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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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