To Be Decided*

Journal of Interdisciplinary Theory

VOLUME 8

ALTERNATIVES & POTENTIALITIES

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Editor's Introduction

We are beyond excited to present Volume 8 of the "To Be Decided" student-run graduate journal, themed and titled *"Alternatives and Potentialities."* This journal is presented on behalf of the master's program in Social and Political Thought at Acadia University. This journal extends the interdisciplinary spirit of our program to institutions and departments across the country and beyond for the purpose of providing a collaborative platform for imagining and realizing new modes of thought and action.

Our previous volume, "**Change; Together**," began the work of reflection regarding the way in which our world had changed following the Covid-19 pandemic. Over the course of 3 years the world has had to adapt to new policies regarding almost every aspect of life. At the time of this publication, the World Health Organization has just declared that Covid-19 is no longer a global threat. We have already begun to see the ways in which the world has begun to return to what was considered "normal" pre-pandemic. We hoped with this issue to embrace the optimistic sentiment that we have been given an opportunity in which we are able to reject the old ways which have been harmful and exploitative to humans and non-humans alike, and instead imagine positive alternatives for a better world. While it may be difficult to imagine another form of life, especially when alternatives are continuously sealed off, or absorbed into the established powers-that-be, we wanted to provide a platform for our fellow students to imagine and engage in the alternatives and potentialities of a world that ought to be. Our authors have come together to create thoughtful and unique submissions which address the ways in which their disciplines are changing the narratives to create alternatives and potentialities for a better, healthier, and more accepting world.

Morgaine Lee's project *Interspecies Relationality: Tending to Affect in The Wood Wide Web Debate in Fungal Science* combines affect theory, feminist posthumanism, and critical discourse analysis to address fungal interspecies affectual relations as written in wood-wide-web science. Lee's project provides an alternative to traditional Western scientific rationality, and provides examples of the way in which thinking with fungi challenges anthropocentrism and scientific narratives.

Max Abu-Laban's project entitled *Reverence, or Revolution: Japanese Spiritual Ontologies and Generative Ecological Praxis,* combines his personal experiences of living in Japan with Japanese and East Asian spiritual ontologies, as well as anticapitalist theory to advance a set of proposals for political and philosophical mobilization, which he refers to as "ecological praxis".

Cicely Haggerty combines theoretical developments of Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics in order to reflect on the work of Howardena Pindell, in their project entitled *Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics: The Anticipatory Work of Howardena Pindell.* This project connects these theories

with Pindell's work in order to create an alternative critique of the way in which heterosexist and racist mishandlings of history have existed within the art world.

Helen Yao combined visual art and prose to create her creative project entitled *Abolitionist Imagination: Re-Mapping Canada's East Coast Prisons*. Yao uses photos of Nova Scotian prisons, and paints over them. Combining her artwork with personal prose, as well as references from abolition feminist academics and activists Yao's project presents spaces where institutional violence takes place and reimagines them as spaces of care and compassion.

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Interspecies Relationality

Tending to Affect in The Wood Wide Web Debate in Fungal Science

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Consciously or not, we are bound by our material and affectual relations with fungi. That is to say, we *move* and are *moved* by fungi. Throughout the history of the planet, fungi have played a major role in shaping the world we live in today.[1] Fungi are a queendom of fascinating and enigmatic creatures — a vast diversity of species. As the popularity of fungi grows, with a particular interest in the worlds of mushrooms (the fruiting bodies of some fungal species) there is a demand for research on the lifeways and capacities of fungi. One popular finding in mycology, or fungal science, is the concept of the wood wide web. Mycelial networks underground serve as connectors between trees and plants, facilitating nutrient sharing and interspecies communications. As evoked by the metaphor "wood wide web," the fungi-tree relationship has been summarized as trees talking to each other through internet-like mycelial networks. This metaphor alarmed some mycologists and ignited a debate about the roles and motivations at play in interspecies relationships. Is the natural world better characterized by competition and individualism, or collective wellbeing and care? The former depiction represents the traditional ideological orientation in the natural sciences where the natural world is regarded with a Darwinian survival of the fittest framework based in competition.

Both sides of this debate impose assumptions about the natural world with a general presumption that fungi are passive facilitators of communication rather than communicators themselves. Attending to affect in scientific narrative production allows us to "explore [the] interconnectedness" of

[1] Hathaway, Michael J. *What a Mushroom Lives For: Matsutake and the Worlds They Make*. (Princeton University Press, 2022): 28-49.

multispecies worlds encounters and the roles of fungi in the scientific narratives produced about them.[2] Thinking with fungi helps us to push past the boundaries of rational Western scientific thought. For example, fungi are unencumbered by colonial binary notions of sex as most fungal species contain more than two sexes with some species — such as *Schizophyllum commune* — having as many as 23,000 mating types.[3] Fungi *move* us to challenge our anthropocentrism and to imagine alternative scientific narratives beyond the limits of human exceptionalism.

In this paper I use affect theory, feminist posthumanism, and critical discourse analysis to address fungal interspecies affectual relations as written in wood wide web science, tending to the agentive ways fungi build relationships with other species including the humans who study them. To begin to unsettle some of these assumptions and rationalizations, I address the inescapable presence of affect in the production of science and argue for the necessity of its tending to. I present the 'wood wide web' narrative as an example of an affectively charged science narrative that has sparked a larger conversation about the nature of nature as fundamentally competitive or collaborative. This case study, built on metaphors, offers an opportunity to investigate how the language we use in science writing both conjures and denies the lively and emotional impressions our more than human collaborators make on us.

Affective Science Making and Affective Ecologies

Unravelling the ideologies, ontologies, and politics that are inescapably woven into scientific narratives unsettles the objective and rationalized position science can hold. Joanna Latimer and Mara Miele (2013) suggest tending to affect in the production of scientific research as a means of bringing to light how "relations between the different elements of any scientific endeavour are never only objective

[2] Latimer, Joanna, and Mara Miele. "Naturecultures? Science, Affect and the Non-Human." *Theory, Culture & Society 30,* no. 7–8 (2013): 3.
[3] Kaishian, Patricia, and Hasmik Djoulakian. 2020. "The Science Underground: Mycology as a Queer Discipline." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 6-2: 10.

or functional."[4] By tending to affect, social studies of science have demonstrated deeply affectual relations between scientists and their 'objects' of study.[5] Approaching research affectively addresses "the need to open up our ways of knowing beyond the usual senses and modes applied in traditional histories."[6] In my analysis, I use affect as articulated by Kathleen Stewart (2007) and Sara Ahmed (2014). Stewart refers to affect as an ability to "pull the subject into places it didn't exactly "intend" to go"[7] demonstrating what it means to *move* and be *moved by* through poetic vignettes that elicit affective responses in the reader. Ahmed uses the idea of "impressions" to represent affect as she argues this term allows her "to avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion and thought as if they could be 'experienced' as distinct realms of human 'experience.'"[8] Through her writing, Ahmed argues that affect and emotion are always and inherently social and relational. With attunement to the senses and keeping these affectual frameworks in mind — just as Ahmed centres in her work — we will turn our attention to examples of what affect *does* rather than what it *is*.

Though known for developing and perpetuating a mode of scientific practice based in objectivity and impartiality, Charles Darwin affectually "*moved with* and was *moved by*" the orchids and bees he studied.[9] Through their feminist approach to interspecies relationality, Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers (2012) explore the evocations of affect in Darwin's studies of orchid and bee relationships. They describe the contradiction in Darwin's notes between rationalized functionalist accounts and what Hustak and Myers describe as a "penchant for mimesis" in the way he would respond to the orchid, mirror the bees' actions, and physically interject himself into his experiments.[10] Scientific accounts of orchid-bee relations

[4] Latimer and Miele, "Naturecultures?" 13.
[5] Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum" 74–118; Latimer and Miele, "Naturecultures?"5-31; Myers, "Conversations on Plant Sensing" 35-66.
[6] Kanngieser, Anja, and Zoe Todd. "3. from Environmental Case Study to Environmental Kin Study." *History and Theory* 59, no. 3 (2020): 385–93.
[7] Stewart, Kathleen. *Ordinary Affects*. (Duke University Press, 2007), 40.
[8] Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 7.
[9] Hustak, Carla, and Natasha Myers."Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters." *Differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 85.
[10] Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum" 106.

evoke the essence of their relationship as based in pleasure, yet scientists also write adamantly against such implications. Hustak and Myers suggest that in Darwin's search for functionalist and mechanistic explanations for anatomy and behaviour, he was "affectively tangled" and just like the insects he "was caught in the orbit of these alluring plants."[11]

Myers (2015) has noted other accounts of plant scientists who build and recognize affectual relationships with their species of study. They excitedly share stories of plant sensing, consciousness and capacities while remaining cautious of ascribing plants with agency or awareness in definitive terms. As an anthropologist, Myers describes the ways she carefully navigates conversations with these plant scientists in order to avoid invocations about the plant senses and capacities that veer beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable scientific conversation. Myers describes her sensorial experience auto-ethnographically, "I feel the constraints on permissible and impermissible ways of speaking about organisms in the pauses and prevarications and elisions of my own speech."[12] And yet, she notices how the plant scientists move and are moved by the plants in expressions of mimesis whereby the scientist mimics the plants. However, mimesis and recognition of the consciousness of the plants is left out of the published narratives. If these scientists published an affectual account of their study, they could risk being ostracized and not be taken seriously by the scientific community that upholds an idealization of impartiality and objectivism. And yet leaving these aspects out of their work also has implications and consequences to our understanding of how the world works.

In 1991, anthropologist Emily Martin demonstrated that patriarchal assumptions were the basis for the story science was telling about how human conception unfolds.[13] Martin (1991) points to the story of the egg and the sperm as a scientific narrative imbued with particular gendered beliefs. Martin argues

[11] Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum" 79.
[12] Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum" 20.
[13] Martin, Emily. 1991. The egg and the sperm: How science has constructed a romance based on stereotypical male-female roles. Signs: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 16(3), 485-501.

the egg and the sperm are depicted as passive and active respectively based on an underlying bias by researchers. To build on Martin's argument, I add that these beliefs serve to craft a highly affectual narrative of heroic sperm versus 'damsel in distress' egg. The scientists reproduced the patriarchy of society through their assumptions that the sperm and egg would rationally act according to patriarchal logic. Martin's work led to research which showed the egg and uterus have a very active and leading role in the story of conception, thereby opening up a whole new understanding of the relationship between the egg and the sperm. The way scientific stories are written matters, and for example, have implications for how forests are understood, engaged with, and managed.

The Wood Wide Web Debate

Below the forest floor are vast worlds of connection, the soil is teeming with life and death. Microbes feast on decaying leaves as tree roots reach through the depths of earth drawing in water and nutrients to grow. Mycelium, the wispy root-like structures of fungi made up of microscopic threads called hyphae, weave through the soil searching for food and making connections with roots and shoots, growing vast networks of interconnectivity. In every inch of soil, worlds of myriad species intersect and relate. Each "[organism comes] into being in relationship with one another" building worlds with every encounter.[14] Interspecies relationality is integral to the natural world. As fungi grow vast networks underground, forming relationships with other species, they saturate the soil with their presence. There can be as much as eight-square miles of hyphal filament in one square inch of soil.[15] The presence of fungi in forests is significant. Scientific attention to the relationship between fungi and trees has tended to focus on the trees. The discovery that fungal networks facilitate nutrient sharing and communications between trees and other plants led to the scientific and colloquial fascination with the idea that trees can talk to each other through underground networks of fungi.

[14] Hathaway, Michael J. "Elusive Fungus?: Forms of Attraction in Multispecies World Making." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 62, no. 4 (2018): 41.
[15] Stamets, Paul. "Six Ways Mushrooms Can Save The World." (TED Talk, 2008).

In 1997, Suzanne Simard and her colleagues published a now famous study that popularized an understanding of the roles and functions of mycorrhizal fungi that build symbiotic relationships with trees via hyphae-to-root connections.[16] Simard's work incited a wave of studies investigating the roles of fungi in the forest, particularly in relationship with trees. Studies have demonstrated the actions of communication and nutrient transfer between trees, through fungal networks.[17] One of the ways fungi communicate both inter-organismically and intra-organismically is through electric and chemical firings.[18] And thus, these underground networks were affectionately deemed the "wood wide web" by *Nature* journal that published Simard's article.[19] This scientific narrative and this metaphor have been met with mixed responses. Interspecies encounters are vast and consequential to the forest, the forest moves and is moved by fungi. Fungal-tree relationships involve mycelial networks of fungi that negotiate entanglements arboreal roots serving as vessels for communication and nutrient sharing. Some scientists have responded to these claims with concern about implications of fungal altruism with a fundamental question: What would motivate fungi to act on behalf of the wellbeing of trees as opposed to their own survival or self-interest? And what does the language we use to animate fungal activity *do*?

The scientific conversation about the capacities and roles of fungi in their interspecies relationships has made its way into popular media including podcasts, TED Talks, and numerous books. The conversation has been posited as a debate by two pieces published in the *New York Times* (NYT). Each article is authored by a different journalist, nearly two years apart. The first article, published in December 2020, details the work of Suzanne Simard, a professor at the University of British Columbia in the Forestry Department who has been hugely influential in mycorrhizal sciences, or the science of fungi-to-root connections. Through dozens of journal articles, two books, and a popular TED Talk, she has

[16] Simard et al., "Net Transfer of Carbon," 579–82.
[17] Adamatzky,Andrew, Language of Fungi, 1-15; Roper and Dressaire, "Fungal Biology" R130-32; Simard et al., "Net Transfer of Carbon," 579–82.; Witzany, "Keylevels of Biocommunication" 1-18.
[18] Witzany, "Keylevels of Biocommunication" 3.
[19] Simard, Suzanne, et al., "Net Transfer of Carbon," 579–82; Stamets, "Mushrooms Can Save The World."

played an important role in disseminating a collaborative and care-based narrative about trees and their fungal relationships.[20] The essence of her argument is that trees have relationships with one another where they share nutrients and communicate through mycorrhizal networks underground.[21] Her most recent publication includes another central metaphor to further illustrate the nature of interspecies relationships in the forest: the notion of a "Mother Tree."[22] The Mother Trees represent hubs where as many as 200 varieties of fungus may be connected to a single tree that shares nutrients with new growth in the forest.[23] Simard's work exemplifies a scientific narrative about interspecies relationships that has been both praised and heavily criticized. The critiques that followed Simard's work hung heavily on the fundamental beliefs that underscore it, arguing that her studies do not provide sufficient evidence of her claims of fungal motivations. Another major critique of the wood wide web story, in general, is of the effect of anthropomorphic language on the science narrative.

In November 2022, almost exactly two years after their first piece was published, the NYT published an article re-igniting the conversation about the roles of fungi in a forest. The article highlights three researchers who argue "scientists have yet to show that these webs are widespread or ecologically significant in forests."[24] Interestingly, and unmentioned in the NYT article, two of these three researchers are collaborators and co-authors with Simard, including on her now famous 1997 *Nature article*.[25] The author of the NYT article explores the debate from the side of critique that Simard's work overstates the ecological significance of the so-called wood wide web. Simard's use of anthropomorphism, for example, is questioned by her critics for misleading public understanding of the nature of fungi-tree relationships.[26]

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[20] Jabr, Ferris. "The Social Life of Forests." The New York Times. The New York Times, December 3, 2020.
[21] Simard et al., "Net Transfer of Carbon between Ectomycorrhizal Tree Species in the Field." *Nature* 388, no. 6642 (August 1997): 579–82.
[22] Simard, Suzanne. *Finding the mother tree: uncovering the wisdom and intelligence of the forest*. (Penguin UK, 2021)
[23] Bierend, Doug. *In Search of Mycotopia: Citizen Science, Fungi Fanatics, and the Untapped Potential of Mushrooms*. (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2021), 37.
[24] Popkin, Gabriel. "Are Trees Talking Underground? for Scientists, It's in Dispute." The New York Times. The New York Times, (November 7, 2022).
[25] Simard et al., "Net Transfer of Carbon," 579–82.
[26] Flinn, Kathryn. "The Idea That Trees Talk to Cooperate Is Misleading." Scientific American. July 19, 2021.

Simard has argued that her use of anthropomorphism is necessary for challenging Western science and the idea that humans are separate from nature.[27] One of the major themes throughout the NYT article is concern for the popularization and simplification of the claim that trees can talk to one another. Though mycologists seem to agree there are mycorrhizal networks in relationship with trees, some maintain that further research is necessary to investigate the nature of these relationships. The 2022 NYT article ends with a quote by Dr. Justine Karst, a mycorrhizal ecologist at the University of Alberta who suggests, "the true story is very interesting without this narrative put on it, [the forest] is still a very mysterious and wonderful place."[28] The perception of science as objective and rational is persistent and pervasive. As social scientists have repeatedly and meaningfully demonstrated, science-making is steeped in culture, bias, ideologies, politics, and more. This is not to say that the science is less valid by any means, only that it is necessary to consider the implications of the influences woven into scientific narratives.

As the NYT articles exemplify, the debate reveals some of the underlying assumptions about nature that inform mycological studies. First, is the assumption that fungi are passive mediators facilitating nutrient transport and communication. They are not generally appreciated as communicators themselves, at least in the context of the wood wide web debate.[29] There have been studies investigating fungal communication, though many centre the role of and benefits to trees. Passivity is painted into the metaphor used to summarize the essence of the roles of fungal networks in a forest, the *wood wide web*. Assumed passivity or fungi as conduits of information and nutrients, stops the scientific inquiry from exploring the agentive, intelligent, creative ways fungi actively participate in their interspecies relationships. Meeting research on fungal interspecies relations with affective curiosity opens the door to

[27] Literary Hub: Emergence Magazine, *Literary Hub: Emergence Magazine*, November 14, 2022, https://lithub.com/finding-the-mother-tree-an-interview-with-suzanne-simard/.
[28] Popkin, "Are Trees Talking Underground?" NYT.
[29] Hathaway, *What a Mushroom Live For*, 90-93, 98.

imagining capacious possibilities beyond functionalist and mechanistic modes of being and values of worth beyond human-use value.

Hierarchy and Metaphor

The use of metaphors in understandings of the natural world is an ancient practice. Metaphors both serve and harm scientific endeavors upholding findings in ambivalent tension. With the use of comparative wordplay, a vast group of people can grasp the essence of a complex scientific phenomenon. Scientists themselves may use metaphor to communicate their work, or even to make sense of their work in their own minds. However, the use of metaphor in science causes varying effects. As Andreas Hejnol (2017) states, "Metaphors are always a double-bind: they allow us to see and stop up our ability to notice."[30] At once we are able to understand complex things and are stuck in a particular framework that halts our ability to notice further nuance. As Hejnol argues, this effect of metaphor can also halt scientific inquiry. An early and enduring example of metaphor shaping and indeed limiting our understanding of nature is "the tree of life."[31] Hejnol details the history of the development of the tree of life metaphor and the implications this metaphor has had on our understanding of life, species differentiation and taxonomy, evolution, and relationality. As Hejnol demonstrates, the tree of life representation presumes that taxonomy should be organized in a "hierarchical ordering of beings" from simple to complex with humans anthropocentrically at the top as the 'most complex' beings. [32] Complexity is the scale of value upon which organisms are evaluated to be categorized. Though in many ways taken for granted, taxonomy is precarious and subject to question when we take seriously claims by scholars including Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti (2018) Donna Haraway (1991), Ed Yong (2016), Michael Hathaway (2022), Anna Tsing (2012; 2015), and Robin Kimmerer (2013) and others who have argued for and

[30] Hejnol, Andreas. (2017). "Ladders, Trees, Complexity, and Other Metaphors in Evolutionary Thinking" in *Arts of living on a damaged planet: Ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene*. Tsing, et al. (U of Minnesota Press, 2017), G87.
[31] Hejnol, "Ladder Trees, Complexity," G90.
[32] Hejnol, "Ladder Trees, Complexity," G91.

demonstrated humans as "coming into being" through interspecies relationally and the body itself as multispecies.[33] How can humans hierarchically categorize ourselves when our lives are so intimately dependent on our relationships with the species around us and in us?

Imagining taxonomy in hierarchical terms has widespread implications as "hierarchical metaphors for ordering beings have shaped not only human perceptions of nature but also strategies for managing natural worlds."[34] Kimmerer (2013) adds to this notion, "[how] we approach restoration of lands depends, of course, on what we believe "land" means."[35] Science on the wood wide web is guided by what we believe of fungi and trees that in turn informs approaches to forest engagement and management.

In this representation of fungal network as internet, as technological conduits, we can visualize thousands of wires extending between trees, wrapping, twisting, firing sparks of electricity between them, "nature's internet."[36] With just three words we can grasp an idea of how this complex interspecies relationship is expressed. The wood wide web metaphor serves as a catchy story about fungi to be easily and widely shared; however, just as the metaphor myceliated its way into public conversation, so too did critique of the science it was based on. Simplifying the complex sympoiesis—the notion that no being is completely autonomous, a deep interconnectedness—between organisms in the forest to technological representation limits the imaginative possibilities for further inquiry.[37] To unsettle the wood wide web metaphor, we might begin by tending to affect in the production of the science that developed this narrative and debate in the first place. One affect-laden aspect of science-making is in the modes of environmental worth that underscore and shape our affective encounters in interspecies research.

[33] Hathaway, "Elusive Fungus," 41.
[34] Hejnol, "Ladder Trees, Complexity," G92.
[35] Kimmerer, Robin. W. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (Milkweed Editions, 2013), 328.
[36] Stamets, "Mushrooms Can Save The World."
[37] Haraway, "Sympoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble." In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*." Duke University Press. (2016) 58-98.

Modes of Environmental Worth and Politics

Social and natural scientists alike come into the field with diverse ontologies, ideologies, epistemologies, values, and assumptions that shape the work we pursue.[38] We write ourselves into our work. I write about fungi because I am deeply curious and excited about learning from and with their worlds. I value what fungi have taught me about the intelligence and creativity of more-than-human worlds and the *pull* they invite to move away from human exceptionalism.[39] I wholeheartedly believe I *move* and am *moved by* fungi. I meet their worlds from this reciprocal and affectual place. Fungi contain incredibly diverse species ranging from molds, to yeast, to mushroom-producing fungi like the classic spotted red cap *Amanita muscaria*. The roles they play in nature also range from parasitic to symbiotic relationalities. It should be noted these relationalities are not dichotomous and the same fungi can even switch modalities with the same organism over time.[40] The world of human-fungal relations is also highly emotional. Fungi incite reactions of love and fear. Mycophilia (love of mushrooms or fungi) and mycophobia (fear of mushrooms or fungi) are common relational expressions of human-fungal encounters.[41] Out of this emotional basis of fungal love and fear, emerged from morally and politically charged ideas about nature that guide fungal research trajectories. For example, to perceive nature as a resource for human extraction and use, versus nature as holding intrinsic value to be met in reciprocal relation would produce two different scientific narratives reproducing and constraining studies to perceived worths.

Thévenot et al. (2000) provide a series of seven modes of environmental worth: market, industrial, civic, domestic, inspirational, renown and green worth, each is imbued with ideas about the

[38] Hathaway, *What a Mushroom Lives For*,1-28; Martin, "The Egg and The Sperm" 485-501; Myers, "Conversations on Plant Sensing" 35-66.
[39] Hathaway, *What a Mushroom Lives For*,1-73.
[40] Bierend, *In Search of Mycotopia*, 37.
[41] Bierend, *In Search of Mycotopia*, 22, and Hathaway, *What a Mushroom Lives For*, 56-61

value of nature.[42] Of the seven, only *green worth* recognizes the value of nature unto itself.[43] Kimmerer (2013) provides an alternative set of values based in relationality that I will apply to fungal-interspecies relations. The relational possibilities Kimmerer outlines are as follows, "land as": capital; property; machine; teacher; healer; responsibility; sacred; community; and home.[44] Where Thévenot et al. offers a set of worths based on use-value, Kimmerer offers a series of relational possibilities. Indigenous scholars have advocated for this type of re-orientation to relationality in science and social science of the environment.[45] Kimmerer's "land as machine" mode might best exemplify the relational assumptions made of fungi and trees in the wood wide web debate.[46] In this mode of relationality, plants or in this case fungi, are positioned as "engineering solutions" to the tree's needs.[47] The fungi are regarded functionally in a more or less one-way relationship in service of the collective wellbeing of the trees and understory of the forest. Fungi are often placed in the role of engineer — as solutions to climate crisis, to health problems and general well-being.[48] In his TED Talk, Paul Stamets (2008) a popular mycologist, has even made the claim "mushrooms can save the world," fungi as a hero. To a sapling in the forest, or a tree in need of more nitrogen, the wood wide web provides a solution — a network to share nutrients. This scientific narrative paints the relationship as one-sided. The place of anthropology in this debate is not to prove or disprove the narrative at hand, but to dive deeply into the limits and possibilities written into the stories we tell, to poke and prod at the edges of our attention and imagination. What might be beyond the idea the trees are the ones controlling and dominating their relationship with fungi? With renewed

[42] Thévenot, Laurent, Michael Moody, and Claudette Lafaye. "Forms of Valuing Nature: Arguments and Modes of Justification in French and American Environmental Disputes." In *Political Practice and Culture in French and American Environmental Disputes*, Cambrige University Press, 2000. 229–72.
[43] Thévenot et al., "Forms of Valuing Nature" 29.
[44] Kimmerer, Robin. W. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (Milkweed Editions, 2013) 329-40.
[45] Kanngieser and Todd, "Environmental Kin Study" 385-393; Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 329-40; Watts, "Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans" 20-34.
[46] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 330.
[47] Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 331.
[48] Stamets, "Mushrooms Can Save The World."

attention to affect and agency to expand flattened ontologies into layered nuances of scientific storytelling, what kinds of relations and actions might we notice?

We Too Are the More-Than-Humans We Write About

The person filled with values, ideologies and epistemological standpoints who writes scientific narratives about nature is a part of the nature they study. And, as previously discussed, we write ourselves into the stories we tell. In this section I take seriously the notion that "organisms come into being in relation to one another."[49] We are relational beings. The worlds we build overlap and intersect with one another. We *are* because we meet and encounter one another. Every body extends beyond the limits of our skin; the body is porous and permeable — we *affect* one another. [50] Our bodies are made relationally, they are "not born; they are made" with every encounter.[51] As Stewart (2007) poetically demonstrates, we alter each other's life course for a moment, an hour, a day, or longer.[52] We *impress* and we are *impressionable*.[53] The mycologist caught in the interspecies encounter of the forest is corporeally filled with microbial, bacterial, and fungal worlds *a prioi* to their scientific venture into nature or the lab. The overlapping, intersecting corporeality of the fungal encounter is inescapable. With every breath, the mycologist inhales thousands of microscopic spores (the reproductive projectiles of fungi) filling their lungs with swirls of fungal spores and freshly exhaled oxygen from the trees. With every breath and every step, they are in deeper relations with one another — sensing and responding to one another.

Thinking about the body through fungi complicates and challenges the notion of human corporeal purity and anthropocentrism. Studies have shown that only 43 percent of the cells in the human body are 'human' and the rest are microbes, bacteria, and indeed, fungi.[54] These scientific stories paint the

[49] Hathaway, "Elusive Fungus," 41.
[50] Gil, José. "Paradoxical body." *The drama review* 50, no. 4 (2006): 21-35.
[51] Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," 203-230.
[52] Stewart, Ordinary Affects, 11.
[53] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 7.
[54] Bierend, *In Search of Mycotopia*, 14.

human body as multispecies on cellular and extracellular levels. Is our body a home to these organisms? Are we simply hosts to micro-worlds that live and die inside of us? Are they a part of us or are the multiple species encapsulated in one body a singular, but complex one? This perspective of the body begins to unravel the imposed hierarchy of the tree of life structure's anthropocentric bias if the 'anthropo' in question is a multispecies being, a *holobiont*.[55] The body's multiplicity cannot be contained just as taxonomical boundaries are porous and contested. The rationalized idea of objective, impartial science is incommensurable with a multispecies encounter that recognizes the human body as itself more-than-human. Where is the singular-narrative neutrality in stomachs, mouths and skin which are teeming with microbial life? How can we be impartial when our lungs are filled with the spores of the fungi we study? We too are the more-than-humans we study and write about. It is from this starting point that we enter the forest to meet fungal-interspecies relations, motivations, and affectations. From this place, flora, fauna, and funga are collaborators in science making. How we engage with the species around us is deeply informed by our beliefs about our relationship with the natural world and at the same time there are entanglements between us that are embodied, unconscious, and inextricable from our beingness.

Conclusion

In the face of climate change rapidly devasting the planet, and with respect for the remedial acts of fungi, including but not limited to breaking down plastics, cleaning oil spills, and filtering water, there is an urgent interest in what fungi *do*. In the last several years, scientific debates about the roles fungi play in nature have been brought to mainstream public attention by way of the *wood wide web*. The debate over fungal-tree interspecies relations provides a case study of a current day expression of an age-old debate in biology about the nature of nature. Each story is imbued with modes of worth that evaluate and communicate the ideological value nature holds to the people conducting the research and writing of the

[55] Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies," 203-230.

narratives that shape our understanding of nature. Is nature motivated by competition and individualism or cooperation, collective well-being, and care? Scientists have even pointed to the political ideologies implied and evoked by this very question, in essence interpreting the question as 'is nature capitalist or socialist?'[56] Though the implications of these questions and connections are intriguing, as an anthropologist I meet this question with curiosity and humility — uninterested in resolving the debate by uncovering a singular positivist truth. Instead, my aim is to unsettle the anthropocentric (and otherwise) assumptions about the natural world that come into play in this scientific narrative-making and to explore what these assumptions *do*.[57] I argue that tending to affect helps us go beyond scientific rationality steeped in functionalism, mechanization, and objectivity — to imagine alternative possibilities for the nature of nature. Modes of affective attention both animate the underlying values and hold space for understanding the agentive capacities of more-than-human species. By analyzing the body of the researcher through a feminist posthumanist approach, illuminating our relational and multispecies essence, I argue the multispecies beings we study *move* us and we *move* them. Returning to the example of Darwin's mimesis, "*moving with*" and "*moved by*" the orchids he affectionately researched, I argue that the pull orchids exhibit is worthy of consideration.[58] Whether or not the scientist chooses to include or exclude elements of their relationship to the species they study, they are *impressed upon* by the species. These beings have, in a moment, a study, a lifetime, *moved* and *impressed* the scientist in ways that are inextricable from their work — whether we write about it or not. Just as we write ourselves into our research, so too do the more-than-humans we collaborate with make their impressions on the work too.

Regarding the wood wide web debate, the stories we tell about these interspecies relationships will hold consequences for how we engage with forests. There is a place for further investigation of how

[56] Heijden, Marcel G. A. van der, and Thomas R. Horton. "Socialism in Soil? The Importance of Mycorrhizal Fungal Networks for Facilitation in Natural Ecosystems." *Journal of Ecology* 97, no. 6 (November 2009): 1139–50.
[57] Crist, Eileen, and Helen Kopnina. "Unsettling Anthropocentrism." *Dialectical Anthropology* 38, no. 4 (December 2014): 387–96
[58] Hustak and Myers, "Involutionary Momentum" 74–118.

fungi write themselves into the narrative through their affective *pulls* and *impressions*, and the very stories that they may have to tell. With respect for the impressions these beings make on us as researchers, and on the research itself, it is worth consideration how our interspecies interlocutors and beings of study are meaningful collaborators and science is co-created. Thinking *with* fungi and other more-than-human collaborators can help us to challenge the boundaries of rational Western scientific thought as they move us to challenge our anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism.

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Reverence and Revolution

Japanese Spiritual Ontologies and Generative Ecological Praxis

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"Those who wend their way on old roads… will never know this new way. Even the pioneer who attempts the new path has no idea what she will find."

– Noe Itō, *The Path of the New Woman*, 1913

Introduction: Prospects and Praxis

It is difficult to overstate the severity of the environmental crises presently destroying Planet Earth. It is equally true that without radical social and economic change, our species and countless others face increasingly grim futures of accelerating instability, runaway global warming, and ultimately, extinction. In response to the tasks of these times, I propose a synthesis of threads found in Japanese and East Asian spiritual ontologies – such as Shinto, Zen, and Taoism – with generative anticapitalist theory, to advance a set of proposals for mobilization I refer to as *ecological praxis*. I argue that themes of ecological reverence found in these philosophical currents can be most effectively actualized within the domain of revolutionary politics, and in turn, that a commitment to reverence for the Earth and all life both justifies and necessitates the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Japan provides a context within which to explore the deployment of these ontologies apropos the dynamics of late-stage capitalism, with insights that may be applicable to the ecological crisis of capitalist societies more broadly. The synthesis of reverence and revolution is not confined to Japan or any one locality, and my invitation is for everyone with an abiding love of the Earth and radical anticapitalist sensibilities to engage with the arguments and meditations on ecological praxis presented in this article.

In searching for the constituent elements of a generative ecological praxis, I undertake a two-part exploratory analysis: first, the ecological destruction unfolding in Japan and the present inabilities of reverence-based spiritualities to prevent this destruction, and second, the potential applications of these ontologies to inspire and inform praxis. With respect to these ontologies of ecological reverence, the first half of this article is animated by a single immediate question: *why haven't they worked*? Domestic environmental problems in Japan are severe, and national and international policies are entirely consistent with its position as a core capitalist power in the Global North. Despite an undeniable wealth of ecologically oriented spiritual traditions in Japan, the followers and practitioners of these traditions have been by-in-large absent from efforts to prevent environmental destruction, meaning most of the environmental victories in Japan have been won with no pretext of spiritual principles as a guiding impetus to action.[1]

From an ecological and historical materialist perspective, I explore why this has been the case and argue that the dynamics of capitalism can in large part explain the failure of Japanese ontologies of reverence – as currently constituted, imagined, and institutionalized – to prevent ongoing environmental devastation in Japan. I demonstrate that although Japan's problems are locally specific, they are problems bearing the hallmarks of capitalism, and a critique of the Japanese situation therefore offers more generalizable insights into capitalist development and its socioecological consequences. In the latter portion of this article, I turn my attention to what might be required to combat ecological destruction: a generative synthesis of reverence-based ontologies and radical political praxis. To explicate this position, I draw from ontologies of spiritual reverence, revolutionary theory, and my own experiences in Japan to offer a basic sketch of an ecological praxis both informed by reverence and committed to revolution. To universalize from the particular I turn my attention to the potentialities of this portable and combative

[1] Arne Kalland. "Holism and Sustainability: Lessons from Japan." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology* 6, no. 2 (2002): 155.

praxis to be deployed as a challenge to the dual crises of late-stage capitalism and environmental decimation, both of which are now planetary in scale and catastrophic in severity.

Japan: Not as Advertised

Allow me to begin with a rather banal observation, though one that has implications beyond what immediately meets the eye. In Kyoto, where I lived as a student for three months, there is almost no litter on the streets whatsoever. This is not true to the same extent in other Japanese cities, such as Osaka, where I lived for another month, but it is nonetheless common for busy streets in Japan to be trash-free – even while public garbage bins are practically nonexistent. This remarkable display of social and aesthetic efficacy (or perhaps conformity) is a testament to the strong emphasis on fastidiousness and harmony in traditional Japanese culture, a concept described as *wa*.[2] But when viewed as an environmental gesture as is often the case, the implications of this invisibility become far more unsettling. In Japan, there are as few immediately visible signs that anything is amiss ecologically as there are pieces of litter in Kyoto. Apart from a few revealing events such as the Minamata incident in the 1950s or the Fukushima nuclear meltdown of the 2010s, Japan's ruling intelligentsia have sustained a convincing mythology of cherry blossoms, verdant temple groves, and perhaps above all else, natural and *national* purity. But setting aside mythologies of harmony and love of nature, which themselves are largely a product of Meiji era discourses of national identity-building,[3] a query into the *hontou* (unspoken reality) of the Japanese ecological situation reveals that there is indeed trouble in paradise.

According to Alex Kerr, a commentator on Japanese modernization, "Japan has become arguably the world's ugliest country" in the half-century following World War II.[4] This is, of course, a subjective and contestable statement, but there is a degree of evidence to support Kerr's claim. In the postwar era,

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[2] Roger Davies and Osamu Ikeno, *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture*. (Ruttland, Vt: Tuttle Pub., 2002): 116.
[3] Aike Rots, "Environmentalism," *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Japanese Religions*. Edited by Erica Baffelli et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021): 65.
[4] Alex Kerr, *Dogs and Demons: Tales from the Dark Side of Japan*. (Hill and Wang, 2001): 14.

Japan's construction industry has risen to the level of a national cartel, hence some commentators describing the country as *doken kokka* (the construction state). As of 2000, the Japanese state-bureaucracy had committed forty percent of the combined national budget to public works projects, as compared to ten percent in the U.S. and six percent in France.[5] The earthly impact of this national "pave and build" campaign has been sterilization of ecological "messiness" through the application of concrete embankments and dams on 110 of Japan's 113 major rivers, replacement of forty-three percent of native woodlands with cedar plantations, and countless other high-intensity alterations of the landscape using modern technology.[6] These interventions display a logic of environmental control at odds not only with the flourishing of non-human life, but also with the aesthetic and spiritual tradition embodied by the likes of Dōgen, Basho, and Miyazaki Hayao. In acting on the climate crisis, the discrepancies are equally startling. Japan's energy mix contains a greater share of fossil fuel sources than almost any other industrialized country in the world,[7] and Japan is the second largest global exporter of gas-powered automobiles.[8] Both at home and abroad, Japan's national bourgeoisie remains devoted to practices that must be eliminated for climatic stabilization to remain a possibility.

While state and corporate agents behind *doken kokka* and the perpetuation of fossil capital (to borrow Andreas Malm's descriptor),[9] continue to reap the spoils of ecological destruction, "a strong focus on ideals of nature (as in Japanese artistic traditions)" serves to obfuscate the physical and material impacts of capitalist practices on the environment.[10] As Arne Kalland notes, the Japanese "love of nature" tends to fetishize an abstracted, metaphorical "nature" through rituals and well-manicured aesthetic displays, often to the detriment of concern for ecology as a whole.[11] How should one seek to understand

[5] Ibid., 20.
[6] Ibid., 15, 53.
[7] As of 2021, over 85% of Japan's energy came from fossil fuels. Japan's reliance on fossil fuel energies is greater than that of China, Canada, America, the UK, and the European Union: https://ourworldindata.org/fossil-fuels
[8] Japan's 2021 automobile exports were second only to Germany: https://www.worldstopexports.com/car-exports-country
[9] Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*. (New York: Verso, 2016).
[10] Aike Rots, "Forests of the Gods: Shinto, Nature, and Sacred Space in Contemporary Japan." (2014): 124.
[11] Kalland 2002, 154.

this *false reverence* and the puzzling occurrence of environmental devastation in a land that, as Zen master Suzuki Daisetz once claimed, treated nature as a "constant friend and companion."[12] Perhaps Louis Althusser's analysis of ideology may offer a few preliminary insights; for Althusser, ideology represents, "*the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence*" (emphasis original).[13] In the case of Japan, real ecological conditions and practices – which are not on the whole distinct from other industrial capitalist societies – are concealed, while ancient spiritual traditions (in their institutional forms) become an ideological state apparatus (ISA) through which capitalism maintains and reinvents itself.[14] This is certainly accurate in the case of the Shinto establishment, which was *explicitly* incorporated as an ISA in the Meiji era,[15] and other ontologies of reverence such as Zen have been mobilized in a similar though less conspicuous fashion.

Attempting to explain such phenomena in principally cultural and ideological terms however, is to commit the error characterized by Karl Marx (and many subsequent Marxists) as *idealism*.[16] Staying with the *materialist* analysis is to reject the premise that inbred deficiencies of Japanese culture are to blame for environmental destruction and the misappropriation of spiritual ontologies to serve state power and capital. An accurate socioecological understanding begins instead with an examination of class divisions and interests, and this not only results in a clearer understanding of the forces at work, but also lays the groundwork for advancing an ecological praxis. The main culprit responsible for Japan's socioecological predicament is the capitalist mode of production and those who administer it, as well as it is a systemic imperative that the real practices of ecological destruction remain in place for capital to reproduce itself. To quote Marx's writing in *Capital*, such decisions do not "depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist

[12] Simon James, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004): 124.
[13] Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. (Monthly Review Press, 2019): 109.
[14] Ibid. 2019, 106.
[15] Rots 2014, 136.
[16] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The German Ideology: Part 1," *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Edited by Robert C. Tucker. 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978): 148–149.

production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him."[17] Cultural and ideological proclivities do come into play in the Japanese situation, but within the confines of the dominant global religion: "accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production."[18] With these outcomes and consequences of capitalism at the forefront, I now move to examine the spiritual ontologies of reverence and their place within this debacle.

I have admitted that I am not a detached critic of the East Asian spiritual and philosophical currents such as Shinto, Zen, and Taoism. A deep interest in these traditions is in part what led me to Japan, and I claim they contain profound implications that may prove eminently useful in constituting an ecological praxis necessary to respond effectively to the environmental crises of our times. With that said, the modern environmental credentials of these philosophies are ambiguous and contradictory, and their practitioners have often been uninterested in supporting relatively uncontroversial environmental initiatives in Japan, let alone an overthrow of the capitalist economic order. 'Actually existing Zen' institutions in Japan have long concerned themselves with individual self-development rather than collective organization (though the two can no longer be mutually exclusive), and this has predictably led to a strong conservative tenor within the mainstream tradition.[19] Similarly, and as Aike Rots described to me in correspondence, very few Shinto actors are anticapitalist or revolutionary, and attention to environmental concerns within the tradition usually takes the form of local conservation initiatives such as *chinju no mori* (sacred forest grove) restoration rather than political mobilization.[20]

Shinto, meaning, *The Way of the Gods*, is a polytheistic folk-spirituality that has had an abiding influence on Japanese society and is most often associated by outsiders with the iconic *torii*; ubiquitous bright-orange gates which supposedly delineate entrance into the realm of the divine. Its practices are

[17] Karl Marx and Ben Fowkes, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1977): 381.
[18] Ibid., 742.
[19] James 2004, 123.
[20] Correspondence with Dr. Rots in October 2022.

rooted primarily in the worship of *kami*, the multiplicity of deities animating all matter, including humans, non-humans, landscapes, and objects. As historian Helen Hardacre documents, it was during the Yayoi Period (400 BCE – 300 CE) when *kami* worship, and the earliest forms of what would later become Shinto, first emerged on the *Nihon* archipelago.[21] She continues, "archaeological evidence suggests that religious life developed in connection with rice cultivation… The Kami were strongly identified with natural forces governing the crops."[22] Thus, Shinto arose from the practical and contemplative reverence of kami, the sublime agencies imbuing will and animacy within the "great elemental objects and phenomena" responsible for the ecological dynamics on which all life depends.[23]

Like any structure of belief, Shinto has undergone many mutations. The Meiji era saw it incorporated into ruling structures as State Shinto, and the tradition has most recently taken a form referred to as "Shinto environmentalism" by Aike Rots and a handful of others. Rots has been highly critical of Shinto's alleged environmental turn towards the end of the 20th century, which along with the emergence of a "Green Zen," "paradoxically coincided with large-scale… environmental exploitation by Japanese state and corporate actors, domestically as well as abroad."[24] Shinto environmentalism has most often assumed the form of conservation initiatives and poses no threat to the extractive interests of Japan's capitalist class. Influential elites have had much to gain from this paradigm, which not only sidelines more serious environmental issues but reasserts a green iteration of Shinto within the wider contours of nationalist discourse. Rots contends, "Normative understandings of Shinto as the ancient, unifying worship tradition of the Japanese nation… go hand in hand with initiatives to preserve ancient landscapes and *chinju no mori*."[25] This is not to say that environmental concerns in the Shinto community

[21] Helen Hardacre, *Shinto: A History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 18.
[22] Ibid., 18–19.
[23] W.G. Aston, *Shinto: The Ancient Religion of Japan*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 13–14.
[24] Rots 2021, 65.
[25] Aike Rots, "Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of 'Chinju No Mori.'" *Japanese journal of religious studies* 42, no. 2 (2015): 227.

are entirely embedded in nationalist aspirations,[26] but there is plenty of reason to suspect that the conservative Jinja Honchō – Japan's shrine establishment – has little interest in organizing progressive elements in a mass-based oppositional campaign to ecological destruction. There are some promising developments within Shinto, which I return to in the following section, but they are limited and take place almost exclusively outside the mainstream tradition.

A similar argument can be made for Zen, which has been framed outside Japan as an ecocentric spiritual tradition dating back to Suzuki Daisetz's popularity amongst beatniks and hippies in 1960s countercultural currents.[27] Suzuki, for his part, outlines a Zen environmental ethic quite lucidly in his writings, reminding us that "Nature cannot be conceived as a passive inert substance… Nature is also power and energy; Nature reacts to human calls."[28] But lofty words and concrete actions seldom correspond in the Japanese traditions of reverence, and respect for stability and the status quo generally take precedent over political and ecological action. The Critical Buddhism scholar Hakamaya Noriaki argues that the concept of "Buddha-nature" inherent in all things acts as a reactionary force within Japanese Buddhism, part of a "constellation of ideas which together militate against criticism and reform of the social order."[29] Zen is just one of the many Japanese Buddhisms that has developed since the introduction of Buddhism to Japan from Korea in the 6th century, and as Elisabetta Porcu notes, the "Japanese love of nature" and "ecocentric" worldview promoted across Buddhist denominations produced one of the most enduring ideological narratives of the modern Japanese nation-state.[30]

Returning to earlier observations about ideology and class interests, Shinto and Buddhist actors and organizations have for centuries fostered ties with wealthy and powerful elements of Japanese society. As such, it is against their class interests to take radical positions on political and ecological

[26] Aike Rots, *Shinto: Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017): 49.
[27] Rots 2021, 66.
[28] Suzuki Daisetz and William Barrett, *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1956): 233.
[29] James 2004, 123.
[30] Elisabetta Porcu, *Pure Land and Buddhism in Modern Japanese Culture*. (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 59–60.

questions. It is a predictable outcome of class society that ideals would become subordinate to interests and that spiritual traditions would be mobilized towards reactionary ends through ideological state apparatuses. Both Aike Rots and Simon James reflect on the quietism in Shinto and Zen respectively, but also reject the premise that this is a natural or inherent feature of these traditions, despite the history of this having been the case.[31] [32] The Japanese ontologies of reverence are far more than ossified artefacts now repurposed in service of bourgeois ideology, but their application in this time of capitalist and ecological crisis requires a rupture from the establishments unwilling to interpret these philosophies as a spiritual ammunition needed to negate the terminal antagonisms we confront.

One of my favourite scenes in Miyazaki Hayao's classic film, *Spirited Away*, is when a *kusare gami* (rotten spirit) from a nearby polluted river arrives at the *sentō* (bathhouse), and the protagonist Chihiro frees the beleaguered spirit of his stinking filth – revealing a powerful and benevolent *kawa no kami* (river spirit) beneath the refuse and sludge.[33] A generative ecological praxis seeks to wash away the accumulated muck of class society from the East Asian ontologies of reverence, thereby releasing a spiritually rich wellspring of understandings engendering a reverential relationship with the Earth and all life. As Marx and Engels conclude in *The German Ideology*:

> revolution is necessary… not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in *ridding itself of all the muck of the ages* [emphasis added] and become fitted to found society anew.[34]

For Shinto, Zen, and Taoism to aid and guide this endeavour, they cannot remain mired in the muck of the ages with a backwards-looking political valence; if they are to be mobilized in ecological praxis, the only option is to radically reinterpret them for the present moment.

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[31] Rots 2017, 205.
[32] James 2004, 125.
[33] Miyazaki Hayao et al., *Spirited Away*. (Tokyo, Japan: Studio Ghibli, 2001).
[34] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C.J. Arthur. 2nd ed. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976): 95.

Reverence Reloaded

In the first section of this article, I focused primarily on how Japanese ontologies of reverence have been compromised by capitalism and have so far failed to prevent environmental devastation in the country. In this second part, I turn to an actively oriented and less contextually specific question: *What Is To Be Done?*[35] This question, once posed by V.I. Lenin at the start of the 20th century, encourages a venture beyond the realm of academic discourse and into the riskier terrain of articulating a broadly-applicable praxis. This shift into an action-oriented discussion is risky, at least in one narrow sense, because it immediately invites a few well-justified criticisms of the author's method and analysis. The fact that I am proposing a synthesis of East Asian ontologies of reverence and revolutionary politics, may for some, warrant the charge of *orientalism*.[36] Edward Said is deservedly one of the most celebrated intellectuals of the 20th century due to his criticism of the Western episteme, and its cultural production of a mystified, romanticized Orient as an artifact of imperialism. There are elements of this synthesis that I am prepared to defend against anti-orientalist critique, but the reality is that there is a degree of orientalism that is unavoidably embedded in the premise of what I am doing. Some contemporaries in the field of postcolonial studies may conclude that there is an unjustifiably orientalist impulse within this praxis, and in some respect, they are not wrong; however, I am aware of the potentially problematic nature of my perspective and the criticism it could justifiably engender. My defense lies within that awareness, and in my attempts to reflexively minimize its impact on my analysis. The final judgement concerning my level of success in this endeavour must lie with the reader.

What does a practice of ecological reverence, inspired by East Asian spiritual ontologies, look like in the context of revolutionary politics? Let us inspire this process of synthesis with a simple yet profound imperative: ecological praxis must begin with a love and reverence for life, matter, and

[35] In his 1902 pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done: Burning Questions of our Movement* (Lenin 1902), V.I. Lenin first argues for a revolutionary workers' party to spread Marxist ideas and consolidate proletarian class power.
[36] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

existence in its sublime and multiplicitous totality. We find ourselves and all known life-forms provided for by a homeostatic Mother Earth (or *Gaia*, if you prefer), anchored by gravity, and confronted with the inconceivable vastness of the universe beyond. The fact that anything exists at all is immediate cause for awe and reverence. Although I draw from Japanese and East Asian spiritualities due to their rich *ontologies of reverence* – which have the potential to engender an affect and form of ecological engagement based on non-possessive, non-dualistic veneration of Earth's life-forms and vital matter – such practices and relational understandings cannot belong to one system of philosophy.

Suzuki makes this point about Zen, in that its spiritual dimension extends beyond "Zen" as a school of philosophy: "Zen must have its philosophy. The only caution is not to identify Zen with a system of philosophy, for Zen is infinitely more than that."[37] Forging a renewed red-green alliance and ecological praxis based in spiritual ontological understandings is not dependent on any one philosophical tradition of reverence, Japanese or otherwise, but on reaching into its *universal* dimension to provide the impetus and justification for revolutionary political action. This means that the universally definable feature of this ecological praxis – reverence – achieves universality only through its very indefinability. Nowhere is this expressed with more lucidity than in the *Tao Te Ching*, where Laozi opens with a paradox; the Way as "way" is not the lasting Way, nor is the name as "name" the lasting name.[38] The various manifestations of form are the "ten thousand things," juxtaposed but not separate from the indivisible source of all life: the creative power that cannot be named. Laozi further identifies this quality as "form before form – something looked for but not seen, or listened for, not heard, or reached for, not found."[39] Similar to Suzuki's insight regarding Zen, Laozi teaches that the mysterious and all-nourishing *Tao* cannot be delineated by ritual and conceptual signifiers. The revolutionary overthrow of capitalism through ecological praxis can be defined in relatively concrete terms, but the emergent potentialities of

[37] Suzuki and Barrett 1956, 261.
[38] Laozi and Moss Roberts, *Dao de Jing: The Book of the Way*. (Berkely: University of California Press, 2001): 27.
[39] Ibid. 2001, 59.

spiritual reverence arise from a formless source as deep as existence itself. This is the embodiment of Yin-and-Yang, or dialectical unity of opposites, seen within a reverential ecological praxis, which allows it to access into a universal reverence without insisting upon a universal manifestation.

There is not a great deal by way of historical precedent to inform the actualization of reverence *qua* ecological praxis, but there are clues coming from the margins of Shinto that point the way forward. One of these is Kyoto-based professor John Dougill's blog, *Green Shinto*, which he maintains in addition to his teaching work at Ryukoku University. In his blog, Dougill outlines an appealing vision for a different kind of Shinto: "a Shinto free of borders, liberated from its past to meet the demands of the new age… a Shinto that is green in deed as well as in word."[40] Furthermore, *Green Shinto* blog posts often express political and environmental commentary on controversial issues, such as Japanese nationalism and nuclear energy, that directly contravene the positions held by Jinja Honchō.[41] *Green Shinto* does not provide the theoretical basis required to generate praxis, but its truth content consists of demonstrating that Shinto, and indeed any reverence tradition, finds its most inspired embodiments when recast to serve political and ecological causes *without the permission* of dominant actors and institutions. Within the established Shinto community, one of the most promising examples of green-red collaboration in Japan was when the head priest of a small shrine in Yamagata Prefecture joined forces with a local chapter of the Japanese Communist Party (JCP) to oppose a construction project that would have decimated the shrine's sacred forest. This effort was successful in saving the forest and stymying the *doken kokka*, and as Rots notes, it was the alliance between shrine advocates and JCP communists that built the critical mass necessary to do this.[42]

These two insights garnered from the margins of Shinto – ontological mobilization without sanctioned permission and the fruitfulness of red-green alliances – provide a useful framework for more

[40] 'About,' *Green Shinto*: https://www.greenshinto.com/about/
[41] Rots 2017, 202.
[42] Ibid., 135.

ambitious and combative applications of ecological praxis. The ecological crisis of capitalism is universal, what is needed is a means to wage these battles that goes beyond localized and solely defensive forms of resistance. A foundational component of ecological praxis that does this work is what I call *ecological internationalism*: a collective effort of planetary solidarity that seeks to negate ecological antagonism by all means necessary and engender reverence as a universal affect. The best way to understand the role of ecological internationalism is through a dialectical reversal of the environmentalist dictum, "think globally, act locally." To *act globally* through ecological internationalism is to understand that the negation of environmental crisis and the abolition of the capitalist antagonism can be realized only through planetary means; while to *think locally* is to establish reverence and sensitivity towards living environments and overcome the ecological detachment and anti-relationality characteristic of capitalist society. Both the means and ends of ecological internationalism are guided by reverence for our shared Earth, and repositioning of spiritual reverence in our era of environmental catastrophe means celebrating revolutionary struggle as a profound act of reverence while imagining radically different ways of inhabiting the planet. This would be to engender futures of ecological reverence akin to Gary Snyder's Zen-inspired vision of communities of life, imbued with a deeply spiritual sense of *place*, that would, "enable people to live regionally and yet learn from and contribute to a planetary society."[43]

Leon Trotsky is not generally considered to be an exemplar of spiritual reverence, but the self-described "proletarian revolutionist, Marxist…[and] irreconcilable atheist" may have stated this case best of all: "Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression, and violence, and enjoy it to the full."[44] Trotsky's insight is both particular and universal, simultaneously the promise of communism while also transcending political classification, and on a foundational level, the entire

[43] Mary Tucker and Duncan Williams, *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, 1997): 192–193

[44] Taken from 'Trotsky's Testament' written in early 1940. A few months later he was assassinated in Mexico City on Stalin's orders. His testament is online: https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/fi-is/no7/testaments.htm

category of 'politics' as it were. Life is beautiful, and although life remains, as Inna Viriasova notes, "unpolitical… [in] its essential relationality,"[45] revolutionary political action must be undertaken *without delay* for prospects of (liberatory) postcapitalist existence on this Earth to remain as a possibility. It is this *spiritual commitment* that compels and justifies a struggle to the death for the Earth which sustains life, the Earth which is *life itself*. This is to do away with the artificial barriers constructed between humans and our environments, to do away with the anthropocentric utilitarianism of 'resource ownership,' to do away with the commodification that robs the Earth of intrinsic value, and to do away with the capitalist mode of production, exerting its brutalities upon humans, non-humans, and living environments the whole world over. It is through a praxis guided by ecological internationalism, based on *acting* globally and *thinking* locally, and which is prepared to defend the habitability of the planet by all means necessary, that truly egalitarian, truly sustainable possibilities emerge from this period of intense crisis and antagonism. In this article, I provide a basic sketch of an ecological praxis informed by reverence and committed to revolution. This praxis may take many different names and forms, but it must remain, as Marx said about communism, "the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."[46]

Conclusion: A New Universality

My experiences in Japan provided something akin to a personal synthesis of reverence and revolution in the four months I spent living there and this has left a lingering impact reflected in my writing and worldview. During this time, I paid visits to shrines, temples, and spiritual sites at every available opportunity, informing the understandings of reverence at work in this ecological praxis. Although further research has dispelled any illusions I may have held concerning a special and uniquely "Japanese" relationship with the environment, there nonetheless exists a reverence in certain aspects of everyday life that has survived assault and appropriation by capitalism. In the alleyways of Kyoto, small

[45] Inna Viriasova, *At the Limits of the Political: Affect, Life, Things*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018): 136.
[46] Marx and Engels 1978, "The German Ideology: Part 1," 162.

shrines with offerings of water and flowers for wandering kami remain a ubiquitous feature of the urban landscape. Despite a barrage of generic and visually jarring infrastructure built in the postwar era, the *torii* gates and temple gardens serve as a reminder that there is beauty in *Nihon* to be found and drawn upon as well; that this society today is more than just another tragedy in the theatre of capitalist development. Regardless of political utility, a renewed attention to the sublime in everyday life has value on its own terms, and I wonder if it is a place to begin cultivating a more active commitment to a larger reverence for the Earth and all life. I know it certainly has been for me.

In my early days in Japan, I had the impression that a profoundly low political consciousness was uniform amongst the general populace, and I was thoroughly surprised to encounter some of the most dedicated revolutionaries I have ever met adjacent to the small yet prominent left-radical student milieu in Kyoto. These introductions culminated in four days spent agitating against Abe Shinzō's state funeral proceedings in September 2022 with *Chūkaku-ha*, the Japan Revolutionary Communist League (National Committee). A young woman my age, Yajima-san, was in the vanguard of *Chūkaku-ha*, Japan's most heavily monitored far-left insurgency group whose core members live and breathe revolution – spending days and nights in a barricaded central headquarters outside Tokyo in a way that would impress even the likes of Lenin. When I asked Yajima-san how she got to this position of leadership at such a young age, her response was, *honmono no sainō*, "genuine talent." Everyone at the table burst out laughing, and I was taken by this expression of irony and levity from someone who has devoted her life to the decidedly serious endeavour of communist revolution and leading an organization constantly monitored by Japanese state police.[47] The residual "muck of the ages" was nowhere to be found in the hearts and spirits of the radicals I encountered. When I lived with anarchists in Osaka for three weeks, paying rent in the

[47] I contacted Yajima for permission to mention her by alias; she responded saying that I could refer to her in this article by real name instead. An article outlining Chūkaku-ha's past and recent activities can be found here: https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14143308. Their webpage is here: http://www.zenshin.org/english/index.htm

form of a presentation on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and a ten-kilogram bag of rice, I asked a fellow traveller one night whether he was *Nihonjin*; he responded, this time in English, "I am not Japanese, I am a person of the universe!" Though I didn't realize it then, this is the sentiment that would underpin the idea of ecological internationalism and the non-national, universal solidarities that I have come to engage with and deeply appreciate.

The impulse to exoticize and romanticize what I encountered in Japan is of course one I have had to contend with. But the fears, desires, contradictions, and political imagination I saw in those I crossed paths with were, in many ways, reflections of my own. As Bruno Latour says of the ecological crisis, though it applies equally to vicissitudes of late capitalism, "the new universality consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way."[48] With the grounding foundation of ecology everywhere moving towards accelerating instability, the opportunity is to rediscover the common (now extended to encompass to the entire "community of life"), and fight in common to realize the conditions where the commons can be venerated. Mao Zedong once said, "Marxists are not fortune tellers,"[49] and there is no telling whether the radical aspirations I witnessed in Japan, which have a basis far beyond any one locality, will be realized as a series of ruptures from the mounting antagonisms of late capitalist implosion. What is clear to me, however, is that mobilization against capitalism in defense of ecology is a unifying imperative, and that a synthesis of spiritual reverence and revolutionary politics can serve as a generative, *universal* praxis to call forth egalitarian alternatives, deepen solidarities between all life, and in the little time available, avert the worst of the nightmare promised to life on Earth by continued capitalist accumulation and commodification of all that is holy. I will be devoting myself to testing this hypothesis in the years to come; my invitation to the reader would be that you, in your own way, might consider doing the same.

[48] Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2018): 9.
[49] Mao Zedong and Slavoj Žižek, *On Practice and Contradiction*. Revolutions (London, England: Verso, 2007): 70.

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Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics

The Anticipatory Work of Howardena Pindell

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In the last several years, there has been a visible trend in the art world that demonstrates a desire to politicize perceived-apolitical movements in art history. Art historians and queer theorists have been coining terminology and descriptive language in service of this desire. In a 2013 conversation published in *Art Journal*, Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy used the term "queer formalism" to describe the new ways abstraction has been mobilized by young queer and trans artists to circumvent scripted forms of expression.[1] Alan Ruiz coined "Radical Formalism" in 2016 to consider how materials and form act as "carriers of the political," and to "understand what form can perform."[2] Ruiz was careful to explain that the use of Radical Formalism does not mean forgetting the sexist and classist roots of traditional Greenbergian Formalism, but rather, appropriating it to create an alternative analytic that is more inclusive and allows for more possibilities.[3] In 2017, *ASAP/Journal* published a special issue on Queer Form. In an editorial titled "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," Kadji Amin, Amber Jamillia Musser, and Roy Perez built on these definitions and related them specifically to the experiences of artists of colour. They asserted that "aesthetic form is crucial to the work of queer artists,

[1] Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy, "Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation," *Art journal* (*New York, 1960*) 72, no.4 (2013), 64.
[2] Alan Ruiz, "Radical formalism," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 26, nos. 2-3 (2016), 233.
[3] Formalism, broadly, is the study of art by analyzing its form and style. The key theorist of Formalism as it is most hegemonically understood was Clement Greenberg. In the 1950s and 1960s, Greenberg popularized the idea that all media (i.e., painting, sculpture, etc.) have essential elements, and that mastering these elements through formal purification was the marker of good art.

artists of color, and more broadly, artists concerned with the structural conditions of social violences."[4] A year later, in the introduction to a special issue of *Women and Performance*, Uri McMillan used the term "Surface Aesthetics" as a way to theorize "surface *as* depth and as relational."[5] For practitioners of Surfacism, "the realm of the aesthetic… functions as a vital resource… as they manipulate corporeal and technological surfaces… to refuse the interpretive demands of readability, certitude, and transparency so often expected of artists of color."[6] The recent development of these terms and associated concepts demonstrates the recent proliferation of a desire among historically marginalized and equity-deserving groups to resignify Formalism in a way that insists on its political and subjective underpinnings.

Given the proliferation of this language within the span of a few years, one might assume that the terms correspond to politics and practices that are decidedly contemporary; however, this paper considers the longer history of practices that are now called Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surfacism by returning to the work of Howardena Pindell, an artist who I see as an antecedent to all of these movements. Pindell is a Black feminist visual artist, curator, educator, writer, and activist. Although Pindell mainly worked in abstract painting during the early years of her career, her practice has always been intimately tied to her lived experience and activism. Historically, it has been difficult to discuss Pindell's work in a way that gives equal weight to both her formal innovations and her political messaging. The importance of language is thus demonstrated through the ways that Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics allow us to retroactively see and discuss the important work Pindell did in showing how material aesthetic elements are themselves political – how politics can happen through parts of the work that are not "representational" in the conventional sense. The contemporary theories of Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics allow for an

[4] Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Roy Perez, "Queer Form: Aesthetics, Race, and the Violences of the Social," *ASAP journal* 2, no. 2 (2017), 227.
[5] Uri McMillan, "Introduction: skin, surface, sensorium," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 28, no. 1 (2018), 2.
[6] McMillan, "Introduction," 4.

alternative reading of the work of Howardena Pindell, one which gives credit to her radically innovative philosophy.

Expanding Biographies: Radicalizing Art Historical Methods

Conventional discourses around abstraction and Formalism disregard artists' biographies. These discourses frame abstraction and Formalism as "universal" rather than particular aesthetic experiences; however, a consideration of Pindell's biography is necessary to fully understand her practice of abstraction – one which is rooted in lived experience. Thus, I present her biography to illuminate how her lived experience informs her aesthetic decisions, disrupting dominant narratives about particular genres or movements in art histories. Pindell's career traverses several fields, including her longstanding studio practice, a professorship at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, a curatorial career in which she was the first Black woman curator at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), a prolific history of activism beginning in high school, and an extensive catalog of writing including personal narratives and statistical research on gender representation and racism in the art world. Born in 1943, Pindell grew up in Philadelphia and engaged with art from quite a young age. She completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Boston University in 1965 and continued her studies in the Master of Fine Arts program at Yale, graduating in 1967. At the time, the undergraduate classes at Yale were still all male, and she was the only person of colour in her program. Pindell moved to New York City after graduation, where after a taxing job search, she eventually found work at the MoMA and continued her art practice in the evenings.

For decades, two strands of dialogue circulated around Pindell's multifaceted practice: one that related to formal innovations and aesthetic properties, and another that related to context and narrative. The first major retrospective exhibition of Pindell's work, *What Remains To Be Seen* – which took place in 2018 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago – put these two strands in conversation for the first

time. According to co-curators Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, the exhibition aimed to examine Pindell's "creative and social output in a way that allows us to think about contemporary practices in which object making, activism, advocacy, scholarship, and self-actualization become increasingly and inextricably intertwined."[7] The scholarship on Pindell's work that emerged from this exhibition and its catalogue demonstrates "Pindell's commitment to not only shape visual language, but also to imagine new histories and possibilities of being in the world."[8] Cassel Oliver describes her work as a "convergence on tensions between formalist and social concerns, [which] underscore the artist's commitment to free-range experimentations in abstraction and social responsibility."[9] Pindell's abstract paintings are an example of this convergence. Her subversive use of the minimalist grid shifts it from a "formal device to an actionable device—one that expands into the tactile and becomes materialized, embodied, and mutable."[10] However, as Beckwith observes, even in Pindell's "autobiographical" works—a series of paintings made after a traumatic head accident—equal value is still given to the visual elements that are a result of these personal experiences.[11] As Pindell describes, "the way one inhabits a set of circumstances has aesthetic implications."[12] For example, the artist was accustomed to painting in natural light, but she was not afforded this luxury once she began working at the MoMA in 1972. She adapted by developing new methods and techniques to suit her circumstances. Many of the formal innovations born of this context have become hallmarks of her practice, such as creating hole-punched

[7] Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Opening Thoughts," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*, edited by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2018), 30.
[8] Beckwith and Cassel Oliver, "Opening Thoughts," 30.
[9] Valerie Cassel Oliver, "The Tao of Abstraction: Pindell's Meditations on Drawing," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*, edited by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2018), 116.
[10] Naomi Beckwith, "Body Optics, or Howardena Pindell's Ways of Seeing," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*, edited by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2018), 94.
[11] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 96.
[12] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 98.

paper stencils through which to apply paint and sprinkling the left-over hole-punched "chads" (the paper circles which are the result of hole-punching) like confetti on the canvas.

Working in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, Pindell experienced first-hand several new influences, shifts, and movements in the art world. One such movement was the Abstract Expressionist movement, which was taken up by painters in the 1950s and 1960s and at once valued the process of making art – the technical aspects such as gesture, colour, shape, brushstrokes, or scope – over the final product, and devalued or disregarded the inclusion of ideas, concepts, or meaning behind art. Another was Minimalism, which was also an abstract movement from the 1960s that forwarded the idea that art should not be representative of anything besides itself, but usually involved geometric shapes. While both movements focused on the formal elements of artworks, they were often seen in opposition to one another, as Minimalism reacted against the visibility of the artist's hand and the "high-art" aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism. Through her amalgamations of seemingly contradictory elements, Pindell incorporated aspects of both these movements in combinations unique to her practice.[13] At the same time, the 1960s and 1970s were a time of rising social activism, and New York City was experiencing an influx of feminist politics. Many of Pindell's contemporaries engaged in activist movements in their personal lives, yet it was not uncommon for these artists to continue to create abstract work that was not connected to their political stances. As Beckwith and Cassel Oliver note, Pindell,

> Was among the first wave of academically trained artists to dismiss this separation and assert that the pressures, prejudices, and exclusions placed upon her – as a black artist and as a woman – played out as much in the art world as they did in the greater social world and, as such, were fair and necessary content for her art practice.[14]

[13] Beckwith and Cassel Oliver, "Opening Thoughts," 22.
[14] Beckwith and Cassel Oliver, 22.

In her essay "Painting with Ambivalence," art historian and curator Helen Molesworth describes how feminist painters working in the 1960s and '70s often grappled with the tensions and contradictions of the dominant movements of the period.[15] In doing so, these artists "explore how even color [or form, shape, medium, etc.] is gendered."[16] Pindell's work offers an alternative to well-worn narratives of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. Through her inclusion of the Minimalist grid, as well as abstraction, she appropriated aspects of these movements and turned them into something else; this gesture itself is political, so too are the paintings that resulted.

During Pindell's tenure at the MoMA, the exhibition *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* debuted at the museum, and in 1973, Pindell travelled to Africa with her colleague and friend, Metropolitan Museum curator Lowery Stokes Sims. The trip and the exhibition influenced Pindell to take her formal innovations further, when she began painting on unstretched canvases in 1974. Pindell has acknowledged that the constructed canvases and interwoven strips she used in works like *Carnival at Ostende* (1977) and *Memory Past* (1980-81) are connected to the African textiles she saw in the early 1970s at the MoMA and in Africa. Incorporating this influence and aspect of her identity into formal canvasses is an example of how Pindell continuously "finds material in her own being in the world," placing the same value in both form and content.[17] The development of these inspirations into formalist innovations in her work took place "at a time when assertions of connection between artists' ethnicity and their work would not have been widely countenanced in the world. But Pindell herself has always been actively involved in a process of self-reclamation and definition in both her art and her life."[18] Pindell herself has stated, "I think one can also use abstraction and have a black aesthetic because [of] the way abstraction has been handled in

[15] Helen Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark, (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 428-439.
[16] Molesworth, "Painting with Ambivalence," 439.
[17] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 98.
[18] Lowery Stokes Sims, "Synthesis and Integration in the Work of Howardena Pindell, 1971-1992: A (Re)Consideration," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*, edited by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2018), 66.

Africa through the use of geometry and patterns."[19] In this case, she explains how works created from formal elements like shapes and patterns can be tied to identity as much as a representational work could be. This is just one instance where Pindell rejects conventions to make artwork that includes lived experience; she demonstrates that one's artwork does not need to be representational to be legible within a politics of identity.

Experimenting with Form to Create a New Formalist Language: Pindell's Practice

Through her formal innovation and experimentation, which deturns aspects of 20th century Greenbergian Formalism, Pindell is creating the conditions of possibility for a *new* language of Formalism. Some of Pindell's works that appear purely Formalist in aesthetic, like *Carnival at Ostende* (1977), are manifestations of a series of politically-motivated material and aesthetic decisions. From afar, the large-scale work has a cream surface, scattered with innumerable speckles of colour. When looking at the painting closer, one can see that the speckles are made up of layers of sprinkled glitter and hole-punched chads. The chads, a signature element of Pindell's work, are brown, blue, yellow, purple, green, pink, and red. Several look as if they have been painted with stripes, and there are fragments of text on a few of the circles. Although the composition is intentional, Pindell's thick layering of paint, paper, and glitter makes the canvas look as if it is the result of a travelling fair; remnants of what could be confetti, bubblegum, or flyers left behind on the canvas with no organizing principle. Beneath the abstract composition, however, faint lines (perhaps constructed with string, or else an illusion created by the layering of paint) are barely visible, but resemble a grid.[20]

[19] Howardena Pindell qtd. in Charles Gaines, "Howardena Pindell: Negotiating Abstraction," in *What Remains To Be Seen*, edited by Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2018), 143.

[20] Within the traditions of Art History, the grid has been used by different artists who are attached to specific movements, such as Minimalism, which was one of the dominant schools at this time. The grid is an organizational tool which signifies a predetermined order. In her foundational 1979 essay, "Grids," art historian Rosalind Krauss argues that the grid is emblematic of Modern art, and that it "declares the space of art to be at once autonomous and autotelic" (52).

The painting reflects a shift which occurred in Pindell's work during her time at the MoMA, to a "machinelike, process-based work mode," one which "evad[es] immediate legibility," – "her stencil making is controlled and meditative, the resulting painting is improvisatory."[21] Her use of the circle and the grid in one composition, seen here and across four decades of work, grew out of her intense interest in process and form. This processional method, which emphasizes the labour of painting, reveals the artist's hand in the creation of the work. Thus, while Pindell's abstract canvas obviously privileges formal innovation and exploration, it does not share the same concealment of the artist's hand as many Formalist works of the time aim to.[22] As Cassel Oliver describes, this "resistance to the hand's effacement perhaps can be read as a metaphor for the denial of selfhood as a woman and especially a woman of color."[23] Further, the shifting between shapes seen in the work "undermine[s] the rigidity and formalism of minimalism," in turn "challenging the underlying social structures and demands of the art world."[24] Pindell was establishing her seriousness as an artist through her engagements with Formalist conventions and the Minimalist grid; however, she was refusing to conform to the idea that Formalism results in apolitical art. The painting is a representation of how Pindell's work pushes against the boundaries of form, testing the flexibility of these boundaries and their ability to communicate new meanings.[25] Through her inclusion of found objects, snippets of text, feminine-coded materials like glitter, and the visibility of her hand in the work, Pindell is able to make statements about the material conditions of her life, something not normally seen as being communicated through formal elements.

Another painting that is exemplary of Pindell's practice is *Memory: Past* (1980-81), which consists of horizontal strips of cut and sewn canvas that were painted a faded hue of purple, layered with multi-coloured chads and various paper collage, mainly green in colour, strewn across the surface. Even more

[21] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 91.
[22] Cassel Oliver, "The Tao of Abstraction," 113.
[23] Cassel Oliver, 113.
[24] Cassel Oliver, 113.
[25] Cassel Oliver, 113.

than *Carnival at Ostende*, this composition is so rich in layers and textures that a viewer may be tempted to reach out and touch the canvas. The painting is representative of Pindell's favoring of haptic and kinetic experiences, her reconsideration of the primacy of the visual.[26] As demonstrated through both works, by the mid-1970s Pindell's process was mainly one of construction, destruction, and reconstruction. Another of her many explorations with form, she stopped using stretched canvases and began using large, irregularly shaped unstretched canvas, or cutting strips of canvas which were sewn back together. She then used these surfaces as a base for several layers of paint and other materials, such as paper chads, glitter, talcum powder, postcards, perfume, and other found objects.[27] This process was performative. In taking on "preconceived notions of her proper place in the contemporary art world," by remixing elements from existing styles to create a new visual language, Pindell also rejected the idea that her work as a Black woman must be a testimonial to oppression and that formalist work cannot be subjective and political.[28] Through a critical, deconstructive engagement with conventional styles, Pindell's work represents what bell hooks calls an oppositional gaze. In describing this sort of gaze, hooks asserts that "by courageously looking, [Black women] defiantly declared: 'not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.' Even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that contain it, opens up the possibility of agency."[29] As described by hooks above, the oppositional gaze is a deconstructive, and reconstructive, process. Not only does Pindell also emphasize the process (or labour) of making work, but her manipulation of preexisting forms, ideas, and movements can also be categorized as oppositional. This opposition is what creates space for new possibilities to be explored through the work.

[26] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 96.
[27] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 95.
[28] Cassel Oliver, 131.
[29] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectator," *in black looks: race and representation* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 116.

Pindell's emphasis on process allows her to challenge "the optical aspects of painting," stressing the labour that goes into creating a painting, and undermining the illusion of transparency and readability that would come with a more figurative or representational work.[30] Through her refusal of representational modes and focus on tacticity and feeling, Pindell's cut and sewn canvases "deprivilege the very system of seeing," thus disrupting "our models of how seeing, knowledge, and power operate."[31] In fact, "from her earliest works, [Pindell] refuted a societal faith in seeing or the visual encounter" as unquestioned truth.[32] Pindell resists binary logics and conventional stereotypes through her manipulation of the surface, ultimately presenting "alternative, even illegible, forms of representation and personhood."[33] In her work, she disrupts the expectations tied to her identity through the visual order: she "asks her audience to take her at her word by 'draw[ing] on my experience as I have lived it and not as others wish to perceive my living it as fictionalized in the media and so-called 'history books.'"[34] Although they may be communicated alternatively, and thus obscured by some degree of opacity, Pindell presents the audience with experiences of both joy and pain and asks viewers to take this at face value.

Further, the circles seen throughout Pindell's paintings are an example of how the artist found ways to incorporate her personal experiences into her work without relying on figuration, representation, or narrative content. Pindell once wrote,

> when I was a child, I was with my father in southern Ohio or northern Kentucky, and we went to a root beer stand and they gave us mugs with red circles on the bottom to designate that the glass was to be used by a person of color. I see that as the reason I have

[30] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 94-95.
[31] Beckwith, "Body Optics," 90.
[32] Beckwith, 107.
[33] McMillan, "Introduction," 3.
[34] Howardena Pindell qtd. in Beckwith, "Body Optics," 107.

> been obsessed with the circle, using it in a way that would be positive instead of negative.[35]

Not only does Pindell imbue formal qualities with politics, but she refuses the demand that any expression of subjectivity by a so-called minority artist must be a negative one. The discourses of the 1970s and '80s treated abstraction as universal and thus not concerned with differences such as race and gender, but Pindell's evasion of transparency and insistence on the connections between formal elements and her personal experiences disrupts these discourses.

Communicating the Potentials of Formalism: The Contemporary Language of Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics

Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics provide a method for discussing the critical value of the ways politics can be addressed through non-representational forms, especially in marginalized communities. To reiterate, Getsy and Doyle explain how artists working with Queer Formalism use abstraction to refuse conventional functions of materials, but also to reject the demand often placed on minority artists to address sexuality or race through explicit representation. Getsy expanded on these ideas in his 2015 book *Abstract Bodies*, and again in a 2017 paper called "Queer Relations," where he described how "historically, there has been many times when formal manipulation has been the only vehicle through which queer insubordination could be conveyed."[36] Getsy argues that Queer Formalism encompasses not only art made by queer-identifying artists, or exclusively art that relates to sexuality, but explains that it is "a means for mobilizing formal relations in order to call forth counternarratives, to challenge given taxonomies, to attend to unorthodox intimacies and exchanges, and to subvert 'natural' and ascribed meanings."[37] Queer Formalism is an analytic framework for looking at

[35] Beckwith and Cassel Oliver, "Opening Thoughts," 33.
[36] David Getsy, "Queer Relations," *ASAP Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017), 254-255.
[37] Getsy, "Queer Relations," 255.

how form is "mobilized in relation to content as a way of fostering such queer tactic as subversion, infiltration, refusal, or the declaration of unauthorized allegiances."[38] In defining Radical Formalism, Ruiz asks how form might behave differently if we detach it from the "institutionalized understandings" often associated with it – he sees Formalism as it stands as something of a "dirty word," but suggests this is where the "exciting, yet slippery" potential in the term lies.[39] And, when defining Surface Aesthetics of Surfacism, McMillan actually cites Pindell as an example of "surface play at work," as her practice in abstraction foregrounds the surface and its ability to speak for itself.[40]

As Getsy articulated in 2017, "historically, there has been many times when formal manipulation has been the only vehicle through which queer insubordination could be conveyed… its proponents escaped censure by means of this dissemblance and coding through form."[41] Beyond a means of survival, Queer Formalism and related theories allows us to consider the historical demand that queer artists and artists of colour produce "art that transmits information rather than pushing aesthetic boundaries."[42] This demand has also, until recently, silenced an *analysis* of these artists' aesthetic innovations or aims. With new language, however, it can be understood that, "rather than positioned as binaries, form and content should instead be understood in dialectic tension in that they are each of value only insofar as they exist in service of one another."[43] Form, the proponents of Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surfacism suggest, can be utilized as "a seductive decoy;" [a strategy that makes] "difference a little *less* knowable, visible, and digestible."[44]According to the editors of ASAP journal's issue on Queer Formalism, "the world-making ethos of contemporary queer studies is vulnerable to critique, because when it is perceived as unmoored from history it appears idealistic and facile."[45] Thus, mooring Queer

[38] Getsy, "Queer Relations," 255.
[39] Ruiz, "Radical Formalism," 233.
[40] McMillan, "Introduction," 6.
[41] Getsy, "Queer Relations," 254-255.
[42] Amin, Musser and Perez, "Queer Form," 227.
[43] Ruiz, "Radical formalism," 236.
[44] Ruiz, 238; Amin, Musser, and Perez, 235.
[45] Amin, Musser, and Perez, 229.

Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics to a longer history through Pindell's work serves as a way to ground and contextualize the practices they encompass, which, importantly, "wrest representation from the heterosexist and racist mishandling of history."[46] Conversely, the editors of the catalogue for *What Remain To Be Seen* propose that their project asks how to "approach a fuller understanding of Pindell's formal innovations from our current vantage point? And most importantly: how do those formal innovations extend into a mode of rethinking the social and political context of their making?"[47] The development of contemporary language such as Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics—which all recognize how aesthetic form can be a tool in the subversion of art historical and art world conventions and act as an "analytic for considering how artists circumnavigate corporal limitation and resist over determined interpretations of their work"—may help in answering any parts of these questions as yet to be answered.[48]

Again, one reason the discussion of Pindell's work as a unique and generative amalgamation of political and aesthetic qualities has been delayed may be due to a lack of language, especially as she was working during a time when Formalism meant a rejection of narrative, representational content, and differences of identity. Pindell rejected this definition of Formalism, "gradually peel[ing] away the layers of obfuscation with which assimilation and acculturation [had] disguised her multi-ethnic background," and identity as a woman artist.[49] Her cut and sewn canvases, innovations in geometric abstraction, and the way she connects these aesthetic properties to her identity demonstrate how her art is non-representational, as well as political. The contemporary language of Queer Formalism, Radical Formalism, and Surface Aesthetics provide scholars with the opportunity to consider Pindell's work through a contemporary lens, valuing both her formal innovations and her activism. After looking at

[46] Amin, Musser, and Perez, 231.
[47] Beckwith and Cassel Oliver, "Opening Thoughts," 27.
[48] McMillan, "Introduction," 12.
[49] Stokes Sims, "Synthesis and Integration," 66.

Pindell's work, we can see how her practice anticipates and gets to the heart of what is so important about the development of this new language, thus grounding it in a longer history of queer or racialized artists working against the grain.

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Abolitionist Imagination

Re-Mapping Canada's East Coast Prisons

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Helen would also like to acknowledge that the construction of prisons and expansion of policing is the modern-day continuation of colonial dispossession and that with this acknowledgement there must be a concrete commitment to dismantling colonial institutions

In this series of artworks, I obtain pictures of prisons from Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and use a variety of artistic methods to re-imagine them. The project is a practice of abolitionist imagination and a disruption of the carceral landscape. I ask myself, as I sit with these pictures and wrestle with the crushing weight of testimonies from inside these institutions: What can I do to cleave open the veneer of law and order and expose the cruelty beneath? How can I (artistically) dismantle these mechanisms of carnage and forge them into something different? What life-sustaining structures can we build instead of prisons? Creating an abolitionist future requires nurturing intimacy as a form of rebellion against state violence. Radical care, rooted in Indigenous knowledge and Black feminisms, is a crucial part of abolitionist feminist praxis (Simpson, 2017; Whynacht, 2021; Kaba, 2021; Maynard & Simpson, 2022; Haymarket Books, 2022; Jones, 2022). I am inspired by Robyn Maynard's (2022) letter to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in *Rehearsals for Living*, where she imagines walking through Toronto and mapping "some of the places where our collective apocalypses are being drawn up" (p.11). She says:

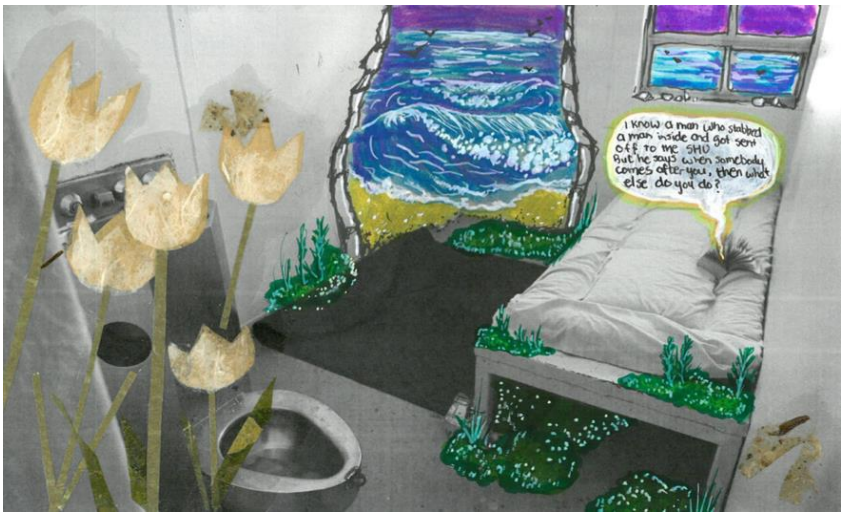
> ...It is hard to believe that this— THIS— is what is to show for the accumulated catastrophes of our past-presents, our ancestors' lives and bodies and dreams of otherwise being funnelled—accumulated—toward these undifferentiated grey masses of rock, brick, steel and glass filled with undifferentiated living (just barely) pink-grey masses of human-shaped greed... That should

> we make it through this, our great-grandkids will have to look at pictures of this unremarkable landscape, these boring and unimaginative tributes to stolen wealth and stolen lives, to make sense of the who, why, and where of it all. (p.16)

When I read this paragraph, I wanted to scream from how deeply I felt it. I also wanted to map out these sites around me and rip them apart. When you have read and heard and watched and mourned and cried over all of these tales of catastrophe, how can you not burn with rage when you come face to face with the architects of the apocalypse? In the context of my project, prisons are more explicit sites of violence. I still want to partake in this re-mapping exercise, because I think it is worth contesting the belief that prisons are natural, inevitable features of our society. This is an attempt to look *closely* at sites of carceral violence, especially when so often we have been told to look away from what happens behind their walls. It is an attempt to bring to light what has been branded unfathomable, unspeakable, and undesirable, while insisting upon its capacity for transformation.

The Cracks in the Walls

[1][2]Springhill Institution



I know a man who stabbed a man inside and got sent off to the SHU
But he says when somebody comes after you then what else do you do?
-El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 2022, p.136

[1] Source: https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/
Description: A typical cell in the segregation unit at Springhill Institution. The black and white image depicts a cot with an open book, a toilet with a washbasin, a window, pale walls, and a spotty floor with a thin mat.
[2] Source: See 1a
Description: Image 1a after it has been altered artistically by the author. A hole has been drawn on the prison walls. Outside the cell, there is a glimpse of a yellow sandy beach, blue and green waves, and a stretch of purple sky. Silhouettes of sea birds can be seen amongst the waves. Inside the cell, there are pen drawings of seashells on the cell windowsill. Green vegetation with white highlights is drawn on the cell floor and the cot. In the corner of the image, where the toilet is, beige and green paper cut-outs in the shape of tulips and butterflies are glued onto the page. A speech bubble with yellow highlighted outlines hovers over the pages of the open book, depicting an excerpt from *Abolitionist Intimacies* (Jones, 2022): "I know a man who stabbed a man inside and got sent off to the SHU/But he says when somebody comes after you, then what else do you do? (p. 136)"

It starts with a picture of a segregation unit inside Springhill Institution. This photo, like many others in this project, is taken from a photo essay by the Senate Committee on Human Rights (2018). The cell is small and empty, with a toilet, a bed, and an open book on the sheets. El Jones (2022) writes that prisoners told her they have to clean up the overflowing toilets with their bare hands. Someone said that they were once in a segregation cell barricaded with iron plates, it was where Ashley Smith's brother was when he heard about her death.

Segregation units are well known for inflicting trauma and exacerbating mental health issues (Senate of Canada, 2018). In 2007, guards watched as nineteen-year-old Ashley Smith choked herself to death in her segregation cell (Kilty, 2014). I do not think people who have never been confined understand the brutality of carceral isolation. My own frame of reference came from when I was held for a week in a hospital psychiatric unit at eighteen. I was struggling with suicidal ideation and an undiagnosed trauma disorder. I was considered codependent, emotionally dysregulated, and a risk to myself and others. Phone calls, visits, my own clothing, translation services for my family, were some of the things that were withheld from me during my stint in the psych ward. Even as I write this, years later, my hands shake and fear constricts my lungs. When I encountered the notion of prison abolition, I realized that I did not need to deny the gnawing feeling in the back of my mind whenever I thought of paper-thin sheets and brain-numbing boredom; I did not have to keep repeating the words I had been made to believe, which is that isolation would keep me safe (where my mental condition cannot infect those around me) and a stripped-bare room is where I would find healing (where I can bypass the years-long waitlist and access the resources that I had been deprived of, at the cost of my autonomy).

I know that there is no clean equivalence between psych wards and prison cells, but I cannot deny the chilly recognition that rises in me when I read about people taking their own lives in segregation units. When your body and your mind are under the total control and mercy of others, you

start understanding powerlessness and worthlessness in a raw and real way. When abolitionists say that segregation is not path to healing, I feel that statement in my bones.

I pick up my marker and smash the pale walls apart. The cell gives way to an ocean. I think of how many times someone would lie in the little cot, dreaming of sea birds and crashing waves. How many of us travelled to Canada by the sea? How many of us think of being buried in it and letting the currents take us home? The plants that crawl into the cell and the tulips that grow out of the toilet bring whispers of freedom. Butterflies wander in, carrying thoughts of a warmer place.

Jones' (2022) poem "There will Never be Justice" is about seeing prisons for what they are. Prisons contain people from communities hyper-surveilled and under-funded; they serve as a remedy for systemic neglect, a place for the men who stabbed another man because they thought they had to fight for their lives. Angela Davis (2003) notes that the prison "relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism" (p. 6). Robin Kelley (KODX Seattle, 2017), Mariame Kaba, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (The Graduate Center, 2020) indicate that the organized abandonment of neoliberal austerity is accompanied by the organized violence of carceral interventions.

Abolitionists recognize that while we are all capable of committing harm, our social positions determine whether we are regarded as deserving of rehabilitation (Davis, 2003). Critiquing the racist, classist, and sanist constructions of criminality does not mean abolitionists naively assume all incarcerated people are non-violent and virtuous. In Ardath Whynacht's (2021) account of domestic homicide, she recounts sitting with men who have killed their families. Her experiences working with the victims and perpetrators of intimate violence has led her towards, not away from, abolitionism. She confronts the reality that some incarcerated people *have* committed egregious harm, and argues that *in*

spite of this, police and prisons are not the answer. Abolition is more than feel-good stories of healing and exoneration. It is sitting with the complexity and *humanity* of those that are criminalized, and *still* rejecting incarceration as the solution. Jones (2022) says, "I don't think you have to not have done it for justice to be miscarried" (p.138). Abolitionists oppose prisons not on the basis of everyone inside being innocent, but rather because we believe that prisons do not address harm.

Springhill Institution

[3]

[4]

Love is a contraband in Hell, cause love is an acid that eats away bars. But you, me, and tomorrow hold hands and make vows that struggle will multiply. The hacksaw has two blades. The shotgun has two barrels. We are pregnant with freedom. We are a conspiracy.

-Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography*, 1999, p.130

[3] Source: https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/
Description: A black and white photo of a pay phone and a bench behind rusty iron bars. This is a cell where prisoners are held as they make phone calls at Springhill Institution.

[4] Source: See 2a
Description: Image 2a after it has been altered artistically by the author. Pen drawings of vines resembling grape or ivy twine around the phone and stretch across the cell walls. In a similar manner, cracks are drawn on the bench with little mushrooms and grass emerging from the gaps. In the left corner, pink and green paper cut-outs are arranged in the shape of peonies and glued onto the page. The cell bars that take up the forefront of the image are shown to be broken, as if being corroded by acid. In the space between the decaying bars, a pink and blue speech bubble demonstrates a quote from Assata: An Autobiography (Shakur, 1999): "Love is a contraband in Hell, cause love is an acid that eats away bars" (p. 130).

I imagine sitting in the cramped, rusty cell and picking up the phone, knowing that companies like Bell are gouging every cent from my precious minutes with my loved one s (Jones, 2022). This is one of the only ways prisoners make contact with the outside world, the Senate document tells me (Senate of Canada, 2018). I think about how intimacy is regulated and policed in carceral settings, how El Jones (2022) says she held the hand of someone who was crying and the guard gave him a warning. When Springhill goes on lockdown, there are no calls or visits. Families travelled all the way to the prison only to be turned away because a lockdown happened (Jones, 2022).

In Angela P. Harris's (2011) article on gender violence in a prison nation, she notes that the only language of intimacy men are granted behind bars is violence, and that is the dialect so many of them pass onto their kin. Whynacht (2021) reminds us that domestic homicide is a disfigured language of love, told through possession and coercion – the very same refrains infused into these prison walls. In this sense, the cruelty of carceral institutions mirrors the tactics of an abuser. The violence prisons claim to address only becomes systematically applied, its effects lingering in our communities.

I wonder how easy it would be to pry open the locks and bend the bars. I think about the little line of hope that makes its way out from the phone, like a stubborn vine breaking through the frost. I think of how prisons crush intimacy like a summer storm tearing into the delicate petals of peonies. But in spite of it all, abolitionist intimacies still bloom. Assata Shakur (1999) says: "Love is a contraband in Hell, cause love is an acid that eats away bars" (p.130). Desmond Cole comments to Jones (2022) that the work they do is about struggling every day, religiously, to build a heaven from hell. Mariame Kaba (2021) tells us that hope is not an emotion, it is a discipline. Hope as a discipline is about "believing in spite of the evidence and watching the evidence change" (p.60).

It takes a religious commitment to choose hope, choose vulnerability, choose trust, and choose intimacy in spite of all the violence and alienation. Abolitionists bear witness to all the terrible things

human beings are capable of, yet we insist that transformation is possible, both individually and socially. Davis (2003) and Kaba (2021) remind us that much like the movement to abolish slavery, prison abolition is a struggle beyond our lifetimes. I think it must be like planting seeds not knowing when they will sprout, but you still gently place each one in its pocket of soil like a prayer. We build intimacy with those on the inside, even when they have committed harm, because we refuse to accept the logic of disposability. We practise an insurgent love that demands accountability and justice from our relations (Whynacht, 2021). We learn the language of love as resistance. And isn't that the essence of any anti-oppressive struggle? I draw dandelions that emerge from cracks in that bench. If they grind their heel into one, a thousand more will grow. May we love abundantly, may we have so much love they can never stamp out the coming of spring.

The Fire

Burnside Jail/ Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility

 [5]

 [6]

But if you go get the ropes
I'll bring the bulldozer
Because what we learned from our history Is how quick their idols shatter
And they taught us how to wipe away
And end the day in laughter
Like your grandmother's grandmother whispered
Soon, dear, it will be over

-El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 2022, p.x

[5] Source: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/covid-19-outbreak-announced-at-burnside-jail-cases-rise-at-women-s-prison-1.6301532
Description: The black and white image depicts a clean, empty hallway inside Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility (also known as Burnside Jail). On the right side of the hallway is a banister that presumably overlooks the lower floors, on the left side there is a row of unoccupied cells with heavy doors. Through the open doors, it seems that each cell is equipped with a toilet and a washbasin.

[6] Source: See 3a
Description: In the altered image, red and yellow flames curl out of the cells. Black marker lines on the cell doors make them appear broken and shattered. The hallway is painted black, with a chasm of red and yellow in the middle, as if the floor has been split open and fire is burning underneath. The background of the image has also been painted black, with splatters of white dots resembling embers and constellations.

The original photo was taken in Burnside. I found it in a CBC news article titled "COVID-19 outbreak announced at Burnside jail, cases rise at women's prison" (Ryan, 2021). Citing Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Maynard (2022) reminds us of how vulnerabilities compound in "forgotten places". Inmates do not have control over their interactions. COVID exposures become an inevitable part of their sentences (Ryan, 2021). I think of how many elders are at risk for complications, how frequently lockdowns occur, and how long people have gone without seeing their loved ones. #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth was a demand that emerged from New York City jails during the COVID-19 pandemic (Free Them All for Public Health, n.d.). Organizers drew attention to the negative health outcomes for incarcerated people and their loved ones. They argue that this will become exacerbated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The high infectious rates in prisons pose a significant public health risk. The campaign fought for vulnerable populations to be released from jails and provided with adequate housing and healthcare. #FreeThemAll4PublicHealth was part of a broader call for NYC to stop the expansion of prisons and police forces. The pandemic radically transformed our lives, giving many a peek into what confinement and isolation can feel like. It also laid bare all the ways certain groups are simultaneously deemed expendable in the face of illness and essential for the machinery of racial capitalism (Simpson & Maynard, 2022). It gifted us a chance to question "business as usual" and demand something better.

Before I paint a future without prisons, I want to acknowledge the transformation process. I do not want my creations to read as calls for "feminist" or "humane" prisons. I do not want to build luxury housing or corporate offices on top of these sites, replacing one form of exploitation with another. Jones (2022) describes the difference between "life that is reclaimed from death" and "the life that feeds itself by ignoring death" (p.192). We build something beautiful in defiance of the suffering inflicted upon our communities, not because we desperately want to bury these sites of destruction and move on.

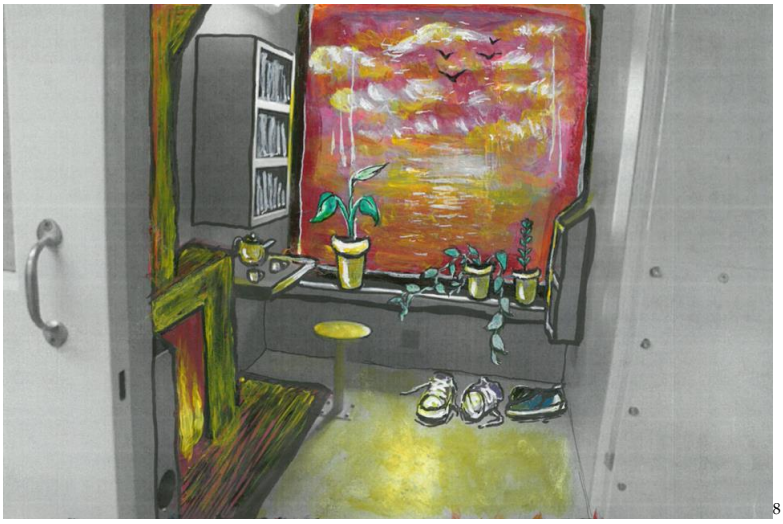
Locks are torn from the doors, the ground splits open like a wound. Free them all, so that we can set fire to this place and grow something from the wreckage. The doors are open. The windows are broken. The ceiling has fallen. The crisp night air bursts in, and the stars have never looked so bright. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) teaches us that in Nishnaabeg thought, constellations are doorways into other worlds. They bear witness to the past, present, and future. They map fugitive flights out of settler colonialism. Simpson and Maynard (2022) poignantly assert that not all world-endings are undesirable. For so many, the apocalypse has already occurred. We demand the end of *this* world, in affirmation of all the other worlds that have been destroyed by colonialism and racial capitalism.

Kaba (2021) calls abolition a "jailbreak of imagination" (p. 52), where we "imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society" (Davis, 2003, p. 46). Gilmore (2019, as cited by Davis et al., 2022) proclaims: "Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions" (p. 61). So, if you pour the gasoline, I will strike the match. We can watch the embers rise and become twinkling stars. This destruction is an act of love, a dream of freedom, and a promise of rebirth.

The Things We Reach For

Burnside Jail/ Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility

 [7]

 [8]

[7] Source: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/central-nova-scotia-correctional-facility-heating-problem-1.4980227 https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/government/province-house/the-prisoners-at-the-burnside-jail-are-engaged-in-a-non-violent-protest-here-is-their-statement/ https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/former-burnside-inmate-jail-conditions-1.4801281
Description: A black and white photo of an empty cell at Burnside Jail/Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility. The room contains a toilet with a washbasin, simple shelves mounted on the wall, a desk that is attached to the wall, a stool nailed to the floor, a long and narrow window, and platforms by the window where the prisoners presumably sleep.

[8] Source: see 4a
Description: An altered version of image 4a which depicts a reimagined space. Instead of a narrow slit, marker lines indicate that the window now takes up the whole wall. Painted shapes reveal an outside scene of pink and yellow sky with white clouds, and a flock of birds. On the windowsill, a monstera, a pothos, and an olive tree sit in yellow pots. The shelf on the wall is filled with books. A tea kettle and two cups are placed on the table. Two pairs of shoes lay casually on the floor. A fireplace with bright flames takes the place of the toilet. The room is bathed in warm, golden light.

Here is another photo from Burnside, which appears in a number of news articles. One of them tells me that during the winter, Burnside Jail is so cold that you cannot sleep (Mulligan, 2019). Another one details the lack of adequate reproductive care, phone access, and clean air (Cowley, 2018). On Prison Justice Day, the inmates at Burnside went on strike demanding better medical care, library access, unlimited visits, healthier foods, etc. (Jones, 2018). They cited Nelson Mandela, George Jackson, the Black August strikes in America, etc., emphasizing their strike's relationship to prisoner struggles around the world. The strike went on for twenty days, through worsening conditions and continuous lockdowns (Bousquet, 2018). A prisoner died shortly afterwards. This event generated national attention, with protestors coming right next to the jail to show their solidarity, so close that those inside could hear them.

I put books and plants and a fireplace in this room. I want to instill warmth into it so that no one would ever be too cold during the winter. I try to portray intimacy that has been stifled by incarceration: Two pairs of shoes casually laid out on the floor, a pot of tea to share, a big window for the sun, a family of birds in the sky... I feel a bit like an interior designer, trying to make a home out of what had been a cell. How do I get the proportions right? Where does the nailed-down stool go? Is this a fire hazard? Oh well, this is an exercise in imagination. Just remember, the fire that warms the hearth comes from the flames that tore down the prison. This is not a cell that looks like a home, this is a cell that has been destroyed so that it can become a home.

Jones (2022) talks about doing writing workshops with women in prisons. She says that guards reprimanded her for "illegal counselling" because she expressed sympathy when one of the women told her that she broke up with her girlfriend. Things as simple as a hug, a touch on the hand, a greeting, or a promise for later contact were all policy violations. She was eventually not permitted to return to Nova.

This is the same prison where Camille Strickland-Murphy took her own life, where Veronica Park died from negligence, where Ashley Smith was held in administrative segregation, and where a guard was found guilty of raping women in custody (Hounsell, 2015; Luck, 2016; Durling, 2021; Sponagle, 2022).

I think about that bone-deep chill you get when you have gone too long without human contact, and you start to wonder whether or not you are real. My heart is shattering all over again from how prisons reduce you to a sum of body parts, carve off the things that make you feel human, and make them into a luxury you cannot afford. I think about what it means when the only touch you receive is when you are pricked by the needle, scraped raw by the shackles, violated during the strip search, or shoved against the cold concrete. How long does it take before hurt becomes the only way you know how to speak to yourself and to make yourself real?

[9]

Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019, *Conviction*, 20:23-20:46

[9] Source: Screencaps taken by author from *Conviction* [Video] https://gem.cbc.ca/media/conviction/s01e01
Description: A series of four black and white captures from the documentary *Conviction* (Ackerman, MacInnes, & Pahlke, 2019). In the upper left picture, a woman with a ponytail and dressed in prison clothing can be seen crouching on her hands and knees, her right arm stretched out. The subtitles read: "[A] couple times I tried to touch but you can't quite touch it". The upper right picture shows her hand and forearm, with floral patterned tattoos, pushed beneath a small gap under a door. It is only wide enough to fit her fingers. In the lower left picture, her hand is holding a small film camera to the gap, attempting to capture a footage of the grass outside. There are line tattoos of flowers and stars on her forearm. The subtitles say: "I can see it, I can see it. Now I can see the grass". The lower right picture shows the prison courtyard, with high concrete walls, an overhead net, and surveillance cameras. There is snow on the ground. In the corner of the yard, in front of a heavy metal door, is the small figure of the woman on her hands and knees looking through the crack. The subtitles read: "It's so close but so far away".

The documentary *Conviction* (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019) is produced in collaboration with women in Burnside and Nova. I often think about this scene, where Laura, one of the inmates, says that she would crouch by the door and peek at the grass outside. There is a tiny, tiny gap. A slice of nature thinner than an exhale. The blades of grass are visible, but she cannot quite reach it. The scene makes me recall how when I was hospitalized, I would sit by the window all day, watching the grey skies and the snowy mountains. They told me I was not allowed to sit on the windowsill, because I was a risk to myself and I could get hurt by falling down. I think about how I escaped the sterile room with its reinforced windows, because I did not have to run with generations worth of wounds from colonial dispossession. Laura talks about her father being a survivor of the Residential Schools, how being surrounded by violence means you start to internalize it (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019). It becomes how you navigate conflicts and make sense of the world.

Indigenous abolitionists such as Vicki Chartrand (2019) observe that the cruel aspiration of colonial dispossession is exemplified in institutions of segregation and assimilation. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) tells us: "The 'social ills' in our communities Canadians so love to talk about are simply manifestations of the hurt and trauma from the ongoing violence of dispossession" (p.42). Jones (2022) writes: "I have a hard time seeing justice as a reserve without a well/But then we bring its children a smudge kit in their cell" (p.137). Grounded knowledge and cultural practices are destroyed, as Indigenous bodies are literally and figuratively severed from the land. Grass, intimacy, land, justice are locked behind iron gates- things to reach for, but not quite allowed to touch.

Decay, Rebirth

Nova Institution for Women

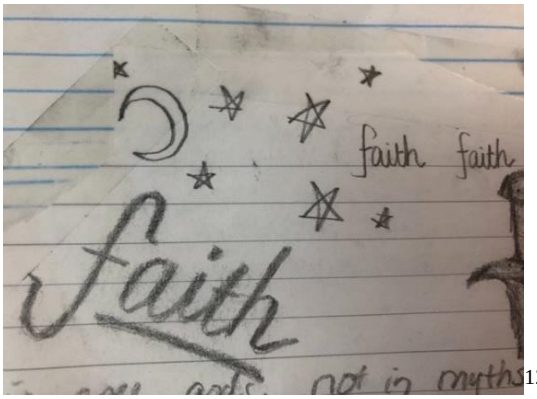
[10]

[11]

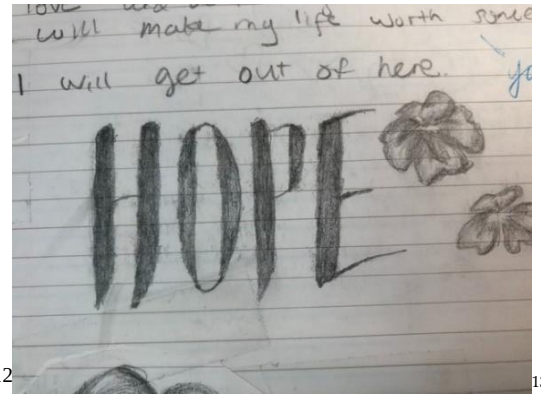
[10] Source: https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/
Description: A black and white photo of a cell at Nova Institution for Women. Through a door that is ajar, the viewer can see into a room with a bare mattress, a toilet, and cinderblock walls. On the wall, the resident of the room has painted the words "faith", "hope", and "love".

[11] Source: See 6a
Description: 6a after it has been artistically altered by the author. On the doorframe, a tiny ladybug is crawling up green and white shapes that resemble moss and fungi. Inside the cell, the toilet is covered in similar mossy cracks, with lupins sprouting out of the bowl. The bedframe is transformed with black and white marker into a raised garden bed with strawberry plants in it. The cinderblock wall is broken, and through the holes, there are peeks of trees, grass, and a blue and purple sky. What remains of the wall is covered with vibrant graffiti. The words "faith", "hope", "love" are now in colour and surrounded by various phrases and patterns: "hope is a discipline", "abolition democracy", a rainbow, green leaves, a yellow bird… A large drawing of two hands reaching for each other covers the wall below, wrapped in pink, orange, and green. Underneath, the words "free them all" and "ACAB" are visible, along with blue and pink patterns of lavender plants.

Someone had written a message on her wall: "Faith, hope, love." I think about how I sat in my hospital room and wrote "hope" again and again in my journal, reciting these silly little words and clichés I never thought twice about before being hospitalised. In that moment, even the most mundane things held so much weight. Everything was a ritual and a prayer. You reached for every ounce of your conviction to tell yourself that you will make it out of there. You hold onto silly little words like they are the most precious thing in the world, because in that moment, they were the only tethers you had. In my mind's eye, I can see the woman standing on her bed, painting the words onto the cinderblocks. Was she alone, or were there people with her? Who offered her the paint and the brush? Did she paint it after a particularly bad day, or did she paint it on a good day to remind herself that things are capable of being better? What does she think about when she looks at it?



[12]



[13]

Excerpts from my journal, 2018

[12] "Faith"
Source: Author
Description: A snipping of a notebook page, where the word "faith" is written with pencil in bold, cursive letters and underlined. The word is repeated several times in a smaller font. There are also pencil doodles of a crescent moon and some stars.

[13] "Hope"
Source: Author
Description: Another snipping of a notebook page, with the word "hope" written in large and bold letters. Beside it, there are pencil doodles of flowers. In the line above, the sentences "I will get out of here" and "I will make my life worth something" are visible.

Laura does one last smudge with her friend before she gets released (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019). When she is outside, she yanks up a handful of withered grass and crumples them between her fingers. She laughs, the sound does not echo in the open space, there are no prison walls to ricochet off of. Her smile is radiant in the sun. There is a chorus of knocks from the prison windows, overlapping thuds scattering like summer rain on the pavement. The women inside always knock when one of them gets released. It is like a ritual, or a blessing. A few hours later, Laura overdoses. She still struggles with opiate use, and she eventually ends up back in prison (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019). This happens again and again in *Conviction*. Women walk to their freedom full of hope and determination, but what awaits them on the outside is precarity, lack of shelter, toxic relationships, inaccessible addiction treatments, etc. Hope and determination were not enough to keep them out of prison.

When you first taste freedom again, you swear up and down you will never take it for granted. You promise yourself that you will do everything to make your life count. I tried very hard to make myself believe that being free of a hospital room meant being free from mental illness. Despite this, I still sat in an emergency room two years later because I could not find help anywhere else. The doctor prescribed me sleeping pills and sent me off, jokingly saying: "Don't take all of it at once." When I was outside, I crouched down in the snow and screamed. It was not enough. Vowing to be better was not enough.

I think about the aching distance between the prison and the garden. Laura can finally reach for the grass she yearns for, yet she still ends up stuck inside a cell. Jones' (2022) friend Randy finally gets released after his wrongful incarceration. He spends his time out in the sun, mowing his lawn, but the monitoring anklet he wears still chafes. I think about all the people I know and love who make their way

in and out of crisis situations and psychiatric institutions. A garden cannot thrive if the soil remains depleted. Leaving prison is "still not freedom" (Jones 2022, p.187), because the world we live in is not yet free of precarity, organised abandonment, and carceral institutions.

I keep the words "faith, hope, love" on the wall, because I know these words live on a continuum. Simpson (2017) says: " We first have to survive in order to escape. And we first have to escape (enough) before we can mobilize" (p.118). I keep the words because they tell a story of how we survived. They remind us of how prisons left people fighting for their right to hugs, warmth, and their own clothes; how they built fences with barbed wires, but it could not keep out the voices of solidarity from outside. We kept reaching, even when steel-toed boots threatened to crush our fingers. We nurtured abolitionist intimacies to survive and revolt, and we will use it to thrive. The new vision shows that prison walls have crumbled from a thousand little knocks. A thousand prayers for freedom carried in the "tap tap tap" of knuckles on cinderblocks. The words "faith, hope, love" are no longer the only thing on the wall, they are accompanied by a cacophony of colours and slogans. Fungi and moss dig into the cracks. Lupins sprout from the toilet. Strawberries take root in the decomposing bed frame. When you look at the picture, I want you to think of children's laughter, the first day of spring, and the gentle sounds of people cooking in the kitchen. I want you to imagine how we can thrive.

East Coast Forensic Hospital

[14]

[15]

The path to abolition goes through every aspect of life. There is no body and no form of life that is outside the imperative for abolition today.

-Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Abolition Must be Red" [Youtube], 9:24

[14] Source: https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/news/photo-essay-inside-canadas-east-coast-prisons/
Description : A black and white photo of two residents in plain grey clothing walking in a courtyard at the East Coast Forensic Hospital. Over their head, the sunlight is filtered through a wire net that prevents contraband from being thrown in. The grey walls surrounding them are tall and marked with security cameras. A stone bench is set into the ground beside them.

[15] Source: See 8a
Description: 8a after author's alterations. White pen marks ivy crawling upon the shaded wall. A small bee hovers over silhouettes of wildflowers. A crack runs through the floor of the courtyard, green grass peaking out of the rubbles of the concrete. Next to the bench, a sunflower stands tall. Overhead, the security cameras are redesigned as potted plants and bird houses. The two residents are wearing colourful clothing. One has green dyed hair. They are wearing a green and yellow sweater vest with vertical stripes, a blue long sleeve shirt, yellow/orange pants with a stripe of green, and orange sneakers. The other one wears a red cap, jeans, and a purple jacket with a blue and pink heart on the back. The wall they face has been dismantled, and the wires overhead have disappeared. They are looking out towards a scene of birds, green mountains, blue sky, and white clouds.

In an article for the Halifax Examiner, El Jones (2019) details accounts by patients and staff at the East Coast Forensic Hospital that lay bare the intersection between incarceration and medicalization. Patients and former patients recount issues such as racism, inaccurate diagnoses, inconsistent treatment, arbitrary use of discipline, frequent strip searches, excessive surveillance, ambiguous release dates, solitary confinement, etc.. Four men had filed a habeas corpus application, detailing how they were mistakenly treated as drug traffickers and held extensively in segregation. Three of the four men were Black. Two months after Jones started working on the story, one of the four men, Greg Hiles, killed himself.

I spent years trying to make sense of my time in the psych ward, because how can something that so many authority figures told me was supposed to heal me feel so terrible? What does it mean when "care" is dealt out through surveillance, discipline, and containment? How can a place that people think of as a merciful alternative to prisons still enact the same violence? Anne Laura Stoler (2006, quoted by Jones, 2022) says that intimacy can still be "implicated in the exercise of power" (p.146). White women working in Residential Schools thought of themselves as caregivers for the children; doctors and nurses who turn their patients over to the police see themselves as defenders of public health; social workers who ransack the homes of Black mothers think they are doing their kids a favour (Jones, 2022). When carceral logic infiltrates acts of care, the prison reproduces itself.

Building restorative jails and hospital-cells will not set us free. In *Conviction*, Senator Kim Pate paces around the prison quad and tells the crew that twenty years ago, she may have suggested for the walls to be taken down, or asked for more windows and trees; now, she says it does not matter how nice you make it, a prison is still a prison (Ackerman, Pahlke, & Macinnes, 2019). In her office, Senator Pate pulls out the file for Creating Choices, a proposal for human-rights based, women-centric prisons tabled by the Federal Government in 1990. She says: "Every single one of these initiatives, before they were even finished being built, were becoming more and more prison-like" (1:08:41). Observing the reformist trend

of building "gender-responsive" prisons, Rose Braz (2006) astutely states: "...History teaches us better than anything else: if we build them, we will fill them" (p.87).

The transformation of East Coast Forensic Hospital tears through the façade of carceral intimacy. It follows no blueprint for the newest and shiniest iteration of the prison. Ivy is crawling up the walls. Grass is springing out of the cracks in the concrete. Wildflowers are creeping into every corner. The security cameras are smashed, repurposed as bird houses and flowerpots. A sunflower stands tall where the light cannot be obscured by walls. Two people walk side by side in their own clothes, looking at the green hills beyond the crumbling bricks. Abolitionist intimacies are the fungi that feasts upon the remains of the prison. With every fresh bud, every errant vine, and every creature scuttling into the crevices, this place is being messily, lovingly reclaimed.

I was lucky enough that my family moved into a house with a garden. Whenever I felt too choked up with despair and anxiety, I would go work outside. I let myself dig my fingers into the soil and breathe. It is the most gratifying thing to see how the garden transforms with each summer that passes, how much life this little piece of land can sustain. I cherished the feeling of the sun on my back and the warm breeze on my skin, which have become so rare since we moved from Southwestern China to Canada. My parents tell me about growing up in the 60s, and how every family planted *something* in whatever space they had. It allowed for people to be self-reliant during food shortages. We have always been able to nurture nourishment out of nooks and crannies. Cultivating and sharing our harvest is a practiced motion that feels like coming home.

During this time, I was slowly putting a name to all the ways I felt pain and despair, studying structures of oppression and how my struggles are inextricably connected with others'. More importantly, I was learning to organize, to be anchored in the world and to find hope in the stories of

resistance (like the ones I tell in these artworks about abolition). I understood that transforming a small plot of land is *still* a transformation, even if I cannot magically save an ecosystem.

> But I've seen things come out of prison that I would call miraculous
> Love, forgiveness, resilience, generosity, and thankfulness
> What I know of being human comes from being a prison activist
> To all my people doing time, thank you for making me compassionate
> -El Jones, *Abolitionist Intimacies*, 2022, p. 201

I think of abolition as the process of rejuvenating a monocultural lawn. You turn over the grass or you mulch over it, and you reintroduce an array of native plants. You start to see the land come alive – more worms in the soil, more insects, more birds, more diverse plant life. When the thing that once monopolized the space is allowed to decay and decompose, new life forms blossom in its wake. If we discover beauty that emerges from the most barren soil, observe hope that springs from the bleakest place, and recognize intimacy that persists through the most devastating violence, then we can bring a better world into being.

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