

Every Day We Must Get Up and Relearn the World

An Interview with Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

ROBYN MAYNARD, LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON, HANNAH VOEGELE, AND CHRISTOPHER GRIFFIN

The pandemic has been the most vivid agent of change that many of us have known. But it has not changed everything: plenty of the institutions, norms, and practices that sustain racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy have either weathered the storm of the crisis or been nourished by its effects. And yet enough has changed for us to see that the pandemic has profoundly recontextualised those structures and systems of violence, bringing us into a fresh negotiation with, for example, the question of how we discuss and imagine freedom. Responding in part to this unexpected provocation, activist-scholars Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson forged a collaboration from the lockdown of 2020, corresponding by letter to create their forthcoming book, *Rehearsals for Living*, due to be published by Haymarket Books (US) and Knopf (Canada) in 2022. In this interview, we asked them to explain the epistolary form of the book and expand on the concept of “rehearsal”, before inviting them to reflect on a series of issues that animate our current crises: the politics of recognition; the notion of apocalypse; ways to disrupt linear temporalities; practises of reciprocity against proprietary logics; the gendered violence of state apparatuses; and worldbuilding as a method of resistance. In their expansive answers, Robyn and Leanne draw on their experiences as organisers and educators, commenting on anticolonial struggles, the Movement for Black Lives, and the rise of abolition discourse. Stressing the need to build a multiplicity of shared homespaces in the face of racial/colonial capitalism and organized abandonment, they challenge us to rethink the predicaments and possibilities of the present, enabling us to imagine futures liberated of extractivist, carceral governance – “planting more liberatory futures in the present”, as Robyn puts it. The task of sowing those seeds is a collective praxis of rewriting the narratives that constitute us, refusing to hear that nothing can change and insisting that everything must.

Violent Normalities

Hannah and Chris: As we prepare for this interview, in May 2021, mass vaccination programmes in Europe and what is known as North America promise the imminent return to “normality”. At the same time, patent regimes upheld by these same countries perpetuate colonial violence by preventing global distribution of the life-saving resources necessary to control the pandemic everywhere. “Normalities”, such as the willingness to sacrifice those considered disposable in order to protect the system establishing disposability in the first place, are thus forcefully maintained.

In what ways do you see opportunities to escape from the violent normalities that currently order the world – in this crisis and beyond? Can you also tell us something about how the experience of writing *Rehearsals for Living* helped to sustain and navigate you through lockdown? We are particularly intrigued by your decision to compose the text by writing each other letters, rather than meeting virtually. Your choice evokes an era pre-telecommunications, when those separated by war or emigration would often have to wait weeks for a reply. What made you want to correspond slowly, rather than instantaneously?

Leanne: We need to continue to cultivate a collective set of practices for finding, seeing and creating opportunities to escape the violent normalities that currently order the world. When I think about how my ancestors lived, I remember that they were acutely aware of their *presence in the present*, in the web of relationships of living beings that made up their world, and they lived within this idea in a global sense and through time. Life was practiced as a methodology that led to the creation of more opportunities for the reproduction of life and living things, and not just humans, but plants and animals, and all of the life that makes up the world. I believe that I need to live in a similar manner – being acutely aware of my presence in the present, finding opportunities to create and live beyond the rubric of violence colonialism provides, and I think I need to do this not as an individual, but as a being in commune with other living beings. Actually, this is a really important point – world building cannot take place in isolation or in silos or ivory towers. The earth is a set of relationships between all living things in that the natural world provides the scaffolding humans and our societies must fit into in a way that honours the sanctity of all life. We are experiencing the climate catastrophe right now because racial capitalism has built a world in which the earth is a resource for extraction, exploitation

and dominance. Building something different, a world or worlds in which all of the life on the planet is promoted requires deep relationality, and conversation with all of those life forms.

This reminds me of the opening section of *Freedom Dreams* by Robin D. G. Kelley where he speaks to the Black Radical Imagination charting these practices through various theoretical standpoints and through political engagement, struggle and movement building.¹ He talks about the poetics of seeing the future in the present taking his lead from Aimé Césaire.² This makes me think that those interstitial spaces between knowledge systems, between struggles, between theories, between our lived experiences can provide us with threads of vitality that we can use to recode and reorder the world.

Speaking for myself, I was interested in nurturing a healthy and meaningful relationship with Robyn as an intellectual, a parent and someone who is intimately committed to community and struggle. From our time on the land, it seemed like that was the best medium for moving that forward, spending time together in person outside of institutions and crises. The pandemic made that impossible, and while we certainly could have met weekly on one of the virtual platforms, we both recoiled at the idea. Letter writing became a way of spending hours “with” Robyn every day, rehearsing my letters to her in my head, wondering what she might think of particular ideas or my perspectives, thinking through and researching my own ideas so I didn’t appear to be unthoughtful to her, and of course reading and then reading more. Her letters back were a way of deepening my own thinking and writing and creating a daily practice of thinking through or thinking with or thinking alongside someone else. It was completely natural for us. It’s something we just did – I don’t remember us having any academic discussions about methodology, and of course, this practice has a long historical presence in marginalized communities.

Robyn: To be engaged in struggle in a time of acute racial violence is to work to breach with “normality” once and for all. Normality, as you point out, was and is violence: it is the unrelenting and organized brutality of the current global order. It is unchecked militarism and capitalism, and it is the unmaking of the lives and homelands of Black and Indigenous peoples,

¹ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

² See Aimé Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Verso, 1996), 134–46.

of all dispossessed peoples globally. The racially uneven catastrophes of this moment: ecological disasters, policing, mass evictions, COVID-19: these are disasters that follow racial and gendered logics that were put in place long ago. And they are outgrowths of the unrelenting disasters wrought by slavery, settler colonialism, and global capitalism. We all, collectively, deserve better. All living things do. And what's more, planetary survival demands it. And so, more than seeking to escape, people committed to justice continue to ask one another, in all of the ways we know how, what would it take to interrupt this murderous normality. For me, writing has always been part of this project, at the very least as a form of grounding. I am too much of a materialist to believe that imagining otherwise is enough: we cannot dream or write our way out of capitalism and enclosure without mass, organized resistance. But I am, as well, too much of a dreamer to think that we should be forego imagining. Robin D. G. Kelley's words compel us to "dare to invent the marvelous" as we work to create new worlds in the shell of the old.³

Leanne and I have been thinking together for some time and had wanted to do so more intentionally. But the form wasn't chosen. We had not foreseen a global pandemic, but once it arrived, these letters became, for me, at least, a kind of communion. They helped to collectivize the experience of a shattering world. Our writing was intentionally collaborative in its process – not only with one another, but it felt, too, like part of a broader web and constellation of freedom-oriented practices: we were thinking with our kids, our communities, fellow organizers, land defenders, with and alongside the chorus of anti-colonial and abolitionist world-making happening around us. As Leanne has said, the letters slowly transformed into a homespace for us, one that we built together, inhabited, and tended to, one that continued to expand. It became a space of friendship as well as of intellectual and political focus, a space that, I, speaking for myself here, came to rely on. Not an escape, but a portal into another way of relating to the world around me.

Rehearsal – Study – Resistance

Hannah and Chris: The title of your new book, *Rehearsals for Living*, has made us think about a couple of ways we have seen the concept of "rehearsal" developed recently. We would be

³ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 180.

interested in what the concept means to you and whether it resonates with any of these thinkers?

For Ruth Wilson Gilmore, for example, “Life in rehearsal” is one way to describe abolition. To her, this means “building life-affirming institutions” whilst refusing to reproduce rules or remain with regret. Instead of signifying absence, it is both a present and about presence.⁴

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay makes the case for “rehearsals with others”, to question sovereignty and its operative mechanisms. For her, this entails imagining camaraderie and alliances and reversing the temporality of opposing sovereign violence “to imagine its demise not as a promise to come but as that which others have already experienced and made possible”.⁵

Moten and Harney use the term “rehearsal” to explain their idea of “study” as an always unfinished and improvisatory collaboration: “And since we’re rehearsing, you might as well pick up an instrument too.”⁶

This last example also makes us wonder whether Leanne’s work as a musician involves forms of rehearsal that might be understood as “study” in this sense?⁷ But if so, does this also mean that something is foreclosed or suspended when an apparently finished piece of work (a book, a story, a song, an album) is released?

Leanne: I like to layer my work, and so the way you have connected, rather deeply to the concept of “rehearsal” through the worlds of Gilmore, Azoulay and Moten and Harney is so beautiful to me, and exactly the sort of thinking that we wanted to provoke with the title.

My work as a musician absolutely involves forms of rehearsal as study, and so does my work as a writer and an intellectual. In some ways, I think I could make the same record and write the same book over and over again in my practice. I’m not sure I ever see any of these things as “finished” because I relate to them as study and study is never finished. Every day, we

⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition on Stolen Land”, Keynote for UCLA Luskin Sanctuary Spaces: Reworlding Humanism, October 9, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/467484872>.

⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso Books, 2019), chap. 5.

⁶ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 107.

⁷ Leanne’s records include Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Theory of Ice* (You’ve Changed Records, 2021); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Noopiming Sessions* (Gizhiwe Music, 2020).

must get up and relearn the world as Robyn has said to me many times before. There does come a time in my work where I bring it into conversation with others and over time, those conversations travel to different places. That's part of the layering process and the point where meaning making becomes even more communal. Music and performance is mostly rehearsal – we spend far more time rehearsing than we do performing, and so it is really important that you love and find meaning in rehearsal because it is how you spend most of your time. I actually like rehearsing more than I like performing because in rehearsal there is always possibility. There is always the chance to stop and rethink something and do it differently. There are no mistakes in rehearsal, only chances to try it again. And while you can have a perfect performance, you can't ever have a flawless rehearsal. There is always something someone could have done better at the same time as a feeling that it is good enough and that we are moving towards something together.

That made me think about rehearsal as not just a temporary practice, one that we do until it is time to actually live, but as a generative life expanding practice in and of itself. Anishinaabe worlds are very much created and driven by relationship and context. Meaning is derived from context. Our practices in communal life are just that, practices. Processes that we create, recreate, embody and enact over and over and over again. Many Indigenous societies follow seasonal cycles, the cycles of life and movement that order ecological worlds. If life is a circular, instead of a line, there really is no performance, and all of the joy, the knowledge and continuous rebirth, comes from the repetition of rehearsals as individuals, and as communities. It is through these collective studies that we ignite the knowledge and practices we need to replicate life or to build anew.

Colonialism is continually reproducing itself and morphing in response to our resistances and to our rehearsals. And so, our study, our rehearsals, our resistances and our lived experiences reflect that morphing. Our movements work hard to stay ahead of that morphing in order to be able to care for our communities.

Of course, sometimes, foreclosure is necessary in both art and life. There are ideas and systems of thinking based on harm, extraction, and greed. Foreclosing the logics of racial capitalism for instance, is necessary if we are to bring worlds into reality that support Indigenous and Black life, and the life of the planet. Foreclosing isn't always a negative thing, sometimes our lives and the life of the planet is utterly dependent upon foreclosure.

Robyn: Every day I wake up and rehearse the person I would like to be. This is true whether I think about it consciously or not. But it is on the days I am most aware of this reality that I live in the closest alignment with my values. Some days this is much easier than others. We all inhabit multiple roles: I am, at varying times and to different degrees, an organizer, a professor, a parent, a movement auntie, a writer, a colleague, a shit disturber: all of these are ongoing processes, rather than identities. And it is the process that matters: the rehearsal is the point.

To use the words of the late, great, C.L.R. James, “every cook can govern.”⁸ Organizing, whether formal or informal, whether geared toward a short term goal or a massive, transformative shift: this is what happens when people consciously decide to come together and “shape change,” to think with Octavia Butler.⁹ And to move through the world with the intention of making it a better place for living creatures to inhabit. The title of our book was adapted from Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words: “abolition is life in rehearsal.” These words offer us, in my interpretation, a way of inhabiting our world with intention, as organizers, as theorists, as people in extended communities, based in attunement. An attunement not only to the unfolding disaster of the present, but to the unfolding experiments in living differently, to the more liberatory ways of organizing human and earthly life that are being seeded, in real time all, around us. And most importantly, it’s an invitation to join in. And it is a reminder that liberation is not a destination but an ongoing process, a praxis. Every day, groups of parents, librarians, nurses, temp workers, ordinary people, tired of the horrors of the present, come together to decide what kind of world they want to inhabit. And in doing so, join the chorus of freedom-making struggle.

2020, where most of our writing took place, to me stands as one of the greatest examples that I have personally witnessed of what I would call rehearsals for living. In the face of massive state repression, people new to movement work and seasoned organizers alike collectively learned together on the fly – they taught themselves and one another how to organize a revolt in the middle of a global pandemic! To do so, they had to channel pre-existing knowledge, passed down through generations of struggle, to ensure safety as much as possible: organized

⁸ E.g. see C.L.R. James, “Every Cook can Govern: A Study of Democracy in Ancient Greece”, *Correspondence*, Vol. 2, No. 12. June 1956, published and transcribed also on <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1956/06/every-cook.htm>.

⁹ See Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York and Oakland: Seven Stories Press, 2016).

street medics, provisions of food and water, ways to protect people in the streets, as much as possible, from the harms of tear gas. And they had to improvise, but to do so with great care and attention, not with reckless abandon. New forms of knowledge needed to come into being: how to protect crowds from the spread of an airborne, deadly virus. Joining a chorus of struggle that had been underway for many generations, new harmonies in freedom-making emerged, meeting the demands of the crises in real time. I don't know if we will ever be able to fully map out the kinds of grassroots brilliance that were eked out over those days and months, the knowledge created in late night WhatsApp and Signal threads, whispered in tent encampments, and carefully orchestrated behind bars.

On that last part: there were 21 hunger strikes in Canadian jails, prisons and detention centers between March 2020 and March 2021, most of them collectively organized and collectively undertaken. Sites of state capture were hotbeds of political organizing, even as the media focused largely on the streets. The message was clear: as Black federally incarcerated prisoners in Nova Scotia asked us amidst the sea of protests in defense of Black life across North American cities, "Until Black prisoners' lives matter, can anyone be free?".¹⁰ Indigenous prison organizer Cory Charles Cardinal, may he rest in power, put out a statement that exposed the organized barbarism of the ongoing colonial violence that prisoners were facing in the twin epidemics of COVID-19 and incarceration. He wrote, too, that "within this architecture of oppression, we are a vibrant community of strong, intelligent brothers who eat together, wrestle and play together, and protect each other from a system that has exploited us." Cardinal, with others, had organized mass hunger strikes across multiple Saskatchewan prisons, where Indigenous people make up three quarters of state captives.¹¹ Abolitionist struggle is expansive. In a historic time of mutual aid, newly created support networks, and old and new freedom strategies, we bear witness to rehearsal, study, experimentation in form, a multiplicity of formations of struggle being waged, often most strongly by people for whom freedom has been most denied.

I'm thinking here of Claude McKay's words from "If We Must Die": "Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!"¹² Now of course fighting back looks like many things: street protests,

¹⁰ "Black Lives Matter in prison, too" dictated to and transcribed by El Jones, June 14, 2020. *Halifax Examiner*. <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/featured/black-lives-matter-in-prison-too/>

¹¹ Cory Charles Cardinal, "A Letter from the Organizer of the Sask. Prisoners' Hunger Strike," *Sask Dispatch*, January 4, 2021, <https://saskdispatch.com/articles/view/saskatchewan-prisoner-hunger-strike-COVID-19>.

¹² I'm grateful to John Munro for reminding me of this. – Robyn

statues beheaded, rolled through a city, and thrown in the sea, police stations burned down. But it's also much more: for so many people, whether abandoned by the state in a pandemic or abandoned by society in a carceral site, fighting back, by virtue of necessity as well as of ethics, is building, always building. This is the freedom work, and the love work, and the care work, of rehearsal.

Politics of Recognition and Respectability

Hannah and Chris: Leanne, you have joined scholars such as Audra Simpson and Glen Coulthard in calling for a critical disengagement with the politics of recognition.¹³ Similarly, perhaps, Robyn warns against the “politics of respectability,” i.e. assimilative systems that promise social acceptance to Black people who comply with white standards of proper citizenship, while stigmatising those who refuse, often interpellating them as criminals.¹⁴ On another front, transgender and nonbinary people continue to be pathologised and abandoned by gender recognition legislation that bestows rights on condition of compliance with cisnormative and heteronormative standards.

Do you consider these different struggles to belong to a general demand that recognition – in its state-determined, nonreciprocal, and non-negotiable form – must end? Or would it be a mistake to group separate moments together in this way? Are there any everyday practices of refusal that you would like to see adopted by activists, scholars, and “allies”?

Leanne: I think there are things we can learn by grouping our experiences together in terms of system analysis and critique and there are important things we can learn by separating and honouring specificity and historical context. In a rehearsal or a study, one needs both. I think a lot about how individual diversity and lived experience works in cohort with the diversity of

¹³ See Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017).

other living things. A lot of different beings make up a forest. A lot of different voices make up a choir.

I'm most interested in systems thinking and critique because these are often obfuscated from our daily lives. If one only has their own lived experience, not only is it isolating, but it is difficult to see the logics that order that experience. I wonder about a focus on individuals. It is not *individuals* that will change things. It is movements and formations. Colonialism has been very good at breaking life down into individuals and then prescribing how we will relate to each other in order to reproduce the hierarchies needed to replicate it. The system of racial capitalism is global, and while I study how this impacts Anishinaabeg both intimately and collectively, I must also learn how it operates in places like Palestine, and the inner city of Chicago and in Ovaherero homelands, in the Caribbean and in Nunavik, and in Lake Superior and in the hearts of Two Spirit, Trans and Queer folks, because while our struggles are linked, they are also different.

State recognition is a colonial trick, and from the perspective of building new worlds and new systems, engagement with state recognition historically has often resulted in weakening movements and struggle, while at the same time further entrenching systems of oppression because it takes our energy away from rehearsal. I'm most interested in generative refusal – the kinds of refusal that not only reject state determined recognition, but also build different ways of being and different worlds and different ways of living withinside the living ecosystems of the planet.

Robyn: When I first saw the images floating of Nancy Pelosi and co. wearing kente cloth, taking a knee in the U.S. Capitol, I laughed out loud! I thought it was photoshopped as a joke by and for Black Twitter: an inside joke making fun of white liberals. It seemed too perfect not to be satire: the white moderate's fascination with tokenistic gestures, with symbolic affairs, which serve time and time again to take the place of meaningful, material shifts. By the time PM Justin Trudeau and Mark Saunders, then-head of Toronto Police Services, were taking a knee, the joke was tired. Across the board, it was clear that regardless of what we were seeing in the streets, at an institutional level, the racial reckoning was mere artifice. That little to no substantive response would be made in the wake of historic protests in defense of Black lives. What was being proffered was statements *acknowledging the existence* of anti-Black racism (we know!), minor reforms in police practices. But far less spoke to what was being demanded:

defunding and abolishing the police and all carceral systems. Leanne has said that seeing the PM take a knee reminded her of every part of Reconciliation, and I think of this often. In Canada, anti-Black racism, long totally ignored, is now being more widely acknowledged by state officials, yet funding to police and prisons continues to go up at the municipal, provincial and federal level. All of the systems brutalizing Black people's lives remain intact. So, it's clear that state recognition will not serve to liberate us.

As Leanne points out, (refusals of) recognition and (refusals of) respectability are not identical and have their own specificities and intellectual genealogies. But there are, nonetheless, continuities that are generative to sit with: while we as Black peoples in Canada are being recognized, suddenly, by the state and its policies, we are at the same time being interpellated into a politic of respectability: it's not Black sex workers, Black drug users, whose lives are being centered. It's "diversifying the board room" and such. This politic has always been a trap, empowering a few individual Black people while leaving the broader lives of Black community members unchanged. It's also a trap because, as Dorothy Roberts has reminded us, for most Black people, "our very Blackness places us outside the boundaries of respectability."¹⁵ That said: movement experience has taught me this, too: there are choices people make to make do in an unjust system. We are anything if not adaptable and improvisatory. A friend of mine runs a program for young Black people, and was offered free sneakers for all the kids in his program. There was a catch, though, he found out after he had agreed, the city-funded organization offering this insisted that each kid had to come pick up the sneakers, so that they could also hear an "educational" speech (so-called) on why they should never rob people for their sneakers (!) I will not waste time on explaining the many levels of outrageous racism at play here. And listen, my friend could have easily said "hell no." I would have respected this. But he made a different choice: the kids did need sneakers, after all. So, he convinced the person who ran the program that he would deliver the lecture to each child personally, citing COVID-19 risks as the reason the program coordinators could not personally deliver their screed. The kids got their sneakers, no offensive and racist sermonizing. I respected this choice, as well. What I'm getting at is that sometimes, people are going to take the sneakers. It doesn't mean they are dupes. Scraps that are thrown at our communities when political leaders are under

¹⁵ Dorothy E. Roberts, "Deviance, Resistance, and Love" (1994). *Faculty Scholarship at Penn Law*. 1386. https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/faculty_scholarship/1386, 180-181.

scrutiny and need to quell resistance, they can still be useful, even if they are stopgaps. Who knows, maybe some community centres will get a bit more funding. I would not begrudge anyone this. But we need to recognize symbolic gestures for what they are, and not mistake them for freedom, not ours and certainly not Black peoples' collective freedom. The point I'm trying to make is there are many ways to reject recognition, and some of these involve creative problem-solving. But we should never mistake recognition for liberation.

Beginnings and Endings of Worlds

Hannah and Chris: Apocalypse is a term often used for the world-ending events of slavery and colonialism. We now anticipate an apocalyptic moment of runaway climate change, when the world is overcome by natural disasters. On the other hand, we have the prospect of the "good" apocalypse, namely that which will bring the world of extractivist racial capitalism and cisheteropatriarchy to an end.

But we wonder if you agree that the concept of apocalypse carries some risks? Can it be separated from the messianic assumption that the time of change will be determined by a divine will beyond our control or comprehension – a doctrine that allows us to evade agency and responsibility? Does it not also reduce the horizon of transformation to a single decisive moment of salvation and/or destruction, limiting our awareness of the multiplicity of worlds, and the fact that, as Leanne says, "if a river is threatened, it's the end of the world for those fish. It's been the end of the world for somebody all along"?¹⁶

Leanne: I'm much more interested in world beginnings than world endings, although there are plenty of things to be learned from world endings. I'm uncomfortable with apocalypse because its focus is on endings, and endings are always more traumatic and violent if the seedlings of the next world haven't been planted or haven't yet started to grow. I think the engagement, the practice of building different systems together creates the knowledge and skills we need to actualize these visions and dreams of something different. I think the land, the plants, animals, waters, air and soil provided my ancestors with a complex system of relationality that was the foundation of their world – they didn't build Anishinaabe worlds from scratch, there was and

¹⁶ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 74.

is a complex living system already in place that we can either figure out ways of existing within and propelling the network to create more life, or we can do what we have done – employed the logics of racial capitalism towards continually world endings. In my culture, we have lots of stories about rebuilding the world after a catastrophic world ending. In some ways, I think my ancestors rebuilt their world every day, every season, every year through practices of renewal and repetition. Right now, engaging in world building is a collective act of generating the knowledge we need to figure out how to live with each other the day after this world ends. That seems to me to be important work, that needs not to be insular, but to be in continual communication with other forms of life.

Robyn: I think it can be generative to ask: what does it mean to move toward the end of *this* world, and prepare for another? I am comfortable with some world endings: I'm comfortable with an end to the world that white supremacy built, the world that colonialism and racial capitalism built, the world that chattel slavery built. By this I mean that I am comfortable with the end of a global mode of production and a system of carceral governance that committed this world, and all of its inhabitants, to a mass extinction event.

Apocalypse, given the threat that the climate crisis is posing to earthly life, feels accurate. But as Kareem Estefan writes, re-mixing Patrick Wolfe, “apocalypse is a structure, not an event.”¹⁷ I frequently quote Public Enemy in their framing that “apocalypse-been-in-effect” for Black communities since the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and duly, since the advent of mass genocide of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, and the attendant ecocide that accompanied these human atrocities.¹⁸ These framings help to situate the contemporary crises of our time as not mere tragedy, but as born of a global order, five centuries in the making, that organizes all earthly life into hierarchical schemas of racial (and multiple other) forms of difference, and demands more, always more. And crucially, none of this was predestined. Contra Marx, or, to use Fanon’s terms, “stretching” Marx, Cedric J. Robinson cautioned us against viewing

¹⁷ E.g. see Kareem Estefan, “Worldbuilding in the Wake”, Monthly Program March–October 2021, <https://daratafunun.org/?event=worldbuilding-in-the-wake>.

¹⁸ See Public Enemy’s fourth studio album *Apocalypse 91...The Enemy Strikes Black*, originally released October 1, 1991 on Def Jam. I also engaged with this framework of apocalypse in Robyn Maynard, “Reading Black Resistance through Afrofuturism: Notes on Post-Apocalyptic Blackness and Black Rebel Cyborgs in Canada,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 39 (April 2018): 29–47.

capitalism and its attendant atrocities as a historical inevitability. The global triumph of racial capitalism was not a rational, necessary historical stage, not the “germ” of a new world order born from the negation of its previous host, feudalism, but an opportunistic and adaptive strata emerging from the times.¹⁹ Robinson highlights the contingency of our present, writing “if not for the particular character of 15th century Italian capitalists, English aristocracy, the Portuguese and English merchant classes, the clerical nobility of Rome”, which together made possible the rise of the Portuguese empire, “nothing would be as it is.”²⁰

Just as it was not a historical inevitability, the apocalypse is not a catastrophe with no author. Just the opposite: Lloyd’s Bank of London, Enbridge and Barrick Gold, Jeff Bezos, these are only a few of the authors of the crisis at hand. The horror story of our times is being written in boardrooms on Wall Street and Bay Street, in the London, New York and Toronto Stock Exchanges. Any story that is written can be unwritten. Subverted. Undone. Re-written. Worlds unmade can be re-made.

Some world endings are necessary in order for more collective, life-centered and wellness oriented forms of world-building to take root. Leanne often says that colonialism has been ending worlds as long as it has existed, and yet we have been continually building them. We are– Black, Indigenous and so many other historically dispossessed peoples – steeped in histories and epistemologies that are, to think with Aimé Césaire, “not only ante-capitalist” but “also anti-capitalist.”²¹ There have always been other ways of organizing and tending to life, many of which preceded, and some of which will outlast, the barbarism of the Western political order. Yet this requires imagination, and labour, and perhaps much more than we are prepared to admit to ourselves at this time. And most of all, it requires a commitment to life, to microbial and mineral and plant and animal and human life – nothing else will do.

We Live on the Other Side of Time

Hannah and Chris: Something that becomes apparent when we read your work side-by-side is that anti-Blackness and settler colonialism are both sustained by dominant narratives that are

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 105.

²¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (Monthly Review Press: New York and London, 1972); originally published as *Discours sur le colonialisme* by Editions Presence Africaine, 1955.

characterised by linear, progressive temporalities. In your article on Afrofuturism, Robyn, you explore speculative stories that interrupt the temporal logics that have been used to present Emancipation, for example, as the moment of liberation, a narrative that disguises the violent afterlife of slavery.²² Settler colonialism is of course founded on a progress myth, but in your work on reconciliation, Leanne, you pinpoint a specific expression of that narrative in which the Canadian state tells a national story of grief and contrition that leads to a happy multicultural society. This story of change and growth precisely masks the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples.²³ In stark contrast are the Nishnaabeg creation stories that you retell, many of which call for a reimagining of time as we have understood it in the West since the Enlightenment.²⁴

Is the disruption of hegemonic temporalities a necessary part of resistance to anti-Blackness, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy? Do you have any thoughts on whether the abolition discourse which has become so ubiquitous over the past year runs the risk of being co-opted into an Emancipation-style misdirection? Could we tell stories of nonlinear abolition?

Leanne: Rejecting linear, progressive temporalities has been important in my work because my ancestors didn't live within these sorts of concepts. Nonlinear, expansive linking of cycles was the organizing force for our lives. The idea that the present moment is a collapsing in of the past and the future, or perhaps an on-going conversation with the past and the future transports me to a different register and opens up imaginings that are beyond the current structures of anti-blackness and colonialism. It is that opening up I think that's important. I see that happening in things like artistic practice and poetry for instance in the way Robin D. G. Kelly speaks to it in *Freedom Dreams*. I see that happening in urban encampment communities, in movements supporting migrants and in abolition movements. Indigenous peoples have all sorts of land based and cultural practices for seeing the future and the past in the present. All of these sorts of practices, not just rejecting linear temporalities, have the potential to generate new theories and questions, and it is those times we break through the system that to me are important.

²² Maynard, "Reading Black Resistance through Afrofuturism."

²³ Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

²⁴ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2011). See also Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *The Gift Is in the Making: Anishinaabeg Stories* (Winnipeg: Portage and Main, 2013).

Robyn: Like Sun Ra, I would forward that “We live on the other side of time.”²⁵ The ontologies held in many societies on the African continent prior to colonization were not structured around a linear temporal logic, with past, present and future as discrete units of analysis. The same is true for many other colonized peoples.

Abolition, as a praxis and mode of thought, is nonlinear, it detonates this way of thinking and offers us, instead, multitudes. This is because it is the seeding of multiple freedom-oriented timelines, it is planting more liberatory futures in the present. In refusing to naturalize policing, prisons and the carceral state as natural and permanent structures of governance; in rejecting capitalism as a necessary and inevitable mode of production in the march toward progress, we are also interrupting a teleological view of history. And daring to say that nothing needs to be as it is.

I’m speaking to the potential of abolition. But of course you’re right that it is always important to stay vigilant about co-optation. But by the same coin, I think it’s just as vital that we recognize that co-optation is a threat precisely because it is undeniable that abolition, now, is in the air. More young people than probably ever before believe that a world without police, prisons and borders is possible, and are willing to learn what it means to work toward it. This political moment is exciting precisely because abolition was not meant to be niche: making abolitionist ideas mainstream was the point. Much as we on the left can inadvertently grow comfortable on the margins, the fact that so many young people and community members are now identifying with, and sympathetic to PIC abolition is an incontestable win. That massive numbers of young people have begun to openly espouse these politics, is to me, a sign that a prevailing shift in our society has taken place. After generations of protracted struggle, the unthinkable has become thinkable. And so its attempted co-optation is a form of risk management by and for those who would uphold the status quo.

We’ve never been safe, anyways, from those calling themselves abolitionists while forwarding policies hostile to Black life. Due to the vast uptick of readers taking up the work of Angela Y. Davis and many others, it is now more widely understood that what we now call mass incarceration in the United States was born in part out of slavery’s abolition; with the passage

²⁵ E.g. see Sun Ra in the film *Space is the Place*: John Coney, *Space is the Place: Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Arkestra* (1974).

of the 13th Amendment in the United States which abolished slavery *except as punishment for a crime*.²⁶ And in perhaps the most auspicious example on a global scale, the abolition of slavery served as the moral justification provided by the British for their role in the partitioning of the African continent, a process which brought nearly all of the continent under the control of European empires. As highlighted by Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, the Berlin Conference, better known as the "Scramble for Africa" of 1884-85, was nominally an abolitionist project!²⁷ This is of course preposterous, "abolition" here served to rationalize what was merely a re-organization of violence, and indeed an expansion, of organized violence. It was invoked as the moral grounds that would formalize and legislate a new era of European plunder and mass brutality: land expropriation and dispossession, resource theft, and the widespread use of unfree and convict labour as practices making up only some of the new methods that, as Padmore forwarded, would refashion the enslavement of "the black colonial and semi-colonial people" of the world for a new era.²⁸ And on another register, as I've written elsewhere, carceral anti-sex work feminists, often but not always white and Christian, have long deigned to call themselves "abolitionists," even likening themselves to Harriet Tubman, all-the-while forwarding laws and policies that would disproportionately criminalize Black women, mobilizing Black suffering and slavery to perpetuate its penal afterlife.²⁹

These examples are far from identical, but they illustrate the need for vigilance: we need to analyse politics, policies, and actions to ensure that we are doing more than to re-organize the terms and practices of violence. Words on their own are just that. And in particular, we need to be attentive to any co-optation of abolitionist struggle that could serve to retrench carceral practices or to dispossess Black, Indigenous, and other colonized peoples of their land, bodily and ontological sovereignty. Still, despite the commodification of the phrase "Black Lives Matter" by banks, by Amazon and so on, what this contemporary attempt at co-optation can't take away is that many people's lives were *transformed* by what they began to imagine may be possible. This desire for more can't be taken away tomorrow even if dominant forces in our

²⁶ Angela Y. Davis, "Incarcerated Women: Transformative Strategies." *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noir* 1, no. 1 (1996), 26.

²⁷ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso, 2018).

²⁸ George Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: Borgo Press, 1987), 6.

²⁹ Robyn Maynard, "Do Black Sex Workers' Lives Matter?" in *Red Light Labour: Sex Work Regulation, Agency, and Resistance*, eds. Chris Bruckert, Elya M. Durisin, and Emily Van der Meulen (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2018), 281-292.

society are continually – and I mean *continually* – working to defang our movements. And maybe all of this can help bring us closer to something that could be called Abolition Time.

Gender, Kinship, and Sex Work

Hannah and Chris: In *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, abolitionist Mariame Kaba describes how, earlier on in her organising, gender didn't figure as prominently, and it took a while for her to come into her own as a feminist. Engaging with survivors of domestic violence changed this and shifted her frame on policing.³⁰ Both of you make clear the centrality of gender violence, and heteropatriarchal enforcement of binaries and limited familial relations for state violence and ongoing dispossession, i.e. the “always-already-gendered nature of settler colonialism and state violence that is not an add-on but integral to its very functioning”.³¹

Understanding the gendered – and continuously gendering – mechanisms of these violent systems, can you say something about ideas and practices of “transformative justice” or “queer normativity” and how they build worlds beyond these systems?

Leanne: I really appreciate the work of Mariame Kaba in *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, particularly her chapters on Hope Is A Discipline (with Kim Wilson and Brian Sonenstein); #MeToo and Transformative Justice (with Autumn Brown and adrienne maree brown), and Transforming Punishment (with Rachel Herzing). Kaba made me think very carefully about the ideas of revenge and vengeance, hope not as a feeling but as a practice, and separating emotional responses from abolition and justice. She reminds us that our work is about transforming the conditions in which we live such that prolonged harm cannot develop and cannot be sustained. I'm not ready to say more here, because I'm not done thinking through and thinking with Kaba. I need to spend much more time thinking and talking with folks about this book and her work and bringing it into conversation with Indigenous thought. What I can say is that this book, in this time, has opening possibilities for me that didn't exist before.

³⁰ Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, ed. Tamara K. Nopper (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021).

³¹ Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Toward Black and Indigenous Futures on Turtle Island: A Conversation,” in *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*, eds. Rodney Diverlus, Sandy Hudson, and Syrus Marcus Ware (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2020), 82-83.

And of course, Naomi Murakawa emphasizes Kaba's idea in Murakawa's introduction to the book, that when we centre the lives of women, girls, trans and queer folks, complex interlocking systems of violence become disturbingly clear. In the foreground is this shared idea, that world building or revolution is a process, I'd even say a practice that transforms us as individuals and as collectives. These ideas are so similar to very Anishinaabe thinking that pays particular attention to how individual harm can get magnified across scales. And so, we always need to pay close attention to gendering and violence.

Robyn: I think that one of the most beautiful forms of safety-making that I've witnessed – orchestrated beyond and entirely outside the boundaries of the state mind you – is the ways that sex working communities have developed strategies of community protection. When your race and your job and your gender intersect such that you *cannot call the police*, and the criminalization of your work puts you in continual danger, you figure something else out. Having spent many years in community harm-reduction work, I've been very fortunate that elder cis and trans Black and Indigenous women have schooled me extensively on the networks of safety established by street-based sex workers. Networks of community care, support, and protection flourished before the 1985 prostitution laws were passed in Canada that facilitated the massive police crackdowns on street-based sex workers. This pushed the work underground and undermined many organic communities and networks, leading to a vast increase in violence, including the massive police repression that became the norm. Yet even in a context of acute criminalization and vulnerability to violence seen in recent decades, communities continue to find ways to connect and work toward collective care. Without romanticizing the difficulties and hardship that people working in criminalized economies are subjected to, I think it's valuable to recognize the skills, intellectual labor and care that people who sell and trade sex have accumulated. Particularly in a time when so many people are suddenly ready to imagine ways to solve conflict and prevent harm that do not rely on police or policing, we need to give credit where it's due. People like Monica Forrester, Black-Indigenous two-spirit sex worker and organizer for several decades, have been on the forefront of this kind of abolitionist anti-violence work well before it was a commonplace term.

Refusing Proprietary Logics

Hannah and Chris: Following thinkers such as Cheryl Harris, Brenna Bhandar and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, we can explicate the co-constitutive nature of emerging forms of ownership and concepts of race, gender and sexuality during colonialism and the establishment of liberal European modernity.³² Proprietary relations can thus be situated at the heart of the violence exacted on humans, non-humans and land. In *Policing Black Lives*, notions of property also play a crucial role in the history of Black life in Canada. Leaning on Saidiya Hartman for example, Robyn describes the ways in which enslaved Black people have continuously resisted their designation as property.³³ In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne writes about the relationships of deep reciprocity, interconnection and interdependency with all aspects of creation emerging from Nishnaabeg thought and practices. Even within radical movements we often see struggles over ownership of resources, power or the future of the movement creep back into the structures, disabling relations of commonality and solidarity.

How can we more deeply/generatively refuse to be – or escape the desire to be – owners of others, the world, the self, and instead develop relations of reciprocity when always confronted with, and to some extent living within (or alongside of), societies built on dispossession and continuous propertisation?

Leanne: I've learned a lot about this from my children and trying to parent in a way that respects their individual self-determination while also keeping them safe, and the families they are a part of, healthy. Spending time on the land with Elders, I've seen them live in a world where they are continually practicing consent and respect for the self determination of plants, animals and spirits. I'm reminded of Fred Moten's work on homelessness, and his memories of his mother continually opening up their home to others, continually sharing and continually violating this idea of property and ownership and individualism.³⁴ I think of my work with the

³² See Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707–91; Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

³³ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³⁴ E.g. see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*; also "Give Your House Away, Constantly" - Fred Moten and Stefano Harney Revisit The Undercommons In A Time of Pandemic And Rebellion, Millennials Are Killing Capitalism Podcast, July 11, 2020, <https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/give-away-your-home-constantly-fred-moten-and-stefano-harney>.

Dene, where their first law is “share everything you have”. I think of all of the community organizing that has gone into mutual aid during COVID-19. I think of the ethics of life in encampment communities. I think a lot of different folks in a lot of different places and from many different movements are refusing this desire every day. I take my cues from the land, and my old ones, from movements, from kiddos and from those engaged in struggle.

Robyn: A political choice has been made and remade, at the level of political leaders and the multinational firms that they are beholden to, to serve the interests of protecting and expanding private property. The logics of accumulation at any cost have come at great expense to human, animal, and other forms of ecological life. Of course as your question eloquently suggests, this emerges from long standing historical continuities of racial violence.

At the same time, traditions of Black radicalism are nothing if not the rejection of private property, a rejection of the local and global carceral retrenchment of racial capitalism. Under slavery, Black people revolted against the logics and practices that relegated us to property and progenitors of property. And the world over, Black peoples have also continually contested the ongoing capitalist enclosure of the places that we live: we see this in anti-colonial struggles in the words and political visions of Thomas Sankara and Claudia Jones, to name only a few. African and Caribbean freedom fighters experimented with old and new forms of collective and communal ownership of land, over and against its transformation into private property for (neo)colonial extraction. This has been and remains a crucial site of Black struggle globally, often with grassroots women at the frontlines, from the Niger Delta to Port-Au-Prince to New York.

I highlight this because it’s crucial, I think, that we remember that regimes of private property – and, crucially, the carceral state that entrenches them – are continually being contested, have never been written in stone, and are far from inevitable or permanent fixtures of planetary and earthly life. Our cities, the places that we collectively reside in, are also battlegrounds upon which we are trying, continually, to forward new ways to order life.

I think one of the starkest examples we can see of this is the struggles being waged over tent encampments inhabited by homeless communities, who in Canada are largely but not

solely Black and Indigenous. In Toronto's Trinity Bellwoods Park, riot police, drones and air support, in addition to hundreds of regular police and private security and city bylaw officers, were all deployed to "clear-out" the makeshift homes and communities that people had built in an attempt to eke out safer living during the pandemic and the housing crisis. The cost of this is enormous: the eviction and "remediation" of just three encampments cost over \$1.6 million! Elected officials chose, and choose every day, to spend millions of public dollars on criminalizing homelessness rather than address its root causes: the unaffordability of a city caused by the unchecked powers of developers and the mass abandonment of Black, Indigenous, disabled peoples, and people living with mental health issues. This represents the protection of neighborhood property values over the lives of neighborhood encampment residents, and demonstrates the everyday legal violence that racial capitalism requires.³⁵

But new visions for living are forwarded every day in tent encampments across the country. Mutual aid encampment support projects like the Encampment Support Networks in Toronto and Hamilton, the Freedom Camp organized outside of City Hall by Defund Hamilton Police Services (HPS), and BLM-Edmonton's Camp Pekiwin. As I am writing this our comrades in Halifax are supporting encampment residents against city evictions, ensuring food, water, and medical services where their city has failed to do so. These are all part of a struggle for housing, of course, but they are also struggles over governance, over whether to value human life or the bottom-line of developers and property owners. In city parks across the country, large numbers of people are demanding that we value human life over capitalist accumulation. Here I'd like to bring in the words of Gachi Issa of Defund HPS,³⁶ describing the two-week Freedom Camp that she took part in organizing, and the longer-term encampment support organizing that came out of it:

That is one of the most revolutionary things: to build community with people who our government and our society tells us not to: Black, Brown and houseless people standing side by side, to re-imagine what the world could look like. That's the work.

³⁵ Azeezah Kanji and AJ Withers, "Encampment evictions: Another face of colonial violence in Canada," *Al Jazeera*, 20 July, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/7/20/encampment-evictions-another-face-of-colonial-violence-in-canada>.

³⁶ The Freedom Camp was a historic two week occupation of public space in front of Hamilton City Hall organized by Defund HPS. Organizers demanded that Hamilton Police Services be defunded and that its funding be re-allocated toward free housing for those in need.

Lifeworlds and Homespaces

Hannah and Chris: In April 2021, a delegation of Zapatistas set sail to Europe on their “Journey for Life”. 500 years after the violent conquest of Mexico they follow that same route back but this time to “sow life” and meet with individuals and groups sharing their spirit of resistance and rebellion. Joking about a reverse “invasion”, they also set out to rename Europe:

In the name of the Zapatista women, children, men, old people and, of course, Otroas, I declare that the name of this land that its natives now call ‘Europe’ will henceforth be called SLUMIL K’AJXEMK’OP, which means ‘unruly land’, or ‘land that does not give up and does not despair’. And so, it will be known to the natives and the strangers, as long as there is someone here who does not give up, does not sell out and does not surrender.³⁷

This made us think about how both of your theories and practices are based in the specificities and lifeworlds of place and land whilst always encompassing global social relations of past and present – amongst others complicating notions of departure and arrival. Do you see something of this in this political gesture, subversive act – or what one might perhaps also call “rehearsal” – by the Zapatistas?

Leanne: For sure. This idea of reenactment is something that I see in many different Indigenous practices of life. It reminds me of Anishinaabe artist Robert Houle’s work in Paris/Ojibwe where he retraces the steps of a Mississauga Nishnaabeg group of artists in Europe in the late 1800s, but creates a different ending for them, or the voyages of the Hōkūle‘a – a Polynesian ocean canoe that retraces Hawaiian and Polynesian travel routes. These sorts of practices, particularly when done with others, generate new knowledge. While the Zapatistas action is a political gesture and a subversive act in amongst a long history of resistance, it is also knowledge mobilization and world building, even if that world is only temporary. And yes, it is a rehearsal for living.

³⁷ E.g. see Jérôme Baschet, “The “Zapatista invasion has begun!”, *roar magazine*, May 11, 2021, <https://roarmag.org/essays/zapatista-mexico-europe-trip/>, originally published in French at [Lundimatin](#). Translation by Bastian Still.

In Anishinaabe contexts, many different life forms build and inhabit lifeworlds and specificities in relation to place and land – maple trees, humming birds, deer, pickerel, and map turtles, for instance, all build and live within their own homespaces in an intimate sense; and we all live together in and around the Great Lakes. There is a fantastic, complex multiplicity of shared homespaces that make up Anishinaabe territory or homeland, and Anishinaabe were placed within this ecology with the responsibility to build Anishinaabe worlds that worked in cohort with the existing ecologies to bring forth more life. For me, there has always been an understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence. There has always been an understood and direct relationship between the intimate and the specific and the global. And now, under the conditions of racial capitalism, the land tells me I must be necessarily concerned with the local and struggles taking place in other parts of the world and in communities other than my own. Sitting here writing this, with smoke from wildfires thousands of miles away impacting my lungs, the global climate catastrophe is just making this idea more and more clear.

Robyn: I've now gone and surpassed your word count! But the short answer is yes, absolutely, and without a doubt. Rehearsal comes in many registers, across vast expanses of geographies.

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