

Haunted Utopias:
interpersonal culture, conflict, and cohesion in the activist-workplace

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Thesis presented to the School of Graduate Studies
Masters of Arts, Individualized Studies
September 2025

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

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Masters of Arts, Individualized Studies

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ABSTRACT

Haunted Utopias: interpersonal culture, conflict, and cohesion in the activist-workplace

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This research examines how workers in the “activist-workplace” (small political and mission-driven nonprofits) envision, understand, and interact with their organization’s efforts to create “internal utopias” through their governance and human resources practices. Using a hauntological methodology, research participants were guided through a ghost-story writing workshop in which they explored both what ancestral lessons informed their vision of the ideal, and how those spectral presences cause and interact with conflict in the present. The stories from the participants drew out themes of identity, diaspora, and nostalgia, pointing to the ways that orientations and cross-generational inheritances continue to impact everyday life. Those haunting presences also impacted the ways that participants conceptualized the future, with many expressing doubts about the possibility of achieving organizational utopia, even as they continue working and hoping for its realisation. Ultimately, this project reinforced much of existing thinking of utopia as a process rather than an endstate: that it acts as its own orienting device from which workers can continue building critique of the dominant order whilst imagining better and brighter futures.

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Futures not achieved are only branches of the past: dead branches. “Journeys to relive your past?” was the Khan’s question at this point, a question which could also have been formulated: “Journeys to recover your future?”¹

Introduction

I have worked for over a decade in Montreal’s community sector, the bulk of which was spent at a small youth-serving organization. My experience there serves as the primary inspiration for this research, as I watched myself and my colleagues move cyclically through infighting, burnouts, and departures. And yet there were some who persisted, and new people always joined, even those who had experienced these cycles at another organization, yet still believed fervently in the visions for the future that these supposedly “radical” organizations espoused. They entered the organization, like clockwork, with a passion and excitement that would, over time, flicker and extinguish. I found myself in this cycle multiple times, and over the years began to wonder why, across all these organizations and these diverse individuals, the stories remained the same. Why, when we want so much to make change in the world, do we turn on each other and ourselves instead?

This research aims to pull this cycle apart, to understand the passion that simultaneously brings people into these organizations in the first place, and creates conflicts with one another. I aim to understand how the present interacts with the past and future, to answer the question of what identities and what futures are formed through “calling to” the past² and encountering along the way the ghosts of our ancestors and the inheritances passed down to us. Even if not really “real” (as in: there is a poltergeist knocking over the dishes) and instead only metaphorical, ghosts are “a constituent element of modern social life” that help us build understandings of our surroundings³. Through unpacking and reckoning with the ghosts that linger around, we can better understand the complex dynamics inside the activist-workplace as it embarks towards better futures. Together, the stories and reflections shared by participants through this research process reinforce the definition of utopia as “eutopos” - or no place - but rather a process and a practice from which to continue shared learning.

Context of the nonprofit sector

The non-profit sector in Canada comprises everything from hospitals and universities to (multi)national non-governmental organizations, charities, philanthropic foundations, and grassroots community groups. The non-profit sector as we know it today emerged relatively recently, with many pointing to the industrial revolution as the turning point in professionalizing community care⁴. Prior and alongside that, much of what we would now call “charity work” was carried out either on an individual level (what we’d now call “mutual aid”) or by church and missionary groups⁵. Within Europe this largely manifested in services addressing poverty,

¹ Calvino, Italo. 1978. *Invisible cities*. N.p.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich., 29

² Muñoz, José E. 2019. *Cruising Utopia*, 10th Anniversary Edition: *The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. N.p.: NYU Press., 27

³ Gordon, Avery F. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. N.p.: University of Minnesota Press., 7

⁴ INCITE!, INCITE! Women of Color Against V. 2017. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*. N.p.: Duke University Press., 3

⁵ Joseph, Miranda. 2002. *Against the romance of community*. N.p.: University of Minnesota Press., 88

including soup kitchens and workhouses, that provided services not offered by the state⁶. Internationally at the same time, faith-based services functioned as an extension of state and colonial efforts, furthering objectives of conquest and the spread of Western hegemony through setting up schools and healthcare while preaching Christianity⁷. Today, despite different objectives, tactics, and resources across the spectrum of the sector, each type of organization is inextricably linked to one another, to government, and to the economic markets and private business⁸. They continue to “fill in the gaps” of government services, support Western economic and cultural expansionism into the Global South, and further government priorities and initiatives⁹.

This sector was professionalized - according to INCITE! - in the 1980s with the production of “a flurry of experts [consultants] to advise on the creation and management” of non-profit organizations, development of higher education programs or other curricula, and overall deeper merging of the community-oriented with the capitalist¹⁰. Today therefore, nonprofit organizations and movements rely both the government and the wealthy (particularly through philanthropy) for their survival and sustainability, despite many of those groups positioning themselves as ideologically opposed to and working against state and capitalist structures. In 2007, the INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence Collective popularized the now ubiquitous term “non-profit industrial complex” in the book *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* to describe this phenomenon, defined by Dylan Rodriguez as “a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements.”¹¹. While some philanthropic and funding models directly repress social progressive movements by providing immense resources to counter them¹², even those who *do* fund movement work function in a manner that stunts its ability to create groundswell or sustainability. Despite much of contemporary Canadian philanthropy moving towards concepts like “trust-based philanthropy” - a model that includes improved accessibility, long-term funding, and breaking down power structures between grantor and grantee¹³ - it remains beholden to “newness” and “innovation”, strict rules about non-partisanship that come from charity tax laws in Canada, and the personal interests (and therefore restrictions) of the capitalist ruling class. Innumerable organizations - INCITE! and some of my own past workplaces included - have lost funding for speaking openly about political issues or challenging their funders and Boards. These unwritten restrictions on speech - and the fears that the “good work” being done might be lost for taking a risk - have created a predominantly neutered and vaguely Liberal-left sector (at least in appearance) that has professionalized systems change away from movement-building¹⁴.

⁶ INCITE! 2017, 3

⁷ Joseph 2002, 88

⁸ Dunning, Claire. 2023. “The Origins of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex.” LPE Project. <https://lpeproject.org/blog/the-origins-of-the-nonprofit-industrial-complex/>.

⁹ Joseph 2002, 91

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 46

¹¹ INCITE! 2017, 8

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Community Foundations of Canada. 2021. “Fact Sheet: Trust Based Philanthropy.” October, 2021. https://communityfoundations.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Fact-Sheet_-Trust-Based-Philanthropy.pdf.

¹⁴ There are of course specifically politically oriented groups, including lobbying and policy advocacy ones, but here I am referring specifically to philanthropy and the social services sectors. Even those who might have political leanings - and there are many - will often keep much of their more radical work “quiet” as a tool of maintaining donors or relationships. Particularly in grantor-grantee relationships, there is an often unspoken but near-universally understood practice of obscuring on grant applications or to

Defining the Activist-Workplace

Within this sector sits a smaller niche of organization that remains explicitly political, that I call in this research the “activist-workplace”. I define “activist-workplaces” as grassroots nonprofits or social justice-oriented institutional organisations (ex: student groups at a university) that serve a specific subset of a region’s general population (for example, serving youth in a borough of Montreal), while also being deeply anchored in “progressive” or radical leftist politics. They may describe themselves as anti-racist, feminist, queer, anti-oppressive, sex positive, or non-judgmental. These organisations are “highly mission-driven”¹⁵, in that they see their politics and mission as the most important guidance in their work both internally and with clients or participants. The activist-workplace attempts to challenge traditional capitalist and colonialist ideals of labour through working in or towards alternative governance practices, including collective or “flattened hierarchy” structures. They will also place importance on relationality within and between their key stakeholders (staff, volunteers, Board of Directors, beneficiaries) and the rights, interests, and capacities of the individuals that make up the whole. They have institutionalized limitations on individual power, with layered accountability measures, and attempt to ensure voices are equitably and/or equally represented. These workspaces are often small, with teams of approximately thirty employees or less, many of whom will be on temporary contracts that are compensated through project-based grants; their reliance on fundraising for their operating budget will put them into recurring (or constant) states of financial instability.

These groups are constantly negotiating an almost liminal existence between a philosophical and political opposition to institutions and the state, while also (as an employer) needing to comply with and uphold the standards the state dictates. Given that they often operate without the strict hierarchy of a traditional workplace, organizational culture - including policy-writing - becomes a “shared” responsibility, making employees their own “employers,” in that they have power to influence or change internal structures (whether authoritative voting power, or cultural influence power). This is often seen as an “asset” for employment in the activist-workplace, providing possibilities for personal learning and growth, autonomy and decision-making, and respect for diverse voices that traditional workplaces do not offer. I refer to them as “activist-workplaces” because of the particular importance that political philosophy holds in these workplaces. This goes beyond simple “organizational values,” as many of the staff at these organizations have been, are, or consider themselves “activists” either inside or outside their workplaces. Explicitly naming this desire for radical progressive justice in the workplace as different *is fundamental* to understanding the how and why of their utopian pursuits: through their jobs, these workers attempt to reify the world they dream of.

Research Question

Individuals are drawn into working at activist-workplaces because of a passion for justice, a desire to contribute to a better world, and a pull towards finding or building a community of like-minded peers. Activist-workplaces are deeply utopian environments, but also deeply flawed ones. Their previously-mentioned negotiation of state and politics places them in a unique position of a “constrained utopia,” wherein the limitations on possibility are already set, but the desire to break from those limitations remains a strong driver for job satisfaction and

foundation Boards to create a more neutral - and therefore fundable - understanding of an organization’s work.

¹⁵ Hormann, Shana, and Pat Vivian. 2005. “Toward An Understanding of Traumatized Organizations and How to Intervene in Them.” *Traumatology* 11, no. 3 (September): 159-169.
<https://doi.apa.org/doi/10.1177/153476560501100302>, 159

organisational (re)structuring. This tension between state and values creates workplaces that are rife with conflict, trauma, and burnout, all which impact the workers' abilities to create the utopian conditions that they seek.

This thesis examines the ways in which “activist-workplaces” attempt to build internal, structural “utopias” through their human resources & governance policies and practices, and understand the reasons that those attempts continually collapse. Through unpicking these complexities, there is potential for building increased empathy and team cohesion towards social change. The project is carried out using an interdisciplinary approach largely anchored in hauntology, using the spectral as a point of investigation and reflection to examine the complexity of individual relationships with past/present/future. Engaging with the spectral produces an active, multi-layered methodology that helps participants work through organizational challenges; to answer the questions of *what the utopia is* and *where these ideas for improvement originate*. Ghosts exist across temporalities, haunting the present from both the past and the future through repetition (of the past actions) and anticipation (of the future imaginary) respectively¹⁶. Because of this cross-temporality, ghosts are the perfect avenue through which to unpack the many concurrent forces exerting power within the activist-workplace, and the interpersonal dynamics therein. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon discusses how she turned to hauntology as an analytical tool after being faced with the “limitations of...prevalent modes of inquiry and the assumptions they make about the social world”. She writes:

the available critical vocabularies were failing...to communicate the depth, density, and intricacies of the dialectic of subjection and subjectivity...of domination and freedom, of critique and Utopian longing.¹⁷

In this way, she sees hauntology as an inherently interdisciplinary tool, a “new object that belongs to no one” in terms of academic allegiance, yet belongs to everyone through the ghost’s role as a “social figure” ever-present in daily life¹⁸. These “new objects” of sociological analysis help us unlock other ways of perceiving human interactions and societal systems. To that end, the specter and the haunting can act as a connective force in the analysis of our relationships: to colleagues, to ancestors, to home, to land, to the future. What creates a haunting or a specter is unfulfillment: like a ghost of someone moved on with unfinished business or memories of potentialities that were extinguished by violence. In my research on how “activist-workplaces” attempt to build utopias through their governance and labour practices, “hauntology” (the term coined by Jacques Derrida’s 1993 *Spectres of Marx*) will be used as the nexus that draws out the links between various other disciplines: trauma and identity, diaspora and nostalgia, and the future. Contemporary hauntological concepts are most often used as a tool for analysis within literature and film, in which creators, audiences, or readers use ghosts to explore the depths of human experience. In this way, hauntology already naturally bridges the gaps of academic disciplines, physical and metaphysical spaces, temporalities, and movement. Take, for example, Toni Morrison’s classic work *Beloved*, which uses the ghost of a baby murdered by her mother to prevent it’s enslavement as a tool to explore the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade and intergenerational trauma¹⁹. Though the more “active” haunting is that of the baby’s spirit returning to haunt the town in which her family lives, in *Beloved*, we can also see the future’s haunting presence: to save her baby from *imagined* futures of cruelty, the mother performs

¹⁶ Coverley, Merlin. 2021. *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past*. N.p.: Oldcastle Books., 8

¹⁷ Gordon 2008, 8

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 7

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 140

violence in the “present”, an act which later returns to the family in ghostly form. Morrison’s work, “one of the most significant contributions to the understanding of haunting”²⁰, demonstrates the intersections that can converge under the spectral metaphor. A ghost’s unfulfillment is passed along as inheritance: in lessons, traits, habits, and impulses, even when that unfulfillment was a result of anticipatory protection against violent futures. Intergenerational trauma in particular is a haunting force²¹, and as such experiences of diaspora and colonial legacy feature frequently in hauntological research and literature. The same is true in this research, where to understand the visions and traumas of politically-driven workers, we have to understand the inheritances that have built their politics over time. Those politics and inheritances follow them throughout their daily lives, and will as often be the fodder that collapses utopian efforts as the things that create the utopian visions.

Across history and cultures, “specters have played vital roles in oral and written narratives”²². Therefore, when we allow ourselves to think and live outside of linear time, we can see the intersections of past/present/future as all under the guidance - or the thumb - of some ghost or another. To that end, my methodology uses ghost stories as a tool in alternative and expansive oral histories, through designing a creative writing workshop that invited eight participants to write about the ghosts that linger around or follow them at work, “crisscross[ing] the borders of the remembered and the forgotten”²³. These stories from the participants functioned as a kind of auto-ethnography, from which they could excavate their own lineages and the spirits that haunt them. Through the weekend-long creative writing workshop and one follow-up interview, the participants shared intimate and vulnerable stories of their families, their workplaces, and their reflections on the community sector at large. This internal exploration did more than provide research data; it also provided a cathartic healing space for the participants, indicating potential for the methodology to be adapted into a shareable practice.

The next chapter in this thesis is an overview of the academic disciplines that make up this project, pulling from political and queer theory, hauntology, phenomenology, memory and diaspora, and utopia studies. In Chapter 3: Process & Ethnographic Notes, I will detail the methodology of this project, beginning with an explanation of the pedagogical approach to the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop from which data was gathered. The rest of the chapter moves chronologically through both the workshop’s design and unfolding, to allow the reader to “discover” the workshop process like participants did. This chapter also includes ethnographic data from the two days of the workshop, reflections on creative writing as a tool for both research and healing, and details about the experience for the attendees. Chapters 4 and 5 are written to reflect the order of the workshop activities, beginning first with The Future. This chapter will discuss the participants’ “Ideal Organizations” - the first activity from the workshop - and important context from participants’ work experience that helps make sense of their view of the utopian. The Future chapter also looks at participants’ understandings of utopia as a concept, their relationships with the future, and some of the barriers they faced in imagining it. Next is Chapter 5: The Past. This order of writing (from future to past) is the same that the participants’ followed during the research process, wherein the ideal visions are identified and discussed before the roots of those visions can be fully understood. In the fifth chapter, we dive deep into the participants’ ghost stories, and the ways that those ghosts show up in the

²⁰ Gordon 2008, 139

²¹del Pilar Blanco, Maria, and Esther Peeren, eds. 2013. *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic., 8

²² *Ibid.* p. 1

²³ Young, Hershini B. 2006. *Haunting capital : memory, text and the Black diasporic body*. N.p.: University Press of New England., 31

workplace to sooth, disrupt, and teach important lessons to their descendents. In particular, this chapter contends at length with how the legacies of identity and diaspora influence the experiences of individuals in the present workplace. The alternative structure of this thesis is a reflection of the objective of this research at large, an intimate look at the ways that the stories we inherit impact our day-to-day lives. To that end, I have also included scans from the participants' workbooks (their doodles and writings) which can be seen scattered throughout this thesis. The inclusion of these images is designed to bring the participants' full selves closer into this document, adding additional weight to their words, making them more than just data points.

Literature Review



Theoretical Frameworks

There are three authors whose work form the theoretical foundation of this research: Jose Esteban Muñoz, Wendy Brown, and Sara Ahmed. Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* is the primary text from which my research was born and my understanding of utopian concepts began: that "the past and the future [are used] as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now"²⁴. His book, though largely discussing art and performance, details concepts of time from queer perspectives, positing utopia as not a fixed point but a never-arrived-at vision to which we are constantly working. In discussing these queer future/presents, Muñoz brings in Jacques Derrida's 1993 work *Spectres of Marx*, exploring how ghosts operate outside of traditional temporalities, allowing for the flattening of time and generations into the present as it opens up potentialities in the future. Muñoz draws on the interplay between "communal mourning [and] group psychologies"²⁵ as a politic that drives forward progress, or as he says "a politics that 'carries' out dead into battles for the present and future"²⁶ based in a knowledge of what needs to change²⁷. This pathway from past ghosts to visions of the future is what this research explores, though within the confines of the activist-workplace.

The second primary text is *Queer Phenomenology* by Sara Ahmed, which explores the way we experience objects (inanimate, human, more-than-human), the way objects appear to us or around us, and our orientations around them. Like with Muñoz, Ahmed asserts that "queerness" (used here more broadly and philosophically) is a disruptive force that moves differently than other orientations due to its continued *dis*orientation of the body relative to others and to time. Here "queer time" sits separately from hegemonic (or heteropatriarchal) time, a completely other understanding of relations to past/present/future. Ahmed's work also helps us "map" interaction(s) across time and space, looking at concepts like inheritance, "reachability"²⁸, and movement. In her chapter on orientations and racialized bodies, Ahmed goes a step further in this discussion of reachability by referencing "inheritance" in the context specifically of racialized bodies in diaspora, and their simultaneous orientations to/from "homeland" and their present locations. Muñoz and Ahmed's books follow and propose similar paths: one that continually turns between temporalities as it attempts to make sense of the present and vision the future. Though Ahmed does not directly engage with ghosts, the intersections between phenomenology and hauntology are clear: the way(s) we orient ourselves in our sense-making, to slightly conceptually stretch Ahmed's writings, dictates and is dictated by memory and

²⁴ Muñoz 2019, 12

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 46

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 38

²⁸ Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. N.p.: Duke University Press., 117

orientations, by how we "begin". That conceptual "beginning" is potentially infinite: one can find a beginning at any point in personal and ancestral history, within any interaction. Thus, the mining and understanding of where we find *the beginning* is essential in understanding how we attempt to build futures: the beginning is the root of the orientations we take in the present. As Muñoz would propose, this "looking back" inherently involves the dead - either direct ancestors or communal ones.

Finally is Wendy Brown's *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (1995), another key theoretical basis for this research. Though not directly tied to the community sector, this book engages in discussion of identity and identity politics. In it, Brown explores and critiques the idea that "woundedness" (i.e., marginalization under white supremacy or heteropatriarchy) is an identity category that requires protection from and collaboration with the state as a tool for gaining justice and equality. In "Chapter 3: Wounded Attachments", Brown argues that when movements or communities that have experienced oppression create calls for justice based on a fixed identity of being "injured", they will often "mirror the...configurations of power" that were used against them²⁹. This "flipping" of power can be a vengeful one, with these "injured" communities creating often punitive and problematic systems to "rebalance" social domination. Within the activist-workplace, we see a similar phenomenon of attempting to "flip" that power, rather than collaborate effectively to do away with state-made power structures completely. The institutional individualization of "freedom" or justice for these injured groups - for example through programs like "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" - is, according to Brown, not freedom at all. Instead, it is a neoliberal project³⁰ meant to maintain social order, as it functions in direct opposition to creating conditions for movement-building work by creating only individual or micro-community solutions.

Organizational culture & behaviour

Very little academic research specifically examines the niche occupied by the "activist-workplace". There are three books that are used in this research that fit somewhat within that niche: *Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry* by Delfina Vannucci and Richard Singer³¹ and oral history project *Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City* by Amy Starecheski³². Another oral history, *After Accountability: A Critical Genealogy of a Concept*³³ by the Pinko Collective, examines the experiences of punishment and interpersonal relationships amongst abolitionist activists. All three of these books look at non-hierarchical organizing, with Starecheski's examining more closely what happens when community activism and organizing is professionalized, in this case in the transition from squatters groups to co-operative housing. Starecheski's book uses a methodology that helps the book look more closely at the experience of conflict, an approach that is essential for navigating the complexity of activist and "alternative" communities. *Come Hell or High Water*, in contrast, is written to guide community organizers towards better shared power and collective decision-making.

²⁹ Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. N.p.: Princeton University Press., 3

³⁰*Ibid.* p. 8

³¹ Vannucci, Delfina, and Richard Singer. 2010. *Come Hell Or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry*. N.p.: A K Press.

³² Starecheski, Amy. 2016. *Ours to Lose: When Squatters Became Homeowners in New York City*. N.p.: University of Chicago Press.

³³ Pinko Collective. 2025. *After Accountability: A Critical Genealogy of a Concept (Revised and Updated Edition)*. N.p.: Haymarket Books.

More largely, Miranda Joseph's *Against the Romance of Community* provides critique and reflection on the general concept of "community", with an anchoring in the larger nonprofit sector. Joseph's work contends with how identity politics provide complications and challenges in building shared vision in organizations of all kinds, and the limitations of making community a tool of appeasement under capitalism. We can see similar work to this coming from Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, which looks at how universities attempt to "solve" their diversity issues through policy writing and internal projects, and the impacts of that on racialized workers³⁴. Both Joseph and Ahmed's books examine the awkward space between activism and professionalism, and the bureaucratization of politics that comes with it, much like within the activist-workplace.

Pat Vivian and Shana Hormann are prolific writers in the field of organizational trauma. Both authors work with nonprofit organizations that they classify as "highly mission-driven"³⁵ in which employees can develop "intense emotional connections" to both their clients and the organization as a whole, creating unhealthy confluences of individual and organizational identity³⁶. Their work, crucially, also sees organizations as traumatized spaces to be a part of, in which the organisational culture becomes toxic for all who work inside it: what they call a "shadow culture"³⁷. Within activist research, there is a large focus on the problems of burnout, sometimes also called "compassion fatigue" or "chronic organizational trauma". Paul Gorski's many writings on activist burnout provide a complimentary lens to Vivian & Hormann, in that he is focused largely on individual experiences within activist work. In "Nobody's paying me to cry: the causes of activist burnout in United States animal rights activism," Gorski and his fellow writers Stacy Lopresti-Goodman and Dallas Rising acknowledge a lack of existing research that "differentiates between activists whose workplaces also are their activist organizations and those whose work lives are separate from their activist lives" as their findings showed that those who were "professional or full-time" paid activists felt a sense of entanglement between their work and activist lives³⁸. All this, they say, points to a need to understand how job-related burnout impacts activist sustainability³⁹.

A great deal of the associated burnout and trauma research looks specifically through the lens of racism and other oppressive systems. This area of writing is incredibly vast, encompassing thinkpieces, op-eds, art praxis, and books that all respond to and critique the rampant racism that is clearly at odds with the supposed progressiveness of the social services sector. To bring this area into better focus and more specific context, I looked at pieces written *specifically* about Montreal and Quebec where my research will take place, as the province has unique dynamics of language, class politics, and a history of left wing organizing. In September 2024, the Centre for Community Organizations (COCO) published *Diversité d'Abord*, a research project which aimed to "target the impacts of racism within the non-profit sector in Quebec...to divulge data and testimonies from those most affected by this problem, and to suggest solutions capable of

³⁴ Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. N.p.: Duke University Press.

³⁵ Hormann, Shana, and Pat Vivian. 2013. "Chapter 33: Trauma and Healing in Organizations." In *Handbook for Strategic HR: Best Practices in Organization Development from the OD Network*, edited by John Vogelsang. N.p.: American Management Association., 247

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 248

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 249

³⁸ Gorski, Paul, Dallas Rising, and Stacy Lopresti-Goodman. 2019. "'Nobody's paying me to cry': the causes of activist burnout in United States animal rights activists." *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 3 (May): 364-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1561260>, 375

³⁹ *Ibid.*

concretely transforming practices within the nonprofit sector”⁴⁰. This project follows in the tradition of others like Alexandra Pierre, author of *Empreintes de résistance* (Imprints of Resistance), a book which interviewed nine racialized women activists in Quebec⁴¹; and Marlihan Lopez & Jade Almeida, who wrote “Feminist workplaces: “Safe spaces” for black women?” for *Future of Diversity*⁴². All three of these works look at the larger activist and nonprofit sector, but many of the organizations cited in individuals’ interviews fall into the definition of the “activist-workplace”. They demonstrate the entangled political motivations that pose serious challenges in these workplaces for racialized peoples, and show the ways in which ancestral traumas of colonialism and oppression show up in the interpersonal dynamics of these workers and their colleagues.

Other areas of organizational behaviour research provide additional scaffolding for analyzing employee motivation and engagement in workplace change. For example, *Generation to Generation* discusses the complexities of family businesses brought about by combining those family members with employees and shareholders. In it, the authors write that these family businesses draw “special strength” from shared history and common language, sometimes with faster (though not necessarily easier) communication between family members⁴³. They also explore how stories are used as tools for making decisions, and also be used to “hold over” other family members for power or influence. Though not a blood family, many participants in my research described their organizations as either operating like one or feeling like one to them, leading to many of the same dynamics (and resentments) that one would find in a family business. In a more broad area of writing on organizational behaviour, what I call “behavioural resilience culture” area of research, we see a combination of academic and non-academic disciplines and theories converge. Some of these types of pieces - mostly targeted towards managers - include *Reinventing Organizations* by Frederic Laloux⁴⁴, *Get Better at Flatter* by Markus Reitzig⁴⁵, and *Solidarity and Organizations* by Philippe Eynaud and Genauto Carvalho de França Filho⁴⁶. Though important to highlight for its ubiquity, this area is less applicable to my research project due largely to its solutions-oriented focus. These types of texts largely avoid engagement on the *politics* of labour or the interpersonal clashes that can disrupt organisational change. Instead, this style of writing is focused on medium-to-large scale corporate-nonprofits attempting to make structural internal changes, but there is a lack of research into the “activist-workplace” where concepts like flat governance and solidarity are already their structure. There are other areas of research and writing focused on the medium-to-large scale nonprofit that approach from an international development or multi-national approach, like

⁴⁰ Yarde, Shanice, and Emily Y. Clare. 2024. “Diversité d'Abord.” COCo.

<https://coco-net.org/diversite-dabord/>.

⁴¹ Pierre, Alexandra. 2021. *Empreintes de résistance: filiations et récits de femmes autochtones, noires et racisées*. N.p.: les Éditions du Remue-ménage.

⁴² Lopez, Marlihan, and Jade Almeida. 2021. ““Feminist Workplaces: “Safe spaces” for black women?”” Edited by Christiane Kuptsch and Eric Charest. *The Future of Diversity*; N.p.: International Labour Organisation (ILO)., 171-186.

⁴³ Davis, John A., Marion M. Hampton, Ivan Lansberg, and Kelin E. Gersick. 1997. *Generation to Generation: Life Cycles of the Family Business*. N.p.: Harvard Business Review Press., 14

⁴⁴ Laloux, Frédéric. 2014. *Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness*. N.p.: Nelson Parker.

⁴⁵ Reitzig, Markus. 2022. *Get Better at Flatter: A Guide to Shaping and Leading Organizations with Less Hierarchy*. N.p.: Springer International Publishing.

⁴⁶ Eynaud, Philippe, and Genauto Carvalho de França Filho. 2024. *Solidarity and Organization: Toward New Avenues for Management*. N.p.: Springer International Publishing.

NGOization by Dip Kapoor and Aziz Choudry⁴⁷, which due to their international lens did not directly apply to this research.

Hauntology

The term “hauntology” was first coined by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book *Spectres of Marx*. In this book, originally a series of presentations, Derrida discusses the legacy of Marxism and communism that hangs over Europe. His work broke ground on the concept of hauntology, asserting that our inheritances, whether visible or not, leaves marks upon our cultures⁴⁸. These lingering spectral presences exist across time, both “revenant and arrivant” as any story begins by their very return⁴⁹. According to Merlin Coverley, Derrida’s work has become so significant in research fields partly because hauntology is a “porous concept” that provides a convenient tool for which to navigate both the anxiety and nostalgia that comes from “confused temporalities” in everyday life⁵⁰.

Unfortunately, the bulk of Western academic works that use hauntology today do so through literary or cultural analysis. This is true regardless of other areas of focus that the authors take, including those who are writing *about* hauntology itself as an academic principle or methodology. Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* and Merlin Coverley’s *Ghosts of Futures Past* are both examples, with the former examining the works of Sabina Spielrein, Luisa Valenzuela, and Toni Morrison⁵¹; and the latter looking at historical understandings of ghosts in literature, beginning his analysis using Charles Dickens and ending with 1970s Cold War science fiction⁵². Even one of the most oft-cited writers on this topic, Mark Fisher, uses hauntology as a framework in film studies in his book *What is Hauntology?*⁵³. By positioning the analysis of cultural works as the primary vehicle for hauntological engagement, we see the ways that it has moved to a metaphorical device rather than a “real” presence with us in much of Western thought. Though the Victorians, with the rise of industrialization and introductions of new technologies like electricity, were invested in the occult and the supernatural as real beings⁵⁴, much of that began to shift at the beginning of the 20th century when thinkers like Theodor Adorno and Sigmund Freud asserted that actually *believing* in ghosts was primitive or a tool from which to disassociate from modern capitalism⁵⁵. Therefore much of the spectral moved from the belief in beings themselves to a belief in ghostly concepts as ways of understanding humanity metaphorically, and the seeking out of those presences through writing them into fiction.

I will underscore though that conceptualizations of spirits are not universal, neither in the West nor in the rest of the world. What cultural studies and other more metaphorical disciplines lack is an understanding of how *everyday* people interact with hauntings as a social relationship to the past. Anthropological research, and geographic and spatial theory, does employ this approach,

⁴⁷ Choudry, Aziz, and Dip Kapoor, eds. 2013. *NGOization: Complicity, Contradictions and Prospects*. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁴⁸ Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx : the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the New International*. N.p.: Routledge., 33

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 29

⁵⁰ Coverley 2021, 128

⁵¹ Gordon 2008, 196

⁵² Coverley 2021, 20

⁵³ Coverley 2021, 7

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 29

⁵⁵ “Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities” 2013, 5

looking at ghosts across the world not as metaphorical or as “devices” exclusively, but as central figures in post-conflict or post-trauma communities, as they reckon (perhaps even decades later) with the loss of loved ones or places. Notably, much of this literature is not employing hauntology as a methodological *tool* per se. It is largely also outside of the West, and/or in racialized or queer communities who employ either non-Western epistemologies or live outside of white and/or heteropatriarchal time and relationships, as Ahmed would describe them. Ranging from small villages to urban communities post-violence, to post-AIDS-epidemic Western gay communities, these works share a “communal mourning”⁵⁶ in which bringing the dead either with us or back to life in some way can help make sense of the present and future. Some of the works dealing specifically with ethnographic research include “The dead as memory workers” by Lia Kent, which looks at the nearly 25-year Indonesian occupation of Timor-Leste, where the dead are considered restless and disruptive spirits⁵⁷. Similarly, *The Age of Wild Ghosts* by Erik Mueggler, which looks at a rural post-conflict Chinese Village, follows the same lines of both the affective and literal hauntings of the dead⁵⁸. *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness* (edited by Janet Carsten), includes a series of ethnographies around memory that range from displaced Muslim communities in Sri Lanka to sex workers in London⁵⁹. Some of these ethnographic works go deeper into hauntological theory rather than focusing on memory and ghosts of the dead, as is the case with “The specter of the “arrivant”: hauntology of an interethnic conflict in Afghanistan” by Andrea and Melissa Chioventa, which looks at the hauntings of ethnic groups as being done “not only by a murderous past (the revenant), but also by a future (the arrivant) which anticipates equally murderous violence”⁶⁰.

I have found only a small handful of texts that propose different ways of using hauntology as a *methodological* research approach, rather than as a research question or symbol of analysis like in cultural studies and anthropology. The strongest deployment of methodological hauntology is “A Pedagogy of Hauntology: Decolonizing the Curriculum with GIS” by Michalinos Zembylas, Vivienne Bozalek, and Siddique Motala. This paper proposes hauntology as a pedagogical tool of analysis in geography and spatial mapping, specifically in this case looking at a neighbourhood that was cleansed during Apartheid South Africa⁶¹. Their paper emphasizes the potential that hauntology holds for understanding haunting as “material(ist)”⁶²; using ghosts to “animate” spaces⁶³, and to help understand what happened in the past and the impacts of history on the present. Another piece that proposes hauntological methodologies is “Considering the past, present and future: making the case for a hauntological approach to youth” by Charlotte McPherson. For McPherson, hauntology disrupts all-too-common pushing of youth towards being “representative of the future”, without adequately taking into account how (their) past influences their visions. Similarly to my research approach, McPherson proposes

⁵⁶ Muñoz 2019, 46

⁵⁷ Kent, Lia. 2024. “The dead as memory workers.” *Memory Studies* 17, no. 3 (June): 500-514. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980241240715>, 501

⁵⁸ Mueggler, Erik. 2001. *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*. N.p.: University of California Press.

⁵⁹ Carsten, Janet, ed. 2007. *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*. N.p.: Wiley.

⁶⁰ Chioventa, Andrea, and Melissa Chioventa. 2018. “The spectre of the “arrivant”: hauntology of an interethnic conflict in Afghanistan.” *Asian Anthropology* 17 (3): 165-184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2018.1480917>. 164

⁶¹ Zembylas, Michalinos, Vivienne Bozalek, and Siddique Motala. 2019-2020. “A Pedagogy of Hauntology: Decolonizing the Curriculum with GIS.” *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 2 (1-2): 26-48., 26

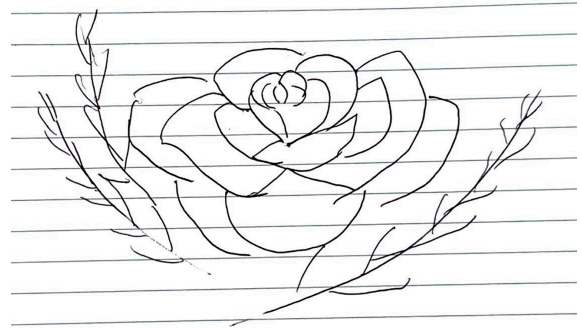
⁶² *Ibid*, 31

⁶³ *Ibid*, 32

that hauntology's "pantemporal" nature provides opportunity and avenues to reimagine sociality, particularly for youth who are facing uncertain - and frightening - futures⁶⁴. As she writes, "hauntological research can generate important and rich insights into the injustices these ghosts represent, and the ways young people respond to them"⁶⁵.

Memory & Diaspora

Given that many of the workers in the sector are racialized and/or diasporic subjects, and the sector's progressive politic results in anti-oppression or anti-racism becoming foci in their utopian efforts, diaspora and ancestral memory become crucial elements in understanding the ghosts that haunt the activist-workplace. There also exist many works which already engage with hauntology in their diaspora writings, including Hershini Bhana Young's *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text and the Black Diasporic Body*, and "Specters of Home in Two Caribbean Memoirs" by Melva Persico, both of whom who discuss memorialization of the dead⁶⁶. However, other works like Stuart Hall's foundational "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," though not using the language of hauntology, still engage in the looking back/looking forward: for example, in discussing identity formation, Hall encourages an "unearthing [of] that which the colonial experience buried"⁶⁷, and promotes finding collectively shared histories as crucial elements in building cross-border diasporic "coherence"⁶⁸. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym similarly looks at how diasporic communities (in this case, focused on Eastern Europe) attempt to build coherence post-migration. Her book discusses what is, in her opinion, the almost-fallacy in this search for coherence: arguing that the homes once left (by the individual or by the ancestor) can never really *be remembered*, as they no longer exist - in this case, making them more of a ghost than a true memory. Her analysis of *how* those pasts/ghosts are constructed within diaspora communities, and her theories of "restorative and reflective nostalgia" provide a strong analytical framework for this research⁶⁹.



Other writings on memory and/or diaspora that are important texts for this project include Maurice Halbwachs' "On Collective Memory," which again looks at socially-constructed memories; Pierre Nora's *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoires*⁷⁰, which looks at the flattening of memory, history, and memorialization in the context of major historical events like the French Revolution; and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, a real "ghost hunt" of a book that begins with Hartman - a slave

⁶⁴ McPherson, Charlotte. 2024. "Considering the past, present and future: making the case for a hauntological approach to youth." *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2328121>, 12

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ Persico, Melva. 2018. "Specters of Home in Two Caribbean Memoirs." *CLA Journal* 61, no. 3 (March): 207-222. <https://doi.org/10.34042/claj.61.3.0207>

⁶⁷ Hall, Stuart. 1990. "Cultural Identity & Diaspora." In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, 222-237. N.p.: Lawrence & Wishart., 224

⁶⁸ *Ibid*

⁶⁹ Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. N.p.: Basic Books.

⁷⁰ Nora, Pierre. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26, no. no. Special issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring): 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>.

descendent American - “returning” to Ghana with the hopes of understanding her lineage and identity⁷¹. Like nostalgia, described by Svetlana Boym as “the relationship between individual biography and biography of groups or nations”⁷², ghosts and hauntings have been used across literature as a metaphor to look back over histories and “address the way certain subjectivities have been marginalized and disavowed” in service of hegemonic norms, and how those subjectivities reappear, return, or in some ways never left⁷³.

Utopia & The Future

The final academic area supporting this research is utopia and futuring. These are two linked yet also distinct concepts, with utopia representing the “idealized perfect future”, and “futuring” representing the act of imagining or designing *possible* futures. Sometimes those futures imagined are utopian, but more often than not they are solutions oriented or reparative, as the discipline of “futuring” in academia and praxis touches on corporate strategy, climate, military, psychology, and politics. There is debate about the roots of the professionalized futuring field, though many cite WWII-era forecasting by the United States military as the “starting point”⁷⁴ that has birthed professional fields of strategic foresight and design thinking; areas which address possible and proposable scenarios for policies and populations at all scales and sizes. This is not to say that futuring *conceptually* began in the 20th century: imagining the future is a fundamental aspect of human psychology, one that the human brain is “designed to make” through even the smallest “what if” scenarios⁷⁵. We can look to fortune tellers or foretelling arts like tarot and tea leaves as proof enough of humanity’s constant pursuit of life’s great answers. “Techniques of futuring: On how imagined futures become socially performative” by Oomen *et al* puts forward a theory that individuals engage in practices that perform the future through their own kind of dramaturgy: setting scenes, writing scripts, and putting on the “play” of the future through the imagining of it in the present⁷⁶. I see the work of activist-workplaces as similarly dramaturgical: they are “fractal” performances of ideal futures, wherein they “see [their] own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place [to] can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the Planet”⁷⁷ to influence and reverberate outside of their small communities. In this way, they are engaged in an iterative performance, working out the kinks in the ideal future as they live through a small practice of it. This theory of the dramaturgical was used to explain the workshop activities to participants: outlining to them the performative nature of futuring and their places within it helped to contextualize for them the research objectives.

With respect to utopian studies, the term itself emerged from ancient Greek, and the first book birthing a radical and popular vision of “Utopia” coming from Thomas More’s 1516 book of that

⁷¹ Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. N.p.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁷² Boym 2001, xvi

⁷³ del Pilar Blanco and Peeren 2013, 310

⁷⁴ Hines, Andy. 2019. “When Did It Start? Origin of the Foresight Field.” *World Futures Review* 12 (1): 4-11. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1946756719889053>, 5

⁷⁵ *Ibid*

⁷⁶ Oomen, Jeroen, Jesse Hoffman, and Maarten A. Hajer. 2022. “Techniques of futuring: On how imagined futures become socially performative.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 25, no. 2 (February): 252-270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020988826>.

⁷⁷ brown, adrienne m. 2019. “Fractals: The Relationship Between Small and Large.” *Earthling Opinion*. <https://earthlingopinion.wordpress.com/2019/03/01/fractals-the-relationship-between-small-and-large/>.

name⁷⁸. Other traditions for futuring not as a professional praxis, but as a philosophy or ontology, exist across cultures and encompass afrofuturisms and Indigenous futuring, wherein ancestors and past colonized cultures and practices play a role in imagining utopian otherwise. Decolonial (or precolonial) ways of relating to time and the future persist both in home continents and across the diaspora. Take for example “Sankofa”, an originally West African practice today found and practiced across Black diaspora, including in the United States⁷⁹. “Sankofa” can be described as:

...the idea that you need to go back and search in the past, to let the past be a guide. It has to do with the connection with past and present. That you have to look backwards in order to look forwards. It means to revere ancestors and to respect elders.⁸⁰

Storytelling practices, both oral histories and fictions, are key aspects of futuring across cultures. In particular, a methodology based in storytelling can function to “deWesternize” or decolonize relationships with the future⁸¹. In “Inviting a decolonial praxis for future imaginaries of nature: Introducing the Entangled Time Tree”, Terry *et al* explore the concepts of storytelling as a futuring practice in-depth, proposing it as a methodology for opening up greater imaginations of the future and challenging linear time⁸². This non-linear and decolonial representation also shows up in Indigenous ontologies, like the work of Qwo-Li Driskill in *Asegi Stories* (2016), who uses the concept of “re-storying” to find cultural memories that were crushed under colonialism (in this case, queer Cherokee stories) to locate space for those memories and their practices in present and future⁸³.

In *The image of the Future*, Fred Polak’s book that proposes frameworks for “projecting the future” of Western civilization, he argues that utopia - as a project - begins with “holding up two mirrors: one to reflect the contemporary generation, and one to reflect a counterimage of a possible future”⁸⁴. The work of Ruth Levitas functions much the same, with her book *Utopia as Method* elaborating on not just the concept of utopia in social life and across histories, but also proposing the re-configuration of utopian thinking as a method through which we are always “critiquing the present, exploring alternatives, imagining ourselves otherwise and experimenting with prefigurative practices is all around us”⁸⁵. Moving forward into the practical application of utopia in activist contexts, authors like Luisa Passerini locate utopia as having “reappeared in the form of nostalgia for rebellion”⁸⁶, in her work specifically looking at mid-1960s French student revolutions. But, she writes, in lacking the right political tools, the utopian project

⁷⁸ Eagleton, Terry. 2015. “Utopias, past and present: why Thomas More remains astonishingly radical.” The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/16/utopias-past-present-thomas-more-terry-eagleton>.

⁷⁹ Temple, Christel N. 2010. “The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History.” Journal of Black Studies 41, no. 1 (September): 127-150. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704098>., 128

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 129

⁸¹ Terry, Naomi, Azucena Castro, Bwalya Chibwe, Geci Karuri-Sebina, Codruta Savu, and Laura Pereira. 2024. “Inviting a decolonial praxis for future imaginaries of nature: Introducing the Entangled Time Tree.” Environmental Science & Policy 151 (January): 103615. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2023.103615>., 2

⁸² *Ibid*

⁸³ Driskill, Qwo-Li. 2016. *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory*. N.p.: University of Arizona Press.

⁸⁴ Polak, Fred. 1973. *The image of the future*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company., 178

⁸⁵ Levitas, Ruth. 2013. *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan., 219

⁸⁶ Passerini, Luisa. 2007. *Memory And Utopia: The Primacy of Inter-Subjectivity (Critical Histories of Subjectivity and Culture)*. N.p.: Equinox., 61

becomes misinterpreted as revolution rather than “revolt”⁸⁷. In other words: what the utopian agitators engage in is violence (revolt) in anger *against*, rather than the true revolution *towards*. This concept of revolt versus revolution returns us to the conflicts that, I posit in my research, are inherent to utopian projects in activist-workplaces.

Moving Forward

The existing literature on organizational behaviour and activism sit largely in two thematic areas: identifying and analyzing the failings and risks, or a “solutions-focus” that proposes concepts like unpacking oppression or experimenting with supposed progressive structures. But there is a lack of depth in this binary that fails to address an analysis of the structural realities that impact individuals and their interpersonal relationships in the activist-workplace, and indeed in other workplaces too. At the end of the day, workplaces are nothing more than the people within them, and therefore everything they bring in with them becomes part of the workplace dynamic. Within the activist-workplace, with extremely high self-identification and intimate social relationships, coupled with strict political rules and norms, employees will often bring *more* of themselves than with a traditional work environment. In fact, they will more often than not be invited to bring their “full selves” into work, including their vulnerabilities. Professional human resources personality tests that examine motivators and work style are insufficient, in addressing both what staff feel they are working towards (their passions) and what informs their interactions with one another (their traumas). By merging utopian thinking and hauntology with traditional organizational behaviour research, it is possible to better explore the depths of workplace dynamics. These concepts push organizational analysis further, by utilizing the language of the communities being studied to support them in unlocking the links between personal experience, ancestry, social change objectives, and work.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 70

Process & Ethnographic Notes

The methodology for this project was an immersive one, pulling from ethnographic, phenomenological, and hauntological disciplines. Over two days, eight participants joined myself and my co-facilitator Gabriela - a somatic therapist and consultant - for a writing workshop called *Addressing the Ghost*. The experimental workshop invited participants to write ghost stories about their experiences working in activist-workplaces; tracing backwards in lineages and personal histories to locate the forces that both pressure their presents and provide their images of the future. Two to three weeks after the workshop itself, participants were invited to participate in individual interviews to analyze the “fictional” stories they created.

This writing workshop methodology initially took its inspiration from adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha’s *Octavia’s Brood*, an anthology of speculative science fiction short stories that were created through writing workshops of “collective ideation”⁸⁸. Participants in this workshop co-built a “shared world” (setting, time, geography, etc) before independently writing their own stories. The anthology presupposes that “all [social justice] organizing is science fiction,” and that striving for a different future requires “collectively dreaming” a world that can one day be built⁸⁹. Unlike the work that created *Octavia’s Brood*, this workshop did not entail collaborative world-building or science-fiction futurisms. In fact, *Addressing the Ghost* forbade speculative fictionalizing, instructing participants that in their first activity of imagining the ideal activist-workplace organization, they could not change anything in the “real” outside world.

Another inspiration for the structure of the research groups come from the Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab’s Land Education Dreambook, a pedagogical toolkit for organizations engaged in land education programs with youth. The Dreambook contains a series of different activities for young people, including “Storying Seeds” and “Draw a Path on Rematriated Land”⁹⁰. The latter activity, in particular, is an inspiration for my research project: in it, participants are taken onto the land, and asked to observe how their five senses relate to the environment around them, and imagine new futures for it, and share stories and memories of it⁹¹. Similarly to this, *Addressing the Ghost* invites participants to exit the world as we know it and speak to and about the more-than-human across temporalities. In this way, my approach expands on the tradition of oral history to find spaces where “imagination, symbolism, and desire merge”⁹².

The data discussed in this chapter comprises the ethnographic observations from the workshop sessions. The data gained from the interviews, sharebacks, and stories was analyzed using a coding system of “thematic” then “emergent” codes that reflected the workshop’s structure. The stories specifically were also analyzed from a literary lens as well as an oral history one. As the stories are pulled from participants’ lived experiences, as previously mentioned, I read them with an eye for the *way the story is told* as much as the “facts” or events that took place; attempting

⁸⁸ Imarisha, Walidah, and adrienne m. brown, eds. 2015. *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. N.p.: AK Press., 198

⁸⁹ Imarisha, Walidah. 2015. “Rewriting the Future: Using Science Fiction to Re-Envision Justice — Walidah Imarisha.” walidah imarisha.

<https://www.walidah.com/blog/2015/2/11/rewriting-the-future-using-science-fiction-to-re-envision-justice>.

⁹⁰ Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab. n.d. “Draw a Path on Rematriated Land: Land Education and Land Relations.” Land Education Dreambook. <https://www.landeducationdreambook.com/draw-a-path-on-rematriated-land>.

⁹¹ Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab. n.d. “Storying Seeds: Working with Seeds as More-Than-Human Relations.” Land Education Dreambook. <https://www.landeducationdreambook.com/storying-seeds>.

⁹² Portelli, Alessandro. 2009. “What Makes Oral History Different.” In *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans*, edited by Luisa Del Giudice, 21-30. N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan., 23

to understand how memories of conflicts or traumas operate from different levels of distance or severity. This was amplified with the literary analysis approach, which looked for ghost-story tropes (ex: possessions, physical disturbances, conversations) that added additional emotive layers to the narratives being shared.



The participants

Recruitment & Outreach

With over a decade of work in Montreal's community sector, I have access to a large network from which I began my participant recruitment. Via email, I reached out directly to eight sector peers who I had worked with in some capacity, either in a board-staff relationship, or in a consultant-staff relationship. I made the decision not to recruit anyone with whom I had been employed staff at the same organization at the same time to avoid conflicts of interest. Out of the eight recruited, four agreed to participate. Only one recruited participant came from a referral.

Direct outreach allowed me to control some of the potential variables that could arise in organizing a methodological practice that involved extensive and intimate time together as a group. This not just ensured adequate representation of the sector (in terms of job roles, types of organizations, and demographics) but also the temperament of the space. After the direct research, I recruited the remaining participants through social media. As opposed to demographics, the criteria was instead focused on the *types* of organizations potential participants had worked at. Those criteria were:

- Located/Based in Montreal
- Annual operating budget of less than three million dollars
- Team of 30 people or less
- Includes registered charities, registered nonprofits, co-operatives, student unions or similar groups with compensated staff
- Operating under a non-hierarchical governance structure, where a majority of decisions are held by more than one person

Facebook groups were used for general recruitment. I posted my research call-out in two employment-oriented Groups, one with 11,700 members and the other with 2400. Through those two posts, I received just over 45 interested candidates who reached out via email. Many of these outreaches did not progress past an initial exchange either because their interest waned or because based on an initial assessment of their employment history, they were deemed ineligible based on the above criteria. Through the open recruitment calls, I accepted an additional four participants, bringing the total workshop attendance to eight.

Those participants were*:

Megan	Currently in a management position at a women's not-for-profit. Has worked at and sat on the Board of a variety of organizations, with a variety of mandates and organizational structures.
Noah	Community organizer & artist. Currently works as part of an organization doing advocacy and community-building work. Formerly worked in a collective organization that provided client support.
Oliver	HR professional, currently no longer in the community sector. Previously worked in a variety of organizations focused on food security and sustainability, with a variety of organizational structures.
Milo	Has worked administrative positions in a variety of queer-focused organizations, with different organizational structures.
Swara	Currently not employed in the nonprofit sector. Formerly worked at and sat on the Board of Directors at a variety of arts organizations, with different organizational structures.
Willow	Currently works at a queer-focused organization. Has worked at others in a different Canadian city before coming to Montreal.
Ari	Community organizer, currently works in a food security organization. <i>Did not participate in the one-on-one interview⁹³</i>
Ons	Community organizer. Has worked at and sat on the Board of a variety of organizations, largely serving queer and/or racialized or migrant communities. <i>Was unavailable for the second day of the workshop, but completed the story independently and participated in an interview</i>

**these names are pseudonyms*

Participants were recruited and/or selected to provide a diversity of professional experiences and personal backgrounds representative of Montreal's Anglophone grassroots nonprofit sector. Just over half of the participants were racialized, the majority are queer and/or trans, all but one are Anglophone (though most speak French at different levels), and they are all in their 30s, save for one participant in their 40s. The ages of participants was a limitation on data collection. It didn't provide a window into the experience of those who are "new" to the workforce, and for whom their ideas of utopia (and its feasibility) have potential to be very different from those with at least a decade in the sector. Similarly, though many of the participants have held multiple types of job roles throughout their careers (including a mix of client-facing and administrative positions), there were none which one would consider "elders" and for whom their experience of organizational utopianism would be very different with many decades of experience. The

⁹³ Ari communicated their departure from the research process very succinctly, without further information about their decision. Nothing was flagged by or about them throughout the workshop, and there have been no indications since of any long-term adverse impacts of their participation.

organizations represented by the participants are those that either provide services (to individuals and/or groups) or are engaged in community-building (ex: running drop-in spaces).

I made a deliberate decision not to include detailed demographic information for each individual in this chapter for a few reasons. The first is because of my concerns regarding confidentiality: some of the participants in the research have held prominent positions across organizations that would make them immediately identifiable should their demographic information be shared in too much detail. The second reason for limited sharing of demographic data is the desire to let each participants' story speak for them. Knowing a participants' background before reading their stories has the potential for changing a readers' experience, allowing them to ascribe meaning via biographical knowledge. This is not to say that analysis of the data will not engage with the demographic differences between respondent groups (ex: do racialized participants engage with different ghosts than their white counterparts). However, I will let the participants' stories and disclosures emerge naturally.

Workshop Design

In preparation for *Addressing the Ghost*, I created a number of materials to set the tone of the space and support participants in their story writing. The first was a "Shared Space Agreement", which participants received in advance of the workshop along with their consent forms. The Shared Space Agreement outlined a series of standards to which everyone agreed, acknowledging that the intimate environment being created required trust and openness to other perspectives. The agreements also included reminders of confidentiality and to be aware of their speaking times, and that devices were not permitted during group discussion. The Agreement didn't only manage expectations between participants, but also from the facilitators: it explained that the workshop was not designed as a healing space, underscoring that the weekend's intentions were academic, and that my co-facilitator Gabriela was present for support and participant safety only (in case of emergency) and not regular counseling services.

Other documents prepared for the workshop in advance were the example-responses I created based on my own experiences in activist-workplaces. As I began designing this methodology, it felt important that I worked through the steps myself to improve on the quality of questions I was asking, and to ensure through building an understanding of the experience from the participant perspective. Over time and further development, this initial work of "testing" the methodology became the examples that would be shared with participants during the workshop. Once the workshop was underway, it became apparent that it would have been impossible - or at the very least, incongruous with the workshop's design - to request a high degree of vulnerability and exposition from participants, many of whom were strangers, without providing an offering of my own vulnerability in return. Though originally the purpose of working through the design was purely related to quality of the workshop design, I would now as I reflect upon the experience describe the sharing of my own stories as a way of engaging in a mix of auto-ethnography and participatory ethnography that built intimacy with participants and allowed me to participate "with them" in the analysis despite also sitting in a facilitator role (though, I will note, I will not be analyzing my own stories with those of the participants). This auto-participatory-ethnographic approach in itself pulls from my own inherited political lineages (a queer one, a racialized one), and a desire for practicing a shared oral history that challenges "colonialist precepts of ethnography"⁹⁴ by allowing the studying of one's own community through full ingratiation. This ingratiation breaks down the fourth wall of the research process, allowing myself to be seen and

⁹⁴ Russell, Catherine. 1999. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. N.p.: Duke University Press., 277

studied by the participants as much as I study them, towards less hierarchy in the research room.

I would also argue that in some ways, the participants also engaged in miniature auto-ethnographies, both through the narrative-writing and later through the co-analysis of their work in one-on-one interviews. In speaking about auto-ethnographic film-making, Catherine Russell writes:

The autoethnographic subject blurs the distinction between ethnographer and Other by traveling, becoming a stranger in a strange land, even if that land is a fictional space existing only in representation.⁹⁵

By placing themselves, through the spectral lens of part-reality-part-fiction, within the “larger social formations and historical processes”⁹⁶ that created them and in which they exist, participants too can step into dual roles of researcher and researched, crafting - as we’ll see later in this chapter - a new reality in which they can engage analytically with their own pasts and presents.

The Addressing the Ghost Workshop

Day One

The day opened with introductions and check-ins, where participants could get to know one another, and hear from myself and my co-facilitator Gabriela. They were asked to share what brought them to the workshop: most participants shared a curiosity about the concepts of ghosts in nonprofits and activist spaces, and a desire to speak about their experiences within the sector. Following check-ins, we went through the Shared Space Agreement again before I introduced the participants to the theories that would be guiding the weekend. This included an explanation of the below graphic:

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 280

⁹⁶ Russell 1999, 276

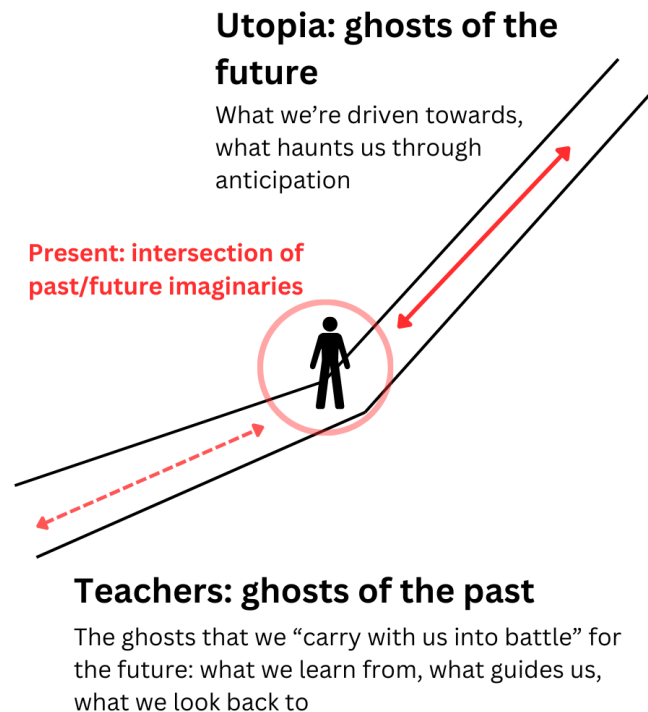


Figure 1: Graphic of the research theory, as explained during to participants during the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop

Borrowing inspiration from Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (as outlined in the Literature Review), this graphic depicts the theoretical framework guiding this project: that ghosts of both the future and the past exert equal force on our performance of the utopian (in this case, utopian organization). This model formed the basis of the workshop's structure and direction. The workshop objective was for participants to work to chart a "path" from past memories to utopian visions: starting from "the future", describing the idealized organization; then identifying the lessons they pull from that inform that ideal, or some of the inspiration points and ancestral teachers; and finally examine in more detail, through storytelling, some of the other ghosts that have been present in their organizations that have helped reaching utopian ideals or caused those efforts to fail.

The *Addressing the Ghost* participants understood the graphic (pictured in Figure 1) easily, without any questions. When I moved from the theory to the overview of the weekend, however, they began to ask more clarifying questions about the "kind of stories [I was] looking for". This included length, genre, whether fictional or non-fictional stories could be used (the response to this was "fictionalized autobiography"). These kinds of questions would be a recurrent theme throughout the weekend, with the participants maintaining a strong impulse to "get it right" and produce "good" content for my research: it would also be a recurring challenge for me to try and dissuade them from this impulse, assuring them that whatever they produced *was* the correct content, as their writing style and choices was part of the data being analyzed.

Following the overview of the workshop weekend, participants began their first activity: "The Ideal Organization". Each participant was given a standard *cahier* notebook and pens or pencils to write with, as well as the first prompt sheet to work from. The prompts included:

- What does it look like? What's changed about the organization?
- Name of places that are close to it
- What is your role in it? What other roles do you imagine?
- Describe how it's different from the present.
- What tools are needed to get there?
- What do you think this future feels like?
- What does it feel like to imagine it? Urgent? Calm? Scary?
- How do you work with others in this future?

Following independent writing, participants gathered in the big group to discuss. They shared their experience of thinking through the paradisiacal organization, and the challenges they've witnessed or felt in pursuing better workplaces. Some soft debate emerged amongst the participants around their concepts of utopias, with disagreements about the degree to which certain groups should be "centered" in the decision-making of an organization or not. This was reflected further in moments of light tension, a sense of activation or discomfort which was easily perceptible for both myself and my co-facilitator Gabriela. In one instance, for example, Milo became highly emotional while speaking about their experience in organizations; coming almost to the point of tears. Notably, Milo was also one of the more charismatic and "strong" participants, and one of their interventions from this first day's shareback became a concept that many other participants returned to independently.

Though this tension dissipated throughout the conversation, and was completely gone by the weekend's conclusion, it was a crucial moment in recognizing how - for many participants - the traumatic wounds of their past experiences were still very close to the surface. And yet, the space created by the workshop structure supported participants in *moving through* those wounded feelings, and relaxing into an environment of mutual understanding. As Gabriela said:

I will just say that I am noticing my system just go [deep exhale]. We're like all in a room and we get to talk about these things and nobody has to be "right". And there's no decision that needs to get made. Usually you're talking about these kinds of things in a very high pressure context where it's like, "We have a decision that needs to be made," and like if we disagree, that creates barriers to the decision getting made and it slows things down and that's really stressful. And so right now I'm just noticing myself be like, "Huh! Everybody has different ideas. It's cool, like we're just here chilling, talking" ...like what a fucking relief.⁹⁷

We then moved into lunch, for which an hour and a half was allotted. Participants all stayed to eat together, to talk, and to connect. After lunch, participants moved to the first step of their main activity for the weekend: writing the ghost story. To start, they were instructed to choose 1-2 elements of their Ideal Organization to focus on: they were asked to identify *where this future came from* by choosing one or more ghosts from the past (ancestors, political lineages, organizational pasts) that informed elements of the future they imagined, and then examine a moment in their career history where their organization attempted to reach it. This was all designed to flow together in one story, with the participants receiving a prompt sheet divided into two sections: "Ghosts of the Past" and "Addressing the Ghost / Building the Future".

I circulated while participants worked through the prompts, offering advice and coaching them through the story-writing. At first, many of the participants struggled to "go deep enough" in their

⁹⁷ *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, March 22-23 2025, Montreal, Quebec. Participants (anonymized): "Oliver", "Megan", "Willow", "Nidal", "Raga", "Noah", "Milo", "Ari". Supporting facilitator: Gabriela Gomez.

identification of a ghost, not fully grasping the concept of ghosts as teachers: in particular, Swara started by writing a ghost story about the individuals they had had conflict with in an organization, rather than a spectral force exerting a presence *within* the conflict. Other participants like Megan initially struggled to personify the ghost, instead writing about concepts like “whiteness”. My role as facilitator at the start of the writing process was to push participants to get “underneath” and locate the fear, love, and/or lessons that sat at the root of their ideal. I also reminded participants that it was acceptable - even encouraged - to have more than one spirit present in their story: many were concerned about “overcomplicating” their narrative, and had to be reminded that the complexity of human interaction that they were attempting to distill into a short story did often require the integration of multiple presences and hauntings.

We closed the first day with a short “check-out”, as the participants wanted to use as much time as possible to work on their prompts. This started with a physical stretch and grounding exercise from co-facilitator Gabriela. We then invited all the participants to share 1-2 words describing how the day felt for them overall, pictured in Figure 2. Gabriela and I also participated:

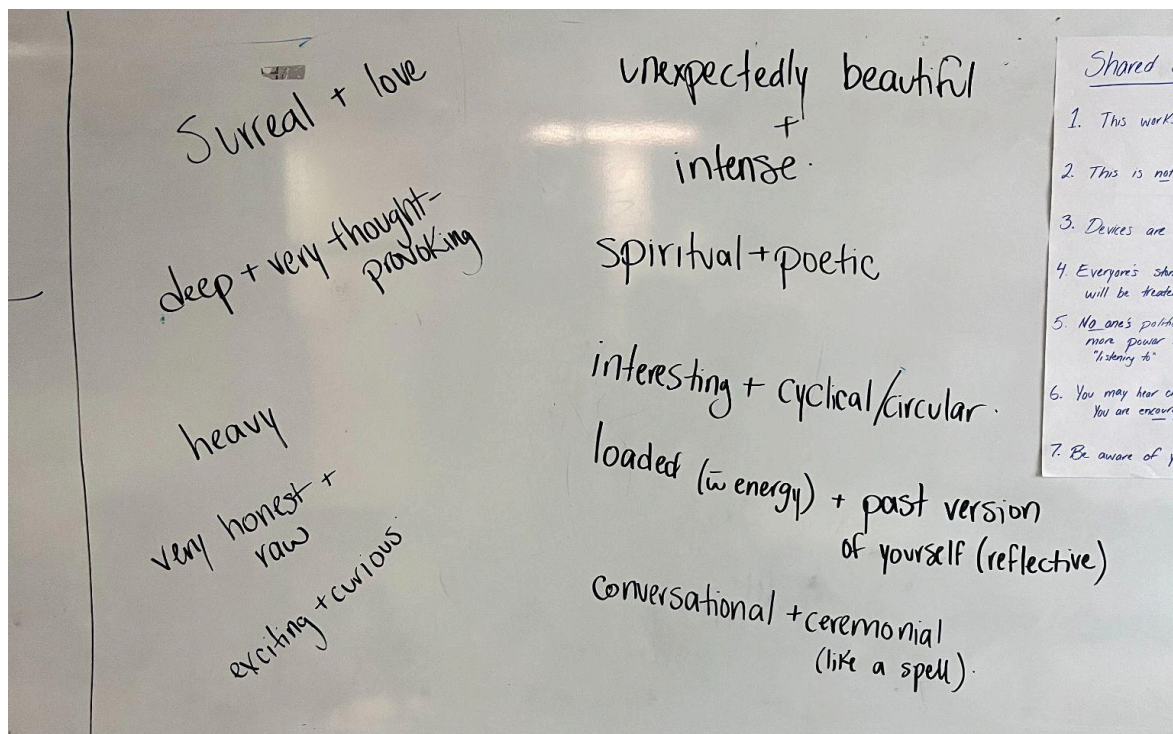


Figure 2: A whiteboard with the words written on them: “surreal & love”, “deep & very thought-provoking”, “heavy”, “very honest & raw”, “exciting & curious”, “unexpectedly beautiful & intense”, “spiritual & poetic”, “interesting & cyclical/circular”, “loaded (with energy) & past version of yourself (reflective)”, “conversational & ceremonial (like a spell)”.

Day Two

The second day began when I, arriving 30 minutes before the workshop’s start, was greeted by Oliver already in the common area waiting for the room to be opened. We chatted as I set up for the day, and he told me that after leaving the first day of the workshop, they had called their long-distance partner to tell him about their experience. In that conversation, Oliver had asked their partner what he thought *his own ghosts might be*. For Oliver, the concept of hauntings served as an interesting springboard for engaging in a conversation with his partner about their families and lineages, and thinking about the influences those pasts have on the present. This

conversation would prove to be a promising foretelling of the energy for the day, highlighting the excitement and enthusiasm of participants in continuing the work. Unfortunately one participant could not attend due to a personal emergency. As Oliver later said in our interview:

I found myself, since participating, asking people about their ghosts. Like, what's your idea of utopia? And also, what do you think are some of the ghosts of your past or your ancestral ghosts? Or like, do you feel you're haunted by any kind of ideas or issues, you know? I've just [been getting] to kind of hear what people say, and I've heard a really wide variety.⁹⁸

During our morning check-in and reorientation to the space, participants largely felt some fatigue (though one identified themselves as “energized”) with lingering “activation” or tension they could feel in their bodies after spending a day examining such hard topics. Some, similarly to Oliver, talked to roommates or loved ones about the experience while others tended to their needs through “self-care” or allowed themselves to linger in the story throughout the evening. However, even with this fatigue, all the participants expressed gratitude and appreciation for the space to talk about the challenges in activist-workplaces with others, and excitement to work on their narratives and continue turning their experiences into creative works of “fiction”.

After that short check-in, participants returned to working on their prompts for the first hour of the day. During that time, Gabriela and I made the decision to revamp the agenda for the day to maximize writing time. As such, instead of a large-group shareback before lunch, we switched to a short 20-minute partnered shareback, in which participants shared some of what they’d written or blocks they were experiencing in their writing. This proved to be an effective activity for the group, one that in retrospect could have taken more time, as it built greater connection for participants and helped them get ideas or move through uncertainty. The partnered shareback was also used to transition participants from the prompts exercise to the “narrativizing” (writing the story itself), which they had an hour for right before the mid-day break.

After cleaning up from lunch, Gabriela and I returned early to find about half of the participant group already back in the workroom, continuing their writing. For many participants, making their story “real” at last (i.e., transforming it into autobiographical fiction) was an exciting and engaging task, and a way of excavating their own emotions and experiences. After many requests from participants for more time to wrap-up, we extended the allotted writing time, cutting into the end-of-day group shareback. During that shortened shareback, participants shared reflections on the writing experience as cathartic, healing, or simply an interesting and new approach to the topics of conflict in activist-workplaces. Some of the participants also shared details or read excerpts of their stories. By this point the group was comfortable and relaxed with one another, allowing for more casual conversation intermixed with reflections and discussions on grief and hauntings. Take for example this exchange after Oliver told the group about his ghost, an imaginary friend named “Chester”.

Noah

Chester was the name of my pet cat.

Oliver

Was Chester anxious?

Noah

⁹⁸ “Oliver” interview with Richenda Grazette (author), March 31 2025, online.

Yes, very much.

[group laughter]

Overall, the Addressing the Ghost workshop was successfully designed both to pull important data, and in creating an environment of organic intimacy and mutual support amongst the participants. In particular, keeping the agenda flexible and adaptable to the group's needs, without being too strict with timings, was an asset.

That is not to say, however, that there wouldn't be changes needed to any future workshops of this kind. Firstly, the workshop would benefit from an additional 2-4 hours of time. The participants and the research would also have benefited from more group discussion time, to deepen shared bonds and surface - for both them and for the data - additional reflections that didn't emerge when they were writing. Though the workshop had a number of moments for embodied exercises to (re)orient the participants and shift energies, we missed one between the partnered shareback and narrativizing, which would have been beneficial. With even more time - or even an extra day - it would be interesting to also explore more "play" in the workshops' design, including more partnered work, role playing, or other less cerebral ways of engaging with the concepts of hauntings.

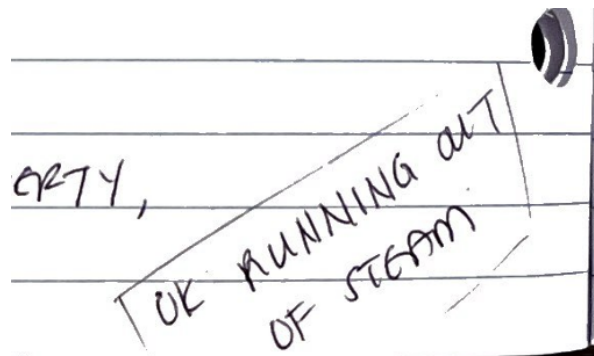


Figure 3: A note-to-self, from a Willow's workbook

Interviews

Two weeks after the conclusion of the workshop I began one-on-one interviews with all the participants except for Ari, who recused themselves from the process. Nidal was interviewed approximately one month after the workshop due to them missing the second day and instead writing their story on their own time.

These individual interviews had multiple objectives: to offset the possibility that a participant might have elements of their story or experience they wouldn't want to share in a group setting, to create a more intimate space for vulnerable and deeper conversations with each participant, and for them to share reflections or perspectives on their stories and experiences that might have emerged later on. Pulling from a more traditional oral history methodology, the interviews were designed to be largely unstructured and participant-led, with open-ended questions meant to allow the conversation to flow naturally and into topics of participant interest. Given the complexity and personal nature of the stories being shared, this approach felt essential: to

“guide and to probe” participants to “recount their [experiences] in a way that makes sense to them”⁹⁹.

Each interview had both generic and personalized questions. The generic ones were not always used in each interview, and included questions about the experience of writing, their concepts of utopia, and whether there was anything they weren’t able to fit into their story. For each interview, I also read through the participants’ stories and crafted personalized questions that would probe deeper into topics that either lacked clarity or were of interest to pursue more deeply. Given this flexible structure, the interviews ranged thematically, from familial and personal stories of trauma to specific experiences in activist-workplaces: each was totally unique both in content and in tone, with some interviewees requiring very intentional sustained prompting while others talked in monologue with few to no questions. A high number of the interviews entered the philosophical and meta-reflective space surrounding both the sector at large and the concept of utopias. The discussions around the nonprofit sector and activist-workplaces were particularly rich, given that the time constraints of the workshop impeded engaging in deeper conversation between participants on those topics.

The only question that was consistent throughout all the interviews was the first, in which I asked participants to share in more detail their experience during the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop sessions. As an opening question, this not only helped “loosen” up the conversation before diving into more loaded topics, but also helped to resituate the participants in the workshop experience and environment after weeks away - encouraging them to “drop back into” that space and time to reassess the emotional state and reflections which they may have forgotten about. Overall the reflections were positive about the workshop experience, with the only critique being a lack of time to either complete the stories or to engage in more group dialogue. These conversations also harkened back to the autoethnographic elements of the workshop process, with participants sharing further analysis of not just their stories, but the experience of exploring themselves (as, I would argue, researchers into their own pasts).

Noah, for example, discussed how the dedicated workshop allowed for a creation of space to reflect that he previously hadn’t had access to:

...it was bringing up a lot of personal things around my own habits. And how my own work habits played into the work culture [at my organization] and then amplified the whole, you know, culture of overwork and burnout. These are things I’m still dealing with. So I feel like that was kind of heavy, but it wasn’t really the fault of the workshop, it’s just my personal baggage I have to unpack.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Milo spoke about the writing experience as cathartic and healing, allowing them to reexamine past conflicts from an almost external point of view, bringing forward new ways of remembering or engaging with painful memories. Others like Willow pointed to that healing or validation coming from the shared space the workshop created.

...the experience of writing was very cathartic in a specific way. Because I have a relationship of trust with you, I knew that the person that would be reading it was not going to be someone who would be dissecting it to find out whether or not I was a good

⁹⁹Sheftel, Anna. 2018. “Talking and Not Talking about Violence: Challenges in Interviewing Survivors of Atrocity as Whole People.” *The Oral History Review* 45 (2): 288-303. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohy057>., 290

¹⁰⁰ “Noah” interview with Richenda Grazette (author), April 8 2025, online.

person. And so it was nice to have it be written because it was still a private experience, in a certain way.¹⁰¹

As community workers, I think we have a lot of similar experiences, [but] I didn't realize how similar some of those experiences were with a lot of other folks in the group. And yeah, I think it was validating to hear similar struggles that folks have.¹⁰²

That the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop provided avenues for healing and personal reflection for so many participants only further demonstrates the depth of traumas held by sector workers¹⁰³. Surfacing and exploring these traumas are essential for staff members as they continue working to improve their work cultures and conditions, and hopefully create reverberative impacts within their communities for the future.

¹⁰¹ "Milo" interview with Richenda Grazette (author), April 1 2025, online.

¹⁰² "Willow" interview with Richenda Grazette (author), April 8 2025, online.

¹⁰³ It is important to note here that self-selection certainly played a role in the level of disclosures that this project was able to gather. Participants that were drawn to this research process would, one would expect, have a natural inclination towards and comfort with sharing intimate stories with a group of peers.

The Future

The utopic vision is almost like... there's almost a question in it, which is like, imagine how many beautiful things we could do and imagine, how many important steps we could take towards our shared goals, if we could just get our relationships and the function of our community right... Like if we could just get our house in order, imagine the guests we could invite.¹⁰⁴

“The utopian voice is always tendentious; it has designs on the reader”¹⁰⁵

Many of those experiencing systemic marginalization attempt to realize their dreams of a “better” future through working in or joining non-profits: a sector whose existence is predicated on (theoretically) working outside of state systems to fill institutional gaps. They seek out work in activism and nonprofit spaces because of passion for justice and values-driven work. This was also the case for participants in this research:

I say this as someone who has relied on community services and community organizations [throughout] my life: in my experience, I've relied on them when I haven't had community. And I think the amount of community organizations that we have to have in North America, for example, is indicative of how broken “community” is and how individualistic society is.¹⁰⁶

Well, I wish I had something like that growing up, you know? I wish I had that space to learn guitar and, like, be in a band. I felt like that didn't exist in [where I grew up]. It was a boys club, no one invited me to be a part of things like that. I never saw anything like that, you know, in the 90s and 2000s.¹⁰⁷

The concept of “community” here is a complex one. For Willow, community is what represents “the way out of these situations” of oppression and poverty, in which people can fully express and be themselves¹⁰⁸. The same is true for Raga, who sees the primary objective of activist-workplaces as creating spaces that are “different than what you'll hear in your day-to-day”¹⁰⁹. In *Against the Romance of Community*, Miranda Joseph describes much of this view as a “romantic narrative” that sees community “as prior in time to ‘society,’ locating [it] in a long-lost past for which we yearn nostalgically from our current fallen state of alienation, bureaucratization, rationality”¹¹⁰. Those who join the activist-workplace - and activist write large - are speaking of community “as a fantasy that expresses [their] political desire” for what they hope the world can be¹¹¹. This romantic and idealized narrative sees “community” as functioning outside of or in “balance” with the forces of capitalism¹¹². But as Joseph argues, this is a false separation: especially in the case of activist-workplaces and other community organizations that are reliant on capital and capitalism for their very existence. However, this romantic narrative

¹⁰⁴ “Oliver” 2025

¹⁰⁵ Bartkowski, Frances. 1989. *Feminist utopias*. N.p.: University of Nebraska Press., 9

¹⁰⁶ “Willow” 2025

¹⁰⁷ “Raga” interview with Richenda Grazette (author), March 30 2025, online.

¹⁰⁸ “Willow” 2025

¹⁰⁹ “Raga” 2025

¹¹⁰ Joseph 2002, 38

¹¹¹ Pinko Collective 2025, 213

¹¹² Joseph 2002, 38

persists nonetheless, extending to community organizations, which are viewed as “formal sites for communal behavior, for caring and giving”, that replaces what once individuals could have received informally through neighbours and other networks of connection¹¹³. In this way, the drive to join an activist-workplace can come from a haunting in itself, a nostalgic yearning for an imagined version of society that is at once directed toward the future, the past, or even “sideways”¹¹⁴: sideways in that for those joining the activist-workplace, they see it as representative of an “over there” that they just haven’t reached yet but can access through their labour.

Therefore, activist-workplaces are by their very nature already sites of fervent futures performance. Utopian thinking is already “braided through human culture”¹¹⁵, and within the activist-workplace, every staff-client interaction, every document drafted, is a performance not of completely new concepts or worlds, but the microcosmic, hoped-for changes to the world that workers dream of. These visions, already known, if yet unexcavated, exert power on the social interactions of everyday life, and when mobilized correctly - at even the small scale - can act as a “trigger for social progress”¹¹⁶. This is what adrienne marie brown refers to as “fractals”, a “structural echo” that moves from the small scale, ripple-like, to the layers of the world around it



¹¹⁷. This starts with the activist-workplaces’ *raison d’être*; the work they do in the community. Through their advocacy efforts and/or service offerings, they are modeling new ways that they believe governments (or even larger nonprofit organizations) can improve their methods of supporting the most vulnerable. Some of these approaches that they hope to be adopted at larger scales include concepts like “harm reduction”, “human-centered”, or “trauma-informed care”, that are too progressive and indeed sometimes too experimental for large institutions to implement at scale.

The second level of futuring that activist-workplaces engage in, and the one that this research examines, is through their internal processes and practices. These workplaces already have a political drive underscoring their approach to work, pulling inspiration from history of labour organizing and movements for social justice. This political foundation shows up in their structures, policies, and ways of relating. However, activist-workplaces are also in a constant state of re-ideation and review, always striving to create “safer” or healthier work environments for their staff and volunteers. This is of course due to the continued “failing” of their structures or a conflict, which spurs the organization into action to redefine the ideal that it’s working towards. They might hire consultants, conduct evaluations or strategic visioning sessions, all to define their paths forward. Then, as policies or new guiding documents are written and rewritten, the performance of the future starts anew in a continuous cycle. The constant utopia-seeking that staff are engaging in with one another pushes the organization forward overtime, while again operating as a “fractal”, only this time the hope being that their *internal* performance make a change to the external work they do with clientele.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 107

¹¹⁴ Boym 2001, xiv

¹¹⁵ Levitas 2013, xii

¹¹⁶ Polak 1973, 179

¹¹⁷ brown 2019

It is essential to study not just how the future is performed “now” by these organizations, but also how “such performances travel to redefine existing imagined futures”¹¹⁸. Or, in other words, how the ways in which we perform the imaginary (and the results of those performances) then exert force on the ways we relate and exist in the present. The future is an equally haunting force as the past, one that manifests in the present as urgent anticipation and speculation¹¹⁹ for something that “will end up coming”, even without a clear timeline¹²⁰. As such, this chapter essentially flattens time to some degree: while this paper is divided between “past” and “future”, one cannot deeply understand the utopian visions within the activist-workplace without first understanding the current context, and existing performances, in which those workers are operating. Therefore this chapter brings in examples and discussions of “the present” state of activist-workplaces, looking particularly at burnout, cynicism, and the way they have continually reconstructed their governance systems. These cycles are particularly relevant to the explanation of “fractals” in the previous paragraph, as these workers enact in the present what they anticipate in the future, making the future itself “already pre-existing”¹²¹, through both repetition and a collective “taking up”¹²². This is a different than “foretelling”¹²³ or futures design: every community and every person is already “saturated with utopianism”¹²⁴, engaging with it consciously and unconsciously in how they move through the world. This is especially true in activist-workplaces, where the everyday work in which they engage is aspirational at its core. According to Ruth Levitas, there are three “modes” of utopian construction: the archaeological, the ontological, and the architectural¹²⁵.

The first is an archaeological mode, piecing together the images of the good society that are embedded in political programmes and social and economic policies. The second is an ontological mode which addresses the question of what kind of people particular societies develop and encourage... The third is an architectural mode – that is, the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future, acknowledging the assumptions about and consequences for the people who might inhabit them.¹²⁶

The futuring component of this larger research program was initially set up to be largely archaeological and architectural in nature, seeking to both imagine potential alternatives and locate the ways in which those potentialities are already existing, in some form, within participants’ workplaces. Despite the architectural and archaeological remaining the primary functions of the workshop, participants also began engaging ontologically, examining “what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed” under their utopian visions *and* utopian attempts in their organizations¹²⁷. In particular, participants engaged with thinking about the exclusionary aspects of utopia, a thought process elaborated on later in this chapter. This defied my initial expectations that participants would enjoy dreaming more than grappling with the challenges of utopian futures. Instead, participants felt

¹¹⁸ Oomen, Hoffman, and Hajer 2022, 10

¹¹⁹ Bryant, Rebecca, and Daniel M. Knight. 2019. *The Anthropology of the Future*. N.p.: Cambridge University Press., 192

¹²⁰ Derrida 1994, 20

¹²¹ Oomen, Hoffman, and Hajer 2022, 4

¹²² *Ibid*, 3

¹²³ Chambers, Josie. 2025. “The perils of foretelling the future.” BLOG: Utopian Pulses; Utrecht University. <https://www.uu.nl/en/opinion/the-perils-of-foretelling-the-future>.

¹²⁴ Levitas 2013, 5

¹²⁵ Levitas 2013, 153

¹²⁶ *Ibid*

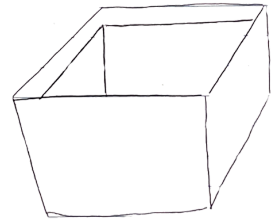
¹²⁷ *Ibid*

immediately comfortable sitting in the uncertainty of the future¹²⁸, in fact pulling the research deeper into that discomfort through continued reflection and analysis. As such, after briefly overviewing some elements of the “Ideal Organization,” the focus of this chapter is more on the complexities of utopia as a concept that the participants raised: the constraints of imagining, and the fears of dystopian futures.

Elements of the Ideal Organization

At the beginning of the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, participants “warmed up” to the workshop’s objectives through thinking through what constituted their “Ideal Organization”. As mentioned in Chapter 3: Process & Ethnography, they were given a series of prompting questions to guide their reflection.

Overall, the participants’ Ideal Organizations shared a number of similarities in the ways in which they envisioned their extrinsic and intrinsic needs at work could be better met. Despite the instruction at the beginning of the activity that nothing outside the organization could change (including increased funding to their organization), all the participants asserted that the financial changes were the most important element of the “ideal”. They cited higher pay, more days off (vacation, health, and mental health days), larger team size (for improved individual capacity), and lower individual hours worked. Some participants also included in their “ideal organizations” allotments and accommodations for disability, including remote work. Remembering the chronic underfunding, high workloads, and burnout experienced in the nonprofit sector at large, it is entirely expected that the “ideal” participants seek includes improved quality of life. So obvious was this - to the participants and to myself - that during the workshop it was not a point of further analysis or group discussion. Ari’s “Ideal Organization” provides an example of the focus on increased resources and staff capacities being at the root of utopian possibility:



Sovereignty, collaborative approaches, those who do all the work have agency over what they do

An ideal organization is one where there is an adequate number of staff and volunteers relative to the work that needs to be done. It has enough resources to pay people a living wage and to offer a safe and positive environment for volunteer participants.

It is in a central, accessible location. There are various roles available to participate which are relative to the individuals’ capacity, lifestyle, abilities, and identity.

It’s different because its creative structure and use of resources allow it to find its niche in a society rife with injustice. It is not perfect but it is making positive change on a consistent basis and constantly growing and degrowing.

The organization is a space of learning and offers support, belonging and work to people. It is tended to. Space to care for organizational health is a priority.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Chambers 2025

¹²⁹ “Ari”, *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

The description of increased capacities, larger team size, and “agency” over the work were also echoed amongst other research participants, pointing to organizational health - after individual benefits - as the second most important element required to build the “ideal”. A key element for participants in improving organizational health was addressing the failings of governance structures at their organizations, from which other problems like burnout and interpersonal conflicts could be addressed.

The participants in this research worked in a variety of organizational structures, ranging from a “flattened hierarchy” which coupled some authority figures, like an Executive Director or decision-making collective that supervised staff, to “completely flat” organizations in which all decisions were made by consensus of the team. These alternative governance structures are central to activist-workplace structures, as these structures flow naturally from the “anti-capitalist” collectivist politics that are foundational to these organizations, a “natural reaction against the over-structured society” in which these activists work¹³⁰. Even organizations with formal hierarchical systems will place a great deal of emphasis on collaboration in both activities and decision-making.

Despite the present diversity of governance structures, participants expressed frustration with frequent lack of strong leadership in their organizations. They agreed that the total absence of structure they had frequently experienced failed to address problems like stalled decisions, uneven work distribution or abandoned tasks, and unclear expectations within the collective group. Noah, for example, worked in a consensus-based small organization for many years:

“Even if you get to the decision stage, which is difficult because you're working with consensus if it's a flat structure, there's nobody who has the agency to actually put it into place, or the capacity. Because you're all working so much and your plates are already full. So who's going to take this big project on organizational change, [when] that's normally the Executive Director?”¹³¹

In fact, within their discussion of the “Ideal Organization”, none of the participants explicitly named a desire to work in a completely “flat” structured organization (like a collective): even those who kept their ideal more vague in terms of actual structure named clear leadership and/or accountability measures as being essential. This points to a question of a desire for bureaucracy - or rather bureaucratism - as still being desired and critical to what the participants see as a healthy functioning of their organization. As Graeber writes in *The Utopia of Rules*, despite a surface-level and political yearning to work collectively and through person-to-person approaches, there still exists a “kind of covert appeal” in the formalized rules that hierarchies and bureaucracy provide¹³². Part of this appeal lies in the “ease” of impersonality that bureaucracy provides¹³³, while at the same time providing a set of codes upon which fears of favouritism or “unfairness” can be, theoretically, dispelled.

In the 1970s, feminist and author Jo Freeman wrote “The Tyranny of Structurelessness” about this very reality. Though it was critiquing early feminist activist organizations, the principles of her essay still apply to activist-workplaces and other movements today. She points out,

¹³⁰ Freeman, Jo. n.d. “The Tyranny of Structureless.” Jo Freeman.
<https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.

¹³¹ “Noah” 2025

¹³² Graeber, David. 2016. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. N.p.: Melville House. 198

¹³³ *Ibid*, 199

however, that a total lack of structure did not stop power from being hoarded or seized informally: it can become concentrated amongst a select few charismatic leaders who construct an organization in which “the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules”¹³⁴. This point is echoed in *Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry*. In flat structures, authors Vannucci and Singer write, when “a prominent, influential, or intimidating member of the group voices strong support/detraction of a proposal... it can undermine the democracy by restricting the free exchange of ideas, and influence the final outcome”¹³⁵. Structurelessness also opens up possibilities for labour and tasks to be distributed inequitably due to power hoarding, social privilege, or cultures of martyrdom and overwork. Even in flat or flattened hierarchical structures, those who oversee the already-bureaucratic elements of operations that are required by the state (like finances or protocols) will be able to wield certain powers over their colleagues. Bureaucracy is a flexible, amorphous, and creeping way of being, one that even the most well-intentioned and “alternative” organizers cannot escape from. It is therefore arguably impossible to get rid of, in a society built foundationally on bureaucratic systems. As Graeber writes, “a bureaucracy, once created, will immediately move to make itself indispensable to anyone trying to wield power, no matter what they wish to do with it”, particularly through limiting access to information or task-hoarding¹³⁶. It must be restated, however, that even within the bureaucratic negotiations of the activist-workplace, the informal powers that are held by those “loud personalities” are not lost. In fact, the simultaneous existence of the bureaucratic and the “human-centered” create much of the conflict within activist-workplaces, when formal and informal powers - or structural and cultural powers - clashing with one another¹³⁷. Conflicts that may emerge between these types of leaders are limitless, but at the root comes down to struggles for power, whose “vision” for an organization will be implemented, and how decisions are made.

These structural needs from participants were coupled with more existential questions about the “ideal organization”. One in particular was the need for shared purpose, values, or common cause, with the impacts of the work being visible and tangible. This manifested in different understandings and manner of expressions, with some participants focusing on the overarching *internal* principles of the organization, while others saw the ideal as being client-centered, flowing “ground up” instead of being designed by staff and Board of Directors. It is notable that those who worked primarily directly *within their own communities*, or had easier access to the lived experiences of those their organizations served, were often more likely to express (though not necessarily more likely to believe in) client-centering as a key component of the ideal organization. Take, for example, these words from Ari:

“[We need to be] Remembering ourselves as members of the community we serve, not outside it”¹³⁸

This is not to say that the other participants in the workshop were not members of marginalized communities (in fact, all are), or that they do not in some ways serve their own communities through their work. The differences between them and the above-mentioned participants was

¹³⁴ Freeman, n.d.

¹³⁵ Vannucci and Singer 2010, 22

¹³⁶ Graeber 2016, 197

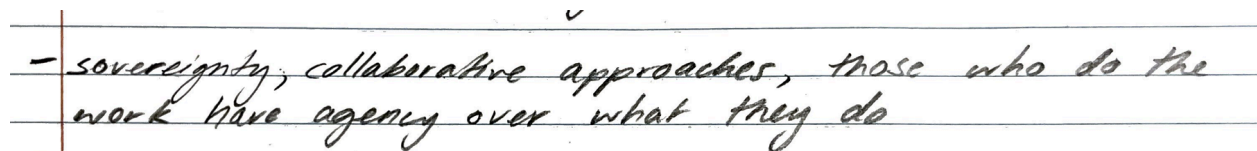
¹³⁷ Structural power here refers to workers who take on greater administrative work or have greater decision-making power in a hierarchy, whereas cultural power refers to those with charismatic or domineering personalities that can hold sway within the group.

¹³⁸ “Ari” activity workbook 2025

more about the roles they had or still occupy at work, and the central missions of their organizations. Take Noah for example: he worked until recently in a largely administrative role, at an organization that served an extremely wide variety of clientele, and that did not provide direct individual services meant to improve quality of life (unlike someone like Willow, whose organization is focused on providing services to and breaking isolation for queer communities). Similarly to Raga (whose primary engagement has been through a Board of Directors) and Oliver (who currently works in Human Resources), Noah's ideal of mission centering came from a more philosophical and theoretical place, and one with a starting point *within* the organization:

"An organization is a structured association of people working towards a common cause. The cause ideally is anchored in principles of anti-oppression, anti-racism, anti-colonialism but also recognizes and upholds the sovereign rights of Indigenous peoples in the territory."¹³⁹

What unites all the participants, however they approach it, is the essential presence of politics and a justice-oriented approach to governing their work. This extends inward to how they hoped employees would relate to one another as well: many spoke to a dream of calm work environments with strict checks & balances to prevent burnout, as well as open communication that facilitated healthy and welcome conflict.



- sovereignty, collaborative approaches, those who do the work have agency over what they do

Figure 4: Note in Ari's workbook about the Ideal Organization that reads "sovereignty, collaborative approaches, those who do the work have agency over what they do".

Whither Utopia?: challenging the concept

The ideal organization doesn't exist, shouldn't exist, shouldn't have to exist. The ideal organization might still never meet our needs.¹⁴⁰

Though the participant descriptions of the "Ideal Organization" provided interesting reflections on the challenges facing activist-workplaces and those who work within them, it was through the discussions *around* utopia conceptually that the participants really got to engage with the challenges facing activist-workplaces in the present, and the constraints those place on imagining alternative futures. Many participants expressed a defeatist attitude about the future in activist-workplaces, born from an even greater defeatism about the future facing the wider world, an outlook currently plaguing much of the political Left¹⁴¹. Part of this attitude can, of course, be attributed to continued failed efforts to create utopias, coupled with the continued challenges in supporting clients beyond "quick fixes" and band-aid solutions¹⁴². Quoting a mid-century "radical leaderless" group called Red Therapy, Hannah Proctor demonstrates again how these challenges are not new to 21st century organizing. As these 1970s activists said:

¹³⁹ "Noah", *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

¹⁴⁰ "Willow", *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

¹⁴¹ Chambers 2025

¹⁴² "Willow", activity workbook 2025

We wanted to work together politically in non-hierarchical ways... I think we found it was ALL HARDER THAN WE THOUGHT - that we couldn't somehow will ourselves liberated and wake-up the next morning feeling wonderfully collective, non-jealous, confident, non-competitive, etc. We couldn't suddenly change the patterns of a lifetime which we had been forced to conform to in this society...¹⁴³

Though there are many factors contributing to defeatism for the population at large, cultures of overwork and constant conflict, coupled with the vicarious traumas gained from working with vulnerable communities¹⁴⁴, create an epidemic of chronic burnout amongst activist-workplace employees. This burnout is also exacerbated by a culture of martyrdom in nonprofits that is both culturally imposed and self-imposed¹⁴⁵. This self-imposition is borne from often an idealistic or passionate entry into the sector (as described at the start of this chapter). Megan discussed this phenomenon during our one-on-one interview:

And there's a lot of people, I think, [who are] not willing to feel calm. Like, there's just a lot of people who want to have five jobs and and like, even if you could give them the opportunity to not, I don't know that they would take it. And it gets complicated because I think that at the same time people are...people want these jobs because they so genuinely care, and they so genuinely want to do this work, but it also feeds a certain personality type that is, like really caught up in like trauma and panic, that feels comfortable in the chaos. And I think that a lot of people say they don't want to be in the chaos, but I think that when you test them it doesn't always like hold up! So yeah, I think there's a lot of other things, but I think that they all kind of stem from that, like people end up in this triggered state and they're panicking. They're like, they don't feel like they're able to calm down or that it would be a good idea to calm down and then they... things like clash from there.¹⁴⁶

When an employee's initial idealism is shattered through experiencing trauma and conflict, and their burnout reaches either a critical level, they become cynical, one of the main elements of burnout. When burnout becomes chronic, cynicism can turn into a larger defeatism or nihilism about the future. This was true for the research participants, for whom their both active and passive nihilism resulted in a shared sentiment that utopia was impossible, unrealistic, or shouldn't need to exist at all. This was, it is worth noting, often in direct contradiction to their own separately stated needs *for* a different future, demonstrating that that idealistic young person was still inside. We can see this with quotes from Noah and Megan, who discussed the ways that the *outside world* was impacting their view of the ideal:

When we think about Utopia, a lot of it is the Hollywood-ified version of it. You know, it's very external. It's like, oh, flying cars and Star Trek and we can teleport anywhere and there's trees and we've solved climate change. Like, that's the Gene Roddenberry version. I'm closer to the other visions of the future... Global inequities between people [won't] be solved anytime soon and [nor will] equities between people as long as there's nation states, as long as there's like a financial system involving money - and even when that's vanished, as we see with the microcosm of [my organization], even if we're supposedly at the same level, there are those inherently genetic and social and gender based and racial things that dredge up historical inequities and continue to pull them into

¹⁴³ Proctor 2024, 12

¹⁴⁴ Hormann and Vivian 2005, 160

¹⁴⁵ Gorski, Rising, and Lopresti-Goodman 2019, 371

¹⁴⁶ "Megan" interview with Richenda Grazette (author), April 2 2025, online.

the future despite ourselves. So I'm a little bit pessimistic on the concept of utopia as being an external, you know, shiny sunny Gene Roddenberry World and it's the same thing for an organizational utopia.¹⁴⁷

People just live in the world. And even if every day you go to your utopic workplace and everything is perfect and amazing, you still have to see the real world and the real world is shitty sometimes. And so like, yes, things get reproduced and things influence the inside of any org. But even if they didn't, it wouldn't fix the problem. And also like what we're working in is trying to work against these things, you know? None of the nonprofits would even exist if there wasn't all this mess, because what we're trying to all do in some form or another to change something within that or to Band-Aid something within that or to, you know, react against that.¹⁴⁸

For some, like Willow, the challenge in designing the ideal was a simpler one, coming from a discomfort or insecurity in their own positionality:

I also felt uncomfortable writing this, like I felt like I was given too much power and like it's something that should come about organically and decided by more of a group, is kind of how I thought. It was like, yeah, I didn't want to make too many decisions, but that was my feelings.¹⁴⁹

Thoughts around utopia shared by Milo, Megan, Noah, and other participants continued to return to the “issue” of human nature: that utopian organizations are stunted because of the divergent priorities, needs, and lived realities of the people who constitute them. This is especially true the in alternative governance structures that activist-workplaces operate under, which can pose a significant challenge to the creation of a truly unified vision:

Imagining it is scary yes - imagining structuring organizations when everyone is so frighteningly opinionated is hard. Also, these are workplaces. Balancing the vibe of volunteering (I show up when I want to, I respond when I'm inspired, I pick up this mission & run with it only when inspiration strikes and conditions are right) - which can be very inspirational, responsive, important, the way we build movements for change - and that of a workplace with a mission & deliverables to funders...well there is an obvious tension.¹⁵⁰

Alternatively to Milo, Megan and Ari saw this “balancing act” instead as a grounding one as they discussed their organizations. Rather than sitting within the nihilistic as an inhibitor, they saw it instead as a framing from which they could dream up more “realistic” futures:

I think that I also [have] a realism, where I'm like, it's not possible to - at least immediately - change the overarching thing that we're dealing with. And so I think my version of trying to seek utopia is kind of like “seeking utopia-ish”. Like, it's not gonna be utopia-utopia. Why would we not try to make it like as best as we can, you know? And at the same time be able to be like it's not going to be perfect. At a certain point, that's OK. And like it's not worth our time to be stressed about the imperfection because like, that's

¹⁴⁷ “Noah” 2025

¹⁴⁸ “Megan” 2025

¹⁴⁹ “Willow”, *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, 2025

¹⁵⁰ “Milo”, *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

really not the problem. The problem is clearly other shit that is making it impossible to be perfect. So yeah.¹⁵¹

All of that is making me think - like and even writing as well - like maybe it is kind of doing ourselves a disservice to try to create an ideal organization in a world that's not ideal. And putting an undue level of pressure upon ourselves. And...yeah that's I think that's been a key piece of my experience in this kind of community orgs: that sense of pressure to fix everything. And feeling the impossibility of that against your own efforts and the small successes can be difficult. So I do think part of my definition of an ideal organization is one that's somewhat imperfect. That's just aiming to make some positive contributions, but not necessarily solve everything.¹⁵²

Taken altogether (a desire for community-led utopias, reflections on “realistic” ideals, challenges inherent in alternative governance), we can see consistent blocks on participants’ capacities for imagining otherwise. For some, like Willow, there is a desire to challenge the tradition of utopian thinking emerging largely from the “elites” and “upward-striving” classes who wish to gain or rebalance power through creation of a “new world order”¹⁵³. Interestingly though, for Willow, Nidal, and Ari, who all expressed a desire for “community-led” visioning - despite being themselves members of the communities that their organizations serve - there is a level of self-effacement and a fear of becoming or being that which the utopia seeks to “reverse”. This is not to say that in the left in general there is a lack of capacity to engage with futures ideation. Indeed, academics and thinkers, fiction and literary writers, and organizers and activists on the left are all - like all of us - “saturated”¹⁵⁴ in utopianism as fields of study or motivating forces. In fact, for some of the participants it was easier and more possible to imagine an *overarching* utopia for society for their organizations. Though I never asked directly about these blocks, based on their responses an assumption can be made that for those employed towards “making the world a better place”, there is a certain sense of groundedness in everyday life that they grapple with when engaging in utopian thinking. This is what Donna Haraway would describe as “staying with the trouble,” or a tendency to describe “what is” when faced with the extreme injustices in society, rather than engaging in fantasy¹⁵⁵. This coping mechanism not only inhibits imagining, but goes hand-in-hand with the pervasive burnout facing nonprofit workers like those interviewed: they both “stay with” the trouble and are stuck in it, unable to see beyond the urgency of need from clients and colleagues alike. Unlike true Utopianists, the *Addressing the Ghost* participants do not and cannot engage in the “collective amnesia” that utopian thinking sometimes requires, and that erases complexities “in favour of abstract ideals”¹⁵⁶, as they face daily the realities and consequences of reality both inside and outside their organizations. Take these quotes from Megan and Noah:

It's just very interesting working in nonprofits because you end up in, like, this weird thing where what you're doing does have a lot of meaning both in terms of what your services are and how you're trying to create a different way of relating to each other in the workplace (ideally). And those things do have a lot of meaning in and of themselves, but they're also within this larger structure that's like outside of your influence and you just...

¹⁵¹ “Megan” 2025

¹⁵² “Ari”, *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, 2025

¹⁵³ Polak 1973, 181

¹⁵⁴ Levitas 2013, 5

¹⁵⁵ McConville, David, and Dawn Danby. 2024. “When utopia is oblivion / Quand l'utopie force l'oubli.” Spherical. <https://labs.spherical.studio/when-utopia-is-oblivion/>.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

It's like just a weird thing where as like, I guess many things in life, it sort of feels like the thing that you're doing has an influence on the larger structure and it sort of feels like it doesn't, you know?¹⁵⁷

It can feel very disembodied, especially if you're not working on the front lines and you're a bit removed or you're doing office work or you're on a computer all day. You can feel very like, "Am I really making a difference? What impact is it having really? I've been here for 5 years or 7 years or 10 years. And I don't really know if this is doing... if this is making a difference". You don't see that, and I think that can be very demotivating.¹⁵⁸

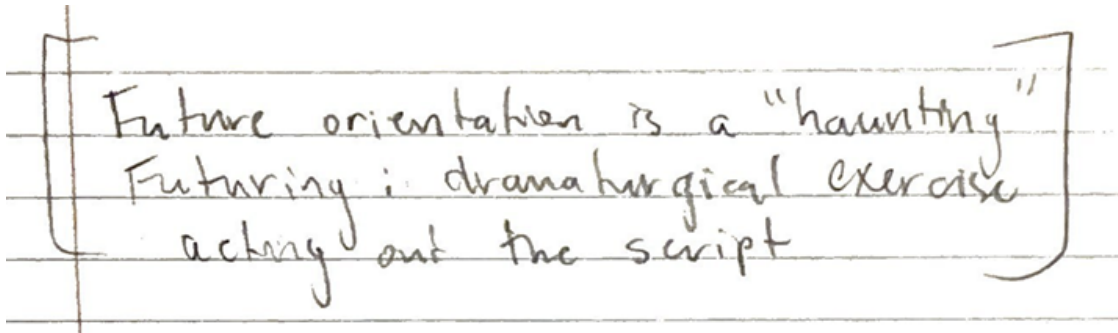


Figure 5: Note from Oliver's workbook, that reads "Future orientation is a 'haunting'. Futuring: dramaturgical exercise acting out the script"

Utopia & "Totalitarianism"

The complicated feelings towards utopias extended even further for the participants into a struggle to separate the dreaming and pursuit of better worlds from their own fears of creating dystopias, or what several of them described as "totalitarianism"¹⁵⁹. As Milo said:

I was talking to my brother about this project and he was like "firstly all utopian endeavours are totalitarian endeavours, with extraordinary pressures that exert both conformity and exclusion". And I was like, "Well, I thought that was only true when people were trying to create, like utopian colonies in Eastern Oregon because they wanted a sex cult. But now that you mention it, it did happen!" [laughs] But yeah...I said to him exactly that; that I thought that a values-based nonprofit was not the same as a utopian cult trying to set up an in person community, but [he] should have told me about 14 years ago because it would have saved me a lot of time.¹⁶⁰

That totalitarianism draws on utopian ideals and principles (and often vice versa) is not a novel argument, nor does it bear much repetition. That violence that has resulted from utopia¹⁶¹, or that utopian ideals have been used as an excuse or explanation *for* violence has created a hesitancy of engaging too much with the "ideal" future. Today, we see technofuturism wreaking

¹⁵⁷ "Megan" 2025

¹⁵⁸ "Noah", *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, 2025

¹⁵⁹ I will use the word "totalitarianism" in this section because that was the word used by/with participants, understanding that it is simplified and not entirely accurate to what they're describing.

¹⁶⁰ "Milo" 2025. Note: In this quote, Milo is speaking about their experience of "cancelling" (alienation, exile) from an organization for what they described as inadequately conforming to the expectations of their colleagues. I won't go into further detail for the sake of confidentiality.

¹⁶¹ Polak 1973, 178

havoc upon the planet and people, strategic foresight used by (and many claiming origins within) the military¹⁶², and films about dystopias built on some tyrant's ideal. It is not surprising, then, that there is a fear amongst leftist organizers of *becoming* that totalitarian figure.

I would argue that for the research participants, much of this fear comes from this being a pre-existing dynamic within not just their organizations, but the political Left at large. In her book *I Hope We Choose Love*, Kai Cheng Thom discusses her experiences in leftist organizing circles, and the “activist theatre” that requires conformity to values or ways of speaking (i.e., “correct” language), with those seen as problematic being expelled or publicly shamed¹⁶³. She echoes what has been shared by the participants in this research, of a fear of replicating traumas (both familial ones and societal oppressions), while simultaneously and contradictorily using the tools that oppressors have used. She writes:

Perceived problematicness is frequently ferociously dragged, and meaningful dialogue is rare (though it does occur). The cultural atmosphere is thus more conducive to anxiety-driven attempts to prove one's goodness through faith in the dogma than it is to the creation of authentic relationships in which we are allowed to be imperfect¹⁶⁴

Here is where the “ontological mode” of utopia as method became most prevalent amongst participants, as they began reflecting on social arrangements of human nature¹⁶⁵, that leads to ever-present conflicts. In both *States of Injury* and *Moralism as Anti-Politics*, Wendy Brown explores this phenomenon in more detail. She identifies a thread within liberal and leftist politics to “strike at what appears to subordinate or humiliate” in order to make a new world in its own self-image¹⁶⁶. Looking specifically at language, she describes the banning or mandating of “certain utterances” as part of this project¹⁶⁷, in effect mirroring the mechanisms of power that would - in another community - be used to limit or erase the freedoms of the population that my participants are part of and aim to serve¹⁶⁸. Some, like Hannah Proctor in *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat*, argue that turning on one another within movements is in fact a symptom of burnout and defeatism in the face of state and systemic forces. She writes:

Exhausted, an activist might also repudiate or begin to doubt their political commitments and principles, turning their anger away from the oppressive social conditions they had been fighting and onto the movement itself.¹⁶⁹

On the Left, this often also comes up seeking out increasingly microcosmic identity markers from which “injured” and “injurer” categories can be constructed¹⁷⁰. Take for example an entirely Black organization, in which conflict breaks out over class dynamics, with some workers claiming that their colleagues are intellectual elites or from higher income backgrounds: both comments meant derogatorily in a “progressive leftist” context. Another example would be the

¹⁶² Hines 2019, 2

¹⁶³ Thom, Kai C. 2019. *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes from the End of the World*. N.p.: Arsenal Pulp Press., 17

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Levitas 2013, 153

¹⁶⁶ Brown, Wendy. 2002. “Moralism as Anti-Politics.” In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, 368-418. N.p.: Duke University Press., 373

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 383

¹⁶⁸ Brown 1995, 3

¹⁶⁹ Proctor, Hannah. 2024. *Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Defeat*. N.p.: Verso Books., 114

¹⁷⁰ Brown 1995, 21

one Nidal describes, an entirely queer and predominantly racialized organization in which there was conflict surrounding whether Canadian-born racialized peoples could adequately provide support to queer refugees and asylum seekers.¹⁷¹

This concept of performing the “right” way, and the punishment that comes from failing to perform, was a recurrent theme amongst the research participants. There is a prevalence - bordering on obsession - within activist workplaces of “[policing] one another’s commitments to their causes”¹⁷². This was cited often by participants as relating to politics: being a “good ally” or having the “correct vision” for the organization.

Several research participants also spoke at length about expulsion or “cancellation”. Some, like Noah, witnessed situations in which colleagues get pushed out of an organization, either for political transgressions or deviation from organizational culture norms. Others like Milo and Nadal were themselves pushed out or pushed others out. As Milo said about their “cancellation”:

The anger is righteous, but the destruction sometimes goes further than it needs to.¹⁷³

This quote highlights, again, how complex dealing with interpersonal conflicts - particularly across injured/injurer dynamics - can be in activist-workplaces. While someone like Milo freely acknowledges the privileges that whiteness has afforded them in the world and in the workplace (ex: a comfort with bureaucracy), and the validity in critiquing that whiteness, there also exists a problem of a jockeying of power in general, aggravated by constant overwork and burnout that depletes individual capacity to work well with one another. When people are depleted, they turn to the more violent forms of accountability: demands for public self-denouncement, shaming¹⁷⁴, online campaigns¹⁷⁵. This quote also points to the problem of accountability within activist-workplaces: who is in charge of “punishment” or re-education, when the work environment is organized collectively or under an alternative governance structure. As explained in *After Accountability*, contemporary activist groups working in a “transformative justice” mindset are always renegotiating what it means to hold each other accountable. For some of the Pink Collective interviewees, for example, the question returns to how to balance care for “survivor demands” in instances of harm while maintaining a dedication to transformative justice practices and overall organizational well-being¹⁷⁶. The key difference between many activist and community organizer groups and the activist-workplace is, however, the question of risk: though the alienation and expulsion from shared activist communities can be extreme, it does not necessarily correlate to a risk in livelihood. This is not the same for the activist-workplace, in which anything from actual harm to a perceived cultural deviation can result in loss of income and resulting financial precarity. As such, for participants in this research, accountability measures became a crucial element of the Ideal Organization. With robust and clear mechanisms for navigating and preventing conflict, and addressing “problematic” behaviours before escalation, the risk of punitive or carceral methods of handling one another may be reduced.

The supposed potential for “totalitarian” utopian thinking was approached by both Megan and Oliver with a different but still nuanced perspective: they both recognized that the Left was as at

¹⁷¹ "Nidal" interview with Richenda Grazette (author), April 21 2025, online.

¹⁷² Gorski, Rising, and Lopresti-Goodman 2019, 367

¹⁷³ “Milo” 2025

¹⁷⁴ Thom 2019, 61

¹⁷⁵ Pinko Collective 2025, 39

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 22

risk for dogmatic “proselytizing” as the far right¹⁷⁷. Oliver in particular explained that from his perspective, dogmatism of any kind is the root of the challenge and conflicts within activist-workplaces: deep entrenchments in any ways of understanding the world or viewing individuals breed conflict, regardless of the validity of that position. And yet, both he and Megan simultaneously agreed - in some ways - with the potential benefits and simplicity found in sameness. During the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, they wrote about their “Ideal Organization”:

Individual utopic visions are constantly dispelled, save when they are process, strategies, reorganisations, innovation or creativity that support the work of the group using existing resources.¹⁷⁸

This part I don't think is realistic but in an ideal world, when a staff member is really either not aligned with the values not able to do their work at the same level that everyone else is and/or isn't a good fit for the org, there would be a collaborative transition process everyone is honest and agree that things aren't working and the staff member has a grace period to find another job, so that discipline doesn't need to feel like one person (or a collective of people) is taking away the autonomy (or power) of another.¹⁷⁹

In their one-on-one interviews, both Oliver and Megan elaborated on the challenges and risks in shared visions. Megan is currently in a leadership role at her organization, and specifically discussed some of the challenges in managing staff:

And so all you can do is expel them, and then they need to go find something else. But like ...yeah, I think in some ways it means that accidentally the dream is totalitarianism [laughter] because like in the fake ideal in my brain I'm like and then I can pick you up and I can drop you exactly where you belong and you can be totally fine.¹⁸⁰

Although less blunt about their perspectives, other participants echoed these sentiments. Language like “shared visions” point back to the desire for working with people for whom there was no question about their politics, and therefore - in theory, anyway - no need for surveillance. Take, for example, this quote from Ons:

An organization where there is space for learning and committing mistakes, but also a space to unlearn past toxic, disrespectful, authoritarian, ungrateful practices. An organization where there are common understandings of social justice, intersectionality, decolonial, anti-racist, anti-phobias & not only understanding, but also practices on the day-to-day work.¹⁸¹

Amongst the participants (and even within each individual's responses), there was contradiction surrounding sameness. A deep desire to work in an organization free from some of the interpersonal violence in some ways does require a lack of difference. However, the participants also freely acknowledged that *without* difference, they wouldn't be working within a community of real people, and wouldn't have any way to grow and continue developing their work for the

¹⁷⁷ “Oliver” 2025

¹⁷⁸ “Oliver”, *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

¹⁷⁹ “Megan”, *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

¹⁸⁰ “Megan” 2025

¹⁸¹ “Nidal”, *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

best of those they serve. Altogether, their conversations reflected another major theme that emerged amongst participant discussions of utopia: democracy. Raga described it as learning the fundamental principles of music theory before trying to improvise¹⁸². Milo described it being “imperfect”, and allowing our mistakes to show us better paths forward¹⁸³. Oliver described the future as a “doll house”, a “tiny vision...[requiring] daily tending and constant vigilance” that would allow a group to work towards bigger and better things¹⁸⁴.

It is worth noting here that the fears present within the participants of becoming totalitarian (or even mirroring totalitarianism in the small scale) are just that. Despite their fears of it, the subjects of this study and the communities they represent simply *cannot* become totalitarian, despite the acknowledgement that the community sometimes does inflict violence upon itself. There are two reasons for this impossibility of totalitarianism. The first is the most obvious: totalitarianism in its true sense requires “state power...to remake society” towards a world without conflict of any kind¹⁸⁵. Secondly, by continuing to discuss the consequences of their ideal workplaces, coupled with continued questioning of the kind of people that are welcomed in and pressed out, they avoided reaching the levels of groupthink and alienation that are required for totalitarianistic social structures. Even asking the question *about* totalitarianism makes evident the inability to achieve it: like the participants in this research project, those within activist-workplaces that continuously engage in conflict and questioning prevent the community’s descent into sameness.

Reflections

In the organization there is a real sense of community, ideally, there is deep trust and healthy interdependence that comes from having organized together many years - knowing and accepting each other’s strengths and challenges. The community is what makes people stay - not the organization. If the org were to fold, the people would still stay in relation, because the work/cause keeps their flame alight...¹⁸⁶

Within the activist-workplace, there is a pervasive isolation and a constant jostling for recognition, validation, or support, without adequate resources to give it¹⁸⁷. These dynamics can, of course, be prevalent in other organizations both volunteer and paid, but what differentiates the activist-workplace in particular is how the work and organizational cultures become imprinted into every aspect of life through them being places of employment. Without a separation of “work life” and “activist life”¹⁸⁸, and with a social network made up of those in or around the organization, it can be almost impossible to extricate one’s own inherent individual worth and usefulness from success at work. Being paid to engage in both “activism” (loosely defined) and service provision simultaneously - as the participants’ organizations are - also complicates the voluntary versus involuntary nature of participation in the system. By building a codependence between identity within a community and livelihood, a perception is created for

¹⁸² “Raga” 2025

¹⁸³ “Milo”, *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, 2025

¹⁸⁴ “Oliver” 2025

¹⁸⁵ Levitas 2013, 9

¹⁸⁶ “Noah”, activity workbook, 2025.

¹⁸⁷ This is not even to touch on the vicarious and cumulative trauma that employees may experience within the work itself from “ongoing, continuous exposure to pain and suffering” of those they serve (Vivian, 2005, 163)

¹⁸⁸ Gorski, Rising, and Lopresti-Goodman 2019, 375

workers that their engagement in these organizations is “involuntary”; that they have to be there, have to perform, and have to keep pushing towards making it “better”.

With psychologists describing futures-thinking being a fundamental aspect of humanity¹⁸⁹, the participants themselves are clearly very effective utopianists. They demonstrate an understanding of core and key concepts in utopian thought, notably that there is no “binary separation between utopia/non-utopia”¹⁹⁰ with the visions of the future being a fluid and emergent state rather than a fixed one or a “blueprint” one can draft to solve all the world’s ills¹⁹¹. The way that participants engaged with both their visions and conceptual understandings of utopia continually changed; that evolution itself being a key feature of any “utopian” project or aspiration¹⁹². They simultaneously feared the future (both their own actions within it, and the futures outside of their control), while also seeing utopian thought as a springboard for hegemonic critique¹⁹³ and an aspirational process opening windows of imagination.

What we can see from the participants’ complex reflections is, ultimately, that the future can be an equally haunting presence, constantly lingering in the corners of the office dictating and directing. These hauntings carry “significant implications”¹⁹⁴ for research participants: what they imagine - or allow themselves to imagine - acts similarly to any other ghost, with the potential to impact their sociality and potential relationships in the present.

¹⁸⁹ Hines 2019, 2

¹⁹⁰ Levitas 2013, 4

¹⁹¹ Sargent, Lyman T. 2010. *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*. N.p.: OUP Oxford., 202

¹⁹² Polak 1973, 189

¹⁹³ Muñoz 2019, 39

¹⁹⁴ McPherson 2024, 13



The Past

everything begins by the apparition of a specter.¹⁹⁵

The “empty” chair is not empty. In it sits the ghost/ancestral spirit whom we must mourn and remember as we go about the mundane task of living. In the chair sit the ghosts of the African diaspora, one by one. Let me wash your feet as you travel between worlds, moving like ghostly presences do, in attempts to persuade and influence the living.¹⁹⁶

With the future as a haunting ghost exerting influence on the way people act and perform, that “pulls” them forward, there exists an opposite and equal force that “pushes” them. Where do their visions of the future originate, what are they hoping that the future will rectify and respond to? Behind every vision of the future lies a lesson from the past, behind every beginning the return of some ghost. In the primary activity of the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, participants engaged with these concepts through exploring their own hauntings. They were instructed to pick one element of their Ideal Organization, and describe how that ideal “came” to them in the present, using the spectral as metaphor and anchoring for their storytelling.

This research is my attempt at creating what Gayatri Spivak calls “the ghost dance”, the establishment of an “ethical relationship with history...ancestors real or imagined”, an invitation and a craving to be haunted¹⁹⁷. Through a conjuring, a dance with spirits, we engage in a kind of cross-temporal confrontation that clarifies our present¹⁹⁸, and helps us (re)pave the orientations that we follow (or understand the orientations that we have followed thus far) towards “better” futures¹⁹⁹. In my ghost dance, creative writing was a means of locating the participants’ “present” orientations and future visions of the activist-workplace²⁰⁰. Their stories were therefore analyzed in an approach inspired by cultural and literary studies: looking at themes, literary devices, symbols & motifs, tone, etc. This analytical approach allows us to look deeper into the ghost story, to understand how the ghost is spoken to/of by the writer; something explored more deeply in one-on-one interviews with each participant, almost like an author’s “talk back”. The stories written by participants were incredibly diverse in length, concept, and tone. The eight

¹⁹⁵ Derrida 1994, 20

¹⁹⁶ Young 2006, 3

¹⁹⁷ Spivak, Gayatri C. 2013. “from Ghostwriting.” In *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*, edited by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, 317-334. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic., 323

¹⁹⁸ Gordon 2008, 195

¹⁹⁹ Spivak 2013, 323

²⁰⁰ I use the term “present” loosely here, as the temporal nature of the stories is more complex, with participants largely using the “distant past” (ghosts) to reckon with the “recent past” (an experience in the workplace). However, for the sake of clarity, anything that has happened to *the participants themselves* we will consider “present”, and anything that qualifies or was named as an inheritance we will consider “past” or “spectral”.

stories ranged in length from 200-2500 words, though the majority of stories were under 1000 words. They also ranged widely in genre, from a “pulp fiction” style haunting to diaristic explorations of past experiences. This diversity of stories provided robust and holistic analysis of participants’ relationships with ghosts and memory. Some saw their ghosts as loving and benevolent, while others saw them as violent and disruptive. Regardless, almost all of the spectral characters, except for Megan’s, were haunting from a place of pain or injustice. What is required then, in addressing each of these fractured and bruised ghosts, is to treat them the same way we would treat a human being: offering them the full weight of empathy and understanding, attempting to uncover the reasons behind their hauntings without judging or dismissing them as “good” or “bad” in a simple binary.

To that end, I have divided the participant stories into three (broad) thematic categories: Ghost as Soother, Ghost as Disruptor, Ghost as Teacher. Across these categories the *motivations* behind the ghosts interventions are all the same: protection (flawed or otherwise) of those they haunt. These categories instead describe *how* each ghost takes up this protection. Some of them succeed in imparting the lessons that they returned to bring, while others increased or exacerbated the challenges of those they haunted. These categories are loose, and many of the stories can fit into more than one or all, particularly those stories that either in their original drafting or through one-one-one interviews explored multiple spirits or specters. However, I use this division to provide scaffolding from which we can build out deeper analysis of common literary tropes, emergent themes across demographics, and the ways in which ghosts impact participants’ abilities to engage meaningfully in the workplace.

Ghost as Soother: Megan & Oliver

Chester began haunting me when I was young. He shows up to remind me to put things back where they were, to organize shoes & cupboards, to offer to skin chicken legs, reminds me to say sorry, to help out, and to shut off lights. It may be more fair to say that Chester haunts spaces that get too full, too noisy, too chaotic. Chaos conjures him. He first appeared to be when an imaginary friend might start to show up for a lonely child, but Chester was more than just an imaginary friend. Chester protected me by teaching I could take control of something. I think Chester saved me.²⁰¹

Around the table there are too many ghosts. This ghost (who does not need anyone to know her name) keeps her eyes straight ahead so as to not see the others. There is a level of protecting, not ignorance exactly but at least a curtain needed to just push on. This can be healing, this will be healing, the ghost needs it to be, or knows it needs to be. The other ghosts are prone to chaos and conflict but not this ghost, this ghost is prone to sitting still and grounding, like wedging a hook into the earth to stay still.²⁰²

Roots of the “Ghost as Soother”

Oliver’s story, “Imaginary Friends & Small Gods”, is about an “imaginary friend” style ghost called Chester. One of only three participants to *personify* his ghost, Oliver’s story proposes a “friendly ghost” trope at first, a companion who initially helps a child navigate the world around

²⁰¹ “Oliver”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁰² “Megan”, activity workbook, 2025.

them. Oliver's imaginary friend, Chester, comes from response to "early childhood...adverse experiences" in family of origin²⁰³. Oliver's use of the concept of imaginary friends is an interesting appropriation and combination with the ghostly. Though child psychology sits far outside of the purview of this research project, Oliver's use of imaginary friends is interesting in the ways that it furthers the story's literary themes and ghost's personality. It brings to mind the image of a guide and companion to a child as they mature. Oliver specifically points to Chester's first appearance as reaction to "the embodied forms of my mother or my brother", selfish and noisy ghosts, against whom Chester appears as "answer and saviour"²⁰⁴. In the present, Chester continues to act as the defender-ghost, the facilitator, the guard, the vigil-holder, the shepherd, the trouble shooter, the executioner"²⁰⁵. Oliver explains that in these origins, Chester emerged to help Oliver engage with those traumas indirectly, act as an intermediary, and support Oliver in taking back control²⁰⁶.

But what's really interesting is like. I didn't necessarily touch the trauma. It's Chester... Chester is empowering me to sort of take control of a situation that feels chaotic and the trauma is probably that chaos; the feeling of being lost or not having proper support or guidance. But then and then, Chester is kind of like this intermediary and navigating that or like finding safety or securing my own sense of my place in the family or in the group.²⁰⁷

Throughout the story (and later the one-on-one interview), though, it became apparent that into Oliver's adulthood, Chester's lingering presence transformed from a friend and companion into what Oliver described as a "possession" of sorts: he is an anxious, annoying, and often unwelcome presence, by Oliver's description. More than that, Chester is also a ghost that turns his vigilance inward, "policing itself for signs of selfishness, vanity or narcissism"²⁰⁸.

Megan's story, in contrast to Oliver's, does not have a named "personified" ghost. One of the shortest two stories written during the workshop, she tells the story of a spirit sitting in a meeting room surrounded by other ghosts. Megan also locates her ghost in childhood and family inheritances, though from a different vantage point. Unlike Chester the imaginary friend, Megan's ghost is not one of surveillance or policing. Hers is one of "revolutionary and love filled lineage" that believes in equity and taking care of one another²⁰⁹, writing:

Ok going back to the beginning for a moment. I think there are multiple ghosts: I think there is a very old ghost, which I guess I am naming as secure attachment, which I think or imagine to be the ghost of loving in a realer, more human, community, a kind of more ancient way of both telling on yourself and feeling comfortable, and genuinely being interconnected and being in community - both relying on and being relied upon by others.²¹⁰

Megan describes her childhood as a secure and comfortable one, in fact calling her ghost one of "secure attachment", in which the calm that emerges in moments of chaos was learned. She describes comfort as "intergenerational in some ways", attributing it to several generations of

²⁰³ "Oliver" 2025

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ "Oliver" 2025

²⁰⁸ *Ibid*

²⁰⁹ "Megan", activity workbook, 2025.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*

family to having “what they need”, not trying to get rich and not concerned with scarcity²¹¹. This privileged and secure position is, of course, one that Megan ties to whiteness and an inherent belief within her family of “things working out”²¹². Now into adulthood, Megan’s ghost is called up to remind her of this almost-mantra, to regulate and protect Megan during moments of chaos. She credits her ghost’s stoicism to “WASP” (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) culture, but also to what could be read as a sense of duty. As she wrote in her workbook:

Ok going back to the beginning for a moment. I think there are multiple ghosts: I think there is a very old ghost, which I guess I am naming as secure attachment, which I think or imagine to be the ghost of loving in a realer, more human, community, a kind of more ancient way of both telling on yourself and feeling comfortable, and genuinely being interconnected and being in community - both relying on and being relied upon by others.²¹³

Even in our interview, it was hard to draw out of Megan a complete definition of how whiteness was a haunting force. There is a complexity here that is hard to untangle, but in our conversation Megan spoke to a sense that whiteness - and the comfort that it provided growing up - helps her on one hand to believe that “there is no apocalypse”²¹⁴. In other words, while queerness and anarchist teachings have taught Megan to fight for justice against oppression, while her whiteness has created an optimistic naivete:

I think the whiteness is like this thing that doesn't totally believe in the fact that there's an [apocalypse] you know? Like it's like ohh, maybe there is a way to like turn this around! And just like work with what we have to like to make something that is different and better and like instead of...just burn it to the ground. Which I also believe obviously - but there's [a feeling] not wanting to let go of comfort... [can we] make it better without losing the comfort, the small comforts that we already have?²¹⁵

Despite pointing to opposite upbringings, both Megan and Oliver’s stories share similar ghostly spirits. They are both ghosts of order as much as they are soothers, wanting to maintain environments of emotional and structural regulation. They are also both ghosts afraid of vulnerability, and though born from opposite childhood experiences, Oliver and Megan’s ghosts haunt their workplaces (and our protagonists) in similar ways.

²¹¹ *Ibid*

²¹² “Megan”, activity workbook, 2025.

²¹³ *Ibid*

²¹⁴ “Megan” 2025

²¹⁵ *Ibid*

Playlist: Addressing the Ghost

Genreflecting Ghost by Sufjan Stevens ⑥
 How to be Invisible by Kate Bush ②
 Keep me from Dreaming by ionnalee ⑤
 Something Wicked by The Herbalizer ①
 Mystics Dream by Loreena McKinnitt ③
 Silver Ladders by Mary Lattimore ④

Figure 6: Playlist of “ghost” songs, from Oliver’s workbook

Soothing the workplace

Megan and Oliver’s ghosts are engaged in constant labour for the writer (the haunted), the organization (the haunted space), and those within it. They do not enact any physical presence in space, but rather help to anchor Oliver and Megan’s reactions to the world around them. These ghosts are also arguably engaged in a utopian effort of their own: the “emotional management” of the organization at large, as they work to bring about more harmonious communication. In particular, both Megan and Oliver name that their ghosts *react to those of others*, pointing to a conflict between opposing visions of the ideal that causes the emergence of a need for control.

In both of their workbooks, Megan and Oliver surface the existence of other ghosts in the workplace. This too, interestingly, is a reflection of the roles that both Megan and Oliver play(ed) in their organizations in human resources and team supervision. Though other participants spoke about ghosts in a general sense, Megan and Oliver approached it more analytically, giving a high-level and almost managerial overview of dynamics they’ve seen:

I think there are a lot of ghosts that pop up... Ghosts like: ghosts of past traumas and loneliness that come out when there is too much time to think, ghosts of shame (not being productive enough) and guilt (not using your ability to the utmost to help others...). I’m also thinking about how the board is haunted by their own jobs and experiences under capitalism. Like the board meeting is such a site of many external ghosts that suddenly need to be tended to even though they’re not the most important ghosts and they are often harder to predict or understand beforehand.²¹⁶

I think the sector’s ghosts are a bit lost, lost in “big hairy ideas”...they push past what we’re capable of and move everyone outside themselves to the cause in spite of ourselves. Another ghost of the sector is Victorian - purist, privileged, vain, proving its moral superiority. Another ghost is the starving artist - sacrificing all for the passionate, enthralling installation.

- These ghosts all summon Ghost B: “Chester”.
- Ghost B reminds the missionaries when they try to venture beyond the scope of their trip.
- Ghost B pops the big hairy idea balloon.

²¹⁶ “Megan”, activity workbook, 2025.

- Ghost B reminds the artist to use a drop cloth.
- Ghost B tells the Victorian that their sentiments should be relegated to the watercooler.²¹⁷

The many sector ghosts identified by both authors are very different, with Megan focusing on a more practical and grounded side, while Oliver focuses on the philosophical and behavioural. They effectively demonstrate the chaos and continuous trauma of working in the sector, while providing essential additional context to their primary ghosts' actions: these spectral personalities are the ones that, as Oliver writes, summon the author's primary ghosts. These efforts leave both ghosts consistently tired and anxious. In the case of Chester the imaginary friend, he is always reminding colleagues of policy, of what they need to fix, of how to fall in line:

Chester panics when colleagues want to get experimental. He gets so nervous when we ignore policy, or when a charismatic and self-interested person starts to take up too much space. Chester relaxes when a policy gets approved, an apology is offered, when a desk gets cleaned out. Group harmony and fairness banish him. I feel bad for Chester - he cares so much but no one really likes him, even if they agree. Chester always seems tired - I don't think he ever truly gets to rest, but maybe that's how all ghosts are - tireless and vigilant.²¹⁸

Chester's behaviour calls to mind Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included*, and her discussion of the failings of diversity policies within universities. However, the problem of "fetishizing"²¹⁹ policy for the sake of policy extends far beyond diversity, and to all governance and human resources policies within an organization. These documents, themselves arguably functions of white supremacy in the workplace²²⁰, are detached from the everyday lives of workers: while they ostensibly are designed to provide clarity around everything from financial decisions to psychological harassment, policies fundamentally cannot attend to the human condition. Similarly, they cannot *adapt* to changing times and unique challenges, to provide clarity for workers navigating incredibly complex interpersonal situations. Take, for example, this anecdote from Oliver:

There was a colleague who was chronically late. And you know [we worked] in service provision, she's racialized. And she's like, you know, 'white supremacy has me down, capitalism'. And so [she] had been chronically late 7 times, and we missed service two of them. And [during that moment I felt] like 'We have racialized employees who make it around time, so figure it out', you know?... There's something kind of militant and philosophical about it. There's also a question of, like, the posturing and the signaling, where it's like underneath it, there's the heart of the group.²²¹

In this situation, a policy - the policy that theoretically Chester the ghost would turn to - cannot navigate the complex racial dynamics at play. Instead, the policy becomes a cold and in itself detached piece of bureaucracy, of legislation, that creates strict processes without acknowledgement of the particularities in every relationship. As Ahmed argues, "[t]he point of

²¹⁷ "Oliver", activity workbook, 2025.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*

²¹⁹ Ahmed 2012, 87

²²⁰ The Centre for Community Organizations 2019. "White Supremacy Culture in Organizations." The Centre for Community Organizations.

<https://coco-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Coco-WhiteSupCulture-ENG4.pdf>.

²²¹ "Oliver" 2025

the document can be to have a document you can point to”²²² - which is to say, documents and policies are a performance of utopia. Think again here of Graeber’s arguments around bureaucracy, and its inherent impulse to create impersonal (and therefore “fair”) systems that do away with traditionally white supremacist and heteropatriarchal systems like nepotism²²³: the idea being that if there’s rules of fairness, then no one can cheat and no one will be excluded based on their identities. Elements of bureaucracy (like policies) are a practice in building an ideal state, an ideal way of “handling a problem”, but over-reliance on them is in contravention to the values and epistemologies within which activist-workplaces are anchored, and often turn out to produce the opposite effect of *completely removing* humanity in service of regulation; still, somehow, in contravention to the activist-workplace’s aims.

Although, as mentioned, at the beginning of their story Oliver describes Chester as a “saviour” during childhood, it is clear that he did not remain that way into Oliver’s adulthood and into the workplace. Oliver describes Chester as “adding to the noise and the chaos that he’s seeking to undermine and correct” while often convincing Oliver that there is a problem where there isn’t one²²⁴. Oliver becomes haunted and consumed by Chester, putting Oliver into danger. As they say, “a character like Socrates, who was sentenced to death by the state was definitely haunted by a Chester like Ghost”²²⁵.

Megan’s ghost is also reactive, exhibiting what she describes as a knee-jerk response to “activation” that emerges in situations where she feels disempowered or not in control. She said in our interview:

[When colleagues are experiencing high emotions] I think it does feel activating. My reaction is to really go the other way and like to balance that and to be so calming and so like... try to in some ways emotionally manage the situation.²²⁶

Like Chester, this effort leaves Megan’s ghost exhausted:

This ghost is tired, this thing they are weaving is a facsimile, a new art piece modeled off a memory that can’t be accessed (was it given paint?). There is a balance that needs to be struck between recognizing the transformative potential of art and understanding that a painting never stopped a genocide. The ghost is tired. There is something playful in the chaos behind the curtain, something looser, but there are too many ghosts there to be taken care of. They will burn the house down. And what are you supposed to do without a house?²²⁷

However, as we discussed in her interview, Megan’s ghost stunts her ability to engage with colleagues on an emotional level. Her story alludes to this at the very end: with so much to be taken care of, there is no room for looseness. Her ghost leans on structure instead, building a strong frame (the house) to hold all the ghosts within it. Some of what Megan describes here are concepts written about in “White Supremacy Culture in the Workplace”. These include avoidance or fear of open conflict, right to comfort²²⁸, and in other resources maintaining

²²² Ahmed 2012, 90

²²³ Graeber 2015, 33

²²⁴ “Oliver” 2025

²²⁵ *Ibid*

²²⁶ “Megan” 2025

²²⁷ “Megan”, activity workbook, 2025.

²²⁸ The Centre for Community Organizations, 2019.

“niceness” above all else or “looking on the brightside”²²⁹. This is all something that Megan is acutely aware of as well, acknowledging freely in our interview and in her story the ways in which her upbringing and positionality have influenced her. What is most interesting about her reflections, and indicative of the power of engaging hauntologically, is being able to see a different perspective on whiteness: as haunting as well, as much as diaspora or ancestral violence, from those trying to remedy or reflect on generational privilege. A cursory internet search on whiteness in the workplace will turn out dozens - if not hundreds - of additional articles and blog posts detailing how and why to unpack whiteness at work, or focused on the ways that white workers “fail”. But it reveals a lack of writing and literature about how white workers unpack, how they grapple, specifically in Leftist (and even liberal) workplaces where they are the ultimate “injurer”, and so rarely able to express injuries of their own. As such, I have a hesitancy to delve much deeper into whiteness in the workplace as I find much of the literature flattens the complexity of privilege, and beyond the scope of the research at this time.

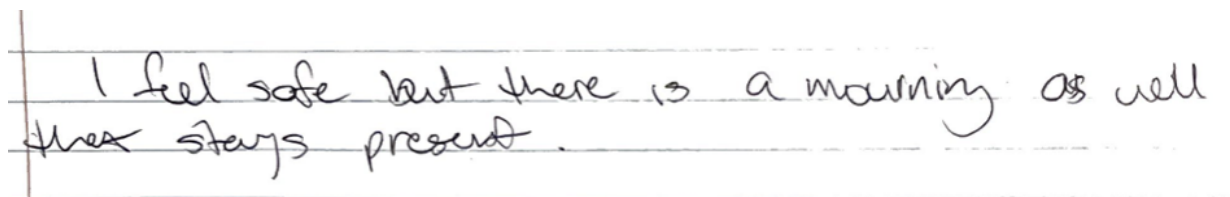


Figure 7: Note from Megan’s workbook, that reads “I feel safe but there is a mourning as well that stays present”

Through the open-ended conclusions of both stories, Megan and Oliver communicate the reality that their ghosts are, perhaps, as unaware of the answers to complex problems as the writers that they haunt. The “protection” they offer is a flawed and clearly failing effort: leading us to question whether they are in fact soothing at all. Despite their best efforts, the two ghosts are instead straining all those they haunt. They are full of the problems of others as they try to manage the experiences of colleagues, while placing structure and emotional limits that have potential to cause or exacerbate conflict.

Ghost as Disruptor: Noah, Ari, Raga

Another audible ping from my office. Was I hearing things? And then another. Warily, I approached to find the dark office marbled with the aura of a lit screen. Feeling a mix of trepidation and annoyance, I opened the door and advanced around my desk with hesitation. Not only was the computer still on, the email client was open and displaying an unsent draft email that I had forgotten to write.²³⁰

Yaru once felt connected to their Jana – especially through their deep love for people, for music, and the mysticisms of life. An avid reader and natural humanitarian, they loved through stories and characters and ideals. They still care so much for others, but now it’s in a different way. Now, everything they do is driven by their Mana.²³¹

²²⁹ Talley, Heather L. 2019. “White Women Doing White Supremacy in Nonprofit Culture.” Equity in the Center. <https://equityinthecenter.org/white-women-doing-white-supremacy-in-nonprofit-culture/>.

²³⁰ “Noah”, activity workbook, 2025.

²³¹ “Raga”, *Addressing the Ghost* activity workbook, March 22-23 2025.

One day I was in the library, it was a day like any other. Then books around me started crashing to the ground. Paintings became crooked. Things moved but I didn't know why.

The next week I went to the museum. My roommate that was supposed to go with me was ill with COVID-19. How can we do anything these days - threats are everywhere. I walked through the modernist architecture of the museum. It's high ceilings reached up indefinitely to disappear into a sky light and its blank white walls seemed to stare at me. Where was the art?²³²

Roots of the “Ghost as Disruptor”

The ghosts of Noah, Raga, and Ari all embody the trope of a spirit with “unfinished business” that disrupts the physical world in an effort to be heard and seen. In sharp contrast to the ghosts of Oliver and Megan, the Ghost as Disruptor enters to *cause* havoc and chaos, rather than emerging in response to it. The motivations behind their disruptions, though, lie in a scream: the desire to be seen, to consume, to avenge, to be validated. The ghosts of these three participants “drag in the pathos of their loss and the violence of the force that made them”²³³, coming into the contemporary world from the distant past, but not knowing what to do with their pain. Unlike Oliver and Megan’s stories, the Ghost as Disruptor is rooted further back than childhood, in familial and ancestral histories.

Noah and Ari’s stories are both tales of poltergeists. Noah’s ghost lives inside the computers at his office, pulling him back into his work late into the night. Ari’s is of ghostly ancestors first confronted in a museum, who follow the protagonist home and begin turning their apartment upside down²³⁴. Raga wrote two ghosts (Mana & Jana) into their story; they do not engage in physical disruptions, but instead haunt the mentality of a character to sabotage a friendship in a workplace. The three stories contained in this section have roots in the diasporic experience. They represent a kind of “reflective nostalgia” that dwells “in longing and loss”²³⁵, particularly from the many forms of colonial rupture that these diasporic ancestral subjects experienced. These diasporic roots are interestingly not explicitly named in the stories themselves, instead either alluded to or explained through interviews and story-writing notes.

Ari’s ghosts have seen “big, monumental changes” and “taken action ‘without permission’ from an oppressive authority”²³⁶. In the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, Ari described to me how the idea for their story came from a trip they had taken to a museum showcasing Black & Indigenous art: in reflecting on that experience during the workshop, they described the challenge in existing as a Black person in the sector while carrying alongside them these ancestral traumas - including, in this case, erasure. What we can see in Ari’s story is then a kind of vengeance against erasure, and a desire to be remembered and named by any means necessary:

²³² “Ari”, activity workbook, 2025.

²³³ Gordon 2008, 22

²³⁴ Note: As Ari did not complete the research process, there will be less analysis of their story throughout this chapter

²³⁵ Boym 2001, 41

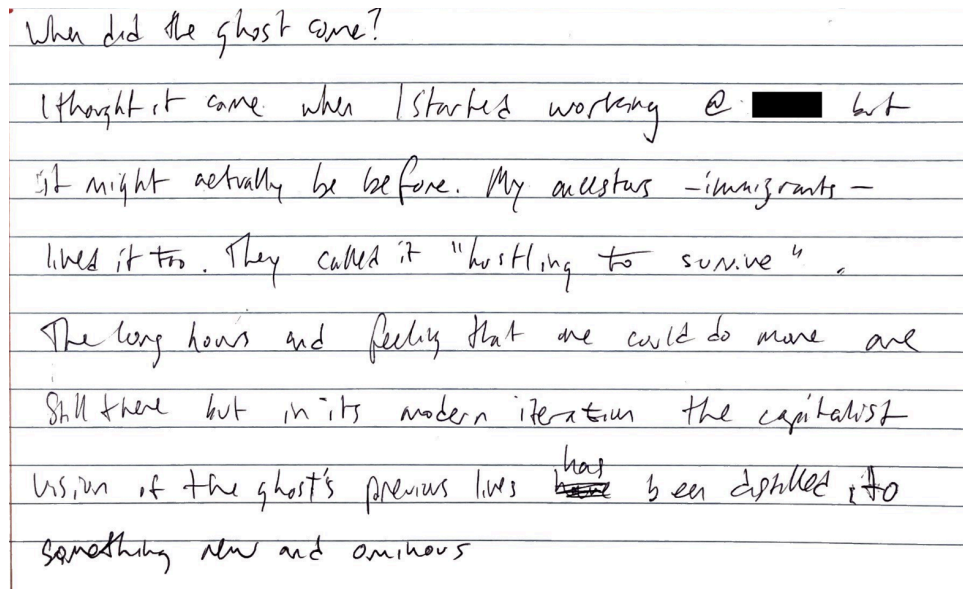
²³⁶ “Ari”, activity workbook, 2025.

Something that day distracted me, and when I arrived home I wrote furiously - why have all these creators been forgotten? I tried to say their names but all I had was a feeling, no words.²³⁷

In Ari's story, the ghosts' need for recognition is still a distant one: they are more generalized or communal ancestors, and as such Ari is not able to "speak to" or see them directly. They are a presence that is only felt, and a vague amorphous one at that, showcasing Ari's distance from them. Noah's story, in contrast, is more proximal and familial in its roots. As he wrote in his workbook notes:

When did the ghost come?

I thought it came when I started working [at my organization] but it might actually be before. My ancestors - immigrants - lived it too. They called it "hustling to survive". The long hours and feeling that one could do more are still there but in its modern iteration, the capitalist vision of the ghost's previous lives has been distilled into something new and ominous.²³⁸



When did the ghost come?

I thought it came when I started working @ [redacted] but

it might actually be before. My ancestors - immigrants -

lived it too. They called it "hustling to survive".

The long hours and feeling that one could do more are

still there but in its modern iteration the capitalist

vision of the ghost's previous lives ~~has~~ been distilled into

something new and ominous

Figure 8: Notes from Noah's workbook about the roots of his ghosts, written out above

Noah elaborated on this in our interview. He spoke about his grandparents living through "the Exclusion Act²³⁹ period...the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong", and his grandmother's experience as a newcomer to Canada rolling dumplings in a restaurant basement²⁴⁰. This

²³⁷ *Ibid*

²³⁸ "Noah", activity workbook, 2025.

²³⁹ The Chinese Exclusion Act (also known as the Chinese Immigration Act) was a bill in place from 1923-1947 that completely prohibited Chinese immigration to Canada. The act also required that "[a]ll Chinese persons living in Canada, even those born here, had to register with the government or risk fines, detainment, or deportation" ([Parks Canada](#)). For Noah's family, like many other families, the Chinese Exclusion Act inhibited the reunification of his great grandfathers' family, as his great grandfather was unable to bring his wife and children from China to join him in Canada.

²⁴⁰ "Noah" 2025

aspect of the immigrant experience naturally extended to Noah's own parents as well and then into himself, a sustained spectral force that both pushes and pulls the haunted deeper into their work. As Noah says, "When they could go further, they did. And so I think maybe like inherently that was passed on".²⁴¹

The roots of Raga's ghosts "Mana" and "Jana" are, like Ari's, less explicitly tied to ancestry. Initially, Raga's ghost was another person they had had conflict with at an organization. When pushed to go deeper, however, Raga pivoted to writing about that same conflict, but using the two spirits to explain and understand the complexities of the interpersonal dynamic. They described the ghosts as "essences" or "spiritual entities" that exist in everyone:

Jana. It's a calming translucent mist that glistens within, emanating from our soul, out into the external world. It feels like a peaceful misty breeze draped across your cheeks. Jana is our aligned nature and looks different in everybody, yet it is the thing that unites us all... That moment of peace and resolution to be our true selves... It is our ability to see in an expanded egoless view, open and ready to listen and receive, and to look at ourselves from different lenses.

Mana is a dark, opaque, plaguing cloud that constricts the throats of any entity it passes through. It separates a person from their nature, fragmenting their Jana, creating barriers of access. Mana is vain, self-serving, insecure, manipulative, rigid, and irresponsible. It is a limiting cloud that restricts your vision where everything feels like a threat. When you live in Mana, you can't see and in turn, are fighting to be seen. Everything becomes external to you pulling you farther and farther from your nature.²⁴²

In their workbook, Raga pointed to both generalized and specific familial ancestors as roots for Mana and Jana. Raga's parents are both South Indian, and grew up "in villages where collective families live in villages, growing up together, children playing together, open door policies, traveling together, sharing resources" before being sent away to boarding schools²⁴³. From there, the rupture from land and place only continued, as both of Raga's parents moved to pursue careers in Canada and "changed the paradigm of their realities"²⁴⁴. Similarly to Ari and Noah, the rupture of diaspora created Raga's understandings of these two ghosts. One important difference, however, was that Raga's story points to a desire within themselves to "refind" what was lost - the Jana, collectivism - while battling what was "found"- the Mana, Western individualism and immigration. These two aspects of self speak to Raga's (and many others') orientations under diaspora, it is by facing "back" - so to speak - towards the real and/or imagined memories of life under a lost land that we make sense of the new land to which we have been transplanted²⁴⁵. As Ahmed says, "The Orient provides the object, as well as the instrument, that allows the Occident to take shape, to become a subject, as that which "we" are around"²⁴⁶.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*

²⁴² "Raga", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁴³ *Ibid*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*

²⁴⁵ Ahmed 2006, 116

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*

Good sides of Jana
Charismatic
Curious
Loving
Knows who
they are
Bright
Confident

Figure 9: Notes from Raga's notebook, outlining the traits of the ghost Jana, reading, "Good sides of Jana. Charismatic. Curious. Loving. Knows who they are. Bright. Confident"

In other words, it is not just that we better understand the West through forcing our gaze back towards homeland, but also understand how we are able to exist within dominant cultural forces and our place as a diasporic subject. For all three participants, the rupturing force of diasporic "splitting" between lands and across ancestries opens the way for their disruptive ghosts to enter and make their voices or pains heard. But for Ari and Raga, the memories conjured through their seeking and their encounters with ancestral ghosts are incomplete memories, particularly in the case of Ari's story, wherein there is a no named familial lineage to their ghosts: they encounter the ghosts through library and museum spaces, in environments where those histories have been "stripped...to bare facts and precious details"²⁴⁷. Ari's and Raga's ghosts, then, disrupt and impart lessons that are more largely political, historical, and wide-ranging in nature, rather than specific to their own predecessors. They are stories that demonstrate the phenomenon of a "collective taking shape through the act of repetition"²⁴⁸; adding their own experiences to socially constructed, shared, and learned narratives about their communities. In this way the two authors are joining a much larger practice of (re)construction of ancestral pasts to build "a comforting collective script for individual longing"²⁴⁹:

[The ghost] would say to stay determined, don't be afraid to be brave or different. Remember where you came from. I do think my ghost would want me to get to work doing things.²⁵⁰

I always grew up feeling the effects of their immigration that fragmented their connections to their family and therefore mine. I felt family was not a priority in my household. People's needs were only cared for if they were screaming out for attention.²⁵¹

Rejection and acceptance

Together, what we see in the stories of Noah, Raga, and Ari is a tension within themselves and with the specters that follow them. What links them then is not just the violence inflicted by the ghosts on workplaces and apartments, but also the *need* felt by the authors (or main characters,

²⁴⁷ Hartman 2008, 29

²⁴⁸ Ahmed 2006, 119

²⁴⁹ Boym 2001, 42

²⁵⁰ "Ari", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁵¹ "Raga" 2025

in the case of Raga's character "Yaru"), to find and engage with those disruptors. It calls to mind this quote from Paul Valery, referenced by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx*:

Hamlet does not know what to do with all these skulls. But if he abandons them! Will he cease to be himself?²⁵²

The original quote from Valery comes from *Crisis of the Mind*, a series of letters written in the aftermath of World War One, reckoning with his perceived decline of Western civilization²⁵³. What we pull out of this quote's metaphor, though, is a suggestion that the violence of war, loss of life, rupture, renders the "intellectual" unsure of his own existence after building his vision of himself through the ghosts of previous thinkers (in Valery's case, Kant, Hegel, and Marx). My intention of pulling this metaphor of Hamlet's ghosts into racialized diasporic experience is to underscore the phenomenon of building a self-definition through the work, experiences, and legacies of shared ancestors. Despite the flaws of *Crisis of the Mind* (i.e., the pedestalling of white Western thinkers over other ways of knowing), this quote perfectly describes the experience of overwhelm that diasporic subjects face. In their stories, our participants are describing a sense of duty or loyalty to their ancestors; repeating their behaviours and lessons as a way of feeling connected to them. This quote from Noah's story is the best example of the disruptive ghost's continued "pull" over the protagonists' self-definition. It questions directly what it would mean for Noah's sense of self to begin "abandoning the skulls" of his ancestors, and asks whether these ghosts are indeed benevolent rather than malicious. Like other specters we are discussing, the answer likely lies in between, with the ghosts attempting to "protect" Noah through the hard work, without knowing that approach (at one time protective of them) is now a violent one in the present.

The screen blips off, the computer fan groans to a stop. As silence pervades my senses, my eyes adjust. Only the desk lamp is on. As I bend down to pick up my bag, I glimpse a reflection in the glass of the screen. A face - but not my face.

Most of the face was obscured in shadow. I only remember the eyes, sunken, with bags doubled deep under the eyes, unblinking. My heart stops as I slowly sit back up in my chair, turn towards the screen. No - it's me. Was I hallucinating?

Then - the office screams out with the sound of multiple phones ringing at once. Someone is calling - me -

Certain ghosts haunt specific places, and others are imprinted on a family line through a curse or a traumatic event. The spectre of overwork has hung over my family for generations. Does it really haunt us, or is the haunting actually a form of benevolent vigilance?

In that office it lived and lurked, sometimes approaching to perch on my shoulders like a gargoyle. If I could speak to it, what would I say?²⁵⁴

²⁵² Derrida 1994, 4

²⁵³ Kreis, Steven. 2014. "Paul Valery's The Crisis of The Mind (1919)." The History Guide: Lectures on Twentieth Century Europe. <https://www.historyguide.org/europe/valery.html>.

²⁵⁴ "Noah", activity workbook, 2025.

Disrupting the workplace

What we see in this passage, at the end of his story, is Noah's recognition of the ghost coming from and living inside of him, a kind of possession: merging of the human and more-than-human. In our interview, Noah elaborated on this "taking up" of the poltergeist's mission, and the way in which it has impacted his relationship to the workplace:

My grandmother worked when she arrived to Canada. She couldn't speak English and she worked rolling dumplings in the basement of [a] restaurant in Saskatoon for years until she got arthritis. She didn't see any light of day: she was in the windowless room in the basement every fucking day, because she had to help the family to survive, to get money.

When [my parents] could go further, they did. And so I think maybe inherently that was passed on. Also, I think there's an expectation that we mustn't let down the group. The initial group being your family and then later on that being transferred to work environments. And in this particular environment at [my organization], I was more in relationship with everybody than at the usual corporate job where you could just check in and check out, you know 9 to 5 where you don't really care about your colleagues... [My organization] was different. You had very much the ambience of a surrogate family, and there was care there.²⁵⁵

Throughout all of the stories in this section, the almost vengeful nature of the Ghost as Disruptor creates significant impacts on their engagement in the workplace, though for very different reasons. For Noah, his ghost brought him closer and deeper into his organization's functionings, creating a tighter relationship between his sense of self and his sense of "duty". In our interview, Noah described a sense of responsibility that reproduced the dynamics of the family home: his ghost serving the interests of work over Noah's health and well-being, rather than disrupting his ability to be *in* his work. Working in a collective for many years, this sense of responsibility would easily be put to use by himself and others, in which there is almost limitless additional labour to be done either for the organization at large or for supporting colleagues.

In contrast, Ari's ghost and Raga's "negative essence" Mana pulled their main characters further away from the workplace or their relationships within it, instead instilling introversion and isolation as a means of processing trauma.

Somehow we were haunted, our home, our possessions, by the spirits that would not let us forget. They were here and life could not go on as usual without acknowledging them. How the hell was I gonna go to work in a state like this. Who would understand. My world was completely reversed.²⁵⁶

Yaru saw the ease in which Swara worked and delegated tasks. They felt the sweltering stormy clouds of Mana rise within them, with each interaction. Their eyes darkened. Feeling powerless, they began to shut down, and were unable to see how their promises were going unkept, tasks were piling up, and dynamics of trust were affected.

²⁵⁵ "Noah" 2025

²⁵⁶ "Ari", activity workbook, 2025.

Swara tried to help Yaru see the destruction they were causing but it was too late. The Mana had completely taken over them and Swara was left to pick up the pieces. Others noticed the tension but did not know what to do. Swara thought a mediation could help because at this point, Yaru was so deep in their Mana they brought up personal feelings about their recent past friendship.²⁵⁷

What is also similar for these two stories is the isolating nature of the haunted experience. For Raga's main character Yaru, the "Mana" (negative essence) emerges in response to a triggered trauma at the workplace. For Ari, the traumatic (re)triggering of those lost ancestors brings a spirit into their life that in turn contributes to a lower capacity in the workplace "the next day". Ari, we can imagine, would then take increased time away from work in order to care for their mental health, to put their furniture back to rights. When they do return to the office, these ghosts will follow them in: lurking in the corners of rooms pulling their attention away from work, pressing heavily on their shoulders and exacerbating the pressures of client work.

In all of these scenarios we can think again about never-innocent ghosts who drag their sadness and tragedy into the present with them. Crucially, they also don't carry only their own pain: they carry too the ghosts that *created and preceded them*, calling to mind what Derrida describes as "the rumbling sound of ghosts chained to ghosts"²⁵⁸. Through the very act of their return, they isolate their "victims" as they demand "a different kind of acknowledgment"²⁵⁹; in these cases, one that takes over the worlds of those around whom they linger. In the workplace, the impact wouldn't be felt just by the haunted character either: both isolation and overworking can bring conflict between colleagues, through withdrawal (which puts more work on others), built up resentments, or potential perceived power hoarding that could arise from a character like Noah taking on extra work.

Ghost as Teacher: Willow, Nidal, Milo

Widened eyes peak over masks, waiting for an alarm. The ~~despair~~ hopelessness is palpable. Another piece of plaster falls from the wall as the last team members tucks in their seat for the meeting. Just as the Executive Director introduces the agenda in that familiar defeated tone, a colleague interrupt[s] with a yelp while flicking a bedbug off their forearm.

We're all part of someone who knows a way out.
We all have a guide to be unlocked.
Few things trouble me more than feeling stuck.
[the entities / energies] thrive off a self-inflicted prison.

[I'm part of the problem, my heart doesn't live here anymore - detached too far]²⁶⁰

There once was a city made of concrete and frost, where exile clung to windows like condensation and names were often left at the border. In this city stood a house—not built by architects, but by dreamers, drifters, and those with salt and sun traces are still felt in their

²⁵⁷ "Raga", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁵⁸ Derrida 1994, 3

²⁵⁹ Gordon 2008, 64

²⁶⁰ "Willow", activity workbook, 2025.

bones.

The house was alive. Not in a spooky way. In a *real* way. The walls murmured in several languages and dialects. The stairs sang old protest chants. The fridge door creaked open for those too shy to ask, and at the center of this enchanted refuge was Amber, a soul wrapped in human skin, with burnt sugar eyes and a laugh like summer wind chimes on a Jasmin balcony in Tunis.²⁶¹

Roots of the “Ghost as Teacher”

In our final category, Ghost as Teacher, we see the trope of the specter that returns to impart warnings, give reminders, or provide lessons. For the most part these lessons are “good” and coming from ancestors and across lands; though again, imparting moral good and bad to the ghostly does a disservice to its nuances.

Unlike our previous category of Ghost as Disruptor, which is also rooted in diasporic nostalgia, these ghosts more closely resemble what Boym calls a “restorative nostalgia” that looks to rebuild lost homes and fill the gaps that rupture leaves in memory²⁶². On larger scales, restorative nostalgia “characterizes national and nationalist revivals” through a return to historic collective symbols, and at the extreme can lean into conspiracy theory, fascism, isolationism²⁶³. They are the memories upon which identities are formed, clung to because they are under threat, and therefore in constant need of preservation or rebuilding²⁶⁴. In the case of these research participants the act is much smaller, focused on personal engagement with the beauty of the past. This is not to say, however, that these reconstructed memories exist outside of pluralities: the act of individual reconstruction is always rooted in a communal bind passed across generations and laterally across communities. A better definition of these stories’ nostalgia, perhaps, would then be from Stuart Hall, who describes it as “imaginative rediscovery”, a “profound research” that aims to “[unearth] that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid”²⁶⁵. It describes a “dialogue of power and resistance” with and against the forces of the colonial projects²⁶⁶, but also in some cases undoing the ills that those projects inflicted in/on ancestors’ past. This is most easily seen in Willow’s story, where the primary spectral figure interacts with the narrator/protagonist in a direct dialogue both physical and verbal:

All it takes is faith. And then she appears. I feel her smile. Her warmth familiar. She not always nice, but she is kind. A Jamaican woman who has survived the turn of the century encompasses wisdom and duality.

Just as I am searching for her, she is searching for me. She enters the drop in so swiftly, so smoothly, that it takes a moment before the entire room pauses...

²⁶¹ "Nidal", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁶² Boym 2001, 41

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Nora 1989, 12

²⁶⁵ Hall 1990, 224

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 223

Before any of us can react, she shakes her head, snaps her fingers above her head and whistles loudly. She is not all-knowing, and calls on the collective.

Still frozen in shock, each of my colleagues are joined by an orb that is slowly taking form. Suddenly we are surrounded by a projection of beings - humans, animals, objects. Guides, grandfathers, visual embodiments of memories and reminders. The scent in the space shifts from stale mildew to the smell of dumplings and mannish water.²⁶⁷

In this scene, Willow's ghost is the first to arrive, identifying the problems in the meeting space, and then "summoning" or bringing with her the "spirit guides" that would teach and caretake each staff member. In our interview, Willow described themselves as "too into it" when they started writing, wanting to craft a more robust backstory about a Jamaican Maroon before deciding to scale down the character to make it more intentional and simple²⁶⁸. What they landed on, then, was an image of a maternal Jamaican woman, with some elements drawn from Willow's own aunties and family members. Willow describes the character as one who "survived the turn of the century"²⁶⁹. Though which century is not clear, based on Willow's initial desire to write a ghost based on an escaped slave or Jamaican Maroon, we can assume that the ghost's ties to the experience of slavery are proximate. Even if not herself someone who was enslaved, she and Willow exist in what Saidiya Hartman describes as "the afterlife of slavery", the socio-economic, familial, and physical effects of inherited trauma across Black families whose ancestors were enslaved and/or colonized²⁷⁰. The physical and psychological transgenerational traumas of slavery make the Black body "always collective", according to Hershini Young, "as it remembers both its ghosts and that which has traumatically marked it as Other"²⁷¹. That Willow looks backwards to this imagined ancestor, then, is not surprising. Slave descendents are marked by the severe rupture of selling and separation, which requires in the present a more an intentional seeking of historical connections²⁷². Hartman described this experience as a determination to "fill in the blank spaces of the historical record and to represent the lives of those deemed unworthy of remembering"²⁷³.

WHAT SPECIFIC ELEMENT OF THE <u>IDEAL</u> DO YOU WANT TO FOCUS ON?
• LOVE-CENTRED + LOVE-GUIDED (<u>NOT</u> SAVIOURISM, URGENCY, RIGIDITY, CONFLICT-AVOIDANCE)
• SPACE + CAPACITY FOR INNOVATION
• RE-DISCOVERING WHAT IS SACRED
• GENUINE, GROUNDED EMPOWERMENT + RESPONSIBILITY

Figure 10: Notes on ghost story drafting, from Willow's workbook. It reads, "What specific element of the ideal do you want to focus on? Love-centred + love-guided (not saviourism, urgency, rigidity,

²⁶⁷ "Mannish water" is a type of soup in Jamaican cuisine. "Willow", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁶⁸ "Willow" 2025

²⁶⁹ *Ibid*

²⁷⁰ Hartman 2008, 24

²⁷¹ Young 2006, 6

²⁷² We can think here of Saiyida Hartman going through the archives in search of ancestors, writing, "It was as if I had conjured her up. Was my hunger for the past so great that I was now encountering ghosts?" (Hartman, p. 34).

²⁷³ Hartman 2008, 34

conflict avoidance. Space + capacity for innovation. Re-discovering what is sacred. Genuine, grounded empowerment + responsibility”

Comparatively, Milo’s and Nidal’s stories pull on multiple influences to craft their diverse ghostly presences. Though Willow’s story does make reference to other ghosts, those haunt Willow’s colleagues, instead of multiple ghosts haunting only the narrator or protagonist. Milo’s story, which uses a diaristic writing style rather than narrative fiction, describes their engagement with their parents’ and grandparents’ generations as having taught them how to move through the world. Despite a story with a wide variety of characters, there are only two “spectral” elements of Milo’s story: one a real historical figure who Milo considers a teacher, and the other a metaphorical representation that originates within their family. The first of the two comes only at the end of Milo’s story, a sort of epilogue to the main narrative called “Who is Brenda?”:

Chapter 6: Who is Brenda?

Brenda Howard was called the mother of pride. I know you’ve never seen an infographic of her. She’s not the right hero for our generations. She’s Jewish, bi, and has multiple bi men as partners. She practiced BDSM and was a big advocate during the AIDS crisis.

...

When I don’t know my place in these movements I think of Brenda. Her Wikipedia says she would simply [know] what the cause was and show up with her people and her signs. She was a great mobilizer for causes that didn’t always affect her personally. She wore big glasses and was fat and was outlived by her 2 boyfriends. I know it’s uncomfortable to have bi cis women with men partners in queer spaces, so I silently found my own heroes. There is not enough to know about her on the internet to have had her fall off the silent pedestal I keep her on all for myself. She’s quiet but freaky, uplifted and fought for those around her, and she’s my kind of leader. Thank G-d for Brenda. I look at her smiling, nerdy face, and I know I’m not alone.²⁷⁴

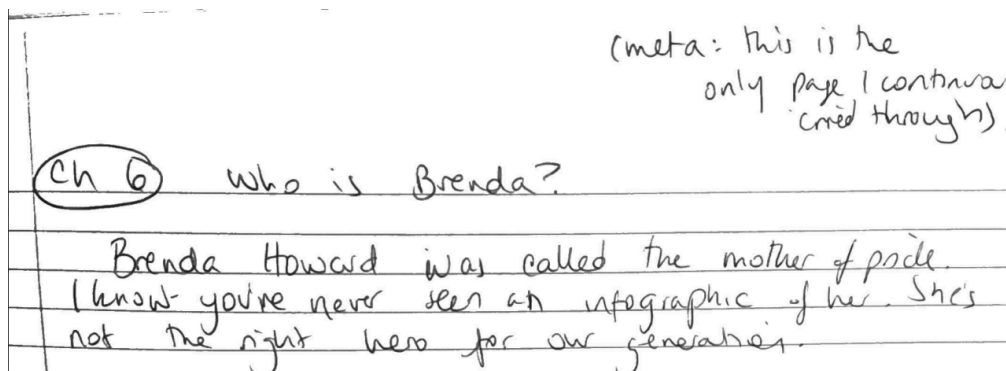


Figure 11: Excerpt from Milo’s workbook, the first sentence of their chapter “Who is Brenda?”, as written out above. In the top right corner of the figure it reads, “(meta: this is the only page I continually cried through).”

²⁷⁴ “Milo”, activity workbook, 2025.

The “chapter” on Brenda within Milo’s story is a more straightforward teaching-oriented one for Milo, who struggles with the amount of space they take up in community organizing and activist-workplaces. It is notable that, as they wrote in the workbook, Milo cried while writing this chapter: taking inspiration from a figure that was unapologetic in their sexuality and identity, with a deep understanding of how they could contribute to their community’s liberation.

In addition to their personal hero in Brenda, Milo’s story also explores familial ghosts across complex cross-sections of diaspora. On the British side of Milo’s family, their ancestors moved to East Africa as part of the colonial project, a history that Milo struggles to reconcile and has pushed against both in their politics and what they tell others about their ancestry²⁷⁵. This is a more extreme echo of Megan’s experience with whiteness, pushing even further into questions of what “guilt” and what responsibility whiteness holds - or is made to hold - in Leftist spaces. The other side of the family is Italian, still white but from a more collectivist diasporic culture than the WASP British. It is through this side of the family that the hauntings are most apparent: through metaphor that is more “hidden”, intangible and woven throughout all eleven pages of Milo’s story. This ghost originates from Milo’s great-aunt, who in the rural Italian 1950s divorced her husband rather than move with him to work in an East African colony²⁷⁶. Milo is inspired by this figure, one they describe as hard working, who grew vegetables to sustain her children and share with her community. From this inspiration, Milo weaves throughout the story a metaphor of growing tomatoes:

I think of my Zia’s garden - the need for trellises for the kiwis and stakes for the tomatoes. Without the structure, the sprawling weight of plump tomatoes would break every branch, every successful tomato a threat to the plants health, no matter if it’s a sign of juiciness.²⁷⁷

The metaphor of “tomato and trellis” is referenced at either the beginning or end of each chapter of Milo’s story. Though not intentionally written as a ghost, this choice is more *demonstrative* of a haunting (showing rather than telling), by weaving inheritance throughout a longer and larger story of the workplace.

A tomato is filled with life. From the water and sun it creates great life, it flows with juice, it drops down chins, it splits in the sun and drops seeds in the earth, coming back again.

A trellis is dead. Steel or wool, it’s been taken from its land and is only used for its ability to structure. It eventually rusts or rots, it gives under the weight of the life its supported and thrown away. It’s silent in the background and blamed for the tomatoes failing - it wasn’t strong enough to hold the weight of that life.²⁷⁸

This excerpt exemplifies Milo’s grappling with both sides of the ancestry at once through their “ecosystem of ghosts”²⁷⁹: reckoning with the challenges of existence in a white body while being critical of whiteness and the inheritance of perpetrated violence. They undertake this reckoning by looking to a collectivist and “duty-bound” inheritance instead from their Italian side, using it to find their place in the community sector. Additionally, the legacy of Milo’s great-aunt serves as a

²⁷⁵ “Milo” 2025

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷⁷ “Milo”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁷⁸ “Milo”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁷⁹ Machado, Carmen M. 2024. “Endlings.” Literary Hub. <https://lithub.com/endlings/>.

reminder of “power and place”²⁸⁰, a benevolent haunting presence that carries forward early feminist and anti-colonial lessons into Milo’s present and future imaginaries.

Nidal, similarly to Milo and Willow, pulled from a variety of ghosts in their stories. Like Milo’s reference to Brenda Howard, Nidal references famous figures and scholars (crucially some still alive) as the “teachers” they draw upon when imagining utopian organizing & organizations:

The third ghost/teacher is some of the trans and queer figures like Amina Wadud, EL Farouk Khaki, Iman Hendrick and lots more + feminist scholars like bell hooks and Olfa Yusuf, Nawal AL Saadawi who defied the normative society.²⁸¹

In their story, we see Nidal seeking across rupture from land and ancestry through exile. That exile, for Nidal, is tied to queerness. Generations of erasure, hiding, and threats of violence have created their own intergenerational traumas. This is particularly true for racialized queer folks like Ons. Unlike familial trauma, queer intergenerational pain is passed culturally, politically, and historically in addition to the traumas from one’s own life and experiences. Within queer communities and amongst queer artists, ghosts are a common tool for reckoning, as seen with Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* or in literature around the HIV/AIDS crisis like “Viral Hauntology” by Møller and Ledin²⁸². Queerness, according to Jose Esteban Muñoz, is “still forming, or in many crucial ways formless”²⁸³, with a historically absent and forcibly erased history. Many of Nidal’s ghosts emerged when they were a teenager and “described as ‘disobedient’, ‘troublemaker’, ‘outcast’”, which helped them understand themselves as different than others and “defying the structures that [they were] living in” back home in Tunisia²⁸⁴. Elders and intellectual leaders provide not just validation of identity; they also provide, in the utopian sense, a roadmap for present and future existences in queer bodies. As Nidal writes, those ghosts “live in my heart, brain, and body... in the stories told and untold”²⁸⁵. Nidal of course also looks to ancestry and the inheritances brought from family, this time inspired by the revolutionary activities of their grandfather:

One of the ghosts/teachers from the past is my grand- father, who fought for the independence and sovereignty of Tunisia. He fought the French colonisation and I heard lots of his stories and stories of his comrades. The second ghost/teacher is “Sufism” and iconic sufi figures like Rumi, Ibn-Arabi, AL Tabrizi - they demonstrated how love can be the main source of revolutionary building / revolutionary love and how they encourage spiritual and holistic practices in a very beautiful and inclusive and intersectional way.²⁸⁶

They elaborated on these ghosts in our interview, describing their grandfather as someone who “spoke the truth and kept speaking the truth”, being loud and outspoken as opposed to living a “quiet life” and accepting the norms²⁸⁷. These lessons of truth and revolutionary love are visibly close to Nidal’s heart, exemplified through their perspectives on community work and their presence in the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop. Their story reflects this passion, telling the

²⁸⁰ “Milo” 2025

²⁸¹ “Nidal”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁸² Møller, K., C. Ledin, and J. Fritsch. 2021. “Viral Hauntology: Specters of AIDS in Infrastructures of Gay Sexual Sociability.” In *Affects, Interfaces, Events*, edited by BM Stavning Thomsen and J. Kofoed, 147-162. Vancouver: Imbricate!

²⁸³ Muñoz 2019, 29

²⁸⁴ “Nidal”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ “Nidal”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁸⁷ “Nidal” 2025

story of a character who crossed borders to end up in a “city made of concrete and frost”, to find a series of spirits: “guides, comrades, and teachers” much like the teachers they’ve described above:

Each room in Beit Zaytoun was watched over by an old ghost, though no one feared them...

Zaytoun, the olive-hearted one, stirred in the steam of couscous, olive oil, and the seventeen spices. They reminded newcomers that roots could grow in exile too—that land is not only earth, but memory, care, and hands touching and forming dough together.

Mouna, whose voice was calligraphy and thunder, helped those who had been renamed by colonizers or silenced by systems find their true names again. They ran a secret library in the attic, where every book was a doorway, and every story taught resistance.

Yahya, the ghost who beat rhythm into the floorboards, taught the young ones how to speak loud in drums, how to write love poems that doubled as political manifestos, how to take up space without apology.

Hayat, the breath between sobs and songs, gave sanctuary in the garden, where rosemary grew wild, and mint was harvested under moonlight. She sat with those grieving and whispered: *You are still here. And that is holy.*

Noor, no one ever saw. But everyone felt their light—in the courage to speak out at city hall, in the hand that reached across the table, in the flame that refused to go out even when the world went dark.

People came and went. A queer Syrian painter who left their family but found one here. A Palestinian Trans migrant who taught soul food infused with cumin, zaatar and hope. A Haitian poet who turned trauma into gospel. A Tunisian who couldn’t go home but recreated it in every bite of brik they made.²⁸⁸

Nidal's story is the only one out of the eight participants that is wholly positive and optimistic. Rather than reflecting on the traumas of the activist-workplace and community organizing, Nidal constructs a spectral ecosystem of inspirational figures who work in tandem to teach and care for those around whom they linger. In this story, the ghosts are not transitory figures, but rooted. Nidal has created through this story a different kind of haunted house than those we typically see: rather than a dangerous house filled with dark corners, Beit Zaytoun reflects Nidal's ideal, setting it apart from the other stories for whom there was a focus on the traumas rather than the possibilities. Again, this could partly be attributed to Nidal missing the second day of the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, but also reflects the ways that Nidal approached the project and their passion for their work.

²⁸⁸ "Nidal", activity workbook, 2025.



Teaching in the workplace

What these Teachers provide in the workplace context are “pathways” or visions towards ways of working better together, unlike the Disruptor - and arguably the Soother - who have more “hands on” impacts on those they haunt. When Willow’s ghost finds them at last, the lesson is one of embracing softness, helping Willow to understand how their detachment (from their own emotions, and those of others) has played a role in the problems in their organization and their interactions with colleagues. When she arrives, the ancestor helps Willow to remove an “armour” that they didn’t notice they had been wearing:

“Do you want me to help you take that off?” my spirit guide asked, using her lips to point towards my shoulder.

“Take off wh-”

I looked at my shoulders and both instantly felt this unbearable weight as I saw shimmering armour seemingly appear out of nowhere. I look back up at her, stunned.

She laughs. “JOKES. Mi nah work fi free. I’m not here to do the work for you, let’s see you lift it den”

I struggle to remove the armour, shoulder aching from what feels] like years of weight and tension.

“You have it on your back this whole time as you JUS’ notice? Lord haff mercy,” she chuckles again.

Finally, I find the strength to remove the armour that had completely enclosed my torso.²⁸⁹

In our interview, Willow elaborated further on the interaction:

What she’s really trying to communicate is, you know, “wearing the armour was a necessity in my time, and so it’s not useful to carry this around anymore. Because girl, I’ve done that, and it’s safe now”.²⁹⁰

The “shimmering” aesthetic of Willow’s armour helps the reader see it as a separate haunting presence, a lingering effect of trauma on the body that demands the haunted Black descendants to “show strength” and be resilient, unemotional. Having the spirit guide remove the armour shows how she is effectively “undoing” her own impacts. Though Willow’s ghost had to be “hard”

²⁸⁹ “Willow”, activity workbook, 2025.

²⁹⁰ “Willow” 2025

in her own life in order to survive, now upon her return, her ghostly self has reached “a calm state”²⁹¹ which she brings with her into the present as a reminder to Willow that they need not carry her burdens with them anymore. This exchange is a kind of reconciliation, a full circle moment between one of the ancestors whose trauma haunted our protagonist, coming back (“beginning again”) to reverse and review it. Willow’s story is also one of a chronically burnt out worker, and the cynicism that is a key element of it that constitutes “hardening” and detachment from colleagues and the organization itself²⁹². This detachment is often used as a protection mechanisms for employees in burnout situations, but like in Willow’s case can be further isolating and erase the passion and drive which originally brought them into activist-workplaces.

Like Willow, Milo’s story also functions as a means of reckoning with their place and behaviours at work. In Milo’s case, there is a grappling with whiteness, queerness, and “place” in the highly politically charged world of the activist-workplace, similarly in some ways to Megan. By looking directly at the colonial project *from the side of the colonizer*, Milo very effectively troubles the ways in which whiteness functions in spaces of progressive leftist politics, by engaging with their own guilt (both an inheritance from their father, and a weapon used against him) over their family’s colonial legacies. At the end of every chapter, as Milo recounts their overarching story of “cancellation” and challenges navigating leadership within their activist-workplaces, they refer back to the tomatoes as a metaphor: seeing their role in the community sector as being the trellis that supports the good work of others:

Your job is to be the tomato. The rest, is me.

After all, I could only be a white woman - too good or too bad were both a problem... it's hard to build a path outside of those deadly futures, but we were trying - ethical leadership, forward movement, a trellis that allowed us all to grow. We could only get there together - a trellis without its tomato is lifeless. A tomato without its trellis breaks. How would we share that power?

A tomato is filled with life. From the water and sun it creates great life, it flows with juice, it drops down chins, it splits in the sun and drops seeds in the earth, coming back again. A trellis is dead. Steel or wood, it's been taken from its land and is only used for its ability to structure...²⁹³

Milo themselves as a structure that supports the work of others. This too echoes Megan’s story - and even Oliver’s - in which duty and structure become features of their workplace interactions, a frequent space in which conflict with colleagues can occur. Where Milo can be differentiated, however, is that their ghosts are not attempting to soothe or take on emotional management. Theirs is a purely structure-bound ghost: as an administrator, they see their role as a backbone of the organization, a double-edged sword that both functions to support the operations and dreams of colleagues while - as they see it - also often positioning themselves as the “villain” that always holds onto processes. Still in active recovery from an extreme burnout, the cynicism on display in Milo’s story is marked (describing themselves, as the trellis, as “dead” in comparison

²⁹¹ *Ibid*

²⁹² Bang, Hyejin, and Thomas G. Reio Jr. 2017. “Examining the role of cynicism in the relationships between burnout and employee behavior.” *Revista de Psicología del Trabajo y de las Organizaciones* 33, no. 3 (December): 217-227. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rpto.2017.07.002>.

²⁹³ “Milo”, activity workbook, 2025.

to the life-giving tomatoes). Though theoretically aligned politically with their colleagues, Milo's story points to a catch-22 of administration, with those like Milo holding structure and legal obligations of any workplace, sitting in sharp contrast to colleagues who prioritize the outcomes and impacts of that work.

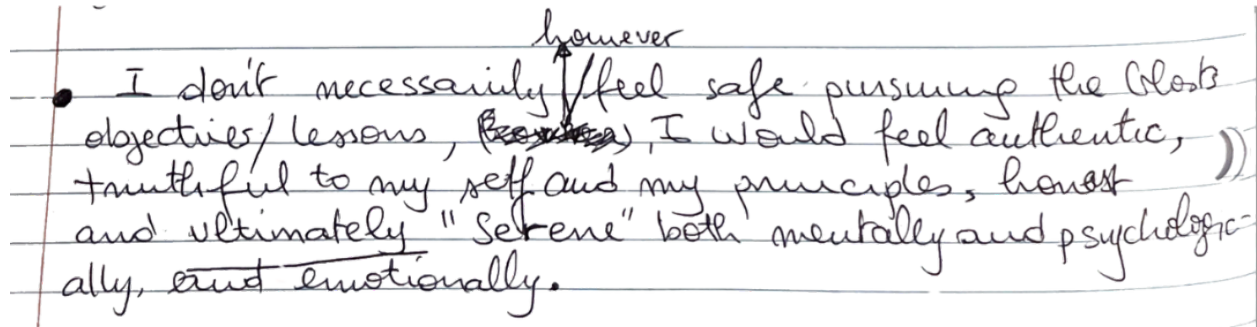


Figure 12: Note from Nidal's workbook that reads, "I don't necessarily feel safe pursuing the Ghosts' objectives/lessons, however I would feel authentic, truthful to my self and my principles, honest and ultimately "serene" both mentally and psychologically, and emotionally"

Nidal holds the opposite position to Milo, focusing on the potential for these organizations to make social change as more important than formal professionalization. This comes through both in the content and style of their writing:

In Beit Zaytoun, there was no such thing as "too political." Resistance was the very act of waking up and feeding each other.

Workshops turned into healing circles. Cooking classes into oral histories. Community dinners into organizing hubs. And every now and then, the house shook—not from fear, but from laughter so deep it shook loose the sadness from people's lungs.

Amber never called themselves a leader. But they were the root holding the soil.²⁹⁴

Once again, we see here an engagement with the utopian ideal and the lessons from ghosts informing it: those "liberation figures" that have created Nidal's vision of values-driven, collective, by-and-for models of organizations²⁹⁵. Within the activist-workplace, despite its shared and lofty goals, this dedication to the vision can itself be a site of conflict with colleagues. For Nidal, the ghosts of homeland make up those values. Like Raga, the experience of diaspora is one of at once confronting the individualism and competition of the neoliberal West, while holding onto the collectivist lessons from home. Despite their frequent anti-capitalist political ideologies, activist-workplaces are still not exempt from internalizing the overarching social culture. Intragroup surveillance over political alignment or work ethic, precarity of resources both organizational and individual, and clientele demands all contribute to creating an environment that "fosters competition rather than cooperation"²⁹⁶. As Nidal said:

²⁹⁴ "Nidal", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid*

²⁹⁶ Gorski, Paul, and Nour Erakat. 2019. "Racism, whiteness, and burnout in antiracism movements: How white racial justice activists elevate burnout in racial justice activists of color in the United States." *Ethnicities* 19, no. 5 (October): 784-808. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819833871>, 790

I've seen these groups being created back home in [my country], for example. And I've seen them being created here, but then this sense of individuality comes very stronger here. So most of the time there is like the individual interests that come stronger than the collective interest. It's really... it's really a thing, right?²⁹⁷

A note on food

In all three of these stories, and in Noah's recollection of his grandmother making dumplings after arriving in Canada, we see the cruciality of food in diasporic experiences of all kinds. For Willow, it is the appearance of their spirit guide accompanied by the smell of "dumplings and mannish water". For Milo, the garden tomatoes. And for Nidal, food is woven into every facet of their story: from the title ("the House of the Olive Branch"), to the emphasis on cooking communally, and to what their protagonist took with them as they started their journey:

Amber had crossed many borders, some drawn on maps, others stitched deep into the skin. They carried nothing but two things: a spice pouch handed down by a mother who once brewed revolution into every couscous she made, and a notebook full of recipes, traditions, rituals, stories, and names—some real, some lost.²⁹⁸

With more space, the return of food as a ghostly follower and teacher across diaspora could be a chapter of its own. A great deal of literature and theory exists on "culinary nostalgia"²⁹⁹, including in *Queer Phenomenology*, where Sara Ahmed describes the experience of moving house, writing "I allow the cumin to spill, and then gather it up again. I feel flung back somewhere else"³⁰⁰. In her writing, food is a way of maintaining a dual directionality, at once a "facing" towards lost home while remaining engaged with the "new" diasporic land³⁰¹. In "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Authenticity", Anita Mannur describes how for South-Asian communities, food functions primarily within the feminine and domestic space as a means of retaining or reproducing culture and identity³⁰². We see this in the *Ghost as Teacher*, with all three participant-authors citing a female ancestor as the one passing down lessons or bringing the food with them into the present. We also see it with Noah's grandmother: though not in the story itself, his retelling of her experience using food to provide for her family, and the fissures caused with her children by the need to cook for others all day long.

In this way, cuisine is a means of spectral engagement that speaks across the senses. It also creates a certain affect and memory that "invent[s] an image of the homeland as an unchanging and enduring cultural essence and are often singular about the ontological coherency of their national cuisines, despite the fact that memories are fragmentary, partial, and "irretrievably lost", harkening to a simpler time free from the ills of migration and labour under capitalism³⁰³. Not to mention, of course, the role of food in increasing the divide between gazes of land of origin and present land, and attempting to bring the values of home - the ghosts of memory - into the individualism and violence of the West. As Nidal said in our interview:

²⁹⁷ "Nidal" 2025

²⁹⁸ "Nidal", activity workbook, 2025.

²⁹⁹ Mannur, Anita. 2007. "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora." MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States 32, no. 4 (December): 11-31.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/32.4.11>.

³⁰⁰ Ahmed 2006, 10

³⁰¹ *Ibid*

³⁰² Mannur 2007, 14

³⁰³ Mannur 2007, 14

One of the main elements that really grounded me through my exile experience was food. And food, like, it has so many meanings and I do have a very strong connection to food, to food elements, to cuisine in general. And culturally, that's what brings us all together, you know? I don't remember growing up eating alone. That concept doesn't exist in my archives.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ "Nidal" 2025

Conclusions

It is hard to capture within a reasonable number of pages the many layers of metaphor and storytelling that the hauntological lens inspired in all eight of the participants' stories. As products of generations, lands, traumas, and migrations, they represent a series of ever-fractured inheritances from an immeasurable number of ancestors and elders (both familial and otherwise) that are carried through their daily lives. These many stacked inheritances call to mind Sara Ahmed's discussion of Edmund Husserl's "writing table", and all the events that "have already taken place for the table to arrive"³⁰⁵. The table's wood is taken from trees, grown from earth over decades or centuries. The wood then passes through dozens of hands as it is cut, shaped, assembled, varnished. The tools used have their own material roots and creation processes too. The table is then shipped from manufacturer to seller, from seller to owner. Sometimes sold from an old owner to a new one. Everything and everyone that the table touches leaves an imprint in the present, from its designs to the scratches and wears on its surface. This - and much more - is the table's "background", that which must be examined to understand how it emerges in the present, and how it exists in space³⁰⁶.

For employees at the activist-workplace, their "backgrounds" (all that's left an imprint) exert force on their interpersonal relationships, their ability to engage in their work, and their sense of self. In the present, these ghosts of pasts and traumas interact with the anticipatory hauntings of the future: images of equitable, just, and "free" systems of governance. As workers attempt to co-create their utopic visions, even perform those visions through their policy and practices, their individual and shared inheritances seep out of walls and through floorboards. Some ghosts further (re)entrench individual visions, some inspire retreat, some try to wrestle control. The ghosts are arguably a greater threat to team cohesion than even the external forces like funding and government policy because of the ways that they can collapse the utopian project, impeding the ability of staff to work collaboratively and intentionally against state and capital threats. Because of the collision of these spectral presences, further "ghosts" of organizational trauma are layered on each new generation of worker.



Reckoning with ourselves & our pasts

"I am a future ghost. I am getting ready for my haunting"³⁰⁷

In an effort to continue building a picture of the activist-workplace that is rooted in creative fiction, let us imagine briefly that all eight of the *Addressing the Ghost* participants worked together in one organization. Though themselves never colleagues, their stories give us a picture of how different ghosts contribute to a theoretical activist-workplace, and of what the dynamics and potential conflicts in this work environment would be.

³⁰⁵ Ahmed 2006, 37

³⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 38

³⁰⁷ Tuck, Eve, and C. Ree. 2013. "A Glossary of Haunting." In *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Stacy L. Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams, and Carolyn Ellis, 639-658. N.p.: Left Coast Press, Incorporated., 648

We know, as demonstrated in Chapter 4: The Future, that everyone on this fictionalized “team” has similar ideas about the ideal state of their organization: they all want better extrinsic benefits like higher pay and more health days, strong and open communication, and accommodations for worker ability and capacity. The participants also shared a vision of a mixed governance structure that combined high autonomy with some hierarchy and accountability, though any specificity in terms of an organizational chart remains elusive. While these similarities are a promising start for team solidarity, it was in their interactions with these visions that our fictional “colleagues” began to diverge or disagree, even conflicting with their own ideals. Disagreements would arise, for example, over team composition and expulsion, with some participants wanting to only “let in” those who inherently understood the values and politics of an organization. At the same time, other team members (or even those very same team members) might find this impulse incongruous with the stated political aims of diversity and community-building.

It is in these types of divergences around the utopia that we begin to also see each individual’s ghosts arrive (or return), and that we can imagine how a team made up of these individuals could descend into chronic burnout and internal conflicts. Noah and Ari, for example, might clash over the manifestations of their diasporic traumas in the workplace; the ghosts in Ari’s home disconnecting them from work, while Noah throws himself into his responsibilities in an effort to appease his familial hauntings, possibly even taking on some of Ari’s work as they right their flipped-over furniture. There would be potential within that dynamic for one colleague to become resentful of the other or as they both deal with disruptive ghosts that impact - in opposite directions - their abilities to lead independent and “unhaunted” lives. Oliver and Nadal might have conflict over accountability and structure, with Oliver’s ghost “Chester” gravitating towards “rule-following” while Nadal’s holds the vision of a work environment that feels like “home” and moves more fluidly and from passion rather than strict adherence to policy. Megan and Raga, both quieter and more reserved employees, might chafe at Milo’s assertiveness in decision-making spaces. And then there is Willow, observing it all, and feeling further validated in their hesitance to share vulnerabilities while dealing with the cynicism of burnout. Despite their shared utopian visions, the pathways that both brought them into the organization and the ways they navigate through it are so inherently human: divergent, flawed, exhausted, and clashing. In Willow’s case, this translates into a larger reflection on organizations as a whole, and reckoning with how we see them and what we expect of them:

I think the exercise brought up having to reckon with a lot of the impossibilities of community work. And yeah... I want to say it’s like a sense of hopelessness, but I think [it’s] just the issues we run into and trying to work around an environment that’s inherently highly emotional and can be very...dealing with a lot of different identities and things like that. But also, I think there was some hope in terms of how we can shift our expectations that we put on ourselves as service providers and staff and as organizations...I’m more about following where the love is, where like rather than identitarianism or like certain politics, I think that as a guide, it can be very helpful.³⁰⁸

Coupled with the other stressors like financial insecurity and overwhelming levels of client demand, naturally it is hard to imagine this fictional team “leading themselves” through complex flat governance structures or making programming decisions efficiently. The persistent burnout and conflicts that come from a stressful environment like this one consistently stunts the ability of workers to meaningfully engage with one another, requiring alternative approaches to improving cohesion and collaboration. It is crucial to explore what one “brings in” to an organization, and how that impacts what they “receive” there: to reckon with the ghosts that

³⁰⁸ “Willow”, *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, 2025

follow them around in an effort to change their interaction with them. In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon writes:

Reckoning is about knowing what kind of effort is required to change ourselves and the conditions that make us who we are, that set limits on what is acceptable and unacceptable, on what is possible and impossible.³⁰⁹

The spectre tries to share unheard or ignored messages, both when they are lost potentials haunting from the past, or “unfulfilled promises” from the future that may still come to pass³¹⁰. Hauntings are lessons in not forgetting, something to hold onto, a warning of imminent (real or imagined) risk³¹¹. As ghosts are an inevitable and unavoidable part of social life³¹², deep engagement with and challenging of the social “scripts” that are our spectral inheritances provides a pathway from which reckoning can come, not just for individual healing or improved work environments, but also in service of building better futures. The use of narrative and fiction helps participants to better understand themselves and their colleagues, and, possibly, that better understanding can create the conditions for healing. As Oliver said in our interview: “there’s something about letting them [the ghosts] be free, that then frees yourself from the haunting simultaneously”³¹³. By letting the ghosts speak at last, we care for them and their motivations. We can better understand the influences that they exert on us, and begin to move through/past them, setting them free. Milo said something similar in our interview:

I found it incredibly moving as a way to talk about the invisible, because I think that there are always invisible forces at play and you have to find a very creative and playful way of discussing that to even get people to be interested in discussing it, I found. I found it, as I said, cathartic to just write this story down from a different perspective. And I think that was like it was helpful for me to do that.³¹⁴

As previously discussed in other chapters, the aim of the ghost-story writing methodology was to provide an avenue for participants to explore traumas (in the recent or distant past) through a “third party” (the ghost). Using hauntology for storytelling also has potential to create safe containers for conversations about difference. Viewing our oppressions through the spectral lens allows us to move away from rendering our colleagues “culpable” and “prosecutable” injurers, and instead opens up potential for better collaboration against the state³¹⁵. The objective is to build webs of care that consider each individual’s complex “unique combination of circumstances,” going beyond binary understandings of privilege and oppression, and instead help us see the many historical imprints that created our present dispositions³¹⁶. It is worth noting that there is an irony here that remains unspoken by all the participants: amidst the many different pathways and inheritances that have created them in the present, there remains near-universal sameness in the lessons they carry with them. This goes beyond just their shared visions of collectivism and openness: they all grapple with the legacy of colonialism, they all share a fear of vulnerability, they all feel internal contradictions about how to apply their politics in human-centered ways. So while yes, every individual is unique, there are also ways in which they are in fact not unique at all. Through the use of storytelling, we can use a literary

³⁰⁹ Gordon 2008, 202

³¹⁰ Coverley 2021, 10

³¹¹ McPherson 2024, 10

³¹² Gordon 2008, 201

³¹³ “Oliver” 2025

³¹⁴ “Milo” 2025

³¹⁵ Brown 2002, 371

³¹⁶ Vannucci and Singer 2010, 101

analysis to identify common tropes, themes, and characters that could be used to unite teams and build deeper empathy. Altogether, by making a ghost something that we speak to and of, we can create a new dialogical approach to our traumas and collective or individual memories, and hopefully “find the root” of organizational conflicts. Though all of our participants had similar shared *visions* in many ways, the ways they “gesture”³¹⁷ towards those futures differed greatly. With improved mutual understanding, our fictional “team” might uncover shared inspirations and pasts from which to design their organization. It also gives employees something to hold on to or refer back to in moments of conflict around the future: whenever a new ghost “arrives” or an old ghost “returns” to disrupt, it can be used to reorient and anchor an organization during moments of transition.

This is not to say that hauntological exploration isn’t flawed, like any kind of oral history methodology. The participants only write what they can see within themselves, and what they seek out when they look towards the past. What those ghosts tell us about ourselves are only *what we make of them*, only how we see and understand them. So while exploration can unlock healing and understanding, there remains the risk of finding only what we want to find. Also, though this project attempts to speak to the spirit and make the spirit speak back, as Derrida says it “can only be taken at [its] word”³¹⁸. We cannot really see the spirit, reify it, or confirm that what it says is truth. As Noah said:

Another thing that came up for me was this idea of what is represented in negative space, because ghosts are sort of not in the physical space, right? They’re an absence in a way, and they can’t generally express themselves in the traditional idea of a ghost. They don’t speak. They just kind of are a presence. So this idea of like, what is unsaid, what is said by the unsaid? What is expressed by that’s not explicit, that’s implicit?³¹⁹

The utopia in/is practice

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.”³²⁰

On the second day of the *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, the participants sat hunched over desks with pens in hand writing their stories, and I joined them. Not to write my own ghosts - or any more of my ghosts than already written down - but to write each participant a short thank you note attempting to express the depth of my gratitude for the gift of their time. As I wrote those letters, it struck me that the design of my research was both my own exorcism and my own utopian project. All I have wanted, through my own burnouts and departure from the activist-workplace, was to have a moment in which a group could really see each other. Where they could really look into themselves. Where they could collectively examine, dream, cry... with no purpose but connection. As we saw in Chapter 3: Process & Ethnography, the workshop was successful in creating an environment for eight strangers to connect and find shared

³¹⁷ Zembylas, Bozalek, and Motala 2019-2020, 46

³¹⁸ Derrida 1994, 25

³¹⁹ “Noah”, *Addressing the Ghost* workshop, 2025

³²⁰ “Oscar Wilde. The Soul of Man under Socialism.” Originally published, 1891. Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>.

experiences across a very diverse set of activist-workplaces. I had, in the end, engineered a new way to set my own ghosts free, and free myself of them in turn.

I came into this project looking for a pathway to something akin to Muñoz's "Brown Commons"³²¹: a swirl of ancestors and future generations convening in the present, to help us understand something about what we're working towards, some roadmap toward utopia. I also came in looking for ammunition: testimonies about the way we were failing one another, though I was unsure for what purpose (I can now confidently say that it was a disruptive ghost looking for validation). But Muñoz asserts that "The task at hand is not to enact a commons, but to touch an actually existing commons"³²². And ultimately this project demonstrated that finding the existing commons is not as far away as we think it is. This project showed me only that there is something unanswerable about the question of a utopian ontology in leftist communities, and the struggle to define and realize it. The participants could engage in imagination only to an extent, and so in a sense threw the question back to me: what *are* we working towards? Are there small, connected and domino-like utopian moments that build upon one another over time? Or are they fleeting flashes that leave us wanting more? Is Utopia then a toxic relationship of glimpses that keep us tied to our efforts, making us say "I've gotten close, so it must be there"?

I asked Noah in our interview whether he felt he had experienced anything like a utopian organization. He spoke about where he works now, a neighbourhood advocacy organization in Montreal, saying:

Yeah. I don't want to toot my own horn, but [my organization] is modeled after mistakes of other organizations that I've coached or been a part of. Obviously it wasn't [only] on me either...it is a very, very exceptional organization that came out of a group of activists that were already tightly in there, therefore there was a trust relationship that we formed. It's kind of an exceptional case, but [there are] definitely glimpses of that [utopia] in working with [my organization]. But it's not...not utopic or any of that stuff yet.³²³

This language of "glimpses" stuck with me as I began analysis of the research data and the writing of this thesis. And all the while, I have been oscillating between an optimistic and pessimistic view of utopia within the activist-workplace. These views are two sides of the same coin, two lenses, two frames with which to understand and grasp the fundamental conclusion of this research: that the utopian project is already all around us, and it can be found in our "expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living"³²⁴.



Through the "pessimistic" lens, I would assert that if there cannot be one "ideal" for everyone, then perhaps the constant attempts to create it (the glimpse) is the closest that we can get. This is not to excuse the sector's faults, but an offer to reframe our view towards seeing the *striving itself* as the utopian effort: perhaps we must be satisfied with the striving, and not expect more. Limited imagination and limited power

³²¹ Muñoz, José E. 2020. *The Sense of Brown*. Edited by Tavia A. Ochieng' Nyongó and Joshua Chambers-Letson. N.p.: Duke University Press.

³²² Muñoz 2020, 6

³²³ "Noah" 2025

³²⁴ Levitas 2013, xvi

mean that any “contested” utopian project, any project without universal agreement, will fail³²⁵. Though the activist-workplaces do not want for imagination, they still operate under collective structures embedded with the freedom to express dissent³²⁶, which often manifests as infighting over visions of both the “what” and “how” of utopian striving. Accompanying this stunting conflict is their greatest limitation: their power within the state, which through their unstable funding and unending demand keep them from creating or participating in mass liberatory movement-building. Altogether, the recurrent internal conflicts that come from a struggle to gain power, bad actors causing pain, and systemic repression makes existence of a potential utopian organization even further out of reach. As Willow wrote in their workbook, perhaps the ideal organization should never and will never exist, and we must somehow find satisfaction in the knowledge that we keep trying to make it real. A cynical perspective to be sure, but one that reflects the cynicisms held by the research participants, who look at their own sector with a sense of disappointment, or even rage, layered under their continued commitment to the sector’s perpetuity. Many of those who exit activist-workplaces will become consultants, join Boards of Directors, or move to philanthropy; all to stay connected somehow to the good work of organizations they once were part of. Therefore my “pessimistic” argument is less pessimistic, and more an urging to a kind of contented resignation: under all our limitations and contestations, perhaps we must find satisfaction in the knowledge that we continue trying to make the work - and the world - better, though we know we won’t. That that effort is enough. That conflict is at the centre of the haunted human condition; that it is foolish to expect that the utopian is implementable, or can ever be more than just glimpsed.

However, through the more “optimistic” frame, if we believe the participants-authors’ when they say that democracy is critical to utopia, then perhaps that process of debate and reevaluation - our incessant attempts to “get it right” - should be celebrated as an asset within leftism, rather than held up as an indictment against our community. If we are so afraid of “totalitarianism” and political purity culture, then the antidote must be...this. Perhaps rather than resigning ourselves to the part-and-parcel tension and disagreement of the human condition, we view it instead as a commitment to democracy and diversity, the true virtues of The Utopia. In this framing, I turn away from pessimism and instead to Muñoz and the “not-yet-conscious”³²⁷: despite our imaginations and anticipations, we are experimenting in the present towards a future yet unknown. The fractalized performance of the ideal in the activist-workplace continually creates new and better models that work against white supremacy: through intimacy and vulnerability, through acknowledgement and deconstruction of harm, through collectivism. This viewpoint might be better described more as naivete than optimism in its positing that perhaps - rather than “the closest we can get,” we should view these organizational practices as the Utopia. We should look lovingly back on ourselves, and feel pride that these organizations exist and give us spaces for dissenting, sticky, and passionate expressions of our dreams. As Muñoz writes, through our ideation we continue to know “exactly, to be sure, what the false thing is”³²⁸, and therefore our commitment to attempting utopianism functions as a critiquing the dominant oppressive structures of the state³²⁹. Utopianism as resistance to hegemony. Utopianism as a “being alongside”³³⁰ in the journey, working democratically through and across difference.

³²⁵ *Ibid*, 220

³²⁶ *Ibid*

³²⁷ Muñoz 2019, 28

³²⁸ *Ibid*, 38

³²⁹ Muñoz 2019, 39

³³⁰ Muñoz 2020, 2

These two lenses of resignation versus resistance then naturally pose the following question... will this “perfect organization” never exist, or, are we already in paradise? Probably the “answer”, whatever it is, lies somewhere in the messy middle. But as we acknowledge that the utopia has been and can be glimpsed, while also acknowledging that the process continues to harm, there is only one thing of which we can be certain: that the utopian effort these organizations undertake continues to operate as “a critique of the present and a reconstitution of the future”³³¹. It continues to show us where we fail, and it shows us the paths forward. The utopian process can in essence only operate as an orienting device, and when we pause to stand in it, to examine what we’ve done thus far and what ghosts are lingering on the road behind us, we can find the next point on the map.

³³¹ Levitas 2013, 220

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Appendix: Complete Participant Stories

Megan's Story

Around the table there are too many ghosts. This ghost (who does not need anyone to know her name) keeps her eyes straight ahead so as to not see the others. There is a level of protecting, not ignorance exactly but at least a curtain needed to just push on. This can be healing, this will be healing, the ghost needs it to be, or knows it needs to be. The other ghosts are prone to

chaos and conflict but not this ghost, this ghost is prone to sitting still and grounding, like wedging a hook into the earth to stay still.

This ghost is tired, this thing they are weaving is a facsimile, a new art piece modeled off a memory that can't be accessed (was it given paint?). There is a balance that needs to be struck between recognizing the transformative potential of art and understanding that a painting never stopped a genocide. The ghost is tired. There is something playful in the chaos behind the curtain, something looser, but there are too many ghosts there to be taken care of. They will burn the house down. And what are you supposed to do without a house?

Oliver's Story: *Imaginary Friends & Small Gods*

Chester began haunting me when I was young. He shows up to remind me to put things back where they were, to organize shoes & cupboards, to offer to skin chicken legs, reminds me to say sorry, to help out, and to shut off lights. It may be more fair to say that Chester haunts spaces that get too full, too noisy, too chaotic. Chaos conjures him. He first appeared to be when an imaginary friend might start to show up for a lonely child, but Chester was more than just an imaginary friend. Chester protected me by teaching I could take control of something. I think Chester saved me.

Chester is a really anxious ghost, but he has a tendency to add to the noise. "If no one says or does this now, it'll be so difficult later!" Chester can't help it, even though he knows that bigger ghosts drive change and create chaos, ghosts that are more powerful, and who have at least for centuries, haunted the world. These ghosts are more like small gods.

Since joining the community sector, I regularly witness Chester turning around in circles, struggling against a few larger, more powerful sector ghosts: the missionary ghost, the virtuous Victorian ghost, the big hairy ideas ghost, the starving artist ghost. Chester panics when colleagues want to get experimental. He gets so nervous when we ignore policy, or when a charismatic and self-interested person starts to take up too much space. Chester relaxes when a policy gets approved, an apology is offered, when a desk gets cleaned out. Group harmony and fairness banish him. I feel bad for Chester - he cares so much but no one really likes him, even if they agree. Chester always seems tired - I don't think he ever truly gets to rest, but maybe that's how all ghosts are - tireless and vigilant.

Ari's Story

There is a ghost called the spirit of change.

One day I was in the library, it was a day like any other. Then books around me started crashing to the ground. Paintings became crooked. Things moved but I didn't know why.

The next week I went to the museum. My roommate that was supposed to go with me was ill with COVID-19. How can we do anything these days - threats are everywhere. I walked through the modernist architecture of the museum. Its high ceilings reached up indefinitely to disappear into a sky light and its blank white walls seemed to stare at me. Where was the art?

I made my way to the "19th Century Canadian Art" section, adjusting my face mask as I walked. I found myself amongst artifacts of all kinds, silverware carved with elaborate designs, polished

wooden chairs, varnished desks, glazed ceramic vases. The objects all seemed to communicate the same thing. They remembered who created them but couldn't speak it, couldn't communicate it to the curator, gallerists, and passerby that looked at them every day. Next to all these works the description plate read: Artists Unknown.

Something that day distracted me, and when I arrived home I wrote furiously - why have all these creators been forgotten? I tried to say their names but all I had was a feeling, no words.

That evening as I slept, my house rearranged itself. My chairs flipped themselves upside down, my vases smashed themselves against the wall, leaving puddles of broken glass and flower petals. My dreams were feverish. I awoke with a start and couldn't tell what was a dream what was real... because how could it be possible that the ceiling of my bedroom had become my floor, and all my belongings had fallen, dispersed by gravity as if someone held my house like a rubix cube and shifted all its components around.

My roommate walked in, stumbling into this [altered] space. He was still sick. He shouted from the wall: "What happened?"

Somehow we were haunted, our home, our possessions, by the spirits that would not let us forget. They were here and life could not go on as usual without acknowledging them. How the hell was I gonna go to work in a state like this. Who would understand. My world was completely reversed.

Raga's Story

Yaru is a ghost carrying a spiritual entity within them that we all can relate to known as Jana. It's a calming translucent mist that glistens within, emanating from our soul, out into the external world. It feels like a peaceful misty breeze draped across your cheeks. Jana is our aligned nature and looks different in everybody, yet it is the thing that unites us all. It's the thing we try to access on our weekends with family, going out to the cottage, when we travel somewhere new, or when we go to that restorative yoga class. That moment of peace and resolution to be our true selves. Jana is also bright, curious, charismatic, confident, responsible, balanced and has good intentions. It is our ability to see in an expanded egoless view, open and ready to listen and receive, and to look at ourselves from different lenses.

Yaru once felt connected to their Jana – especially through their deep love for people, for music, and the mysticisms of life. An avid reader and natural humanitarian, they loved through stories and characters and ideals. They still care so much for others, but now it's in a different way. Now, everything they do is driven by their Mana.

Mana is a dark, opaque, plaguing cloud that constricts the throats of any entity it passes through. It separates a person from their nature, fragmenting their Jana, creating barriers of access. Mana is vain, self-serving, insecure, manipulative, rigid, and irresponsible. It is a limiting cloud that restricts your vision where everything feels like a threat. When you live in Mana, you can't see and in turn, are fighting to be seen. Everything becomes external to you pulling you farther and farther from your nature.

Yaru always felt disenfranchised and different. In a nutshell, they felt very unseen and used vehicles of Jana, human connection, to absolve the darkness, their Mana within them. Yaru

came to join the board of an organization connected to one of their favourite things, music. Music is filled with Jana, a natural expression of the soul.

Yaru's intentions were to help young people connect to their Jana and find expression. Their desire to be there was born out of the pain of feeling cut off, and fragmented, and having challenges with their mind and body. They knew nothing about how the board worked but seemed eager to learn. Yaru was brimming with ideas and elated by what the board represented in their journey. Yaru loved to bathe in its ideals.

Swara, their friend, had been working at the organization on the board for over a year. They welcomed Yaru in. Swara was very engaged with the mission and values of the org, and dedicated to the vision of what they were trying to create that year. They too, felt disenfranchised by the hardships of childhood adversity and how that reflected into their adult life. Swara had overcome a lot in their life including a chronic illness that kept them bedridden for years. They dreamed of working at this org but didn't have the capacity in the past and longed to give back to music and their inner child. Swara was no perfect angel, but they had the ability to see when they were operating from Jana or when Mana, and the agency to choose Jana on their path.

Yaru saw the ease in which Swara worked and delegated tasks. They felt the sweltering stormy clouds of Mana rise within them, with each interaction. Their eyes darkened. Feeling powerless, they began to shut down, and were unable to see how their promises were going unkept, tasks were piling up, and dynamics of trust were affected.

Swara tried to help Yaru see the destruction they were causing but it was too late. The Mana had completely taken over them and Swara was left to pick up the pieces. Others noticed the tension but did not know what to do. Swara thought a mediation could help because at this point, Yaru was so deep in their Mana they brought up personal feelings about their recent past friendship.

But Yaru was unable to access their Jana to reconcile and Swara was left burnout from the misunderstandings of their intentions and had to stop working. Swara quickly realized that Yaru had come to this space to be revered and not to truly help the young people find their expression through music. They just wanted to say they did that.

Swara learned from this ghost that conscious leadership is a pillar of community work and requires a balance of ideals and execution. They learned that work coming from Jana, rather than Mana, is actually what allows for true collectivism where people can have their autonomy, share the power and decision-making and sync that towards a common goal. And in order to do that, they need to have access to their Jana.

Noah's Story

As the last flares of daylight paint the horizon a livid pink-orange, another dead leaf falls from the spiny fig-leaf plant in the window, long desiccated from the extended drought of the pandemic. No one had entered the office in months to work, much less to water. Or so we thought -

6:33pm. Last one in the office, as usual. I shut down my work station and prepared to go. Into the shared kitchen to grab my leftovers. Tidy up. Lights off. And then - something strange. The workstation was still on. Somewhat perturbed, I gave the command again to shut down and walked towards the door to arm the alarm.

Another audible ping from my office. Was I hearing things? And then another. Warily, I approached to find the dark office marbled with the aura of a lit screen. Feeling a mix of trepidation and annoyance, I opened the door and advanced around my desk with hesitation. Not only was the computer still on, the email client was open and displaying an unsent draft email that I had forgotten to write.

Mental calculation on how long it would take me to write that email, the consequences of arriving home late vs. the potential letdown to the organization is this doesn't go out tonight.

The email involved a follow-up to all staff members regarding avenues for restructuring task distribution to lighten the workload for everyone. The topic had been discussed in last week's collective meeting, and the consensus had been to move forward. No one, however, had the capacity to do so, and as I had raised the issue I was compelled to step up and take it on. Compelled by an unknown force -

Others who had worked in the organization had felt it as well, earlier than I had. Some had honed their sensitivity over the years, and others had been afflicted with physical manifestations of sickness. Their bodies had tried to tell them. Fatigue, loss of concentration, headaches, wrist pain, stiff knee joints, nausea: their bodies were smarter than mine. They did not last, they buckled, bowed out and saved themselves.

I am still here. At work.

9:09pm

Sent the email, then sent a few more before it would be too late to send them and still appear professional.

I glance at the office messaging system and notice a colleague calling for support on reviewing a funding application - in French - that, if successful, would enable us to hire an admin assistant who could help us lighten the load on our day-to-day tasks. Due tomorrow! At noon. Reasoning that I probably won't come in early tomorrow, and that the French revision will come easier to me than other Anglos in the collective. I am called to take it on.

The organization had not always been non-hierarchical. There had been an ED at one point, near its birth. Even back then, the demand for services and the scarcity in the sector had imposed a certain culture, and with time that culture became the implicit norm. Some surmise that the ghost first appeared (*gestated?) around that time. Others say it came later. Whatever the case, before long came the inevitable existential crisis. How to operate sustainably a community organization in a way that truly reflected the anti-colonial, anti-oppressive values it supposedly espoused? That rejected the hetero-patriarchy and power dynamics of the vilified

“corporate” sector? They - the elders, the ancestors, although they were young and - some say - naive at the time, decided to mutate into a flat, non-hierarchical structure in which there was no named leader, no inequity in the pay scale. Decisions were to be made by consensus, action be borne by everyone, with the collective responsibility and accountability at keeping the organization afloat split between everyone equally. Many hands make light work. We need not only imagine the ideal organization, they proclaimed - we may create it! Mold it! And in a mad elan of utopic glee, they did so and recorded it in the meeting minutes, although those minutes have been blurred and fractured through years of cloud drive mismanagement, alas -

It is uncertain whether they themselves created the ghost, or whether the ghost was already there in the rafters, and compelled them to ritualize its own creation. I tend to think it is the latter.

11:50pm.

I suddenly am taken by a catatonic stiffness in my neck. I pop my head back, away from the screen, and stretch. What time is it? The clock on my computer, in the upper right of the screen, has vanished. By the astral glaze streaming through the window, I guess that it is almost midnight. I must leave - I hastily save in-process documents and close Windows. Shut down - or try to -

It doesn't work, it stays on, stubbornly. The “shut down” option is greyed out. I try a hard stop with the button on the unit - to no avail. Fuck it - pull the plug -

The screen blips off, the computer fan groans to a stop. As silence pervades my senses, my eyes adjust. Only the desk lamp is on. As I bend down to pick up my bag, I glimpse a reflection in the glass of the screen. A face - but not my face.

Most of the face was obscured in shadow. I only remember the eyes, sunken, with bags doubled deep under the eyes, unblinking. My heart stops as I slowly sit back up in my chair, turn towards the screen. No - it's me. Was I hallucinating?

Then - the office screams out with the sound of multiple phones ringing at once. Someone is calling - me -

Certain ghosts haunt specific places, and others are imprinted on a family line through a curse or a traumatic event. The spectre of overwork has hung over my family for generations. Does it really haunt us, or is the haunting actually a form of benevolent vigilance?

In that office it lived and lurked, sometimes approaching to perch on my shoulders like a gargoyle. If I could speak to it, what would I say?

Willow's Story: *The Compass / Encompassing: A Guide to Spirit Guides*

We're all sitting in the drop-in space together.
We think it's just us, we think it's a new day.

But we're all a culmination of our lineage and ~~the energies that danced around~~ and everyone, everything that has touched us.

Widened eyes peak over masks, waiting for an alarm. The ~~despair~~ hopelessness is palpable. Another piece of plaster falls from the wall as the last team members tucks in their seat for the meeting. Just as the Executive Director introduces the agenda in that familiar defeated tone, a colleague interrupt[s] with a yelp while flicking a bedbug off their forearm.

We're all part of someone who knows a way out.
We all have a guide to be unlocked.
Few things trouble me more than feeling stuck.
[the entities / energies] thrive off a self-inflicted prison.

[I'm part of the problem, my heart doesn't live here anymore - detached too far]

All it takes is faith. And then she appears. I feel her smile. Her warmth familiar. She not always nice, but she is kind. A Jamaican woman who has survived the turn of the century encompasses wisdom and duality.

Just as I am searching for her, she is searching for me. She enters the drop in so swiftly, so smoothly, that it takes a moment before the entire room pauses.

She notices things are out of order. Not the objects in the room, but the room feels like a garden overrun with weeds. She sees what we can't.

Before any of us can react, she shakes her head, snaps her fingers above her head and whistles loudly. She is not all-knowing, and calls on the collective.

Still frozen in shock, each of my colleagues are joined by an orb that is slowly taking form. Suddenly we are surrounded by a projection of beings - humans, animals, objects. Guides, grandfathers, visual embodiments of memories and reminders.
The scent in the space shifts from stale mildew to the smell of dumplings and mannish water.

There are looks of disbelief and confusion, which quickly dissolve into enchantment. The familiarity and comfort pulls us in.

The BBQ is a place for our spirit guides to bring us closer to our lessons, closer to our truths. We are all humbled in our respective ways. Our needs alone have summoned exactly who or what we need to see.

Almost everyone is eating and chatting. I see two colleagues burst into tears almost in succession. One is being held in the arms of a South American man. I make out the words "responsabilidad" and "corriente".
The other colleague, a white man, holds a compass that appeared before him - it's shiny, brass, almost glowing.

I turn to my spirit guide - she finally has a moment to chat after visiting and acting as host to the other pairs around the drop-in.

"I wonder where he's off to with that compass" I saw comically.

“To find the answers inside himself,” my spirit guide answers calmly, without missing a beat.

I blush, realizing how dismissive my comment was, instantly made aware of how much mysticism, colour, and hope was around me while I chose to remain a critic.

“Do you want me to help you take that off?” my spirit guide asked, using her lips to point towards my shoulder.

“Take off wh-”

I looked at my shoulders and both instantly felt this unbearable weight as I saw shimmering armour seemingly appear out of nowhere. I look back up at her, stunned.

She laughs. “JOKES. Mi nah work fi free. I’m not here to do the work for you, let’s see you lift it den”

I struggle to remove the armour, shoulder aching from what feels like years of weight and tension.

“You have it on your back this whole time as you JUS’ notice? Lord haff mercy,” she chuckles again.

Finally, I find the strength to remove the armour that had completely enclosed my torso.

Nidal's Story: *Amber and Beit Zaytoun – Amber and the House of the Olive Branch*

There once was a city made of concrete and frost, where exile clung to windows like condensation and names were often left at the border. In this city stood a house—not built by architects, but by dreamers, drifters, and those with salt and sun traces are still felt in their bones.

The house was alive. Not in a spooky way. In a *real* way. The walls murmured in several languages and dialects. The stairs sang old protest chants. The fridge door creaked open for those too shy to ask, and at the center of this enchanted refuge was **Amber**, a soul wrapped in human skin, with burnt sugar eyes and a laugh like summer wind chimes on a Jasmin balcony in Tunis.

Amber had crossed many borders, some drawn on maps, others stitched deep into the skin. They carried nothing but two things: a spice pouch handed down by a mother who once brewed revolution into every couscous she made, and a notebook full of recipes, traditions, rituals, stories, and names—some real, some lost.

The house Amber built—or maybe the house that *found* Amber—became known as **Beit Zaytoun**, the House of the Olive Branch. But it was more than a name. It was a promise.

Here, those crushed by the weight of forgetting could begin to remember...

Each room in Beit Zaytoun was watched over by an old ghost, though no one feared them. These spirits were not remnants of the past—they were guides, comrades, and teachers. They aspired for a future.

Zaytoun, the olive-hearted one, stirred in the steam of couscous, olive oil, and the seventeen spices. They reminded newcomers that roots could grow in exile too—that land is not only earth, but memory, care, and hands touching and forming dough together.

Mouna, whose voice was calligraphy and thunder, helped those who had been renamed by colonizers or silenced by systems find their true names again. They ran a secret library in the attic, where every book was a doorway, and every story taught resistance.

Yahya, the ghost who beat rhythm into the floorboards, taught the young ones how to speak loud in drums, how to write love poems that doubled as political manifestos, how to take up space without apology.

Hayat, the breath between sobs and songs, gave sanctuary in the garden, where rosemary grew wild, and mint was harvested under moonlight. She sat with those grieving and whispered: *You are still here. And that is holy.*

Noor, no one ever saw. But everyone felt their light—in the courage to speak out at city hall, in the hand that reached across the table, in the flame that refused to go out even when the world went dark.

People came and went. A queer Syrian painter who left their family but found one here. A Palestinian Trans migrant who taught soul food infused with cumin, zaatar and hope. A Haitian poet who turned trauma into gospel. A Tunisian who couldn't go home but recreated it in every bite of briq they made.

In Beit Zaytoun, there was no such thing as “too political.” Resistance was the very act of waking up and feeding each other.

Workshops turned into healing circles. Cooking classes into oral histories. Community dinners into organizing hubs. And every now and then, the house shook—not from fear, but from laughter so deep it shook loose the sadness from people's lungs.

Amber never called themselves a leader. But they were the root holding the soil.

And when the frost of the city thickened, and systems cracked down harder, and people began to disappear into detention and deportation, the house did not crumble. It *grew*.

It grew arms that reached into detention centers, mouths that spoke truth in courtrooms, feet that marched without hesitation.

Amber would often sit under the olive tree they planted out back—grown from a pit smuggled across seas—and whisper the names of everyone who passed through.

Not one was forgotten. Not even the ones who only came once, or the ones who came only in dreams.

Beit Zaytoun is still there, you know.

Maybe not in Montreal. Maybe not in this world.

But wherever people cook for each other with intention, wherever queerness is met with joy instead of fear, wherever community means survival, and survival means revolution—

There is a house with a creaky floor, and ghosts with gentle hands, and someone like Amber waiting to welcome you in.

Milo's Story

Chapter 1

Marie and Gabbi, two queer elders, sit with me around a glass kitchen table in the first adult queer apartment I've seen. Gabbi lives here with her wife, a successful lesbian power couple that have made a living of speaking truth to power, organizing for women's rights, hiding their lesbian private life from prying eyes, decentering themselves within the movements they have fought so hard for.

Marie explains to me the role of a leader the way only a 50+ year old trans top can - through a BDSM analogy.

"Tops don't hold 'all the power'", she says, "Tops share the power with bottoms. Bottoms dictate the scene. Bottoms have safe words. Tops create the structure with the bottoms. They provide a structure where bottoms can get creative. They both need each other".

"Real leadership is collaborative - it's unproduced," Gabbi adds, "It gives room to the others to lean back and feel taken care of - to grow their own initiatives and focus on their realm of expertise." They've taken their morning to explain to me, a very scared 27 year old - afraid of of my own power, of my own voice, of my positionality - of the possibilities of failure if I don't memorize and put into place the ever shifting rules of (youth, terminally online) social justice culture, the possibilities of ethical leadership. Of the necessity of role specialization to create the responsible structure that would allow for fast pivots needed for growth. I think of my Zia Bruna's garden - the need for trellises for the kiwis and stakes for the tomatoes. Without the structure, they sprawling weight of plump tomatoes would break every branch, every successful tomato a threat to the plants health no matter if its a sign of juiciness.

I am scared to be in a position of power. "I see myself more as a service bottom," I say. "That would work," responds Marie.

Chapter 2

What created this fear of my own power? My parents always taught me radical politics, and I always saw them as hypocrites. My mom, loving her country and hating American imperial power from when she met American soldiers in her childhood, had always been a ferocious fighter. But she believed Italians faced racism, her fight against racism was a fight against prejudice she experiences as an ESL speaker who was treated as a second class citizen in the 1960s Toronto she moved to. I could never convince her Italians weren't racialized anymore, so we eventually had to agree to disagree, but I knew she was wrong. I was afraid of my radical friends finding out I once came from a lineage of white women winning prizes like the MLK Library Prize when it really should have been a racialized woman.

My dad was silent. As a British man who grew up in Africa pre-the ending of British colonial rule, that was the only option I gave him. Everything he did could not excuse that start. He was a colonizer. I went to university to study his wrongs and critique his past. The fact that I knew so little about it meant nothing to me. The fact that I was perpetuating the cold and logical British upbringing - devoid of parental love and replaced by a boarding school, where logic was valued and connection was a networking opportunity - meant nothing to me. He told me stories of trying

to be friends with his Kenyan or Ugandan (I couldn't tell you because I didn't want to know as a teen) compatriots, and internally I yelled "don't you realize what you represented? A white man?!" but to him he probably simply wanted to interrupt the Us vs. Them of his childhood. Be one with all humanity. He married an Italian and was unknown to his family. His mother hired a private detective when I was 7 to find him. We only met them two times but I hated the British in my nonetheless. At 22, as a young genderfluid queer, I formally hid the last name [I was given]. [My new name] was a shortening of my mother's name, a formal renunciation of any part of my lineage was wasn't fighting back against empire, that wasn't connected to a land and a people who wasn't indigenous to their territories. I would rather be a victim than a perpetrator. I'd rather critique than build. I'd rather question power than be powerful. I would never again hold power over, I would always uplift others' values. I would not trust in my own, I would not want the ghosts of my British past to accidentally sneak through me. Someone else should lead. If I was to top it was for someone else's benefit. A stone top - almost service bottom. I would become a living apology, a corrector of historical wrongs. I would carve a new path, by spongeing all the right options and using my position to repeat them. I would use my privilege for good. I could be the bridge, the translator, that finds a way to bring good from these modes of colonial structures. I'll apply to the grants like a modern Robin Hood. I'll bring home \$ from AirBnB but you will not have to taint your reputation by mentioning their name. You remain an angel, I'll get my hands dirty.

Your job is to be the tomato. The rest, is me.

Chapter 3

Why is leadership needed in community organizing?

My coworkers wanted to make sausage, but not know how the sausage was made. They wanted to bring ideas on what LGBTQ+ youth needed, and work with the youth. But when it came to \$, it should be provided. They wanted to be in good working conditions, with salaries, policies, contracts taken care of. And honestly, they should not have to do it all. Every day worrying about \$ was a day not spent designing programs. When they had to turn someone away because it was outside the scope of our organization's mandate, they needed someone else to define that for them. Their hearts were too close, the youth too close to themselves and their friends, each personifying an unmet need they still sow every day.

I knew it. I had been a triaging receptionist, and when I got to ask the supervisor if we were taking more clients for the day, I loved to have that responsibility on someone else's shoulders. I loved the negotiation of telling her someone's story and having her be the one who needed to decide if we had time or not. When I started, I thought of her as a tough bitch, but by the end I was grateful to have someone else define the structure. It gave me the flexibility and level of responsibility that made my role manageable.

I knew they needed someone else to source the ingredients for the sausage and set up the back end so they could be creative. I was afraid of my power, but I knew what it was to be held by a top, for a tomato to trust its trellis. I agreed.

Chapter 4

It came to tell my coworkers of the decision. I had put it off for 2 months of extreme nervousness. I knew many people fell off pedestals, became leaders to be ceremonially beheaded. I didn't want to be the Marie Antoinette of my small org. I stopped posting. I stopped being visibly friends with people. I kept to myself. I gave up myself entirely, with very little left to give to my husband and cats at the end of every day. I did not want to be seen as trying too hard

to be an innocent and good white woman, but I also didn't want people to perpetuate wrong on my peers. I sacrificed myself at an altar I kept a secret. I tried to be less of myself and more of the mission. I sat her down.

"I've accepted the role of interim director," I say. She tells me they (the other two workers at the community org) had turned it down. "We have less history with the org". I know by that she means I'm personifying it's policies and practices, I'm slowly stepping into being responsible for its entirety. My history with the org is that I volunteered for one year at 19 and then stepped down because they had enough white university students involved, as I told the director, who just wanted another body to share the load. I'm not the right body, I [had] said.

She tells me of her history in LGBTQ+ organizing spaces. The initiatives she started and who continue in her absence. How her advocacy for QTBIPOC causes has created her enemies in high places. She advocates from her position as victim, viciously fighting back against the powers that be. I feel the ghosts collect behind me - of old bosses, ongoing empires, men who refused her when they found out she's trans, all the wars her families fought - lost. Empire - harsh, [?] in the way she always got the short end of the stick.

"I'm going to be very hard on you," she said. Good - I thought. I never wanted to be listened to without feedback. Never wanted to be a vindictive being leopold who's soldiers unquestioningly cut off worker's hands in the Congo to keep up supply of rubber. I knew the power I had must be wielded gently, in service of the collective and the mission, even if I was the leader. I accepted my fate. One day my head would have to topple. I simply had to work hard to delay that inevitability. My best would only be available through her questioning the goal, only reached through her fighting back. If I took her ideas I would appropriate a BIPOC trans woman's work, if I didn't let her lead I would perpetuate the invisibilization of BIPOC trans womens' leadership. I had to find something in between - despite the fact that I wouldn't know how fucked I was until I acted, and so I gingerly stepped forward knowing each step was watched, and accepted the oversight. A good leader is ethical, my ethics could not be trusted and my motivations were suspect. After all, I could only be a white woman - too good or too bad - both were a problem. A Karen or the woman who killed Emmett Till. it's hard to build a path outside of those deadly futures, but we were trying - ethical leadership, forward movement, a trellis that allowed us all to grow. We could only get there together - a trellis without its tomato is lifeless. A tomato without its trellis breaks. How would we share that power?

Chapter 5: How did I die?

A tomato is filled with life. From the water and sun it creates great life, it flows with juice, it drops down chins, it splits in the sun and drops seeds in the earth, coming back again.

A trellis is dead. Steel or wool, it's been taken from its land and is only used for its ability to structure. It eventually rusts or rots, it gives under the weight of the life its supported and thrown away. It's silent in the background and blamed for the tomatoes failing - it wasn't strong enough to hold the weight of that life.

She yelled at me. She told me the litany of my sins. I knew many were structural and how could I have fixed it all? I personify the structure but changing a structure takes time and work. After all the giving, I was burnt out but mostly silently, to my workers at least, who I didn't want to show my faults, for fearing they would think I'm playing up my innocent white womanhood.

My mind fought back against my logic with incessant flashbacks. "I'm smart, you're dumb. I'm big, you're little. You're wrong, I'm right. And there's nothing you can do about it". This line from

Mathilda would run through my head every time she asserted her dominance over me. I was a powerless child again in this house where I knew what was right but couldn't be listened to or trusted. I was just an image - young, pretty, innocent, white - not a mind and heart and body that tried. I knew her pain, I contextualized her words, I tried to give her grace, I did not ask her to be more. I shrunk my pain, I put my words in the context of the colonial structure I represented, I held myself to a high standard and asked myself to be perfect. My body broke out in eczema, anxiety, a litany of signs I couldn't take the pressure I was under. She resigned, after telling every partner we had about my litany of sins but not in detail - in scathing character defining words - racist, power hungry, irresponsible, disorganized. I left as well. I did not, could not, trust myself. What legacy did I carry? What would I perpetrate? What did I unknowingly bring up into my interactions? Could I be trusted? I asked my new employer to check if my new racialized coworkers felt comfortable working with me despite our only interactions being me putting into place their will (buying supplies, cutting cheques). I stepped into even smaller roles, discounted my expertise and silenced the bossy leadership I could offer the movement as a fierce femme. I threw myself out. The trellis had no use. It had not been the support the tomato needed. It only represented the ghost. The parts of empire that continue in government structures and trade routes after the British left. I could not be of any use. I left.

Chapter 6: Who is Brenda?

**meta: this is the only page I continually cried through*

Brenda Howard was called the mother of pride. I know you've never seen an infographic of her. She's not the right hero for our generations.

She's Jewish, bi, and had multiple bi men as partners. She practiced BDSM and was a big advocate during the AIDS crisis.

She is called the Mother of Pride because she organized the first Pride rally. I know other women (esp trans women are so important like Marsha P Johnson) said the speeches we remember, but someone had to define the date, print the flyers, put them up, and bring the megaphone that Sylvia & Marsha talked into. She probably did not do all those things but she did do many of them. She had the connections and audacity as a Jewish woman from the Bronx to think pride needed celebrating, and so she organized it.

When I don't know my place in these movements I think of Brenda. Her Wikipedia says she would simply ask what the cause was and show up with her people and her signs. She was a great mobilizer for causes that didn't always affect her personally. She wore big glasses and was fat and was outlived by her 2 boyfriends. I know it's uncomfortable to have bi cis women with men partners in queer spaces, so I silently found my own heroes. There is not enough to know about her on the internet to have had her fall off the silent pedestal I keep her on all for myself. She's quiet but freaky, uplifted and fought for those around her, and she's my kind of leader. Thank G-d for Brenda. I look at her smiling, nerdy face, and I know I'm not alone.