making present a world that does not yet exist" (O'Neill 2021, 63).

Originating in the arts, Afrofuturism has traditionally been regarded as an aesthetic template for generating creative works and undertaking research which may serve as an outlet for self-determination (Barber et al. 2018, 201). In this respect, it exists under a wider umbrella of Black speculative art and thought alongside Quantum Futurism, Afro-Pessimism, Ethno-Gothic, Black radical imagination, and various other ethnocultural futurisms including Indigenous futurisms (Barber et al., 2018; Anderson 2016; Kelley 2002; Dillon 2012). The term "Afrofuturism" was coined by Mark Dery in his 1994 text "Black to Future" to describe a Black American sub-genre of speculative fiction which "appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future"—a phenomenon which Dery also used to discuss the possibility for imagining Black futures despite systemic efforts to erase Black histories (Dery 1994; Hart 2021).

I much prefer and embrace Ytasha Womack's later description of Afrofuturism as a multifaceted concept at the "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 2013, 9). My preference for this specific definition arises from a desire to centre a Black feminist's definition of Afrofuturism. More specifically, Womack's emphasis on imagination aligns with my own view of Afrofuturism as more than an aesthetic movement but a framework for action, a roadmap toward liberation. As I will elaborate on later, Black feminist Afrofuturism as a method assumes the possibility for liberation and charts a path toward it that is collaborative, excited, and hopeful. As Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish write, "the sort of hope, courage and possibility the term [imagination] evokes are in short supply these days (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010, iii).

I choose to describe a distinctly *Black feminist* Afrofuturism to emphasize what I regard as a necessary convergence of Black feminist and Afrofuturist thought. I owe a great deal of inspiration to Susana Morris's "Afrofuturist feminism." My neglect of her nomenclature in favour of a separate term arises not from a substantive difference in perspective but a stubbornness on my own part to remain true to the Black feminist tradition which I have already described, wherein the naming of Black feminism is itself an important act in refusing erasure (Collins 2001). This convergence spotlights the possibility of imagining and realizing a future for Black women and gender diverse people that contests their systemic marginalization and attempted erasure. Afrofuturism in "symb[iosis]" with Black feminism argues that Black people will not simply exist in, but wholly inhabit futures where, as Morris articulates, "… Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society" (Morris 2012, 153). As an extension of Womack's definition, I adopt Morris's understanding of an Afrofuturism centring on Black women's knowledge and experiences, as well as one that makes space for Black liberation through self-determined acts of futurity. Like Morris, I consider Black feminism and Afrofuturism as essential, mutually amplifying ingredients, in this case of a methodology with the power to "incite a future quite different from the hegemony of present structures" (Morris 2012, 154).

Black Feminist Afrofuturism as Methodology

Why articulate Black feminist Afrofuturism as a methodology rather than yet another theory? As I will argue, Black feminism and Afrofuturism together extend far beyond a mere lens through which to view or understand phenomena. Black feminist Afrofuturism, I contend, is centred around three radical *practices* of countermemory, interdisciplinarity, and worldbuilding—actions which are not strictly intellectual but also lived and experienced individually and in community with others. These practices allow Black feminist Afrofuturism to be employed as a strategy of both radical imagination and actualization through a variety of mediums. I draw inspiration from Katherine McKittrick's assertion that, Black methodologies "offer rebellious and disobedient and promising ways of undoing discipline" (McKittrick 2021a, 41).

Similar to McKittrick's discussion of academic discipline, its relegation of Black life to sites of oppression, and the liberating capacity of the "demonic ground" beyond, I propose that Black methodologies, birthed and living outside of "colonial categories," likewise constitute the fertile grounds for new and autonomous myths (McKittrick 2012, 44). Interjecting from McKittrick's demonic grounds, Black methodologies—whether Black feminist Afrofuturism or others—may challenge the most entrenched of political, social, and economic

structures and even perhaps the very myths which undergird them. To establish the shape of such a Black feminist Afrofuturist methodology, I will outline each of its three radical practices: countermemory, interdisciplinarity, and worldbuilding.

Countermemory

Common to many Black art movements and academic traditions, the practice of countermemory involves a contestation of hegemonic Western or Eurocentric myths which, whether intentionally or merely effectively, marginalize and erase Blackness. For example, one practice of countermemory in the arts and academia is the re-framing of chattel slavery and the Middle Passage as an apocalyptic event or a focal set piece in the origins of modernity (Maynard 2018; Eshun 2003). Proponents of Afrofuturism have historically achieved this transgressive centring of Black diasporic experiences through the allegorical and aesthetic freedom of science fiction, ultimately presenting more hopeful readings of Black life as always propelling towards the future. Others have applied countermemory to reframe our imagination of Black people and individuals themselves. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein (2022b) characterizes Harriet Tubman as a scientific intellect, an astronomer, who acted with agency and intention of a kind denied to her by white writers keen to describe a woman stumbling towards freedom, ignorant of her surroundings, merely following the North Star. Put another way, countermemory is the pickaxe for breaching the seemingly boundless strata of Western myth to mine what has been concealed beneath.

Within a methodology of Black feminist Afrofuturism, countermemory begins as a willful act of refusing dominant colonial, patriarchal, or white supremacist myths, challenging their dominion, and excavating Black knowledge and experiences from beneath their desolate surface. It is a deconstructive practice. But challenging or shifting one's focus from prevailing myths inevitably unearths hidden, forgotten, or forbidden histories and experiences. These recovered fragments—what I regard as the seeds of future myths—unlock the potential for what others have called a "radical imagination" tracing liberated Black existences through the present and future (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010). As I will discuss later, this thread is what binds countermemory to two other radical practices of interdisciplinarity and worldbuilding.

The practice of countermemory in Black feminist Afrofuturism can likewise constitute a sort of temporal plurality, surveying the future, present, and past together to uncover further seeds by observing glimpses of each in the others. Nikki Giovanni practices a form of countermemory consistent with this construction in her poem "Quilting the Black-eyed pea, We're Going to Mars." Here, Western colonial myths are confronted and deconstructed through their situation alongside rationales for travelling to outer space. Past, present, and future are viewed simultaneously to spotlight "the necessary connection between black history and our collective human future" (Bashir 2002). Giovanni restates the narratives of conquest and adventure that propelled Western "progress" and modernity, interjecting images of racial violence, references to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1793, and scenes of the Middle Passage (Giovanni 2021). Blurring the lines between the experience of the Middle Passage and space travel cleverly challenges us to embrace Black knowledge as a means of discovering "new ways to be people" (Giovanni 2021; Prescod-Weinstein 2022a). Perhaps, Giovanni tantalizingly asserts, the look and nature of life beyond the Earth is embedded in Black diasporic experiences because, in some sense, Black people have already been there.

Giovanni, like Wynter, Fanon, McKittrick, and others, pulls on a thread to reveal how Black knowledge, gathered from across diasporic and pan-African Black experiences, can teach us things that may have otherwise been unknowable. As Robyn Maynard writes, "To be denied access to humanity is not to be subhuman. In fact, it is to have access to ways of existing beyond and outside the limits of the human" (Maynard 2018, 32). The lived experiences gained from a positionality of fungibility or subjugation, as imposed by a Western framing of Blackness, can reveal new knowledge through the practice of countermemory. The result is a confrontation and disruption of hegemonic myths, unveiling the suppressed histories and experiences of exploited and

oppressed communities to provide the seeds for further thought and myth-making around humanity's collective present and future in outer space.

Countermemory, as one practice of Black feminist Afrofuturism, enables the centring of Black histories and lived experiences, whether in the arts or academia. But these seeds must be watered if they are to blossom into the new myths we—practitioners of Black feminist Afrofuturism—need to actualize liberated, just futures in outer space. That garden of imagination and intellect may best be cultivated by a coalition of scholars, artists, activists, and others united by a practice of radical interdisciplinarity.

Interdisciplinarity

In academic circles, interdisciplinarity entails integrating ideas originating from one discipline in research undertaken within another or, in some cases, collaboration between scholars in different fields. For the purpose of Black feminist Afrofuturism, the practice of interdisciplinarity must go radically further than merely appropriating scholarship from a separate discipline. One could argue that, in conventional manifestations of interdisciplinarity, a primary discipline (that of the author) subordinates one or more secondary disciplines as mere metaphors used for illustrative or even performative purposes. Radical interdisciplinary eschews this approach of merely "reading outside our discipline, researching, and using slices and terms from people we do not normally read" (McKittrick 2021a, 119). As the second critical practice of Black feminist Afrofuturism, radical interdisciplinarity refuses the practice of knowledge generation in isolation and demands direct collaboration—knowledge created in community—to derive new insights and perspectives from the convergence of disparate practices of countermemory.

A truly radical form of interdisciplinarity, especially within the context of Black feminist Afrofuturism, is one whose aim is "sharing ideas comprehensively and moving these ideas into new contexts and places" (McKittrick 2021a, 119). McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories* and S*ylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis* are standout examples of the power of radical interdisciplinarity at work. Insight is brought to life within these works through their dialogue, the back-and-forth between sciences and humanities, and the compounding voices of not only McKittrick and Wynter but Frantz Fanon, Edward Glissent, Rinaldo Walcott, and many more. I have earlier described such interplay as the sowing of epistemological seeds harvested along the practice of countermemory.

Within both Black feminist and Afrofuturist spaces, a common manifestation of this sort of interdisciplinarity has also involved the convergence of art mediums, the inclusion of one or more art mediums into academic research, and the direct collaboration of scholars from different fields. Musicians like Janelle Monae have used visual Afrofuturistic storytelling and motifs to complement their musical compositions (Rashotte 2022). In a more strictly academic example, Katherine McKittrick and Chanda Prescod-Weinstein also exemplify a radical interdisciplinarity in their exchanges on *PublicBooks.org*. Discussing their respective texts (each also compelling examples of the deployment of countermemory), *Dear Science and Other Stories* and *Disorderd Cosmos: A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, & Dreams Deferred*, McKittrick, a geographer, and Prescod-Weinstein, an astrophysicist, bring different perspectives to shared ideas about the sciences, Blackness, and the liberatory possibilities that exist within the intersections of both (McKittrick 2021b; Prescod-Weinstein 2021).

Black feminist Afrofuturism takes McKittrick's appeal to push ideas into new contexts and places to a further extreme by extending its creative and intellectual coalition to communities beyond academia or the arts. Such a posture closely adheres to the tradition of Afrofuturists like Alondra Nelson, for whom building communities which transcend the academy is essential for imagination and world-building (Nelson 2002). For example, Young-Scaags identifies fandom conventions as an important space for building like-minded communities while Stephanie Jones explores the growth of Afrofuturist networks online through a mechanism as simple as the creation of hashtags (Young-Scaggs 2021). Online networks, fandoms, advocacy groups, church congrega-

tions, hobbyist clubs, and community organizations are all repositories of valuable knowledge and experiences capable of contributing to Black feminist Afrofuturist thought.

In Black feminist Afrofuturism's most compelling instances of radical interdisciplinarity, the academy, the arts, and external communities of knowledge-holders may all coalesce to generate works propelling us toward new modes of liberating thought, expression, or being. In Camille Turner's "Afronautic Research Lab" (Turner 2016), the artist partnered with Outerregion to develop an interactive "social practice project" which "gathers and shares local histories" of the communities which the installation visits. Presented in a dark room lit only by neon lamps, the piece evokes futuristic science-fiction aesthetics, contrasted by the archival examples of "suppressed" Canadian history—enslavement, anti-Black racism, Black Canadian resistance—which adorn a central desk and chairs in the form of newspapers, books, and photographs (Turner 2016). Time in this space feels nonlinear as the observer becomes displaced, immersed in a "futuristic" aesthetic while being confronted by histories from which we are not so far removed. As a Black observer, I myself feel the weight of these histories everyday as I walk through Canadian cities and streets—the lingering presence of white supremacy and an acute awareness of the physical space which it domineers. Entering the Afronautic Research Lab, time coalesces and shades of the future and the past settle into my present. The desk, cluttered with suppressed Canadian histories, invites me to reflect even as, looking up to the neon sign, I feel an urge for change.

In each iteration, Turner's artistry is supported by Outerregion's academic research rooted in Black feminist theories and hauntology as well as the contributions of each local community and the individual visitors who deposit their own observations throughout the installation as post-it notes (Turner 2016). Turner's work is a true exploration of what possibilities exist when we concede that "inequitable systems of knowledge can be, and are, breached by creative human aesthetics" (Turner 2016, 153). Though just one example of the many ways a radical interdisciplinary practice can take shape, Turner's assemblage of art, research, and community engagement directs participants towards dialogue and critical reflection, inviting them to consider new pathways to liberation and, in the image of Wynter's human as storyteller, to "radically and creatively redefine—*re-word* … the representative terms of the human" (McKittrick 2021a, 152).

A table cluttered with newspaper clippings, journal articles, photos, books, post it notes, magnifying glasses. Camille Turner. Used with permission.

Such a sprawling coalition will not necessarily work in perfect harmony at all times and not all of its collaborative efforts will yield groundbreaking innovations. The point, rather, is that sharing a common vision of a just, liberated future and assembling diverging perspectives within a discursive space of mutual respect and care sows and nurtures the seeds of Black feminist Afrofuturism's most powerful outgrowth and its final core practice. Only by placing knowledge produced and amassed outside of the academy on equal footing (rather than relegating it to the margins of discourse) can Black feminist Afrofuturism forge the sort of collaborative and diverse coalitions needed to imagine new worlds and support their emergence.

Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is the practice of imagining alternative worlds, generally undertaken as part of the creative process in speculative genres of fiction and film. Though worldbuilding is conventionally understood as an independent practice wherein a sole author constructs a secondary world for readers or viewers' enjoyment, I would contend that the practice is fundamentally a collaborative one. The author may establish and communicate the imaginative architecture of the world but it is the mind of the reader or viewer which populates it with their own imaginings, thereby bringing it to life. As McKittrick notes, sharing stories is a radical, collaborative, and relational act (McKittrick 2021a, 73). More concrete examples could include co-authorship (for example, Terry Pratchet and Neil Gaiman's *Good Omens*), large multimedia franchises which invite numerous creative participants (consider *Star Wars* or major comic book publishers like Marvel and DC), fanfiction, and games—especially role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* where players share responsibility for building compelling worlds and stories.

Worldbuilding is often mobilized within the arts as a means of responding to and resisting the inequities of our present "real" world. Afrofuturist writers in particular use genres of science fiction and fantasy "as devices to articulate their issues and visions" through the worlds they create while, I would add, compelling our imagination towards an expanded understanding of the future and, in true Wynterian fashion, the human (Womack 2013). In Nnedi Okorafor's (2015) trilogy of *Binti* novellas, the eponymous protagonist undergoes a miraculous series of transformations along a journey through a diverse cosmos, "starting off as a Himba girl, to becoming part alien, part indigenous, part bio-spaceship" (Priyadharshini 2024, 9). Through her repeated transcendences, Binti learns to recognize the other in herself and herself in the other, discovering in alterity a means of bringing peace between warring peoples while never compromising her identity as a dark-skinned Himba girl (Okorafor 2015). Likewise, Tade Thompson's novel *Rosewater* features a version of our world where aliens touch down in Lagos, drawing attention to the Western-centric lens through which the world is viewed in both science fiction literature and our own reality (Thompson 2016). In these and other stories, Afrofuturists rely on worldbuilding as a chief means of imagining Black existences beyond the hegemonic myths of whiteness and the West.

Though worldbuilding is seldom invoked explicitly in social science and humanities research, I observe aspects of its practice in the more established discourses around "possible futures," and various forms of imagination including "Black feminist imagination" and "radical imagination"(Hill-Jarret, 2023; Hobson, 2021; Haven and Khasnabish, 2010). All apply various strategies of imagining to articulate realities removed from oppressive systems, norms, or myths identified in our current reality—a pivotal feature of Afrofuturist approaches to worldbuilding. Most pertinent to my discussion of Black feminist Afrofuturism, Morris (2012) and O'Neill (2021) discuss visions of a specifically Black feminist future that offers Black women pathways to self-determined and joyful existences. They are, in effect, describing another world though, crucially, they do not set that world beyond the scope of the possible. Black feminist Afrofuturist futures are not alternative, but true and imminent as any other, their emergence just as contingent on the choices we make and the stories we tell today.

In the methodology of Black feminist Afrofuturism, worldbuilding is undertaken through the intentional action of imagining or engaging with imagined futures for Black feminist existences. As mentioned in an earlier

section, the first practice of countermemory unlocks the possibility for a radical imagination tracing liberated Black existence through the past and future. Worldbuilding is where this radical imagination is utilized, first to envision possible futures and then to inform action towards real change. As Khasnabish and Haiven note, a "radicalizing idea of the imagination…speaks to our ability to create *something else*, and to create it together" (Haiven and Khasnabish 2010, 3). An example of this may be found in the otherworldly imaginings of Octavia Butler and the Black feminists who have immersed themselves within them. In discourse with Butler's novel *Fledgling*, Morris describes the text as revealing an Afrofuturist feminism (see: our own Black feminist Afrofuturism) that "illuminates…epistemologies that ultimately present possibilities for our own decidedly unenchanted world." (Morris 2012, 147). In this third practice of Black feminist Afrofuturism, seeds that have been collected and sown in the preceding practices of countermemory and interdisciplinarity can now begin to take shape in our collective imagination and inform the shape of our lived reality.

A Black feminist Afrofuturist practice of worldbuilding can actualize change in the "real" world, driven by our radical imaginings. Where Morris and others see Butler as merely gesturing toward future possibilities through her fiction, I see in her works—most especially *Parable of the Sower*—a framework for Black feminist Afrofuturism's worldbuilding project of actualizing change in the real world. *Parable of the Sower*'s protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, creates a new religion, Earthseed, as a means of uniting humankind around a shared goal of "taking root among the stars." (Butler 1993, 222). How she goes about such a monumental undertaking models for proponents of Black feminist Afrofuturism the path to actualizing our own collective imaginings. Lauren's project begins with the simple act of imagination; rejecting the religious tradition of her father and family, she chooses to imagine something else for herself and the people around her, namely through a single key assertion:"God is Change" (Butler 1993, 3). Lauren's second act is to not keep her imaginings to herself, but to write them down and subsequently to share her writings with others. Through this final act of forming a community around Earthseed and its teachings, Lauren has created the conditions for her group to actualize change in the world by living according to their newfound myth.

The Black Lives Matter organization is one standout example of how community activists have worked collectively to imagine, communicate, and organize around a vision of a world that does not yet exist. Beginning with the simple transgressive assertion that Black lives do indeed matter, the Black Lives Matter movement describes a reality that refutes the oppressive systems of the world we currently inhabit. Through mass communication of this idea and related ones (such as #SayHerName), Black Lives Matter has galvanized enormous demonstrations online and in communities around the world. The movement's growing influence has since inspired real-world changes in policing and criminal justice systems around the world, including normalization of body cameras, unconscious bias training, and banning of certain tactics. While imperfect and acknowledging that policing reforms do not necessarily equate to systemic change within the justice system, these changes are evidence of adrienne maree brown's assertion that we may "bend the world to assert and embody that Black lives matter" (brown 2017, 161).

One might synthesize Lauren's worldbuilding process—and that of Black feminist Afrofuturism—as imagination, communication, organization, and finally, action. In practice, this model of worldbuilding as imagination proceeding to action may seem unlikely in the short term to result in the emergence of any new religions. However, it can be leveraged as an effective model for any activities oriented towards building just and liberated futures. To return once more to McKittrick, "The work of liberation does not seek a stable or knowable answer to a better future…it recognizes the ongoing labour of aesthetically refusing unfreedom. The aesthetic labour perhaps reveals, if only for a second and imperfectly, black consciousness" (McKittrick 2021a, 61). In McKittrick's "aesthetic labour," I see the radical practice of worldbuilding, manifested in research, activism, art, policymaking, media, STEM, or any other activity involving the generation of ideas, systems, or artifacts that will implicate human lives and futures.

Sketching a Methodology

In the preceding discussion of radical countermemory, interdisciplinarity, and worldbuilding, I have alluded to the contours of a Black feminist Afrofuturist methodology as a process of "sowing," but the shape of its final form remains unstated. Like the ecological process of growth, decay, and rebirth, the methodology of Black feminist Afrofuturism is cyclical, finding its way again and again to acts of creation through structured practices of imagining. These practices can unfold repeatedly and in many contexts, anchored by and oscillating with the evolving continuum of Black knowledge. Black feminist Afrofuturism, like Butler's Earthseed, is a methodology, indeed a way of being, capable of reflecting and responding to the constancy of change through its recursive form.

While radical practices of countermemory, interdisciplinarity, and worldbuilding can and will unfold simultaneously, their deliberate sequencing and recursion constitute the methodology of Black feminist Afrofuturism, galvanizing us towards an actualization of just and liberated futures. Through countermemory, the practitioner of Black feminist Afrofuturism confronts existing myths (in our case the colonial, the patriarchal, and the white supremacist) and excavates the histories and experiences hidden beneath their veneer of authority. As I have mentioned earlier, doing so may be understood conceptually as gathering the seeds of future myths. Having undertaken disparate practices of countermemory, practitioners across diverse disciplines and communities next aim to share their respective insights by joining together in coalitions united by the common aims of Black feminist Afrofuturism. I have called this practice radical interdisciplinarity. Through intentional direct collaboration and knowledge exchange, practitioners sow the seeds they have recovered together and in doing so derive new insights which propel us collectively toward new modes of liberated thought, expression, and being. Finally, empowered by the transgressive act of countermemory, practitioners can apply a radical imagination to worldbuilding. Here practitioners cultivate the seeds of their thought into new stories or imaginings. However, practitioners of Black feminist Afrofuturism may go a step further, following the example of the archetypal sower, Lauren Olamina and permitting the new stories or worlds of our imagination to guide us towards a further stage of worldbuilding unfolding through our action (Butler 1993). The imagined worlds of Black feminist Afrofuturism reveal themselves as the muse for our creative actions, whether they be the production of art and literature, academic research, policymaking, or community organizing.

Like Lauren Olamina, practitioners of Black feminist Afrofuturism are sowers, scattering the seeds of nascent myths—stories that over time may compel the emergence of new orientations of thought, expression, and being. Our relationship to the myths of future generations is strange and tenuous and deserving of further theorization in other works. We cannot possibly manufacture or control what those myths will be, though we can orient our thought, expression, and action towards aims of justice and liberation which we hope will ripple into and from the future. adrienne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* could be read as one example of an individual's attempts to contend with the enormous scope of such a project within the temporal and corporeal restrictions that bind our individual labours (brown 2017). A more feasible objective for practitioners of Black feminist Afrofuturism, we might conclude, is to imagine new stories and allow them to change ourselves, others, and, through our varying acts of creation, the world in which we presently live.

As we enter a new space age, a movement which promises to be transformative for human life, we must redouble our efforts to confront the colonial, patriarchal, and white supremacist myths foundational to our world's present architecture and disrupt the troubling futures which they portend. Colonialism unleashed incalculable suffering on humanity—are we foolish enough to try it a second time? Perhaps so, but until we have filled outer space with the same structures and ideology that have caused so much harm on Earth, we have time to imagine and tell new stories. We can direct our collective thought, expression, and action toward futures that are more just, hopeful, and considerate of one another. In doing so, we may sow the seeds of new myths that, in the recollections of future generations dwelling beyond the Earth, did not merely disrupt the oppressive structures of our current world, but unmade them altogether.

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