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# A BLADE OF GRASS



## CONFRONTING ENEMIES

## A BLADE OF GRASS MAGAZINE

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Cover: *Mirror Shield Project*, Concept artist, Cannupa Hanska Luger, with drone operation and performance organization by Rory Wakemup. Oceti Sakowin camp, Standing Rock, ND 2016. Image courtesy of the artist.



A monument to Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, transformed by protestors calling for the removal of public displays of Confederate symbols. Image by Mobilus in Mobili/Flickr.com.

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**A BLADE OF GRASS**

# Enemy Territory

By Issue Guest Editor Daniel Tucker

*The enemy of my enemy is my friend.*<sup>1</sup> Turn the proverb around a time or two and you might be able to locate yourself and your allies in the confusing terrain of the present.

The question of how to define an enemy as distinct from a friend has been a longstanding preoccupation of politics. Today, some conventions for deciphering alliances have become complicated. For instance, you can't look into someone's eye or shake their hand while safely practicing physical distancing, and still others are intensified as the ability to track a person's positions through the convoluted archive that is the internet. Those ideological signposts that render some as perpetrators of oppression and others sided with the angels have also experienced some surprising movements in the current climate as fundamental concepts of health and safety encourage surprising alliances. In this moment, masking has become an electoral issue and the movement upsurges following the murders of Black civilians by police have forced a reckoning with racist conceptions of justice from every imaginable form of organization. And turning the question on oneself to examine complicity has become a worthy and dizzying preoccupation of the moment as sometimes the most urgent question can be *what if my friends's enemy is me?*

In this issue of *A Blade of Grass Magazine*, we engaged an inspiring group of thinkers and makers to consider what it looks like for various socially engaged art practices to venture into enemy territory. As socially-engaged art has become more institutionalized, the risk has been that it

becomes more ameliorative, but for many artists the possibility of using art to engage conflict is increasingly urgent. We hope that by sharing these examples we can all learn what crossing these lines can lead to, and to move from healing to accountability. Furthermore, knowing this issue was coming out on the eve of the 2020 elections in the U.S., in the midst of a global coronavirus pandemic, and in conversation with a wave of uprisings against racial injustice, we felt it all the more important to include cultural practitioners who may not all define themselves as socially engaged artists, but who encompass a wide range of collaborative creative practices that seek to confront fascist tendencies and redress the trauma of historical violence.

Our historical reprint for this issue is Grupo de Arte Callejero's (GAC) writing from a decade ago, just released last year for the first time in English by Common Notions press. GAC has been working together for over twenty years and has honed a practice of organizing communities to use street and protest art to publicize and confront perpetrators of Argentina's military dictatorship in their midst.

Artist Cannupa Hanska Luger was interviewed by Prerana Reddy about his *Settlement* project, designed to bring Indigenous artists from North America and the Pacific to reverse-occupy the town of Plymouth, U.K., where the original Mayflower ship set sail 400-years-ago. The wide-ranging interview covers Luger's increasingly collective practice leading up to *Settlement* and how the project had to pivot in the context of the pandemic.

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1. Variously attributed to 400 BC India to Kautilya or 19th century France to Gabriel Manigault

Movement journalist Neesha Powell-Twagirumukiza explores how communities in Georgia, Ohio, and Florida have partnered with the Equal Justice Initiative's engagement efforts to mark the sites where Black residents were lynched. The story is framed by the recent chase and murder of Ahmaud Arbery by vigilantes in the Georgia region where the author was born and raised, and the dramatic rise of movements celebrating Black life and opposing police brutality and white supremacy.

Connecting to Powell-Twagirumukiza's essay, this issue's guest editor Daniel Tucker shares scenes from the last five-years of actions related to monuments commemorating the Confederacy and police brutality. The piece considers experiments such as Monument Lab, Paper Monuments, Chicago Torture Justice Memorials, and the "Haymarket 8-Hour Action Series" as ephemeral and process-based strategies for memorializing conflicts.

Journalist and filmmaker Michael Premo's interview with filmmaker Arthur Jones offers insight into a new film that follows the heels of cartoon character Pepe the Frog from ambiguous slacker to a right-wing meme charged with hate on 4chan. Tracking the frog's trajectory, we see what happens when the original illustrator, Matt Furie, has to confront his social responsibility and Jones shares what it took to enter into the online depths of the alt-right.

Amita Swadhin's writing on her oral history project *Mirror Memoirs* asks what happens when the remedy is the enemy? Sharing the stories of victims of childhood sexual violence and their experiences of violence is further compounded within the very social work and justice systems intended to assist them. Without restorative justice practices designed by survivors and an understanding that perpetrators are often also victims of violence themselves, these legally rehabilitative programs do more harm than good.

The issue concludes with artist and organizer Carol Zou performing as a modern-day Martin Luther by drafting nine bold theses for debate around reproductive labor inspired by the crisis of care and work that has infected our lives alongside the pandemic.

When you find yourself in enemy territory, it is best to have some friends. The contributors who brought their generous engagement with this issue are unified in a symbolic framing that brings their complex experiences together. In this temporary association, there are ideas for ways to confront white supremacy in its most violent and viral forms. They also give us models for how artists can take on state-sponsored disappearances at the neighborhood level and how to reverse-engineer settler colonial movements. They help us understand that these fights are in psychic and symbolic territories as much as physical ones, and that "winning" is not always about defeating our enemies, but about generating more active accomplices. And yet, alliances can be tenuous unless the work is done to consider what makes them cohere or contradict. It is our hope that with this issue, reflected and refracting off one another, these words offer ideas for new and deeper forms of affinity. We need friendships worth fighting for.

### Acknowledgments

I'm lucky to join the A Blade of Grass team in making this project a reality: Vicki Capote, Sabrina Chin, Deborah Fisher, Kathryn McKinney, Karina Muranaga, and Prerana Reddy. It has been a pleasure working with the team and in particular the tireless work of the editorial team has made the thinking through this complex subject matter always stimulating.

Thank you to Mia Henry, Lewis Wallace, Anna Simonton, Danielle Purifoy, AC Thompson, and Malav Kanuga for their help lining up content for this issue.



Cannupa Hanska Luger  
*The One Who Checks*  
& *The One Who Balances*  
2018-ongoing (Monster Slayer)  
Site-specific land acknowledgement,  
Taos, NM. Photo by Dylan McLaughlin  
Regalia: beadwork, surplus industrial  
felt, ceramic, riot gear, afghan

# Contributors

GRUPO DE ARTE CALLEJERO (GAC) is currently made up of Lorena Bossi, Carolina Golder, Mariana Corral, Vanesa Bossi and Fernanda Carrizo, who all live and work in Buenos Aires. The group was formed in 1997 in Buenos Aires, by a small group of Fine Arts students. Their first interventions ranged from mural-graffiti to actions on advertising posters. In 1998, they began participating in the *escraches* of the group H.I.J.O.S., creating a type of public complaint signage in the form of mock street signs. In 1999, they won a sculpture competition for the city's Remembrance Park with their work Posters of Memory, which remains in the park today. The formats chosen for their interventions include installation, graphics, performance and video. They have worked collaboratively with human rights organizations, independent unions, non-partisan political groups, organizations serving the unemployed, and research groups in various areas of culture. In 2009, they published the book *Thoughts, Practices and Actions of the GAC*, Ed. Tinta Limón. <http://archive.org/details/GacPensamientosPracticasYAcciones>

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER is a multi-disciplinary artist of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, and European descent. Using social collaboration and in response to timely and site-specific issues, Luger produces multi-pronged projects that take many forms, provoking diverse publics to engage with Indigenous peoples and values apart from the lens of colonial social structuring. Luger lectures and participates in residencies and projects around the globe and his work is collected internationally. He is a 2020 Creative Capital Fellow, a 2020 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellow, and a recipient of the 2020 A Blade Of Grass Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art. He received a 2019 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant and was winner of the 2018 Museum of Arts and Design's

inaugural Burke Prize. See more from the artist at [www.cannupahanska.com](http://www.cannupahanska.com) and on instagram at [@cannupahanska](https://www.instagram.com/cannupahanska).

ARTHUR JONES has art directed animation and motion graphics for journalists and documentary filmmakers at news outlets like the *New York Times*, *Vice*, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and the International Consortium of Journalists. *Feels Good Man* is his directorial debut.

NEESHA POWELL-TWAGIRUMUKIZA is a Southern storyteller who conspires in the name of liberated Black futures, queer and transgender Black/Indigenous/people of color power, solidarity economics, transformative justice, and community accountability. Powell-Twagirumukiza's writing has been published in various online and print publications, including *Autostraddle*, *Bitch*, *Prism*, *Rewire.News*, *Scalawag*, *VICE*, *YES Magazine!*, and *Monday: the Journal of the Jacob Lawrence Gallery*. They are a MFA in Creative Writing candidate at Georgia College & State University and graduated from the University of Georgia with a B.A. in Journalism & Mass Communication. Tweet with Neesha [@womanistbae](https://twitter.com/womanistbae).

MICHAEL PREMO is a journalist and artist whose film, radio, theater, and photo-based work has been exhibited and broadcast in the United States and abroad. In addition to his work as Executive Producer at Storyline, he has created original work with numerous companies including Hip-Hop Theater Festival, The Foundry Theater, The Civilians, and the Peabody Award-winning StoryCorps. Michael's photography has appeared in publications like *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and *Het Parool*, among others. He is the recipient of a Creative Capital Award, A Blade of Grass Artist Files Fellowship,

and a NYSCA Individual Artist Award. Michael is on the Board of Trustees of A Blade of Grass.

PRERANA REDDY is Director of Programs at A Blade of Grass. Previously she was the Director of Public Programs & Community Engagement for the Queens Museum in New York City from 2005–2018, where she organized both exhibition-related and community-based programs as well as public art commissions. In addition, she oversaw a cultural organizing initiative for Corona, Queens residents that resulted in the creation and ongoing programming of a public plaza and a popular education center for new immigrants. She is currently on the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs Advisory Commission and sits on the boards of NOCD-NY, ArtBuilt, Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability & Equity, and New Immigrant Community Empowerment.

AMITA SWADHIN is an educator, storyteller, activist, and consultant dedicated to fighting interpersonal and institutional violence against young people. Their commitments and approach to this work stem from their experiences as a genderqueer, femme queer woman of color, daughter of immigrants, and years of abuse by their parents, including eight years of rape by their father. They are a frequent speaker at colleges, conferences, and community organizations nationwide, and a consultant with over fifteen years of experience in nonprofits serving low-income, immigrant, and LGBTQ youth of color in Los Angeles and New York City. Amita's writing has been featured on *The Feminist Wire* and *The Huffington Post*, and in the anthologies *Dear Sister: Letters from Survivors of Sexual Violence* (AK Press, 2014) and *Queering Sexual Violence* (Magnus Books, 2016).

DANIEL TUCKER works as an artist, writer, educator, and organizer developing documentaries, publications, classes, exhibitions and events inspired by his interest in social movements and the people and places from which they emerge. His writings and lectures on the intersections of art and politics and his collaborative art projects have been published and presented widely and are documented on the archive [miscprojects.com](http://miscprojects.com). He is currently curator-in-residence at Mural Arts Philadelphia and in 2019, he completed a nine city tour of the curatorial project *Organize Your Own: The Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements*. He works as an Assistant Professor and Graduate Program Director in Socially-Engaged Art at Moore College of Art & Design.

CAROL ZOU facilitates creative social change projects with a focus on racial justice, informal labor, and public space. She is a reproductive laborer, insofar as joy, connection, creativity, social change, and being the "cool aunt" constitutes reproductive labor. Current and past affiliations include: Yarn Bombing Los Angeles, Michelada Think Tank, Trans.lation Vickery Meadow, Project Row Houses with the University of Houston, Asian Arts Initiative, American Monument, Imagining America, U.S. Department of Arts and Culture, Spa Embassy, and Enterprise Community Partners with Little Tokyo Service Center. She believes that we are most free when we help others get free.

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# *Concepts & Practices of Justice*

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## *Experiences from the Mesa de Escrache*

Grupo de Arte Callejero

This excerpt was reprinted with permission from the book *Grupo de Arte Callejero: Thoughts, Practices, and Actions* (Common Notions, October 2019), which was first published in Spanish in 2009. This version was translated by Mareada Rosa Translation Collective.

Opposite: "If there is not justice, there is escrache." GAC's first mobile escrache travels past the homes of various genociders of the military dictatorship. December 11, 1999. Photo courtesy of the Grupo de Arte Callejero Archive.

Argentine President Isabel Perón was overthrown in 1976 in a right-wing coup d'état and replaced by a military junta. From 1976 to 1983, the right-wing, paramilitary death squad Triple A (*Alianza Anticomunista Argentina*, the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) “disappeared” thousands of men and women. With support from the Argentine military dictatorship, Triple A persecuted a wide variety of leftist groups, political dissidents, and their sympathizers, and became a part of the deadly state apparatus under the first military junta, led by Jorge Rafael Videla.

The disappeared were often taken from their homes, held without legal recourse, detained, tortured, and assassinated—all without their families and communities’ ability to account for their absence or any grave that marked their death. The term *desaparecido* was coined to describe this particular phenomenon of political persecution experienced during the dictatorship. Marking the end of the junta, in October 1983, Raúl Alfonsín was elected the President of Argentina and during his term established the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons to investigate the crimes committed by the military.

## The Escraches: A Brief History

The first *escraches* in Argentina were realized by the group H.I.J.O.S.,<sup>1</sup> which emerged in 1995 out of the need to denounce the impunity of institutional justice, namely the passage of the laws Obediencia Debida and Punto Final,<sup>2</sup> as well as the presidential pardons.

The word *escrache* signifies in Argentine [slang] “to bring into the light something hidden” or “to reveal what power hides”: the fact that our society lives with murderers, torturers, and the kidnappers, who until this moment, lived their lives in a comfortable anonymity.

[...]

At first, the *escraches* consisted of interrupting the workplaces or homes of a genocidist linked to the dictatorship. Highly visible figures, such as Astiz, Martínez de Hoz, Videla, and Massera, were chosen as paradigms of the repression. It was necessary to appear in the media, so strategic dates were chosen. The objective was to put the issue on the map, and we worked to spread the action in both the neighborhood of the *escrache* as well as in the city center. The idea was for people to repudiate the genocidists still on the loose, to create “social condemnation,” and to question the absence of a legal punishment. The slogan became: “If there is not justice, there is *escrache*.” (“*Si no hay justicia hay escrache.*”)

[...]

The objective was not simply the number of people who joined the march of the *escrache*, but rather to favor construction in the neighborhood through preliminary activities in that space, respecting its singularity, its tempos, and its subject matter. Beginning in 2001, the Mesa de *Escrache* Popular went into neighborhoods and began to build relationships with different social organizations, cultural centers, musical groups, student centers, and assemblies. Film series, talks, activities in schools and plazas, and open radio all took place. There was a strong sense that the *escrache* was a form of justice that broke with the representations of institutional justice: a justice constructed by people in the day to day via the repudiation of the genocidist in the neighborhood, the reappropriation of politics, and the reflection of the subject matter of the present.

Starting in 2003, a new set of figures began to be *escrached*: those who were complicit with the dictatorship and who continued to be professionally active. It began with the *escrache* against Héctor Vidal, a kidnapper of babies born in captivity and a falsifier of birth certificates, who was living freely thanks to the laws of Obediencia Debida and Punto Final. Six months after the *escrache*, his medical license was revoked. In 2004, the priest Hugo Mario Bellavigna was *escrached*; he was the leader of the church of Santa Inés Virgen y Mártir, worked as a chaplain in the women’s prison Devoto between 1978 and 1982, and was a member of the Comisión Interdisciplinaria para la Recuperabilidad de las Detenidas (Interdisciplinary Commission

1. H.I.J.O.S. stands for Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (Children for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence) and comprised of advocates and children of desaparecidos, many of whom were kidnapped by members of the Argentine military and then raised by other families.
2. Passed under President Raúl Alfonsín, the two laws prevented the prosecution of the perpetrators of state violence during the 1976–1983 military dictatorship. Obediencia Debida stated that members of the military below colonel rank were exempt from prosecution because they were following orders. Punto Final set a very short statute of limitations for prosecutions of crimes. Both laws were ultimately overturned.

*Si no hay justicia  
hay escrache*

*If there is not justice,  
there is escrache*



GAC publicly puts on trial Emilio Massera, a leader of the military junta, in the retirement courts of Comodoro Py in the Buenos Aires Province with road signs that read, "Justice and Punishment." March 19, 1998. Photo courtesy of the Grupo de Arte Callejero Archive.

for the Rehabilitation of the Detained) where prisoners were tortured and manipulated. In 2005, it was police captain Ernesto Sergio Weber's turn. He participated in different repressive acts during the democratic period, among them the repression that occurred directly outside the Legislature after the vote approving the Código Contravencional (Criminal Code); he was also responsible for the deaths during the repression in Buenos Aires on December 20, 2001.

## Thinking Work in the Neighborhoods

The Mesa de Escrache works from an idea of equality. Its practice aims at social condemnation, which asks for the participation of society in general, and is oriented towards an encounter between emotion and the desire for a just society. Its organizational structure is reflected in each weekly meeting, where opinions are exchanged and decisions are made via consensus, with a clear tendency towards horizontality. In this sense, the working group distances itself from every idea of political practice as that of individual actors, where in an action some have more rights than others, or whose actions serve to create a spectacle of individual pain. As Alain Badiou notes, no politics will be just if the body is separated from the idea, even less if it is realized as a spectacle of the victim, since “no victim can be reduced to their suffering, within the victim it is humanity as a whole who is beaten.”<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, the practice of the *escrache* centers on living memory, which creates and acts, generating political practices by means of joy, celebration, and reflection. It moves away from the practices of judicial power, which

reify and individualize social problems, and which generate a spectacle represented in the practice of justice.

[...]

The process of the *escrache* interrupts everyday life in the neighborhood. Having picked a target, the Mesa de Escrache Popular moves into the neighborhood where the genocidist lives. Its arrival produces worry and curiosity, since every weekend the neighbors see a group of people handing out info sheets explaining the criminal record of the next target of the next *escrache* and inviting them to participate in the working group. The group meets in a public space, which means that over time the neighbors get to know the members and know why they are there. The answers of the neighbors are varied and imply distinct levels of participation. We understand participation in a broad sense, as the act of communicating events, for example, when a neighbor rings another neighbor's doorbell to tell her that a genocidist lives next door. Another example would be the information these same neighbors offer about the everyday practices of the genocidist (“He gets his hair cut there;” “He eats breakfast every day at such and such an hour in this bar;” “He is friends with this guy,” etc.).

The practice of the *escrache* generates multiple interventions, including those by the family members, friends, and institutions that defend the genocidist. There is, for example, a constant tearing down of the posters with the genocidist's photograph, as well as telephone threats, accusations of defamation, and, in some cases, police persecution to intimidate and seize the belongings of those participating in the *escrache*.

*The practice of the *escrache* centers on living memory, which creates and acts, generating political practices by means of joy, celebration, and reflection.*

Day by day in the neighborhood, the practice of the *escrache* constructs images that mark the genocidist, removing him from his everyday anonymity. The walls begin to say, “There is a torturer in this neighborhood” and “If there is no justice, there is *escrache*.” The neighbors are now on alert, receiving flyers and dialoguing with the participants in the *escrache*. The aesthetics of the neighborhood change, symbolically cornering the genocidist: no neighbor can ignore what is occurring because when they leave the house there is a poster on an otherwise abandoned wall; when they go to the store, there is a map clearly marking the home of the genocidist; when they throw a piece of paper into a public trash bin, there is already a sticker on the bin denouncing the genocidist; when they stroll through the neighborhood on the weekend, they confront a group of people discussing and denouncing genocidal practices. In this way, the landscape of the neighborhood changes, giving expression to a social problem that invades the furthest corners of the neighborhood.

While it is very important to do the *escrache* against the genocidist, at the same time the *escrache* is an excuse to come to a neighborhood and take on the problems of the present. From this place, we have worked together with neighbors on problems of housing, police violence, corruption in the courts, the fear of talking about the past, creating spaces of encounter, and reflection that relate the genocide to new problems.

[...]

Once it is time to move to other neighborhoods, actors in the group and those in the neighborhood will continue to discuss what occurred in this shared lived experience.

In this sense, we can understand the practice of the *escrache* as a possibility of opening a process of political subjectivity, as it is defined by [philosopher Jacques] Rancière: “An enactment of equality—the handling of a wrong—by people who are together to the extent that they are *between*.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Alain Badiou, “The Idea of Justice,” conference presentation given on June 2, 2004, in the Facultad de Humanidades y Artes in Rosario, Argentina.

4. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 61.



## Escrache: The Use of the Image

[...]

In the beginning, [Grupo de Arte Callejero was] participating from a slightly external position: accompanying the process. Afterwards, we contributed and involved ourselves more. Our participation was further increased when the activity of the *escrache* opened up completely and Mesa de Escrache Popular was created. As such, the demands made visible by the family members who were accompanied by others broadened and created a very powerful political position, totally different from the forms or traditional spaces belonging to parties or unions. At that time, we felt the need to mark and signal the spaces in the city that had served as CCDs (clandestine detention centers), thinking of the nonvisibility of those spaces and the ways in which they were or were not recognized by people passing by. We proposed working on the physical spaces of state terrorism and their invisibility with the objective of unveiling the subjects (by means of an *escrache*) who participated in the dictatorship. We took into account that the majority of the CCDs were not built specifically to be used for the dictatorship, but rather that commissaries, military offices, and public buildings were recycled for the purposes of repression and extermination. For this very reason, in order to signal these spaces and make them visible, the experience of the *escrache* was helpful.

[...]

Our contribution is in the thinking through and making of images in relation to the energy that working on the *escrache* generated. From the beginning, we chose to use the aesthetic of signage, using mock street signs (made of wood painted with acrylics, printed using silk screens or stencils), to subvert the real codes: maintaining colors and icons but completely

changing their meaning. The space being used is the same as the real spaces in the city: on the posts that one finds on the street. We sought to place the signs in spaces that were amply visible both to the passerby and to the driver. These signs served as a spatial intervention in the city, losing and discovering themselves in the daily visual pollution, managing to infiltrate the framework of the city itself.

The great transformation that was implied for us in thinking of the image in the *escrache* concerned, on the one hand, language: the idea of tweaking a determined code (urban street signs). On the other hand, it was the idea of a temporal event that was repeated as a carnivalesque interruption of which the signs were the trace, that which remained “after.” The temporality of the *escrache* made possible the emergence of a type of serial image that reappeared each time. Besides marking the path, the signs mark a time, intervals of time, between *escrache* and non-*escrache*, and also between the *escrache* and other spaces where the same signs appeared copied by other groups. Perhaps for this reason we can consider all of the projects where signs were deployed as a large conceptual unit that spans from the group’s beginning to the present day.

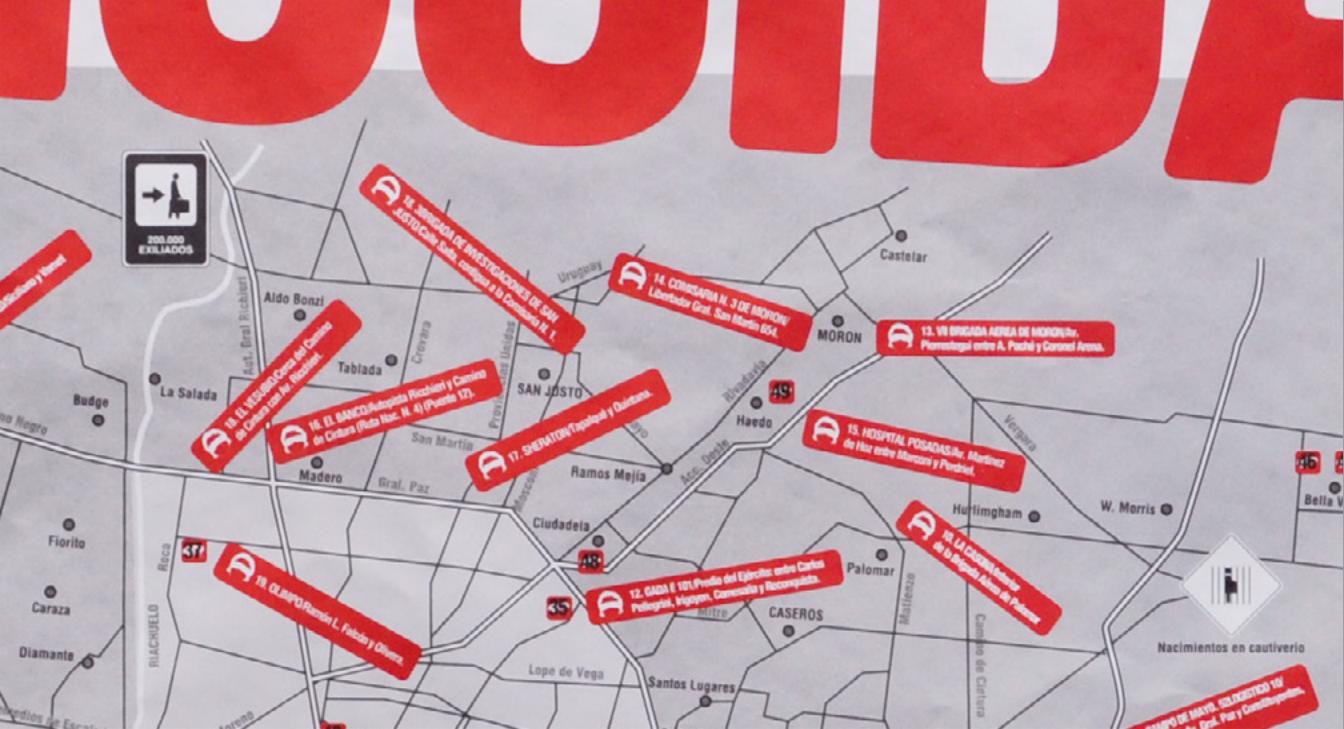
## Walking Justice

[...]

With the arrival of the government of Kirchner and, in June 2005, the annulment of the Obediencia Debida and Punto Final laws, a new moment emerged in the prosecutions of the dictatorship and with this, a shift in position regarding social organizations and movements. The question was raised: with these new trials, would the *escraches* end? Our thinking was that the practice of the Mesa was a kind of social work, starting from thinking of the genocide not as an individual condition but as a collective one. The answer then was



GAC's urban interventions use the language of street signs as part of the *escrache* of Emilio Massera. The signs identify him as a genocider and list his street address. March 23, 1998. Photo courtesy of the Grupo de Arte Callejero Archive.



*An idea of justice that distances itself from the logic of institutional justice*



that in the best of all possible outcomes, if all the military repressors were put in prison, the process of the escrache would still continue, because its principal objective was to reflect on the social transformations and the rupture of the network of intersubjective relations produced by the genocide in order to also address current social conflicts. In this way, an idea of justice that distances itself from the logic of institutional justice began to be formed.

a transformation: it is a collective present of a subjective transformation, as a process of construction of a new body fighting against the social alienation of present-day capitalism.

*Grupo de Arte Callejero is a Buenos Aires-based collective founded in 1997 that continues to work with human rights organizations, labor unions, non-partisan political groups, and research groups.*

[...]

This was an attempt to construct a social condemnation seeking the production of justice outside of institutions and constituted within the day-to-day life of the neighborhood via a process of reflecting on the past and present. The neighbors choose to not have genocidists as neighbors, and they demonstrated their repudiation of them. For example: after meetings of the working group in a particular neighborhood and after the march of the escrache, a building association got together and asked the genocidist to move somewhere else because they didn't want to live with him any longer.

[...]

This is how the Mesa proposes to transform vis-à-vis a “walking justice,” one connected to a knowledge of the past, which is considered along with the present. A walking of everyday justice, neither programmatic nor future-orientated, coinciding with Badiou’s notion that justice is the name of the capacity of bodies to carry ideas in the struggle against modern slavery, “to pass from the state of the victim to one who stands up.” Justice is

A “Genociders Live Here” poster showing the addresses of those complicit with the 1976-1983 dictatorship. The poster was updated annually from 2002 to 2006. March 24, 2006. Photo courtesy of the Grupo de Arte Callejero Archive.

# Un-Settling the Colonial Impulse:

## Contemporary Indigenous Artists Engage Plymouth

Artist Cannupa Hanska Luger  
& Prerana Reddy in Conversation

*Settlement* is a radical performative encampment conceived of by contemporary artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, in which Indigenous artists from across North America and the Pacific were invited to occupy Plymouth's Central Park in the United Kingdom for four weeks in fall 2020. *Settlement* is a key Indigenous-led aspect of the *Mayflower 400*, a year-long multi-national cultural program that commemorates the 1620 voyage of the pilgrims to the "New World." The project aims to go beyond conversations around decolonization and actively practice Indigenization. We spoke to the artist to understand how it supports the descendants of the settlers in moving towards a more relational understanding and acknowledgement of contemporary Indigeneity.

**PRERANA REDDY:** I wanted to start with just a little bit of background about your art practice. You have previously mentioned the concept of individuality as being central to a Western way of thinking and commodification. I know your practice has increasingly moved from individual to collaborative, with other artists such as for *Settlement*, but also sometimes collaborative with movements.

**CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER:** What really started to push me out of being just a studio practice artist was the water protectors gathering up at Standing Rock during [the movement against the] Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016. I'm from Standing Rock. As it was coming through, it was drawing oil from the Reservation that I am enrolled on. It was all so close to home, and so I felt compelled to activate how I was able. I recognize that I have privilege as an artist: I have access to institutions, media sources, and influence with the larger public. Out of pure desperation, I came up with the *Mirror*

Cannupa Hanska Luger  
*The One Who Checks & The One Who Balances*,  
2018 - ongoing (Monster Slayer)  
Site-specific land acknowledgement, Taos, NM  
Photo by Dylan McLaughlin  
Regalia: beadwork, surplus industrial felt,  
ceramic, riot gear, afghan

*Shield Project*, to make something to protect the water protectors on the front line. Going to the camps several times to deliver supplies and offer support, I witnessed the extreme brutality taking place. I wanted to create some form of protection that was also reflective, for the police to witness themselves, and to assert the notion that we were protecting the water for everybody—including them.

For the *Mirror Shield Project*, I used social media as a platform or call to action in order for the public to create the shields, and it changed something in my head. Honestly, I never really looked at social media much before, I didn't understand what its point was, but as all of this was unfolding and I saw its power to amplify voices and to share people's situations, it became a profound resource. That river is wide and shallow though, you know? What does "liking" and sharing actually do? But giving people a task, it becomes an activation. Online everybody is an ally, but not everybody knows how to be an accomplice. So if you create something you can embed into the movement, put some sweat equity into it, you shift from just an ally to an accomplice, you become invested.

I've done several other projects since then using that same model of large calls to action



*Mirror Shield Project* at Oceti Sakowin camp, Standing Rock, ND 2016. Concept artist, Cannupa Hanska Luger, with drone operation and performance organization by Rory Wakemup. Image courtesy of the artist. The artist thanks Jack Becker from Forecast Public Art for helping bring *Mirror Shields* to Standing Rock and Rory Wakemup at All My Relations Arts in Minneapolis, MN, who facilitated a workshop, hosting Luger as guest artist for the *Mirror Shield Project*.

through social media. *Every One* (2018) was a large scale clay work representing missing and murdered Indigenous women, queer, and trans relatives, in which hundreds of communities from across the U.S. and Canada created and sent over 4,000 ceramic beads, which I then used to complete the physical work. And I currently have a project in process called *Something to Hold Onto* (2020), calling for over 7,000 unfired clay beads which will be strung together to create a continuous strand, representing the lives lost on ancestral migratory routes of Indigenous peoples affected by imposed borders. These works attempt to make sense out of unfathomable data, it's an attempt to re-humanized data.

Especially data that actually creates policies for change or structures of accountability.

And so, when I was invited to engage in a large scale project in Europe to build *Settlement* in Plymouth, U.K., one of the things that I wanted to dispel was the notion that Native Americans are just one people. The idea of the Native American as a singular group is inaccurate; this massive umbrella term actually represents nearly 600 diverse tribal communities, with hundreds of language groups, hundreds of different cultural practices, songs, dances, and different scientific and cosmological backgrounds. Yet under this umbrella we become homogenized under the European



Cannupa Hanska Luger  
*MMIWQT Bead Project (Everyone)*, 2018  
Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, NM  
Photo courtesy of the artist

gaze, and to popular culture in America, we are seen as one-dimensional characters. And the only way to really learn and to grow and to appreciate Indigenous peoples is to recognize our complexity. So for *Settlement*, I wanted to bring together as many Indigenous artists, philosophers, and radical thinkers as I could support to be in conversation with one another, for us to contradict one another and be honest.

**PRERANA:** So just to step back and talk about *Mayflower 400*, this multi-national commemoration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mayflower voyage. What does that mean to Plymouth itself as the starting point of that

voyage, and what does it mean to be invited as an element of that commemoration? How did that invitation come to you?

**CANNUPA:** A group from Plymouth, U.K. called The Consciousness Sisters reached out to me and asked if I would be interested in doing something contemporary in relationship to the *Mayflower 400*, where a lot of the programming being developed was commemorating historical events. I was like, "No, I don't think so. Why are you asking me?" See the Pilgrims never made it to my people of the Plains region. There is no ocean where I'm from, you know. We weren't engaging with the West until the 1800s.

Then I started thinking about the effect of how the only representation of Native people is so often us in buckskins and feathers—as historical. Almost every time I’ve gone to Europe, somebody has said, “You don’t look Native American to me.” And I’m like, “I’m not. There is no such thing.” So I decided to work on the project in order to create something hyper-contemporary, to show us as we are: complicated, complex, intelligent, and hard to perish. Building a settlement on the grounds of Plymouth’s Central Park and doing an Indigenous creative occupation would be a great opportunity to flip the narrative of the *Mayflower 400* program. Rather than commemorating 400 years of colonialism, we would acknowledge how those first efforts affected tribal communities across all of America and into the Pacific. The Wampanoag [on whose territory the Pilgrims landed] already had representation [in this commemoration] as one of the host nations for the Mayflower 400, so with *Settlement* I wanted to bring the varied contemporary stories of Indigenous peoples within that 400 year period who were also deeply affected by colonization and who continue to also thrive despite. Ginger Dunnill, the U.S. producer of the project, and I started to look for artists, and we ended up with 28! Everyone was really excited to show the complexity and the contradictions of thought, philosophy, song, dance, and then to produce work together through a contemporary lens.

**PRERANA:** One of the other things that was interesting to me was the process of that collaboration. How you all decided collectively what to do, and maintain a certain kind of individual sense of your own work but also, how are all these things fitting together; how are people working together?

**CANNUPA:** Yes, this project challenges Western ways of thinking and organizing that we are subject to all the time as artists. We wanted to develop programming through

consensus rather than a curator or lead artist telling everybody what they should and shouldn’t do. It takes longer to do this process than to simply dictate to somebody what they should do. I kept telling all of the artists, “Look, the fact that we’re going and doing this at all is amazing. That’s the work. What we present, that’s all bonus, that’s cream.” That kind of alleviated any sort of pressure on each artist to be performative—showing up and witnessing each other, was the real work.

And now that this global pandemic is a part of our piece, there’s something ironic about it all, as far as how Native people and pandemics go. Like how come it’s always got to be a bug!

**PRERANA:** This was supposed to happen in person in July and August 2020 and before we go into how that changed, I wanted to touch upon another thing, which was the community engagement piece. There were meant to be local engagements outside of the encampment itself, right?

**CANNUPA:** What was really interesting about working in Plymouth, is the fact that Plymouthians do not care about the pilgrims. Pilgrims were the people that they asked to leave because they were so puritanical. Americans are the only ones who give a damn about the pilgrims, as their forefathers. It’s all embedded in the American mythos. Rather than bringing American tourists to Plymouth, we were bringing American artists to Plymouth to engage with Plymouthians, to engage with Europeans, to engage with the British. All the development work I had done over two years, traveling to Plymouth, engaging with different communities out there, it was just a slightly different model. This project had to be for us as Indigenous people primarily, and

*Production images from artist films created for Settlement digital occupation. Images courtesy of Red Brigade Films and Razelle Benally. Artists from top to bottom: Haley Greenfeather English, Raven Chacon, and Nanibah Chacon.*



**Almost every time I’ve gone to Europe, somebody has said,**

**“You don’t look Native American to me.”**

**And I’m like,**

**“I’m not. There is no such thing.”**

# I'm trying to figure out how we can make people recognize that the world is in process and that it is not a dictionary of nouns.

then whatever that experience could become onsite would be shared with the communities at large. And those from Plymouth who were interested could come and participate to create something with us as artists, rather than be voyeuristic. Let's get engaged. The whole thing wasn't extractive, even to the British community.

**PRERANA:** We talked about the high roading concept, how not to be extractive, and how not to fit into this system that stereotypes Native Americans. How do you prepare to be in this moment of commemoration around people who may or may not acknowledge that history in the same way? And how do you prepare for both the potential for trauma and the potential for healing around the fact that you will be having agency in that space?

**CANNUPA:** There's a growing understanding of the negative impacts of settler colonialism around the globe, and the lasting toxic effects of colonialism socially. But



Pounds House, a historical mansion in Plymouth, UK, was planned to be the physical site of activation for *Settlement*. Image courtesy of Fiona Evans, *Settlement* UK producer.

the understanding of extractive colonialism, the removal of resources, that's not as openly and commonly understood. With *Settlement*, we have been dealing with the U.K. in the middle of Brexit. That effort to try to close its borders to outside places. Ironically, Plymouth itself is a city that almost every single settler colonial and extractive colonial voyage from the U.K. took off from. The boats were all built there, and that's where everybody stopped before they headed out into the world.

Simultaneously, looking at the Welsh, looking at the Celts, looking at the original inhabitants of that land, what was really triggering for me was recognizing that they have been colonized a lot longer than anybody else. It's embedded in their history, and they don't even recognize the toxicity of it because it's happened for so long that it's been perpetuated as their cultural model. And that colonization has been going on for about 5,000 years. So, how are you expected to be fully open to communication and dialogue under the weight of that trauma?

They have started doing all these projects in Plymouth to amplify their Celtic traditions, the primary people of that region. Catalyzed by the *Settlement* project, members of the Plymouth community have been making traditional wool fiber and other craft and researching their Indigenous plant medicines, ceremony, and regalia. They are working with students within the primary schools, learning about their place and their people and their belonging to that land from a cultural standpoint. I thought that it was really important that they get in touch with their own heritages, myths, and legends instead of exotifying the umbrella of Native American culture to fill that void. I think this all has sparked something in them as a people that could heal some deep trauma into the future.

We all have trauma and to confront it is, well, confrontational. Power is being vulnerable enough to work to heal your trauma in real time with your community, to confront it. But

what I've experienced as a human being is that we have created a system that reinforces the idea that power equals strength. Somewhere along the line, we all decided to agree that power was strength, and that was the birth of patriarchy. If strength is power, then the male form has some sort of dominant role over everything to wield that power. But I can't bench press a child into the world. Power is something that's much greater than strength. And confrontation reinforces the idea of strength as power, but to nurture, and to care, and to support people through their own trauma, I think has a lot more to do with the primary powers of our world, which is creation and empathy.

**PRERANA:** I think the sense of generosity, and that meeting with some sort of, not necessarily equality, but meeting somewhere where you both have stakes seems to be what you were trying to build. And that is actually healing and generative. It's not like something was done to me, and now I'm going to make you feel bad about it.

**CANNUPA:** Yeah, it's more so like, something bad has happened to all of us, you know, somewhere along the ancestral lines. And we have been playing this game of telephone with that bad situation for so long that we forget that we are all deeply traumatized by it, we are all suffering from it. And even if one person is suffering, we are all suffering. I'm trying to figure out how we can make people recognize that the world is in process and that it is not a dictionary of nouns. Everything seems to be or is subject to something, but that's not what it is—we are not those things, we are subject to situations. Even that notion of equity and equality is inherently a power dynamic: equal to what? I'm not looking for equality, I'm looking for somebody to listen, to witness, that's it.

**PRERANA:** Well, with that I'm going to ask you how your plans have had to change.

Traveling is not possible to Europe right now. Obviously the idea of this tourist attraction has changed, and your project is not about that aspect anyway. But what does it mean to have this not be, to the extent that you had planned, a physical manifestation? And what will it be?

**CANNUPA:** We are moving forward with the project as a digital occupation. This October, *Settlement* will be going live online, and we will have the work of 28 artists indigenous to North America and the Pacific represented. The online platform will be a space for Indigenous artists to activate a creative response and claiming of digital space to consider the impacts of colonisation on a diverse number of tribal nations who continue to thrive despite its long term effects. Across the winter, the online platform will include performance, artist discussions, and social engagement opportunities. Through innovative media approaches of idea sharing, our art practices can reach an even larger global audience. This digital occupation is a space to map our stories, on our terms, in a landscape unhindered by borders. I hope this work will create a living archive for contemporary Indigenous artists and that global investors would consider hosting this project in their region. We were talking about doing it again here in Alcatraz. And have the same kind of concept and approach, but engage with our oppressor.

**PRERANA:** And also, it's a reoccupation at Alcatraz at that point, right, so it connects to the whole American Indian Movement history.

**CANNUPA:** Yeah. And there was traction in that scenario, and it's still a possibility. Honestly, I always thought about this *Settlement* project with the two definitions of settlement in mind, both the legal and the physical. To come to some sort of consensus through engagement and communication is how you come to a settlement. It's an official agreement intended to resolve a dispute or conflict. I'm really interested in doing the

project this time with the *Mayflower 400* in the U.K. under the premise that this is just the first step, and it could potentially be something that is bigger than us. What if this became a model for every country around the world that's been subject to colonialism, and settler colonialism, to create an opportunity to develop a settlement? A temporary creative occupation of the colonial landscape. And I would really be interested to see what that looked like from other cultures and other communities, and to experience that myself, as somebody outside of it. I would just love to see it from another perspective, where I'd just be like, "Oh, this is so righteous. This is a good way forward."

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*Cannupa Hanska Luger is a multi-disciplinary artist of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota and European descent.*

*Prerana Reddy is Director of Programs at A Blade of Grass.*

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# NAMES NOT LOST

RACIAL TERROR LYNCHING,  
PAST AND PRESENT

Neesha Powell-Twagirimukiza

A mural memorializing Ahmaud Arbery by artist Marvin Weeks painted on the building that will become the Brunswick African American Cultural Center at 1621 Albany Street. Photo by Jud McCranie/Wikimedia Commons.

A MURAL of a smiling Black boy wearing a tuxedo spans the side of a two-story building constructed in the 1950s out of concrete and oyster shells. His face is imposed on top of splashes of blue and gold. The building, located at 1621 Albany Street, Brunswick, Georgia, was neglected for two decades, with past lives as a nightclub and a cultural center. But due to the tragic fate of the mural's subject, Ahmaud Arbery, it's now poised to become a community hub once again: the Brunswick African American Cultural Center. Painted by Brunswick-bred artist Marvin Weeks, the mural signifies hope in the small coastal city still reeling from the February 23, 2020 killing of 25-year-old Arbery by a mob of white vigilantes, nine miles away from the old tabby building.

As a little Black girl coming of age in Brunswick in the 1990s and 2000s, I would've never dreamed that a modern-day lynching in my hometown would catalyze uprisings across the globe, but that's precisely what the killing of Arbery manifested. Growing up, teachers ignored the Confederate flag-embazoned t-shirts worn by some of my classmates. A store in our local mall called Dixie Outfitters proudly displayed its Confederate apparel.

Racist symbols in Brunswick are just beginning to be seriously challenged. As recently as 2018, the *Brunswick News* covered the annual Confederate Memorial Day celebration at a 20-foot tall white stone monument in the city's historic downtown, installed by mourning daughters of the Confederacy in 1902. Four months after Arbery's death, the monument was spray painted in two different spots with the acronym "BLM."

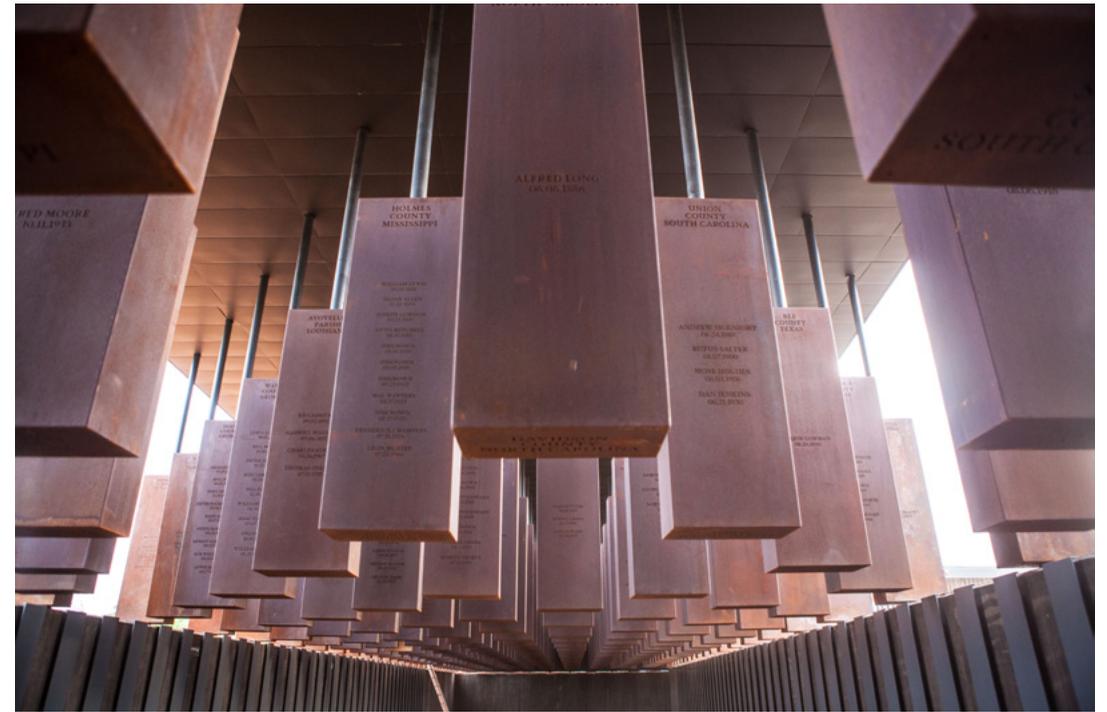
BLM. Black Lives Matter. These messages have irrevocably shifted society and culture by igniting worldwide movements to attain liberation for Black people after centuries of suffering from police and state violence. The omnipresence of BLM is so great that even the most conservative of cities (i.e., Brunswick)

are being forced to reckon with systemic and institutional racism, along with symbols of white supremacy. The refrain has been painted on the street in front of the White House and Trump Tower in New York City, among myriad other places. Meanwhile, statues of colonizers and slave owners are rapidly being removed, by law and by force. Christopher Columbus statues are having a particularly rough year.

**It's clear that communities are ready to envision what and who should be commemorated in public spaces in lieu of reminders of hate.**

In Montgomery, Alabama, one can experience the fruits of such visioning labor at the Memorial for Peace and Justice, colloquially referred to as the "lynching memorial," which opened in 2018. Having a lynching memorial in the U.S. is painful yet necessary, since there's no end in sight to this horrific act. The memorial covers six acres on top of a hill and overlooks a downtown boasting a statue of Jefferson Davis, the sole president of the Confederacy. It's a project of the human rights nonprofit, Equal Justice Initiative (EJI)—an accompaniment to their cultural institution less than a mile away, the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, housed in a warehouse where slave traders once imprisoned Africans before selling them at auctions.

At the memorial, visitors interact with text and narratives intended to convey the horrors of the state-sanctioned violence that has plagued Black people in the U.S. for hundreds of years. Sculpture, art, and design are incorporated into the memorial to "contextualize racial terror." EJI founder and Executive Director, Bryan Stevenson, conceived of the design with his team of attorneys and a host of collaborating artists.



The 800 suspended steel monuments at EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama list the names of the more than 4,000 documented Black victims of lynching in the United States between 1877 and 1950. Image courtesy of Human Pictures/Wikimedia Commons.

As you head towards the memorial, a giant open-sided pavilion, you encounter a scene of bronze figures sculpted by Ghanaian artist, Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. The sculpture depicts a group of shackled Black people whose bodies are contorted in distress. A baby cries at their mother's breast. On the far side of the pavilion is another sobering piece, this one by American conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas. The bronze sculpture evokes the too familiar sight of Black people with their hands stretched to the sky in surrender. Entitled *Raise Up*, the piece embodies the popular rallying cry, "Hands up, don't shoot!"

Once inside the pavilion, you witness a visual ode to the more than 4,000 Black victims of lynching in the U.S. between 1877 and 1950. 800 corten steel monuments are suspended from the ceiling of the pavilion and standing

upright, each one representing a county where a racial terror lynching occurred, engraved with the names of victims. The words of Montgomery's own, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., along with a quote from Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, and Elizabeth Alexander's poem, "Invocation," are featured throughout.

**"Your names were never lost, each name a holy word," the first line of Alexander's poem reads.**

This memorial is hallowed ground that ensures Black lynching victims' names won't be lost, but rather preserved, remembered, and honored. In a field to the side of the pavilion lies 800 monuments identical to the ones inside the memorial, inviting visitors to

publicly remember these injustices in their own communities. Individual counties can claim a replica of these monuments by engaging in EJI's Community Remembrance Project.

The Community Remembrance Project partners with countywide community coalitions committed to steeping themselves in work that creates "greater awareness and understanding about racial terror lynchings" and begins "a necessary conversation that advances truth and reconciliation." Communities find out about the project via EJI's museum, memorial, and website or through word of mouth. EJI puts those who express interest in creating a coalition and who are from the same communities in touch with one another. Once a coalition is formed, EJI and the coalition work in tandem to tell the true story of racial terror lynchings in the given county through the Community Historical Marker Project, the Community Soil Collection Project, and broader community education and engagement. All of the coalitions are moving towards claiming their county's corten steel monument to racial terror lynchings and erecting it in their communities.



Community Remembrance Project Chair, Dee Smith (left), and NAACP DeKalb President, Teresa Hardy (right), with a recently installed lynching marker. Photo by Albert Fields.

As someone who's been organizing in the South for almost a decade, I've admired EJI's work for some time. I spoke with representatives from some of these coalitions, and their emotions were palpable. During these conversations, I couldn't help but think of my hometown, where remembering in public for Arbery is well underway, but lynchings of the past have long been forgotten.

### **"We started to turn it from a project to a journey."**

#### **— Teresa Hardy, NAACP DeKalb Remembrance Project Coalition**

A journey was born from a NAACP DeKalb County Branch trip in summer 2018, when they traveled 160 miles southwest from DeKalb County, Georgia to the EJI memorial and Legacy Museum. During the ride home, the group decided to unveil their community's history of racial terror lynchings with the Community Remembrance Project. On September 18, 2019, inside the DeKalb History Center in downtown Decatur, Georgia, with a 30-foot Confederate monument outside, the NAACP DeKalb Remembrance Project Coalition orchestrated their Interfaith Reconciliation Service.

About 200 community members gathered at the ceremony, where coalition chairperson, D.E. Smith, shared the stories of the three known lynchings in DeKalb County to an aghast crowd. In attendance were five relatives of Porter Turner, a Black taxi driver murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1945. At the end of the service, a "call to commitment" was issued to attendees to engage in the coalition's work, mainly their "Journey of Remembrance and Reconciliation."

NAACP DeKalb President, Teresa Hardy, told me the Interfaith Reconciliation Service marked the beginning of a series of forums and discussions on racial healing.

"The Black people didn't really want to talk about lynching, and the white people didn't really want to talk about it, and then when you do, there could be this anger about the whole thing, so how do we get past all of this? We know our history. Let's know our history, understand our history, and do better from what we know," Hardy remarked.

Since its inception, the coalition has grown to more than 50 community members and organizations. Not even the COVID-19 pandemic has stopped it from reaching milestones. In May, with research support and sponsorship from EJI, the coalition installed their first historical marker outside of DeKalb City Hall, sadly without the fanfare they'd originally planned due to the pandemic (they hope to have a dedication ceremony before September). Like the rest of EJI's markers, their marker is an "Alamo"-shaped plaque affixed on a pole that bears the history of the documented racial terror lynchings in their county. Two more are planned for the cities of Lithonia and Redan in DeKalb County.

Only a month after the marker installation, the group saw their labors bear more fruit. They'd been part of a years-long movement to take down the Confederate memorial in downtown Decatur, which the city finally did by court order on the night of June 18th, to thunderous applause. The significance of the monument's removal on the eve of Juneteenth, a holiday honoring the last enslaved Black people in the U.S. to learn of the Emancipation Proclamation, wasn't lost on the coalition.

### **"I've found it a real blessing to have the opportunity to work with some of the people I've worked with."**

#### **— Susan Righi, Christopher Davis Community Remembrance Project**

Athens County, Ohio has a vastly different racial landscape from DeKalb County, Georgia. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the latter is 54.8 percent Black, while the former is 2.8 percent Black. Both Black spaces and Black history in Athens, Ohio have been neglected over the years, but there are concerted efforts to recover and preserve them.

The community has discovered Black history in its very soil. On September 14, 2019, more than 300 people gathered to collect soil near the site where a 24-year-old Black farm laborer named Christopher Davis was lynched in 1881 for allegedly assaulting a white female acquaintance. Speakers from the community and EJI shared remarks, and an Ohio University (OU) Master's student in acting, Kezia Waters, channeled Davis' narrative in a brief monologue, with a noose around his neck.

"For months [I] feared trouble was coming on me," Davis wrote to his wife while awaiting trial for his alleged wrongdoing. As a Black person doing well for himself, Davis was a natural target for racial violence, so his ominous words are unsurprising. The local newspaper reported that its own editor was a part of the mob who broke into Davis' jail cell, put a noose on him, dragged him to the South Bridge over the Hocking River, and hung him. While the bridge is long gone, the base of it has been recovered and is now owned by OU.

Susan Righi, coordinator of the Christopher Davis Community Remembrance Project, gets chills when reading the story of Davis' lynching. She choked up while recalling it for me. Righi helped assemble the project, a coalition of people and organizations committed to justice for Black lives in Athens, including Ada Woodson Adams, a genealogist who's been a keeper of Black history in the region for decades, and the Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society, a group dedicated to rehabilitating a historic Black church.

Righi told me the project has been a good opportunity for white and Black people to band together for racial justice.

“With the recent events and more police killings coming to light, I think this has helped people understand that this racial violence we’re seeing perpetrated against Black people is not the result of bad apples. It’s not some kind of new phenomenon, it’s just part of a long continuum,” Righi said.

Soil collected at the September ceremony was sent to be displayed at the EJI museum and memorial. In June, the project collaborated with EJI to install a historical marker with the account of Davis’ lynching near where it occurred that will make it impossible for Black history in Athens to be buried again. A dedication ceremony for the marker is planned for later this year.

**“People need to know that these things happened. They should not be ignored.”**

**— Jacqueline Hubbard, Esq., Pinellas County Community Remembrance Project Coalition**

The Pinellas County Community Remembrance Project Coalition is planning their own historical marker dedication ceremony for this November to coincide with the 106th anniversary of the lynching of John Evans, a Black man accused of murdering a prominent local resident and assaulting the man’s wife in St. Petersburg, Florida. In front of a crowd of at least 1,500, Evans was hung from a light post, where he clung for dear life before being riddled by bullets. The marker will be installed at the site of his lynching at Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard (formerly 9th Street South) and Second Avenue South.

The coalition formed to commemorate this racial terror lynching, in addition to two others,

has swelled to 83 members from various ethnic and faith backgrounds since early 2019. Prior to the pandemic, the group met twice a month at St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church in St. Petersburg, one of the oldest historically Black churches in the state. I spoke with a member of their congregation, Jacqueline Hubbard, a retired attorney who serves as a co-chair of the coalition. Hubbard was disturbed by what she saw working within the criminal legal system. In 2018, she and other members of her local chapter of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History traveled to Montgomery to experience EJI’s museum and memorial, which inspired them to answer the organization’s call to participate in “restorative truth-telling.”

Bearing witness to the legacy of racial terror epitomized by lynchings in America is the coalition’s mission. Their goals include advocating for the truth of a story; educating with the truth of the story; and commemorating and collating the history of racial terror lynchings in Pinellas County in an effort to bring about reconciliation, justice, equity, peace, and healing.

Hubbard thinks this work is crucial because the general public lacks knowledge and awareness of what African Americans have suffered, from slavery times to the current era of mass incarceration.

“People would come to see lynchings as if it were a barbecue or a picnic, and they would watch a Black person being literally tortured to death in crowds of people, mostly white, who watched these horrific acts of violence,” Hubbard explained.

Though the coalition’s marker isn’t up yet, Hubbard said their message is already reverberating around the county. People from all walks of life are finally talking about the community’s history of lynching Black people, a solid step towards racial reconciliation.

With support from EJI, the Christopher Davis Community Remembrance Project organizes a soil collection ceremony with community members to memorialize Davis, a Black farm laborer lynched in 1881. Photo courtesy of the group.



I couldn’t write about a lynching memorial project without recalling victims of racial terror lynchings in my own hometown. Their lives still matter, and we must remember them if we claim to be invested in racial justice.

Ahmaud Arbery, a fellow graduate of Brunswick High School, who was cornered by three white men in a subdivision, then shot to death by the one with whom I shared a class in ninth grade.

Henry Jackson and Wesley Lewis, who were given time to pray before having ropes tied around their necks and being shot dead by a mob of 300 men in February 1891.

The eight Black men shot and killed in July 1947 at the now closed Anguilla prison camp after refusing to wade into a snake-infested swamp without their boots on.

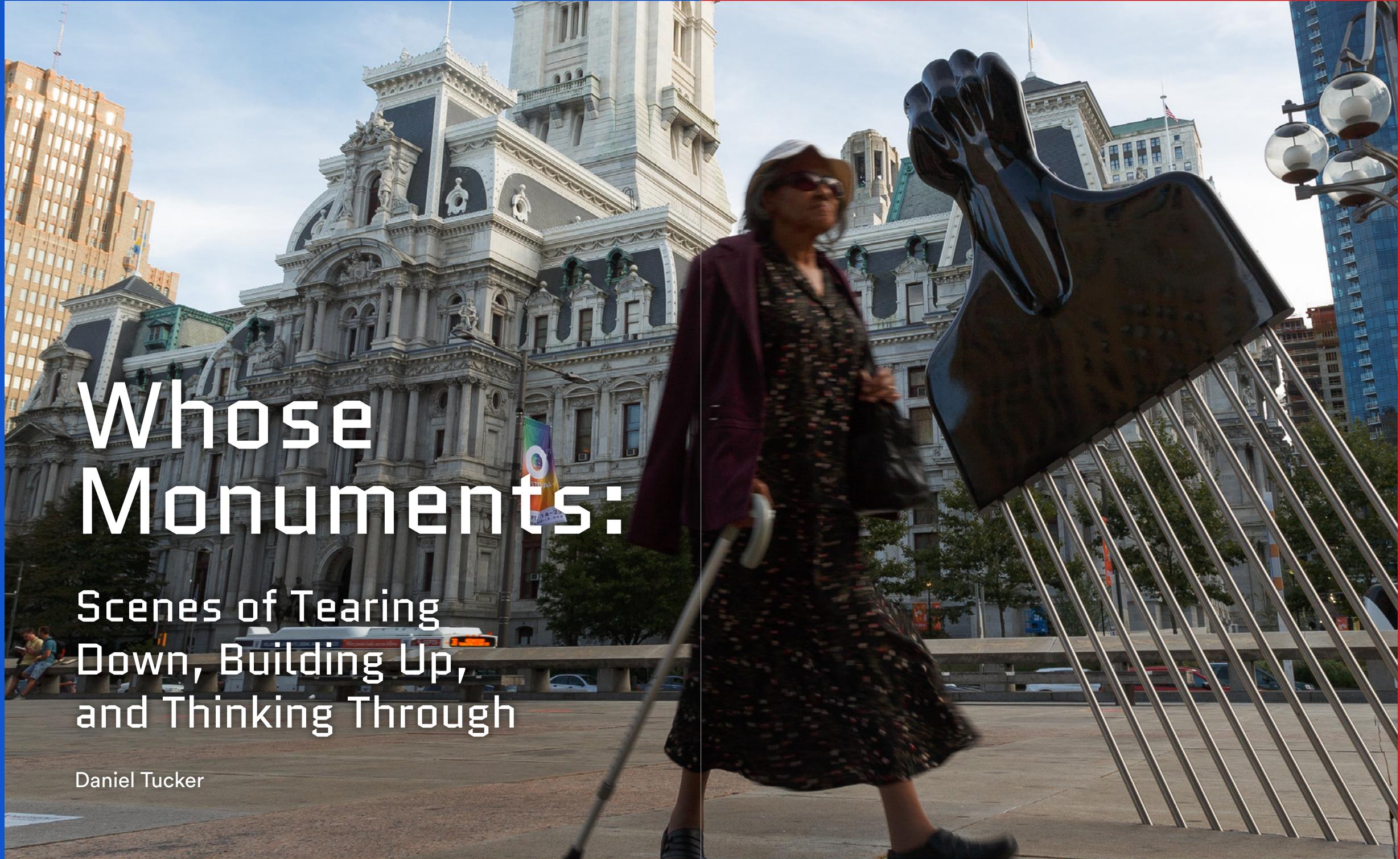
The Confederate memorial in Brunswick was spray painted around the same time as multiple protests and widespread calls for its removal in Arbery’s name, spurring the city commission to appoint a nine-member committee to decide

on its future. The committee represents a broad range of perspectives, including a life member of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, a member of a local women’s advocacy group, a local history professor, and the pastor of a Black Baptist Church.

I suspect the newly formed committee will weigh options similar to ones being considered across the country. Perhaps the monument will end up being displayed in a museum. Maybe it will end up in storage indefinitely. It’s possible that it will remain right where it is in the heart of downtown. As the process unfolds, I’m praying this symbol of hate is replaced by one that remembers victims of racial violence in the same vein as the Community Remembrance Project.

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*Neesha Powell-Twagirumukiza is a Georgia-born and raised movement journalist, creative nonfiction student, cat parent, spouse, and auntie living in Atlanta (occupied Cherokee & Creek territories).*



# Whose Monuments:

Scenes of Tearing  
Down, Building Up,  
and Thinking Through

Daniel Tucker

BY NOVEMBER, the statue was shrouded. Banners hung from businesses encouraging peaceful exchange and disparaging hate speech with hopes that tourists would feel comfortable downtown once again. A temporary marker celebrated that *C'ville* is a place for *love* not *hate*. Despite all the best efforts of the local tourist office, the large black tarp remained the focus of public and private speculation.

A few months prior in August 2017, Charlottesville had been the focus of international attention when a “Unite The Right” rally descended on the small Virginia city. Just as thunder follows lightning, so too do the anti-racists follow on the heels of the right-wing racists. The “alt-right,” as the white supremacists had become rebranded in the lead-up to the election of Donald Trump, marched towards Emancipation Park—where city council had voted six months earlier to remove the now-shrouded statue of the commander of the Confederate States Army, Robert E. Lee, and rename the park bearing his name.

On the second day, the violence escalated as a white supremacist rammed his car into a counter-demonstration. Paralegal and civil rights activist Heather Heyer was killed and nineteen others seriously injured prompting President Trump to state that there were “very fine people” on both sides of the protest, which was taken to be a clear appeal to his base. After much handwringing, even the known racist Attorney General Jeff Sessions described the attack as “domestic terrorism” against anti-racist protesters, spawning a civil rights investigation. The tarp enshrouding the statue was removed by court order in February 2018 and by June the car driver was charged with multiple hate crimes. These events made the well-documented increase of such crimes much more visible, and helped congeal an

[Previous: Hank Willis Thomas, \*All Power to All People\*, Monument Lab, Philadelphia, 2017. Photo courtesy of Steve Weinik/Mural Arts Philadelphia.](#)

already growing nationwide discussion about the politics informing public memorials, plaques, sculptures, honorary street names, and dedication markers of all kinds.

Before May 25, 2020, you may have asked, with all the challenges facing the United States today, why are these monuments and related symbols being widely and publicly discussed now? Of course there were many possible reasons: Is it because of President Trump or the Black Lives Matter movement? Is it their respective uses of social media? Is it because of a sharp rise in racist, homophobic, and anti-semitic attacks or the rise of right-wing populism globally? Is it that this time has come and gone, and returned again more deeply connected with both the material and symbolic legacies of America’s foundational ideology of white supremacy?

But after May 25, 2020, when a police officer knelt on the neck and killed George Floyd in Minneapolis, the link between all of these factors have been made through action. The global movement to confront police brutality and white supremacy, while also celebrating Black life and joy, has erupted. In the sections below, scenes and moments from recent years of activism and experimental monument making will be reviewed to better understand the struggle over how history is documented and how it is connected to movements of today.

## South Pole

“In the name of Jesus, this flag has to come down!” shouted a woman wearing all black with climbing gear and a helmet as she unhooked a waving Confederate flag. Below her was a man wearing a construction vest, clearly there to support her climb but also to deflect attention with the legitimacy only a bright yellow vest can convey. Five days earlier, the two of them had gathered in a living room with a small group of other activists of

Brittany “Bree” Newsome removes the Confederate flag from a pole at the State House in Columbia, South Carolina. Photo by Adam Anderson/REUTERS.



different race, gender, and sexual identity, with many having never met before. They said they wanted to take collective action to attack a racist symbol—and that they did. One of the earliest actions in the period of increased monument removals, this 2015 action by artist Brittany “Bree” Newsome captured the national imagination as she climbed the South Carolina State Capitol’s flag pole on June 27th to remove the Confederate flag flying above.

In a statement posted online, Newsome wrote of the racially motivated massacre in the Charleston, South Carolina church, just 10 days prior, which left nine people dead. The murderer had celebrated the Confederate flag, which had originally been re-raised at the state’s capitol in 1961, a clear statement opposing the famous lunch counter sit-ins occurring at the time during the civil rights movement. Connecting to that history, Newsome wrote that: “I began my activism by participating in the Moral Monday movement, fighting to restore voting rights in North Carolina after the Supreme Court struck down key protections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.” She continued, outlining connections between South Carolina, global conflicts and ethnic genocide, and the killing of unarmed Black men by police in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore just months before.

Since Newsome’s action, calls to remove flags have extended to monuments. In cities throughout the southern United States,

monuments celebrating Confederate history have been removed, while others have been graffitied with the words “Black Lives Matter.” As historian Sarah Beetham wrote the following year: “The recent spate of vandalism directed at Confederate monuments in the wake of racially motivated violence against Black Americans reveals the unavoidable connection with racial oppression that has always been a part of Confederate memory.”

Author Rebecca Solnit reflected on what she calls the “Monument Wars”: “After any true conquest, a city’s landscape changes to reflect the values of the victors. In New Orleans, in the places where these monuments still stand, so does the Confederacy.” That same year, after much legal jostling, the statue of Robert E. Lee in New Orleans had been removed from Lee Circle.

The controversy around monuments is not just centered on their removal, but also their creation. In the report “Whose Heritage: Public Symbols of the Confederacy”, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) created a near comprehensive survey of Confederate flags, building names, and public monuments. There, SPLC explains “this study, while far from comprehensive, identified a total of 1,503... [including] 718 monuments and statues” primarily in southern United States as well as whole counties and cities, public schools, military bases, and tons of historical markers

**With the number of these symbols standing on public land maintained by tax dollars—some estimates reaching \$40 million over the last decade—the stakes of this perpetuation have a material as well as psychic toll.**

honoring Confederate icons. The SPLC goes on to reveal that contrary to popular belief that the monuments are somehow legacies of the U.S. Civil War itself, it was not until 1910 that there were the largest number of monuments erected—forty five years after the end of the Civil War and concurrent with the enactment of the so-called “Jim Crow” laws that enforced segregation and disenfranchisement of African Americans until they were repealed in 1965. In an updated edition of the 2016 report “Whose Heritage?”, the SPLC identifies 114 Confederate symbols that have been removed since the Charleston attack—and 1,747 that still stand.

With the number of these symbols standing on public land maintained by tax dollars—some estimates reaching \$40 million over the last decade—the stakes of this perpetuation have a material as well as psychic toll.

## Monument to Torture

The histories that monuments represent need not be distant, as there are many recent memories of urban life today that remain painfully present.

After decades of campaigns led by victims of police abuse, their families, lawyers, and social justice activists, in 2008, former Chicago Police commander, Jon Burge, was finally indicted. It was charged that Burge had overseen and perpetrated the torture of over 100 mostly African American men at Chicago police headquarters from 1972 to 1991. Despite this being proven, Burge was indicted on the basis that he had sought to “corruptly obstruct, influence, and impede an official proceeding” with false statements due to the statute of limitations limiting prosecution for torture. By January 2011, federal court served Burge’s sentence and by that June, a group calling themselves the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials (CTJM) held their first public meeting to talk about public memory of the events. The

group was initiated by lawyers who, having worked on the case, realized that much of the energy around these abuses had been sucked up by court room processes and worried that people might forget. They reached out to victims who wanted justice and to artists in their community who had experience with symbolic representations of history.

CTJM issued an open call for “speculative proposals” to memorialize the Chicago Police torture cases. Workshops on design strategies for representing complicated histories were held at local history museums and art centers. Inspiration was drawn from global sources including European Holocaust memorials, apartheid monuments in South Africa, and creative activism around the history of military-sponsored disappearances in Argentina. Resulting exhibitions took place at the Sullivan Galleries of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a community gallery, Art In These Times, in 2012 and 2013. The emphasis on “speculation” was essential as the group did not aspire to build bronze statues but, rather, sought to emphasize process over product. The proposal process led to explorations of the poetic and the impossible, of the challenge to adequately capture such a complex event, and of innovative possible approaches that could have a greater impact.

Through the group’s artistic process—and through the decades of what organizer Mariame Kaba has called the grassroots slow and “sustained resistance” of the 1990s by activists, victims, and lawyers—on Wednesday, May 6, 2015, the Chicago City Council passed the reparations package for the Burge torture survivors and their family members. The package included funding for a curriculum to be taught in public schools about the history of the events, support for a memorial, a counseling center for victims and their families, and a financial reparations fund. In 2018, CTJM selected eight Chicago-based artists to create



Rendering of the selected proposal for the Chicago Torture Justice Memorial, designed by artist Patricia Nguyen and architectural designer John Lee. Photo courtesy of CTJM.

proposals for a permanent memorial and two have been selected to proceed to a completed realization.

This was not the first time that Chicago had struggled with memorializing police violence against city residents. Following the infamous “Haymarket Riot” of 1886, in which both police and workers protesting for an eight hour workday were killed, the city erected a monument that acknowledged only the loss of police life. The police held Veterans of the Haymarket Riot parades until at least the 1960s and the history of the workers was never officially recognized despite inspiring millions worldwide to mark the event with May Day celebrations. The city’s police statue inspired resentment ranging from vandalism to being run over by a disgruntled street-car driver who aimed his trolley at the larger than life policeman. In the 1960s and 70s, the Weather Underground targeted the statue twice with a bombing and eventually it was moved from the

exposed public space into the courtyard of the city’s police headquarters.<sup>1,2</sup>

After the police statue was removed, a rough outline of a circle remained in the cement where the pedestal had been. In 2002, the artist Michael Piazza had the idea for a festival of art projects that would inhabit the circle for eight hour shifts intended to memorialize the workers’ demands for an eight hour work day. Piazza’s “Haymarket 8 Hour Action Series” included soapbox speeches by historians and artists, the installation of a fake street parking sign right on the site that read “No Working: Unlimited Idling 9am-5pm,” a history bike tour, a sewing bee, a puppet show, and a performance using contemporary street-team tactics to connect history to the present called “Hay! Market Research Group.” This impulse to be generative versus tearing down could be read as both an occupation that insists on visibility, or that could bring about healing.

1. Sarah Kanouse, “Performing Haymarket,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 7, no. 1 (2008): 69-87.
2. Nicolas Lampert, “Haymarket: An Embattled History of Static Monuments and Public Interventions,” in *A People’s Art History of the United States* (The New Press, 2013), 71-85.

## Appropriate Monuments

Philadelphia is another city grappling with the bronzed legacy of a state-sanctioned abuser. In the summer of 2017, a campaign erupted to call for the removal of a larger-than-life statue of Frank Rizzo. Rizzo served the city as a policeman, Police Commissioner, and two-term mayor in the 1970s. While being well-liked by certain segments of the city’s white population, he was known to advocate abuse and surveillance in communities of color and of social justice activists in his time. To this day, the city is still greatly burdened by the payments to police pension funds, which dramatically increased during his tenure, indicative of his method of choice for solidifying loyalty.

Over the course of 2017, activists would hold protests at the statue and—similar to actions on civil war monuments—it was painted with the words “Black Power” and covered in red paint as was a mural depicting Rizzo in South Philadelphia. Police started to hold their own gatherings at the statue and it became a flashpoint for debate drawing comparisons to Confederate monuments in the South. Commissioned by the Frank L. Rizzo Memorial Committee and paid for by his supporters, the statue was installed in 1998—less than 7 years after Rizzo died. While it is common for more time to pass between a well-known figure’s passing and their public memorialization, the Rizzo statue led many to understand more about how monuments are installed in the first place and there has been growing consensus that this process was too quickly on the heels of the former Mayor’s death. Thousands signed petitions on either side for maintaining it versus moving it.

One day, seemingly out of the blue, a twelve foot tall afro-pick topped with an iconic Black Power fist appeared stuck teeth-first into the cement only feet away from the Rizzo monument. Appearing to taunt the bronze

Rizzo, the statue *All Power to All People* by Philadelphia-born Hank Willis Thomas—while not initially designed for that site—could not have found a more appropriate home. In fact, it was the question of appropriateness that motivated its placement. Part of a city-wide festival of new and temporary monuments, Monument Lab, 20 artist projects took over Philadelphia premised on the question, “What is an appropriate monument for the city of Philadelphia today?”

The artist-designed “prototype monuments” created for Monument Lab varied in overall approach through media, scale, subject matter, and their relationship to site. Thomas’ pick was in a busy downtown plaza just a block away from City Hall where Mel Chin erected a series of wheelchair accessible ramps leading to two identical pedestals, each reading simply, “Me” where a dedication might typically name a historical figure. In that same site, Michelle Angela Ortiz created a video-projected mural *Seguimos Caminando (We Keep Walking)* which grew out of her ongoing work with immigrant families detained at the nearby Berks County detention facility. Blocks away in Washington Square Park, two artists took radically different approaches to material. Artist Kaitlin Pomerantz replaced park benches with iconic Philly “stoops” or stairs recovered from front of houses being demolished across the city. In the same site, Marisa Williamson developed a neighborhood walking tour using augmented reality technology that could be downloaded to a smart-phone and allow the viewer to follow a fictional character through a “video scavenger hunt” about the search for Black freedom in Philadelphia’s past, present, and future.

In Philadelphia, a place where historic homes, reenactments, and walking tours prominently dot the landscape, the prototype monuments of Monument Lab served to complicate a city which is economically and culturally organized around nostalgia.

## Belonging

The heightened public visibility of police killings and the urgent social movement response has catapulted the concept of the war on Black people to a broad new audience. The public responses to the killings of twenty-two-year-old Oscar Grant by Oakland public transit police in 2009, and seventeen year old Trayvon Martin by a Florida civilian in 2012, quickly moved from local to national. While fighting against police brutality was a consistent commitment of Civil Rights and Black Power organizers for decades, the more recent activism of groups like Copwatch and the National Police Accountability Project in the 1990s built an infrastructure for today's movements. Instances of police murder of unarmed civilians like Mike Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 led to a further widening of the awareness that many communities have had for too long—that police, far from being protectors, are themselves primary threats. From there, #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName became global movements powered by social media and first inhabited and then defined a space alongside #OccupyWallStreet, #Kony2012, #IdleNoMore, #BringBackOurGirls, #OscarsSoWhite, #NoDAPL, #MeToo and #IfIDieInASchoolShooting.

One outcome from the explosion of protests initiated by these movements is to highlight the ongoing struggle and the absolute urgency for Black residents of the city to feel belonging.<sup>3</sup> Such a feeling is not merely psychic, but also governed by laws and permitted by a social fabric that can be mobilized to ensure safety or encourage fear. The “right to the city” is often evoked around affordable housing and other economic justice issues, but it also means the right to

full participation and self-actualization free of the harassment and oppression that typically accompany economic marginalization.

As the national Right to the City Alliance wrote in their 2015 article, “We Can’t Win a Right To The City Unless #BlackLivesMatter,” “Working to win a right to the city for all puts us in direct opposition with the process of urban restructuring (popularly known as gentrification) that the free market enforces on our communities. It’s a process that is heavily reliant on the policing of working class, black and brown communities to impose destabilization and displacement. Police violence—and the threat of it—is an intimate part of our daily lives.” The authors go on to state that, “We know that to build a society in which Black lives truly do matter, communities need democratic control over the resources needed to produce safe, equitable, nourishing, livelihoods. This is an inextricable part of our collective cry for a right to the city.”

Monuments are contested today because of unfinished business from the past, but also significant demographic shifts in the present. In Charlottesville, the alt-right protesters chanted “You Will Not Replace Us” and “White Lives Matter.” They also shouted the common leftist call-and-response “Whose Streets? Our Streets!” For that night, in the eyes of the world watching on newscasts, the racists did seem to command at least some control of the streets.

But, this was the same place where the city council had originally voted to remove the Robert E. Lee statue and rename his namesake park. So whose city is it? The city was undeniably changing. And so was the country.

[...]

3. bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (Routledge, 2008), 3-5.

# Monuments are contested today because of unfinished business from the past,



The Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee monument in Richmond, Virginia transformed by protesters with graffitied anti-racist messages and calls to take down public displays of Confederate symbols. Image by Mobilus in Mobilii/Flickr.com.

# but also significant demographic shifts in the present.

People who identify as white have, since 2000, become a minority of the population in the majority of urban counties while their “majority” status has been maintained in rural areas and suburbs. As this shift occurs, the inheritors of racial privilege are still found in the halls of power throughout cities in the United States, but their hegemony is being actively contested in current social movements, local elections, and in the public character of cities. Beyond high-profile fights with racists, the fight over the future of cities is now confronting the white anxieties that continue to result in a deep and uneven economic disinvestment from housing access to public schools.

When considered in relationship to monuments, these demographic shifts mean that a city or a region may have sorted bastions of supporters of a racist monument living in a city that is overwhelmingly ready to confront and move on from its racist past. In Philadelphia after weeks of protests in June 2020, the statue of Frank Rizzo was removed, and in July, a vote held on removing a South Philadelphia monument to Christopher Columbus also overwhelmingly passed. In each site the willful and prideful inheritors of racist and protectionist political culture attempted to defend the statues until public pressure became overwhelming.

[...]

## Temporarily Under Construction

Today, in many cities in the Southern United States, the debate over Confederate monuments is drawn as a debate between history as a resource versus history as a burden. This can often be inflected by

economic development arguments that insist that the repackaging of the past is actually the only way to draw in tourist dollars. This position is complicated by companies like Freedom Lifted that have developed Civil Rights-centric tourism in place of Civil War-centric tourism while focusing on building southern “tourism that boosts local economies by working with community-based and black-owned businesses whenever possible.”<sup>4</sup>

In New Orleans, the group Paper Monuments has taken this same context of a southern region that has too long been overdetermined by narratives of racist history and launched a project seeking to offer a corrective. They want to share “the stories that are too often lost or obscured when New Orleans history is recounted. These are the stories of New Orleanians who were poor and working-class. Black and brown. Women and children. Lesbian, gay, trans, and queer. Immigrants and refugees. Those who fought battles for inclusion and justice; those who worked to improve lives and bring hope, but who were and are unlikely to be elevated on any pedestal.” Inspired by the work of Monument Lab in Philadelphia, they launched a series of temporary monuments premised on the question, “What is an appropriate monument for New Orleans today?”

In the summer of 2020, as the seeds of anti-racist protests against police brutality deepen and spread, there are further calls to remove Confederate statues and other memorials upholding myths and legacies of white supremacy. Cities ranging from Richmond, Virginia; Jacksonville, Florida; and Indianapolis removed statues in the middle of the night—a hasty culmination of work that has taken place over the recent years.

4. In the context of the pandemic, Freedom Lifted has pivoted towards online trainings around anti-racism and policing.



The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia acknowledges and honors the more than 4,000 enslaved African Americans who built and maintained the University. Designed in a collaboration between Höweler + Yoon Architecture, Dr. Mabel O. Wilson (Studio&), Gregg Blearn Landscape Architect, and Dr. Frank Dukes. Photo by Sanjay Suchak/UVA.

These parallel strands of counter-monument campaigns have now fully converged, dealing with the conquest of the Americas and the Civil War at one end of the timeline, and more recent memories of police violence on the other.

Today in Charlottesville, the Robert E. Lee statue remains in limbo and there is a new monumental experience to contend with. The Memorial to Enslaved Laborers was installed this year to commemorate the 4,000 enslaved people who lived and worked and created the literal foundations of the University of Virginia (UVA). The space was designed by a diverse team that included the consultation of descendants of the enslaved laborers, UVA students, and the Charlottesville community. It is an inviting space that inspires gathering, but it is haunting with a minimal design organized around concentric circles including a timeline about slavery, the names of enslaved people presented along with gashes on the inside, and on the outside, the eyes of Isabella Gibbons, a woman who was enslaved at UVA, are engraved by artist Eto Otitigbe. The project would not have come about without the activism of students, part of a movement to pursue acknowledgement and reparations at universities across the country. The time is now to move it from the campus to the capitol.

The examples from Chicago, New Orleans, and Philadelphia above could be read as a counterpoint to the campaigns to remove Confederate monuments in Charlottesville and flags in South Carolina. They could suggest that there is a tension between removing and proposing what bold new ideas and histories should be bronzed and mounted on a pedestal. They could also offer a key to the process that must be embarked on in today’s cities to not only think about what could be removed, but what processes could be engaged in order to gather support and collectivize vision for what could be built or if this approach to permanent statues is acceptable any longer. And, in that process, it may be revealed that there is nothing more important than the process itself.

*Daniel Tucker works as an artist, writer, educator, and organizer developing documentaries, publications, classes, exhibitions, and events inspired by his interest in social movements and the people and places from which they emerge.*

*The author would like to thank Alex Young for his editorial feedback on this essay.*

*Additional reading resources are compiled in this online document: <https://bit.ly/3aoyVQP>*

# Reclaiming Pepe

Documenting How a  
Hate Symbol Gets  
Made and Unmade

Arthur Jones & Michael Premo  
in Conversation



Illustration by Matt Furie, courtesy of Arthur Jones.

Pepe The Frog entered mainstream society on the tidal wave of white cultural backlash that President Trump rode in on, a seemingly out-of-nowhere icon: a cartoon frog that inexplicably embodied fascistic tendencies and an “America First” ethos, communicated solely through his bulging, squinty eyes and noncommittal sneer. At that point, Pepe was a long way from his *Boys Club* home, a humorous and popular series created by underground comic artist Matt Furie in 2006, and only halfway on his journey that would span the entire world and political spectrum. In 2017, artist and art director Arthur Jones began directing his first film, *Feels Good Man*, documenting Furie’s efforts to challenge the gambit of white supremacists, self-marginalized male youth, and MAGA enforcers who populated the 4Chan communities where Pepe became radicalized; claiming for themselves the artist’s sweet, selfish, stoned frog.

Over the 2020 summer, with now incumbent President Trump only intensifying what has been his four-year run for reelection on a white supremacist platform, journalist and filmmaker Michael Premo interviewed Jones by video call to discuss the serious socio-political implications of the rightwing media tactics that have been naively dismissed as “trolling,” and the ethical and aesthetic implications of documenting the culture on film right now. *Feels Good Man* will be featured in the season premiere of Independent Lens on PBS, October 19<sup>th</sup>, and can be rented on all major streaming platforms.

**MICHAEL PREMIO:** Congratulations on the film. I’m curious, before you even thought about doing this film, what kind of work were you doing? How did it lead you to making a film on this topic?

**ARTHUR JONES:** This is my first film, and I never really thought about myself as a documentary filmmaker before. I never really wanted to make work that was socially conscious, honestly. Mostly, I would make money doing advertising, doing marketing, that kind of stuff, as a freelancer. But [this] subject matter was something that I became really obsessed with. I was friends with Matt Furie, who’s the subject of *Feels Good Man*, through the indie comics world.

Then I started to see Pepe the Frog pop up online. In 2015, there was this two-week period where Pepe the Frog was supposedly used by a school shooter in Oregon on October 1, and then two weeks later then presidential candidate Donald Trump retweeted an image of Pepe as himself. And I was like, “What do they have to do with my friend’s comic?” That was the inciting incident for me as an artist.

**MICHAEL:** So, what was in the air and the context of you growing up? Were you pre-social media? Seeing these memes, was that sort of new for you? Or was this something that you had grown up with?

**ARTHUR:** This story really appealed to all the things that I was personally obsessed with: underground and independent comics, but also conservatism in America. I was raised in an evangelical family in rural Missouri. I definitely recognize a lot of the reactionary politics of the right from stuff that came from my upbringing. If 4chan had been around when I was in high school, I might have been a kid on it. I know what it’s like to sort of come out of the fog of right-wing media and basically feel as though you have to... almost escape a cult. As I was making the film, I thought, “If

I was seventeen years old and watching this, what would I think about it at this moment?”

I also felt like it was important to really address the cynicism of what’s going on right now. A lot of films about social media don’t really engage the subject matter in an emotional way. This film really allows you to talk about the way emotion spreads in groups online, how it can kind of metastasize, and how it can be coalition-building. I think most people’s politics are based on sort of a personal emotionality. I also thought it was a unique chance to make a film that people on both sides of the cultural divide would view and have different thoughts about.

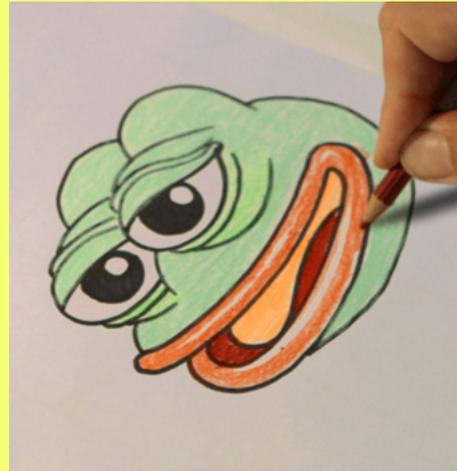
**MICHAEL:** I’m curious if you could say more about what your upbringing means and how that might have also influenced how you structured and approached making the film.

**ARTHUR:** The things in 4chan that I recognized in myself as a teenager was this sense of self-righteousness. I really had this sense that the whole world was against me, and I feel



A meme of Donald Trump as Pepe the Frog that was retweeted by then-presidential candidate Trump. Image courtesy of Twitter.

We are dealing with a situation where the Internet is basically commodifying our emotions.



Artist Matt Furie drawing Pepe in the film *Feels Good Man*. Photo by Kurt Keppeler.

that's the kernel for a lot of people on 4chan. They feel trapped in this echo chamber. It's a platform, but it really becomes a mindset. But 4chan is also a place where people post pretty unvarnished stories, and so they are kind of open to you being open with them. So, I took a journalistic perspective of being a little bit more immersive. And that does create problems because sometimes you are being immersive with people whose viewpoints you realize are more extreme than you initially thought when you first started talking to them. We had to figure out what are the guardrails, so that these subjects aren't necessarily taking control of our narrative, and we weren't putting forth this toxicity into the world in an irresponsible manner.

**MICHAEL :** That's exactly what I'm curious about. What were some of those guardrails? How did you help deal with that?

**ARTHUR :** We wanted to find really powerful voices that push back, to always make it feel like the adults were in the room. So, we got great voices like Adam Serwer who writes for *The Atlantic*. We got great voices like Aaron Sankin, who is someone that I knew from the world of The Center for Investigative Reporting. We wanted to make sure that everything was contextualized.

**MICHAEL :** Did you ever try to reach out to any people who are self-identified white nationalists?

**ARTHUR :** In the very beginning of this project, I did think about reaching out to some white nationalists, and I did have phone calls with some guys that were straight-up self-identified fascists. But I very quickly realized that wasn't going to be responsible or productive. I think you saw, post-Charlottesville, a different dialogue happening within documentarians and journalists about what is responsible to show and what is not. Filmmaking is a visual medium and you really have to be aware of the

potency of the images you are putting forth. People like Richard Spencer know exactly what they are doing in terms of the way they address the media. Those guys spent enough time in the 2015-2016 moment on network TV, in major publications. We could very easily take the things that we needed from those sources.

You will notice in the film that you never hear Trump's voice, and there's a lot of pretty toxic, racist, fucked up memes in the film, but we chose to omit animating those because it just had too much stage presence. We really wanted the film to take Matt's initial intention of the character of Pepe the Frog and canonize that. There's a lot of copyrighted characters that are used by racists online. SpongeBob SquarePants is a really popular racist meme, but it has a huge corporation that is able to protect that intellectual property. Matt didn't really have those sorts of resources at his disposal, so we really sought to canonize the version of Matt's character that felt true to Matt and those original comics.

**MICHAEL :** It's really great to hear the sort of thought process that went into that decision, particularly around how to canonize the original intent. I'm really curious if the film presents an opportunity for folks to understand the right or the left in any kind of way?

**ARTHUR :** We are dealing with a situation where the Internet is basically commodifying our emotions. All of our likes and dislikes and comments are now being collected and aggregated and used to sell us shit. Pepe is part of the same attention economy, but on places like 4chan it is an attention economy of extremism, where the only way that you are able to gain status in that community is to be edgier, and shitter, and more cynical, and darker, and more fucked up than the other person, and that ultimately leads to fascistic thought. And they can pretend like it's a bunch of jokes, but the reality is that these ideas

trickle up from these rather niche platforms into mainstream discourse. Like it or not, the future of our democracy is going to be in the comment section of YouTube. I do think one of the reasons Trump got elected is because we all got our grandparents on Facebook, and they just didn't know how to understand all the shit being thrown at them. I think as we move forward culturally, we really have to have more of an incisive understanding of the way in which we communicate.

**MICHAEL :** Did you personally learn anything new or make any discoveries about the mechanics of right-wing, or left-wing, politicization in this process?

**ARTHUR :** In one scene in the film, we talk to a consortium of computer scientists who have basically been collecting every single post on 4chan and every single post on the politics board of 8chan before it disappeared. Those guys trace how a lot of the ideas that end up in more mainstream sources like Fox News or Donald Trump's Twitter feed start in these online fever swamps. We certainly see that playing out also in the way the primaries have been moving in America. If you read *Ratf\*\*ked*, that book about gerrymandering in America, you know that gerrymandered districts have a bunch of like-minded people; the voices that end up winning in those blocks are the most flashy and extreme voices. You end up getting the most extreme voices coming out of these primaries, and then those people are ending up in Congress. [As I was] finding people to talk to when I first started the project, there was a sense among very lefty academics that this is something that we can't give too much credence to or is something that we can't talk about really.

**MICHAEL :** What exactly is something we can't talk about?

**ARTHUR :** Well, it goes back to the question, were we going to talk to white supremacists

in the film or not? There was this appeal that you can't give it oxygen, but I think not giving it oxygen basically allowed all of these right-wing ideas to have potency within culture. We have to be able to talk about these things, address them head on and be able to call things crazy or fascistic for what they are.

The argument about 4chan and the 2016 election is that the constituency of people that were on these message boards didn't necessarily translate to voters. It's a young group of people that weren't considered to be part of the process. But I do think they are basically the people who are controlling the discourse. We really have to understand that dynamic.

**MICHAEL :** To bring it back to this question of art, there's a school of thought that would argue that all art is political—even your apolitical stance is a statement of politics. Would you say that the dilemma of Matt and Pepe the Frog makes you for or against that particular statement?

**ARTHUR :** With a certain sort of intellectual imagination, you could say Pepe is an emblem for capitalism. So much of the left versus the right [discourse] is choosing to ignore the systems that we all live with and the systems that control us as a society. And certainly, all art gets made within a context, and therefore I think all art comes from a certain time and a certain place, and is able to tell us something about ourselves that we didn't necessarily know before. That was one of the things that certainly fascinated me with this story.

The dialogue around Matt is also fascinating because it's totally new. It's easy for people to be critical of Matt but the reality is this has never happened before—it's a totally unique situation. It's something that I think is going to be looked back at with a lot of interest and scrutiny. I think as the Internet becomes a more potent force in our lives, art and the

things that we make are going to become more important just because more people are making stuff all of the time.

The Trump surrogate in the film, Matthew Brainard, talks about how memes basically energize a group of supporters because they feel like they are now part of a campaign. MAGA became a people's movement because people were making media, and then that media was getting adopted by the figureheads of that movement. I do think art and artmaking is going to shift into being more political as more things go online. Because the way that we basically build community is through these memes that we are making, the things that we are sharing on our phones, the things that we

something sort of an innately human about what we are experiencing that I have yet to put a finger on. I certainly appreciate your film because it's provoked that sort of thinking for me as I was watching it.

**ARTHUR :** Oh, that's great, man. It's funny, in the film we interview a guy who's a magician, and people either love or hate that. There's a certain sort of documentary purist that is like, "Oh, you guys, come on." But I mean, the film is about a cartoon frog that's stoned. There is something about it that is impossible, there is a randomness to it that is kind of crazy and unpredictable, and there isn't precedent for it. We need to talk about it in a way that's going to slightly open people up to thinking about

## Like it or not, the future of our democracy is going to be in the comment section of YouTube.

are selling on Instagram, Etsy, and all this sort of stuff, in order to make it in the gig economy. I think art is becoming commerce faster and faster, and being aggregated for data mining purposes. I'm curious to see if there will ever be a way to take the best parts of social media, remove all of the data mining and privacy invasion, and create a more egalitarian artistic community.

**MICHAEL :** Yeah, I do feel like there is some precedent for this. If we look back at how myths and legends and stories traveled through society, they were definitely used by a wide variety of different people to communicate and express their values. We are seeing the mutation of that in the Internet age in totally crazy ways, but I think there's

a larger way of encountering the *zeitgeist*. The magician is really talking about art and willpower combining into cultural moments; people imbued Pepe with significance, and then that significance took on a life of its own within a community of people.

**MICHAEL :** What I loved about [that interview] was its ability to speak to this ancient way that ideas move through societies. And I immediately thought of the "Kilroy Was Here" graffiti that emerged in the 1930s and World War II—it just popped up all over the place. I came up with graffiti culture and was fascinated by that, and that's just one of many examples of these things that just sort of magically move through our culture, and it's really hard to identify or explain [even though]



“Hong Kongers, Don’t Give Up!” Using Pepe as a symbol of the pro-democracy movement, peaceful protesters in Tsim Sha Tsui district of Kowloon, Hong Kong form a human chain stretching along busy Nathan Road. Photo by Iain Masterton/Alamy Live News.

we have been doing it for thousands of years. As long as humans have had societies, we’ve had these ideas that move through society and set the values.

**ARTHUR:** Absolutely. Certainly animals have always been part of that too. Anthropomorphic animals have been around since ancient Egypt. If you are thinking about this in a Joseph Campbell sort of way, Pepe does sort of figure into [what] we in society are always looking for: we are looking for myth and we are looking for icons to make meaning. Pepe, for whatever reason, became one of those icons.

And he still continues to have resonance in different cultures in different ways, good and bad. The footage in Hong Kong [came to us at a] moment where we didn’t know how to end the film and then all of a sudden we’re just like, “Wait. What? What’s going on right

now?” The baton of Pepe has now been passed clear across to the other side of the world and is being used by a different counter-cultural movement, this time in an anti-authoritarian way. It’s fascinating all the different twists and turns.

*Arthur Jones is the director of Feels Good Man, and has art directed animation and motion graphics for journalists and documentary filmmakers.*

*Michael Premo is an artist, photojournalist and documentary producer, and strategist, and the co-founder and Executive Producer at Storyline.*

Opposite: Pro-democracy protesters wear masks including those of Pepe the Frog during a march in Hong Kong. Photo by Kin Cheung, File/AP Photo.





# Changing the Narrative on Childhood Sexual Abuse

Amita Swadhin

*Mirror Memoirs* is a national storytelling and organizing project intervening in rape culture by uplifting the narratives, healing, and leadership of LGBTQI+ Black and Indigenous people, and other people of color who survived childhood sexual abuse. In early 2016, Amita Swadhin assembled an advisory board of LGBTQI+ survivors of color, created research questions, and set out across the United States to interview survivors at this intersection, ultimately recording sixty audio interviews across fifteen states. We asked them to reflect upon their journey and their plans for the artistic components of the work intended to engage the public. We also asked them to share what these interviews reveal about how traditional reliance on state institutions and carceral solutions actually perpetuate harm to survivors, while doing little to address the root causes of rape culture.

Illustration by Donovan Vim Crony for *Mirror Memoirs*

WHEN I BEGAN my Masters in Public Administration program at NYU in 2008, I knew I wanted to return to my earliest professional work, focused on ending child sexual abuse and family violence. So I did what any public policy student would do: I started going through the statistics again. The research around the neurobiology of trauma and the long-term health effects of childhood sexual abuse has really advanced over a decade. While I was in grad school, the American Academy of Pediatrics published a study showing gender nonconformity was a risk factor for child sexual abuse. The main data sources for child sexual abuse are from very mainstream places like the U.S. Department of Justice and the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Yet, we don't see organizing campaigns from billboards, and public service announcements, and podcasts, and television shows, and paintings, and cultural interventions that you would expect with any other pandemic. During this time of the coronavirus pandemic, I've really come to use the word pandemic to talk about childhood rape, because the CDC conservatively estimates that 20% of Americans are survivors. The rates are even higher in several other countries, again based on government studies. For instance, in my ancestral homeland of India, the rate of survivorship is 1 in 2 children. What other public health issue can you think of that affects that many people, yet we don't have any kind of public messaging around? I can't really think of a single one besides childhood sexual violence.

I started thinking about why that was. With childhood sexual violence, there's no lack of data. There is actually just a lack of cultural ease in naming the violence beyond the media's long history of sensationalizing individual cases. If you only studied media reporting of child sexual abuse, you might think it was just a smattering of unconnected dots, with no structural or historical context at all. That's not the reality, so I realized that we

needed a mechanism that would help people understand the collective, systemic, historical and cultural nature of this violence. Individual survivors needed to tell our stories in a way that could still allow us to be in control of the narrative, and not have to go through the terrible mainstream media machine that too often propagates rape culture.

I knew Ping Chong and Company's theater program *Undesirable Elements* dealt with really difficult subject matter in a way that was not extractive. A play is developed and performed by an ensemble that shares an experience. It's not about one person's story. There's no superhero, there's no pedestal, there's no super victim. I met with assistant director Sara Zatz, and she agreed to hire me to create a show that used the experience of adult survivorship of childhood sexual violence as the common thread. We co-facilitated three weekends of writing workshops and theater games that led to the creation of the script of *Secret Survivors*. The show ended up being a cornerstone of a huge philanthropic initiative by the Novo Foundation to create some of the first funded programs lifting up survivors of color who were doing work to end child sexual abuse. In 2015, I got a phone call from someone who was affiliated with the Novo Foundation explaining that they were starting a new program specifically for people of color who are childhood sexual abuse survivors and who are doing work to end child sexual abuse called the Just Beginnings Fellowship. And that's what led me to create *Mirror Memoirs*.

I was publicly out as a survivor as a college freshman because I worked at the women's center. Because this is a global pandemic that nobody knows how to talk about, except in maybe secret corners or in private therapy, a lot of people on campus started disclosing to me. So by the time I was casting *Secret Survivors*, I already knew a number of people who were child sexual abuse survivors, all of whom were either artists or social justice organizers in New

Individual survivors needed to tell our stories in a way that could still allow us to be in control of the narrative, and not have to go through the terrible mainstream media machine.

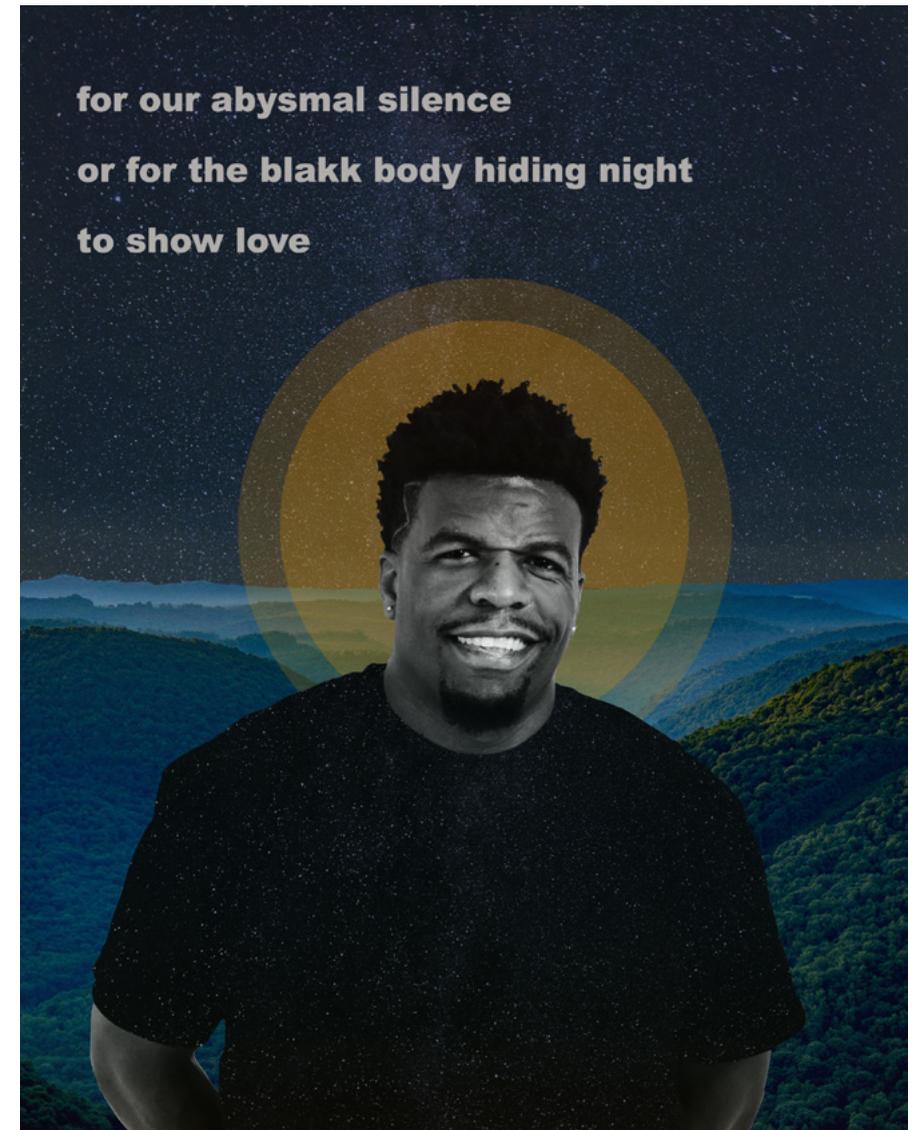


Photo collage of *Mirror Memoirs* project participant Tim West by Mer Young.

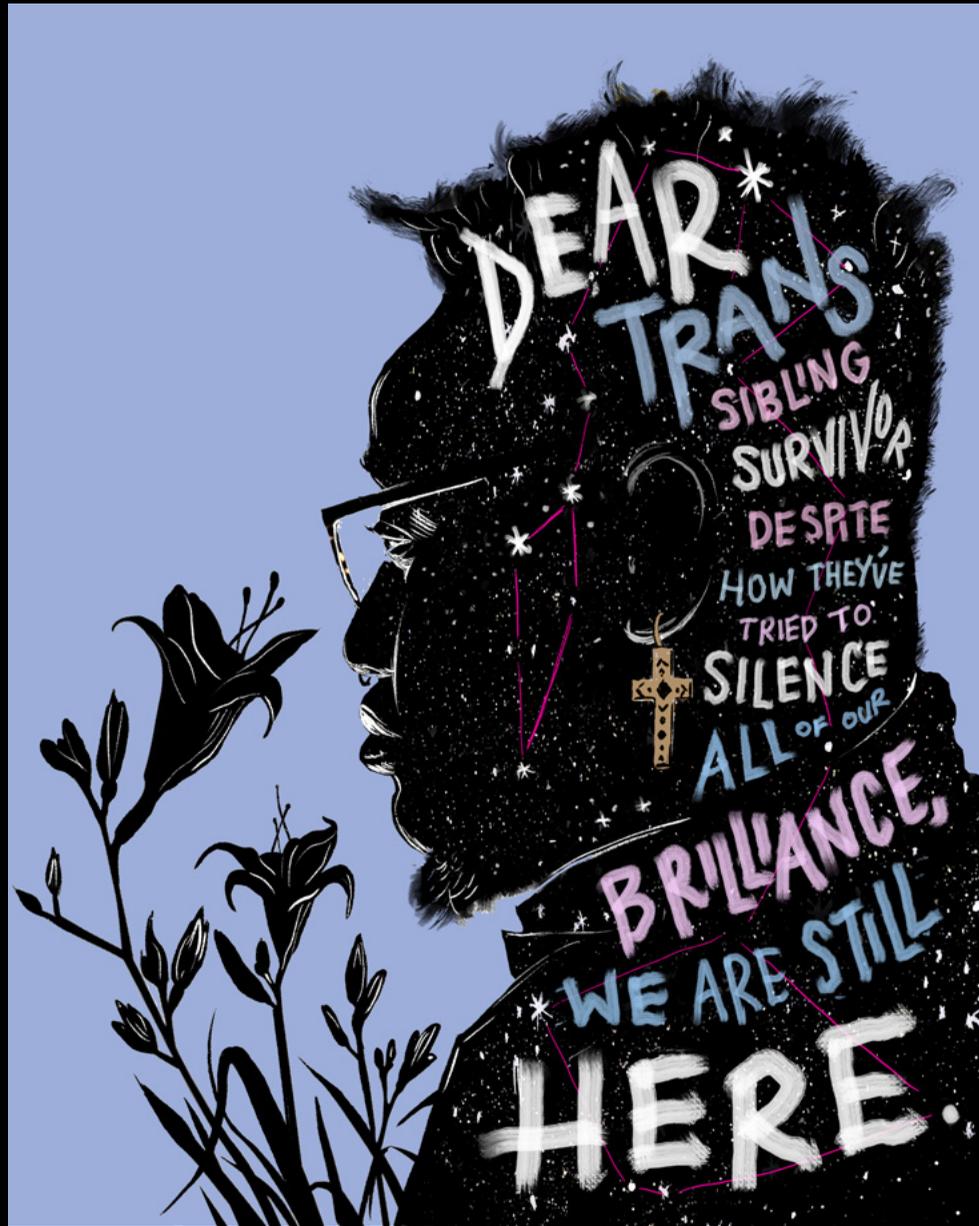


Illustration of Jaden Fields by artist Jess X. Snow.

There is a particularly beautiful kind of art in allowing for that social fabric to be woven where only isolation and wounding existed before.

York City. And by 2009, all of us had already individually developed the politics of prison abolition. That was really important to me in the original show because state violence was a big part of my own survivorship narrative. When there was state intervention in my life at age 13, the social workers, and prosecutors, and police officers were all white people who either threatened to prosecute my mother or responded with very racist white savior narratives and untrue assumptions about Indian American immigrant communities.

The state mandated me to go to group therapy when I was 16 for an entire year with other teenage girls who were incest survivors. The youngest girl there, Pauline, was 13, in foster care, Indo-Guyanese American, and really struggling with suicidal ideation, because she had been harmed by so many men by the time she joined our therapy group. After a few months, she was institutionalized in the county mental health hospital, where she was harmed again by one of the hospital workers, and she ended up taking her own life. She was the second child in six months to take their own life at that same hospital. So I already also had a very personal awareness that the state sanctioned perpetration against children. I have since learned that it's very common for children of color, queer children and trans children, especially those who are wards of the state, to experience sexual assault at the hands of hospital workers in those facilities. And it was really important to me in building *Mirror Memoirs* that we highlighted that reality even more deliberately than *Secret Survivors* had. *Mirror Memoirs* has deliberately and unapologetically been an abolitionist project from the beginning.

One of my aims with the project was to highlight how much the state sanctions perpetration and even fuels it by many

different agents of the state—not only workers in psychiatric institutions, but workers in group homes, foster care families, police officers, and guards in juvenile detention centers. Also studies show that specifically male-assigned-at-birth children who were gender nonconforming in any way were the most at risk. They were six times likelier than children of any other gender to experience rape or sexual assault, so they should be the face of and comprise the bulk of decision-makers in an emerging movement to end sexual violence. But that is absolutely not the case, so *Mirror Memoirs* aims to center transgender, non-binary, intersex, and gender nonconforming male-assigned-at-birth people. The project also centers Black and Indigenous people, because this country was established through the rape of enslaved Black and Indigenous children, as is well documented, in California Catholic missions, Native boarding schools, and southern plantations. With that goal in mind, I put a board together of people I had long-standing relationships with, all of whom fall under the umbrella of LGBTQI+ BIPOC people who survived childhood sexual abuse. They helped me shape this organization from the beginning. They helped define the research questions. They also helped me structure our strategic priorities, once I realized this was going to be more than an audio archive. I recently named a co-director, Jaden Fields, a trans Black man who is a survivor of childhood sex trafficking and other forms of childhood sexual violence. We currently have a fundraising campaign to fund his position, if people wanted to contribute to that!<sup>1</sup>

From the initial sixty interviews, I learned a lot about how sacred it is—and also how treacherous it can be—to hold that kind of space for people, many of whom have never had the privilege of therapy before. These are many people who are severely under-

1. Support *Mirror Memoirs* by donating at: <http://bit.ly/MirrorMemoirs>

We are only taught how to punish each other and then dispose of one another. If you want to live into a world in which people heal and transform, then that means you need to stay in relationship with them.

employed or unemployed, many people living with trauma-related disabilities and chronic illnesses, many folks who face anti-Blackness and white supremacy and transphobia, and are kept out of the formal workplace for those reasons. For many folks, I was the first person they talked with about details of what had happened to them. And that requires a lot of care, not just for the other person, but for myself as a survivor, because I'm obviously a subject of my own research as well. I'm now training people who have told their stories in the project to record more interviews and deliver educational workshops and keynotes, becoming what we now call a core member. Core members also get a say in shaping the direction and form of our organization. It's been kind of a beautiful but humbling experience to also receive the kind of mutual aid and collective care from the membership base that I am holding space for and creating a container for. I am a part of this membership base, and that shows up in my own life all the time.

Looking forward, in fall 2020, we are putting our efforts into creating some toolkits under certain themes: What do we do with the people who commit child sexual abuse if we have an abolitionist politic?; What's the vision for healing and the world we want to live in?; and specific Black experiences within the *Mirror Memoirs* archive. In terms of the art components, I have a big vision that includes

everything from animated videos, to another theater project that is focused on male-assigned-at-birth survivors, to a multimedia art exhibit, and poetry readings. In spring 2021, the plan is to release our audio archive. We have worked with a comic book illustrator, Donovan Vim Crony, to create 15 portraits of the folks who chose to stay anonymous in the archive and we have a photo collage artist, Mer Young, who is still creating some of the beautiful portraits of people who are publicly coming out. Artist Jess X. Snow is starting to envision artistic representations of people's answers in the interviews. We plan to use these images as cover art for audio toolkits and as art products to become a fundraising mechanism for our work to be more self-sustaining.

The art component feels really important because what *Secret Survivors* taught me is that whether or not you are a survivor, everybody is raised in rape culture that enables a global pandemic of children being raped. And so it is the job of the artist in this case to help people see the water that we are swimming in. Listening to *Mirror Memoirs* stories is like taking the red pill in [the movie] *The Matrix*—suddenly you can see the reality of the rape culture that we are all swimming in, and that can be a very overwhelming experience. The fact that we are all socialized to know how to attend the theater, or visit an exhibit, or bear witness to a poetry reading, or sit in a circle with each other, makes it a little bit less horrifying when you have that moment of awakening to the reality of the violence that we are within. That's the power of art.

For survivors in our healing circles and convenings, the power is in being able to come together with 30 other people to listen to each other's stories, engage in somatic theater games, and do some visioning about the world we want to live in. People got so delighted by having this permission to just focus on their own healing. We have to learn how to be playful with each other, even when it is about

something that can be so despairing. Part of my impetus for creating any of these projects was that so many people were disclosing to me when I was a young organizer in New York City, but never telling each other. I wondered how much stronger our movements could be if we had a more holistic compassion for the entirety of what we have each survived? Then people could depend on one another for things that perhaps they were forcing themselves to try and weather alone before, like a panic attack, an anxiety attack, or a trauma-related flashback. The healing needs to come in intimacy and connection because the violence happens in isolation. I think there is a particularly beautiful kind of art in weaving connections between people and allowing for that social fabric to be woven where only isolation and wounding existed before.

Finally, *Mirror Memoirs* complicates the story about who does the harm. It's really important to note that most people who are raped as children do not go on to rape other people, but of the population of people who do, a large majority of them were raped themselves as children. The second phenomenon that comes up in our archive, is that of the small percentage of cases that actually do go through the criminal legal system, 40% of known cases are juvenile to juvenile. So we have a large number of children who were raped or sexually assaulted, and then in their trauma reaction, go on to commit sexual violence against a younger child while they are still themselves a minor. A third phenomenon is that 9% of our survivors were raped or sexually assaulted as children by cisgender women, but that is hardly ever talked about in public discourse. Even in this #MeToo era, there is a uni-directional arrow of harm that is talked about from cisgender men and boys towards cisgender women and girls. And that's just not the reality of how this violence happens. That's why I think the majority of the members in *Mirror Memoirs* are advocating for something different than the legal/carceral system on offer today. Some

people use the words "transformative justice" but other people say, you know, "I wish that the person who harmed me could get the help that he or she needed because clearly they were really wounded if they could hurt me that way. I want them to never do this to someone again. I want them to have to declare what they did in a community that's going to see them and witness them—and not dispose of them—but actually hold them accountable." And that's tricky, because we are only taught how to punish each other and then dispose of one another. If you want to live into a world in which people heal and transform, then that means you need to stay in relationship with them. To be clear, I don't mean the survivor who was directly harmed, but *someone* needs to stay in relationship with them, who knows what they did and can still see their humanity.

*Mirror Memoirs* is partners with the Ahimsa Collective, which is another survivor-led organization founded by Sonya Shah that holds restorative circles in prisons where cisgender men who have committed sexual violence, including childhood rape, go through an accountability process over a year and a half. I have attended two of those circles along with some of my colleagues, and it's really powerful to recommit to the actual practice of abolition when you are literally sitting in a circle, and shaking hands, and sharing meals, and spending eight hours with men who are looking you in the face and saying, "Yeah, I raped a child." And also, "I was raped as a child, and I never got help, and I never had a place to talk about it until I opted into this voluntary program, years into my sentence." In order to end child sexual abuse you have to completely remake the society that we are living in, and the way that we are living with and responsible for one another.

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*Amita Swadhin is an educator, storyteller, activist, and consultant dedicated to fighting interpersonal and institutional violence against young people.*

*If you went through a portal into another dimension in which capitalism does not exist, and your only responsibility, from the moment you wake up to the moment you fall asleep is to heal yourself, and you have a bottomless toolbox with every material and spiritual resource you need to support that endeavor, what's in your toolbox?*

“The first thing I think is that I want to live in a house with a lot of windows and sunlight. The house I grew up in as a child was very small, and was not safe to live in, so where I live is very important to my healing. I currently live in a studio with one window and it's very dark and gloomy and small, and I hate it. And so that's the first thing I need: a place I feel safe and happy to live in.

My next thought is the work I want to do with adults who are perpetrators and survivors of sexual violence, survivors of child sexual violence specifically, but perpetrators of any kind of sexual violence... In the past week, I've been admitted and received a scholarship for a grad school that I really want to go to, and I've been imagining this center where clients would feel welcome and safe to come in. With access to food and employment opportunities—you can't do any kind of healing work when nothing else in your life feels safe and you lack access to basic necessities like something to eat and somewhere to be able to be warm, if it's cold outside... I think that there's not enough emotional energy to go around. Doing this kind of work takes a lot out of people, and it's very frustrating. I go back and forth between hating my father and wishing that he was dead—I've moved away from that, but that's initially where I was during the initial stages of my healing—to now, I wish that he wasn't in prison, and I wish that he wasn't

going to get deported. And I wish there was a place for him to go to sit with someone who cares about him, to ask him what went wrong in his life and what he needs. [Pause]

When I think about my father's story, I know that he was a very smart person, but he was also pushed out of high school. He never finished high school. When he transferred schools from New York to California, the registrar at his new high school in Los Angeles told him that his files didn't transfer, and she kept telling him this. But when he dropped out of school, he went to pick up all of his records and his file was very thick with all of the copies of the records that had been sent over, because this woman had been lying to him, saying his records weren't there. And he destroyed the office, he flipped over desks and was very angry, because his education was taken away from him. And so, I think of my father, I think of someone who is very hurt and sad and didn't have anyone in his life to support him or take care of him. When I'm trying to imagine this center that I eventually want to open, I think of my father, and I think about what would he have needed when he was a child; when he was a teenager; when he was an adult that would have made his life happier.”

— Rio, a Latinx, queer, non-binary,  
*Mirror Memoirs* project contributor



Illustration of Rio by Donovan Vim Crony

*What's your personal vision for how humanity can end child sexual abuse?*



Photo collage of project contributor Bianca Laureano by Mer Young

“The first thing that comes to mind immediately is, this conversation about epigenetics, which is really popular—how we carry trauma. What that tells me though is that, “Okay, if I have trauma in my genetic makeup, that also means that I have liberation in my genetic makeup,” and so how do I tap into that? How do I tap into the parts that aren’t always the traumatic part that people always want to focus on? What will that look like over a generation? If we do this work now and are able to impact the people in our lives who are having babies, who are raising children in whatever capacity, we can really help shift that. Because how amazing if in twenty years the headline is: “Epigenetics, We’re All Wired for Liberation and Freedom and Victory.” That to me is a success. Just emancipating ourselves from these ideas that we’re constantly carrying all these negative things, and we’re made up of this negative stuff or these negative experiences.

I don’t know, maybe it sounds really woo woo, witchy or whatever, but also this larger collective divine power. I don’t know where it comes from, I don’t know where it stems from, but we all have it. And really doing the work collectively. Just like you said, intergenerationally, I feel like transnationally—just worldwide. It’s totally possible. Especially as children of migrants or immigrants, we can also take this back to our homelands or to the rituals that we have in our lives and the ways that we talk about it. So that’s really exciting for me too.

I think also having more open conversations, just wherever we are. Whenever I’m out with friends, I do a lot of sex coaching over a meal

or whatever, there are other people who listen in and can maybe hear some things. I would love to normalize that conversation where we can say “childhood sexual abuse,” we can say “rape” and “incest.” We can say all the words that we need to, and not whisper it. So the people who hear it, they can just be like, “yeah” and it not be this foreign, shameful thing. Instead, it can be like, “That was an injustice, and we’re all collectively invested in ensuring that doesn’t happen again,” and “What do we need to do?” So really, a community response, at the end of the day. What’s a community response to childhood sexual abuse? Because it’s gonna be the people who do it, not just one individual or some policy or whatever.”

— Bianca Laureano,  
Mirror Memoirs project contributor



**9 THESES ON PANDEMIC AND REPRODUCTIVE LABOR**

1. COVID-19: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION INTERRUPTED
2. HOME AS THE SITE OF CONTEST
3. CARE WORK ECONOMIES UNDER A PANDEMIC
4. PROTEST AS REPRODUCTIVE LABOR
5. ABOLITION AS THE POSSIBILITY OF REPRODUCTION
6. MUTUAL AID ECONOMIES—ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE
7. MOVING AT THE SPEED OF DISABILITY
8. INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA IS THE SOMATIC REPRODUCTION OF VIOLENCE
9. DISABLED AND QUEER KINSHIP—MAY I AM IN THE CHIHULUCENE

Photo by Carol Zou

# 9 Theses on Pandemic & Reproductive Labor

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Carol Zou

## I. COVID-19: Social reproduction, interrupted

What day is today? Right now, during a global pandemic, time doesn't matter so much, as hours melt into days melt into what feels like years of wondering when lockdown will end. But time might matter in October 2020, when this essay finally reaches publication, and COVID-19 exists somewhere on the continuum between a continuing terror or a quaint memory, and this essay exists somewhere on the continuum between prescient or total, absolute, bullshit. We are all bound by our time.

What day is today? Today, 112,433 people have died of COVID-19 in the United States. Today is the eighteenth day since protests in Minneapolis over the police killing of George Floyd sparked a nationwide movement of uprisings against police brutality. Today is the eighty fifth day since the City of Los Angeles announced shelter-in-place in response to COVID-19. Today is the forty fourth day since I've passed through an airport, decontaminated myself upon landing, and cried. Today is a Friday.

Today I take up the task of making sense of the reproductive reorganization of society ushered in by COVID-19. Today.

## II. Home as the site of contest

"Stay home," the CDC says, when Black people have been historically disenfranchised from homeownership through redlining, when millions lost their homes in the economic crash of 2008, and when millennials like me eat too much avocado toast to ever dream of homeownership. "Stay home," the CDC says, while thousands of unhoused people live on the streets in the shadows of empty hotels and luxury lofts. "Stay home," the CDC says, when a one-bedroom in Los Angeles costs three weeks of work at California minimum wage. "Stay home," the CDC says, as domestic violence rates surge worldwide when survivors cannot leave their abusers. "Stay home," the CDC says, while the government ignores calls to cancel rent so that we can, in fact, avoid eviction and stay home.

Home is the site of contest for a pandemic whose response necessitates staying home. Home is political as fuck. Stay home actually means, stay political as fuck.

## III. Care work economies under a pandemic

Care work under a pandemic is both acutely highlighted and invisibilized. Widespread death can only be countered with widespread care. The workers responsible for mending society during this crisis are either care or maintenance workers: grocery workers, sanitation workers, nurses,

doctors. At the same time, care work has shifted from its paid position in the economy—a paid position that feminist and care work advocates have advocated for<sup>1</sup>—back into the unpaid domain of the home. Parents are now expected to work full time as well as play the role of stay-at-home schoolteacher. An unpaid labor force of predominantly women are sewing masks to make up for the lack of preparation by the federal government. People are baking a lot of bread.

Care work once again is expected for free, and I worry that we will actually lose whatever little ground we've fought for in making the work of motherhood visible. I'm a little mad at care workers who are not going on strike right now and refusing their multiple roles of caretaker, teacher, and full-time worker. But I'm madder that our general conception of the strike still exists within an Industrial Revolution-era fantasy of organized workplaces, when most of us exist within the late capitalist reality of working from home, working within the gig economy, and unremunerated care work.<sup>2</sup>

As we consider the conditions for economic recovery during a pandemic, I wonder: How can we reorganize our economy around slowing the pace of hypercapitalism that was already killing us and the planet? How do we not create more jobs, but perhaps, fewer jobs for people juggling 4 different gigs to survive? What if we recognized the invisible, unpaid work in society such as placing a paid caregiver with every family that needs caregiving support? What if we created economic structures for paid rest such as employing people in six month "second shifts" for certain frontline positions so that frontline workers could take a break? What if we trained and paid people to hold space, listen, coregulate, and otherwise attend to the mental health needs of their community during this time and after?

We're all working too much right now and having too little of it economically recognized as "work." How do we not "go back to work" but recognize and support the ways that we are already working?

## IV. Protest as reproductive labor

If we understand reproduction as the possibility and survival of the next generation, we will soon realize that there are those of us who were never meant to survive. That to reproduce a next generation, we will need to define reproductive labor as more than just nursing an infant and changing their diapers until they reach adulthood. What does it

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1. Quarantine reading: *Revolution at Point Zero*, by Silvia Federici
  2. Quarantine reading: *Social Reproduction Theory*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya

mean for a Black or brown child to be raised to reach adulthood in a world in which communities of color live in segregated neighborhoods with poor access to food and with poisoned air, water, soil? A world in which police roam the streets and the schools in an open act of war against Black and brown people?<sup>3</sup>

Protest is reproductive labor insofar as it creates the conditions for those of us who were not meant to survive, to live another day. Protest recognizes that white supremacist capitalism is a death cult and protest says let us rupture our reality so that we may live.

Confined to our homes for months, it's no wonder that we in the United States have erupted in protest over state sanctioned killing of Black people. For reproductive labor requires time and space much as all labor does. The traditional capitalist work week leaves no time for contemplating the death structures<sup>4</sup> of society and how they might be changed. It is only through a catastrophe of unemployment, or withdrawal from the formal labor economy, that we are finally able to turn our attention to the labor of transforming society. Is protest the social reproduction strike we have been waiting for?

## V. Abolition as the possibility of reproduction

Abolition, then, is a disinvestment from the necropolitical machinery of the state, and an investment in the conditions of life.<sup>5</sup> COVID-19 does not discriminate, but our state structures do when it comes to who can access medical care, who is still required to go to work, who experiences the rapid spread of COVID-19 behind bars, and who experiences the rapid spread of COVID-19 when the state calls in a militarized police force to kettle protesters instead of letting them go.

Abolition is about more than defunding the police. Abolition is about investing in the social reproduction structures of society—education, physical and mental wellness, economic stability, community resilience.<sup>6</sup> Abolition is a vision that reorganizes what we have come to understand as safety and what we understand to be social divisions of labor. Everyone can, and should be an abolitionist.

3. This is the premise of reproductive justice, a concept originally articulated by women of color reproductive justice collective Sister Song
4. Quarantine reading: *The Necropolitics of COVID-19* by Christopher J. Lee
5. Quarantine reading: *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis, *Golden Gulag*, by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba on twitter @prisonculture
6. Quarantine reading: 8toabolition.com

## VI. Mutual aid economies—another world is possible

We are figuring out what our institutions cannot. I have watched artists figure out how to create supply chains for face masks and face shields<sup>7</sup> with more effectiveness and fewer resources than Jeff Bezos. Faced with images of farmers dumping mountains of potatoes due to the breakdown of trucking systems, we are learning how to grow our own food. Somehow, despite the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression, we have raised millions of dollars for bail and emergency relief funds.

In some ways, I do think that we are learning what truly constitutes essential labor, and what does not. May the labor that you are performing right now during the pandemic be considered the most essential moving forward.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the labor of essential workers on the frontline, may we hold these acts of checking in our neighbors, creating systems of local support, growing food, reading Ursula K. Leguin,<sup>9</sup> sitting still with our feelings of unease, as essential.

The world is on fire, and we are also creating the world that we want to rise from the ashes. The Brooklyn Museum has become a food pantry during the pandemic, and to be honest, I hope every large arts institution that furloughed their workers and was inaccessible to communities of color and poor people becomes public bathrooms for protesters, shelters for unhoused people, daycares for working women, emergency medical centers, community gardens, and more.

## VII. Moving at the speed of disability

Most days prior to the pandemic I was a depressed human trash can, and still am one. I've spent years fine-tuning my life to accommodate my bouts of clinical depression—remote contract working, working at odd hours of the night, neurotically stocking my pantry with non-perishables, amassing a wide range of Instant Pot recipes that require 5 minutes of physical effort,<sup>10</sup> and cancelling or rescheduling meetings because “emotions,” aka hours spent in bed wrestling with thoughts of suicidality.

7. Shoutout to Auntie Sewing Squad and #3DPPEArtistNetwork
8. Quarantine reading: *Take Back the Economy*, by J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy
9. Quarantine reading: *The Dispossessed*, by Ursula K. Leguin
10. Instant Pot congee (粥): 1 part rice, 8 parts water. Pressure cook for 20 minutes. Natural release. Suggested toppings: Sesame oil, soy sauce, furikake, green onion, ginger, pickled vegetables, fermented tofu, fried egg, century egg

Now almost everyone is on depression time. Almost every remote work call begins with a fifteen minute debrief of how the pandemic is touching us today, a mini-therapy session before we halfheartedly reprise our roles in a matinee performance of productivity under capitalism. Almost every remote worker is working odd hours and cancelling meetings because of extenuating circumstances. Projects move at the speed of molasses, or at least the speed it takes for someone to will themselves out of bed, confront the immense anxiety of living in a dying world, attend to work, and repeat.

Yes, it does suck to get a taste of my own medicine. I suppose I'm sorry for all the times I used to flake out and procrastinate on deadlines. But I'm also not sorry that we are learning to view our colleagues through the possibility that everyone might be affected by mass psychic trauma, and adjusting our email salutations accordingly. I'm not sorry that we are learning that the pace of capitalism is incompatible with the pace of disability, which has been the pace of life for some of us. I want to move at a speed that doesn't kill us.

## VIII. Intergenerational trauma is the somatic reproduction of violence

I am so scared of people running away from their trauma right now because I am the anchor runner in a familial relay race of trauma so long that the racetrack spans generations. Overworking is a trauma response and overworking is also a way to avoid trauma responses. Overworking is the cousin of shutting down, the only two options available to us when we feel our sense of safety taken away.<sup>11</sup> And truly, who can feel safe right now? How long must—no, how long can we live with our nervous system stretched between these two poles of total shutdown and total activation, without knowing what respite, connection, care, feels like? How long can we go without putting our hands to another person's heart to let their breathing calm ours, and vice versa?

I am scared that you think this trauma will only last for as long until the economy reopens. I am scared that you think you're OK. I am scared because my dear friend told me that in post-Katrina New Orleans, 2006 was the year the grief came, but 2008 was the year people who fought to hold things together started dying. I am scared that the unaddressed shock and grief of this moment will burrow itself so deep in our bodies that it becomes part of our cell tissue, and part of the cell tissue of future generations.

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11. Quarantine reading: *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy* by Deb Dana

Remember that when we are fighting for the possibility of a future, we are also fighting to hold ourselves in all the messiness, the uncertainty of the present. For the sake of your future self, unravel.

## IX. Disabled and queer kinship—making kin in the Chthulucene<sup>12</sup>

How many of us, honestly, live within a functioning nuclear family? Who is the nuclear family for? It isn't for those of us who have been cast out of our families because of our sexuality. It isn't for those of us who face legal barriers to adoption and other forms of non-heterosexual reproduction. It isn't for those of us who have had family members deported, incarcerated, killed. It isn't for those of us who are living on couches and spare beds to escape a violent home.

I think people of color, queers, and disabled folks are a little bit better at making kin than others. We know that the nuclear family is a conditioning mythology rather than a workable reality. We also know that making kin, making social bonds that catch us in a community safety net when we can't access a social safety net, is how we will survive.

Pandemic asks us to seriously consider with whom we're making kin. Who is essential, who is family when we can only gather in groups of six or less? Who is family not because of blood relation, but because of our mutual promise to care for each other? Who helps you reproduce, for real for real? Disability studies and transformative justice thinker Mia Mingus refers to this as mapping your pods.<sup>13</sup> Apply adrienne maree brown's theory of the power of the fractal<sup>14</sup> to pods, and we might find ourselves emerging from this pandemic within a reorganized society of infinitesimal small units operating under care agreements.

I am hopeful that we will learn how to recognize and make kin beyond the limitations of blood ties. I hope that we see ourselves as existing within care agreements to care for a larger sense of community—and to care through loving, rigorous steps towards justice. I think that's the only way that we can get through this. By recognizing our kin.

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12. Quarantine reading: *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, by Donna Haraway

13. Quarantine reading: *Pods and Pod Mapping Worksheet* by Mia Mingus, <https://transformharm.org/pods-and-pod-mapping-worksheet/>

14. Quarantine reading: *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown

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