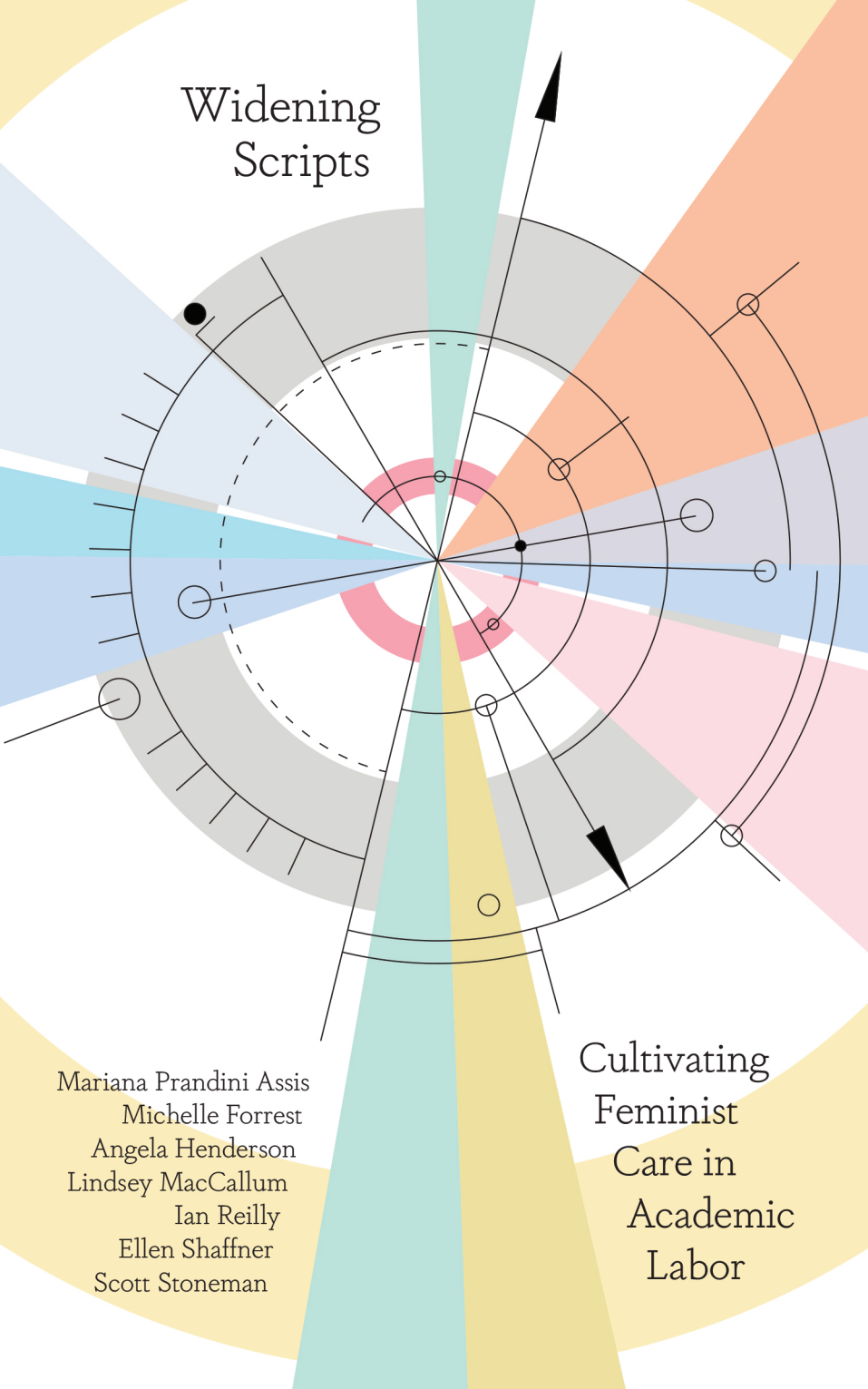


Widening Scripts



Cultivating Feminist Care in Academic Labor

Mariana Prandini Assis
Michelle Forrest
Angela Henderson
Lindsey MacCallum
Ian Reilly
Ellen Shaffner
Scott Stoneman

WIDENING SCRIPTS

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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The BABEL Working Group is a collective and desiring-assemblage of scholar-gypsies with no leaders or followers, no top and no bottom, and only a middle. BABEL roams and stalks the ruins of the post-historical university as a multiplicity, a pack, looking for other roaming packs with which to cohabit and build temporary shelters for intellectual vagabonds. BABEL is an experiment in ephemerality. Find us if you can.

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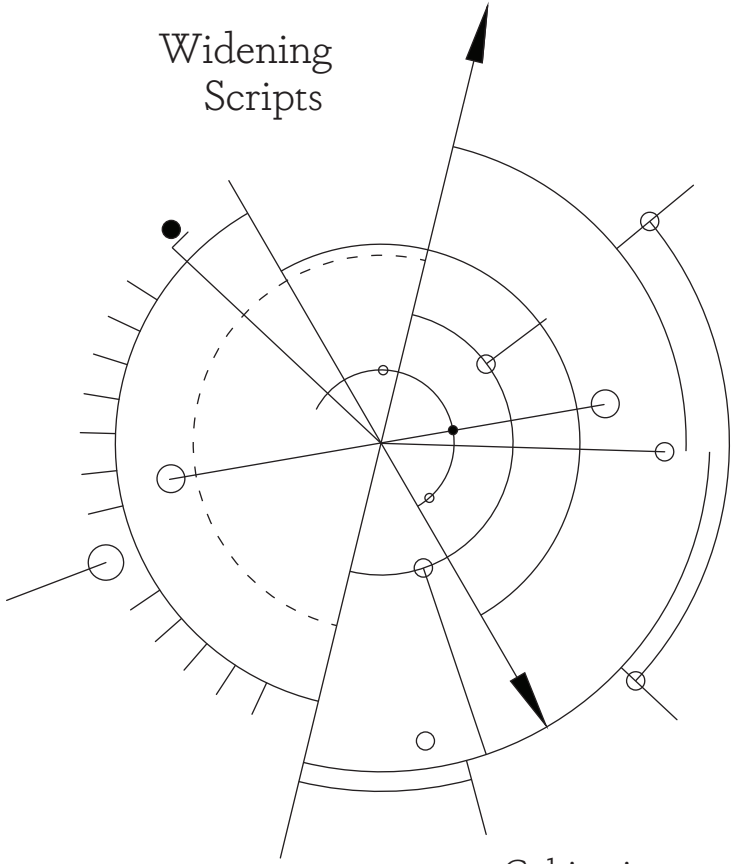
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A killjoy survival kit is about finding a handle at the very moment one seems to lose it, when things seem to fly out of hand; a way of holding on when the possibility you were reaching for seems to be slipping away. Feminist killjoys: even when things fly out of hand, even when we fly out of hand, we need a handle on things.

— Sara Ahmed

To generative failure, the courage to work through it alone and with others, and to feminist killjoys persevering everywhere, when and how we least expect it.

The Sara Ahmed Reading Group: Feminist Collaboration in the Year(s) of COVID-19

The idea of forming a reading group dedicated to the writing of feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed took root in the Fall of 2019 during a series of casual kitchen table conversations between friends. It took very little time for this idea to capture a real sense of excitement and possibility: to escape the well-trodden and formulaic aspects of academic labor in favor of returning to a simpler form of shared reading, discussion, and reflection. Beginning in January 2020, a group comprised mostly of university students and faculty met on campus for weekly two-hour meetings to discuss three of Ahmed's books: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), and *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings were moved online in March 2020 to enable the continuation of the group. None of us would have anticipated that, from a caring and querying space, the reading group would become a site of feminist survival.

 **:::: Ian Reilly :::** @decemberistian · 11 déc. ▼

Dear @SaraNAhmed,
I'm co-organizing a Sara Ahmed reading group for Winter 2020(!) & we've decided to limit the total book count to 4 (this may expand over Spring/Summer). We're hoping to attract (under)graduate students/faculty/staff. Which of your books would you recommend?

🗨 2 ↻ ❤ 2 ↗ ||

 **feministkilljoy**
@SaraNAhmed ▼

En réponse à @decemberistian

Cool! Possibly 1. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2nd Ed) 2. *Queer Phenomenology* 3. *Living a Feminist Life* (which goes back over material presented in *On Being Included, The Promise of Happiness and Willful Subjects*) and 4. *What's The Use?*

[Traduire le Tweet](#)
2:44 AM · 12 déc. 2019 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

2 Retweets **13** J'aime

🗨 ↻ ❤ ↗

 **:::: Ian Reilly :::** @decemberistian · 3h ▼

En réponse à @SaraNAhmed

Thanks so much for taking the time to curate this list. There's been a lot of excitement about this reading group, w/ many of my colleagues either well versed or unfamiliar w/ your work. I'm very much looking forward to it. Warm congratulations on the new book + Happy holidays!

Fig. 1. Twitter exchange with Sara Ahmed, December 2019. Screen capture by Ian Reilly. <https://twitter.com/decemberistian/status/1204767601022377984>.

Ahmed teaches us a great deal about survival in *Living a Feminist Life*. Survival means continuing our investments and even deepening our commitments. Thinking through life, academic labor, and politics with Ahmed throughout this period has proven to be a shared collective commitment, one that continues to this day. So strong was the desire to continue our collaboration through the pandemic that the group not only added

a fourth book to its schedule — *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019) — it also conceived of the current project, this book, which is a collaborative reflection on the many shared and unexpected experiences that punctuated the pandemic year of 2020 (and beyond). What began as a group of people loosely connected through academia meeting to read a feminist thinker as a way to connect and take a break from everyday routine transformed into a small, dedicated community connecting online to read Ahmed as a means to survive the day-to-day isolation and loneliness of academic labor exacerbated by the pandemic. This book is addressed to academics and educators, students and faculty who, like us, continue to grapple with the complexities and challenges of navigating higher education, especially during a time of deepening precarity, uncertainty, and global devastation. In presenting a snapshot of our reading group's activities during the pandemic, we argue that reading groups such as ours — centered on feminist theory, praxis, and politics — constitute generative models for “good academic citizenship” and for the cultivation of an ethic of “collective accountability, challenge, and care.”¹ In what follows, we explore our work as educators performing academic labor during a global pandemic by invoking a powerful question raised by historian Erin Morton: “How can we implement a politics of care — both self-care and communal — that centers shared responsibility and kindness”² in academic work?

To address this question, we engaged in collective reading, writing, dialogue, reflection, and critique, with no fixed goals or objectives but trusting that our process would generate enriching answers or even, and perhaps most exciting, new generative questions. Inspired by Ahmed's own critical reflections on feminist politics and praxis, and more specifically on her creation of a “killjoy survival kit,” the group would later explore the

1 Heather Igloliorte et al., “Killjoys, Academic Citizenship and the Politics of Getting Along,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 38 (September 2017): 192.

2 *Ibid.*, 188.

possibility of fashioning its own adaptation: a collective feminist survival kit in response to the pandemic. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed offers a wide-ranging killjoy survival kit that includes books, things, tools, time, life, permission notes, other killjoys, humor, feelings, and bodies. If, as Ahmed insists, “feminism needs feminists to survive,”³ both her survival kit and our own represent a generative exercise in shoring up shared and individual feminist commitments, energies, and care. Ahmed invokes Audre Lorde⁴ to foreground the necessity of sustaining ourselves so that we can do the difficult work that needs to be done as feminists. We ponder what use our work has beyond helping each of us sustain our own survival as feminists. How do we use this collaborative work as an opportunity to act in the world, when what we describe as survival looks very particular due to our racial, socioeconomic and geographical positions and privileges? The answer we arrived at is care: through our experiences as a feminist reading group during a pandemic, we discovered ourselves enacting a model of care within academia that can be sustaining and in direct opposition to dominant academic practices that are diminishing, competitive, and exploitative.

We would later discover during the collaborative writing for this project that our efforts to rethink and reconceptualize academic labor through an ethics and politics of care were already well afoot. Indeed, the call for a feminist and collective model of slow scholarship capable of cultivating caring academic cultures, processes, and structures has expanded in recent years as a direct response to ever-encroaching logics of acceleration within higher education.⁵ Calls for increased slowness, re-orientation,

3 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 236.

4 Ahmed references Lorde’s essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” frequently in *Living a Feminist Life*. Lorde’s essay is published in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–113.

5 Alison Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1235–59; Carol A. Taylor, “Slow Singularities for Collective Mattering: New Material

collectivization, and care have appeared as implicit and explicit attempts to improve social and material conditions for academic laborers.⁶ The advent of slow scholarship initiatives has inspired many to engage in the subversion of the performative logics of the neoliberal university (contra audits, metrics, and individualization) through so-called devalued forms of scholarly engagement (such as reading and active collaboration).⁷

The sustained revelations and critical appraisals of the deteriorating conditions of academic labor have also provided the impetus for academics of many stripes to carve out alternate routes within, around, and beyond the corporatized university.⁸ The intensity of these efforts has grown to such a degree — particularly among feminist scholars in the academy — that turning a blind eye to institutional excesses is no longer tenable (if it ever was). Feminist push-back against the accelerated academy has taken root with a renewed sense of urgency via co-relational, collective, and affective forms of feminist care.⁹ As Rosalind Gill puts it, intervening in our institutions of higher education is critical at this crucial juncture: “After all, if we as sociologists cannot think about, engage with, and intervene critically against the destructive transformation of our own institutions, then what on earth are we doing? What are we for?”¹⁰ Scholars such as Sara

Feminist Praxis in the Accelerated Academy,” *Irish Educational Studies* 39, no. 2 (2020): 255–72.

- 6 Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 107.
- 7 Brendon Munge et al., “Thinking (Now) Out of Place? Scripting and Performing Collective Dissent Inside the Corporatized University,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 21, no. 5 (2021): 413–23.
- 8 Mary Elizabeth Luka et al., “Scholarship as Cultural Production in the Neoliberal University: Working within and against ‘Deliverables,’” *Studies in Social Justice* 9, no. 2 (2016): 176–96, and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).
- 9 Carol A. Taylor, “Slow Singularities for Collective Mattering: New Material Feminist Praxis in the Accelerated Academy,” *Irish Educational Studies* 39, no. 2 (2020): 256.
- 10 Rosalind Gill, “What Would Les Back Do? If Generosity Could Save Us,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 31, no. 1 (2018): 96.

Ahmed, bell hooks, Les Back, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seiber, Stefan Collini, Cathy N. Davidson, and la paperson (among countless others) have offered rich and detailed analyses of the trappings and failures of the modern-day university, all with an eye towards transforming the institution for the better.

To bring a newly transformed institution within closer reach, care work has emerged as a core area of concern, attention, and praxis. As Ahmed notes, feminist care networks are built, maintained, and reassembled “through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other.”¹¹ Importantly, care work both within and beyond the institution is nothing short of a vital necessity.¹² Just as the Earth requires constant care and maintenance due to the weight of our planetary interconnectedness and interdependency,¹³ so too do human and nonhuman species require the care needed to survive our deeply enmeshed entanglements. Indeed, Victoria Lawson’s argument that care is central to both individual and collective survival is one that appears under several guises in a number of companion scholarly works.¹⁴ As Kaufman roundly asserts, “we cannot *not* care.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, a politics and/or ethics of care is explicitly undermined by the neoliberal vicissitudes that inform so much of what counts and who counts within the rigidly defined hierarchies of higher education. The neoliberal university presents uneven demands of the proto-neoliberal scholar to publish (not perish), compete for grants and funding opportunities (at all cost), prize individualism (ad

11 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 240.

12 María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

13 Réka Patrícia Gál, “Climate Change, COVID-19, and the Space Cabin: A Politics of Care in the Shadow of Space Colonization,” *Mezosfera.org*, October 2020, <http://mezosfera.org/climate-change-covid-19-and-the-space-cabin-a-politics-of-care-in-the-shadow-of-space-colonization/>.

14 Victoria Lawson, “Instead of Radical Geography, How About Caring Geography?,” *Antipode* 41, no. 1 (2009): 210.

15 Emily C. Kaufman, “Staying with the Trouble of Collegiality, Professionalism and Care: Fertilities in Academia,” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 39, no. 8 (2021): 1743.

nauseum), and prioritize work above all else.¹⁶ Given the punishing and punitive arrangements of contemporary academic work across the university system, the question of surviving the institution has figured front and center in much of the public dialogue and discussion on the subject. As Black et al. ponder in their collectively authored piece on the pressures and drag at work in the corporatized academy, “How can I *survive* in these cultures of measurement, audits, comparison, segregation and stratification?”¹⁷

In what remains perhaps the most cogent remedy to the current state of affairs, the process of surviving these destructive forces is very much contingent upon capitalist economies being remade or transformed into caring economies.¹⁸ Such a move would prioritize universal care as an organizing principle across society and would produce a model emphasizing the primacy of (re)making, maintaining, and repairing the world we live in and cultivating the emotional, affective, and intellectual capacities and infrastructures needed to do so.¹⁹ Of particular concern here is the broader question of how to build resistant and caring collectivities. As Igloliorte et al. ask: “How do we build allied and collective forms of challenge and support in order to not individualize the burdens of killjoy-ship, to create forms of collective accountability, challenge, and care?”²⁰

In the absence of these changes, resistance to the neoliberal status quo is witnessing its most concerted expression across a multitude of mostly small-scale, modest, but influential interventions (an ongoing movement which this book seeks to be a part of). Acknowledging first and foremost that “nothing

16 Ibid., 1742.

17 Alison L. Black, Crimmins Gail, and Janice K. Jones, “Reducing the Drag,” in *Producing Pleasure in the Contemporary University*, eds. Patrick Alan Danaher, Marcus K. Harmes, and Stewart Riddle (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), 141.

18 The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 17.

19 Emma Dowling, *The Care Crisis: What Caused It and How Can We End It?* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 42.

20 Igloliorte et al., “Killjoys,” 192.

holds together without relations of care,²¹ care work represents a foundational through line — conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, and ontological — cutting across many of the critical and scholarly interventions currently making the rounds. The significance of care work within efforts to reimagine and remake the university cannot be overemphasized. Although care work is often invisible, devalued, and/or taken for granted, feminist politics and activism have propelled care's significance to greater and greater visibility,²² while also denouncing the gendered and racialized structures upon which our existing care institutions and practices are built. Of particular concern here is the role that these otherwise invisible practices contribute to the building of social ties and relations that are fundamental to individuals' and communities' survival. As Emma Dowling argues, care constitutes the cornerstone of all ethical social relationships that are reinforced by feelings of affection, a sense of service, and the sympathetic bonds and attachments that serve as binding elements among groups and people.²³ Put another way, politics of care have the potential to materialize across wider social relations and networks when care is leveraged at communal scales.²⁴ In tending to care work as a core foundational aspect upon which social relations are built, care has the capacity to materialize as a way “of doing things required by living communities to live as well as possible.”²⁵ For Carol A. Taylor, care unlocks the relational capacities between people (or among groups) that “render the other more capable,”²⁶ thereby improving the means through which communities might live as well as possible. Yet another important aspect underpinning the politics of care is reciprocity. Reciprocal care is central to care ethics in that it has the potential to increase care work's visibility and to highlight

21 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 66–67.

22 *Ibid.*, 53.

23 Dowling, *The Care Crisis*, 64–65.

24 Kye Askins and Matej Blazek, “Feeling Our Way: Academia, Emotions and a Politics of Care,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 18, no. 8 (2017): 1097.

25 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 167.

26 Taylor, “Slow Singularities,” 260.

uneven and unequal care relations and positions and in higher education is thus cast as central in cultivating “fair and sustainable relations in academia as related to wider societies”²⁷ and in disrupting the existing gendered and racialized care structures that place the burden of care work on particular bodies, who in turn are not cared for and often considered disposable.²⁸ Building on Puig de la Bellacasa,²⁹ the deeper challenge lies in attending to asymmetries of reciprocity in care work and caring relations and in fermenting multilateral reciprocities of care to live and dwell in as well as possible worlds and relationalities.

One response to resisting the corporatized and neoliberal apparatuses ablaze across higher education has been to prioritize slow scholarship, feminist praxis, self-care, and caring communities as a means of “finding ways to exist in a world that is diminishing.”³⁰ A growing chorus of scholars have sought to embrace a negative capability of sorts, one that would allow for “the emergence of new ways of thinking and being in academia.”³¹ In lieu of reproducing the gold standard of counting articles published and grants secured, a different model might valorize “thank you notes received, friendships formed, collaborations forged.”³² An alternate model might also reclaim impact through collective collaboration, not individual isolation. As Jones and Whittle have suggested, “Challenging these notions is a crucial part of the process of reclaiming impact, since a key contribution of feminist scholarship has been to reclaim the importance of the (seemingly) small, slow, and contingent, and to dismantle the fallacy that impact is generated through isolated individuals.”³³ As a project conceived as feminist scholarship that

27 Askins and Blazek, “Feeling Our Way,” 1089.

28 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

29 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 121, 140.

30 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 5.

31 Munge et al., “Thinking (Now) Out of Place?” 416.

32 Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship,” 1243.

33 Craig Henry Jones and Rebecca Whittle, “Researcher Self-care and Caring in the Research Community,” *Area* 53, no. 2 (2021): 386.

is small, slow, and contingent, our collective feminist survival toolkit is both an expression and a manifestation of care work from within and beyond the confines of the university system.

The need for a collective feminist survival kit springs from the imperative to get a handle on ourselves when it seems impossible to do so — when we’ve hit a dead end, or when we’re at the end of our rope; it is only in this space of conceding entanglement, vulnerability and self-difference that we can begin to realize the need for what Cassie Thornton calls radical care networks. In her revolutionary artistic practice and her revelatory book, *The Hologram*, Thornton reflects on her own “expertise as a financial survivor” and stresses that we are “trained... to expect bad support or unexpected punishment”³⁴ by a neoliberal system that normalizes debt and indoctrinates us in the idea of individual resilience as an unassailable virtue. What kind of work might be required, politically or ethically, to organize and connect, to create networks of holographic care, and how might this work begin the process of undoing a certain kind of capitalist muscle memory? Thornton speculates on how and why we have collectively been put under the spell of forms of care that are individualizing and, in many ways, contrary to real care. Self-care, it would seem, is predicated on living *your* best life, finding *your* joy, fulfilling *your* wishes. But Thornton asks us to dig deeper and hold accountable the neoliberal roots of those wishes, encouraging us to consider: “What is below this wish? Is it that you seek stability? Do you desire safety? Do you want to experience natural beauty every day?”³⁵

The group has leveraged auto/biography as a vehicle for interdisciplinary self-reflection and critical analysis of personal and collective experiences in the interests of offering a modest collective feminist toolkit for survival. We see connections between our approach to curating our survival toolkit items and the theory underpinning auto/biographical writing. The indi-

34 Cassie Thornton, *The Hologram: Feminist, Peer-to-Peer Health for a Post-Pandemic Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), n.p.

35 Ibid.

vidual entries included here represent how we have responded to Ahmed's call to produce a killjoy survival kit. They speak to the specific ways that we have cared for ourselves throughout the first year of the pandemic by creating an inventory of our "various forms of narcosis (including, of course, art)" which Judith Butler asserts are necessary as a means of bearing "the burden of ungrievable loss, intolerable dependency, and irreparable deprivation,"³⁶ or the crushing weight of caring in a society that stumbles under the weight of paternalistic authority, individualistic apathy, and the carceral logics of reactionary policing and merciless punishment. Following this inventory, we then move to an abridged transcript of a recorded group discussion in which we reflect on our collective toolkit. We conclude with our own insights on care, academic labor, and survival, with a view to how the changes brought on by the pandemic may serve to change our institutions and ourselves. Thus, we advocate for change in higher education by modelling attentiveness to care in academia and by rendering visible anchor points and supports that make academic labor challenging, joyful, and valuable.

36 Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso Books, 2020), 98.

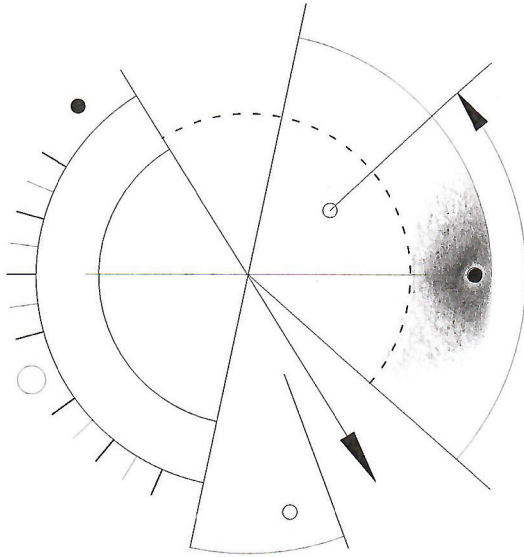


Fig. 2. A Compass for Nowhere #1. Drawing by Angela Henderson. March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Reading and Writing Together as Feminist Praxis

In their shared journal writing, Natasha Behl, Michelle Téllez, Michael Stancliff, and Montye Fuse attempt what they call “an experiment in collective feminist theory building.”¹ Describing three points of common experience — *topos* (or place), feminist grounding, and survival strategies — they were able collectively to fill in “gaps in memory and common sense,”² make the tacit explicit, and think critically about the unacknowledged. By collaboratively “writing the intersections” in their experiences they arrived at “a more capacious feminist framework.”³ In what follows, we recount the same three points of common experience as those of Behl et al. Our connections to physical or imagined places or to the objects that evoke them, our varied commitments to various forms of feminist work, theory, movement-building, and pedagogy, and our strategies for living as feminist killjoys are woven into a variegated pattern constituting feminist praxis.

1 Natasha Behl et al., “Writing the Intersection: Feminist Autoethnography as Narrative Collaboration,” *Journal of Narrative Politics* 5, no. 1 (2018): 32.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Our reading group created a feminist rhetorical space we did not know we were missing until “discursive possibilities” grew gradually in weekly conversation. This buoyed us up and nudged us along from a general interest in Ahmed’s work to collaborating during a pandemic on this account of our feminist survival strategies. As Ahmed describes,

A feminist killjoy lives and works in a contact zone. She might acquire an aptitude for irritation not because of the nature of her speech or being, but because of how much she has already had to put up with. What she has to put up with becomes part of who she is.⁴

Finding rhetorical space for feminist conversation is a respite from the institutional contact zone we are bound by and responsible to. Our discussions feel like surfacing from a dive where, underwater, breath is controlled and meted out sparingly. Relentless pressure can enrapture the diver into forgetting possible worlds above until, breaking the surface, blessed oxygen floods one with relief. Conversations in our feminist reading group sustain us as we put up with the lack of discursive possibilities in the highly systematized world of academia. The stories of how we survive as feminists in the range of disciplines and career stages we inhabit tell of everyday duress, from personal micro-aggressions to the empty rhetoric of equity, diversity, and inclusion staged as due diligence camouflaging systemic, institutional racism and the bottom-line politics supporting it. Telling these stories is what Lorraine Code calls the “epistemology of everyday life,”⁵ which makes clear the commitment to local knowledge integral to feminist standpoint epistemology. As feminists, we have an epistemic responsibility to expand theories of knowledge to the contingencies of lived experience that

4 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 190–91.

5 Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), xi.

constitute rhetorical spaces unavailable within the strictures of traditional philosophical conventions upon which the model of the university is still premised.

In the pages that follow, theory and practice converge in feminist praxis enacting our collaborative politics of the personal and reflecting on our academic labor during a global pandemic. Finding ourselves energized by this reading group and seeing potential in the conversations that emerged from our rich interdisciplinary exchanges, we decided to put our thoughts to paper and see where things might lead, with the general idea that we would produce a collective feminist survival kit inspired by Ahmed's writings. The writing itself was exploratory and the project was conceived of as a collaboration with no fixed goals or objectives. There was no imperative to write for publication since all of us were more than pleased to be part of a supportive group of feminist scholars and writers, open to all points of view and able to sort out conceptual differences without rancor or resentment, something some of us had experienced in prior collaborations. Midway through the initial writing process, an opportunity arose to submit to a book project on autoethnographic feminist perspectives on COVID-19 and the academy, which gave us a stated purpose for the work. The feminist epistemology of everyday life would soon find equal footing alongside a methodological approach quite foreign to many of us. Since the proposed book collection was to be comprised of autoethnographies and our writing to date had an auto/biographical bent, we felt it would fit with the theme and focus of the book. None of us are autoethnographers in the strict sense of the term; therefore, we set to work conceptualizing how best to apply and integrate autoethnography as one of our primary methodological approaches.

Similarly, autotheory would also figure as a useful methodological orientation. Using the term "autotheory" to describe the "integration of the auto or 'self' with philosophy or theory, of-

ten in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware,”⁶ Lauren Fournier claims it is an appropriate category for works that “exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation, and that fuse seemingly disparate modes to fresh effects.”⁷ Each of our feminist survival kit items is “auto/biographical” in the sense coined by Morwenna Griffiths and Gale MacLeod, that is, as a convenient term for grouping a range of personal narrative techniques, such as life-writing, life-studies, life history, narrative analysis, and the representation of lives.⁸ As they argue, “epistemologically sound auto/biographical research should be presented in such a way that readers can form their own assessment of its soundness. As in all research the story the researcher tells has itself to be shown to be trustworthy.”⁹ In the space of a year, we had grown to trust one another enough to honestly share our stories in conversation and to come to believe they were worth committing to writing. In grappling with Ahmed’s words and in participating weekly in wide-ranging discussions, what we would eventually come to write materialized through a sidestepping of the regulative norms always at work in tightly defined disciplinary boundaries. As Ahmed states:

[R]egulative norms function in a way as ‘repetitive strain injuries.’ [...] Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted; they get twisted into shapes

6 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 6.

7 Fournier, *Autotheory*, 2.

8 Morwenna Griffiths and Gale Macleod, “Personal Narratives and Policy: Never the Twain?” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42 (August 2008): 122.

9 *Ibid.*, 136.

that enable some action only insofar as they restrict capacity for other kinds of action.¹⁰

Though we are all experienced feminist writers and researchers in our own disciplines, rare are the opportunities to break with the regulative norms controlling our solo work to engage across paradigms and fields of practice. Traditional epistemology dominates by default through its pervasiveness in the Western academy. How things change and how feminists respond and change with them is the story demonstrating the historical situatedness of practical knowledge (*praxis*).

Resisting what Sara L. Crawley calls “epistemological and methodological hard-lining”¹¹—the traditions in which we have been trained—does not come easily, however much it feels right and good to be doing so, particularly at this time of global upheaval when conventional audiences are being fractured and new modes of knowledge creation, translation, and dissemination are presenting themselves (e.g., blogs, music albums, zines, podcasts, etc.). We see this work reflected in how Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis describe autoethnography: as expressing the “desire to cope with dilemmas and contradictions of being alive and to deal with blows of fate and epiphanies of circumstance.”¹² In their view, this kind of writing “inhabits space between epistemology and ontology.”¹³ We take this to mean that *how we know what we know* is always already implicated in who we are and vice versa. This strong reflexivity is the hallmark of what Sandra Harding calls “strong objectivity.”¹⁴ The

10 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 145.

11 Sara L. Crawley, “Autoethnography as Feminist Self-Interview,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, eds. Jaber F. Gubrium et al. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2012), 145.

12 Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 66.

13 Ibid.

14 Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 49–82.

intimate, inextricable weaving of knowing and being in sound storytelling is a practical, political act, part and parcel of how one lives in community — an inherently moral project in that its outcome is ethical practice itself. As Fournier argues in relation to autotheory, this kind of writing with and through theory also has the capacity and the responsibility to make space for “the exchange between lived, personal, subjective experience and contextualized consideration, critical reflection.”¹⁵

Adapting Crawley’s call to engage scenes from one’s life experiences followed by theoretical analysis,¹⁶ we have approached this project as an opportunity to explore the evocative, analytic, and performative dimensions of caring academic labor. Extending Crawley’s application of the practice of the feminist self-interview, this work embraces co/auto/biography¹⁷ as the means by which our group is able to interweave our stories to enhance the meaning of our immediate context and our understanding of it: enduring the COVID-19 pandemic in Atlantic Canada. Over time, our shared commitment to writing our personal narratives together made possible “the critical, in-depth, collaborative engagement with each other, the literature, our lives, our histories, and our practice.”¹⁸

The collaborative dimensions of this project ensured that our stories remained in dialogue (on the page and in real-time discussions) and the dialogue added to the validity and analytical depth of our individual and collective contributions.¹⁹ In discovering “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness,”²⁰ group members each cultivated in distinct ways the evocative, analytic, and per-

15 Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice*, 174.

16 Crawley, “Autoethnography as Feminist Self-Interview.”

17 Lesley Coia and Monica Taylor, “Uncovering Our Feminist Pedagogy: A Co/Autoethnography,” *Studying Teacher Education* 9, no. 1 (2013): 3–17.

18 *Ibid.*, 7.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Carolyn Ellis, “Heartful Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 5 (1999): 673.

formative aspects of this approach.²¹ Similar to Behl et al.'s narrative collaborations, our "collective narrative practice"²² served as the anchor point for developing collegiality, trust, and accountability.

More specifically, the group's collective reading, writing, sharing, and reflecting constituted a form of feminist praxis that guided shifts in knowledge and understanding, all the while reaffirming our commitments as colleagues and friends. These activities can be characterized as efforts to regain autonomy and express solidarity in moments of extreme difficulty. As with Behl et al.'s depiction of autoethnography, our personal writing is "an act of survival and self-determination through which we recover conceptual and emotional resources — many of them hard won — that would be otherwise forgotten and inaccessible as ground for political consciousness."²³

21 Crawley, "Autoethnography as Feminist Self-Interview," 147.

22 Behl et al., "Writing the Intersection," 31.

23 Ibid.

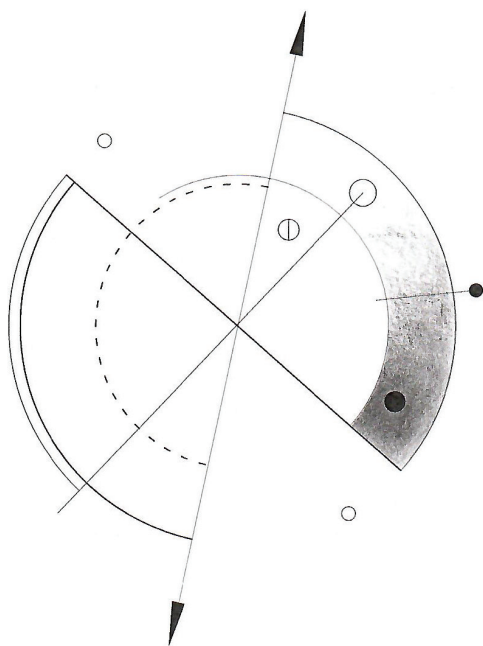


Fig. 3. A Compass for Nowhere #2. Drawing by Angela Henderson. March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Collective Feminist Survival Kit

Ahmed argues that being a feminist killjoy wears one down but also gives one resources: what we learn from the sideways glances and the general disapproval we inspire might be just what we need to survive it all.¹ Is Ahmed suggesting that we need to be resilient in our irritating irritability? Or emboldened by our impatience with the cisheteropatriarchal norm's brazen indifference to collective care? Ahmed's conceptualizing of these contact zones is a site of productive opacity that we would like to keep suspended here. Unmistakably, though, Ahmed articulates feminist survival as fundamentally a matter of keeping one's hopes alive, and the trope of the feminist toolkit persists as an expression of feminist praxis, solidarity building, and self-preservation. More importantly, she suggests that "putting together a killjoy survival kit can also be a survival strategy."² Living a feminist life under pandemic conditions of social distancing and online human relations has us digging deep to seek consolation and connection, effectively prompting us to reflect on what draws us in and what sustains us.

1 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 245.

2 *Ibid.*, 249.

By virtue of Ahmed's prompt — and as a visceral response to the pandemic — our group produced its own survival kit, with each member contributing an item — which falls loosely into these categories: mindfulness, nature, gardening, sunbathing, music, humor, reading. By sharing our tools for endurance, and by laughing and struggling together over their idiosyncratic necessity, we have become part of each other's survival. There is wonder in this process and, as Ahmed notes:

It is through wonder that pain and anger come to life, as wonder allows us to realise that what hurts, and what causes pain, and what we feel is wrong, is not necessary, and can be unmade as well as made. Wonder energises the hope of transformation, and the will for politics.³

Each toolkit item or reflection represents the fruits of unexpected experiences and encounters that materialized during the pandemic and produced the conditions for “a little sideways movement [that] can open up new worlds. Sometimes encounters might come as the gift of a lifeline.”⁴ We developed this collective toolkit to express “the gift of a lifeline” as it unfolded for us and to reflect on the value of doing so together. Each item can be read as a standalone contribution, but the broader intent is for these meditations to be read as what we have needed to survive as academics in pandemic times and how reading Ahmed together helped us to produce a collectively written toolkit.

3 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 181.

4 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 47.

Mindfulness

Lindsey

I would have liked to have known there were other ways of living, of being.

— Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*⁵

Survival starts within me: the ability to get out of bed; to engage with the world; to advocate, change, and rebuild. All of the actions I choose in a day require consistent, deliberate care for myself and my emotions. The very idea of valuing emotions was one I derided for most of my life, always prioritizing the rational, but recently experiencing symptoms of intense professional burnout forced me to reconsider everything. This experience led me to choose mindfulness as my survival kit item, because when I was drowning in exhaustion, shame, and fear, mindfulness offered me a rescuing branch to sustain myself.

When I considered a survival kit, I thought about what gets me through the day. Survival, as Ahmed notes,⁶ isn't about living, but about making it through the next hour — sometimes, the next minute. This description of survival resonated with me, but I was struck by the joy that was present in Ahmed's survival kit; I had never associated joy with survival. Survival has always been painful — a constant struggle to just make it to the next hour. It has taken quite some time, and daily practice of mindfulness, to bring me to a point where I can now recognize and value the joy in that struggle.

5 Ibid., 265.

6 Ibid.

Practicing mindfulness doesn't create joy — it's not supposed to. It also doesn't create a sense of calm or relaxation. I think of mindfulness as a zipper pull tab, stitching together those "two paths diverged in a wood"⁷ into something less extreme, and less finite. If power isn't a zero-sum game, then neither is life, nor academia: regularly practicing mindfulness allowed me to see that when you're on a path that's not taking you where you want to go, you can turn around and go back to the fork in the road. Or, you can strike out and forge a new path. Moving away from the extremes of a "good or bad" mindset into a more balanced approach requires releasing oneself from judgement and expectations, both internal and external — the "shoulds" that run through my brain at every vulnerable moment and are exacerbated in an uncertain time. To practice mindfulness is to think and act from a "wise mind," integrating both logic and emotion equally in an act that echoes Crawley's observation of the "usefulness of rage, sadness and frustration in articulating experiences of the social world."⁸

Articulating lived experiences requires acknowledging the emotions that accompany them, just as mindfulness requires honesty with oneself. This willingness to be vulnerable is contrary to the façade of competency I adopted to enter and remain within academia, and which allowed me to hide away from that honesty. Mindfulness is a slap of cold water first thing in the morning, forcing your eyes open and your body and mind to react simultaneously, in unison — a sensation so rare and so immediate you couldn't possibly deny it. I am able to process the changes to my world — the horror, the joy, the fear — and to choose actions that fit my feminist values in response to those changes. Being able to acknowledge these experiences is part of the process of accepting that given all that has come before,

7 Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," in *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, ed. Oscar Williams (1960; repr. New York: Washington Square Press, 1965), 236.

8 Sara L. Crawley, "Autoethnography as Feminist Self-Interview," in *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of the Craft*, eds. Jaber F. Gubrium et al. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2012), 146.

everything is as it should be; and given that every moment is an opportunity for change, I can choose a different path where survival can be both a difficult and joyful process.



Fig. 4. Zipper. Photo by Scott Stoneman. September 24, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

We find Lindsey's metaphor of the zipper pull tab to be the most eloquent realization of our group's attempt to grasp the meaning of the handle metaphor Ahmed uses in our epigraph. Because we're split at the seams between sites of struggle and sources of joy, this tiny but instrumental handle allows us to apply enough force to join fabric together, using the zipper's teeth to create a temporary space of enclosure. Feminist standpoint epistemology is a particularly powerful zipper, one that secures a space to feel and protection for the body, allowing us to brave the elements. Pull tabs, though, frequently break from overuse or excessive force. Jury-rigging solutions in moments when our original pull tabs snap, as they did when the pandemic and lockdown made it impossible to join together according to our original design, meant crafting a makeshift handle that seamlessly provided enough traction to continue.

Tending the Garden

Angela

Gardening is an act, unceasingly linked to life. Plants provide nourishment, they sustain economies, they are the basis of technologies and medicines and play a vital role as members of earth's ecosystems. Of the many ways in which we relate to the vegetal world, gardening is one in which we can observe the immediacy of our interactions; the benefits and harms that result from care and the absence of care reflect the conditions of this relationship.

If we consider physical space as an expression of a social order where systems of exclusion and inclusion come to bear on our lived realities, pandemic times have revealed a breakdown in our relationship to the natural world. Severe social inequalities such as increasing food insecurity, access (and lack of access) to green space, the effects of climate chaos — especially on the most vulnerable in society — are all evidence of our withdrawal from the natural world. For those living with relative wealth and abundance, the pandemic has created conditions for reconnecting with the vegetal world, while for those without access, the deep inequalities wrought by colonization are amplified in a shortage of the necessities that the land provides us.

The garden serves as a productive space from which to imagine how things might be done differently. Gardening nurtures a deep connection to the physical world through direct contact with the earth, but also through the act of caring for something outside of ourselves. When I remember my grandmother, I think of gardening as an act of survival rather than the calming activity it can be seen as today. She farmed barley and oats on

the Canadian prairies, cultivating the land as a means of subsistence, before advanced geo-locative technologies rendered this a lucrative profession, and in doing so, she grew accustomed to living in a state of uncertainty. As a child, I recall the daily obligations of life on our small family farm where chores, gardening, and caring for animals were a necessary routine. It was here that my relationship to the living world was seeded, germinating from an understanding that these living beings existed for my purposes, as though no other relationship were possible. I understood their usefulness in relation to my own needs, where beyond the requirements of good husbandry and respect for the land, I had never considered them as autonomous beings with needs of their own. Today, I have a much different relationship to the garden I tend. Rather than being a place I depend on for food, it is a place complicated by the privilege of access and at odds with my own aesthetic determinations. Increasingly I find myself asking, how am I beneficial within this relationship? After all, I had assumed the role as gardener where collecting, cutting, killing, and propagating are all verbs synonymous with a well-kept garden.

My early conception of a garden left no room for anyone without a useful role, perhaps, except for the dog and the daisies who, each in their own ways, offered a certain delight, though I imagine that one bite or an unsightly crop would be grounds for removal.

Considering the association of error with uselessness, Sara Ahmed refers to a weed as that which is unwanted, neither useful nor beautiful, and as such, must be removed from the system.⁹ Reflecting on Ahmed's writing on recognizing one's role within a system, I ask myself, for whom and based on what am I able to evaluate who belongs and who is out of place? What constitutes belonging? As I have recalled, the usefulness of those in the garden has always been relative to productivity, to be put to use is to be seeded in ideal conditions for production and consumption. And yet, through observation and attentiveness, I

9 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 118.

see that so much of the garden resists consumptive tendencies; the smell of Solomon's Seal at night, the bees, hard at work in the heat of the day amidst colorful blooms, the trembling leaves in the wind. Gardening has not only taught me to notice what is small and elusive but to acknowledge that I too, play an active role within this ecosystem.

Linking land use to cultivation and making use of the land as part of the colonial project,¹⁰ my garden shows me that my own aesthetic preferences and consumptive practices have developed out of sync with the land on which I stand. Reflecting on gardening, not as a science project but something closer to an artwork, I see the garden not just as a space of contemplation and enjoyment but a living metaphor for histories of colonization and migration. In her work, *Seeds of Change*, Brazilian artist Maria Theresa Aleves reflects on colonialism, slavery, and the global commerce of goods through the lens of displaced plants in the ballast of a ship — when soil was part of the waste material historically used to balance ships — stating, “I’ve come to see these seeds as witnesses to complicated stories between us as people.”¹¹ My own garden, situated in Halifax, Canada, is a small piece of land I have fenced off within the unceded lands of the Mi’kmaq people — the garden I tend is a contested site. Full of beings that did not originate together but find themselves growing alongside one another, coexisting from different origins and diverse needs: those brought here as part of the colonial project, are situated alongside those seeded here since time immemorial. With this in mind, my garden asks me to consider the impact of my actions within this place and offers valuable lessons about the vital role we all have as part of an interrelated system.

The spaces we inhabit can reflect outdated values, but they can also be transformed and overlaid with new ambitions. Freed from routines of consumption, I am left asking, how might a

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹¹ Sam Phillips, “Meet Six Contemporary Avant-Gardeners,” *Royal Academy of Arts*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/modern-garden-contemporary-artist-gardeners>.

relationship based on nurturing difference and striving toward goals of reciprocity require a different set of obligations within vegetal–human relations?

The panel opposite from Rebecca Roher's Lost in the Sublime is situated between Angela and Mariana's work because their pieces both express, in different ways, the idea that wonder in the face of the sublime scale of the natural world can be a vital, transformative experience. The aesthetics of Angela's garden, its consideration even for the weeds, suggests a holistic form of self-care that looks for a more complex reciprocity in place of the ingrained extractivist relationship to the land and the nonhuman world that has metastasized under neoliberalism. The lives of animals, the power of the sun to produce or destroy life, and the scandal of global inequality also animate Mariana's commentary below.



Fig. 5. Panel from *Lost in the Sublime*. Rebecca Roher, 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Living under the Sunshine

Mariana

Growing up in a small mining town in Brazil, one of the things I enjoyed the most was spending a sunny day in our backyard, jumping from the guava to the mango tree, admiring the banana's long peduncle and meeting new and unexpected living creatures with whom I would become friends. Because at home it is sunny most of the year, these backyard expeditions were a daily routine. While I am someone who gets easily bored with routines, this one never stopped surprising me. I always had the company of Lolly, a cocker spaniel I was gifted on the day of my birth, who appreciated our tropical fruits, particularly the sugar cane. I have always been fond of outdoor activities, but it was not until my late twenties, when I moved to the Northern hemisphere and had to endure winters I only knew from the movies, that I realized my enjoyment came not so much from the outdoors, but rather from someone who reigned there: the sun. It is strange how we humans often take for granted what is most essential to us merely because it is always present.

There are many uses for the sun ... a super star that sustains life on Earth (and probably on other planets?), a ruler of all people born between July 23 to August 22 (Leo), a potent deity across world religions and mythologies, a sensation on the skin that takes one home. But humans have not always put the sun to good use. Views regarding climate have been leveraged to justify colonialism and the subjugation of peoples living in warm places. From the 18th century onward, Europeans and North Americans have claimed that 'science' shows that people from warm climates — associated with geographical places

I call home — are inferior, lazy, and mentally unfit compared to the more intelligent inhabitants of cold climates. Ethnoclimatology has been used to legitimize not only the European conquest of the tropics, but also slavery and, more recently, eugenics,¹² producing in its wake practices that dehumanized entire populations and laid the groundwork for the economic system we now refer to as extractivism. While these views and the predatory systems they put in place have been subjected to sustained criticism, it is not uncommon to still encounter harmful stereotypes and practices against migrants like myself who come from warm places. Even if it is true that people from the Northern hemisphere have overcome their fears of hot climates,¹³ colonial visions of and about warmth continue to shape industries such as tourism, where warm places and its inhabitants, humans and nonhumans alike, are enjoyed for a limited time in an extractivist relationship. A hierarchical division of labor and thus worth between cold and warm climates continues to mark the global political economy, putting the sun squarely in the service of justifying neocolonial forms of exploitation and inequality.

The brutal consequences of such a global political system have been exposed by the current pandemic: the capacity for survival is fundamentally shaped by the availability of structures, resources, and forms of collective care that, in turn, are shaped and curtailed by colonialism, cisheterosexism, and racism. Every time I sit on my balcony in Atlantic Canada to get some sunshine after enduring yet another day in social isolation, I am reminded of and reassured that there is a system of care here that I can count on. I anxiously follow the news in Brazil, where daily death rates for coronavirus have exceeded over two thousand and the head of the state's response is: "I'm

12 Mark Carey, "Beyond Weather: The Culture and Politics of Climate History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, ed. Andrew C. Isenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 30–31.

13 Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "Fear of Hot Climates in the Anglo-American Colonial Experience," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1984): 231.

not a gravedigger, okay?”¹⁴ I feel helpless, hopeless, and afraid of what country I will encounter when I return home. Carelessness seems to have now been instituted as a state policy and much political work will be needed to steer away from that.

And yet, on my balcony, I feel the sun on my skin, and in feeling it, I also feel a connection with so many other human and non-human beings that share my use of the sun: it is a ticket home, it brings comfort and wellbeing that cannot be replaced, it is felt with and beneath the skin in a way that nothing else can be — an act of care that provides so much and asks nothing in return. This relationship to the sun, which no stereotypes or ethnoclimatology claims can take away from us, is something people from warm places share and nurture. The interdependency and interconnectedness upon which this feeling is grounded reassures me that other caring relationships are possible. When this is all over and I am able to return home, there will be warmth waiting for me.

14 Katy Watson, “Coronavirus: How Pandemic Turned Political in Brazil,” *BBC News*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-53021248>.



Fig. 6. People work and play under the sunshine in Zanzibar, Tanzania. Photo by Mariana Prandini Assis, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Holly Jean Buck reminds us that the “solar constant” of “1,360 watts per square meter” is our “greatest resource; a foundation of life on earth.”¹⁵ The sun is also our best hope for curing the capitalist addiction to finite, destructive forms of fossil energy. Mariana’s sense of separation from the sun, combined with her critical perspective on the (neo)colonial politics of “climatic determinism,” reflect the global splintering of social and natural worlds that is characteristic of the Anthropocene. Michelle, in the next entry, thinks through her drive for a source of solace that can legitimately confront the stress of this splintering.

¹⁵ Holly Jean Buck, *After Geoengineering: Climate, Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration* (New York: Verso, 2019), 2.

Picking up the Pieces

Michelle

Ahmed says that “[b]ecoming a killjoy can feel, sometimes, like making your life harder than it needs to be.”¹⁶ This can mean regret and grief over what’s been left behind. Feeling broken in can feel like “being used and used up, of having nothing left to give.”¹⁷ Coming into the pandemic, I was recovering from major surgery, something I’d had little warning could happen, which meant emotional shock on top of the physical trauma of being cracked open, repaired, and sewn back together. Life and work had been following well-worn paths. I thought the most arduous stage of my life was past — an abandoned career in the performing arts and compassion fatigue from years of balancing academic work with caring for my elders. Suddenly, I was the sick person, facing my own mortality.

Months of convalescing proved strangely calming with so much time focused on my own well-being. As I got stronger and began to believe this might not be my endgame, the country went into COVID-19 lockdown. In a perverse way, I felt comforted, knowing the whole world now feared infection like I did. But my vulnerability increased exponentially, as I adjusted to an additional form of social isolation. Piecing together shards of my former life, I wondered if I’d learned enough about survival to sustain me through pandemic times.

¹⁶ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 235.

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 227.

For the first months after surgery, I was exhausted yet unable to sleep more than an hour at a time. What calmed me was listening to the record collection I hadn't touched for years. Memories of that music and the quality of the sound from vinyl drew from a well of grief I thought I'd plumbed before — grief for those I'd cared for to the end and for the singing career that had meant so much to them. Years spent in the competitive world of classical music, failing to break through into something never meant to be, was a lingering regret, but going through those records proved cathartic. One album took me completely by surprise: Lois Marshall singing *Folksongs of the British Isles*.¹⁸ Marshall had adjudicated my Jeunesse Musicale performance back in grade school. I was terrified that night, which must have left a lasting impression because the plastic wrap on the record had never been opened. I remember buying it but must not have had the heart to listen to it. Hearing Marshall's lilting voice for the first time, with Loman's exquisite tones on the harp, I remembered her walking arduously across the stage in the school gymnasium supported by crutches. Polio at age two had left her physically challenged; yet she became an internationally celebrated soprano. Forced by fate to reconsider my own life, I listened to other recordings that had meant so much to me. Gradually, it wasn't so painful to hear music I once lived to sing, which helped me love anew what I had tried so hard to forget. My old repertoire became a consolation, allowing me to stop being the killjoy in my own story.

A practice I began just before the pandemic lock-down is drawing blind each day, from images, scenes, objects, dreams, and looking in the mirror. Reading Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: Self-Portraits and Other Ruins*,¹⁹ evoked these drawings of

18 See Lois Marshall, *Folksongs of the British Isles*, Judy Loman (harp), Marquis Records and CBC, 1983, recorded at St. Anne's Anglican Church, Toronto, 1976, *YouTube*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqT3guTZ4kA>.

19 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

me, used up, overdrawn, looking back at myself for better and for worse (fig. 7).

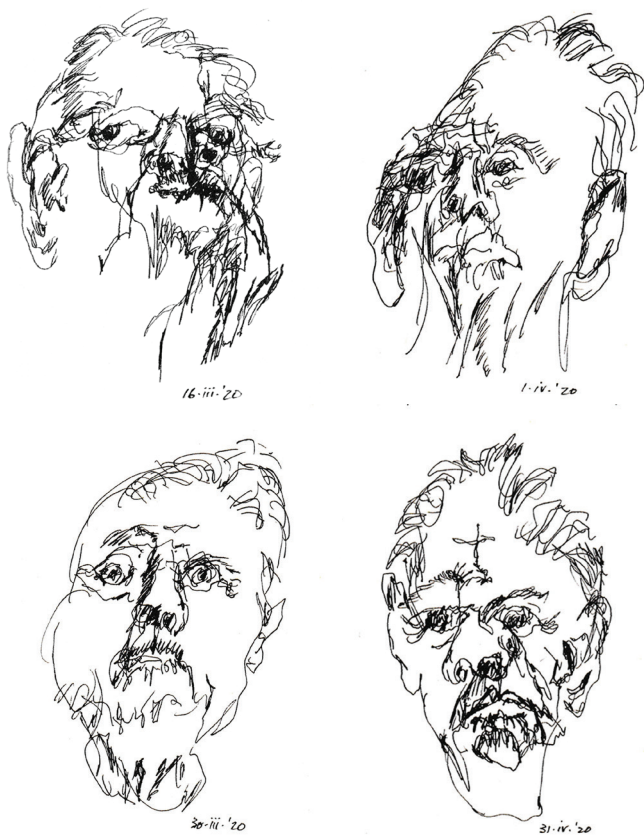


Fig. 7. Four Self-Portraits of Memf, Drawn Blind. Drawings by Michelle Forrest. March 16, 30, 31, and April 1, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

In kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery, a break is “part of the life of the thing.”²⁰ “[W]e can shatter when things shatter. But this shattering can be fierce as well as fragile [...] things [...] can hold an idea of who we are, of who we can become.”²¹ Who could have known that post-operative trauma, a pandemic, and an unopened vinyl recording would lead me to this consoling realization? Ignatieff tells us that in a culture chasing success “consolation is the one prize you don’t want to win.” It’s for losers, yet the ancients understood consolation as “the discipline that taught us how to live and die.”²² The question of what it means to be consoled captivated Ignatieff after speaking on justice and politics as part of a choral festival in which four choirs performed all 150 Psalms.²³ He was so struck by the effect the music had on him, a nonbeliever, that the question grew into a book. As he points out, COVID-19 sent everyone searching for consolation as we were forced into isolation.²⁴

Asking myself why Marshall’s singing of those lilting airs moved me so deeply, I turned to Ignatieff on Hume, whom he calls the philosopher who “crafted a new form of consolation: autobiography as a narrative of self-realization.”²⁵ And to Mahler, who fused “deeply personal and autobiographical impulses” into his First Symphony.²⁶ Many traditional folksongs position the singer in a solitary place of personal loss and longing, consoled by natural beauty and bittersweet memory. Marshall’s lucid voice, free of artifice, recorded live in the Byzantine acoustic of St. Anne’s Church,²⁷ brings her own vulnerability to each

20 Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*, 227.

21 *Ibid.*, 226.

22 Michael Ignatieff, *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021), 2.

23 See “150 Psalms – 1 en 2 September 2017, Festival Oude Muziek Utrecht,” *YouTube*, June 1, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=401hlp33qKc>.

24 Ignatieff, *On Consolation*, xii.

25 *Ibid.*, 119.

26 *Ibid.*, 170.

27 St. Anne’s Anglican Church was built in the Byzantine style, inspired by the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, a departure from the typical Gothic style of Anglican churches at that time (1907). See “St. Anne’s Anglican Church,”

character she portrays. Ignatieff says that music calls on us to “complete its implicit meaning, and when we do so, we have a feeling of understanding our own emotions that is central to the experience of consolation.”²⁸ Does taking the subject position unapologetically transform vulnerability into strength? Is that what I heard in Marshall and felt looking back on my life? Is it about taking responsibility for all that I am with nothing tucked away as secret regret? Pain and memories of being used up don’t lessen, as if it were a matter of quantity and intensity. Perhaps, as Levinas says, “we are not responsible because of our identity; [...] we have an identity because we are responsible.”²⁹

Ontario Heritage Trust, <https://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/en/properties/st-annes-anglican-church>. For more on the unique acoustics of Byzantine churches, see Sharon E. J. Gerstel et al., “Soundscapes of Byzantium: The Acheiropoietos Basilica and the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Thessaloniki,” *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 87, no. 1 (2018): 177–213.

²⁸ Ignatieff, *On Consolation*, 180.

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 141–51.



Fig. 8. Panel from *All the Sad Songs*. Drawing by Summer Pierre, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

This panel from Summer Pierre’s All the Sad Songs draws a direct line between shattering, unsustainable emotional states and the capacity of music to zip us back together when things “slide in all directions,” as Leonard Cohen croons in “The Future.”³⁰ Pierre observes in an interview that “we listen to music in our bodies. It’s not just about what we’re thinking [...] we have this evocative experience physically.”³¹ Michelle and Scott discuss how the embodied experiences of music and laughter can provide connective experiences in moments of fragmentation.

³⁰ Leonard Cohen, “The Future,” *You Tube*, October 7, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYzPVKg3wyo>.

³¹ Scott Stoneman, host, “Summer Pierre Captures the Ways that Music Moves Us and Images Come to Matter,” *Pretty Heady Stuff*, July 27, 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/user-650466923/15-summer-pierre-on-depicting-the-ways-that-music-moves-us-and-how-images-come-to-matter>.

Humor

Scott

I have a deep attachment to the palliative effects of humor. My preference has long been for funny killjoys like Hari Kondabolu. In one routine, Kondabolu poses the self-referential question, “How come everything has to have a political point?” and admits that he “can’t help it,” he’s “a killjoy who does comedy.”³² Contemporary comedians have learned how to be more trenchant killjoys by reflecting on the place of comedy in the indeterminacy of the global moment. And I am finding the use of humor by killjoy communicators to be an indispensable source of care right now, since the future of capitalist politics is patently unstable and I’m often desperate for a place to turn that isn’t purely “academic.” Killjoys kill the fun, so how can humor be defined as “killjoy”? When we recall Ahmed’s points about being a feminist killjoy, she relates moments when what she does as the killjoy is stymy laughter. Being a killjoy means taking the momentum out of a joke that demands consensus and complicity by refusing to participate. The humor I’m referring to is the humor of refusal, of opposition to a happiness rooted to reveling in privilege.

The instability of the current moment is also important, as it’s making even more space for people like Asma Nizami, advocacy director for Muslim women at Reviving Sisterhood in Minneapolis and self-professed “professional destroyer of white men’s

³² Hari Kondabolu, *Mainstream American Comic* (Kill Rock Stars, 2016), <https://harikondabolu.bandcamp.com/album/mainstream-american-comic>.

egos.”³³ Nizami captured in one viral tweet what I—a white man with a fraught ego—had been feeling in response to the sudden mainstream expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement following the police murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others: “I personally think it’s really cool how we all went from learning how to make banana bread to learning how to abolish the police in a matter of weeks.”³⁴

Stuck inside but awakened to the need to occupy the streets, many of us, myself included, started engaging in online forms of solidarity-building and social justice education that communities of color have been forced to develop in response to the dispossession and brutality perpetuated in the name of white supremacy. Following people like Nizami, Noname, Ava DuVernay, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor on social media has provided a treasury of biting humor at a time when we are increasingly forced to reckon with “unbearable pasts,” the “impossibly complex” present, and “our aspirations for different futures.”³⁵ For example, I couldn’t help but vicariously experience the joy that Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor and Marc Lamont-Hill shared in their online panel for Haymarket Books when they reveled in the removal of a statue of the “vile, unabashed racist” Frank Rizzo, former mayor of Philadelphia. The two authors marvel at the “arrogance” of a city glorifying a figure that encouraged people to “Vote White,” but then, laughing, delight in saying that the statue “ain’t there no more!”³⁶

33 Asma Nizami (@asmarelists), “Advocacy director for Muslim women at @risesisterhood in MN. Professional destroyer of white men’s egos,” *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/asmarelists/>.

34 Asma Nizami, “I personally think it’s really cool how we all went from learning how to make banana bread to learning how to abolish the police in a matter of weeks,” *Twitter*, June 6, 2020, <https://twitter.com/asmarelists/status/1269336348630102018>.

35 Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 8.

36 Haymarket Books, “The Fire This Time: The New Uprising Against Racism and Police Violence,” *YouTube*, June 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3_CZ1rDIRg.

Ahmed no doubt delighted, as well, in retweeting a video of protesters in England rolling a statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston into Bristol Harbour.³⁷ She cautions us that “[d]eolonizing the curriculum” is too often “framed as an act of vandalism, a willful destruction of our universals: knocking off the heads of statues.”³⁸ Nonetheless, the global civic uprising we are witnessing should be seen as a part of a broader questioning of settler colonial pedagogy.

Ahmed lists humor as a part of her survival kit, but she is also keenly suspicious of laughter, describing in a number of places the way that feminist killjoys get caught in a web of racist and sexist jokes that emerge out of a myopic sort of self-love, from love that is used to protect privilege, an adversarial love that, as Ahmed describes it, not only looks for, but even “requires an obstacle.”³⁹ I have too often experienced, at the local level, the ways that, in a settler colonial culture, “racial others become the obstacle that allows the white subject to sustain a fantasy that without them, the good life would be attainable.”⁴⁰ And as I write this, the “collective archive of supremacist pleasure”⁴¹ is on full display, as many in Canada are made to confront the spectacle of a white supremacist “freedom convoy” fueled as much by revanchism as it is by a crowdfunding campaign that has been supercharged by rich American conservatives. In late January 2022, a serpentine convoy of hundreds of vehicles converged on Ottawa and occupied the downtown core, refusing to leave until all COVID-19 restrictions were removed. Led initially by truckers who rejected the need for pandemic restrictions when crossing the US-Canada border, the rally grew to include a number of white supremacist groups and eventually became so disruptive

37 Hasan Patel (@CorbynistaTeen), “THEY ARE TAKING THE STATUE TO THE RIVER WHERE HE DESERVES TO BE DUMPED,” *Twitter*, June 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/CorbynistaTeen/status/1269642325376086022?s=20>.

38 Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 213.

39 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 131.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 246.

in the face of curious police indifference that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked the Emergencies Act for the first time in Canada's history, removing the blockades from the streets of Ottawa.⁴²

The big con of the “freedom convoy” and the carnival atmosphere of these protests obscure the fact that this is an occupation that aims to overthrow a democratically-elected government under the deceiving banner of a worker uprising against supposedly oppressive public health restrictions. As El Jones explains, the occupation of Ottawa is fundamentally about upholding “the white order” and expressing rage at the responsibilities implied by a “changing social order,” one that increasingly refuses to regard collective care as subordinate to the social Darwinist logic of late capitalism.⁴³

Why would one even care about comedy in the middle of such catastrophe and escalating conflict? It's telling that Ahmed is rarely focused on the escapist products of popular culture; her attention is typically on fashioning tools for escaping the structures that surreptitiously constrain our agency. In this sense, Ahmed is more aligned with bell hooks's critical question: “Why are you laughing?”⁴⁴ One exception, though, is the 1980 film *Nine to Five*. Ahmed observes that, in the film, “comic inflection” is used to make sexism and sexual harassment “watchable, or bearable.”⁴⁵ This is often seen as part of the magic (and danger) of comedy: to soften the sting of a message through humor. We see this embodied today by comedians like Hannah Gadsby, Aida Rodriguez, River Butcher, and Julio Torres, who experiment with the framing of comedy in order to create a bridge to

42 CBC News, “The Convoy Crisis in Ottawa: A Timeline of Key Events,” *CBC News*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/timeline-of-convoy-protest-in-ottawa-1.6351432>.

43 rabble.ca, “From the Freedom Convoy to the Federal Budget. Whose Country Is It Anyway?,” *YouTube*, February 13, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVVOrsFMv1c>.

44 bell hooks, “Is Paris Burning?,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 154.

45 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 202.

a certain kind of courage in communication that is rooted in intellect, community, and intersectionality.

Cultivating the “pleasure-spectacle of form’s self-violation”⁴⁶ in comedy, Drew Michael’s self-titled HBO special addresses issues of disability and masculine socialization. Michaels jokes at one point in his routine that he has “downloaded [his] sexual identity from movies.” Reflecting on this line prompted me to think about the role of masculinity — and maybe more particularly what Cara Daggett calls “petro-masculinity”⁴⁷ — in galvanizing a group of truckers and far-right protestors who are not only receiving help from former RCMP and military personnel in their efforts to create a grimy garrison of idling big rigs,⁴⁸ but who have also no doubt learned from Canada’s settler colonial culture that rugged individualism and white vigilantism are heroic, that what Robin D.G. Kelley calls “collective freedom [...] the freedom to earn a livelihood and live a healthy, fully realized life”⁴⁹ is somehow tantamount to oppression.

46 Berlant and Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” 234.

47 Cara Daggett, “Petro-Masculinity: Fossil Fuels and Authoritarian Desire,” *Millennium* 47, no. 1 (2018): 25–44.

48 Judy Trinh, “How Organizers with Police and Military Expertise May Be Helping Ottawa Convoy Protest Dig In,” *CBC News*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/convoy-protesters-police-tactical-knowledge-1.6345854>.

49 Angela Y. Davis and Robin D. G. Kelley, *The Meaning of Freedom: And Other Difficult Dialogues* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 7.



Fig. 9. Illustration of the Frank Rizzo monument. Scott Stoneman, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

The monument to Frank Rizzo, which captures him saluting the white constituents he galvanized in the 1970s and waving dismissively at the black and brown citizens he waged war against, is depicted here in its overdue absence. The City of Philadelphia removed the statue on June 3rd, 2020, in response to renewed public outrage. Out of a desire for critical context and a kind of virtual camaraderie, Scott shared the killjoy laughter of two prominent critical race theorists as they savored this symbolic victory over white supremacist violence. Ellen talks about her own pursuit of a refuge from strictly academic sites of exchange and a source of joy to offset the everyday fatigue brought on by professional pressures and the pandemic.

The Forest

Ellen

As a space, a forest holds the opportunity to disconnect from society. We can forget the rapid activity of life, escape the despair that life often brings, and celebrate the small joys that inevitably follow. Over the past several years of the pandemic and its instability, the need to be in a space within which it is possible to forget, to escape, and to rejoice has become even more important to me. It is the thing that continues to offer me survival.

I grew up in a relatively rural area of Nova Scotia. From early childhood, the woods were a refuge, a place of peace, adventure, solitude, imagination, creativity, and vulnerability. I would sneak away to a secluded corner of land and sit under a canopy of branches with a pile of books and stay for hours. I would read, and listen to the sounds of the forest, and let my mind range over imagined scenes from the books I wanted to one day write and the lives I wanted to one day live. I would forget the present and its problems and escape into a world that seemed unstructured by time. It was often as though just me and the trees existed. Sometimes this feeling became so strong I'd be unmoored by the thought that if I were to step out from the woods, it would be a step into a different era, where nature alone governed. The woods were "lovely, dark and deep,"⁵⁰ and promised a place where I could simply exist in the world without expectation.

⁵⁰ Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, eds. Edward Connery Lathem and Rudolph Ruzicka (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1969), 105.



Fig. 10. Jack Lake, Halifax, Nova Scotia. Photo by Ellen Shaffner, June 14, 2019.

When the world and my place in it becomes too much to bear, I still seek out the woods as refuge. They hold the same possibility of peace and escape that I felt as a child, but now they also take on a deeper urgency for me as a place away from the restriction and obligation of adult life. To hike deep into the woods, to breathe with the rhythm of trees that are hundreds of years old,

and to reset my mind through feeling my body let go and connect with the steady, inevitable pace of nature is what allows me to survive. The awe that nature inspires, the perspective provided from standing among old growth trees and recognizing their endurance continues to be a source of relief for me. It allows me to reject the constant pressure for productivity upon which our capitalist societies thrive and helps me reclaim a sort of oxymoronic collective autonomy: I am an individual, my own person, but the forest also reminds me that I exist within a greater network of life and meaning than I could ever comprehend. As an item of this feminist survival toolkit, this reminder helps me reject the efficient rationalization and productivity of academia and of life. The forest has become the handle I reach for when I lose it⁵¹ and when it feels that the world is collectively losing it.

Retreating into the woods is not an unusual way of escaping the demands of our lives. For example, the practice of forest bathing⁵² has gained attention in the western world in recent years as a way to lower blood pressure and decrease stress. However, I gently caution against adding forest bathing as an item on a to-do list. Being in nature, being separate and away from it all, is not something you can check off daily or weekly, not something you can do and be done with. Rather, I suggest that it is an ongoing practice and commitment to oneself to find space, perspective, breath, and security. I encourage those who seek it out for the purpose of escape to do so with intention, rather than automation. I encourage you to feel, rather than do.

Unfortunately, retreating into the woods is not an option for everyone. Our world often seems to place little value on these spaces as refuge. Instead, it seems we happily eradicate these trees that have stood for centuries in the name of progress, de-

51 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 240. This phrasing reflects the following point from Ahmed: “We need a handle when we lose it. A killjoy survival kit is about finding a handle at the very moment one seems to lose it, when things seem to fly out of hand; a way of holding on when the possibility you were reaching for seems to be slipping away.”

52 Qing Li, *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness* (New York: Viking, 2018).

velopment, and consumption. These spaces seem to be becoming ever fewer, ever less accessible, day by day. As an item in this kit, I urge those with access to use these spaces as refuge, and to keep them from the grasp of progress. And, if you have no forest, place your hand or forehead on a tree, any tree, and simply breathe. There is restoration available even in these small moments of connection.

Forests are a space separate from the noise of pandemics, wars, and uncertainty and offer us a great deal through their gentle, restorative nature. They provide escape from time and obligation, however fleeting those moments of escape may be. They offer comfort, renewal, refuge, and connection outside of societal pressures. The intentional use of forests is also an act of resistance. To spend time in the forest, a place largely outside of modern life, is to empower them as feminist spaces. As Ahmed says,

time is related to power: the more something is used, the more power it acquires; the less time something is used, the less power it retains. *Power is time in proportion. To make use of a part is to take time: use as strengthening and preserving; disuse as weakening and withering.*⁵³

By using forests as a tool for survival, I suggest that we strengthen and preserve ourselves, while also strengthening and preserving the spaces themselves.

⁵³ Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 70. Emphasis mine.



Fig. 11. Panel from *You & a Bike & a Road*. Cartoon by Eleanor Davis, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

This abstract image of a path is excerpted from Eleanor Davis's acclaimed graphic novel, You & a Bike & a Road. Ahmed uses the image of the worn path to explain the painful double bind that diversity advocates face within academia: because building an equitable and inclusive future within the university means "proceed[ing] on a path in order to disrupt it, we can end up not disrupting it in order to proceed" (What's the Use?). Ahmed describes this circuitous problem as "a paradox as well as a pain."⁵⁴ Should we walk the line of linguistic fashion to advance a radical politics of difference, or risk trying to carve out an idiomatic route to change? Ellen and Ian's commentaries on self-care deal directly with the tension between freely contributing labor to intellectual projects and protecting the need for emotional mending.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 195.

Slow Reading, Together

Ian

My interest in the Slow Movement has grown considerably over the past few years. It is unsurprising that my desire to slow down has coincided with the increased pace and acceleration of my professional life and personal responsibilities. Inspired by the Slow Food⁵⁵ and Slow Media movements,⁵⁶ I reflected for some time on how I might best integrate principles of slowing down into my work and home life. In 2019, I experimented with a new format, Slow Reading Fridays, a weekly opportunity for students and faculty to congregate in a room on campus in which they could read alongside their peers. The general idea was instrumental: at any given moment, most of us would have coursework or research-related readings to do, so this initiative offered space and time to attend to this important, foundational work. The goal was not merely to slow down or get things done, but rather to engage communally in a personal and professional activity almost always carried out in isolation. As someone who had rarely participated in collaborative research and writing, I was also looking to cultivate a simple way to reduce the isolation I had been feeling. In bringing other people into the slow reading fold (most of whom were graduate students), the act of reading in silence among peers was motivating, inspiring, and comforting. Slow Reading Fridays was an invitation to resist

55 Folco Portinari, "Slow Food Manifesto," *Il Gambero Rosso* (1989), <https://www.gamberorossointernational.com/news/30-years-ago-gambero-rosso-published-the-slow-food-manifesto-here-is-the-complete-copy/>.

56 Benedikt Köhler, Sabria David, and Jörg Blumtritt, "The Slow Media Manifesto," 2010, <https://en.slow-media.net/manifesto>.

the loneliness and alienation of academic labor and a means of encouraging collegiality and solidarity in intellectual life and work. To slow things down in this realm represented a move towards prioritizing reading, one of the most foundational yet overlooked aspects of academic research culture.

One year later, the slow reading initiative would re-emerge, only this time in the form of our reading group dedicated to Sara Ahmed. “To live a feminist life,” Ahmed writes, “is to live in very good company.”⁵⁷ These slow reading activities have most notably increased my exposure to new companions and companion texts. It was at once exciting and reaffirming to read that Ahmed’s own participation in a feminist classics reading group remains, in her words, “one of my favorite experiences of feminist intellectual life thus far.”⁵⁸ Having now participated in Slow Reading initiatives and a reading group (both first-time experiences for me), I share in Ahmed’s validation of these practices as important forms of feminist praxis. To read groundbreaking feminist work is already a pleasurable, awe-inspiring, and challenging endeavor. To share in the (re-)discovery of this work is all the more powerful when others are involved and engaged in what has become an ongoing commitment to reciprocity and care. Continuing to read slowly, with others, during the pandemic has been one of many lifelines. In prioritizing the value of slow reading as a collective and shared experience, the act of reading feminist scholarship via Ahmed has opened new opportunities and pathways for group members to explore feminism and feminist politics in an atmosphere that encourages reflection and discussion at the same time that it has brokered new forms of friendship and solidarity.

“Slow reading, together” emerged as my toolkit item because it foregrounded the primacy of life and work (an inescapable convergence during the pandemic), all the while presenting a much-needed set of alternative arrangements for how one might go about reorienting everyday commitments and invest-

57 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 17.

58 Ibid.

ments. Among the many insights gleaned from making use of this toolkit item, I learned that there are different registers of reading, approaches to reading, and paths towards reconfiguring what counts as reading. As Max Liboiron argues, slow reading initiatives (and other such experiments) participate in the rejection of a self-maximizing economy of academic reading and writing. As such, they also create the conditions for social experiments to materialize as exchanges — not extractions — that can be leveraged for social change “based in imaginations of nongrowth.”⁵⁹ In liberating space(s) and paths for reconfigured modes of reading, our weekly meetings served as a lightning rod in sparking “the process and practice of collaboration as affective possibility” and as a welcome affirmation that “working in friendship could be a way to work outside of productivist demands.”⁶⁰

For Katherine McKittrick, sharing ideas relationally is a central practice underpinning our collective ways of knowing. Rather than mastering or centralizing “knowingness” through communication, referencing, or citation, McKittrick emphasizes the relational sharing of “how we know” and “how we came to know” as strategies for navigating life in all its contradictions and complexities. The practice of sharing ideas relationally has proven to be one of the most defining aspects of the group’s exchanges precisely because no single member has expressed dominance or expertise in relation to our reading or writing activities. Akin to Lauren Fournier’s appraisal of autotheoretical practices as presenting “ways of reading theory apart from ‘mastery,’”⁶¹ our reading group has cultivated an inviting, non-competitive, supportive, and nourishing environment for the sharing and exchange of challenging and complex ideas. Read-

59 Max Liboiron, “Exchanging,” in *Transmissions: Critical Tactics for Making and Communicating Research*, ed. Kat Jungnickel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 105.

60 Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 73.

61 Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 131.

ing feminist theory for purposes other than mastery has proven instrumental in sustaining group interest and in expanding the range of conversations and exchanges within the group. Because our disciplinary backgrounds are so broad and because no one has expressed interest in policing the boundaries of disciplinary thought, members of the group are offered a degree of leeway to engage with the readings without fear of reprisal or embarrassment. Much to the contrary, reading for purposes other than mastery invites a whole new realm of exchange to materialize.

To read alongside such a passionate and dedicated group of readers and thinkers has pushed me to reconsider my short- and long-term priorities as both teacher and researcher. One of the defining takeaways of this larger collaborative project for me has been to prioritize aliveness, connection, and joy in my work. Inspired by adrienne maree brown's provocative book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, the key questions I now pose are as follows: "Is it a pleasure to be with each other? Does the agenda or space allow for aliveness, connection, and joy? Is there a 'yes!' at the center of the work?"⁶² "Slow reading, together" as survival toolkit item has propelled me to explore in what ways this collaborative reading model might serve to increase pleasure, play, exhilaration, consumption, nourishment, metabolization, and rumination, and to consider how this model could be purposefully applied to academic labor for the better.⁶³

62 adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico: AK Press, 2019), 25.

63 Fournier, *Autotheory*, 79, 131–32.

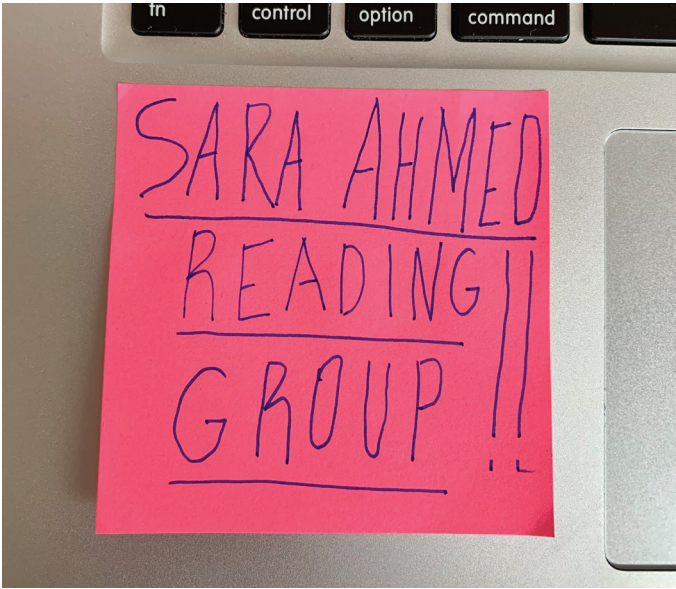


Fig. 12. Sara Ahmed Reading Group, Sticky Note. Photo by Ian Reilly, March 17, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Postscript

As much as academic labor sustains and inspires us to learn, write, teach, and work to preserve the common purposes that constitute the academy, so too does it deplete the strength and resolve of feminists to continue. The pandemic has magnified how much we need other forms of sustenance as we live in the tension of teaching for social justice and societal change while being part of static institutions and traditions preventing that change from being realized. As the toolkit describes, we help ourselves and one another survive by balancing emotions and rationality without self-recrimination; by nurturing new growth beyond the self and fostering reciprocity across difference; by appreciating anew lifelong comforts despite the pain they inevitably entail; by accepting vulnerability and brokenness as part of life; by laughing against and with and being able to discern the difference; by consoling oneself in the natural world and caring for its survival; and by deliberately slowing down in communion with others as the world speeds up.

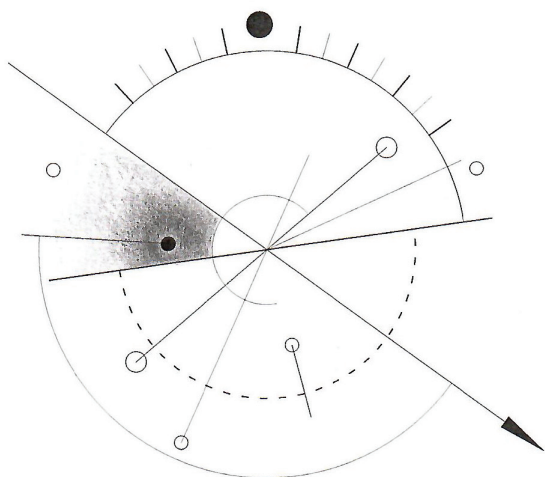


Fig. 13. A Compass for Nowhere #3. Drawing by Angela Henderson. March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Widening Available Scripts

In the killjoy manifesto that concludes *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed calls for the rejection and widening of scripts available for what counts as a good life. Such refusals or rearrangements create the room necessary to live a feminist life.¹ She advocates sharing stories, predicated not on “the life you were assumed or expected to have, but on the queer wanderings of a life you live.”² The creation of our collective feminist survival kit (included in the previous chapter) can be read as a collaborative attempt to widen available scripts through the sharing of stories and wanderings. Our reading group had been meeting on a weekly basis beginning in January 2020, and had already read four of Sara Ahmed’s works.³ The idea of collaborating on a loosely defined writing project gained traction during animated exchanges based on our reading of *Living a Feminist Life* during the long winter of 2020. During the spring and summer of that year, we

1 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 264.

2 *Ibid.*, 265.

3 *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); and *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

scheduled two weekly drop-in meeting times for group members to dedicate time to writing the fruits of what would become our individual survival kit entries and our collective feminist survival kit. These sessions created space for us to meet, connect, discuss, exchange ideas, and offer one another encouragement and support. Once sketches and drafts of our work were beginning to take shape, we circulated our individual pieces to the group to share our progress, invite feedback, and offer help. Individual entries were read with great care, generosity, humility, and gratitude.⁴

The process of creating a cohesive set of feminist survival kit entries inspired us to engage in a wide-ranging, self-reflexive, and open-ended discussion which we captured and recorded as a shared reference point for future collaboration and reflection. What follows is a condensed and edited excerpt from our two-hour recorded audio-video session in which we draw on our experiences in the reading group to discuss lived experiences, common themes, and through lines. We share the transcript to give readers a sense of our group dynamic as it unfolds; how we react to one another, listening with attention to one another's contributions, and shifting focus as new themes arise. We include this exchange in the hope that it will serve as an example of how discussions within academia and among academics about issues that are theoretical, power-laden, and even existential, can take place in a different mode than the often experienced adversarial one. Here, rather than seeing one another as competitors whose arguments we want to prove wrong, we open ourselves to the possibilities of listening with care and indeed of being persuaded and learning from the other. This mode of listening (and thus of talking) might seem like a minor and perhaps irrelevant detail in our rushed professional lives. However, it does change the rhythm and the goals of a conversation, opening up new avenues of engagement. We hope this

4 As of August 2023, we are taking a short break from regular meetings and planning our list of books for resumption of our reading together at a later date.

has been captured in the transcript of our conversation. Because the script is lengthy, presented with very little alteration save for moments when more clarity was called for, we have added five **signposts** that name key themes in each section.

IAN: The only other thing that I would recommend in terms of having a real engaged discussion would be to revisit why we came to be part of this group — for example, what was the idea behind attending the first meeting, the second, the third, and how does it compare with the current moment? And then beyond that, the one question I'm really interested in — because I think that it connects us all in some ways — is that we're all working in higher education, and so throughout I've been mentioning that one of the through lines that I see is around academic labor, and that we're trying to find different ways to do academic labor that are sustaining, meaningful, collaborative, and not somehow tethered to a neoliberal agenda, not tethered to any kind of star system [laughs], not tethered to the cultivation of ego, and so on. So, I feel like many of us were drawn to this group for very specific reasons.

In which members recount why they joined the group, how friendships developed through close reading together, and how Ahmed's work helped refine their understandings of work and labor.

Maybe I'll just begin by saying I was really drawn to this because I wanted to revisit some of Sara Ahmed's work and I also really wanted to read her words carefully and closely, but I was also in dialogue with Mariana and she was super excited, she got me very excited, and so part of it was also the opportunity to deepen my friendship with someone over the course of a semester where we could read someone really closely and that would give us a weekly excuse to spend time together, but also could enable us to do something really interesting. So that was, first and foremost, my attraction to the reading group, and then beyond that, I really like the

idea of reading with other people, which is something that is discouraged or completely missing or invisible. I thought it would be cool to participate in a reading group where people just arrived in a room with zero expectations and didn't have to lead the discussion (because we spend more or less all of the time at the front of the classroom leading the discussion). We can just show up and discuss works that we're not experts in and just really enrich our sense of what some of this feminist theory and philosophy has to offer under the guise of reading someone as dynamic as Sara Ahmed. So that's how I would try to begin that little thread.

SCOTT: Do you remember in one of the last sessions where we talked about *What's the Use?*, we had this exchange about how Ahmed's voice has changed with this book that I thought was, like, a really interesting moment where we were all realizing that we had sort of — and I think people have mentioned this throughout the, you know, the work that we've done — developed a lexicon of Ahmed-ian terms, but then even started to think through the grammar that she uses and, like, you know what I mean? The particularities of her way of writing — I thought that was a really kind of important moment where we all realized that we had become friends through this one writer and we had become friends with that writer, too. We have developed an affinity for other people through this, like, one writer. So I think that's definitely a consistent theme, and you're right to say that, like, I just searched the word “work” in our collective writing document⁵ — it is in the document sixty-four times. So this document is about work in a weird way: whether we know it, or like it or not, it's about work. We have to reconcile ourselves with work and all that it drains out of us, basically. And it seems like, Ian, what you get out of it is this idea that friendship is the counter-agent to what is draining about work. It's like you make the work feel less like work by making it this shared secret that

5 This refers to the manuscript for this book.

you have with other people, you know. Like, this is our thing, right? It's sectioned off from everything else.

IAN: That's a great point, Scott.

MARIANA: I'm curious to see the places where work comes up because I think one difference too is the difference between work and labor, right?

[murmurs of agreement]

MARIANA: And then many times we use the word work to refer to a bunch of other things that are not necessarily labor. And so, I wonder how and to what extent this distinction plays out here.

SCOTT: Yeah, it's more than just a semantic difference. It's not as though work is to labor as stories are to narrative, you know what I mean? Like, we sometimes do this thing where we punch up *story* by calling it *narrative*. Sometimes we may be doing that when we use labor instead of work, but there's also — I just know, like I kind of cycled through some of the instances of work coming up in the document — we're also of course talking about Ahmed's work, which is about a corpus, it's about a body of writing, and that's a different sense of what work means. It comes up in, really, it seems like there is at least half a dozen different registers that we're using for work in this document, which is weird [laugh] in a sense, right? But I guess that's part of autoethnography in a funny way because we're trying to blend so many different, you know, different sources of pressure and different ways that we have been constructed as people, then necessarily we have to use work with all these different valances. But we're doing it. We've done it without even really realizing it, I think, because we have to use the terms, I guess [laugh], but yeah. In theory, like in terms of critical theory, the most — like, it just popped into my head that the way to use work is in the

work of mourning. When we're talking about work, the most weighty thing that has the most ... gravity in critical theory is this idea of the work of mourning something where you're responding to some disastrous event, and you have to do some kind of psychological, spiritual work to kind of rebuild the self, right? And it makes me think of the whole section in *Cultural Politics of Emotion* where Ahmed is thinking about forgiveness and the work of mourning and these national contexts of trying to rebuild a collective sense of self, right? But there's ...

IAN: So, Mariana, I was just wondering: can you elaborate a bit more on the distinction between labor and work and which one do you think is the most prevalent for the group?

MARIANA: Yeah, so when I think of the difference between labor and work, I think work is a much broader term, which we often use as a metaphor for things that are "working." It means things are going well, right? We use it a lot as "Ahmed's work," but it's actually her contribution, it's not necessarily work. While [with] "labor," I see it more like this material investment into turning something, getting some material stuff—like wood or paint or paper—and turning it into something else. So this is definitely work in that sense. In one way we are taking up words and readings and ideas and turning them into collective writing, so that's definitely work, and there's definitely labor there, but when I think about work, it's this much broader sense in which work becomes just a metaphor for talking about a whole lot of other things that do not necessarily mean this material investment into producing something, into creating something, into bringing something to life. For me, that's labor.

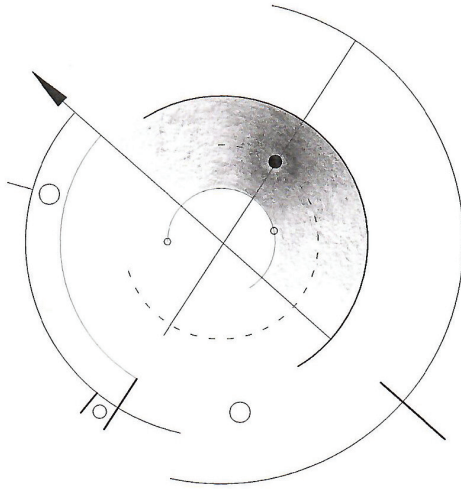


Fig. 14. *A Compass for Nowhere #4*. Drawing by Angela Henderson, March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

IAN: Does anyone else want to say a brief word on why they came to this group and how that's evolved over time?

Describing our desire to build community in academic lives, share feminist interests, and learn from Ahmed's standing up for diversity work.

ANGELA: I could, yeah. I don't know, I thought it was an interesting opportunity to kind of explore ideas with people that aren't—I don't know how to say it—like, aren't things that come up in the kind of ... they are things that come up, but I thought it would be interesting to explore Ahmed's work and some of these ideas that aren't people I typically spend time with. Like, not personally, but in a work-related sense. So, I kind of see it in terms of doing the work or, you know, doing the work that's required, I think, of people, especially people in positions of privilege. It seems to me, like, I don't want to say good housekeeping but in a way, holding a posi-

tion — be it full-time or part-time — in an academic institution, requires of myself to think more deeply about the effects of the things that I teach, or my relationships with students, or you know, would I participate, in terms of activism within the university and in relation to other causes. Kind of substantiating the belief systems that I associate myself with, if that makes sense. It feels like work that needs to be done.

It's like, two years ago I joined the Black Lives Matter reading group that was hosted by a couple of people, because it just seems like the work that you have to supplement your career with. And that sounds so cold ... I mean, I think that's just the work of people in places of privilege [laughs], if that makes sense. So doing that work is laboring in the sense that this has felt very much like a kind of self-reflective place and asking myself hard questions, and then being able to unpack that within a space like this.

IAN: Thanks, Angela. I'm just going to be the moderator for this little round, so who would like to go next?

MARIANA: I think my story relates a lot to Ian's. There were some ways in which Sara Ahmed's writings seemed relevant to me at that point for my own post-doctorate research. I was going to read some of her writings in any case and then we saw the books and talked about it. I have always, at least since undergrad, had a reading group going on. This has always been the way in which I like to engage things. I remember during law school, during my Masters, and my PhD, I always had a reading group on the side happening and this was a good way of keeping me disciplined but it's also so much more engaging, and so much nicer, I learn so much from this. And coming here [to Halifax] to do work that would be very lonely because my research is conceptual and I'd be sitting in my office — like, I'd really be writing on my own for so many hours, it seemed like being in a space with other people would be really nice. And also knowing very few people in the city, it was a way to make new friends and establish new

relationships and get to know what people around here are thinking about. Like, what are they talking about, what are their politics? For me it was an interesting way as well just to engage with the community, get to know the academic scene here and to find out who the academic people are. Yeah, so I think it had all these different dimensions; it was a professional interest but there was also this very personal nurturing, like being in a space and feeling part of a community in a place that was unknown.

IAN: Well said! [laughs] Who would like to go next?

[silence]

SCOTT: I can, I suppose. I'll say something briefly ... I was just, in a state of sort of personal crisis [laughs], you might say. I was desperate to, I think, in a sense go outside of my comfort zone and get comfortable with being uncomfortable. And for me, I've got pre-existing social anxiety that prevents me from doing what this entails, right? Which is, you know, getting to know anyone. Getting to know someone [laughs] is just such a Herculean task in my mind. But that pre-existing social anxiety was outweighed for me by that, you know, pre-existing interest in talking about text, so it was an uncomfortable thing but also there was a lot of comfort to be had in knowing that I was going to a group that was really oriented around the kind of thing that I like doing. So, it's been good, it was the thing that I try and describe it as, like you say, Mariana, something that was nurturing and receptive and really non-hierarchical, which are all of the things that are really valuable when you're trying to do something that is uncomfortable, right? So, it's been very good.

IAN: Thanks, Scott.

LINDSEY: I'll expand on that because I think my reason for joining this group is somewhat similar to Scott's in that I

was actively seeking to be made uncomfortable. At the time I was more drawn into the social aspect of it rather than the reading material. Of course, I soon learned that the material would be very challenging [laughs] and would foster some discomfort. I'd honestly never heard of Sara Ahmed before — the topic of feminism doesn't come up very often, unless you're in like, very progressive critical librarianship circles. And I would say that in Atlantic Canada those circles are not super big. So, it's not something I've really had the chance to talk about very often, and I thought it would be an opportunity for me to broaden my horizons by engaging with theory and thinking about how those concepts relate to my field and the way that I operate in my own discipline. But of course, I was most interested in community as well. So, yeah, I mean there's many other reasons, but I think those were, to me, the big ones.

IAN: Thanks, Lindsey.

ELLEN: I can go next. As you guys know, I didn't actually join the group until we started reading *What's the Use?*, although Ian did graciously invite me to join from the beginning, but I wasn't able to. The reason I wanted to join — and followed through in April — is that I'd heard of Sara Ahmed for quite a long time in my work, but had never read her, and I was at a conference last summer at the Open University in the UK and I got to hear Priyamvada Gopal speak.⁶ She works at the University of Cambridge currently, and she was sort of reflecting on the whole Sara Ahmed quitting Goldsmiths kind of thing, and some of the challenges she faced there. So, since seeing that particular speech I was really, really interested to just learn more about Sara Ahmed and to start reading

6 Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (New York: Verso, 2019).

her.⁷ So yeah, in a weird way I came to this group and to Sara Ahmed through another academic who does really interesting work and is often a person of controversy in the UK. So yeah, I'm really happy that I was able to join even if it was just for one book, I've got a lot out of it.

IAN: Thanks, Ellen. Michelle, can you give us a sense of why you joined the group, and what the original attraction or motivation was?

MICHELLE: Ian, first of all, when did you send the first notice out, do you remember? To join the group, when was the first notice?

IAN: It might have been in December [2019], mid-to-late December, and then things came together very early in January [2020] — probably January 2nd or January 3rd.

MICHELLE: Okay. Right, yes, okay. So, the reason I ask is because I'm just trying to put it into perspective in terms of what was happening for me. I'd been off on sick leave and I was recovering, and when that message came out it's probably just when I started to get back on to email, paying attention to things, and I assumed I'd be back to work in the winter term, and although I didn't get back until the beginning of February, I was keen to join the group because ... off and on for the last or prior to the fall of last year, 2019, for the five years prior, I've been working intermittently on a book with

7 In the version of the resignation letter she made public on her blogsite, Ahmed says: "I have resigned in protest against the failure to address the problem of sexual harassment. I have resigned because the costs of doing this work have been too high [...]. Sometimes we have to leave a situation because we are feminists." See Sara Ahmed, "Resignation," *feministkilljoys*, May 30, 2016, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2016/05/30/resignation/>. In *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), Ahmed gives a detailed account of how diversity practitioners experience institutional resistance in the form of symbolic commitments to diversity not backed by meaningful action.

a colleague, and it wasn't until we got, really to the end of the book, to the conclusion, that we came to some knowledge of the work of Sara Ahmed. The book is on feminist pedagogy and teacher education, so when I saw that I thought, well this is a wonderful opportunity, I had been meaning to read *Living a Feminist Life* so, you know, I wasn't sure whether I would be drawn into her earlier works or not, I didn't know enough about her other than, like Ellen, I was impressed with her taking a stand against the abuse of diversity work in her institution, if you will.

Ian's reply back to me was so welcoming at the very beginning I thought okay, this is going to be lovely, it'll be an opportunity to have a kind of study group that I've never had a chance to be part of since grad school. You get a position, you work with people, but in education of course we're all in different disciplines, so there wasn't really a sense of camaraderie. I lost my last compatriot in philosophy of education some years ago, so I'm the sole philosopher in a faculty of education. From the kind of pure philosophy point of view, I'm in an applied area, so I don't really have that much in common with them either, so it was a wonderful opportunity and from the very first meeting I knew that this was a really bright, committed group of people and I thought wow, how fortunate I am at this late stage in my career to be able to be part of such a thing. So yeah, it's been great, and it's only become more interesting as time has gone on and we've got to know one another a little better, and have had the privilege of working together, you know, with our writing which, then again, the writing aspect of it to me — all these wonderful writers, yeah, it's just been a gift, so thank you all.

SCOTT: Thank you! We've certainly benefited from you being a very vocal, active part of the group. It's been fantastic being in conversation with you too, Michelle.

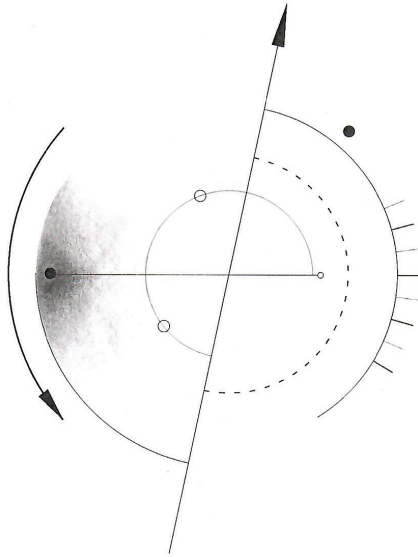


Fig. 15. *A Compass for Nowhere #5*. Drawing by Angela Henderson. March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

IAN: So, can I also just prod everyone a little bit to ... I'm wondering if anyone would like to talk about this idea of academic labor and how it pertains to the group, either in relation to Sara Ahmed or more generally. Because I do feel like that is a key piece and I would like to know what others feel. I've stated my position and my sense of where it fits but I'm curious to hear more, or maybe I'm wrong and maybe there's another point of entry or set of points of entry that are of interest. I'm just curious about what other people's thoughts are on this question of academic labor.

Considering tensions between collaboration and competition, mutual care and individualism, creativity and performativity, loving work you do, and romanticizing academic labor.

MICHELLE: Could I ask, Ian, for someone to read it to me, because I don't have the visual here?

IAN: Oh, there's no real question about the area of academic labor that interests me; I can speak from my own experience. I feel like for some time, there are aspects of academic work and labor that I perform year-to-year that don't give me the kind of satisfaction that I need, and also the pressures of academia are such that pleasure, and joy, and wonder, and curiosity, and imagination are almost always sidelined in the interests of just producing work that you can then publish and churn out — add another publication, add another check mark, add another — you know, add another line to your cv. And for me, I've been actively seeking to cultivate something different, something that isn't adding to my anxiety, doesn't add to my workload, doesn't add to my stress, doesn't add to my perceived need to be competitive or to be even better at my job than I already am, whatever that means.

So, for me the question of academic labor was, is this group attractive to us because, you know, this is the least important thing you can do in terms of your cv? By the way, I will include this on my cv, and I think it's an important line on any cv, but a tenure and promotion committee will not care about this at all. And I do. I really do care about this. I think that part of the attraction was to do something for joy, for wonder, for curiosity, for collegiality, for reasons that do not compute within neoliberal higher education. And to me, I'm sort of wondering if this is one manifestation of how we can think about doing academic labor differently, and if there are different ways of doing it, I would like to be part of that conversation and I would like to push things forward. I know that there's only so much that one can do, but I think that at the moment the models are important and I think that getting people excited about different ways of collaborating is vital, and encouraging people to move outside of the goalposts, or to expand the range of what's possible, even if it may not get you promoted, you know, in that sort of crass careerist way

... In terms of labor, can we just think differently about what we do, and can we introduce different elements that make it a more satisfying and meaningful endeavor? That's what I was getting at, Michelle.

MICHELLE: Thank you.

LINDSEY: I do find it interesting that we joined this group without having the expectation that we would get something "tangible" out of it. Especially, you know, these aren't light readings, this takes time, it takes commitment, if you choose to be committed, and I know I already feel overwhelmed with my workload [laughs], so to carve out those two hours of time every week, and then the additional time to actually do the reading and to think about it — that's quite substantial.

So I do think about that common sense, whether we articulate it or not, but that common sense that something's missing, as you said, Ian, that would drive us to make that significant commitment when I always feel like there's something else I could be doing, something more productive. I could be, you know, writing all these other things, and yet, deliberately choosing to spend this other time on something that I didn't think would ever, as you say, go on my CV, or be considered useful for my tenure and promotion that's coming up in the fall. I think that level of commitment does speak to something underlying in all of us — whatever it may be — that was looking for something different and was willing to put that time aside when we maybe always have those little voices in our head saying, we could be doing something different or more productive, and yet still choosing to ignore that voice.

ELLEN: Yeah, I agree Lindsey. I think that for me, the thing that you're speaking about is resistance, which is kind of a ... I don't know if anybody else has this feeling, but one of the positives that I see in carving out this time is that it does seem to be, to me, a small active resistance to that norm. I guess as Ian has said, you know, making that model of what

things could look like, I think that's really important. I especially think it's interesting we're all at different stages in our careers. As you guys know, I'm still writing my thesis and still hoping to defend, still hoping I get there, and it is hard to commit to something like this with that hanging over my head [laughs]. But committing to it was, like, that act of resistance that kind of makes my thesis more possible somehow. And then interestingly for me, even just reading *What's the Use?*, it's now part of my thesis, you know — the path metaphor has given me a way to explain a crucial thing in my thesis that I think is so accessible, and so useful [laughs]. So, there's unexpected gifts from this time in addition to helping me feel better about the system that I'm complicit in, to some degree.

SCOTT: Can I say some things? I think about the blend of my own career path with the rise of this kind of discourse of intellectual labor, immaterial labor, the creative economy, which has got this kind of neo-Marxist flavor, right? Like, this attempt to theorize what seems to be hegemonic today, which is the commodification of ideas, the commodification of innovation itself and communication itself. It seems like they're telling PhD students now that they shouldn't just be doing what they're doing, but they need to be thinking about all of the alternative possibilities, all of the different ways that they can apply their knowledge beyond just the knowledge part of it, the part of it which is just engaging with text. You have to think about, well, maybe I can get a job in the health sector, or this or that sector. This is really what it seems to me intellectual labor becoming hegemonic has represented. Like, you are just looking at the possibility of exploitation as a privilege. You're just desperately looking for a means to be exploited in whichever sector is available to you with your specific specialization.

So, I think about the fact that I've had to grow accustomed to the fact that I am perpetually part-time, right? That's my situation, I've spent eight years chasing contracts throughout

the city, and talking with friends about how I can diversify my portfolio after seeing this growing hegemony of the gig economy to really produce subjects that can do this kind of impossibly diverse set of tasks. And the podcast that I produce now comes out of that impetus to just create some form of labor, some piece of creative work that is not cookie-cutter academic, I guess. But it comes with its own pressures, I would say. That's the real emphasis for me, you really feel constantly uncomfortable even curating the content you consume, the things you read — nothing can be wasteful, it all has to kind of feed into the crafting of a specific intellect that itself becomes a form of labor. And I find that kind of odd.

But in this group, the whole point has been to reflect on that stuff, and to even — like, there are notes throughout our document about trying to think outside of cultural capital, not see this just in terms of representing ourselves in terms of our tastes and our egos, right, like how we associate the things we consume with who we are, moving outside of that kind of logic of individualism.

On that point of the usefulness of this kind of activity itself, having these kinds of conversations: I have to be rigorously honest with myself too about how I, on some level, think that I gravitated to this experience of dwelling with the uncomfortable, like, socially anxious series of exchanges because there was in the back of my mind some kind of careerist motive of like, I'm making connections. I don't know anybody in the universities that I work in. I am a part-timer who works seemingly for no-one and with no-one [laughs]. So, this is me simulating something almost like an administrative aspect of my labor, right, by speaking with other academics who are all at these different stages, tenured, not tenured, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So, it's like, was I trying to, on some level, insinuate myself from outside, or was it just purely about the pursuit of like, a conversation about ideas? I don't know. There are elements of these things at play.

ANGELA: Yeah, I feel like I can relate in some ways to that, like, some of what you're saying, like, the motivations about joining something like this. I feel like as a part-time person there's so few supports in place for, in ways that are, like, you know, where you can actually take time and kind of commit to your own development as, like, I don't know, an academic or an artist or writer or whatever it is, that stuff always has to be done on top of and outside of your professional obligations. Which, you want to do too, because obviously we're all invested in, you know, creating [laughs], but — where am I going with that? — I have found this group, and even though I didn't read *What's the Use?* with you folks, I am reading *What's the Use?*, and I find that, like, this sort of peer-to-peer kind of support system or network that we've created here has kind of given me tools to work with. For example, the class that I'm teaching right now is an online class that was written and designed by someone else, who at the last minute had to withdraw from teaching it. So, I was given this class at, like, the last minute, and when I look at the curriculum, you know, it's just ... it's populated with, you know, this basically white male Eurocentric perspective in design that's all sort of geared around why we form emotional connections to things. So, I'm looking at it, I'm like shit, this is a ton of work to re-think this, but I can't teach this [laughs] at the same time. And it sort of exposes these flaws in this kind of automated system that the university seems to be so excited about, with the prospect of going online. So, I feel like this — like, you folks — in conversation with you and then Sara Ahmed's texts have in some way given me tools to be able to act in relation to this specific instance — this curriculum — in ways that maybe those things would have taken a lot more time and energy to assemble. Just in terms of citation ... and there were things more readily at hand because we're here having these conversations. So, yeah, I think that's one of the big kind of ways that I relate this work to academic work. It makes me also — sorry, just to add — I can't remember what text it's from, but the idea that Sara Ahmed brings

up when she talks about how a system is working when an attempt to challenge that system is unsuccessful, essentially. And so, I feel like in some ways what this is, our ways of figuring out how to do the work we need to do within a system that kind of thwarts those attempts or doesn't offer those supports.

MICHELLE: Yeah, yeah. Wow. Well, I guess to the first point about, you know, why this—I think it was Ellen who was saying—how despite the fact that we have no time for anything more, somehow we managed to fit it into our schedules because it gives us something. Well, it's reminding me of—again, to go back to the fact that I've had to kind of change my life in many ways, having this health challenge—I have a new appreciation for the purpose of exercise as something other than pure pleasure, and so it seems to me it's like that, you know, by doing whatever that regime is, one gets more from it than it takes to make it happen, even though it may seem like the last thing you want to do at the time. But unlike this, on the other hand, whereby it's always been a pleasure, I've always wanted to come, but if it had been a physical [in-person] meeting—and this takes us to the situation we're in now—I would have missed multiple meetings, I'm sure by now. I would have perhaps started to feel somewhat disconnected from the work.

How all of that plays into the larger question of academic labor: I mean, the university itself—the concept of bicameral governance—places us in a situation where we're beholden to management all the time. Yes, we're paid a salary, but then when we want to use our expertise—that which we've spent years and thousands of dollars attaining—we are pushed back all the time because the more creative the ideas are, the less likely they are to take hold in a system that is so risk-averse now. I had a faculty position, the first one in the late 1990s, and from that time to now has been this push where things have changed dramatically. I've always heard my older colleagues commenting on how different things

are today than they used to be. There isn't the kind of grace, there isn't the room given for creativity. And what I think makes it increasingly — what should I say — increasingly oppressive, and beats one down, is the fact that there's all the rhetoric about the importance of innovation and creativity, even though we know it's a very limited version. So, if you think beyond that version, which you have to, otherwise it's not creative, it's like art — I mean, if it fits every definition that exists already, well then it's nothing new, so what exactly is it but an academic exercise? Then it doesn't fit with board policies, with fiscal policies, etcetera. It becomes increasingly difficult for people to take a chance on something that is really new, not simply a pretense.

Also, my faculty association is comprised of a full-time faculty complement with no part-timers, as is the case at some universities where members' needs become fractured and different, leaving little energy for upholding the idea of the tenured position, of someone actually having the expertise that they should be given the room to do these things. The more tenure is beaten back, the harder it is to progress in the academy with either something very innovative, or with anything that breaks the mold entirely, like what we're talking about here, so a lot of my energy over the years has been spent trying to change wording in the collective agreement to open things up more, and I think the largest challenge that we have at the moment is how do we decolonize the collective agreement? How do we begin to think our way through what it means to recognize traditional Indigenous knowledge as on a par with Western knowledge? And we can't do that alone obviously because we're trapped within our own paradigms.

So, I think that anything that offers an opportunity for people to come together across disciplines, across the life cycle and across general interest, it's a wonderful thing. I mean, a book group has always appealed to me, but I have never had the time in my social life to join a book group, say in my own town or whatever. My pleasure reading is something I

do on my own. I don't have time to be on another kind of rota system with another group, but this was an opportunity to read things with others, and I think ultimately what it shows is the power of good writing and clear, rigorous — forgive the word — analysis of life conditions, which is what Ahmed is doing, and she's doing so in such a creative way that we were all captivated by it and carried along.

I guess academic labor then, to go back to Mariana's distinction — and forgive me, I didn't hear the beginning of this conversation about work versus labor — the labor becomes a kind of creative work under certain conditions that the two merge, and it seems to me that the works that we've been reading by Ahmed have been the medium for that. They have brought those two things together in a way where they're seamless: there is no distinction between work and labor when you're doing something you love to do.

SCOTT: I'm wondering what Ellen might have to say about that, because I remember you talking specifically about your understanding of the Protestant work ethic and how it tends to blur the meaning of work and labor and how it ... you know what I mean? Anyway, I remember [laughs] you saying something about that — not to put you on the spot.

[silence]

ELLEN: Yeah, I was just thinking about what Michelle was saying there. Michelle, you just said so many really captivating things and I think — as Scott said — very, very often in this Western context, I think a lot about the Protestant ethic, which I think is one of the things that people sort of ignore, right? We just don't think that it's impacting our world the way it is, but so much of our lives is based in how powerful that ethic has become, and you know, Michelle, the last thing you said about how work and labor kind of collapse when you're doing something that you love. I'm not a hundred percent sure how to express what I want to say about that, but I

think it's problematic, that whole rhetoric around, if you do a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life [laughs]. It's like, no, you still work, you're still exploited for your labor regardless of how much you love it, and Scott, I think that you were touching on those threads as well.

I just think it's such a complex issue, and in academia, we're supposed to love it, right? Like, why else have we all gone through this journey of getting all the degrees and going through all the torture. The implicit idea, I think, is that we're supposed to love it because we're here, and because we're supposed to love it, we're supposed to work ourselves to the bone, and that's why resistance comes up in how I think about this, I guess, because I don't want to work myself to the bone [laughs]. I don't, and I won't. I will work a balanced life. And people tell me, well, you can't do that, and there's so much about, "you're a good academic, or you're a good Protestant if you have this ethic, if you work constantly." I just see a lot of parallels and a lot of stuff around the problematic nature of loving work or having our passion be something that's also work [laughs]. I don't think that's very poignant, but yeah, there's a lot to think about and unpack there, so thanks Scott and Michelle.

Challenges of public accountability, differential exploitation of academic laborers, idealist's trap, working with the problems, reading together as implicit institutional critique.

MARIANA: I think I understand what both of you are saying and I think I agree with both of you. First, to Ellen, I completely agree that there is a certain romanticization of what academic labor and academia is — that it speaks

to something that is almost, like, this is not really work, that what we're doing is completely different from what other workers do. I think this speaks to privilege, right? Who can really aspire to an academic career, who can really aspire to a full-time job, and then once you get there, you are something outside — completely different from the person who's

taking out the garbage, waiting tables at a restaurant, or sewing clothes in a sweatshop. But I think there also needs to be an acknowledgement that our academic careers, they are indeed very privileged in society, right? Most people do work that they really hate, and they just have to do it because that is how the system works. They do not at all associate or see themselves in the product of their work at all, and in our case, when we finish up a paper or when we do a presentation at a conference, this is so deeply connected to our identity that those products are us us too, right? I consider that for all of us who are in this group, we would certainly not sign off and put our names on a piece of research or a paper that we do not fully agree with. So, I think there is this difficulty in acknowledging that, yes, this is work because there is this deep, personal investment that someone who is working in a factory and just putting a piece in a car and who will never, ever see the final result of their labor does not have. I think there are very different degrees of alienation in work. But then, at the same time, this allows for claiming an elitist position, which I think is very problematic. So, on the one hand, I think there's a need to acknowledge that the level of alienation of academic work is very different from most of the work out there, and this is an immense privilege. But because this is a privilege, it does not make us an elite, but rather it makes us even more accountable to the public, right? It even requires of us that we ensure that whatever knowledge we're producing is socially relevant, that it fulfills a social purpose. Otherwise, it's just a complete waste of resources, which in the end are public resources.

It's also not only done by one individual, brilliant mind, right? I think this is a way of luring people into academia, making you believe that you are truly special, that you are a genius, that it is only about your own mind and your peak capacity of doing important things, when in reality — all of us — we are products of lots of collective labor, we can only be who we are as academics because we have lots of incredible teachers, we have colleagues with whom we share ideas,

we have students from whom we learn on an everyday basis, so ideas are always collective. But I think it's this very difficult position. I can say that I also see myself so much in what Michelle was saying, just because prior to coming here, I was working at a law firm as a lawyer. And even though I really enjoyed working on the cases, I was totally on board with the politics of the law firm, which were good for workers and their unions—I was totally on board politically with what I was doing—there was a very, very hierarchical situation there in which I had to be there every day from nine to six. I could not attend academic conferences, I could not do the things that I wanted to do unless I had permission, and when I was doing those, days were deducted from my vacation. So, for me, engaging with academia during that time was my leisure, it was my pleasure. I would agree with them deducting days that I would go to a conference from my vacation, because for me it was a vacation rather than sitting in an office. Instead, I'm here with people learning things, engaging with ideas that are relevant for me. All of this complexity makes academia a difficult space. How do we acknowledge that it's a super privileged kind of work in our society, especially if you have a tenure-track or tenured position, and at the same time, there is inherent hierarchy, exclusion, and marginalization built into the system? What does that make us? I think that makes us even more responsible and accountable for the work that we are producing, and it requires us to see that we are not some enlightened elite, but rather the product of a lot of collective work behind us and sustaining us.

IAN: I would add one thing to that, which is that, you know, given the—and I know that the hierarchies within higher education are clear, and every step of the way you're reminded of where you are on the ladder—I just feel like it is a privileged type of work, and a privileged kind of labor, and I see so many of my colleagues around me who feel as though the exploitation within higher education is so great that they lose sight of the actual work that they're doing, and they lose sight

of all of the good things that they contribute as educators. It sours the well, and I think that it trickles down in a truly consequential way where students are impacted, and the people around us are also impacted.

Having seen that firsthand — not only myself, but with my colleagues and friends — I want to find a way to resist this knee-jerk reaction, which is to say, “It’s all exploitation.” I want to be able to embrace the idea that this is probably one of the best jobs you could hope for, but to find a way to make the labor joyful, you know? And I think that if you can figure out that piece, which is why I started a Slow Monday and a Slow Friday reading group, just to recapture some joy in what I was doing at the time, and to allow that to spread outwardly, and allowed for me to not indulge the kneejerk reaction, which is, “Wow, I am exploited through and through in the work that I do,” even though I have the most fantastic job, the job I’ve been wanting my whole adult life. I just feel like the privilege is something that we take for granted, and I think that part of the reason for it is because the exploitation that is felt is deep, and the dissatisfaction is also clear. So, what are the ways in which we can reposition ourselves among our friends and our colleagues to improve the conditions on the ground to make the work great? We have these positions that are essentially ... we work on behalf of the public, we work on behalf of the citizenry, right? And so, we want to own up to those responsibilities and those duties, and those roles, and do the best possible work. So, I don’t know, I just feel like there’s something in there that if we can get the conditions right to acknowledge just how good it is and to also make it feel like it’s good — then potentially really good — that softens the edges, because work is work after all, but it doesn’t have to be grueling in the way that some of the neoliberal manifestations of it make it feel.

ELLEN: Yeah, I want to respond to that, Ian, because I think what you just said there at the end about the neoliberal manifestations, everything is about privilege, if you are a full-time

faculty member, if you are on a tenure-track, there is so much privilege that comes with it, but you come to that, if you're lucky enough, following a life as a graduate student that — unfortunately for many — is very, very tenuous and fragile, and doesn't feel all that much different sometimes than less privileged work. And I think there's a holding onto that. It's almost so hard to believe, when you have it — I mean, I'm just imagining because I don't have it — but it's one of those things that maybe stays, because at the end of the day, you are part of this system that within universities is becoming increasingly neo-liberalized, increasingly commodified, and it's easy to see why it's hard sometimes to really feel that joy. I think it's so important to find those opportunities but also to be finding those opportunities that you can actively dismantle some of the things that prevent us from finding the joy so that we can make sense of the privilege and use the privilege, and be accountable in the ways that we want to use them, not filling out forms and sitting on committees — that's not what we want to be accountable to the public for, right? We want to be doing things that matter, and there's a lot of divorce there [laughs], from what I imagine it used to be. I know things were never perfect, but ... I think it was Michelle who was saying there's less space for creativity, and in order to make use of the privileged position we need to actively work to try to get rid of some of the bureaucratization.

LINDSEY: Good points, Ellen and Ian. They bring me back to the Collective Survival Kit and some of the questions that Michelle posed in her section on autoethnography, particularly the points about joy. That was something that I know I commented on. The survival kit that Ahmed has put together does include joy, used as something that gets you through the hard times, and allows you to take the action that's needed in order to transform and make these changes. I think it does go back to some of those questions — what are we writing for? What are we accomplishing with this, you know? How are we contributing — or not — to dismantling that hierarchy

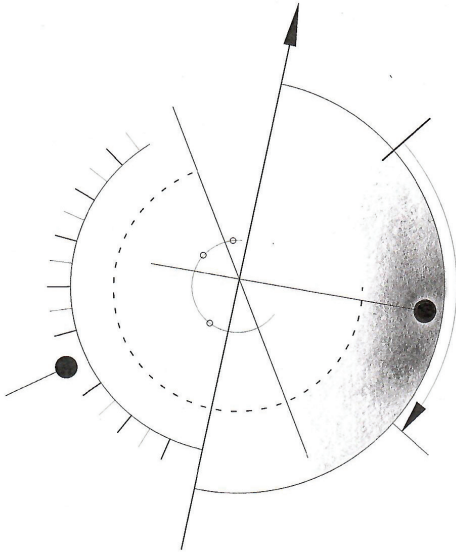


Fig. 16. *A Compass for Nowhere #6*. Drawing by Angela Henderson. March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

and the systemic problems that occur in higher education that put those barriers up for people who are not white, cis-gendered, etcetera. It really does point back quite clearly to what we've been doing and some of those questions about why we're doing it, and maybe what we want to accomplish with this writing.

MICHELLE: You know, if I may chime in here, a lot of what's been said and the tone, once we start to talk about the rigors of the demands, etc., and the way in which we're exploited ... one of the major ways in which we're exploited is because we care about our students, and the way in which our tendency to care about students is used against us: "Oh yes, you can take more because we don't have people to teach them, oh yes, you can make yourself available when you have no time

left.” When it comes to bargaining time that’s always a huge bargaining chip as well.

What came to mind was Isaiah Berlin, he talks about two different types of thinkers: the hedgehog and the fox, and the hedgehog is interested in coming up with the one big thing and the fox is satisfied with all kinds of small things, and I think what happens to us, by virtue of the fact that we go into teaching and writing and scholarship the way we all have, I think we’re perhaps all idealists somewhere deep down — or we wouldn’t keep going — and it seems to me that that’s the idealists’ trap, that the one big thing has to be accomplished. So, it’s a continual search for completing the one big thing and every time you feel you’ve reached and surpassed one of those hurdles, it turns out not to have been the big thing you thought it would be. The best kept secret in post-secondary education is that getting a tenure-track position is just the start of a whole new set of ladders that one has to go through. And so it seems to me that the more we can make this clear to our students early on, explaining to them when it comes time for these anonymous ratings of instruction, exactly what happens to these things, and how it matters what they put, and not to be glib about it, and if you can’t say something instructive, well, just be aware that this could be the difference between that person getting tenure or not getting tenure — things of that nature. It’s the trap of the idealist — don’t let best get in the way of the good.

scott: Could I add something to that? I keep flashing back to this line in Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion* at the end where she’s been really condemning love as a force for pages upon pages, and then she says, “we must love the visions we have.”⁸ I think there’s a way in which love for Ahmed is tainted because in this context what we’re saying is, loving one’s work to such an extent that our identities are bound up with it, is challenging and potentially destructive. It’s too solipsistic,

8 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 141.

we're too much the hedgehog trying to come up with some breakthrough. People like Timothy Brennan have talked about how particular theorists have operated almost in an oracular mode of knowledge production where they're trying to predict the future basically, rather than dwell with the present.⁹ I think we can love the visions we have and not make our own self-love or self-care dependent on the quality or impact of those visions. That's when work becomes maybe more enjoyable because it isn't shot through with all of this pressure around performance and impact.

The cartoon that I briefly shared ... kind of conveys this point nicely [and] the next episode of the podcast is a discussion with [the cartoonist,] graphic novelist Summer Pierre.¹⁰ She struggles with anxiety, especially around her work, and she made this mini comic called *If You Are Lucky* which is about the release of her first major graphic novel, which was nominated for awards. It's literally nine panels in which she goes from being in love with the vision that she had, feeling so grateful that it's out into the world, and then kind of falling apart with feeling disconnected from the perceived impact she felt it was going to have, right? And then she says, in a thought bubble: "I guess I'll just go back to making comics." It's this whole dialectic that we have with loving the visions we have, pinning too much on their performance, how it will ultimately help us transition into a successful career, and then not having that experience and not knowing what to do with the disappointment of not actually having that experience.

[silence]

9 Timothy Brennan, "Resolution," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (2005): 409.

10 Summer Pierre, *All the Sad Songs* (Philadelphia: Retrofit Comics, 2018), 75. Scott Stoneman, host, "Summer Pierre Captures the Ways that Music Moves Us and Images Come to Matter," *Pretty Heady Stuff*, 2020, <https://soundcloud.com/user-650466923/15-summer-pierre-on-depicting-the-ways-that-music-moves-us-and-how-images-come-to-matter>.

SCOTT: But one quick follow-up: I think, Mariana, your thoughts on being accountable to something other, and Ellen, you just trying to actually do something in the world, that's hopefully the purpose of writing in this instance, right? Trying to be answerable to a set of radical goals. We see with the firing of NSCAD's president [Nova Scotia College of Art and Design]¹¹ that actual, radical, structural change is met with hostility because there are still powerful, moneyed interests that are invested in inoculating that kind of dissent. Just trying to maintain those visions, like, keep our eyes on the prize, basically [laughs], that's clearly the test of writing this whole book.

ELLEN: You made me think about that line—I didn't read it with you guys, but in *Living a Feminist Life*, if you expose a problem, you pose a problem.¹² I think that's the other thing that we haven't touched on here, is that so much of what we do is tempered by the fact that we're trying to remain in the system to use the privilege in the best way that we can, because obviously none of us are Sara Ahmed [laughs]. You have to almost work with the problem, otherwise you are the problem; you have to do it quite carefully. Anyway, none of this is straightforward, we don't want to be the problems, we want to expose the problems, but there's a lot of interrelation there.

ANGELA: Just to add to that too, I'm thinking about—what is the book where she writes about the limitations, the difficulty of doing diversity work in the university, and she returns to this frustration with the institution? When I was reading that, I was irritated about that ... I don't know, I was kind of surprised that she wrote so much about the limitations of

11 Greg Mercer, "Inside NSCAD's Real-Estate Row: Ousted President Battled with Board over Halifax Properties, Internal E-mails Show," *The Globe and Mail*, June 7, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-inside-nscads-real-estate-row-ousted-president-battled-with-board-over/>.

12 Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life*, 37.

this work in the institution of the university because in some sense, like, what do you expect, you know? Especially now, I think about funding bodies and universities and these very particular kinds of narrow — well, in particular the alliance with industry and SSHRC [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council] — I know there's lots of different categories for grants with SSHRC, but one of the things that I've experienced in the design department is that there has to be an alliance of some sort with industry and the outcomes have to look for a solution. Like, making plastic out of algae [laughs], or like some kind of measurable outcomes.

What I'm trying to say is there's these very strict limitations in terms of innovative or radical thinking at the outset within a university context, and that's difficult to reconcile because we're in this system, trying to throw rocks at the glass walls and then being frustrated when they don't break. I wonder, even thinking about our writing here, these questions posed that Lindsey copied into the chat about who is our audience or what is this work trying to do? I'm kind of talking in circles now, but I just wonder, insofar as how much the university offers the kind of forum to do the work we want to do and what are ways around that: are there ways to be subversive? Maybe that's idealistic.

IAN: It seems to me that Scott's examples are quite pertinent here and the example of the NSCAD president being ousted — we still don't know the full story — for obviously trying to create different parameters for how the university should function in a more progressive way, in a way that is accountable to the community and not just to a small group of stakeholders. In having read *What's the Use?*, we really get a sense that institutions are immovable, hostile, and extremely resistant to change, and in fact they will up-end your efforts every step of the way. And if that's the case, then there's only so much that you can do, and I think that small initiatives that crop up here and there have the capacity to reorient our thinking around how universities can operate. But I don't

think that you can just come in and make sweeping changes in the way that maybe the NSCAD president had hoped.

To my mind, certain institutions, certain universities (some small, some big) are more amenable to change, and want an opportunity to make those changes. But on the whole, I don't see that as the model, and so maybe small-scale change is what's needed, and that we need a number of these small-scale changes to materialize. I'm wondering ... is this reading group a form of implicit institutional critique? On the face of it, no, we just want to read Sara Ahmed because she's [laughs] one of the most impressive writers you can read, but I also feel like having read Sara Ahmed, there's something about orientation that we cannot resist in terms of taking it up as an idea, this idea of reorienting ourselves within and beyond institutions. I feel like this group has really emboldened me to think about how we could reorient our thinking about how an institution like this — small scale or larger — can operate, and in whose interests. Because I do feel like, if you can bring people together under something as benign as a reading group, and then create a groundwork of social relations for people to then go out and start other little projects here and there, you know, those small changes can actually lead to change down the line. But I also think that change is slow, and it takes ten, it takes twenty, it takes thirty years, and so I also feel like all these experiments should continue, and that hopefully if we can string enough meaningful experiments together, it might lead to larger systemic change. So it's sort of like a reading group is the perfect way of getting people to reorient their thinking, because it's pleasurable, you get to meet people, but it also allows for us — if we give ourselves the opportunity to be real with one another — [to see that] academia is not the carrot you think you've been chasing, or maybe it's time to remove the rose-colored glasses and see what's really in front of you and see what's possible.

LINDSEY: I do think of her writing almost as kind of like a clarion call to find other like-minded folks, or folks who are—without maybe knowing it—interested in this kind of reorientation.

Recognizing the importance of the public good, the role of emotional labor, resisting the dichotomy between “profession” and “labor,” valuing the politics of care, demystifying academic labor, and using the master’s tools under caution to dismantle the master’s house.

And I think about this basically every day of my life [laughs] because so much of my job is trying to ask faculty members to reorient their conception of what quality research is, and to reconsider why you publish. Is it so that you can go to Elsevier-sponsored fancy dinners in London, or something? Why are you doing this? At the very least, be honest about why you’re doing this because for some people it is those kinds of perks and those connections that are highly valuable.

I would argue that for most people, they share and disseminate their research because they believe in that public good, that public knowledge, and they believe that they’re contributing something valuable to humanity—not to get too pretentious. So, I do think about how I have that conversation in a way that doesn’t break apart someone’s ego, but maybe gently nudges it in a certain direction [laughs], and there’s a lot of emotional labor that’s involved in that kind of work. Going back to that idea of labor—this is something we talk a lot about in my field of librarianship—that is, how much emotional labor we do and how little it’s recognized by our colleagues. When we go up for RTP [reappointment, tenure, and promotion], it’s not something that is spelled out in any kind of collective agreement. Emotional labor is not recognized, which again goes back to those ideas of a very patriarchal conception of what qualifies as labor. Emotional work is not necessarily covered by that.

Going back to the idea of what are we doing with this project, why are we writing it, what are we trying to accomplish—I know for myself, I’m trying in my own very small way to offer a different idea of how we can be as an institu-

tion, and to recognize that we make up the institution, we are the institution, and that we can therefore challenge and change. It is going to be difficult, and that's why we have a survival kit — to make it through those difficult times — but we have a lot of power, we have a lot privilege, and we can use it in ways that are beneficial not just for ourselves but for other people as well.

[silence]

MICHELLE: I'd like to say a couple things about labor again. Of course, the problem with us is — as full-time faculty members and part-time faculty members — we're part of labor unions. And yet, certainly with our full-time faculty unions, we're all in Canada. We're so fortunate to be doing this work in Canada, where we have a national body that actually helps pull us together and helps us all understand what is the best, you know, the best argument to make at a given time to protect members' rights and to expand them, and to help people in precarious academic labor, but where we're always exploited is that we don't have a product that we leave behind in the same way as the factory worker, and so that's where I think it is a form of poiesis. We're both the product and the process as creative thinkers, as scholars, as writers. It becomes so difficult then to divorce yourself from your work. Obviously you do consider yourself, just like any human presumably thinks themselves part of what they say and think, that that is part of who they are. It's not like we can leave this behind. The difficulty then becomes how do we rewrite the terms of these collective agreements in ways that open them up to what you were talking about, Lindsey, the emotional labor that goes into it. People at the national level — at CAUT [Canadian Association of University Teachers] — have made this argument, for example: the work that academics do on faculty associations, this should not be seen as internal service, this is part of our academic labor. If it were recognized

in that way then the committedness, the emotional side of it, would be recognized inevitably as well.

The only way that's going to happen is if we all demand it, if we all know the terms of collective agreements, and if when we go forward for promotion we know how to frame our work. I have despaired time and again at seeing how ill-prepared people are when they go forward with their files, not understanding how these things can be misread by close-minded colleagues who are supposedly in charge of the peer-review process — people who see the file and see the CV only in terms of their own discipline, things of that nature. So, I just wanted to add that because for me part of the joy of my time in the academy has been that work in the labor union. When I first came to it, I was shocked to discover how many university professors were very quick to recognize themselves as professionals — they automatically felt that, yes, they were professionals — but they did not see themselves as workers. And maybe it's because I come from a family of people who didn't have higher education — I didn't come from a professional family myself — so for me academic labor is another form of labor and the only way that we can do any good for ourselves is to see ourselves the same way as the folks on the factory floor, and the only way we can help them is if we then open up the academy in ways that it has yet to be opened up. As I say, here in Canada we are a shining light to the rest of the world, really. When the International Education Conference for academic workers happens, we've been asked numerous times to lead seminars, etcetera, because there are so many countries where the idea of collective bargaining rights is just non-existent or has been so eroded.

We do have privilege and yet if we stay cloistered within our own departments then we don't work across the institution, we don't see it. It just astounds me that people can come to a full-time faculty position and work their entire careers and never understand what's going on behind the scenes. The real way to get a sense of what is happening and how all the

trade-offs are being made is to be an active member of one's faculty union.

ELLEN: Thanks for that, Michelle. One thing that just came up as you were speaking that we haven't really touched on that much is our students, and I don't know about for you guys, but for me, the point of trying to do everything that we've been talking about, of trying to change things, of being the killjoy, is so that I can actively try to provide guidance and mentorship and support to students who don't get it from others. For me, all of this is to the end of bringing diversity, bringing those decolonized processes and learning into the university so that it's a place where we can take some of the elitism away from it and support the students who I love and care about and who I see being discriminated against constantly.

At the unnamed institution in the South End where I work, international students are just — I mean, it's appalling, some of the things that you see — and above everything else that we've talked about, that kind of makes it worth it. I don't want to sound paternalistic or anything but just the chance that you can give students who don't see themselves in academia, in universities, getting educations, who haven't had that presented as an option — that you can guide them and give them some support — that's the only way that I would put it. I think that's a very powerful part of why I do this.

MICHELLE: Well said. I've watched the relationship between our faculty where I am and our Students' Union change dramatically over the last 10 years — they're much more active politically, the students, they're more astute, and we work together now in ways that I didn't see at the beginning of my career — either where I am now or at the university where I began, another university in Nova Scotia. It's quite common for senior admin at the board level, at the Senate level, they pander to the students in ways that make it look to them [students] like, senior admin are their best friends, and yet when

push comes to shove, if faculty and students union are not working together to keep tuitions down, to make accessibility demands other than the risk management type of demands that are imposed on HR departments and Student Services departments, then we won't even be able to hold ground, let alone improve things for those students. So, I think young people today are that much more connected and that much more willing to step forward, it seems to me.

IAN: I just want to build on what Michelle and Ellen were saying and, I think one of the real eye-opening parts of this journey from January through July [2020] has been that, in terms of models, I think that it's nice to model a situation where people are looking out for one another and there hasn't been a moment in this group where there hasn't been an element of care that's gone through just about all our interactions. Even to see it via email, you know, it's been so easy breezy, but it's because there's a degree of care, and respect, and collegiality that has run through virtually all our discussions, virtually all our communications. We've talked a lot about care as an organizing concept or theory that is truly applicable to what we've done as a group and I feel like the care that is often missing across departments, is often missing among faculty, among teachers who do not feel supported in the work that they do, it's something that we've been able to do as a very broad and diffuse group of people. We've come together, we've created the context for care to be not only appreciated, but visible, and I think that when you do that, it means that good things can happen elsewhere as well.

To Ellen's point, which is around teaching and our relationships with our students, it can only improve what we're already doing because if we feel supported, if we feel essentially cared for in the work that we're doing, it also helps us to do that in our work and in our relations with students. I think that one feeds the other and because as you know, there's a lot of care work that goes into teaching, and if this is what you define as your work then it's something that you may do for

the rest of your work life, and to sustain that kind of care, there needs to be a culture of care somewhere there. So I feel like part of what I've learned thus far is that it's a really great feeling to be surrounded by people who do take the politics of care seriously — either implicitly or explicitly — and that it just allows me to go out and do other work-related activities with that same sort of mindset, with that same compassion, with that same desire to make collegiality a thing, where in many instances and in many places it is clearly not. And if we're talking about work, why can't we have workplaces that are not only functional but that are self-sustaining?

One final point that I wanted to circle back to around labor is that so much of the labor that we do is invisible to the vast majority of our students, and even to the vast majority of people that we know [laughs], so I feel like one take-away for me is related to the demystification of labor in academia which is something that's only been happening for the last five to ten years, and that we have a lot more work to do. But if we talk openly about the current state of affairs for working and for labor, then maybe we can try to make it a little better, right? We can improve what it looks like. And then relations among faculty, relations between faculty and students, can also improve.

SCOTT: I can get behind that, for sure. The idea of demystifying that takes us back to something Angela was saying about the way that SSHRC [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council] values knowledge too. Those bodies are not visible to your average undergraduate student. They are obscured for good reasons — I think so much is obscured for practical reasons of reproducing the existing power relations, it's not in the university's interest to demystify the ladder that most people climb — it's just not, right? If you did then, you would see that the emperor has no clothes, that there is a lot of illusion at play in this knowledge factory — that a lot of it is performative rather than substantive.

Moments in my professional career of feeling cared for come from students perceiving that I care about what I do. I think there's a degree of cynicism where they see that you're just doing a job and they're paying money — like, here's the thing: we will also want to win a future in which post-secondary education is free. We would most radically like to win that. That would erase a lot of the problems that we're talking about [laughs]. And that's doable, that's conceivable, that's imaginable: it just takes a demilitarizing of society, more or less. So that's the fundamental thing, but because there's so much money in mediating the relationship, those moments where a student sees me as actually giving a shit about what I do rather than just being there for the paycheck, or to show off — just pretentiously sweat in front of them about whatever it is that I know about — those are the moments where I genuinely feel cared for, and seen, as it were, right? They're kind of few and far between for the most part.

That idea of trying to make as visible as possible which kinds of knowledges are valued and why, would lay bare so much of the bullshit, basically, of the way that the university is structured, because you'd have it on the table. It's in nobody's best interest to have it outside of these locked door environments and exposed to the light of day. So, if we want to win, if we want to use COVID-19 opportunism and the kind of flexibility that it is clearly showing as possible, right, cause that's the whole thing — it's exposing the fact that far more flexibility was possible than the university let on — they're making these adjustments out of necessity now that they said were simply impossible before. If we want to win, we do have to seize the timeliness of the current moment where you're seeing in real time the way that radical goals and radical knowledge can evolve in these kinds of social movements in ways that nobody thought was possible before this moment, really.

I say we want to win — that came out of this weird conversation that I was involved in online. Astra Taylor, who directed *Examined Life* and has this new documentary about

democracy, hosted an online panel and I made this comment in the chat window about how democracy as strategy has doomed the left, right? Seeing somebody as Bernie Sanders as unelectable, seeing radical goals as dooming any political program, is what has killed the left—I make this point. And she said, that’s true, but we still need a strategy, and we still want to win, so we have to make our ideas digestible on some level. We still have to use linguistic fashion and modes of communication that are available to us—rigor, if necessary—to break through these doors that do exist, that demystify knowledge. We still have to play within the terms of the game, we just have to understand how the house is built.

[silence]

MICHELLE: So, you disagree with Sara Ahmed and Audre Lorde [and] that we can use the master’s tools to destroy the master’s house [laughs].

SCOTT: I see Ahmed as saying that we are using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house—that’s my reading of Ahmed. That’s a quote from her, that we have to understand how the house is built and then see how power circulates within that structure in order to take it down. There’s no hedgehog-style, completely other idea that will take down the master’s house. That’s my reading, anyway.

MICHELLE: Yeah, I agree with you, Scott. I think I just had trouble with the placement of the quote when she brought it into the text there, and it seemed to me ambiguous, but I agree.

MARIANA: But I don’t think that understanding how the master’s house is built, and understanding its process of building, is the same thing as using the master’s tools. I think that you can understand how the master works, you can understand what the master’s house is made with, you can understand

the master's tools, and you still can find tools which are not the same, in order to ... I don't know, I read her more saying that you need to understand how the master's tools function, how they work, and so on. Her whole contestation about following the path that is the norm — think of her own resignation, right? If she really believed there was political use in the same tools, she would have stayed in that position and tried to use it against the system. I think [of] all the metaphors that she employs, like banging your head on the wall that will never break, dah, dah, dah. So, she understands how the system works, she knows and then reveals it, but from the outside, and that's why she resigns and then becomes someone from the outside — exposing and therefore creating instruments and possibilities for destroying the master's house. But the inside seems to be a place where there was no more room for the possibility of contestation.

Not to say that it's not possible to transform from the inside, but to understand the limitations of the use of the same tools. I think this is crucial. It's the difference between what could be called affirmative politics when you have some kind of correction or compensation, but these do not really challenge the system. Politics which are truly transformative, that are capable of reaching the roots of the problems. The issue is that usually the achievable goals, they are easier to get to, they're easier to produce, they are easier to implement precisely because they're not really challenging the structure — they make the structure even better. And I think being able to see the difference between the two of them is super important for me. And I think that's something that she's trying to say, you know? To always be aware of to what extent just following the same line and therefore by following the line we are actually legitimating the line, we are actually strengthening the line, even if we think that the line can be contributing some progressive transformation.

ELLEN: It's like renovating versus demolishing and rebuilding [laughs]. To go on the master's house metaphor further:

if you renovate, you're just adding onto and improving the structure that's in place, whereas if you demolish it and start from scratch — Angela, you maybe [laughs] can speak best about this — but it creates so many more possibilities for design than using what's there, because what's there limits the opportunity to recreate.

LINDSEY: I also think about the harm that those tools can do the people who are trying to dismantle the house. Sara Ahmed is also a woman of color, and that's something — should I attempt anything similar to her actions, the types of harm that can be done to me are quite different than those that can be done to a woman of color. Especially in an institution like academia, which has put up a lot of barriers for those individuals. I also think that — certainly she clearly has very strong principles and she clearly meant to say quite a lot by her resignation — but I also think about the harm that is done to certain individuals simply because of who they are and the way that our institutions have done their best to keep those individuals out, or at the very least, marginalized.

[silence]

SCOTT: I mean, we're talking about how to make ideas stick, to go back to the first real problem we started with in this reading group — how do you make ideas stick? There's plenty of ideas, but how do you mark the moment where it seems like something is truly gaining traction? That's still an open question, it's a difficult problem, and it's an open problem, you know what I mean? There's no resolution to it, per se, but we're seeing a moment now where there are ideas that contain some kind of purchase that couldn't before, right? This is so much of what I was trying to get at, I guess, in my answer, [and] is inspiring a sense of hope, but then what we're dealing with here is, at what point does that get co-opted, reconsolidated, as part of power's strategies? At what point does that disruption, that dissent, get inoculated and then

institutionalized in an academic article that is a self-reflexive piece on all this stuff?

It's important to stay with that unsettled sense that at any moment, you could lose by being co-opted. You could effectively lose in this struggle for just maintaining some momentum toward something like an equitable society in which the adequate abundance that exists is somewhat more equally shared, you know what I mean? There are different vectors for the present other than full collapse. It's still that sense of hope that something like defunding or dismantling the police actually has legitimacy [group agreement], where it's not just democracy as winning, not just democracy as strategy, but democracy as actively engaging with real material problems. You've got people toppling statues, you've got people projecting the face of murdered black men on Robert E. Lee, you know what I mean?¹³ That's a specific kind of moment that we exist in right now, and making ideas stick right now is a specific kind of responsibility.

IAN: I like everything that Scott's saying, but just to sort of steer things in a different direction: one thing that I think would be useful for us is to identify a through-line among our individual toolkit entries. I'm wondering if anyone has thought about that or if they've noticed any patterns or things that connect our entries. That may be future homework for everyone, but it just seems like that's something that will go in our discussion, and it will make for some potentially interesting and insightful material. Ellen, you've already done the homework, you have the answers, so we'll give you the floor.

13 See Sabrina Moreno, "Projections at Lee Monument Offer Peace in Times of Violence," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/projections-at-lee-monument-offer-peace-in-times-of-violence/2020/07/05/477f79c4-bec8-11ea-8908-68a2b9ae9e0_story.html, and Jessica Stewart, "Powerful BLM Video Projections Help Reclaim Controversial Robert E. Lee Monument," *My Modern Met*, July 28, 2020, <https://mymodernmet.com/light-projections-robort-e-lee-memorial/>.

ELLEN: I was just going to say very, very briefly: I think there's a lot in there about natural things, whether it's breathing in the garden or the forest, or sunshine, and I think that there is some rejection of this positivist, or like, scientific, rationalized way of being I'm seeing as a common thread. I'll still do lots of thinking on that [laughs].

SCOTT: That would be a great through-line because the autoethnography lit review that Michelle wrote has many moments where it's talking about the hegemony of science — that kind of access to objective truth that science has, so it would draw it all together nicely.

LINDSEY: I also see the feeling of connection. And it's in our own individual pieces. It's also in our little intros about why we joined the reading group. There does seem to be a common thought among all of us — to varying degrees and for varying reasons — of seeking some sort of different connection than that which we had previously experienced.

[silence]

SCOTT: And I guess we should highlight the fact that in this conversation we kind of came up with this idea that work and labor and the dialectic of work-life balance and all these things seem to be a through-line. I wondered if we could connect that to the moment we had during the discussion where Michelle intervened to make us not use the term deadline. Reflecting on that, it's like, trying to be less punishing on ourselves about writing. That's certainly something that I brought to this task of collaborating. I've always had this kind of aversion, this perfectionist impulse that makes it very difficult to get from the rough idea that is sort of perfect in your head, to like, a shitty draft, to something that flows and makes sense and can be read by other people. So, I think trying to de-stigmatize, or de-mythologize writing

as something that is an expression of ourselves rather than just merely an act of intervention, an act of entering a conversation — for me, at least — is something that I see running through the work. At least to the extent that this work is the work of writing and trying to write collaboratively.

Our discussion above, but also our practices within the reading group, have been strongly rooted in a desire to contextualize the lived realities of, and feelings associated with, academic labor. The elements of our survival kit, included in the previous chapter, orient us in ways that let us better advocate for a reconsideration of the conditions under which we might more effectively connect, communicate, live in community, and thrive. Hi'iilei Hobart and Tamara Kneese point out that “remedies for hyperproductivity and the inevitable burnout that follows are commoditized,” and thus “self-care” becomes simultaneously “a solution to and a symptom of the social deficits of late capitalism.”¹⁴ From our perspective, the shared act of creating a feminist reading group, where we could have conversations with no stated goals other than knowing (and perhaps understanding) one another and our social world, produces the conditions for the emergence of self-care as a joint project of mutual support. Organizing our collective labor to produce a self-sustaining toolkit could be a matter of *making a life* rather than merely *making a living* in academia. Kathi Weeks resists prescriptions for self-care that assume it is inextricably tied to the task of sustaining one's individual self for the purpose of work:

[G]etting a life is also a necessarily collective endeavor; one cannot get something as big as a life on one's own. And, moreover, though it is a life that would be ours, as a life rather

14 Hi'iilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese, “Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times,” *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 2.

than a commodity, as a web of relations and qualities of experience rather than a possession, it is not something we can be said precisely to own or even to hold.¹⁵

It is noteworthy that our discussion about our survival kit, in the transcript above, turned to a broader questioning of the status quo and pivoted toward a bolder approach to transforming the institution for the better. Even while asking ourselves personal questions, such as why were you first drawn to join a reading group, we all reflected upon structural conditions that make or impede those types of choices from being made in the first place. Earlier we suggested that the survival we wanted to theorize would be concerned with sustaining hope during a time of anxiety and grief, and that what was generative about the process of creating our toolkits in concert was that it created space for experimenting with what feminist praxis could mean in this moment.

This emphasis on self-questioning, reclaiming accountability, and developing feminist praxis in our everyday work is how we now interpret Ahmed's suggestion that "a killjoy survival kit can also be a survival strategy."¹⁶ We see the survival kit as more than a form of hope during difficult times. It's a reminder that care is conceivable, that "things did not have to work out that way; they still might change,"¹⁷ as long as we are willing to see beyond our individual selves, and towards others and the world. By reflecting on our toolkit items and our reading group activities, we designed a collaborative experience that helps us stay committed to our collective efforts of modeling care in academic labor via the supports and anchor points that can make this work valuable and joyful.

15 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 233.

16 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 249.

17 Anna L. Tsing et al., *Feral Atlas: The More-Than-Human Anthropocene* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

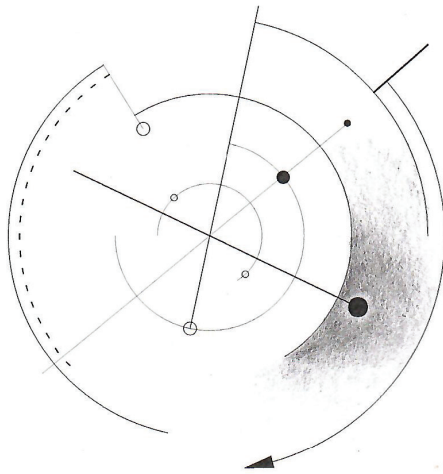


Fig. 17. A Compass for Nowhere #7. Drawing by Angela Henderson. March 30, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Sustaining Care

On the face of it, this project could be described as a coming together of academic laborers who discovered — during the process of a sustained reading group — that collaborating with people in a non-competitive, receptive, and welcoming environment could yield some crucial insights: namely, that academic work is, and can be, extremely challenging and isolating, and that collective and collaborative exchanges can create space(s) for care, generosity, reciprocity, surprise, encouragement, inspiration, and even fulfillment. Such a description or characterization offers only a limited or partial sketch of our collaboration in that it fails to bring to light certain specificities, such as the cultivation of intellectual capacities and curiosities, the building and deepening of trust, the introduction and expansion of a care ethic, the elaboration of a shared critical praxis, the co-creation of a feminist political orientation, the facilitation of an ongoing dialogue, the development of a critical appraisal of institutional life within and beyond the university system, as well as the refiguration of other possible worlds and ways of living. As we conclude this project from our respective global locales, we reflect on our privileges and, more exactly, on how to use “the resources and (unjust) autonomy of our academic positions” to reach outward and nurture a culture of care built upon the “repossession of the university’s literal and metaphorical re-

sources in the name of our movements and communities.”¹ We also dwell with the challenges we face going forward. The 2020 academic year brought new uncertainty: how would we sustain ourselves for the work of structural change that this pandemic makes more immediate, as we all continue to struggle within our broken systems? As Ahmed makes clear, “we are, after all, trying to transform the institutions that employ us.”² Such transformation may well be through attentiveness to care in academia because care conflicts in crucial ways with the “hyper-competitive world” of being a self-sustaining public intellectual or artist, particularly in the social media era.³ Cressida J. Heyes teaches us that self-making, in this context, “can be exhausting, ego-driven [...] and abusively self-disciplining.”⁴ What moves us about collective care is that it reorients self-making into a less punitively self-centered activity. Eased by the sharing of methods of narcosis and survival, it ejects curation of the self out of the realm of competition and moves it into the realm of communally sharing the self.

We have chronicled the process of cooperatively making our survival kits because we believe the feminist practice of “syncretic, speculative fabulation”⁵ has timely value as a way for universities and academic workers to re-imagine ourselves and society in a time of global urgency. Each personal account is representative of us all, our diverse yet shared academic struggles, and the need for care and consolation they educe. We embrace the auto/biographical to extrapolate from heartfelt personal experiences, synthesize these experiences with relevant

1 Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven, *What Moves Us? The Lives and Times of the Radical Imagination* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017), 4.

2 Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 195.

3 Cressida J. Heyes, *Anaesthetics of Existence: Essays on Experience at the Edge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 8.

4 *Ibid.*, 7.

5 Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 9.

ideas from feminist theory, and analyze the context of their use in these anxious times for caring and caregiving⁶.

The reflexivity of this book foregrounds relations between us, as storytellers, you, as reader, the policies we enact and resist in living feminist lives in academia, and contemporary threats to social cohesion. We approach this with the understanding that no one can do this work without others, and we believe there is enormous value in creating what Thornton calls “viral network[s] of non-experts” to engage in “solidarity and mutual aid.”⁷ This is the moment to use our privilege and our voices to insist on investments in what Darrick Hamilton calls “a care infrastructure.”⁸ Our reading group, our collaborative surviving as things “fly out of hand,” and this book are our attempt to foster “stories of inventiveness, of creating something, of making something,”⁹ and to model a transformative form of much-needed care within academia.

Keeping a “survival kit” might strike the reader as an attempt to enshrine the individual, or as akin to a fashionable self-help idea, especially considering the sheer number of articles that have provided us with curated lists of the therapeutic things we might do or consume during quarantine. It is important to remember here that, although the reigning presentism of our age and the pervasiveness of lists online makes them seem like a brand-new genre of writing, as Liam Cole Young argues, “listing is an ancient cultural technique” that has served as an “administrative (facilitating trade and other economic activity), and mnemonic”¹⁰ resource. Lists, for Young, are historically often

6 See Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (London: Routledge, 2016).

7 Cassie Thornton, *The Hologram: Feminist, Peer-to-Peer Health for a Post-Pandemic Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), Appendix I.

8 Democracy Now!, “‘We Will Make Biden Do It’: Economist Darrick Hamilton on Pushing the Next Admin to the Left,” *YouTube*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN2MIBTgw2o>.

9 Ahmed, *What’s the Use?*, 219.

10 Liam Young, *List Cultures: Knowledge and Poetics from Mesopotamia to BuzzFeed* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 14.

exploitative and destructive things, but they also connect contemporary forms of data curation to the historical roots of writing itself. Rather than reproducing information in the interests of prescribing certain kinds of activity, our co-curated survival kit is not meant to sustain anyone in isolation; it is designed to prevent us from shutting down, tuning out, and turning inward—or reverting to what Alexis Shotwell calls “defensive” or “possessive individualism,” a myopic sort of self-care that threatens to jettison any notion of the social. The entrepreneurial self-interest of the idealized Western capitalist subject has become harder to sustain in the face of the virological fact of “interabsorption.”¹¹ And so, we’re invited, in Shotwell’s terms, to “form practices for taking care that allow more of us to live” and to “emerge from isolation with more demands for collective care.”¹²

Early in the outbreak, Arundhati Roy expressed hope that the pandemic could be a “portal” to a more connected, ethical future wherein we’ve disentangled ourselves from “data banks and dead ideas.”¹³ That we are passing through the portal is unquestionable, but how we will pass through it is still unclear. This is the main thrust of Roy’s intervention: will we pass through carrying the limited imaginations and uncaring attitudes that, at the systemic level, have wrought so much death? Or will we pass through with “little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it”?¹⁴ There is never a guarantee that the resistance Roy petitions us to undertake will result in structural change, but we nonetheless think that living a feminist life in the twenty-first century means adopting a position of radical wonder, or a wonder that is, for Ahmed, “about learning to see the

11 Alexis Shotwell, “The Virus Is a Relation,” *Upping the Anti: A Journal of Theory and Action*, May 5, 2020, <https://uppingtheanti.org/blog/entry/the-virus-is-a-relation>.

12 Ibid.

13 Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

14 Ibid.

world as something that does not have to be, and as something that came to be, over time, and with work.”¹⁵

Wondering about a world that does not have to be, we continue to support each other, and to keep our eyes wide open for the opportunity to help push radical solutions into place: ideas that were, to this point, considered “non-starters,” like dismantling cisheteropatriarchy, abolishing prisons, canceling debt, making housing a human right, expanding healthcare infrastructure for the poor and racially marginalized, redirecting policing resources into life-saving social programs,¹⁶ adopting a degrowth politics to avert climate catastrophe, embracing a just energy transition that disarms capitalist imperialism, and reimagining the higher education contexts in which we work. La paperson reminds us that a decolonizing education exists within a colonizing university — that its “machinery is always being subverted toward decolonizing purposes.”¹⁷ By forming this feminist reading group, we have chosen to be part of such a purpose, questioning ostensibly settled notions and destructive patterns of academic labor by enacting caring relationality as an alternative to competitive individualism in our teaching, scholarship, research, and professional service. Our caring relations of what Walsh calls “insurgency and resistance” are not struggles that we necessarily label decolonial; however, they can be understood as such because they constitute “praxis toward an otherwise.”¹⁸

15 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 180.

16 Tari Ajadi et al., “Defunding the Police: Defining the Way Forward for HRM,” *Halifax Regional Municipality*, January 17, 2022, <https://www.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/boards-committees-commissions/220117bop1021.pdf>; Scott Stoneman, “Tari Ajadi, El Jones & Julia Rodgers Define Democracy as Trusting the Public & Investing in Care,” *Pretty Heady Stuff*, 2022, <https://soundcloud.com/user-650466923/tari-ajadi-el-jones-julia-rodgers-define-democracy-as-trusting-the-public-investing-in-care>.

17 La paperson, *A Third University Is Possible* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xiii.

18 Catherine E. Walsh, “Insurgency and Decolonial Prospect, Praxis, and Project,” in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, eds. Walter D.

Revisioning education as caring, collaborative insurgence for transformative futures is a commitment that inspires us through the simple yet profound act of reading together as an act of feminist survival. With one another's well-being rooted in abiding mutual concern, we trust that our survival as feminists models and encourages a feminist ethics of care. On paths similar and unlike our own, others arrive in institutions not intended for them, bringing "worlds that would not otherwise be here,"¹⁹ and hopes of changing academic labor for the better.

Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 45.

¹⁹ Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 165.

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