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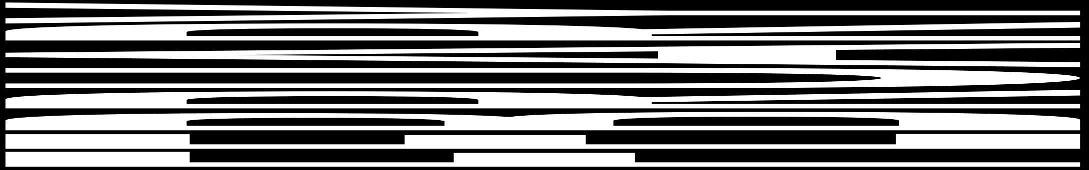

journal

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‘Hope’ to Solve Some ‘Problems’ Here? Investigations into the Agentive Potential of Ambiguous Terms

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Editorial

Introduction. This Is Fine. Not

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Introduction. This Is Fine. Not

Isabel Bredenbröker

Image 1: Excerpt of re-rendering of 2016 'This is fine' comic-meme by artist KC Green for The Nib (https://thenib.com/this-is-not-fine/). Credit: KC Green.

In their conversation on 'How to Change Alt Right Minds' (2022), the trans-female Youtube host ContraPoints and the U.S. political commentator and podcaster Jon Favreau talk about how positive change can be effected in the world. They discuss this on the example of harmful extremist political convictions as well as in relation to climate change, two phenomena that are widely seen as 'problems' (see also ContraPoints 2018). Both agree that hope is a driving factor in effecting active engagement, as it tackles feelings of helplessness that may lead to inactivity or defensive-aggressive positions. With recent world events such as the disemboweling of democracy in the United States, genocidal warfare in the Middle East, tolerance of dictatorships on the global stage, and a general upsurge of far-right positions with twisted narratives and fake 'truths' in Europe and beyond, such feelings of hopelessness may feel especially acute and physical for many people reading this (shared by the author). Problems seem to be all around. Hope may seem to be far, yet something possibly promising new insights, energy, and resilience. But what does 'hope' mean in this context, and how does it relate to 'problems'?

This special issue investigates the potential of 'hope,' which is understood here as a future-oriented political practice. It combines critical

perspectives on 'hope' with thinking about 'problems.' Contributions, which range from articles over conversations in written and spoken form to artistic text and imagery, add to sharpening the analytical usefulness of these ambiguous categories. Both refer to figures of thought in disciplinary discourse as well as to objects in the social imaginary that gain meaning through vernacular exchange. 'Problems,' commonly understood, describe situations in need of resolution. As an analytical category, the term 'problem' is used differently across many disciplines, usually upholding the promise of resolution via response. However, in the case of 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber 1973), neither the definition of a problem nor a solution may seem to be within reach. This appears much closer to social realities which are messy and complex. On an emotional level, 'problem' has a moralizing ring to it in everyday usage, equating things that are problematic with being difficult, undesirable or bad, while 'hope' seems to carry morally positive qualities. Opening up a forum to exchange ideas about 'hope' and 'problems' from practice-based and research-focused perspectives, we ask: what does the concept of hope *do*—theoretically, socially, and emotionally—in relation to 'problems'? Can we sharpen these terms or make use of their ambiguous nature in a productive way? Are there alternative terms that are more useful and, if so, what are they? What are the social lives of these terms, and how do they inform research and analysis?

Placed within a moral and temporal dimension of extremes, hope has been discussed in relation to utopian and dystopian thought, for instance, by Craig Browne (2005). These extremes can also be found across a variety of discourses that deal with hope. The first wave of feminism held on to hope as a means to achieve social change. Contemporary queer and feminist voices amplify this notion whilst being aware of their sometimes uncomfortable relation with hope, as discussed in depth by Rebecca Coleman and Debra Ferreday (2011) in their edited volume *Hope and Feminist Theory.* Combining theoretical engagement and activist intervention, Judith Butler (2011), for instance, stated during the Occupy Wall Street movement: 'If hope is an impossible demand, then we demand the impossible.' This seems to resonate with pre-(Russian) revolutionary ideas, taken up by the Russian cartographer and anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who is quoted to have said: 'The hopeless don't revolt, because revolution is an act of hope.' Queer theory taps into both ends of the spectrum, with Lee Edelman (2004) refusing the insistence on hope as something that ultimately serves to affirm conservative moral orders, and José Esteban Muñoz (2019) thinking through possibilities of queer futurity as something to hope for. Similarly divergent positions exist in the humanities and social sciences as well as in the natural sciences and social movements. Lauren Berlant (2011) calls out 'cruel optimism' as a form of self-exploitation via misguided desire, and Frank B. Wilderson III (2020) calls on afropessimist critique to confront the social fact of racial injustice. Jane Goodall (2021) insists that hope is a mode that must inform environmental research practice and scientific inquiry, while climate and ecology research has speculated that the moment to turn the escalating processes of global warming and mass

extinction has already passed. Yet, past and present political, environmental, antiracist, feminist, LGBTQAI+, and labor movements also continuously reinstate the hope for change through struggle. What can we take from such differing positions? How can these different understandings of hope be made productive for exploring the murky middle grounds of life, for staying with the trouble, in the words of Donna Haraway (2016)? And how do understandings of 'hope' and 'problems' as figures of thought play out when grasping the connections between research's actively-intervening and reflectively-analytical elements? Here, Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) shines a light on the connection between hope and research, stating that 'hope is a method of knowledge formation, academic and otherwise' (p. vii). Following up on this definition, we ask: can research claim agency by engaging with the agentive role of hope as something that is forceful or subversive (see Elliot 2016; Giroux 2004)?

The notion of hope is rooted in Western philosophical discourse and famously linked to the Enlightenment's paradigm of knowledge via Immanuel Kant's 'What may I hope for?'. Critical approaches range from the 'Counter-Enlightenment' (MacMahon 2017) to contemporary engagements with the philosophical canon, for instance, by Dilek Huseyinzadegan (2018), who asks 'What can the Kantian Feminist hope for?' How can a thus canonized concept of 'hope' be interrogated and possibly reappropriated from multiple perspectives, including non-Western traditions of thought, when engaging with phenomena identified as having the qualities of 'problems'? Such may be armed conflicts, war and violence, the changing global climate and ecological transformations that are wreaking havoc on life as we know it, effects of historical events like colonial encounters and contemporary late liberalist doctrines, labor struggles and precarious existence, racisms and many more (see Jansen and Löfving 2009). As scholars, activists, artists, and researchers, we often address 'problems' in that way, usually with the hope of understanding them better, sometimes with the hope of contributing to their transformation and possibly the creation of better futures. But as Jarret Zigon (2009) finds by relating to ethnography that frames understandings of hope among his interlocutors, people recovering from drug addiction in Moscow, it is exactly the everydayness of hoping, defying both ends of the utopia-dystopia spectrum, that describes the social life of this concept best. Yet, as often the case, the narrative of hope and what to hope for was framed by an institution, here the Russian Orthodox Church, which aimed at invoking their idea of faithful hope within a group of people cast out from society.

Contributions to this issue address the entanglements of perspectivally framed 'problems' (in the sense of Haraway's situated knowledges (1988) or, simply put, with an understanding that what one person sees as a problem may not concern another person at all) and the application of hope as a contested concept. Contributors were invited to probe into the usefulness or uselessness of the terms 'hope' and 'problems' and their relation to each other for informing a mode of critical inquiry. In her ethnographic article about a South African informal settlement, anthropologist **Eileen Jahn** unpacks the discrepancies between national

narratives of hope as uniting resilience and communal experiences of neglect by the state, leading to reformulated ideas of hope that diverge from the national ideal of it. Legal scholar and criminologist **Marion Vannier** offers a study of UK prison staff and their relation to aging prisoners facing a life sentence. Her article probes into the structural role of *hope-in-practice* as a stabilizing factor within the carceral system and follows ethical questions raised about hope and who should be entitled to it in this context. Taking a conversational format, the exchange between German-Bolivian artist, curator and researcher **Verena Melgarejo Weinandt** and curator and researcher **Suza Husse** explores the hopeful aspects of a decolonial artistic practice in response to anti-Indigenous racism. Addressing the German White imaginary around Indigeneity, which is tied to figures such as Karl May's Winnetou or the disney figure Pocahontas, they explore how such problematic narratives can be countered through an embodied performative media practice. Artist **Angela Stiegler** discusses collaborative production of work with friends as a method that allows critical engagement with uncomfortable ideas, such as filmic and artistic representations of post-war German culture and continuities of fascism. Situating the problematic within history and art, Stiegler discusses how the intimate realm of friendship can offer a hopeful and creative resource to lingering social 'problems.' *The February Journal*'s own **Pasha Tretyakova** (pseudonym) contributes a personal essay with photo documentation of their performance work that meditates on ambiguous feelings of hope, guilt, and Russia as home from an expatriate perspective. Pasha also conducted a conversation-interview with philosopher **Kolya Nakhshunov**, where the two researchers and friends contextualize the power of hopelessness as a political tool in contemporary Russia, specifically for queer people. The book review section features museum researcher **Amanda Tobin Ripley**'s take on Nizan Shaked's (2022) *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections,* a book she acknowledges as an important work on the road to an emancipated museum practice that becomes aware of its current complicity with the art market as a system of wealth accumulation.

Cartoon artist KC Green came to internet fame in 2016 with a meme of 'question dog' sitting in a burning house drinking coffee while stating that 'This is fine.' Apart from this famous version of the comic, he also made another rendition of the scene, featuring a much more escalated canine response. The house is on fire, and it is definitely a problem. While the state of the world will continue to challenge, defund, and silence critical thought in various ways in the foreseeable future, we hope that our work at *The February Journal* gives you some food for thought and energy for continued resilient work between research, activism, and art. Thank you for reading.

Notes from the Editors

In other news and on a more hopeful note, the journal can announce its successful move to Berlin Universities Publishing (BerlinUP), which will serve as our publisher going forward. BerlinUP is an open access publisher with a non-commercial, scholar-owned infrastructure and with a general, publisher-independent publication and consultation service. It is jointly supported by the libraries of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin, and Charité—Universitätsmedizin Berlin. We are delighted to become part of the BerlinUP journal portfolio and express our gratitude to the BerlinUP team, who have helped us with the process of applying and, most importantly, migrating our website to the new servers and new hosting! Heartfelt thanks go to Ronald Steffen and Michael Kleineberg for the priceless help and patience with our many questions. Special thanks go to our editorial manager Ana Panduri (pseudonym), who has looked after this move and the journal while having left academia and publishing. As Ana will gently take a less active role in the journal's day-to-day activities, we would like to say how much we value her time and labor that went into transforming *The February Journal*! We offer our sincere gratitude to Magdalena Buchczyk for her unwavering support of our journal. We are also immensely grateful to our designer Andrei Kondakov for his professionalism and creative vision. And last but not least, we would like to thank all contributors and reviewers whose work stands at the core of this issue. We appreciate your work and are very happy with the different angles on hope and problems that this issue takes.

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Author's bio:

Isabel Bredenbröker is an anthropologist working between academia and art. Isabel's work has focused on material and visual culture, specifically the anthropology of death, plastics and synthetic materials, anthropology of art and museums, queer theory and intersectionality, situatedness and autoethnography, colonialism, cleaning and waste. They have conducted field research in Australia, Ghana and Togo, Greece, South Africa and Germany. Isabel employs multimodal ethnographic methods and engages with different formats in the field of public anthropology: They have produced ethnographic films, worked with field recording and (co-)curated as well as contributed to exhibitions in museum and contemporary art contexts.

Isabel enjoys the collaborative production of works and collective exchange as a different way of engaging with knowledge, also in teaching. Their first monograph 'Rest in Plastic: Death, time and synthetic materials in a Ghanaian Ewe community' was published open access in June 2024 with Berghahn. Isabel is a co-convener of the European Network for Queer

Anthropology (ENQA), an editor of *The February Journal*, and a co-organizing member of the Network for Decent Labour in Academia (NGAWiss).

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Article

How Hope Defi(n)es South Africa: Reimagining Hope in Johannesburg's Slovo Park Beyond State Failures

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How Hope Defi(n)es South Africa: Reimagining Hope in Johannesburg's Slovo Park Beyond State Failures

Eileen Jahn

This article examines the dual role of hope in South Africa, highlighting its power as both a transformative force and a constraining burden amid systemic state failures and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Drawing on President Cyril Ramaphosa's rhetoric of hope as a cornerstone of national identity and resilience, it explores how hope operates politically and affectively in a society shaped by historical adversity, political disillusionment, and ongoing infrastructural crises. Focusing ethnographically on the Slovo Park informal settlement in Johannesburg, the article reveals how residents navigate government rhetoric, exposing hope's paradoxical role—offering resilience while also fueling frustration. While state-sponsored hope has served as a tool of governance and social cohesion, its failure to deliver tangible change has led marginalized communities to redefine hope on their own terms. Engaging with literature on hope as both an aspirational force and a mechanism of control, this article argues that hope sustains belief in progress but also constrains agency when institutional failures persist. Shifting focus from state rhetoric, it highlights how marginalized communities reconstruct hope as a grassroots tool for change—transforming it into a source of agency, resilience, and self-determined action, and reclaiming its potential to drive meaningful change. This analysis contributes to broader debates on hope's role in perpetuating systemic inequalities while also offering a means for reclaiming its power to drive meaningful change in post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: grassroots agency, hope, infrastructure, political affect, South Africa, state failure

In his 2019 State of the Nation Address (SoNA), just a year before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa introduced a key theme that would reappear prominently in political discourse and his subsequent speeches: hope.

> 'We are a people of resilience, of determination and of optimism. Despite the worst excesses of apartheid, we did not descend into vengeance when our freedom was won. [...] At times it has seemed that the milk of human kindness that allowed us to reconcile in 1994 had gone sour. But we will not surrender to the forces of pessimism and defeatism. [...] They told us building a non-racial South Africa was impossible, and that we would never be able to truly heal from our bitter past. Yet we weathered the storm, and we are prevailing. It was the eternal optimism of the human spirit that kept hopes alive

> during our darkest time. It is this optimism that will carry us forward as we face a brave new future.' (Ramaphosa 2019: 26f)

After centuries of colonial oppression, after apartheid, and over 30 years since the first democratic elections in 1994, President Ramaphosa's statement sought to reaffirm the resilience, determination, and optimism of the South African people in the face of historical adversity. He acknowledges reconciliation challenges and celebrates progress in overcoming past divisions. The President credits the nation's progress to 'the eternal optimism of the human spirit,' suggesting hope as a driving force. His statement crafts a narrative of perseverance and hope amidst persistent post-apartheid challenges. But how does this rhetoric of hope resonate with marginalised communities? And what happens when hope, as a political and social force, is at the heart of a nation-state project while at the same time, it is becoming entangled with disillusionment and unfulfilled promises?

Situated on Johannesburg's infrastructural, urban, and socio-economic margins, the (Joe) Slovo Park[1] informal settlement offers a microcosm of these tensions. Long a battleground for development and access to essential services, Slovo Park reflects the stark disparities between political promises and tangible change. Drawing on 12 months of ethnographic research on residents' fraught experiences with electricity—or its persistent absence—between 2022 and 2025, this predominantly ethnographic article examines how hope, as a political affect, is shaped, sustained, and contested in the face of infrastructural failures and unmet state promises. It explores how residents navigate state-sponsored hope and their realities, revealing hope as both a marker of resilience and a burden while cultivating their alternatives. Decades of unmet promises have left residents disillusioned. In this community, where hopes for a post-apartheid utopia once loomed large, the phrase 'being tired of hope' captures the frustration of a perpetual cycle of anticipation and letdown. Yet, hope endures, serving at once as a heavy burden and a force that inspires resilience and the potential for change.

The broader national context of South Africa's ongoing power crisis, within which these localized struggles unfold, further complicates life in Slovo Park. In late 2022 and early 2023, 'load shedding'—scheduled power outages intended to balance supply and demand—escalated dramatically. For many, including Slovo Park residents, this meant up to 10 hours without power daily, disrupting every aspect of everyday life. Blackouts often lasted even longer in rural and marginalized urban areas, further exposing the inequalities that persist in service delivery. The crisis underscored South Africa's precarious energy situation, with international companies, the South African Reserve Bank, and media outlets (see Daily Investor 2023, SABC News 2023) debating worst-case scenarios, including a complete grid collapse. Though deemed unlikely, the possibility of a national blackout sparked security briefings and discussions about backup solutions (Allan 2023, Vermeulen 2023).

Throughout this energy crisis, economic struggles, and political tensions, hope remained central to political discourse as South Africa

approached the 2024 general elections. In this uncertainty, President Ramaphosa and other African National Congress (ANC) leaders sought to rally support by framing hope as both a necessity and a political commitment. At the ANC manifesto launch in February 2024, South Africa's Deputy President, Paul Mashatile, expressed anticipation for the President to instill hope in the people. Ramaphosa, in turn, echoed this sentiment, pledging that ANC supporters in the May 2024 elections could expect a government dedicated to restoring hope in areas tarnished by corruption, inefficiency, and lack of service delivery. Their remarks, while acknowledging a partial loss of hope, imply that the state's primary duty is to uphold hope, suggesting the ANC's dominance, rooted in its historical role as the leading party in the anti-apartheid struggle and the 1994 democratic transition, hinges on its ability to sustain hope among the populace. Ramaphosa echoed this sentiment, pledging that an ANC-led government would restore trust and progress in areas long neglected. Yet these declarations rang hollow for many. Critics argue the party had lost its moral compass, prioritizing political patronage and self-enrichment over addressing systemic issues. Scandals involving senior officials and unmet promises have eroded public trust and spurred calls for accountability and a change in political leadership. In Slovo Park, such critiques resonate deeply. Residents like Phelelani, a community leader who has lived in the settlement with her family for over two decades, articulate weariness from unmet expectations. 'They [politicians] are promising lies for the people just to continue on hope,' she told me during one of our conversations. Her words echo broader frustrations across South Africa where persistent challenges have deepened the disillusionment in once ANC-loyal communities.

The idea of hope itself has become a contested terrain. Political commentator Onkgopotse JJ Tabane captured this tension in the lead-up to the 2023 SoNA, remarking: 'We are prisoners of hope in South Africa' (Eyewitness News 2023, 4:00—4:03). His observation reflects hope's dual character, serving as a double-edged sword: inspiring optimism or trapping individuals, communities, and even states in their quest for change or progress, and cultivate a sense of dependency. Within Joe Slovo Park, this duality is palpable. Hope persists as a driving force, but its weight is undeniable, shaping the rhythms of daily life as residents grapple with both immediate challenges, such as accessing electricity and securing funds for infrastructural development, and the broader struggle for systemic change.

Hope in Crisis: Force of Change and Constraint

Hope has gained significance as a political symbol and a subject of extensive scholarly examination with a long philosophical tradition. A surge in literature on hope began around the turn of the millennium, with anthropological focus emerging in the nineteen-nineties, particularly in the context of global capitalism and neoliberalism (Kleist and Jansen 2016: 373, Hage 2003). Research in this area ranges from the empirical analysis of hopes (e.g. Miyazaki 2004,

Crapanzano 2003), to how hope changes (e.g. Miyazaki 2006), to studies of its relationship to affects such as waiting (Janeja and Bandak (eds.) 2018), disappointment (Zigon 2018), despair (Harvey 2000), and optimism (Zournazi 2002; Zigon 2009; Liisberg et. al. (eds.) 2015). In South Africa, hope emerges as a dominant and intensely recognized force in public discourse and political rhetoric (see Olivier 2005). This is evident in the context of health crises, such as HIV/AIDS, where hope counterbalances despair, helping individuals navigate the challenges of living with HIV/AIDS (Kylmä et al. 2001, Pegrum 1997). Studies with long-term survivors also emphasize hope's crucial role in coping with HIV/AIDS (Kylmä et al. 2001), while for HIV-positive pregnant women, it empowers them and prevents mother-to-child transmission but also unifies advocacy for treatment access (Nkomo 2015). Beyond health, hope also fosters resilience and social cohesion in national narratives (Olivier 2005).

This article builds on existing scholarship examining uncertainty as a site for constructing and negotiating particular formations of hope (Kleist and Jansen 2016, Cooper and Pratten 2015, Johnson-Hanks 2005). Crises—political, economic, or infrastructural—offer critical moments in which hope is redefined and contested (Kleist and Jansen 2016, Vigh 2008). In South Africa, converging political and electrical crises position hope as an aspirational force, grounded in the country's history and central to the post-apartheid socio-political order. However, state-sponsored hope lacks affective leverage against the lived realities of those on the socio-economic and political margins. In this dynamic, people cultivate their own political hope, rooted in and shaped by their lived experiences and aimed at generating tangible alternatives.

In the section of the article entitled *South Africa's Enduring Spirit of Hope*, I investigate how hope has evolved from apartheid to post-apartheid through political discourse. This builds on the scholarship conceptualizing hope as a governance tool to sustain social order, manage expectations, and reinforce ideology (Hage 2003, Turner 2015). Anti-apartheid and transition narratives frame hope as transformative, especially in crises. Anchored in ideals like the Rainbow Nation, this discourse has significantly influenced public understandings of hope since the nineteen-nineties, depicting it as key to unity and resilience amid ongoing crises. While leaders use hope rhetorically, this article explores its deeper political and affective functions. Given the unfulfilled post-apartheid promises, you might ask: How does hope mediate the relationship between the South African state and its people? How has its political role evolved, and what are its shifting effects?[2] In the section on *The Persistence of Hope under Increasingly Stale Prospects*, I ethnographically situate state-sponsored hope within Slovo Park residents' lived experiences, where hope shifts from inspiration to burden, weighted by unfulfilled promises, cyclical disappointments, and systemic inequalities. How do repeated broken promises affect their relationship with the state? To what extent is hope a mechanism of control, sustaining engagement in a failing system? How do people resist or reframe political hope? By foregrounding these questions, this article contributes to debates on hope both as a force of endurance and as a constraint (Berlant 2011, Zigon 2009). Finally, I summarize

the findings and reflect on hope's ongoing role in shaping politics, public expectations, and everyday struggles in South Africa.

South Africa's Enduring Spirit of Hope

On February 9th, 2023, the President delivered his 7th SoNA at Cape Town City Hall, which I watched via live stream on my laptop in my studio apartment in Johannesburg. He opened by acknowledging, 'We gather here at a time of crisis,' (Ramaphosa 2023: 3), referring to the electricity crisis. In general, each SoNA allows the President to review past promises, set priorities for the coming year, and articulate a vision for the country. It could even be said that it is essentially a moment when hope is manifested. After formal greetings, directed to everyone, from politicians to the people of South Africa, Ramaphosa reflects on the essence of nationhood and what defines South Africans as a people:

> 'A moment of the State of the Nation endears us to ask ourselves a number of questions but the one I want to focus on today is, what defines us as a nation? We are not a nation defined by the oceans and the rivers that form the boundaries of our land. We are not defined by the minerals under our earth or the spectacular landscape above it. We are not even defined by the languages and the cultures that we have as a people, by the songs that we sing, or even by the work that we do. We are at our most essential a nation defined by hope and resilience. It was hope that sustained us during the struggle for freedom. And it is hope that swells our sails as we steer our country out of turbulent waters to calmer seas. Even in these trying times, it is hope that should sustain us and fuel our determination to overcome even the greatest of difficulties. And difficulties we have by the ton.' (Ramaphosa on Eyewitness News 2023, 1:22:54—1:24:34)

He strategically reframes the crisis, emphasizing hope and resilience as integral national characteristics rooted in South Africa's history and essential for its future. By drawing on the historical significance of hope in the freedom struggle, he positions it as a collective and historical force guiding the nation through the current crisis. Hope thus becomes not only a shared national attribute but also a symbolic continuation of the country's enduring spirit of struggle and subsequent victory. This rhetorical strategy carried into the 2024 SoNA, where Ramaphosa again invoked historical memory—this time explicitly linking the present to South Africa's democratic transition by citing Nelson Mandela: 'This is the beginning of a new era [...] of hope, reconciliation and nation building' (Mandela in Ramaphosa 2024). By invoking Mandela's words, Ramaphosa reinforced his vision of hope as central to South Africa's progress, not only honoring Mandela's legacy and the ethos of sacrifice but also reaffirming his own commitment to nation-building. Through uniting past struggles with present aspirations, hope becomes the bridge connecting South Africa's past, present, and future, anchoring the nation in a shared vision of resilience, unity, and progress. This narrative of perseverance continues to resonate with the nation's collective memory and its hopes for the future.

Ramaphosa's emphasis on hope as a defining national trait and a force for progress is not merely rhetorical; it draws on a much deeper historical lineage. The idea that hope can sustain a nation through hardship has long been central to South Africa's political imagination, from the anti-apartheid struggle to the dawn of democracy. But what role did hope play during the darkest years of apartheid? How did it sustain resistance movements, and how was it transformed into a political force that helped shape the new South Africa?

From 1948 to 1994, the apartheid system established and enforced a complex array of measures that institutionalized and legalized racial segregation, subordination, and discrimination. These regulations controlled every aspect of life, from where individuals could live, attend school, work, seek medical care, spend their free time, or even form personal relationships. The police, military, bureaucracy, and educational institutions—typical instruments of colonial control—were used to enforce white supremacist rule. Black,[3] Indian, Coloured, and Asian people[4] faced brutality and systemic violence, including physical and psychological abuse, arbitrary arrests, killings, and forced disappearances. They were systematically marginalized, stripped of their political rights, and denied citizenship. This relentless oppression essentially relegated and confined them to the status of 'non-people' (Nyamnjoh 2013: 11).

The anti-apartheid struggle was driven by ideals of justice, equality, human dignity, and peace in a society ruthlessly fractured by racial domination, discrimination, and exploitation. Beyond the framework of 'existence is resistance,'[5] hope was essential in sustaining the anti-apartheid movement. In 1975, Nelson Mandela wrote to Winnie Mandela, 'Difficulties break some men but make others. No axe is sharp enough to cut the soul of a sinner who keeps on trying, one armed with the hope that he will rise even in the end' (Nelson Mandela Foundation n.d.). As an aspirational force—even though it lay in an indefinitely distant and uncertain future—, it allowed people to envision a future free from segregation and oppression, with dignity, and social and economic justice for all.

Apartheid's end sparked a plethora of optimistic expectations in the country and globally for the future of South Africa and, in fact, for humanity. These aspirations were tied to open elections, equality under the law, free political activity, individual rights, human dignity, constitutional government, and more. Rapid and far-reaching political, economic, and social changes followed to actualize the transition. Affirming the universal and accommodating the different, proclaiming civil liberties, democratic rights, and (political) freedom for all as the promise of a new South Africa after the brutal system of white minority rule under apartheid manifested hope as a powerful force. The 1996 Constitution enshrined the vision of a non-racial, non-sexist, and ultimately non-discriminatory democracy, serving as a beacon of hope for generations to come. After 1994, for example, South Africa saw reforms, where civil society gained more influence in policymaking, minimum housing standards were established, and social grants were introduced to

assist the impoverished. Economic policies addressed apartheid's disparities, for instance, through workers' rights, affirmative action and universal health care. Education reforms introduced free basic education for all children and inclusive curricula. Thus, in South Africa, hope has a history of catalyzing significant political change, yielding tangible and far-reaching effects that many scholars fail to address.

In the early 1990s, negotiations and elections paved the way for a democratic future, marking the presumed endpoint of a prolonged struggle against racial oppression, inequality, and bigotry, as well as the dismantling of racially organized political, economic, and social structures (MacDonald 2006). The post-apartheid era was infused with hope, reflecting the nation's aspirations for reconciliation and restorative justice while serving as a cornerstone of the nation-building project. Once an outcast of the international community, South Africa transformed from racially entrenched authoritarian rule into a democracy and a global symbol of democratic hope. As Annalena Baerbock, Germany's Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, emphasized in June 2023, 'South Africa's path to freedom has been a beacon of hope inspiring men and women around the world' (Vögele 2023; due to a slip of the tongue, she said 'bacon'). Initially, this hope was embodied by figures such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Solomon Mahlangu, Albertina Sisulu, Steve Biko, and Rahima Moosa. However, with the transition to democracy, hope expanded beyond individual leaders to encompass the entire nation, which was seen internationally as capable of generating alternative narratives and visions for the future. Ultimately, this shift marked the emergence of a shared, collective hope—one that not only imagined different possibilities for societies and the world but also believed in the ability to realize them.

The success of the anti-apartheid struggle and transition to democracy affirmed the feasibility of long-held aspirations. The nineteen-nineties and the far-reaching constitutional, judicial, administrative, political, social, and economic changes that transformed how South Africans related to hope. Rather than projecting desires and aspirations toward an undefined future point, people began to expect the fulfillment of these hopes in the immediate future of tomorrow. At the same time, the locus for the realization of the hoped-for was essentially pushed into the realm of the state. Far from being a monolith, the state is a dynamic ensemble of practices, communities, processes, and individuals whose interactions and interpretations collectively produce its effects. Consequently, the transition brought sweeping changes and a belief in the state's ability to actualize that change.

Hope has long been central to South Africa's socio-political order, from its role in the anti-apartheid struggle to its use as a tool of governance in the democratic era. While leaders like Mandela and Ramaphosa have framed hope as a unifying and transformative force, its persistence amid unfulfilled promises and systemic inequalities has made it a burden for many. The next section examines how Slovo Park residents experience and challenge this exhaustion of hope.

'We're Tired of Hope': The Persistence of Hope under Increasingly Stale Prospects

Sitting across from Nonhlanhla, a widow in her late 50s who fixes clothes for sparsely paying customers inside her half-brick, half-metal sheet house, I can't quite figure out who is pictured in the blurry color photograph hanging behind her. My gaze doesn't go unnoticed. 'This is my late husband when he was young,' she says from in front of the faded wooden wall unit decorated with a few glasses and faded group and portrait photos. Leaning against an oval wooden table, his suit jacket unbuttoned, her late husband sits on a dark brown leather couch in the photo, in front of a similar wooden display cabinet filled with plates, cups, and bowls. 'And the one sitting next to him is Jacob Zuma,' she adds looking straight at me. Without elaborating on the picture, she jumps back to continue telling me about Slovo Park's history.

> 'We've been through a lot, hey. And too many leaders have passed on already, without ever seeing change. [...] After the Gauteng Premier back in 1998, [...] promised houses being built in the settlement and that we would not be moved elsewhere, the City assured us in 2001 that the construction of 950 new houses will start in September the same year and that money had been set aside for that. They even put up a big tent from the City right next to where the community hall is now. The same promise about the houses was made again in 2003 by people from the National Department of Housing and the Province, I think the Gauteng Department of Housing and Local Government.'

Nonhlanhla was one of the first people to settle in Slovo, which today is home to an estimated 12,000 to 18,000 formally unemployed or working poor Black (South) Africans, a fraction of whom work in the nearby sweets and general goods factories across the road from the settlement's southern border. It was established in the late 1980s on the remaining portion of Lot 33 of the Olifantsvlei 316-IQ farm, located in southern Johannesburg, near the southern edge of Soweto. For nearly three decades, since 1995, Slovo Park residents and community leaders have actively engaged and collaborated with housing officials at various levels of government to advocate for the development of their settlement. Nonhlanhla continues:

> 'Just a year later, after nothing had come to life, the Premier and Ralegoma, who was in the Mayoral Committee for Housing back then, put up another tent and told us that by September the houses would start to be built. Just before the elections in 2006, I think it was early December 2005, after they found dolomite here and told us that fewer houses could be built, the Mayor promised to put money towards Slovo Park to build houses. After that, nothing happened. A lot of talking, talking, talking, and in 2007 we were promised again that houses will be built in September but this time around a lot fewer than before. Because of the dolomite. [...] The number of houses got only smaller over the years and plans to relocate more and more of us came up again and again.'

Illustrating not only a pattern of broken promises and unfulfilled commitments made by government officials regarding the construction of houses in Slovo Park, Nonhlanhla's narration also asserts a trajectory of dwindling prospects.

The reference to dolomite as a cause of delay due to its susceptibility to dissolution, which can lead to sinkholes, ground instability, and structural damage in affected areas, underscores the difficulties of construction. Dolomite is essential to the iron and steel industry as a flux to lower the melting point of iron ore, as a source of magnesium to improve the strength and microstructure of steel, as a refractory to withstand high temperatures in blast furnaces and converters, and as a promising material for renewable energy storage solutions (Humphries et al. 2018). In Slovo and similar settlements, 'dolomite' has become synonymous with 'resettlement,' indicating a tendency to displace residents because of this geological problem. However, while dolomite does pose legitimate structural risks, it is increasingly associated with the political intentions of officials to remove residents from certain areas, effectively transforming it into a bureaucratic mechanism to evade commitments to housing development. The settlement's residents increasingly perceive references to dolomite not as neutral scientific assessments but as strategic justifications for displacement, reinforcing their disillusionment with a state that repeatedly fails to deliver material improvements to their lives. In this way, dolomite symbolizes a broader pattern of hope employed by the state—rhetorically promising progress while functionally sustaining marginalization. The mention of a 'lot of talking, talking, talking' emphasizes the perceived lack of concrete action and tangible results, further contributing to the community's growing sense of distrust toward government officials and institutions.

> 'At some point, I think in late 2008, even a Township plan was submitted to the City but I don't know what came of it. By then, not only the issue of houses was important to us but also service delivery, water, electricity, roads, and sewage. [...] Over the years, we've been speaking to so many government officials and high-level ANC members, but nothing ever changed. Since 2008 we also worked with legal organizations, first with the Legal Resources Centre and then with SERI [Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa], but for many years they also didn't get much out of government and City officials. [...] We even won a court case against the City to finally upgrade Slovo. But as you can see, nothing ever changes. All promises and up to today, all empty promises and empty excuses. The only thing we got in 2018 was electricity from the City. Nobody from the government has delivered on the promises they made.'

Despite repeated promises from politicians and government officials, the Slovo Park community still lacks access to formal services and adequate housing. Politicians and government officials have visited the settlement, engaged with community leaders, and offered assurances of imminent development. Feasibility studies, including geotechnical surveys and socio-economic assessments, have been completed, and layout plans have been devised. Steps have been taken to designate Slovo Park as a Township and to provide funding for proposed development initiatives. This designation process will formalize the settlement as a legally recognized residential area, including land demarcation, secure land tenure, and the permanent provision of basic services such as water, electricity, sanitation, and roads. It also allows for urban planning, infrastructure development, and integration into municipal

governance, improving residents' access to services and legal protection. Legal action was pursued against the City of Johannesburg in 2014, resulting in a favorable ruling for the residents in 2016 (Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa 2020). However, despite these efforts and proactive community advocacy and litigation, tangible progress toward permanent housing, tarred roads, and improved sanitation systems remains elusive.

As I walk around Slovo with Kulani and Itumeleng, I realize that there is no space in the surrounding area to expand the settlement. Kulani and Itumeleng are both part of the local ANC Youth League chapter, active leaders in the Slovo Park Community Youth Forum and have lived in the settlement all their lives. Slovo Park is located adjacent to an industrial area in Nancefield, positioned between Eldorado Park and the securely fenced-in area of bonded houses known as Bushkoppies. It is bordered on the west by the nearby floodplains of the Klipspruit River. On the way to Phelelani's house, we wind through narrow lanes beneath tall steel overland transmission towers, three layers of high-voltage power lines stacked on top of each other, transecting the settlement from north to south. As I stop at Phelelani's fence, ready to join inside for a quick refreshment, I am struck by the overhead cables towering over us, cutting streaks through the clear blue sky and casting thin gray shadows on the red soil. 'Before you come in, wash these for me,' Phelelani says, directing her request at me and handing me five plastic cups. Accompanied by Itumeleng, I walk out, over to the standpipe at the top of the street to rinse the cups. 'Did you hear about the guy who died trying to connect his cable to the big one up there?' she asks, throwing her head back to look at the spot. Trying not to imagine the incident, I shake my head: 'No.'

As we squeeze between the fence and the door of Phelelani's house, I am enveloped by warmth and a sudden thirst. Itumeleng and I join the others seated on the low couch and black plastic chairs. When I ask Phelelani if we can continue our conversation from the other day about the situation in Slovo Park, she starts right away: 'It was a struggle I tell you, we come far as people. But here we are, we won the court case and they said they were going to electrify this place, which they did, and they said they were going to build RDPs[6], but they haven't done that,' she exhales. 'And now, we are in the middle of load shedding, now we don't even know when is it going to end.' In 2018, the City of Johannesburg installed electricity distribution lines, individual poles, and a meter in the main household of each plot in Slovo, however, only temporarily, pending upgrading to a full Township. 'You see, these political parties, they are campaigning, saying different things [...]. They are promising lies for the people just to continue on hope. [...] ANC playing with people's lives, how many years they have promised us houses and resettlement,' Phelelani continues, pointing up, 'away from under these cables. Nothing, we are still waiting. They [the politicians] never honour their promises, they only try to give us hope that maybe someday they will come and fix this problem,' she added, her voice slowly rising. 'My uncle Mdala has been waiting for his RDP since the nineties,' Kulani adds as everyone else slowly nods their heads, 'but a few years back, he decided to start building his own brick house right here in Slovo.'

Phelelani's account of broken assurances reflects a cycle of hope, disappointment, and frustration experienced by the Slovo Park community in response to promises of development and improvement made by government officials, and illustrates a complex relationship between promises and hope within the community. Repeated failures to deliver on commitments have created a deep skepticism and distrust of political promises, with Phelelani bluntly accusing politicians of offering false hope and 'promising lies' to further their agendas. A promise can inspire hope by signalling a commitment to a better future, while hope can reinforce the promise by sustaining belief in the fulfillment of that commitment, even in the face of setbacks or challenges. While promises initially inspire hope for positive change and improved livelihoods, the continual failure to deliver on those promises erodes that hope over time. Each unfulfilled promise serves as a blow to the community's aspirations, reinforcing a cycle of disappointment. Promises made by authorities and politicians are often used as political tools to manipulate and appease the community, rather than as genuine commitments to address their needs, which over time exposes the failure of hope mobilized by the state as a political narrative and emphasizes its waning leverage without meaningful material changes. Ultimately, hope and promises have become synonymous with deception and manipulation for Slovo residents. The manipulation of hope by government officials through empty promises to postpone material change to an unknown point in the future, to hold out, perpetuates a cycle of dependency and disappointed expectations, leaving community members feeling abandoned and marginalized.

While the March 2016 court order established resettlement as a last resort for the number of people the land can accommodate, part of the phased plan was to relocate the metal sheet houses under and directly adjacent to the electricity transmission towers that cut through the settlement, either within the Slovo Park area at a safe distance from the towers or to another parcel of public land. 'Eish, Eileena. I tell you, we're tired, just tired. No politician looks out for the communities [...]. We waited for RDPs, even today, we are still waiting,' Phelelani shakes her head gently and looks straight at me.

> 'People were told just to make sure that they do not even build houses because they [the government] are going to build houses for them. And then when those things do not happen, what do you expect? Me, I can't build a house under these power lines. But even if I lived somewhere else in Slovo, I wouldn't.'

She takes another sip of water before concluding, 'We're just tired of hope.' An unnerving silence falls over the room, broken only by the occasional clicking of tongues to indicate annoyance or disappointment, as we empty our cups.

Despite winning a court case, securing a firm court order, and receiving repeated promises of general improvements and development, overall change has yet to materialize. Phelelani's words underscore a deep disillusionment and frustration that stems from unfulfilled promises by political parties, particularly the ANC, regarding housing and relocation

from dangerous areas near transmission towers. Her criticism extends to the tendency of politicians to make empty promises during election campaigns, which she has personally experienced. Phelelani's tone reflects resignation and weariness, expressing skepticism about meaningful change and a longing for tangible solutions over the continued delay and empty rhetoric. The phrase 'playing with people's lives' underscores a deep-seated distrust of political motives. This narrative reflects a pervasive sense of disillusionment with the cycle of promises and dashed hopes, and highlights issues of governance, accountability, and representation that shape South Africa's political landscape amid a broader global disillusionment with democratic systems.

In Phelelani's account and Mdala's example of whether or not to build a brick house in Slovo Park, everyday life with hope bereft of material changes, however stale it may feel, unfolds differently: For Phelelani, building in Slovo is not an option, perhaps because she is holding on to the possibility that the state will step in and build it for her but potentially also because she doesn't have any extra money to spare and wouldn't be considered a plot owner in the case of upgrade, which meant she would have to relocate away from Slovo Park anyway. Mdala, on the other hand, chooses to build his own brick house to make a difference for himself and his family rather than wait endlessly for the government to assist. The relationship to and manifestation in the present, and the activating effects of hope echo Sara Ahmed's words: 'The moment of hope is when the "not yet" impresses upon us in the present, such that we must act, politically, to make it our future.' (2014: 184). If hope is indeed present-oriented, then it compels, in this case, Mdala, to act in the present rather than waiting for a future that always remains ahead of us. In other words, the presence of hope demands proactive engagement with the current circumstances to shape and realize the envisioned future. As people relinquish their hopes in the state to actualize significant changes to their lives, individuals begin to conceive of change and hope originating elsewhere. Faced with the inability of hope deployed by the state to resonate with and make a material difference in their lives, those on the socio-economic and political margins develop their own forms of political hope. Grounded in their experiences, this hope is shaped by their daily struggles and focuses on creating practical alternatives that address their needs with the means they have. This transition in the source of hope signifies a wider disenchantment with institutional frameworks.

Like everyone else, however, Mdala knows that when Slovo is upgraded to a Township with paved roads, brick houses, permanent electricity, and a sewage system, all existing structures will most likely be demolished to make way for the new layout. When Slovo is demolished and rebuilt, he will also receive government-subsidized housing. In a sense, the examples do not only highlight the contrasting approaches and orientations to change and who will bring it about but ultimately reveal two forms of political hope: one about hope vested in the state coming up against its own limits and another in which hope shifts to become something people have to make for themselves rooted in their lived experiences and capacities.

However, the examples also share a common thread. In conversations with other residents, the phrase 'being tired of hope' keeps coming up in various iterations, and the choice of words strikes me. Instead of using terms like hopelessness, loss of hope, or past hope, most of the people I talk to choose 'tired' to describe their relationship with hope. By making this distinction, residents portray hope as a burden, a constant companion for so long that they're overly familiar with it, it's worn out, and they're tired of it. At the same time, the use of fatigue rather than the absence of hope implies that...

> '...[t]o give up hope would be to accept that a desired future is not possible. [...] Being hopeful may be necessary for something to stay possible, but it is not sufficient grounds for the determination of the future' (Ahmed 2014: 185).

Essentially, a life without hope may simply seem impossible to the Slovo Park residents. Hope is deeply tied to the broader historical and political narratives of post-apartheid South Africa, where the state, emerging from the struggle against apartheid, positioned itself as the architect of progress and inclusion. The promises of housing, land redistribution, and economic upliftment were integral to the liberation project, forming the chore of state-sponsored hope that continues to sustain it. Yet, as these promises remain largely unmet, hope becomes a site of tension fueling discontent. Phelelani's experience exemplifies how hope transcends the immediate actions of the government; it is not just something imposed by the state but a relational force that binds individuals, communities, and the government to a shared, if increasingly fragile, vision of a better future. Even as faith in political leadership diminishes, the expectation of transformation persists, illustrating how hope continues to function as both a means of endurance and a demand for justice.

Even if hope provides the motivation and belief in the possibility of change, it is not enough to bring about the desired change (ibid.: 184). This understanding sheds light on a setting where hope can be a source of resilience, a weighty reminder of unmet expectations, and a constraint. For Phelelani and other residents, hope becomes a lingering expectation that runs too deep to give up and a source of exhaustion because it is continuously imposed by the state in the form of promises and rhetoric from government officials, while incremental changes in residents' lives to sustain hope are consistently blocked—at times by the state itself—leaving them with no avenue for action.

Betting on the Future

In the tapestry of South Africa's history and post-apartheid nation-building, hope emerges as a persistent thread weaving through the intricate layers of adversity during the apartheid years, the triumph of 1994, and ongoing

economic struggles, political tensions, governance controversies, social unrest, and energy challenges. Over time, hope has taken on various roles and acquired different meanings as a historical symbol, in political rhetoric, and through the confrontation with everyday lived experience.

Juxtaposing the historical trajectory of hope in South Africa's political discourse with the lived experiences of marginalized communities reveals the interplay between hope, crisis, national identity, and the state. Once a driving force in the anti-apartheid struggle, hope became a cornerstone of South Africa's democratic transition and global identity. During apartheid, it served as both a political rallying cry and a source of resilience, motivating individuals and communities to envision and actively pursue a better future despite overwhelming obstacles. Initially embodied by key leaders, hope was later projected onto the nation-state, reinforcing South Africa's image as a symbol of transformation, and more recently, Ramaphosa has framed it as an integral feature of national identity. However, as hope became institutionalized, its fulfillment shifted to government structures, leading to widespread disillusionment when progress stalled or promises remained unmet.

The tension between promise and ongoing letdown is particularly evident in places like Slovo Park, where systemic inequalities and persistent crises shape daily life. Here, state-sponsored hope is no longer an unquestioned source of inspiration but a burden—marked by disappointment, fatigue, and complicity—that serves as a constant reminder of deferred dreams and an inescapable cycle of waiting. Expressed in the recurring phrase 'tired of hope,' this sentiment challenges the simplistic notion of a hope–hopelessness binary, revealing the resilience required to sustain hope even as it becomes exhausting. This exhaustion with state-sponsored hope in communities like Slovo Park reflects a broader national struggle in which hope remains deeply intertwined with the core promises of the liberation struggle.

In South Africa, hope is inextricably linked to the nation's historical trajectory and the aspirations for the post-apartheid era. It has long been central to the country's socio-political order, driving real change and fostering a deep-rooted belief in its transformative potential. However, as present disappointments are measured against hope's past ability to effect meaningful change—and as life without this defining hope remains unimaginable—disillusionment grows more acute. The contrast between past achievements and persistently unmet promises has left many grappling with the weight of unfulfilled expectations, forcing them to renegotiate their relationship with hope and its connection to the state. While hope can inspire resilience and transformation, it can also act as a pacifier, anchoring individuals in an unchanging present as they wait for a better future. By focusing on distant improvements, people may become more tolerant of harmful current conditions rather than working to transform them, aligning with Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of *cruel optimism*, where the belief in a brighter future sustains the very structures that perpetuate harm. In this way, hope operates as a double-edged force: it has the power to drive progress

but can also trap people in cycles of endurance and inaction, reinforcing the very status quo they seek to escape.

In response to the ongoing friction between hope as a catalyst for transformation and a mechanism of stagnation, residents navigate state-sponsored hope in two ways. For some, abandoning this hope altogether seems impossible, as it remains deeply embedded in their historical and political reality despite unfulfilled promises and growing disillusionment. To relinquish it would mean giving up on broader aspirations of progress, inclusion, housing, land redistribution, and economic uplift—goals too integral to simply forsake. Rather than embracing hopelessness, they describe being *tired* of hope, seeing it as both a necessary force for envisioning change and an exhausting burden continuously reinforced by state rhetoric yet obstructed by systemic inaction. For others, disillusionment with the government's ability to effect change has led them to withdraw their hopes from it entirely, at least for now. No longer trusting government institutions, they instead cultivate their own sources of political hope—rooted in their lived experiences and aimed at generating tangible alternatives that work for them. This shift from imposed unproductive hope to one aligned with everyday struggles is itself a political act, reflecting a broader rejection of institutional structures. By resisting and redefining state-driven hope, individuals transform it into a tool for resilience and self-determination, reimagining its role beyond government assurances.

As South Africa continues to navigate its path forward, President Ramaphosa's assertion that hope remains a fundamental force—one that is constantly shifting and often shines a light on its own fragility—holds weight. Yet, a paradox emerges when the nation is defined through the lens of hope, even as the state obstructs and undermines it. This contradiction or friction forces individuals to disentangle their identity as South Africans from the state's inability to fulfill national aspirations, prompting the question of, if not the state, who or what should be responsible for realizing these ideals. Building on Lauren Berlant's conceptualization of hope as both transformative and entrapping (2011) and Sara Ahmed's argument that abandoning hope means surrendering the possibility of a better future (2014: 185), this article argues that hope in South Africa is both a necessity and a constraint. In a context where the gap between government promises and lived realities continues to widen, hope remains vital for sustaining belief in progress, yet it also becomes a burden as individuals grapple with the tension between their aspirations and the state's failures. The article introduces a perspective on the pragmatic reorientation of hope—shifting away from the empty promises of the government and toward tangible, community-driven action. In doing so, people do not abandon hope but instead redirect and ground it in more sustainable and actionable forms. By reclaiming agency and redefining what it means to hope amid systemic failure, people are transforming hope into a collective, resilient force that reflects its enduring significance and forges pathways toward progress independent of state limitations.

1. Formerly known as Nancefield settlement, it was renamed in 1995 after the death of anti-apartheid activist and housing minister Joe Slovo.
2. While social movements play a critical role in shaping and mobilizing hope as a political force, a detailed examination of their strategies and impact falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, in the context of disillusionment, movements such as Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban have emerged as key actors in a politics of hope, steadfastly advocating for land, dignity, housing rights, and a future free of oppression, poverty, and displacement. It could be argued that the hope mobilized by these movements functions analogous to the state-sanctioned version, yet it is firmly embedded in the experiences of the residents and their tangible struggles. Rather than focusing on hope in the context of more organized activism, this article draws from the experiences of Slovo Park residents in constructing a distinct political affect that is shaped by their lived experiences and also responds to the shortcomings and contradictions of governance.
3. Although the term 'Black' does not capture the full complexity of these groups, it is used here as an umbrella term for Zulu, Xhosa, Bapedi, Ndebele, Basotho, Venda, Tsonga, Swazi, and BaTswana.
4. I acknowledge that not only these racialized groups of people were repressed.
5. This slogan originated within the Palestinian struggle for liberation and resistance against Israeli occupation.
6. RDP is a shorthand expression for subsidized housing. Under the *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (RDP) the qualifying beneficiaries receive a fully constructed house at no cost from the Government.

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Article

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On the Importance of 'Hope-in-Practice' behind Bars

Marion Vannier

Studies show that prison staff and prisoners believe that hope, when it is vested in a possibility of release, is essential for ensuring safe management of the prison environment. However, the way in which this significance of hope manifests within prison walls has not been thoroughly explored through research. This paper, based on unique data gathered in a prison in England and Wales, empirically examines how prison staff interpret and understand hope, particularly from the perspective of those working closely with older prisoners serving life sentences—individuals with the slimmest chances of release within their lifetime. This article argues that hope in prison is viewed as a means to ensure the safety of both prisoners and staff, maintain order, propel rehabilitation, and, in some cases, as something that life-sentenced prisoners should not be entitled to. These findings begin to shed light on *hope-in-practice*, raising important questions about the ethical dimensions of promoting, protecting, and nurturing hope in the context of the harshest forms of imprisonment.

Keywords: hope, life imprisonment, old prisoners, prison

1. Introduction. The Appeal of Hope

Hope is an open-ended psychological and philosophical concept often defined as a combination of desire for a specific outcome and belief in its possibility, even if improbable (Day 1969; Downie 1963). Unlike mere optimism, which involves an expectation that the desired outcome is likely, hope does not necessarily depend on such high probability (Martin 2013). Philosophers argue that hope requires an affective engagement with the possibility of the desired outcome, making it distinct from wishful thinking (Chignell 2013). Aristotle, for instance, linked hope to courage, suggesting it motivates confidence in the face of challenges, while others, like Thomas Aquinas, described hope as future-oriented and involving difficult yet achievable goods (Bobier 2020; Gravlee 2000). Others underscore the motivational and emotional depth of hope (Meirav 2009; Pettit 2004). Modern psychological theories, like Cindy Snyder's, emphasize goal-directed agency and pathways as key components of hope (Snyder et al. 1991). Whether viewed as an instrumental virtue or an intrinsic good, hope is recognized as essential for human resilience, motivation, and agency in uncertain situations (Blöser 2019; Calhoun and Calhoun 2018). Overall, works in anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and politics (Havel 2018; Marcel 2010; Miyazaki and Swedberg 2016; Snyder et al. 1991) emphasize the vital role of hope as a driving force, enabling individuals to

persevere through severe hardships and to find a way forward in even the most challenging situations. Hope inspires and motivates to overcome adversity.

Hope has recently become a key topic in discussions about one of the most severe forms of punishment in Europe, life imprisonment. Under European human rights law, judges from the European Court of Human Rights found that hope derived from a realistic possibility of review and release was essential to determine the acceptability of the most extreme forms of punishment (*Vinter and Others v. the United Kingdom* (2013)[1] and then *Matiošaitis and Others v. Lithuania* (2017)[2]). Judges held that whole life orders and then life sentences more broadly should preserve a 'right to hope' for release during imprisonment. Hope under European human rights law is cast as something experiential, that is, 'lived through' (Trotter 2024). It recognizes prisoners' capacities to atone and to change as features of their humanity (Trotter 2022). Alongside these jurisprudential developments, the concept of hope has become a topic of larger political debate in the UK, challenging the role of penal institutions (Gove 2016; UK Parliament 2020) and propelling new academic interest in both law and prison sociology (Ashworth and Zedner 2019; Liebling et al. 2019; Trotter 2022; Wright et al. 2023).

Criminological studies have begun investigating the importance of hope behind bars. They stress the struggles to find meaning and purpose when there is no hope (Crewe et al. 2020; O'Donnell 2016; Styles 2019). An important source of hope is retaining the sense that there is a significant portion of life worth living upon release; it then becomes a source of motivation to engage with the prison regime and can mitigate the pains of long-term imprisonment (Crewe et al. 2020; Wright et al. 2023). While hope can emerge from deep, individual experiences in moments of profound despair (Crewe 2011a; Crewe et al. 2020; Seeds 2021), hope vested in procedural possibilities of release is appealing because it can ensure security and stability. Prison staff and prisoners indeed believe that 'hope derived from a realistic possibility of release is essential to maintain order and safety in the prison' (Seeds 2021:1).

Yet, where does the value of hope lie for those who work closest to prisoners with very slim chances of parole due to their advanced age and sentence length? In examining the significance of hope for prison staff in the specific context of older life-sentenced prisoners, we can also begin to articulate an understanding of '*hope-in-practice*.'

Drawing on unique data collected during group discussions with prison staff from all ranks in one high-security facility in England and Wales in 2024 and building the analysis within international criminological studies on older prisoners, this paper examines their understanding of hope behind bars. The main question addressed is as follows: what are the justifications for fostering hope among older life-sentenced prisoners who are either unlikely to be released within their lifetime or face a particularly arduous journey toward release as they continue to age?

The initial findings are as follows: for prison staff, hope sets the severity threshold of 'true' life sentences; it is perceived as an efficient tool to ensure their own safety and that of older prisoners; it can motivate

rehabilitation and desistance from crime and appears as a useful managerial means to maintain the prison regime. Hope as practice does not emerge as an individual or agential sentiment but materializes as a functional and pragmatic *techne*, strategically cultivated to act as a stabilizing force, and ultimately becoming integral to the concept of life imprisonment itself.

2. Old Age, Life Imprisonment, and Prospects of Release

The overlap between old age and life imprisonment provides a critical framework for understanding the importance of hope when it is invested in the possibility of release. The prison population is aging worldwide (Aday and Krabill 2012; Baidawi et al. 2016; Ridley 2021; Vannier and Nellis 2023). England and Wales illustrate this trend particularly well. There are almost four times the number of people in prison aged 60 and over than there were in 2002 (Ministry of Justice 2023a: Table A1.7). Almost one in five (18%) of the prison population is aged 50 or over (15,525 people). Of these, 4,178 are in their 60s, and 1,965 people are 70 or older (Ministry of Justice 2024: Table 1.3). Alongside the greying of the prison population, the number of life sentences is also increasing (Ministry of Justice 2023b: Table A.1.15) and represents a significant portion of the total prison population (10% of the sentenced prison population in the UK) (Ministry of Justice 2023c: Table 1.9a). In part, this is due to penal policies expanding their scope, prison minimum tariffs having been lengthened and are often exceeded (House of Lord 2022), and to the fact that life sentences continue to be routinely handed down despite a decline in crime and homicide trends (Office for National Statistics 2024).

The aging of the prison population and the increase in life sentences coincide; the older life-sentenced prisoners are the fastest growing sub-group in the country. Over a third (33%) of those serving a life sentence are aged 50 and over (Ministry of Justice 2023d: Table A1.16). The correlation between aging prisoners and life sentences can be understood through several interconnected factors. Some individuals are sentenced to life imprisonment later in life, often due to delayed justice, such as cold cases being solved, improved forensic techniques, or individuals being held accountable for historical crimes committed decades earlier (Ievins 2023; Ridley 2023). Older individuals are also more likely to be convicted of serious offenses like murder or sexual crimes, which typically carry life sentences (Prison Reform Trust 2024b).

Release becomes increasingly distant for individuals who enter prison in midlife to serve a life sentence, particularly when they exceed the tariff. In December 2023, one in seven (14%) life-sentenced prisoners had a tariff of 10 years or less, almost half (48%) a tariff of between 10 and 20 years, and over a third (36%) over 20 years (Prison Reform Trust 2024a: 18). Over a fifth of people currently serving a life sentence have already served their minimum term. In 2021, post-tariff lifers had spent an average of nine years and two months extra in prison (Prison Reform Trust 2024a:18). During the

tariff period, prisoners are not eligible for parole or release. Although they *may* become eligible for parole after the tariff period and could potentially be released, the extension of the tariff means they are effectively held in custody for longer, serving extended periods without the possibility of parole or release. Additionally, the process of aging itself may limit their ability to fulfil parole requirements, such as securing housing, work, or meeting stringent health criteria (Dagan and Vannier 2024; Vannier and Dagan 2024). Even when release is thus theoretically possible post tariff, the conditions for parole remain restrictive, resulting in extended incarceration and aging behind bars (Amalfi Wronski and Kokkalera 2023; Codd and Bramhall 2002).

The number of deaths among older prisoners serves as a stark illustration of the illusory nature of the prospect of release (Ministry of Justice 2023e). English courts have repeatedly asserted that the severity of life imprisonment includes the risk that prisoners, regardless of their advanced age, may not be released during their lifetime (Van Zyl Smit and Appleton 2016; Van Zyl Smit and Appleton 2019). Even for those who do not die in prison, the combination of advanced age and a life sentence creates a uniquely challenging journey toward release. Prisons were designed and built for young able-bodied men, but the demographic has evolved and will shift even more over time toward older, sicker residents (Ridley 2021). The literature on the pains of imprisonment—defined as the loss of liberty, desirable goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security by Gresham Sykes (1958)—emphasize how they vary depending on ethnicity, gender, disability, and young age (Chamberlen 2016; Crewe et al. 2017; Dodd et al. 2022).

Prisoners who grow old in prison will experience the traditional pains of imprisonment, but these will be exacerbated under the effect of aging. Studies across the world highlight the *cumulative* nature of the pains that older prisoners endure. Diete Humblet (2021) writes that older prisoners face a range of pains 'that both consolidate and exacerbate those experienced by the (general) prisoner population' (p. 60). Charlene Lane et al. (2020), for instance, point out that 'the 10 most common physical problems reported included osteoarthritis, asthma, hypertension, diabetes, hearing loss, high cholesterol, ischemic heart disease' (p. 339). In addition, not only do they deteriorate physically and mentally, but they experience stress and trauma and may become more dependent on peers and prison authorities (Kerbs and Jolley 2009; Maschi et al. 2012). They also lose the ability to participate in daily supportive activities like visiting the chapel or library, taking classes or working (Crawley 2005; Humblet 2021; Wahidin 2004). As they grow weaker, older prisoners also become exposed to enhanced abuse and bullying (Pratt and Hosoi 2022).

When old age is combined with a life sentence, other sources of harm accumulate (Vannier and Nellis 2023). The indeterminacy tied to life sentences is particularly harmful for those who grow old in prison, as it removes key markers of aging such as retirement, loss of a partner, or adjusting to chronic conditions (Crewe 2011: 512–513). Older life-sentenced prisoners become aware they have very little hope of ever being released and

that they will die in prison (Crewe et al. 2020; Nellis 2013; Vannier 2016). The conflation between the time left to live and the time left to serve makes the experiences of older prisoners serving life sentences distinctively distressful (Aday and Wahidin 2016; Deaton et al. 2009; Wahidin 2004: 109). Older life-sentenced men do 'harder time' and experience imprisonment as a more severe form of punishment than their younger counterparts (Mann 2012). In sum, an examination of 'hope-in-practice' that is grounded on the prospect of release must recognize that older prisoners serving life sentences either have minimal chances of being released or endure arduous paths toward a hypothetical release.

3. Methodology: How to Research the Importance of Hope in Prison

The study 'In Search of Hope: The Case of Older Life Sentenced Prisoners in England and Wales' was funded by a UK Research and Innovation grant and started in 2022. Its aim was to uncover the meaning and value of hope across the criminal justice system. Fieldwork was conducted across three prison sites in England and Wales to explore how experiences and practices of hope evolve in different security-level environments and at various stages of the sentence. To give hope 'meaning-in-practice' (Liebling and Ludlow 2016; Martin 2014), the methodology employed was multi-layered and included group discussions with prison staff and prisoners, prison observations, and individual interviews with prison staff; prisoner participants were also invited to write diaries on instances of hope.

This article draws on the researchers'[3] notes taken during two group discussions held in one prison, at the start of the fieldwork with staff of all ranks and working in both operational (in wings) and managerial positions. A total of 26 prison staff took part in the group discussions that lasted around 1.5 hours. The sessions were designed to present the study and to initiate a conversation around views on the importance of hope. Given the complexity of hope, the group discussions included a set of questions to engage the participants and help them reflect on the meaning and value of hope in the carceral environment. Participants were asked to think about the questions in pairs first and then to share their thoughts with the rest of the group as part of a broader informal conversation. Questions included 'Can you think of an example to illustrate feeling hopeful?', 'How important is hope in your daily prison activities?'; 'What can older prisoners serving life sentences hope for'; 'How do you preserve and give hope to older prisoners?'; 'What comes in the way of preserving and giving their hope?'. Both researchers took handwritten notes during the discussions; these were then discussed and compared, later typed and analyzed inductively (Birks and Mills 2011; Petintseva 2022), and constitute the basis for the early findings discussed below.

The notes produced rich and varied data to provide some initial findings and thoughts on the importance of hope 'as a prison practice.' There was little variation in views on the importance of hope, but the richness

of these narratives lies as much in the diversity and dissimilarities of their individual representations, as it does in the commonalities and shared understandings of their reality. These subjective and varied views are still valuable, as they highlight aspects of the institutional perspective on hope and provide unique insights into how hope is understood and applied within prison operations, though they naturally leave some aspects unexplored. Different perspectives were thus not treated as contradictions (where some views would be prioritized over others), but rather the differences helped develop the reflection and pushed the analysis further. In this article, these views are situated within and contrasted with existing criminological studies. At a later stage of the research, the group discussion data will be enriched with staff one-to-one interviews, data from prisoners, and material collected in other prisons. The four main themes that emerged across the group discussions are discussed below.

4. Findings: The Importance of Hope for Prison Staff

a. The denial of hope to ensure the severity of life imprisonment

Some participants asked whether prisoners serving a life sentence even deserved hope for release. They asked: 'Is it not part of their sentence that they have no longer hope to be released?' One member of prison staff confided that 'when I heard about the project, I'm going to be honest, I thought it was bullshit because they don't deserve to hope.' The reactions depicted fear and concern over the ethical justification for giving hope to prisoners who had committed extremely grave and violent offences. There was a sense amongst the staff that the prisoners who had been sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to this prison deserved a punishment that did not provide hope for release. In the discussion, someone asked: 'Why would they deserve hope anyway? They committed horrific crimes...' Prison staff, however, did not go as far as to say that if hope were to emerge, they would seek to smother it. Rather, they questioned the deservedness of hope, suggesting that some prisoners were deserving of feeling hope for release whilst others, due to their levels of blame, did not have a legitimate right to experience the positive effects of hoping for a way out of prison walls.

This finding could suggest that for some prison staff, hope does not need to be exclusively tied to the prospect of release but could instead be linked to other meaningful objectives or aspirations within the prison setting. For example, hope might center on personal growth or contributing to the prison community without depending solely on the promise of release.

But most importantly, the discussion around deserving hope for release is evocative of how some staff perceive the threshold of 'true' life sentences. A feature of serving a life sentence, the comments suggest, is to have no or little hope for release. If life-sentenced prisoners were to have such hope, they would somehow not be serving a real or full life sentence.

The contention is also revelatory of the punitive attitudes that persist amongst those who work in prison, where positive emotions in prison environments (Laws 2022) are treated with suspicion and resistance (Liebling and Arnold 2004). The absence of hope serves to expose the true essence of life imprisonment, making hope important, as it becomes an integral part of the life imprisonment experience.

b. Hope to ensure safety

During the time we conducted the fieldwork, a number of violent incidents occurred, where prisoners assaulted officers, causing entire wings to be shut down, alarms going off, and reinforcement staff were called in. We were told that the levels of violence had significantly increased over the last five years, and this was largely tied to a change in demographics and offender profiles. Organized crime offenders were younger and tended to be more violent than the older, less aggressive offenders, we were told. When reflecting on hope, staff members repeatedly said that without hope, prisoners were likely to 'lash out' and become dangerous as they would have 'nothing to lose,' suggesting that violence was not solely due to demographics. This echoes a long-standing belief that prisoners sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of release present an enhanced risk for staff and are likely to become 'uncontrollable' (Cunningham and Sorensen 2006; Sorensen and Reidy 2019).

These perceptions are interesting to contrast with research on misconduct amongst life-sentenced prisoners. Studies evidence how inmates facing lengthy prison terms have lower rates of disciplinary violations than inmates serving shorter sentences (Herbert 2019; Toman et al. 2015). As prisoners spend time in prison and adapt to their environment, the levels of violence decline (Jarman 2020). They prefer solitude and stand away from 'impulsive, disruptive, and even dangerous' behaviors (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005: 10). Lower levels of risks are further mediated by age. Violent conducts decline as prisoners grow older (Cunningham and Sorensen 2006).

It is interesting to note that discussions on the importance of hope often shifted towards the fear of its absence. The value of hope was framed in a negative light, as something whose removal could lead to serious and potentially dangerous consequences. Equally notable is the observation that features typically associated with older prisoners—such as frailty, dependence, and low risk—seem to disappear when considering the potential implications of individuals losing hope. The absence of hope was perceived as a universally destabilizing force, regardless of age or perceived vulnerability. Even older prisoners can be potentially dangerous if they were to lose hope.

In addition to the belief that hope increases safety for staff, participants stressed that hope helped reduce self-harm amongst prisoners. From this perspective, hope is viewed as having the power to keep prisoners safe too; it gives 'the drive or will to carry on,' as one participant stressed. The staff made the point that if prisoners no longer had hope, they would give

up and take their lives. Preserving prisoners' hope was characterized as a way to protect prisoners from themselves. The participants described hope as a resource to keep prisoners alive, even though some prisoners in this facility would most probably die in prison, given their age and prison sentence. Once again, the prison staff approached the importance of hope through its absence: its essential nature, according to them, somehow became most evident only when it was taken away. A positive approach to the importance of hope nonetheless emerges in discussions around rehabilitation and desistance.

c. *Hope to propel rehabilitation and desistance*

From the conversations with staff, there was a sense that hope could serve as a fuel to take part in the prison environment. 'It keeps them moving forward,' one participant said. They spoke about how those who took part in activities dedicated to older prisoners, such as gym sessions for those over 65 years old, and described well-adjusted workshops such as the barbers' course or the braille workshop. Prison staff also believed that with hope, older prisoners were more likely to stay away from criminal activity in prison, which was on the rise in this particular prison during the time of the fieldwork. This resonates with work on rehabilitation (Arbour et al. 2021) and desistance (Liem and Richardson 2014; Maruna 2001) that has established that prisoners' engagement with the prison regime is key to move away from criminal activities and reintegrate into the community. Taking part in education activities, jobs, treatment programs is also a requirement to progress through the prison system. To be transferred from a high-security prison to a lower-security facility (Burtt 2024) or to become eligible for parole, prisoners indeed need to demonstrate that they have engaged with the prison regime. The motivation to change thus stems from the individual and is induced and shaped by official policies.

But when prisoners become older, engagement in prison life encounters a range of practical barriers that have to do with ill-adapted architectural design for older prisoners (Mann 2012; Crawley 2005). Reduced mobility and cognitive decline also require special access and adaptation, which prisons, including the one we visited, rarely provided (Ridley 2023). The lift between the first floor, where food, health care, and educational activities were located, had been broken for months, we were told, which implied that older prisoners whose cells were on the higher floors either did not attend some of the activities or had to rely on others to bring their food up or help them down the stairs to access the classrooms. The lack of resources, staff, and space are all practical hurdles to engaging in prison life regardless of there being hope or not. Despite wanting to stay away from criminal activities, participants described how some of the older prisoners were bullied, harassed, and sometimes forced to take part in drug-related activities by the younger offenders.

d. Hope to manage and maintain the prison regime

In the group discussion, participants pointed out that hope helped the staff manage prisoners and ensure a secure environment. Hope was described as a helpful tool to trust and develop relationships with those working on the landings. It helped keep the communication channels open, as those with hope were keen to ask about opportunities in prison life (such as workshops or educational training) and would become knowledgeable about administrative and procedural requirements to work towards release. Hope helped obtain 'compliance,' they said.

While hope was described as an essential tool to manage prisoners and maintain the prison regime, the staff were concerned about giving 'false hopes' and described the importance of managing expectations. To do this, they gave examples of never making empty promises and orienting prisoners to activities or administrative tasks that they felt confident could be completed or achievable. Hope was thus portrayed as a managerial tool that required a bit of fine-tuning to channel prisoners' expectations.

The expectations of older prisoners were described as focusing primarily on leading a quiet and uneventful life, with some participants emphasizing that their single-occupancy cell frequently 'became their home.' Participants highlighted that, although the traditional view assumes that prisoners aim to progress through the prison system and work towards lower security categorization, many older prisoners expressed a preference for maintaining the status quo. They seemed reluctant to disrupt their established environment or routines. Some were described as even refusing to complete the requirements to progress through the prison system.

Compliance through hope is also evocative of a form of coping, whereby prisoners adapt and become resilient to the prison regime. Life-sentenced prisoners, and older prisoners too, are known to adjust to their predicament over time (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005; Toman et al. 2015). Coping with prison life, however, is also indicative of profound emotional damage and distress (Haney 2003; Liem and Sampson 2016); it is not 'pain-free.' Adaptation further illustrates how prisoners become 'institutionalised', defined as 'prison-based habits and ways of being, an overdependency on external structures and routines to organize and regulate one's behaviour, a tough veneer that precludes expressing weakness or vulnerability, the generalized mistrust that comes from the fear of exploitation, and a tendency to strike out in response to minimal provocations' (Haney 2012: 7).

The association of hope with compliance thus raises the question whether the outcomes mentioned (i.e., engagement with the prison regime, desire to lead a peaceful life, and others) are akin to a form of maladaptation or even 'sedation' to the prison environment (Crewe 2024). As Crewe (2024) claims, 'highly painful circumstances [can] generate psychological adjustments that enable their survival, and can engender a sense of personal growth' (p. 4). This idea of *compliance-through-hope* finally echoes works on how the exercise of the punitive power breeds obedience discipline (Foucault

1977), which has become increasingly less visible, more pervasive, and all-encompassing (Crewe 2011).

5. Discussion: Pervasive Hope?

This paper situates the notion of hope in the carceral context, in the specific case of older life-sentenced prisoners. It relies on data collected from two group discussions with prison staff to shed original light on the importance of hope from the perspective of those who work closest to these prisoners. While some doubts were formulated on the place that hope holds for people who are least likely to be released due to the combination of their advanced age and the nature of their sentences, there was an overall agreement that hope had some value.

From the stance of prison staff, hope is perceived as an essential tool to ensure the safety of both prisoners and prison staff; it has the propensity to propel efforts to rehabilitate and change; and it is characterized as a resource to maintain the smooth running of the prison regime. *Hope-in-practice* operates as a carefully cultivated mechanism that fosters compliance and order among prisoners while simultaneously motivating rehabilitative efforts and desistance from crime. Hope is also deemed important through its denial. Some prison staff argue that prisoners sentenced to life should not be afforded the comfort of hope, as it undermines the severity of the sentence and the punitive purpose of their incarceration.

Prison staff's deliberate nurturing of hope in prisoners, vested in the possibility of their release, creates a dynamic where hope is wielded as both an individual incentive and a source of collective discipline. Firstly, beyond its traditional framing as an individual sentiment and agential force, hope is leveraged to align prisoners' behavior with the broader goals of imprisonment. The promise of release is employed to motivate all prisoners to engage in rehabilitative programs, adhere to rules, and demonstrate 'progress.' But the cultivation of such behaviors and beliefs towards an outcome that may remain perpetually out of reach due to the realities of aging in prison carries significant ethical and moral ambiguities. When confronted with the fact of aging in prison, the practice of hope appears as potentially deeply manipulative. Secondly, hope further seems to target potential unrests within the prison environment. It is not just a way to shape prisoners' behaviors to adhere to institutional goals; hope is employed for the *collective* management of the prison environment. For prison staff, the cultivation of hope—however tenuous—turns into a pragmatic response to reduce violence, prevent mental health crises, and create an environment that appears to prioritize rehabilitation, even if the structural realities of release mechanisms in the context of older prisoners limit its operationalization.

The instrumentalization of hope behind bars raises fundamental questions about the contours of punishment. Hope is deemed important either by its absence or presence. Its absence is justified to determine and

reveal the true nature of life imprisonment, and its presence serves to reinforce the very structures of control and deprivation that define imprisonment. The practices of hope ultimately become *a part of* the punishment. And in becoming embedded into the very fabric of penal governance, hope becomes an inextricable part of the punishment's capacity to sustain and justify itself. Put differently, the pervasive role of *hope-in-practice* compels us to rethink its function as an integral feature of the state's power to punish.

In grappling with these questions, we see that hope in carceral settings often becomes a source of moral discomfort. It becomes essential to acknowledge the moral cost of using hope to serve institutional priorities at the expense of recognizing the fact of aging in prison, which is a matter of dignity and humanity. At its core, the conversation about hope as a prison practice forces us to confront not only the contradictions of imprisonment when it comes to older prisoners but also our own collective responsibilities toward those it incarcerates for the longest time.

A further step in the research would be to uncover whether and how hope is equally important for different prisoners and across different prison security levels. We would be able to better understand the meaning of hope in the carceral setting and evaluate the extent to which hope as a prisoner's 'lived experience' differs from 'hope as a prison practice' and 'hope as law.'

A word of caution to conclude. We should bear in mind that this study only tells one story about one prison in one country in the context of older life-sentenced prisoners and from the perspective of a small group of prison staff. I further acknowledge that different narratives may exist for other prison staff across the prison estate in England and Wales—and these views may be contingent on factors such as age, gender, ethnic origins, and prison experience. In addition, the analysis is based on transcribed notes of group discussions; whilst situated in criminological studies and official data, the discussion results were not triangulated with the official data on older prisoners serving life sentences. Although caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings, this study sheds new light on an under-researched area and reveals the complex role of positive experiences such as hope in prisons. It is our hope to inspire future research on hope in prison.

1. The case of Vinter and Others v. the United Kingdom concerned whole life orders and found that life imprisonment without a prospect of release may violate Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (thereafter ECHR or the Convention) which prohibits inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment. The case involved three applicants who were serving whole life orders in the UK. They argued that their sentences were incompatible with Article 3 as they had no realistic prospect of release, regardless of rehabilitation. The European Court of Human Rights (thereafter ECtHR or the Court) ruled that while life sentences are not inherently inhuman or degrading, there must be a mechanism to review such sentences after a certain period.

Without this possibility of review, whole life sentences could become disproportionate and violate Article 3. The Court emphasized that a review mechanism must assess whether continued detention is justified based on legitimate penological grounds, such as public safety or rehabilitation. The judgment effectively challenged the UK's practice of imposing irreducible life sentences, stressing the importance of hope and the possibility of rehabilitation in the penal system.

2. The ECtHR found a violation of Article 3 of the Convention in the case of six applicants serving life sentences in Lithuania, as their sentences were deemed neither de jure nor de facto reducible. Measures such as parole, amnesty, and reclassification offered no genuine prospect of release, and the presidential pardon lacked transparency, judicial review, and procedural safeguards, rendering it arbitrary. Prison conditions also hindered rehabilitation, as inmates were confined for extended hours with limited social interaction. The Court concluded that whole-life sentences without proper mechanisms for review and rehabilitation progress violated Article 3.
3. The notes of the principal investigator and the research associate.

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Article

Wandering the In-Between, Where All Contradictions Concur. Confrontations with Anti-Indigenous Racism, White Colonial Pop Cultures, and Performance Traditions in the German-Speaking Context

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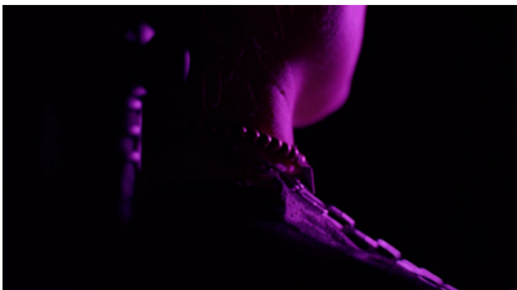
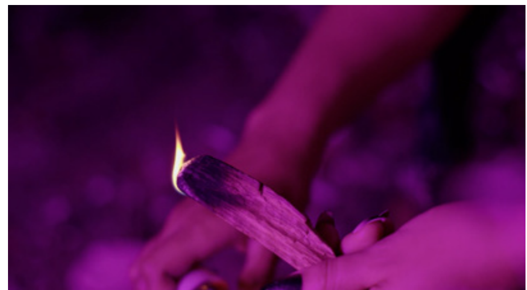
Wandering the In-Between, Where All Contradictions Concur. Confrontations with Anti-Indigenous Racism, White Colonial Pop Cultures, and Performance Traditions in the German-Speaking Context[1]

Verena Melgarejo Weinandt and Suza Husse

This article explores the role of performance as a colonial as well as anti-colonial cultural tool. It looks at how popular performance culture is used to create colonial imaginaries about Indigenous people in the German-speaking context, and how we can understand these imaginaries in connection to the realities and repetitions of colonial violence in the present. Based on their practice of working, thinking, and writing together as artists, researchers, and cultural workers, the two authors interlace biographically situated perspectives on the presence of anti-Indigenous racism and its rootedness in German society through colonial pop cultures and white performance traditions. The article is inspired by Melgarejo Weinandt's performative alter ego Pocahunter engaged in a performance and multimedia practice countering colonial stereotyping and anti-Indigenous racism. Connecting to realities in the postsocialist East, where Husse grew up, cultural practices around 'Indianthusiast' spectacles, and museum cultures connected to the colonial writer Karl May, we think about ways to seek transformative modes of repair; in doing so, we look at different cultural expressions, artistic counter-practice, possible theoretical framings, modes of activism.

Keywords: anti-Indigenous racism, anti-colonial arts and activism, colonial pop culture, decolonial and queer imaginaries, Indianthusiasm, Indigenous world-making, Karl May, Matoaka, performance art, Pocahontas, postsocialism





Figures 1–2. Stills from the video performance *Invocation, Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)*, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, 2022. All rights reserved, courtesy of the artist.

Verena: In my performative video *Invocation, Connecting in Darkness* (2022), my alter ego Pocahunter walks through an undefined area with bushes and small trees at night. City lights can be seen in the background. She wanders through this landscape without a destination. She appears, is visible, and yet also remains hidden and unrecognized. She prepares herself, sorts her necklaces, ties her shoes, lights palo santo. A text is whispered:

> I am your body, your soul, your mind
> we are one, and also not
>
> now you are here
> you were always
>
> what can I call you?
> zombie-Pocahunter
> nightmare-Pocahunter
> wandering ancestor
> with wandering names
>
> you have found rest in the underworld
> are haunting people in their dreams
> the head of John Smith is dangling on your belt
>
> you wander through all times
> not belonging to the past, the present, nor the future
> still, you inhabit all of them at once
>
> wandering the in-between, the liminal space
> where all contradictions concur
> you move in constant transformation[1]

This performance is an invocation of Pocahunter describing her relationship to my personal identity and the story of Matoaka, the Powhatan woman from present-day Virginia, USA, on whom the fictional *Pocahontas* stories are based. What remains at the end of the video is the smoke of palo santo that drifts across the images. My voice whispers into and through this darkness as a gesture of transcendence.

The video is a ritual and marks the beginning of a video series that follows this invocation of Pocahunter as a performative being. The video is also a gesture, a movement, and a form of wandering towards a space-time-body that exists outside my reality and the present; it is an invocation of this alter ego, an attempt to communicate, and at the same time an expression of the impossibility of communication.

Suza, you and I have been exchanging ideas, collaborating, and interweaving our practices, thoughts, and stories for several years

now through curating, exhibitions, workshops, publications, and events of all kinds. While we have been sharing our thoughts and emotions on the never-ending presence of anti-Indigenous racism and its rootedness in German society for years, it was not until our collaboration for the online archive *re.act.feminism* (2008) and its presentation at Manifesta 14 in 2022, as well as the production of the performance video *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)*, that we had finally found a frame that allowed us to start our collaboration on a topic that we felt—and still feel today—needs more attention and general awareness. Let us start from here.

Suza: Next to working together in relation to Gloria E. Anzaldúa's legacy and its significance for queer, migrant, intersectional creating of worlds, making art, and rethinking political and cultural organizing that has connected us since 2017, your performative alter ego Pocahunter has become an important bridge between us. It has been inspiring to witness how, beginning in 2014, Pocahunter has appeared and disappeared again and again in different times and spaces, sometimes conjuring up nightmares against the colonial imagination, and sometimes braiding different dimensions into threads of connectedness. I think it was around 2021 that Pocahunter began to bring about an exchange between us that connects our individual, biographically different, and shared confrontations with coloniality, racism, white colonial pop cultures, and performance traditions in the German-speaking and multilingual context. In 2022, I was collaborating with the online performance archive *re.act.feminism#3,* founded by Bettina Knaup and Beatrice Stammer, to create a digital format for new artist commissions in interaction with works from the archive. This became *revenge ~ avatars and manyness**, which was co-created by you, Oreet Ashery, and myself, and which referenced the works of Teresa María Díaz Nerio and Bartolina XiXa (Ashery, Husse, and Melgarejo Weinandt 2022). The video performance *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)* was your contribution. Here, Pocahunter emerges from the in-between worlds, perhaps more like a movement that manifests in a body—I mean gestures and imaginaries that rise from dissident ecologies and political underworlds. This leads me to ask: from where did she emerge for you, and how did she arrive to you?

Verena: One of the most important moments in the development of Pocahunter, and one that has become particularly significant in retrospect, was when the Disney film *Pocahontas* was released in Germany. That was in 1995, and I was nine years old. At that time, a whole generation was consuming the same television and cinema programs; therefore, they played a major role in determining our cultural influences. These shared references created a bond between people of my generation and a shared sense of identity. It's interesting how some events can take on a completely different meaning at a later point in life. With a German mother and a father from Bolivia, my family was not one of the strongly present migrant groups in Berlin at that time, but

we were no exception in terms of families with a history of migration in Berlin-Kreuzberg, living in this district which was predominantly migrant and working class. This meant that experiences of othering, racism, and xenophobia, even if we weren't familiar with the definitions of those concepts at that time, were not uncommon due to this diverse demography. White people would often assume that as People of Color we couldn't be German. My appearance often puzzled people, as they couldn't clearly place me in their existing catalog of ethnic stereotypes. But the release of the Disney movie *Pocahontas* drastically changed that experience. I was suddenly confronted with the excitement of people who had the impression that seeing me meant having a living version of *Pocahontas* in front of them. Within my social environment, this film revitalized centuries-old colonial, racist, exoticizing, and sexualizing stereotypical images of and narratives about Indigenous people. They were updated and made accessible to a whole generation, to my generation. I remember being asked in everyday life—at a bus stop, on the subway, and so on—about my resemblance to this figure. This comparison became a recurring moment that was repeatedly (re)inscribed throughout my whole life. Later, I was able to contextualize these experiences as just one out of many repetitions and updates of colonial imaginaries through the cultural productions of the past centuries that reproduce mechanisms of colonial violence towards Indigenous people. It is hard to grasp or even imagine this forever unsolved 'problem' in all the violent dimensions, outputs, and consequences of this never-ending repetition of narratives and images. It is their ability to create racism and sexism through stories that are completely invented and used to generate financial profit by exploiting Indigenous peoples as well as their histories and cultures but are presented as 'innocent' novels and children's books that have remained intact as a mechanism over centuries. And this is where my performance figure Pocahunter comes in. Through this fictional alter ego, I found a channel which allowed me to explore different layers, dimensions, and meanings of my experience. It gave me an outlet to express how this experience has altered my self-image and changed my search for gestures and images that would heal it. The emphasis here lies on this search, on the process of creating those gestures and images rather than providing or finding clear answers. It also gave me an output for my research on the significance and impact of fictions and fantasies about Indigenous people, especially in the German-speaking world, allowing me to make visible how they unfold themselves, shape our present, and reproduce centuries-old colonial mechanisms of violence today.

As a trained photographer, I have been *searching* for images since I started studying and creating art. Making videos feels like an extension of this process: exploring images beyond violent stereotypes while using my fictional alter ego to create new imaginaries for myself and others. This is indeed a 'hopeful' endeavor, as I am thus expressing how creative processes and aesthetics can create change and transformation beyond rational comprehension (at least my own). This is related to Gloria E. Anzaldúa's (2015) understanding of the relation between 'self-knowledge and creative work'

and 'creativity as a liberation impulse' practiced by what she calls 'the artist as chamana' (pp. 40, 39). I believe that expressing this ability allows us to image different futures, of ourselves as humans and of our relation to all beings.

Suza: For me, your work, and Pocahunter in particular, is an impulse to find ways to unlearn the colonial fictions with which I have grown up as a white kid and teenager in East Germany, and a language for the dissonances they still trigger today. Pocahunter reminded me that I was born into a time of state-sanctioned revival of the colonial writer Karl May. His revival in the early 1980s renormalized performative and narrative traditions of white German superiority that had been significantly influenced by his work, including the cultural appropriation of Indigenous imagery and traditions. In 1983, the GDR head of state, Erich Honecker, personally advocated for the 'Indianer Museum' in Dresden Radebeul to be reconnected more explicitly with the figure of Karl May, whose collection the museum was based on and to whose legacy it was dedicated, but whose name it could not bear because, since the founding of the GDR and until that moment, Karl May had been officially condemned as an imperialist author. In 1956, the East German newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* described May, a writer that was favored and widely popularized by the Nazis, as 'a harbinger of fascist sentiment. His super-German supermen... inculcated the youth with an unhumanistic [*unhumanistisch*], barbaric attitude' (Bronnen 1956, cit. in von Borries and Fischer 2008: 19). While it is interesting that the 'barbaric' is recognized in this text as an attribute of imperial masculinity and the 'super-German' as a brutalization of the world, only a decade later May's 'ghosts'—the role models his characters provided—began to reappear in GDR cinema and TV culture with only slightly changed signifiers. As a child in the 1980s and 1990s, I watched East German cinematic renderings of Indianist novels, now written by socialist authors, as well as West German film adaptations of May's books. The homoerotic brotherhood between the good white proto-soldier who brings 'peace' and 'humanity,' and the 'noble savage' who has been 'educated'/'civilized' through Christian contact, riding together towards the horizon of a 'new world,' became part of my imagination.

I don't remember visiting the Karl May Museum when I was a child. My family didn't read May's novels at home, but to dress up as 'cowboys' and 'Indians,' or as May's characters Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, was definitely a thing in kindergarten. In 1984, when I was two years old, the Karl May plays were returned to the program of the open-air theater Felsenbühne Rathen near Dresden, which had been founded in 1938 by the National Socialists to host their Karl May Festivals. In the time and space of my growing up, all these performances of the colonial constituted an important part of the repertoire of late socialist and then postsocialist youth culture. They were as present in the everyday experiences of playing and rehearsing social roles and structures as was being part of the young pioneers, visiting dinosaur parks, playing on building sites, and, later, finding oneself on different sides of the political rifts that ran through teenage belonging, with its divisions into punks, *Faschos* (neo-fascist skinheads), and ravers.[2]

Verena: Pocahunter deals with this phenomenon that Hartmut Lutz (2002) calls *Indianthusiasm*, which is expressed in many of the experiences that you mentioned as well as in German cultural practices and phenomena more broadly. Lutz (2002) describes Indianthusiasm as a German version of 'yearning for all things Indian, a fascination with American Indians, a romanticizing about a supposed Indian essence' (p. 168). While this yearning exists in many other cultural contexts, too, Lutz (2002, 2020) and Susanne Zantop (1997, 2002) have studied how this stereotype has impacted German culture and nation-building since the proclamation of the German empire in 1871. Today, in the German-speaking context, there is a significant lack of consciousness about the historical role that Indigenous stereotypes have played in the making of a German identity that had yet to be constructed with the foundation of the unified German state in the second half of the 19th century.[3]

After 1871, Indigenous stereotypes were used to create a desired fictional identity with which Germans could identify, an image of a positively connotated 'other,' which was later used by the Nazis as a positively connotated stereotype that served as a counter-image to antisemitic stereotypes (Lutz 2002: 179–180). So, the stereotype of the Indigenous other became a fantasy which was used to create a German national identity. It was loaded with images, character traits, and ideas of connection to the own community and to nature, which served as a mirror for the projections of what German national identity aspired to be. Cultural productions and colonial imaginations such as May's novels played a vital part in presenting whatever Germans imagined themselves to be. They also addressed a 'lack' in terms of colonial identity and colonial empire at a moment in history when Germany was still hoping to play an important role in colonial imperialism (Zantop 1997: 6). Colonial fantasies served as the ground for the realization of colonial endeavors: 'imaginary colonialism' (Zantop 1997: 9).

Suza: Your analysis of how an imagined Indigeneity was crucial to the project of constructing Germanness, or a collective German identity, has helped me better understand what happened during the so-called transition years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when a 'reunified' German identity celebrated itself as white, capitalist, and Christian. The continuation and revival of colonial imaginaries went hand in hand with the intensification of racist violence and neofascist organization. The recourse to colonial fictions such as the ones popularized by May and the German *Indianthusiasm* culture lent these movements more than cultural legitimacy. It gave them tools. May's writing is inconceivable without the collective practice of dressing up as the colonized, the colonial other, which he cultivated and celebrated in his house and gardens that host the museum today.

The revitalization of stereotypical images and narratives of Indigenous people with Disney's Pocahontas that you described earlier activated this pre-existing imaginary, pushed it to re-emerge and made it much more popular again. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that the *Pocahontas* craze reached us at a time when post/migrant and

BIPoC feminist struggles and anti-racist cultural, social, and political work in Germany had been building up for decades and was very virulent. In fact, Encarnación Guitiérrez Rodríguez and Pinar Tuzcu (2021) state that the 1980s and 1990s mark a peak of feminist political self-organization of migrants, Black people, People of Colour, Sinti:zze and Romn:ja, of exiled and Jewish women, lesbians and queers. In this light, I think your Pocahunter character can be seen as a manifestation that is part of these forms of organized activism, resistance cultures, and world-making, and their anti-colonial counter-proposals, in which you have been actively involved for many years.

Verena: I agree that we have to think of our activities and art-making as part of a larger movement that has shaped what and how we articulate in different formats, images, words, and movements today.[4] Indianthusiasm has been analyzed and criticized by the film *Forget Winnetou* (2018), directed by the Chiricahua Apache/Cherokee writer, game developer, educator, psychologist, and filmmaker Red Haircrow.[5] This movie creates a space for Indigenous/Native people to address and discuss how Indianthusiasm unfolds many different forms of oppression and perpetuates structures of colonialism in Germany today. In my opinion, it should be part of every school curriculum in Germany.

Suza: While *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series, Part I)* was in the making for *revenge ~ avatars and manyness**/ re.act.feminism#3*, Oreet Ashery, you and I talked a lot about revenge and the unsettling of colonial time. We made a zine out of these conversations (Ashery, Husse and Melgarejo Weinandt 2022). Thinking with both your and Oreet's practices at the time led me to reflect on revenge as a queer and anticolonial possibility, a form of hope maybe, that addresses or reaches through the past and is morally ambiguous.

Pocahunter's revenge—and practice of enacting hope in which you engage through her—seems to be an interweaving of dissonances. It activates connections made of living fragments that fan out their rupture bodies like indissoluble shadows: frequencies; Pocahunter-Verena-Matoaka; tectonic trembling through loops of time. In her entangling of times and her return to Matoaka, the actual Powhatan ancestor, Pocahunter unsettles *Pocahontas* and blows up the wrong, violent vessel that this colonial fiction has created, but which nevertheless transports fragments of this spirit/ancestor. When these become space-time bodies again via Pocahunter, as you say, *Pocahontas* is *dismembered* by her, as we could call this recomposing form of remembering according to Gloria E. Anzaldúa.

It seems to me that this *dismembering* and interweaving of dissonances have shaped your approach to Matoaka over the years and allowed you to call on her as an ancestor that remains inscribed even in her exoticized representation, to reinforce that which is resistant—present/absent in the colonial archive as a glitch, as a rupture. This interweaving within the Maotoaka-Verena-Pocahunter triangle also seems to carry some

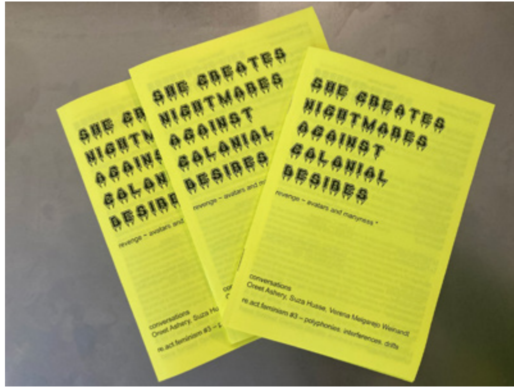
of the flickering of what Indigeneity means. How would you say this triangle has changed since you started working more intensely with the history of Matoaka? In her latest appearance, Pocahunter literally makes braids connecting her to and through different dimensions.

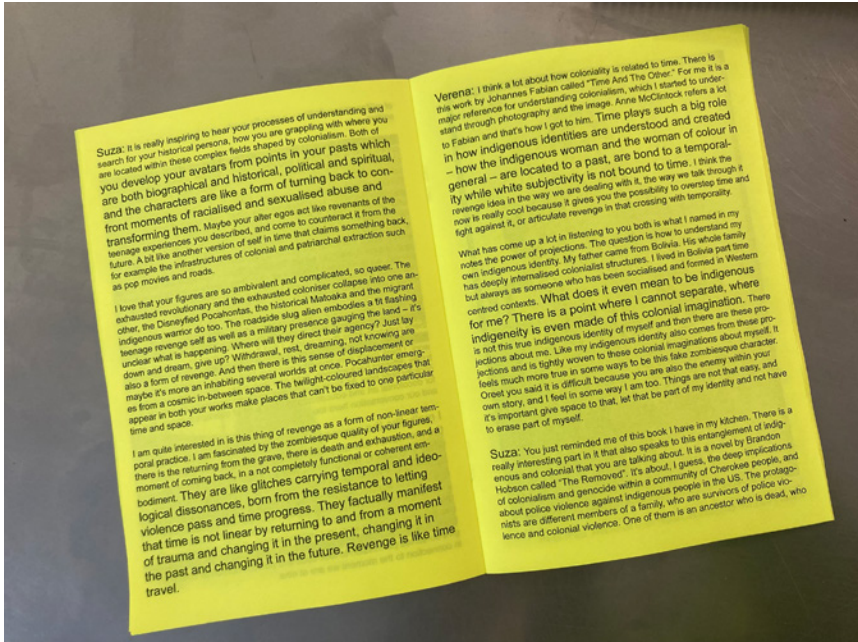
Verena: Your question is not easy to answer, and at the same time it is one of the central questions that inspires me in my work and engagement with Pocahunter. You are already including a definition here that goes beyond a colonial definition of linear temporality and spatial thinking, because you also include Matoaka[6] in the triangle, a person who lived many hundreds of years ago and with whom I have no direct relationship. So, what is my relationship with Matoaka?

The documents and publications from the archives that were used to reconstruct her biography consist exclusively of reports, letters, and publications written from the perspective of English people who were involved in the colonization of the land, people, and all beings of what is today Virginia, USA. These archived documents bear witness to and describe various moments in Matoaka's life: her abduction and hostage-taking in present-day Virginia, her marriage to the English tobacco farmer John Rolf, her baptism and change of name to Rebecca, her journey to England, the birth of her son Thomas Rolf, her death on a ship on the Thames, and her burial in Gravesend, a small town outside of London. But her own words about all of this, her perspective and descriptions and hints to gestures, wishes, denials, refusals, and strategies of survival are not in the archives. Saidiya Hartman (2008) famously describes the dilemma of missing voices in archives when she writes: 'The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed' (p. 8).

Matoaka's story is hardly known by all of those who have seen and know the Disney movie *Pocahontas* based on her life. What is known through the Disney movie, however, is a story about Matoaka which is very unlikely to be true and which was told by one of the colonizers of Jamestown. John Smith first published this story in 1624 in his *Generall Historie*, in which he describes his rescue by Matoaka. He published this story at a time when it was politically convenient; many years after this alleged rescue (1607–1609) are said to have taken place. John Smith was able to promote this story very well, as we would put it today. The illustrations for his publication were executed by Robert Vaughan, a successful engraver who worked in the style of Theodor de Bry. Helen C. Rountree (2005) speaks of Smith's 'self-aggrandizing accounts' (p. 2) and how he exaggerates not only his own importance of the then 11-year-old Matoaka for the encounter between John Smith and the Powhatan people, making his story less credible. But his narrative continued to circulate.

In 1805, Matoaka became the main character of the novel *The Settlers of Virginia* by John Davis. This love story became a bestseller of the early European novels and an influential book during the emergence of a bourgeois reading culture for women (Theweleit 1999: 45). I would therefore





Suza: It is really inspiring to hear your processes of understanding and
search for your historical persona, how you are grappling with where you
are located within these complex fields shaped by colonialism. Both of
you develop your avatars from points in your pasts which
are both biographical and historical, political and spiritual,
and the characters are like a form of turning back to con-
front moments of racialised and sexualised abuse and
transforming them. Maybe your alter egos act like revenants of the
teenage experiences you described, and come to counteract it from the
future. A bit like another version of self in time that claims something back,
for example the infrastructures of colonial and patriarchal extraction such
as pop movies and roads.

I love that your figures are so ambivalent and complicated, so queer. The
exhausted revolutionary and the exhausted coloniser collapse into one an-
other, the Disneyfied Pocahontas, the historical Matoaka and the migrant
indigenous warrior do too. The roadside slug alien embodies a tit flashing
teenage revenge self as well as a military presence gauging the land – it's
unclear what is happening. Where will they direct their agency? Just lay
down and dream, give up? Withdrawal, rest, dreaming, not knowing are
also a form of revenge. And then there is this sense of displacement or
maybe it's more an inhabiting several worlds at once. Pocahunter emerg-
es from a cosmic in-between space. The twilight-coloured landscapes that
appear in both your works make places that can't be fixed to one particular
time and space.

I am quite interested in is this thing of revenge as a form of non-linear tem-
poral practice. I am fascinated by the zombiesque quality of your figures,
there is the returning from the grave, there is death and exhaustion, and a
moment of coming back, in a not completely functional or coherent em-
bodiment. They are like glitches carrying temporal and ideo-
logical dissonances, born from the resistance to letting
violence pass and time progress. They factually manifest
that time is not linear by returning to and from a moment
of trauma and changing it in the present, changing it in
the past and changing it in the future. Revenge is like time
travel.

Verena: I think a lot about how coloniality is related to time. There is
this work by Johannes Fabian called "Time And The Other." For me it is a
major reference for understanding colonialism, which I started to under-
stand through photography and the image. Anne McClintock refers a lot
to Fabian and that's how I got to him. Time plays such a big role
in how indigenous identities are understood and created
– how the indigenous woman and the woman of colour in
general – are located to a past, are bond to a temporal-
ity while white subjectivity is not bound to time. I think the
revenge idea in the way we are dealing with it, the way we talk through it
now is really cool because it gives you the possibility to overstep time and
fight against it, or articulate revenge in that crossing with temporality.

What has come up a lot in listening to you both is what I named in my
notes the power of projections. The question is how to understand my
own indigenous identity. My father came from Bolivia. His whole family
has deeply internalised colonialist structures. I lived in Bolivia part time
but always as someone who has been socialised and formed in Western
centred contexts. What does it even mean to be indigenous
for me? There is a point where I cannot separate, where
indigeneity is even made of this colonial imagination. There
is not this true indigenous identity of myself and then there are these pro-
jections about me. Like my indigenous identity also comes from these pro-
jections and is tightly woven to these colonial imaginations about myself. It
feels much more true in some ways to be this fake zombiesque character.
Oreet you said it is difficult because you are also the enemy within your
own story, and I feel in some way I am too. Things are not that easy, and
it's important give space to that, let that be part of my identity and not have
to erase part of myself.

Suza: You just reminded me of this book I have in my kitchen. There is a
really interesting part in it that also speaks to this entanglement of indig-
enous and colonial that you are talking about. It is a novel by Brandon
Hobson called "The Removed". It's about, I guess, the deep implications
of colonialism and genocide within a community of Cherokee people, and
about police violence against indigenous people in the US. The protago-
nists are different members of a family, who are survivors of police vio-
lence and colonial violence. One of them is an ancestor who is dead, who

Figures 3–5. Views of Oreet Ashery, Suza Husse and Verena Melgarejo Weinandt's zine *She Creates Nightmares against Colonial Desires. revenge ~ avatars and manyness * Conversations*, published as part of *re.act. feminism#3*, 2022. Photographs by Suza Husse, 2025. All rights reserved, courtesy of the photographer.

add a fourth position to your triangle: the fictional projection of Matoaka, known mostly as *Pocahontas*. This figure represents the centuries-long circulation of fiction that is constantly renewed and remains intact despite all changes in society, technology, visual language, communication, media, and narrative styles. Matoaka was taken up again to adapt her story in media-effective forms and narratives to the respective time, the existing social and cultural codes and norms, in order to revive the same story time and time again: an Indigenous woman who not only falls in love with her colonizer, but even saves him from death, protects him from her own family, and ultimately identifies with his culture and beliefs.

Moreover, I would give your triangle a circular movement; not a linear movement from A to B, but a constant back and forth, a reference back to the past and a carrying forward into the present. Through Pocahunter's gestures, I want to express the impact and manifestation of these stories and fictions which travel into the present and future, suspending temporal and spatial boundaries. Pocahunter asks how these fantasies circulate in the German-speaking context and what policies are formed with and through them, for 'colonial fantasies provide access to the "political unconscious" of a nation, to the desires, dreams, and myths that inform public discourse and (can) propel collective political action' (Zantop 1997: 4). She asks how these fantasies were assimilated in order to create a German national identity and how they then manifest themselves as part of the Germans' 'collective mentality' (Zantop 1997: 4). Here, we see a discrepancy that is systematic when it comes to Indigenous peoples. The ubiquity of fictional imaginings, when compared to reality, to representations of real Indigenous people. These endless fictions speak about and reflect those who produce them, from whom they come, not the other way around. And then they live on as ideas and shape reality through those who consume them. Pocahunter wanders between these realms, the imaginative and the real, expressing the need for reorganizing and transforming the relationship to colonial imaginaries that shape us collectively and individually.

My alter ego Pocahunter addresses this imaginary dimension and its power to influence and shape reality. She explores how these fantasies are inscribed in my—our—bodies and the way we project ourselves. Through her, I can articulate and externalize forms of violence that I, like many others, have internalized and normalized, and find methods to transform those influences again. I ask myself, after Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019): 'What does it take to attend to the recurrent moment of original violence?', understanding that '[t]o attend is to seek different transformative modes of repair of which restitution and reparations are possible options' (p. 8). Suza, what other references can you think of concerning frameworks, concepts, and cosmovisions that allow for transformative modes of repair by altering the way we think about and understand these moments of violence?

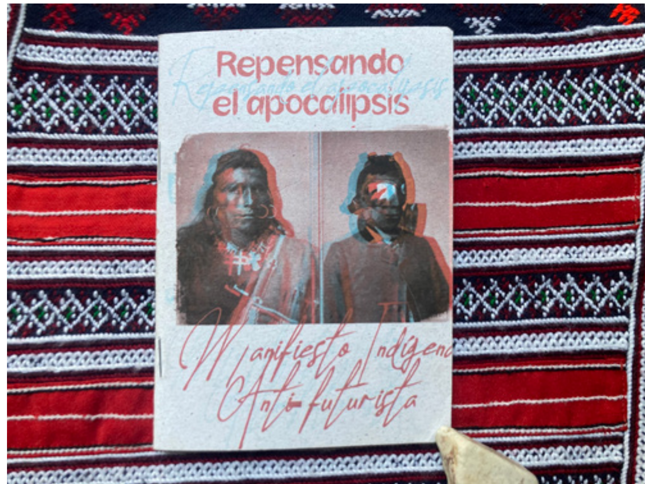
Suza: The way you connect Pocahunter to Azoulay resonates with what fascinates me about the idea of revenge as a form of time travel and nonlinear

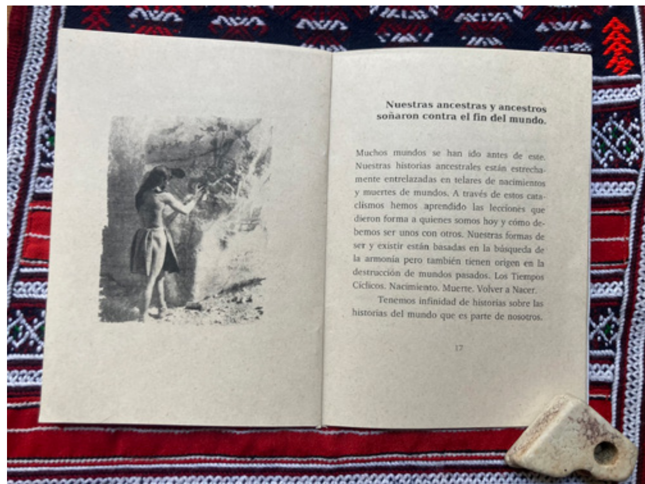
memory, both of which could also be described as states of dreaming. Another powerful reference, and one that already has been part of our conversations is *Repensando el apocalipsis. Manifesto Indigena Antifuturista*, a manifesto which was published in 2020 during the COVID lockdowns.

In it, the motif of dreaming appears as an expression of ancestral connections and the crossing of time:

> 'Our ancestors dreamt against the end of the world.
> Many worlds have gone before this one. Our traditional histories are tightly woven with the fabric of the birthing and ending of worlds. [...]
> We have an unknowing of histories upon histories of the world that is part of us. It is the language of the cosmos, it speaks in prophecies long carved in the scars where our ancestors dreamed. It is the ghostdance, the seven fires, the birth of the White Buffalo, the seventh generation, it is the five suns, it is written in stone near Oraibi, and beyond. These prophecies are not just predictive, they have also been diagnostic and instructive.
> We are the dreamers dreamt by our ancestors. We have traversed all time between the breaths of our dreams. We exist at once with our ancestors and unbirthed generations. Our future is held in our hands. It is our mutuality and interdependence. It is our relative. It is in the creases of our memories, folded gently by our ancestors. It is our collective Dreamtime, and it is Now. Then. Tomorrow. Yesterday. The anti-colonial imagination isn't a subjective reaction to colonial futurisms, it is anti-settler future. Our life cycles are not linear, our future exists without time. It is a dream, uncolonized.'[7]

In the two video performances *Invocation. Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)* from 2022 and *Braiding Renewal (Pocahunter Series)* from 2023, Pocahunter is invoked as both a dream and a dreamer. Pocahunter dreams of Matoaka, if we want to describe the invocation and re-embodiment as a kind of dreaming. At the same time, with the *Manifesto Indigena Antifuturista*, Matoaka can be seen as an ancestor who dreamed of you and Pocahunter 'against the end of the world.' These kinds of dreams inscribe forms of survival, resistance, repair, or healing, that also inform the work of speculative historiography, the creation of counter-memory, and the material-spiritual weaving of connections that you do in your art. We read a part of the *Manifesto* when you and I had a public conversation inspired by your two works mentioned above, as part of the program 'Tonight the city + + is a tectonic bone radio—, Our ancestors are on every channel + + +,' which I co-organized within the collective anticolonial feminist infrastructure 'When the Jackal Leaves the Sun: Decentering Restitution | Pedagogies of Repossession' in June 2024.[8] 'Tectonic Bones Radio' brought together descendants, activists, artists, lawyers, cultural workers, and healers to engage speculatively with the earthquakes and tectonic shifts caused by Indigenous ancestors and 'ancestral remains' held against their will in German institutions and by the continued struggles against colonial injustices. Engaging with their presence as a constellation of epicenters, their tremors moving deep in time allowed for a different kind of speaking both through biographical, historical, and earthly speculation. Many people spoke about moments in their childhood as political seismographic events and thus manifested counter-histories





Nuestras ancestras y ancestros soñaron contra el fin del mundo.

Muchos mundos se han ido antes de este. Nuestras historias ancestrales están estrechamente entrelazadas en telares de nacimientos y muertes de mundos. A través de estos cataclismos hemos aprendido las lecciones que dieron forma a quienes somos hoy y cómo debemos ser unos con otros. Nuestras formas de ser y existir están basadas en la búsqueda de la armonía pero también tienen origen en la destrucción de mundos pasados. Los Tiempos Cíclicos. Nacimiento. Muerte. Volver a Nacer.

Tenemos infinidad de historias sobre las historias del mundo que es parte de nosotros.

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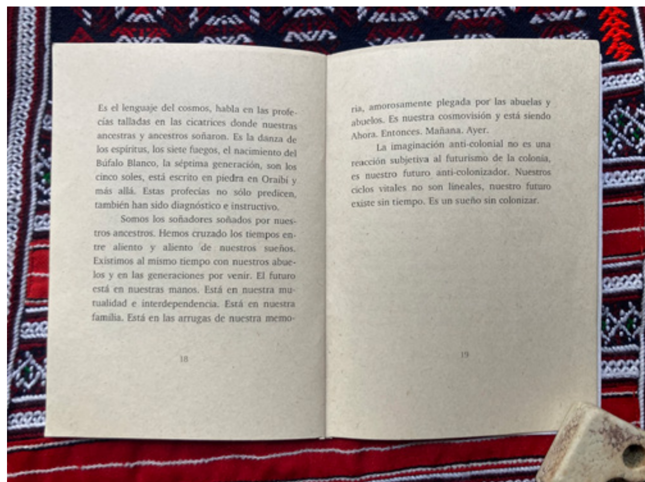

Es el lenguaje del cosmos, habla en las profecías talladas en las cicatrices donde nuestras ancestras y ancestros soñaron. Es la danza de los espíritus, los siete fuegos, el nacimiento del Búfalo Blanco, la séptima generación, son los cinco soles, está escrito en piedra en Oraibi y más allá. Estas profecías no sólo predicen, también han sido diagnóstico e instructivo.

Somos los soñadores soñados por nuestros ancestros. Hemos cruzado los tiempos entre aliento y aliento de nuestros sueños. Existimos al mismo tiempo con nuestros abuelos y en las generaciones por venir. El futuro está en nuestras manos. Está en nuestra mutualidad e interdependencia. Está en nuestra familia. Está en las arrugas de nuestra memo-

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ria, amorosamente plegada por las abuelas y abuelos. Es nuestra cosmovisión y está siendo Ahora. Entonces. Mañana. Ayer.

La imaginación anti-colonial no es una reacción subjetiva al futurismo de la colonia, es nuestro futuro anti-colonizador. Nuestros ciclos vitales no son lineales, nuestro futuro existe sin tiempo. Es un sueño sin colonizar.

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Figures 6–8. *Repensando el apocalipsis. Manifesto Indigena Antifuturista*, 2020. Photographs by Suza Husse, 2025. All rights reserved, courtesy of the photographer.

and counter-memories that live in each of our bodies, in transgenerational experiences, and in the ecologies that we are part of. To connect these speculative tectonics and ancestral dreaming of futures, I want to ask about your child self: was Pocahunter perhaps also a dream of this child self, a dream to counteract pocahontization? Can you remember what forms of resistance you found and invented as a child?

Verena: I find it hard to remember what the reactions and emotions to the Pocahontas projections I experienced in my childhood were. Maybe it also doesn't matter if Pocahunter already existed back then as a fantasy—because she exists now, she has created that connection to my childhood experiences. This goes back to what we discussed earlier: the relationships between past, present, and future are to be made multiple and circular. I am able to connect to my childhood by creating this performance, which at the same time is directed towards the future. Pocahunter creates a connection to my childhood experiences beyond my rational understanding, and she is able to heal parts of what is still present from my childhood within me today in ways that are beyond what I can express in words. And although resistance is a very important part of Pocahunter's strategy, I wouldn't limit her actions to that. Or you could say that Pocahunter's resistance is not only directed towards things and people outside, but it also tries to move inward, into imaginaries and fantasies of myself, and explores how they are connected, and how this connection can be transformed in a collective manner. This doesn't mean that she doesn't acknowledge violence, but Pocathunter's approach is not as clearly directed toward binaries such as 'me vs. them,' 'inside vs. outside,' or 'good vs. bad.' Pocahunter's methods and strategies are also very momentary and can change. This constant transformation is what she is about. I don't think I have a direct answer to your question. While Pocahunter does confront violence, she incorporates this 'enemy' also into her braid, which is then, together with all the other parts of the braids, transformed into something else. The visual description and the practice of that performance *Braiding Renewal* describes my conceptual approach better than I am able to put in words, is what I sense here.

Inspired by the manifesto to which you are referring, I developed the performance *Braiding Renewal* within a two-year collective exhibition project.[9] This manifesto was actually the starting point of the whole project and the first text we had discussed collectively. For my performance video for this exhibition, I chose braiding as the central gesture. I went to a river, a place that I visit regularly because it gives me a lot of energy—after visiting it for many years now, I feel very connected to that place. I braided black textile braids on site, a symbol and element that I have been working with for a long time in my artistic practice. I see the braids not only as a reference to the hair and braids of my Indigenous ancestors but to hair in general, as a manifestation of how we all constantly change throughout our lives. It is a physical manifestation of our constant transformation. Braiding as an activity gives the possibility to bring different strands—elements, energies,

Figures 9–10: Stills from the video performance *Braiding Renewal (Pocahunter Series)*, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, 2023. All rights reserved, courtesy of the artist.

and stories—together and separate them again. Although the individual strands of the braid form a unit, they also remain separate from each other. I am interested in this visible difference, this continuation of separation within the commonality as a concept, for it allows me to think about our connections and identity formations. The activity of braiding, of connecting and separating again, of the entanglement of all things and beings while at the same time being apart.[10] The performance has an intuitive character and does not follow a linear narrative but tries to convey a process, a capacity for transformation, and the possibility of creating change and healing, all of which I understand as part of the meaning of 'hope.' In the video where I braid, I put on a cape made of braids, and I use the textile braids to connect with the environment, especially with the trees. Then, I go into the water and wash the braids. The cape embodies the heaviness and burden of creating these connections, the burden of history that we carry on our shoulders, and the work that is implied for bringing about change. To feel this burden, but also to share it, to transform it, and finally to let go, to transfer the work and the process to another element, so that it can continue on its path, is the conclusion but at the same time the beginning of a process, which again refers to a cyclical understanding of time.

Suza: This weaving and loosening of connections as well as the burden of history that you are talking about remind me of what the Argentinian anthropologist Rita Segato (2021) describes as *contra-pedagogías de la crueldad*, translated into English as 'counter-pedagogies of cruelty.' She talks about regaining connections, empathy, and reciprocity that create community in defiance of the monocultural forces of our time. The letting go that you are talking about is such a valid way of dealing with colonial relationships, patterns, and architectures, but it doesn't really appear in her work. When we visited the Karl May Museum in Dresden together in March 2024, we talked a lot about what it would mean to engage with this place, which, even though it also feels almost banal and peripheral, remains an epicenter of German colonial fiction. I find Segato's (2021) definition of 'pedagogies of cruelty' very apt for what is on display there. With 'pedagogies of cruelty,' she refers to actions and practices that teach and program people to transform that which is alive and its very vitality into *things*. For example, she talks about how colonial capitalism resignified lands that were multitudes of communal rootedness, that were alive with histories into landscapes of extraction. According to Segato (2021), the pedagogy of cruelty is an education in something that goes way beyond murder, for 'it teaches a deritualized murdering, a death that leaves remains, if at all, in place of the dead' (p. 13, trans. by Suza Husse).

The Karl May Museum is an example of what Segato describes as a fixing, stopping, arresting of what is alive and of time, a place where that which flows uncontrollably is brought into an immovable state; a place where a society learns to get used to the 'spectacle of cruelty.' It is not the cultural, political, ecological, and spiritual realities of Indigenous societies that one can learn about here, but rather endless fictions (in your words, Verena) that speak and reflect those who produce them. It is a museum of white colonial and patriarchal cultures of dispossession and appropriation of aliveness, a museum of German *Indianthusiasm*, and of the mythmaking of white masculinity. But that is not how it communicates itself. It does not say, visit and study a culture of cruelty that is at the basis of historical and contemporary German identity.

There still is a significant collection of ancestral remains of Indigenous people from North America in the Karl May Museum that have been removed from the exhibition display only in recent years. To this day, many public and private collections and storages in Germany hold ancestral remains of people who were murdered and/or deported to Germany in the context of colonialism and colonial genocide; they are held in dehumanizing conditions and against their consent or the consent of their descendants. According to the recent *Scientific Report on the Inventory of Human Remains from Colonial Contexts in Berlin*, in the geographical area of Berlin, where I live, there are at least 13,500 bodies or body parts of colonized ancestors from different parts of Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas, which in many cases continue to be used for white scientific research and education (Decolonize Berlin e.V. 2022).

Verena, you often talk about how the colonial fictions around Indigeneity are based on an imaginary of Indigenous peoples that is stuck

in the past, on an imaginary of Indigenous life that ended with modernity, a genocide, or an apocalypse that had been total. Perversely, to this day and against better knowledge, this imaginary legitimizes both the collection and 'conservation' of cultures that are presumed to be dead or in the process of being murdered during the colonial occupation and their *Indianthusiast* embodiment. In fact, this fascination and embodiment remains exclusively focused on a particular time and space—the Indigenous societies from North American geographies in the 19th century. The collection of the Karl May Museum does the same, confirming Segato's point about an aliveness fixated in death, an arrest of time.

Verena: I agree that Segato is helpful for understanding the Karl May Museum in the way it expresses and perpetuates a form of violence that is rendered 'invisible' or 'hidden' behind all the fiction—among other things, behind the fictional Apache character Winnetou from Karl May's stories and behind the author himself, who is celebrated as a 'bad guy' and 'adventurer' and who was imprisoned for stealing while writing his first novel. He definitely knew how to blur the lines between fiction and reality by pretending to be Old Shatterhand, one of his main characters; only later in life did he reveal that he was not and that he had traveled to the USA only long after writing his novels about the 'Wild West.' And then you see how closely the Karl May Museum is connected to reality: in 2023, they came across a Swastika painted on the buttocks of a sculpture supposed to resemble a Comanche warrior. The almost life-size figure was painted by Emil Eber, a celebrated Nazi painter. None of this is visible or included in the exhibition today (Graewert 2023). And until 2014, the museum had exhibited a human skull which was only removed from the exhibition after a repatriation claim made by the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians (Survival International 2014), who had to wait until 2020 when, after years of refusal, the museum finally agreed to return their ancestor (Knight 2020). These two dynamics manifest within the Karl May Museum what Lisa Michelle King calls (2026) 'the fascination with the fantasy' (p. 38) and the fantasy's ability to cover a very violent reality. This is why this place is a very clear example allowing us to understand how fantasies about colonialism and Indigenous people and the reality of colonialism in today's Germany exist side by side.

With regard to Pocahunter, I see overlaps to Segato's theory but also differences as far as my approach is concerned. Concerning Matoaka, especially in the German-speaking context, I clearly see elements of what Segato describes with her term 'pedagogy of cruelty' as a strategy of de-emotionalizing violence against people (she explicitly refers to violence against women) and thus turning them into objects that can be consumed.

What has happened with the Pocahontas story is this domination of the fiction, which made it completely impossible to connect with Matoaka and her real story, and to find empathy for what happened to her—simply because it is not known. What remains is the fictional figure, suitable only for reproducing colonial fantasies. The real history of violence has been rendered

completely invisible, it is no longer emotionally accessible, it is concealed by songs and images that in turn produce and reproduce their own violence and demand empathy, but for this fiction rather than the person behind it. These fictions correspond to the stereotypes of primitivism. They are a manifestation of the 'dispossession of life' that Segato writes about and are forever trapped in the 'process of consumption' (Segato 2021: 17).

Karl May's Winnetou, on the other hand, is a purely fictional character, completely detached from any real indigenous identity or history. There is tension here with Segato because, as a fictional character, Winnetou also has female connotations, and this association of male indigeneity with supposedly feminine traits is an important element in the 'destabilization' of Indigenous masculinity. Her clear separation of those whom she defines as 'women' from what constitutes 'Indigenous masculinity' is therefore not as clear-cut in the way these structures of violence operate as Segato describes.[11]

Both fictional characters, Winnetou and Pocahontas, can take up so much space because they fill a constructed void that we have both mentioned already, the void that is based on the idea that Indigenous people no longer exist and have not survived colonialism, that they forever belong to the past and are virtually trapped there, never to be part of a contemporary reality. I am also thinking here of what Johannes Fabian (1998) calls 'temporal relegation,' which he uses to describe the creation of a temporal distance from those who are constituted as 'the others.' Within anthropology, Fabian illustrates how temporal localization in the past is an important element in creating a colonial identity of 'the other' while simultaneously constructing them as inferior. Museums that own and exhibit ethnographic objects are an ideal space to study how objects are used to mediate cultural and collective fantasies about cultures and people. We can see and understand what fantasies are invoked and reproduced through these exhibitions. In particular, human remains in museums are an example of how life has been turned into consumable objects to be used violently for profit, consumption, and the maintenance of power structures. They are a symbol of total objectification.

Suza: There are two images that came to my mind when you were talking about Winnetou and the feminization of the 'other.' One is the cover of Friedrich von Borries and Jens-Uwe Fischer's (2008) *Sozialistische Cowboys. Der Wilde Westen Ostdeutschlands* (*Socialist Cowboys. The Wild West of East Germany*), a book I came across in the bookstore of the Karl May Museum. It is a black-and-white photograph of a horse carrying a person with two long dark braids; the person is wearing fringed pants and moccasins, with the upper body bare except for a long string of pearls. They are standing on a meadow in front of a massive concrete industrial building, perhaps a power station. It's the 1980s, somewhere in the GDR.

The picture shows a member of the *Indianthusiasm* community in the GDR—white people who organized themselves in numerous clubs to dress up as and to re-enact what they imagined as North American Indigenous cultures, often in camps in the fields and forests of the socialist

industrial natures at the peripheries of cities. For me, this image speaks to paradoxical political embodiments and desires: the appropriation of a lost connection to nature and spirituality, the conflation of the mythologized gender identities of white and Indigenous masculinities, and thus the embodiment of both German superiority, which grants itself universal access rights (for example, to identities, cultures, and spiritualities that are othered), *and* the Indigenous struggle against settler-imperialist land dispossession. This latter identification with the fight for Indigenous lands is at the core of the Nazi identification with North American Indigenous cultures, a reversal of the colonizer and colonized positions into a victimhood that legitimizes aggression as self-defense.

The second image is an election poster that was circulating in the streets and squares of Saxony, where the Karl May Museum is located, before the 2024 State Parliament election. Saxony is the region in East Germany where I grew up, and it is at the forefront of Germany's far-right political shifts. The poster carries the embodiments I just spoke of, weaponizing them for political purposes. On the poster, Christian Hartmann, the candidate of the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU), is drawn in a cartoon style, dressed up as Winnetou in full *Indianthusiast* make-up, with a headband and a feather, a non-specific ethnic top, and leather decorations around his neck, arms, and wrists. The caption says, 'Karl May belongs to Saxony and Winnetou to German television.' With this poster, the CDU takes a clear position in the ongoing debate about both Karl May and the continuation of cultural appropriation by German television and cinema, which entered the mainstream with the 2022 decision of the Ravensburger publishing house not to republish Karl May's children's books on the grounds that they were colonialist and racist. Hartman defended his poster by saying that 'we in Saxony risked a lot for debates and freedom of expression in 1989' (Jackson 2024), referring to the political movements in East Germany that brought about the Peaceful Revolution. In this way, the poster not only sets colonial and racist practice at the core of the mythologized 'we' of white East German identity, but it also does so as a form of defense against the restriction of fascist hate speech that Hartman calls 'freedom of expression.' In doing so, the CDU is closing ranks with the extremist right-wing party AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*, Alternative for Germany), which for years has been appropriating the emancipatory political experiences of 1989 and its aftermath to claim the position of white (male) victimization and resistance.

I want to close by discussing—but not showing—these two images because they bring us back to many parts of this conversation and our ongoing exchange. And they give context in terms of performances of whiteness for our future engagement with the cultures of objectification in the Karl May Museum. I am curious to see how the wisdoms of Pocahunter-Matoaka and the rich muddy pleasures of anticolonial dreaming will unsettle these contexts and scenes.

1. This text is based on the condensation and interweaving of several informal and public exchanges between the two authors in 2023 and 2024, including transcripts from recordings of our contributions to the symposium Sub(e)merging: Poetics, Temporalities, Epistemologies, organized by Petra Löffler and Marie Sophie Beckmann at the Institute for Visual Arts, University of Oldenburg, in cooperation with the Edith Russ House for Media Art on 25-27 May 2023 (publication planned for 2025), and to the program Tonight the city + + is a tectonic bone radio—, Our ancestors are on every channel + + +, which Suza Husse organized as part of the project When the Jackal Leaves the Sun: Decentering Restitution | Pedagogies of Repossession at district*school without center Berlin in cooperation with Flutgraben e.V. on 30 May–7 June 2024. Bringing our collaboration and relational thinking and feeling into this text has its own challenges. The flow and mutual understanding inherent to our conversations is hard to evoke through written texts. The organic dialogue of our oral exchange—because we live in different cities (currently Vienna and Berlin/Belfast), this usually takes the form of long phone calls or online meetings—the spontaneity, co-thinking, shared drifting, responding to each other, banter, loops, picking up each other's thoughts, jokes, pauses, detours, complementing, and reminding one another of previous discussions and shared experiences, creating a vocabulary together—all of this is difficult to render in the linearity and registers of academic writing. After such a long time of speaking to each other, it is not easy for us to shift to this text format. We feel the added pressure that often comes when the context of academia is involved. We realize how differently our exchange develops in academic writing, how illegible our usual conversations become. Knowledge production in this field follows specific rules that have to do with the making of power and that determine what forms of knowledge are legitimate. Paradoxically, it can force a cementing of positionalities and put ambivalent demands on biographic authenticity oscillating between extractive academic patterns and emancipatory autotheory. This text is an exploration of those challenges without claiming to provide an answer that would make all those dynamics evaporate. We appreciate spaces, such as the one created by *The February Journal*, that allow for contradictions and are sensitive towards those dynamics. We are trying this new (for us) kind of exchange in the hope of being able to draw more attention to how the issue of anti-Indigenous racism in Germany can be confronted. This is why we are participating in a format that allows our conversation to be part of specific collective discussions, which, we feel, are much needed in the politically challenging times we live in.
2. An excerpt from the video performance *Invocation, Connecting in Darkness (Pocahunter Series)*, 2022, by Verena Melgarejo Weinandt. shown at Manifesta 14 (https://manifesta14.org/event/9633/, accessed on 05.03.2025), with the exhibition and archive project *re.act.feminism*,

curated by Suza Husse (https://www.reactfeminism.org/work.php?id=344, accessed on 05.03.2025).

3. For a reference on postsocialist youth culture in the Lausitz region, where I spent a big part of my childhood and youth, and on how these political divisions played out in the late 1980s and 1990s, see Lemke 2023.
4. See, for instance, the following quotation: 'The Romantics' search for a German identity based on a shared culture, language, descent, history, and territoriality assigned an essential and a priori antiquity to what the nationalists were only about to construct. While it seemed relatively easy to follow early linguistics and identify language as a collective property, other criteria proved to be less conclusive, given the continuous movement of people throughout Europe, especially during the fifth century. The assumption of a common culture thus rested on brittle grounds, leaving room for creativity and much wishful thinking' (Lutz 2002: 171).
5. In my article 'A deep dive into the (collective) self. Creating Autohistoria-teoría with the performative alter ego Pocahunter,' which will be published in September 2025 with Sternberg Press as part of the anthology *Standpoint Autotheory. Writing Embodied Experiences and Relational Artistic Practice*, edited by Ana de Almeida and Mariel Rodríguez, I describe in detail the collective formations within which Pocahunter grew into existence. See Melgarejo Weinandt forthcoming 2025.
6. See https://forgetwinnetou.com/project/ (accessed on 24.02.2025).
7. Pocahontas used several names. Pocahontas was indeed one of them, but this was more of a caring nickname given to her by the Powhatans. Her birth name was Amonute, and Matoaka was another given name, which was also used in her portrait painted by Simon de Passe in 1616 while she was in London. I [Verena] use her name Matoaka to refer to her, although most researchers use Pocahontas, as this feels more appropriate than using a nickname given to her by her own people.
8. For the full English translation of the manifesto, see Indigenous Anti-Colonial Agitation & Action 2020.
9. 'When The Jackal Leaves the Sun: Decentering Restitution | Pedagogies of Repossession' is a decolonial feminist infrastructure for memory politics, art and, transformative justice connecting Nairobi, Windhoek, Kigali, Dresden, Dar Es Salam, Dakar, Sinne Saloum, Jaol-Fadiouth, Cape Town, and Berlin. It is initiated by Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Jennifer Kamau, Memory Biwa, Michael Bader, Rehema Chachage, Reneé Akitelek Mboya, and Suza Husse, in collaboration with district*school without center, International Women* Space, Nyabinghi Lab, SOMA, Wali Chafu Collective. The speculations with Anike Joyce Sadiq, Ina Röder Sissoko, Michael Bader, Mnyaka Sururu Mboro, Sarah Imani, Suza Husse, Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, Yvonne Wilhem/knowbotiq for 'Tonight the city + + is a tectonic bone radio—, Our ancestors are on every channel + + +' took place at district*school without center Berlin with Flutgraben e.V., 30 May—7 June 2024. For details, see https://whenthejackalleavesthesun.com/ (accessed on 06.03.2025).

10. The project was called *Antifuturismo Cimarrón: El Futuro Ya Fue* and was curated by Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, and Katia Sepulveda. The curators invited us, a group of artists, to think about what would happen if Europe as a trope no longer existed or had never existed. For details, see
11. https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/es/exposiciones/anti-futurismo-cimarron/663 (accessed on 08.05.2024).
12. See the video here: https://repatriates.org/pocahunter/transformation-braiding-renewal-pocahunter-part-ii/ (accessed on 06.04.2025).
13. Segato formulates her decolonial feminist standpoint in comparison to Maria Lugones, see Segato 2021: 73.

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Authors' bios

Suza Husse is a cultural worker, researcher-poet and swimmer. They work with a focus on visual and performative cultures of memory, speculation and re/imagination as well as collaborative processes, co-learning, and transdisciplinary research across different fields of knowledge and practice. Since 2012, Husse has been co-shaping the arts and community space district * school without center in Berlin. From 2017 to 2018, they held a guest professorship for interdisciplinary artistic research at the University of Arts, Berlin. In 2016, they co-founded the collective The Many Headed Hydra for arts and publishing work that interconnects anticolonial mythmaking, queer ecologies, and transformative practices that emanate from bodies of water. They co-run D'EST, a nomadic platform and online archive for postsocialist video art, and co-initiated the collective artistic research project *wild recuperations. material from below*, on intersectional approaches to dissident politics, ecologies, and sexualities that emerged in state socialism (Archive Books, 2020). Currently, Husse coordinates the arts, community and research platform Sensing Peat for swamp and waterland ecologies and cultures at the Michael Succow Foundation and is part of the organizing committee of the Venice Agreement for Peatlands.

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Verena Melgarejo Weinandt is a German-Bolivian artist, researcher, curator, and educator. She is currently part of the ERC artistic-research project *Repatriates* at the Central European University, Vienna (www.repatriates.org/pocahunter). Before that, she was researching at the DFG Research Group *Knowledge in the Arts* at University of the Arts Berlin. Her current artistic research project focuses on her performative alter ego Pocahunter, looking at the significance of indigenous stereotypes in the German-speaking context, with a focus on how they shape cultural and institutional practices and beyond, as well as our relation to the fictive, shared imaginaries and non-human-beings as a tool to (re)create the self and collective identity. Her works have been exhibited internationally at La Vierreina, Barcelona, Manifesta 14 Prishtina, 16th Biennal Sur Buenos Aires, Biennial Sur Cúcuta, nGbK Berlin, and Wiener Festwochen Vienna. Since 2015, she has done workshops, exhibitions, publications, and educational programs around the writer and theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa and is going to publish the German translation of *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza* alongside a volume on Gloria Anzaldúa as a method in decolonial artistic and educational practice with Archive Books.

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Reflexive essay

Friends with Benefits: On Working with Ambiguity in Artistic Friendship-Collaborations

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Friends with Benefits: On Working with Ambiguity in Artistic Friendship-Collaborations

Angela Stiegler

Friends with benefits was the title by which we—a group of three artist friends, Samuel Fischer-Glaser and Yulia Lokshina as well as this essay's author—were invited to an exhibition in an artist-run space in Munich, Germany. The result was a 20-minute video installation that we framed as a music video for our imaginary vegan punk band by the same name: *friends with benefits* (2018/2023). We used this title as a name for our collaboration addressing the entanglements and sexual connotations that go along with it and expanded it to a diverse understanding of artistic collaboration. In this essay, we deal with what it means to be artists working in capitalist times and during multiple crises. We suggest a method for artistic collaborative work in Germany today. We embrace our working and living together, maneuvering continuously through problems and conflicts that emerge with the proximity of both work and life, friendship and love. Our common artistic strategies of collaboration include methods such as reading our own or others' writings to each other, producing videos and re-using material already produced, a procedure we call 'arte povera,' and adding new layers of interpretation to it, thus exercising what in German is popularly known as 'Verfremdungseffekt' (literally: defamiliarizating effect). By reading and speaking in different registers, we gave the video material from 2018 a 2023 sound layer, in which we used our voices to perform different ideas of authorship and artisthood. By confronting ourselves with popular and problematic positions and by embodying them, we claim this as an 'inconvenient' method to develop critical thinking. Some of these voices that resound lead back to Munich as a site of avantgarde cultural production of New German Cinema as well as of two legendary and controversial figures of that movement, the director and actor Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945–1982) and the actor Klaus Kinski (1926–1991). We also present ourselves as fictional musician characters that go on tour with their latest hit: *Nie wieder Tier* (*'Animal Never Again'*). Through this setup, we 'hope' to approach 'problematic' situations in the present and address the symptoms of a still post-war German culture and the continuities of fascism.

Keywords: artisthood, autofiction, cohabitation, collaboration, critique, friends, New German Cinema, Munich, shared authorship

The essay starts with a transcription of the first words spoken in a collaborative video work entitled *friends with benefits* (Fischer-Glaser, Lokshina and Stiegler, 2018/2023). These bits of text are translated from German into English and

Chinese.[1] This polyphony of voices is connected to the question of how to solve problems. It is based on an encounter in a street in Munich, Germany. Are we actually able to formulate problems that we encounter? Who do we talk to about these problems? And who will actually listen to or understand them? The three languages—German, English and Chinese—are representative of a political set of Western power structures and its supposed antagonists. So, the very casual encounter on the streets of Munich with Ting, a Chinese woman living between the UK and Germany (so, very much in the West), raised for us the political question of how these different languages resonate and speak to different people in the world. We explained to her in English what we had done in the video and why we had done this. To continue this discussion, we agreed to exchange contacts and provide English subtitles to the video that she would then use to create Chinese subtitles. They form an additional layer of reflection on top of the ephemeral relationships between text and image, voices and speakers, personae and impersonators. These subtitles are therefore a continuation of the organic and socially contingent production process of the entire piece. In the first seconds of the video, you see a scene at night: An underpass and a parked van on the right side and then three figures coming slowly into the picture from the left, crawling down a hill. They are wearing safety vests. All you really see is reflecting stripes from the safety vests, as the video is shot in night view. After some seconds, an offscreen voice starts speaking:

[00:00:39:15 — 00:00:58:23]

[in Bairischem Dialekt][2]
[in Bavarian accent]

[用德国巴伐利亚州地方口音]
Ihr seid geil, ihr seid so richtig geil.
You're awesome, you're really awesome.
你们真棒，你们真的很棒。
Ihr habt's drauf.
You've got what it takes.
你们拥有成名所需的一切。
Stars, Stars mach ich noch aus euch.
Stars, I'll make stars out of you.
我会让你们成为明星。
Ihr seid wirklich—
You really are—
你们真的有
ihr habt Starpotential!
you have star potential!
有明星的潜力!
Des habt ihr.
You have it.
真的

Nächst's Jahr, ich bring euch ganz groß raus.
Next year, I'll make you really big.
明年，我会让你们真正大红大紫。
Nächst's Jahr spielt ihr in der Olympiaarena!
Next year you'll be playing in the Olympic Arena!
明年你们会在奥林匹克体育馆演出！

Cut. The three figures walk underneath the underpass, with their vests shining into the camera, but now there is enough light to recognize their faces looking into the camera.

Image 1: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), an installation view from outside through the window, with magazine collages, red foil, books, red lamp, skull money box, microphone, one of two screens saying 'STARS' in the foreground, and acoustic panels and foam in the background, Galerie von Empfangshalle / Projects 154, Theresienstraße 154, Munich, Foto: Constanza Meléndez, © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

In this essay, I want to speak about taking up space, occupying space, and using time as an artistic practice. From my experience in artistic and interdisciplinary collaborations, it is key to develop strategies that, within self-organized structures, can be reproduced and applied by using space and time outside the logics of capital, ever-present as it is in our daily lives. Therefore, I am focusing on local practices and community-related work. I am writing from a practice-based perspective as a visual artist, working freelance in multiple roles, as an art educator and art mediator as well as a curator and, moreover, someone who is doing voluntary work in these contexts. I live and work in Munich, Germany. Being an artist in a capitalist 'arte povera'[3] world today means that (some) artists can exhibit but (most) do not get paid. Most recently, cultural production has been negotiated along the lines of antisemitism and anti-antisemitism, which has become a central point of discussion, first within a postcolonial discourse during documenta 15 curated by the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa[4] and then as a result of the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the Israel-Gaza war that followed, on a wider scale. *The February Journal*, for which I am writing

this text, has been reconceptualized and renamed following Russia's latest full-scale invasion of Ukraine, ongoing since February 2022. The specific artworks I am going to discuss in my text for this journal reference a post-war German culture that I believe to be stretching into the present and to contain continuities of fascism. I have been asking myself how these continuities have been dealt with culturally and artistically in the past and present and will therefore trace specific times and places, especially local spaces and practices in Munich, Germany, today and in the post-war era, specifically the late 1970s and early 1980s. Munich, the National Socialist 'Capital of the Movement,' had by that point assumed the role of an ideological center of West German conservatism. I want to talk about practices of friendship as important emotional and economic relations, using as a case study the recent collaboration with my artist friends Samuel Fischer-Glaser and Yulia Lokshina on a video installation and an exhibition of the same title as this contribution, *friends with benefits*. This title, chosen by the curator Maria Justus and presented to us as part of the invitation, became the name of our autofictional vegan punk band which appears in a video made on that occasion. Expanding our way of working together with shared authorship, I want to claim watching films together, reading texts to each other, or reading books in a group as potential methods of creating discursive spaces and formulating critique. This expansion of artistic practice into the 'private' realm is not new, but I use this approach to think about 'solving problems.' Being in a small, intimate circle and confronting each other with difficult, problematic content is key to this strategy, as it is through these practices that we learn to speak, feel, and think about problems that are relevant to not only ourselves, but possibly a wider group of people. I do not claim that this method will necessarily solve any problems; my wish is to find a way of bringing problems onto the table. In my argument, artistic practices are (artistic) actions in relation to specific problems. Programmatically, these actions consist in working in 'inconvenient' ways—which is to say, ways that stand apart from the more convenient modes of affirmation or rejection. This inconvenience allows for experiment, but it also creates confusion and further discussion, which emphasizes once more the difficulty of 'solving problems.'

This essay uses the structure of the video *friends with benefits* (2018/2023) as well as fragments of the text from it, in German with translations into English and Chinese. One afternoon during the run of our exhibition and installation *friends with benefits* in an artist-run space called Projects 154 or Galerie von Empfangshalle[5], located in 154 Theresienstraße in Munich, a passerby stopped to see what was going on. The gallery was in disguise. In an effort to alter its white-cube character, we had covered the showcase window with magazine cutouts and placed a carpet and old bits of foam on the floor to hang out on. It had become a kind of stylized hovel reminiscent of a band rehearsal space. We started chatting. She introduced herself as Ting Zhu, an urban planner based in the UK and an occasional visitor to Munich. Ting kindly offered to support our work by translating the video's English subtitles into Chinese.

Image 2: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), an installation view inside the gallery with a carpet, acoustic panels, and foam boards, Theresienstraße 154 (Empfangshalle Gallery/Projects 154), Munich, Foto: Constanza Meléndez, © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

Image 3: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), an installation view inside the gallery with the second screen and collages, books, a red lamp, a skull money box, and a microphone, Theresienstraße 154 (Empfangshalle Gallery/Projects 154), Munich, Foto: Constanza Meléndez, © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

[00:01:56:10]

'Wenn mein Herz gesund wär', spräng ich zuerst aus dem Fenster; dann ging ich in den Kintopp und käm' nie wieder heraus' (Lasker-Schüler 1982 [1913]).[6]

If my heart was healthy, I'd jump out of the window first; then I'd go to the cinema and never come out again.

如果我心脏健康，我会先跳出窗户；然后去电影院再也不出来了。

As we were working on the video *friends with benefits*, I became aware of the piece's connection to the ongoing screening series that we as a group of artist friends started in our apartment during the early nights of the Covid-19

pandemic. The three of us used to share a small apartment with two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, a balcony, and a kitchen. We tried to kill time and change the mood by confronting ourselves with a complex film program. All this took place mainly in the so-called Lounge, an alternative home cinema in our apartment, which is a real and an ideal space that continues to exist and which became our chat group name. It is definitely a place of trust and comfort. In this case, a locally bound space starts to exist also outside of its local boundaries and is extended into a common virtual space in our minds and phone chat histories. I thought I would list the films we have watched so far (in the remembered order of screening them). I want to think of this as part of a method of dealing with 'problems' by confronting them, on both artistic and structural levels alongside our artistic collaboration, as implemented in the recent video *friends with benefits* (2018/2023). The 'problems' in the following list of films are related to Germany after the Second World War. They include being a son of a Nazi filmmaker, group dynamics within leftist terror cells, or heritage within the Richard Wagner clan. The films are trying to deal with these problems artistically. To us as people born long after the immediate post-war period, they make specific problems and struggles of the times accessible through the experiences of the filmmakers, who often have a direct relation to the content:

Wundkanal (Germany, France 1984 / Thomas Harlan); *Notre Nazi* (France, Germany 1984 / Robert Kramer); *Herbstmilch* (Germany 1989 / Joseph Vilsmaier); *Une Jeunesse Allemande* (France, Switzerland, Germany 2015) / Jean-Gabriel Périot); *Wintermärchen* (Germany 2018 / Jan Bonny); *Swastika* (United Kingdom 1973 / Philippe Mora); *Winifred Wagner und die Geschichte des Hauses Wahnfried, 1917–1975* (Germany 1975 / Hans-Jürgen Syberberg); *Der Anständige (The Decent One)* (Germany, Austria, Israel 2014 / Vanessa Lapa); *Die dritte Generation* (Germany 1979 / Rainer Werner Fassbinder); *Das Meisterspiel* (Germany 1998 / Lutz Dambeck); *Zeit der Götter* (Germany 1992 / Lutz Dambeck); *The Zone of Interest* (US, UK, Poland 2023 / Jonathan Glazer).

We watched these films over a period of almost four years. All of them address issues arising from the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust; a lot of them were produced in Germany or deal with German protagonists; all of them were created after the Second World War, between 1973 and 2018. Some of the films are controversial or provocative, confused or confusing. So, having someone to share the experience with and talk to after the film is almost a necessity. For us, or at least for me, this ongoing film series was initially a way to cope with pandemic life by focusing on the much deeper collective wound of Nazism. This allowed us to understand that something which has been accepted as collective guilt still needs to be dealt with on a personal level. Watching this specific series of films brought together our three perspectives as viewers and gave us insight into the knowledge that each of us has. We were able to discuss things that we might not have said out loud if we had watched these films on our own. Moreover, we might not even have watched them at all, as we might have found them

too complex to deal with; we might have felt too scared to watch them alone. (The same could be said about reading a text or book together and discussing its contents.) I want to emphasize here that the screening series has built a foundation and base for our thinking and working together as friends, artists, and filmmakers. It has given an insight into the method of my work in collaboration with others that I refer to as 'economies of friendship' and that constitutes the ground for interdisciplinary or a-disciplinary[7] work. Such an 'economy of friendship' does not try to overlook unpaid labor but thinks about strategies of collaboration that sometimes are not thought of as labor. I see a parallel to housework here: for decades, the importance of housework to communities and society-at-large has been minimized and undermined. As in other economies, friendship demands investment and desires securities. In economies of friendship, time is invested without monetary exchange or real securities. There are unpredictable (though foreseeable) interruptions to such economies as a result of conflict or emotional fracture. What kind of friendships are we able to afford? When I graduated (from art school) ten years ago, I found a great so-called network of friends and collaborators. This network has changed over the years, some friendships ended, others continued. Through these conflicts, pre-existing class differences have become deciding factors in our relationships and careers. As the upholding of the singular artist subject becomes an increasingly tenuous project, what these friendship economies produce is not value, but meaning.

Samuel, Yulia and I, Angela, have different backgrounds that set the horizon of multiple perspectives. We met in Munich in pre-pandemic times, between 2014 and 2018. We graduated from art and film schools between 2014 and 2022. All of us are born between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, in Germany and Russia, and grew up in different parts of West Germany: Hannover, Bremen, and smaller towns and cities in Swabia and Bavaria. I feel myself sticking out as the only 'Bavarian' among the three of us in this constellation, as I was born in Munich and grew up in different parts of Upper and Lower Bavaria. Some of us have grandparents with a 'Nazi background,'[8] one of us grew up in the Jewish tradition, and none of us is part of any religious congregation.

The invitation to do an exhibition with an already set title made us think of (mutually) beneficial relationships of capitalized sexuality that go along with that title—*friends with benefits* profiting from each other in an expanded friendship and erotic economy. We definitely agree that artistic collaboration takes place on different levels and often makes the separation of the private and public or the intimate and business-related obsolete. And yes, we are 'friends with benefits' in a literal sense, reaping the rewards of the friendship economy. As three close friends, two of us now in a married partnership, we have lived together in different constellations, sharing apartments in Munich and Berlin. We share our lives. And by sharing these lives we also share our problems and conflicts, sorrow and grief, happiness and joy. The private is stated as political[9], in the first-wave-leftist-feminist understanding of the phrase. Personal problems are detected as political problems. 'There are no

Image 4, from left to right: Angela Stiegler, Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, and their work *Kochshow: Wer wählt, wählt verkehrt* (2022), a performance in a public space with reading, live cooking of Chili sin carne and a DJane set, in realm of *Young Rebellion*, A.K.T; Pforzheim, Foto: Indigo Pictures © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

Image 5: Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler, *Kochshow: Wer wählt, wählt verkehrt* (2022), a video still from a performance in a public space with reading, live cooking of Chili sin carne and a DJane set, in realm of *Young Rebellion*, A.K.T; Pforzheim © VG-Bild Kunst Bonn, 2024. Courtesy of the author.

personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. [...] Women are smart not to struggle alone [...]' (Hanisch 1969: 4). Within our relationship, private problems include and exceed those of nuclear families and family values. Our relationship expands to the space that I referred to earlier as the 'Lounge.'[10] In this example, the 'Lounge' as a place of trust and comfort becomes part of a professional workspace. Our working methods vary from time to time: we try to keep them open for unknown practices, possibly also practices that are not defined as professional. In a way, we work as dilettantes, with the term 'dilettante' problematizing the differentiation between professional and amateur techniques of working. One of our strategies is to reuse material several times and recontextualize it.

The personal and the political thus become intertwined. Instead of calling it 'new' or 'neo-something,' we started calling this approach 'arte povera,' after the Italian art movement of the 1960s–1970s, when artists began attacking the values of the established institutions of government, industry, and culture. When we use this term as a familiar quotation around 50 years later, we appropriate it to denote a working method by which we frame and address working conditions that offer us possibilities to show our work but rarely open the channels to send an invoice. It also could be thought in line with the so-called *Verfremdungseffekt*[11] (Brecht 1967), after Bertolt Brecht's experimental theatre technique of the 1920s, where elements interrupted or disturbed a closed narration. Out of a mix of artistic and economic reasons, for *friends with benefits* (2018/2023) we decided to start working with the video material shot in 2018 in an open space called Theresienwiese. For two weeks in late September each year, Theresienwiese becomes the official ground for the Munich Oktoberfest; throughout the rest of the year, it is used for different communal actions, exercises, and test scenarios, as well as for marches and demonstrations, for instance, the 'Hygiene-Demos' (2020, literally: 'hygiene demonstrations') or 'Lichtermeer für Demokratie' (2023, literally: 'sea of light for democracy'). On this ground, the three of us and two other friends filmed each other crawling and occupying the 'empty' asphalt space, hovering like security guards or nocturnal construction workers.

How do we use time and space in general, as friends, artists, and citizens here? And what do we use it for? This crawling as well as our 'arte povera' method pay tribute to a way of making art as dilettantes or amateurs, a term used for non-professionalized lovers of the arts, rather than 'geniuses.' When I think of crawling today, I think of the US-American visual artist William Pope.L (1955–2023), who has performed 30-plus 'crawls' over more than three decades of work as an artist. This combines artistic labor with something not considered labor at all: moving on all fours in the street. For *The Great White Way*, Pope.L crawled 22 miles within nine years from the beginning to the end of Broadway—Manhattan's longest street—wearing a capeless Superman outfit with a skateboard strapped to his back.[12] Each part of the performance took as long and went as far as Pope.L could endure. It is important to mention that these crawls were conceived as a group performance. 'Unfortunately for me, at that time, I was the only volunteer,' Pope.L said (Simoni 2013). I did not know his work in 2018.

From my own crawling experience, I can confirm that even a very short crawl of approximately one minute feels very long and costs a lot of energy. The 2023 sound layer that we added to our 2018 crawling video shot in night view gave us the chance to face different West German artist figures and especially some artist 'heroes' from Munich in the 1970s. We did so by impersonating them in their own words and our own voices. We challenged the audience of this video with several ambiguous voices. On the one hand, the three of us (named as Angela, Yulia and Samuel) formed a vegan punk band and released our first three songs: *Nie wieder Tier* ('Animal Never Again'); *Nie wieder Brecht* ('Brecht Never Again'), and *Ich esse Fleisch—nicht*

('I Eat Meat—Not'), interrupted by an obscene voice talking openly about their hedonistic art and lifestyle. I understand this way of work as a method to develop critical thinking. Hereby, we do not try to silence the voices of our 'problematic faves' or ignore them, even though we might not find them appropriate anymore; instead, we give space to the idea that we are very much shaped by these ideas of artisthood and authorship. We try to develop our own voices in continuation of these previous voices and sometimes in opposition to them. Therefore, it felt necessary to embody them (temporarily) with our own voices of today in order to understand what these voices felt like and stood for—basically, to hear what they wanted to say. As friends, artists, and citizens, we are confronted with the legends that make us think that being an artist means performing a certain lifestyle or being a genius. We came across these voices during various spontaneous actions starting with a simple act of taking a book from the shelf and reading out loud to the others in the room. The books from which we read to each other were books by different artists and authors that we had at hand. It turned out to be a mix of artists and authors we liked and disliked, all of them German (in alphabetic order): Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Klaus Kinski, Christian Kracht, Else Lasker-Schüler, and others. We decided not to censor our spontaneous selection but expose ourselves to its content. We put focus on positions related to artistic practices in Munich. Here, I read from Klaus Kinski's (1975) autobiography:

[00:01:01:04 – 00:01:25:20]

'Unsere Truppe ist inzwischen nach Amerika eingeladen und Tatjana plant eine Tournee bis nach Japan und Australien. Aber nachdem in unserer Truppe jeder mit jedem oder alle zusammen geschlafen haben und wir uns in Venedig noch um die Gage zanken, die sich ein deutscher Reiseleiter zur Hälfte unter den Nagel gerissen hat, entsteht eine derart geladene Atmosphäre, dass dieses herrliche Ensemble auseinanderbricht.'

In the meantime, our troupe has been invited to America, and Tatjana is planning a tour to Japan and Australia. But after everyone in our troupe has slept with everyone or all together and we are still squabbling in Venice over the fee, half of which a German tour guide has snatched, the atmosphere becomes so charged that this marvelous ensemble breaks apart.

与此同时，我们的乐团受邀前往美国，Tatjana正计划到日本和澳大利亚进行巡回演出。但是即便我们团员都互相发生性关系或多人性关系，我们还是在威尼斯因为费用的争执而激烈对峙，其中一半费用被一名德国导游抢走。氛围变得如此紧张，以至于这个奇妙的乐团分崩离析了。

[00:01:26:10 – 00:05:11:13]

'Ich fahre von Venedig nicht direkt nach Paris, wo Jasmin auf mich wartet, sondern fliege mit einer Tänzerin nach New York, wo sie im New York City Ballett auftreten soll. Sechs Wochen später fliege ich von New York nach Paris' (Kinski 1975).[13]

I don't travel directly from Venice to Paris, where Yasmin is waiting for me, but fly with a dancer to New York, where she is due to perform at the New York City Ballet. Six weeks later, I fly from New York to Paris.

虽然*Yasmin*在巴黎等我，我并没有直接从威尼斯飞往巴黎，而是和一位舞蹈演员一起飞往纽约，她将在纽约市芭蕾舞团表演。六周后，我从纽约飞往巴黎。

This idea of an artist—international, on the move, traveling from here to there, living a superstar lifestyle—is still present and popular today. The passage above is not as shocking as others from Kinski's (1975) autobiography. In it, Kinski specifically writes about incestuous relationships with his mother and sister, and the abuse of his daughter. An abusive male actor is showing off about his lifestyle as an artist, about his artistic and sexual power. Tragically, some decades after Kinski published this autobiography, at least the abuse of his daughter turned out to be true, according to Pola Kinski's own writings (Kinski P 2014). Filmmakers like Werner Herzog seemed not to believe this truth about Kinski or, as I speculate, worked with it as a transgressive power beyond biographical realities.

The method of speaking in another artist's or another author's voice that I started to describe earlier continues in the rest of the video. After reading to each other, we walk outdoors on the streets, sitting down on a park bench and improvising dialogue with our 'authentic' voices which by that time are informed by all the fragments of text that we listened to and read to each other earlier. The search for an authenticity of our own voices here becomes performative in the sense that we start to consider ourselves as artists performing certain roles and trying to express their thoughts and beliefs. We are still Angela, Samuel, and Yulia. This is a playful way to distance ourselves from each other in order to find a funny, even ironic way to think of ourselves. By improvising, we search for our voices set in a dialogue, listening to one another, responding, conflicting, or agreeing while speaking. This dialogical dynamic is embedded within our relationship as friends that encounter each other in an intimate set-up that is the condition of our working and experimenting together. Sitting there and talking made us realize that we could embrace this wide spectrum of voices by 'becoming' a vegan punk band. A plan we had conceived some years earlier now came to fruition. Therefore, the consequence was to come back to the apartment and record our first three songs (with each of us singing a separate voice layer into our phones). In that sense, the text spoken and read in the video is rather a transcript of how we spent our time together instead of being a planned artistic production. In this particular text, it could be read as a 'solution' to problems. But to be more precise, it rather helps to detect and understand 'problems' of collaborative production by analyzing its specific dynamics and conditions of artistic collaboration today.

Another example of a 'friends with benefits' community is the group around the Munich filmmaker, director, and actor Rainer Werner Fassbinder. In the case of Fassbinder, 'community' was never something out of control but strictly controlled and directed by filmmaking. In the first place, they started

working within the so-called Munich Antiteater—an anti-Bourgeois, counter-state theatre ensemble—and shot their first fiction film *Love Is Colder Than Death* ('Liebe ist kälter als der Tod' in German) (1969). 'For me, it's about the exploitability of feelings, whoever exploits them.'[14] Fassbinder's characters are indeed constantly exploited, oppressed, and used. Most of the time he worked with the same people, his surrogate family, and at times he even lived with them. The group was an artists' collective in the beginning and became more and more of a 'Fassbindertruppe' ('Fassbinder troop'). They used their apartments to work and, at the beginning, lived together in a villa outside of Munich. Work and private life mixed up more and more, brought empathy, conflict, envy, fancy cars, debt. Fassbinder's mother took over bookkeeping at some point. They became an incredibly specialized team that produced films at a rapid speed. Nevertheless, only Fassbinder—and not the whole group—is later described as a 'Chronist of the Federal Republic of Germany' and the 'most productive post-war filmmaker of Germany.' He and his team made 40 feature-length fiction films, two television series, and three short movies. Fassbinder died at the age of 37 in 1982. His last film *Querelle* (1982) features the song *Each Man Kills the Thing He Loves*.

[00:21:11:04 – 00:21:39:18]

'Ich bin der Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Ich erkläre, dass wir das dahinten als Requisiten für unseren Film brauchen. Wir haben alle in der letzten Zeit ganz schnell gelernt: Bewege dich nur, wenn es dir die Bullen erlauben, sonst kann es deine letzte Bewegung sein. Und frag lieber zweimal nach, bevor du deine Papiere aus der Jackentasche ziehst. Mitten auf der Ingolstädter Straße komme ich mir vor wie in New York' (Baer 1982).[15]

I am Rainer Werner Fassbinder. I explain that we need that back there as a prop for our film. We've all learnt very quickly recently—only move if the cops allow you to, otherwise it could be your last move. And better ask twice before you pull your papers out of your inside jacket pocket. In the middle of Ingolstädter Straße, I feel like I'm in New York.

我是莱纳·沃纳·法斯宾德。我解释说我们需要把那个要回来作为我们电影的道具。我们最近都很快掌握了 - 只有警察允许你动你才动，否则你一动可能就是你的最后一步。而且在你从内衣口袋里拿出身份证之前，最好问两遍。在*Ingolst*膢*ter Stra˚e* 大道，我觉得自己就像在纽约。

In the post-war German culture, the protagonists of the so-called Young German Film, later known as New German Cinema, are known for dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust and with post-war West Germany in their films. I looked into their manifesto from 1962, published in the West German journal *Filmstudio* and reprinted in *Artforum* in 2013 on their 50th anniversary.[16] I am trying to understand the initial drive that birthed the now 61-year-old manifesto. Wondering who and what is left of that 'original' group and New German Cinema, I have collected some names of those active and alive today: Alexander Kluge, Margarethe von Trotta, Werner Herzog, Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, Rosa von Praunheim, Wim Wenders.

'Papas cinema
is dead mani
festo of the yo
ung 1962 ho
pe or
disaster' (Oberhausen Manifesto 1962)

And it ends with a very popular quote: 'The old film is dead. We believe in the new one' (Oberhausen Manifesto 1962). This promise mirrors the wishful thinking of the 'Stunde Null' ('zero hour' in English) rhetoric that circulated in Germany directly after the Second World War, with its tacit belief that one might start from scratch, and that needs to be contextualized with the 1950s German television industry. 'We don't believe in the distinction between art and entertainment. Something that doesn't also entertain can't be art because it doesn't concern people. And something that is good entertainment will always betray artistry. So, a ghetto for art and a broad mass base for entertainment, that's a basis we don't believe in,'[17] Alexander Kluge declared in 1966 (Steinbeißer 2023).

In search of what it means to be or work as an artist today, I have difficulties to continue the narration of a world of making art and film that is told through manifestos, excess, geniuses, or low rents. We live in a time of high rents and lack of space in post-pandemic times, and we are still fighting for the basic payment for artistic work as well as the recognition of collective practices. We live at a time when, in Germany at least, culture is driven by cuts and bureaucratic discourse. Dilettantes were declared to be geniuses, 'Geniale Dilletanten' in the 1980s: another dichotomy that might be outdated now. Apparently, each generation of artists needs to redefine their relation to 'new' or 'genius' over and over again. Isn't the initial moment of something like that 'Oberhausen moment' very similar to the one in which I am finding myself right here right now, the impression that we are driven by the search for solutions to problems? I do not believe in manifestos. It is through practice that we define the conditions and expectations of working as an artist. For me, they are dependent on others, on those with whom I can think, share ideas, and work, with whom I can spend time in our 'Lounge,' watching and debating films, reading and re-reading texts. All this while waiting for the 80th anniversary of 'Stunde Null' to be celebrated this year, days before the re-elections in Germany. I want to conclude this text by once again impersonating one of the characters of *friends with benefits*, the expressionist poet Else Lasker-Schüler (1982 [1913]), and wear her persona as she wears her cat fur, meow-meow-meow-meow-meow-meowing with fear:

'Es ist mir genau so, als ob ich das große Los gewonnen hab' und noch nicht ausgezahlt bin, oder auf einer Pferdelotterie einen Gaul gewonnen hab und keinen Stall "umsonst" auftreiben kann. Das Leben ist doch eigentlich ein Wendeltreppendrama, immer so rund herauf und wieder herunter, immer um sich selbst bis zu den Sternen. Ich bin in freudiger Verzweiflung, in verzweifelter Freudigkeit; am liebsten machte ich einen Todessprung oder einen Jux. Meine Freundin Laurentia zecht wie ein Fuchs. Aber

was geht mich das alles an; ich will nichts wissen, nichts. Wenn es nur nicht klopfen würde! Das Gehirn wird rein aufgewühlt, es klopft nicht allein unten jeden Freitag und Sonnabend, jedes Stäubchen wird aufgewirbelt, es klopft auch an den anderen Wochentagen, denn ich wohne zwischen Haus und Haus und muß die Brutalität aller Höfe ertragen. Ich sitze immer bei geschlossenen Fenstern und werde gar nichts von dem Sommer haben; ausgehen kann ich nicht, ich schreibe Geistergeschichten; ich habe Schulden. Dabei zieht's, wenn ich die Türen rechts und links und hinter mir auflasse. Ich trage seit dieser Wohnung ein Katzenfell; wenn ich abends wo eingeladen bin, überkommt mich eine furchtbare Angst, ich könnte anfangen zu miauen.'[18]

It's as if I've won the jackpot and haven't been paid out yet, or won a horse in a lottery and can't find a stable 'for free.' Life is actually a spiral staircase drama, always going up and down, always round and round until it reaches the stars. I am in joyful despair, in desperate joy; I would prefer to take a death leap or a joke. My friend Laurentia is carousing like a fox. But what is all this to me; I want to know nothing, nothing. If only it weren't knocking! The brain is purely stirred up, it's not only downstairs every Friday and Saturday that it knocks, every bit of dust is stirred up, it knocks on the other days of the week too, because I live between house and house and have to endure the brutality of all the yards. I always sit with the windows closed and won't get anything out of the summer; I can't go out, I write ghost stories; I'm in debt. There's a draught when I leave the doors open to the right and left and behind me. I've been wearing cat fur since this flat; when I'm invited somewhere in the evening, I'm overcome with a terrible fear that I might start meowing.

这就好像我中了头彩但还没有兑现，或者在彩票中赢得了一匹马，却找不到免费的马厩。生活实际上就如同一个螺旋式楼梯戏剧，总是上上下下，兜兜转转，直到达到宇宙尽头。我活在欢乐的绝望中，在绝望的欢乐中；我宁愿纵身跃亡或者游戏人间。我的朋友Laurentia像狐狸一样发骚。但这对我来说有什么意义；我什么也不想知道。要是没人来敲门该多好！思绪完全被打扰了，不仅在每周五和周六有人来楼下敲门，每一点灰尘都被搅动起来，每周的其他日子也有人来敲门。因为我轮流住在不同公寓，必须忍受其他后院住户的动静。我总是闭窗而坐，夏天也闭户不出；我不能出去，我写鬼故事；我负债累累。当我把门打开时，四面八方都是冷风。自从住在这个公寓以来，我就一直穿着猫毛；当我晚上被邀请去别处参加活动时，我会突然感到一种可怕的恐惧，怕自己会开始喵喵叫。

1. The Chinese language throughout this text refers to the official Chinese dialect: Mandarin.
2. Improvised dialogue from *friends with benefits* (2018/2023), 26 Min., two-channel-video installation by and with Samuel Fischer-Glaser, Yulia Lokshina, Angela Stiegler; in other roles: Leo van Kann, camera: Julia Swoboda, further texts by Klaus Kinski, Else Lasker-Schüler, Christian Kracht, Harry Baer, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Ulrich Becher. One-channel online with English subtitles: https://vimeo.com/917594333/92daa60ecf?share=copy (last viewed on 25 January 2025).
3. 'Arte povera' is used here as both a term literally referring to 'poor art' and the historic episode of art-making in the 1960–80s in Italy.
4. See the website of documenta fifteen: https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/about/ (last viewed on 25 January 2025).
5. See the website of Galerie von Empfangshalle: https://www.salon.io/empfangshalle/galerie-von-empfangshalle (last viewed on 25 January 2025).

6. Translated by the author into English and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.
7. A term shaped by a group of artists and thinkers I used to work with between 2013 and 2020 under the name 'K Hybrid,' see also Bredenbröker et al. 2021.
8. The term 'Nazi background' ('Nazihintergrund' in German) came to my attention through a discussion started by the artist Moshtari Hilal and the political geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah. They speak about a Nazi heritage by reversing the German term 'Migrationshintergrund' ('Migration background'), see Monecke 2021.
9. Also quoted as 'The Personal Is Political.' See Hanisch's (1969) essay.
10. In capitalist terms, 'Lounge' is a space to hang out, listen to chill-out music, relax, and do nothing at all.
11. Also called 'V-Effekt' in German (alienation or distancing effect), see Brecht 1967.
12. A description of the work is available on the MoMA website: Pope.L, *The Great White Way*: 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street (2001–2009). See https://www.moma.org/collection/works/287704 (last viewed 25 January 2025).
13. Here and above, translation by the author into English and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.
14. 'Bei mir geht es um die Ausbeutbarkeit von Gefühlen, von wem auch immer sie ausgebeutet werden.' Translated into English by the author. The quotation as well as the information in this paragraph comes from the documentary *Deutsche Lebensläufe: Rainer Werner Fassbinder—Der Rastlose*. The episode was directed by Dagmar Wittmers and aired on German television on 10 February 2005. See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1365531/ (last viewed on 25 January 2025) This is one of many documentaries about Fassbinder.
15. Translation into English by the author and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.
16. See https://www.artforum.com/features/declaration-of-independents-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-oberhausen-manifesto-200259/ (last viewed on 25 January 2025).
17. 'Wir glauben ja nicht an die Unterscheidung von Kunst und Unterhaltung. Etwas, was nicht auch unterhält, kann gar nicht Kunst sein, weil es die Menschen gar nicht angeht. Und etwas was gute Unterhaltung ist, wird immer auch an Kunstfertigkeit verraten. Also ein Ghetto für die Kunst und eine breite Massenbasis für die Unterhaltung, das ist eine Basis, woran wir nicht glauben.' Translation into English by the author.
18. Translation by the author into English and from English into Chinese by Ting Zhu.

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Author's bio

Angela Stiegler is a visual artist and art educator negotiating sculptural practices, performative forms, and the artist's role as mediator. Her work focuses on shared authorship in collective contexts, collaborating with artists, neighbors, and academic institutions within and beyond traditional exhibition

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Reflexive Essay

Homework—Hopework

Pasha Tretyakova
Independent researcher; *The February Journal*, Berlin

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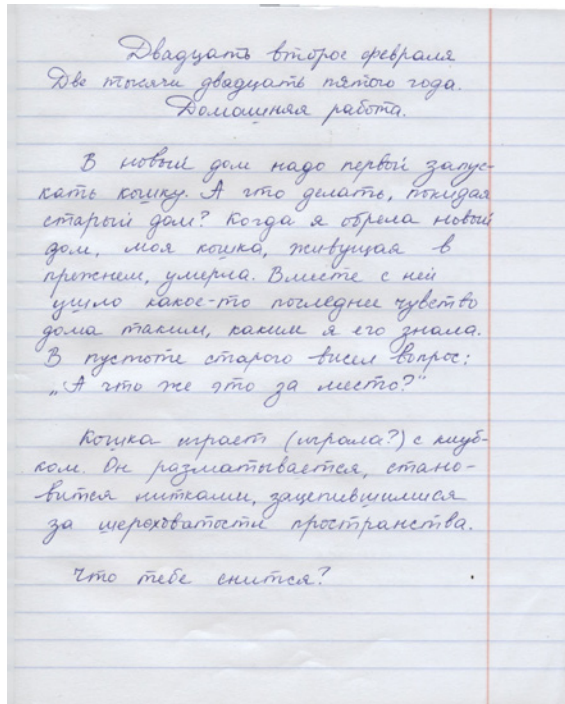
Homework—Hopework

Pasha Tretyakova

What is possible when a home is not home because home is love and love contains hope? Do you not have hope? Does your place of origin hang around your neck like a problem? In the wake of the war that Russia has been perpetrating in Ukraine, with the full-scale invasion beginning on 24 February 2022, the author negotiates in this autoethnographic essay with performative elements what it means to see, love, lose, and have hope in your home.

Keywords: autoethnography, home, hope, image, Russia

for my cat



Двадцать второе февраля
Две тысячи двадцать пятого года.
Домашняя работа.

В новый дом надо первой запускать кошку. А что делать, покидая старый дом? Когда я обрела новый дом, моя кошка, живущая в прежнем, умерла. Вместе с ней ушло какое-то последнее чувство дома таким, каким я его знала. В пустоте старого висел вопрос: „А что же это за место?"

Кошка играет (играла?) с клубком. Он разматывается, становится нитками, зацепившимися за шероховатости пространства.

Что тебе снится?

Figure 1. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.[1]

22.02.25.

My cat died. It lived at home.

In the texture of this loss I feel the threads of many more.

There is a folk belief in Russia that when moving into a new home, you have to let the cat in first. It rids the space of evil spirits, I think. I've moved away from Russia, I have a New home. But no cat.

There's a fear that seems to be waiting for me to get off the airplane, to meet me at the airport, to hug me, to welcome me, to take me home, and slowly to settle in my mind and body. I try to run, to run away from the here and the now.

Everything is congruent. My impulses match up with the environment. I want buckthorn tea? Here's buckthorn tea. The patterns in me and the patterns around me are in synchrony. As comforting as the synchrony is, it makes me feel as if nothing else in the world exists. Just home, just me in it, with it.

It's like being a parallel line to your surroundings. Things run so smoothly, without the knots and yanks of culture-shock discomfort, that one never has to wake up. Slide along on the ice rink of home. Keep moving. Glide. The maneuvering will come naturally.

Leave the rest at the door. *Оставляем за скобками. Не сюда, не надо.*

But because of the fear that first holds me by the hand, then hugs me around the shoulders, then carries me, I slip and slide on the ice towards something further away. To balance on ice, you have to concentrate, bodily. But I am afraid to see a reflection in the ice and thus look look look, with every fiber, elsewhere. Feeling nowhere. Every once in a while, I fall flat and look up and see patches of the sky.

Figure 2. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

What does one do when home is so configured to be constantly rearranged into fear? Where is the problem—am I the problem? Is there hope in the cracks or only a wind that will make you catch a cold? Our states of wakefulness—awake—awoke. The sky is blue.

Land of cold and sad, I say. The place I call home is a problem, in many ways. Or too many. Is it a problem to me? Even when I say 'Russia,' I think '*gorod N.*' At the end of the day, home is just *gorod N.*[2]

I have been home on and off since the beginning of the war. (*Well, in 2014—when it actually started—I was still in school. By 2022, when we* all *started counting, I had gone abroad*.) Some longer periods of being there I called 'living in *gorod N*' and some shorter ones 'visits,' but the lines between the two were confused. Over these periods, I started taking zoomed-in pictures of my city. It felt strange because it used to be something I'd never do: bad-definition pictures made for low-quality Instagram aesthetics. But I was drawn to it, cropping reality to only capture things that were pretty. Occasionally, things I found interesting. My camera-vision remade the place I found emotionally intolerable when viewed as a whole. And this way I could put together something that I found beautiful, if nothing else. And make myself at home in that, safe. Without army-contract billboards, without Z-marked caps and stickers.

I printed the photos.

I sewed them together.

It looked very strange.

As if I lived in heaven.

Like the red pen of a school teacher marking mistakes in your notebook, the red threads pull out something you don't want to see.

Writing it out now, I see that this behavior is something I myself might label a 'problem.' Looking away is what Russians are faulted for most—the morally questionable territory of just going on. So, I spell out the choices for myself, remembering my endless therapy sessions from the summer of 2022. '*Бей—беги—замри—смирись.*' 'Fight or flight' is a reaction I knew well. But not 'freeze or fawn'—play dead or appease. They made sense then, convincingly mapped onto my disquieted self. When I google the terms now, I learn they are neatly arranged under the umbrella of 'trauma responses.' But in July 2022, my therapist had given me a print-out, pointed to 'fight—flight' and said, 'You are here.' And then she pointed to 'freeze—fawn' and said, 'You need to move over here. That is safety.' The place where you make some peace and carefully keep going. Talk about culture-specific therapy.

I tried to be attentive to the expanses. The big sky, the big water—the things I love. I stared and I took pictures, and I tried to fly myself into them. I zoomed in to be closer. Freeze the scene, the moment, and yourself in it. Then use it as a stepping stone.

In my New home, I am experiencing something that I find confusing: belonging. Brought about by a sense of agency, of being in the right place, and sustained by comfort and familiarity. It's like the warm air of a supermarket gushing towards you as you step in from minus 20° Celsius. It's startling and a little nauseating—how could this much comfort exist? You will be drunk on it in a second. Can you no longer fight then? I worry about being strong.

I now look at the old pictures. Pretty pieces frozen to be something safe. Put together, they form a puzzle. What of? The irony dawns on me as I look at the sunless photos. I spend a lot of time disgusted at the efforts of the Russian government to distract people from the war, to entertain them. But what did I do when I put on their shoes? I looked at the sky. I looked away. I'd go home to pet the cat.

I am not guilt-tripping myself. I remember clearly how rare it could be to find an island of safety. Now I look at my visions because I can – I am not falling head-first into the overwhelm of 'trauma responses.' Some feeling has returned to my limbs. 'To perceive is to be the movement, not the object' (Adnan 1986: 32). I can move between 'freeze—fawn' and 'fight—flight,' but only once I start looking. I had learned to deal peace like a deck of cards. Face down. No more than four each. But I don't want to anymore. I have a flight to catch. And a cat to bury.

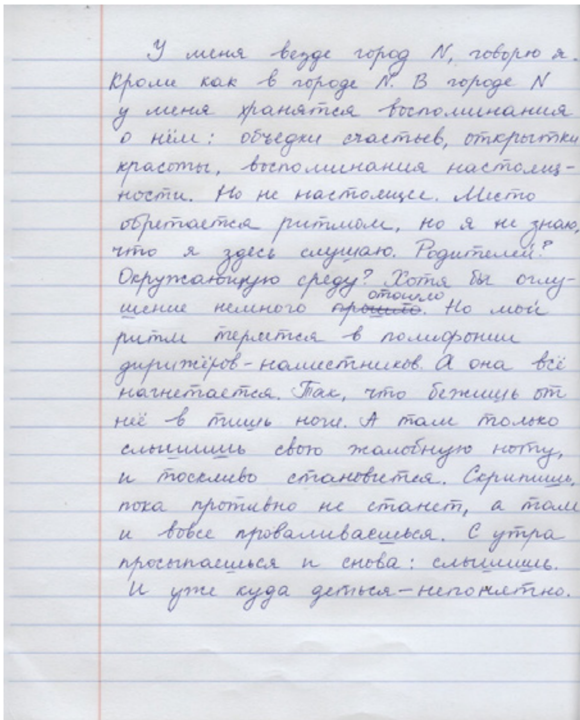
Figure 3. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

An image of a crumpled piece of paper has been wandering my dreams. No. Of a hand crumpling a piece of paper into a ball and then letting go of it. The paper slowly unbunches a little. Neither here nor there, ball nor flat.

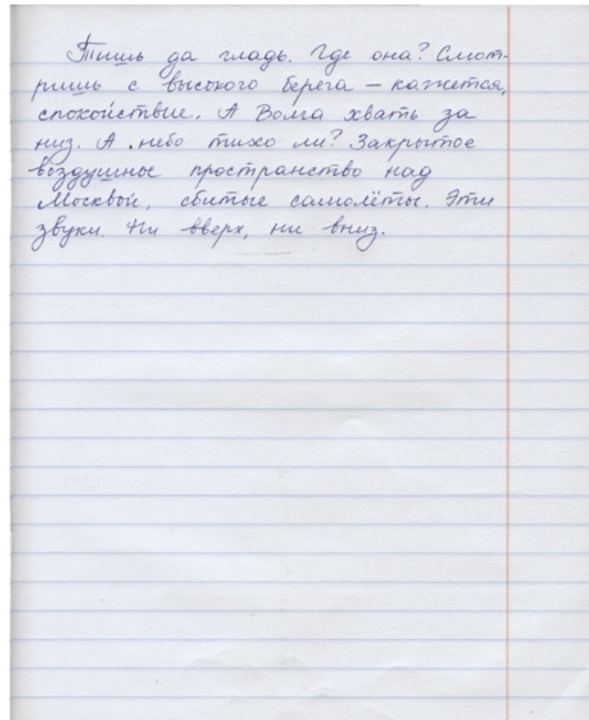
Grief is a tongue-twister. You think you've smoothed it out. And then the day starts again, and it's all messed up, tied up in a knot that is lodged between your eyebrows and one that is at the bottom of your stomach and one that yo-yos up and down between your throat and your chest. It's not really a solar plexus anymore, it's a shadow plexus. A place where something you can't grasp dwells. Something that follows you, won't leave you alone. Comforting, maybe, because it keeps you company. But like a black hole it sucks life in and traps it. And it makes you feel like you can't get out, either.

All these terrors I have found inside. Coming out of the numbness of years.

'Russia is a terrorist state,' goes a chant. It is hard for me in my heart to agree with this. I guess it's my sense of belonging, of love, of care that holds me back. And that makes me wonder: are the terror in me and the terror of the state connected? Do they come from the same place? Are we, too, sewn together?



У меня везде город N, говорю я. Кроме как в городе N. В городе N у меня хранятся воспоминания о нём: объедки счастья, открытки красоты, воспоминания настоящности. Но не настоящее. Место обретается ритмом, но я не знаю, что я здесь слушаю. Родителей? Окружающую среду? Хотя бы ощущение немного ~~прошлого~~ отошло. Но мой ритм теряется в полифонии дирижёров-наместников. А она всё нагнетается. Так, что бежишь от неё в тишь ночи. А там только слышишь свою жалобную ноту, и тоскливо становится. Скрипишь, пока противно не станет, а там и вовсе проваливаешься. С утра просыпаешься и снова: слышишь. И уже куда деться — непонятно.



Тишь да гладь. Где она? Смотришь с высокого берега — кажется, спокойствие. А Волга хвать за низ. А небо тихо ли? Закрытое воздушное пространство над Москвой, сбитые самолёты. Эти звуки. Ни вверх, ни вниз.

Figure 4—5. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.[3]

Home is where your people are—yes. But it has taken me some time to figure out that home is *with* people, not *in* people. We aren't matryoshki. Recognizing a familiarity, a safe space, a comfort will make you feel otherwise.

I have tried to hold on to love. But the love that held me in place here is growing its own way. The people I love are having to live, to cope, to be and become in ways that restrict love because being becomes oriented towards fear. I don't blame them. I can be frustrated and hurt by their lack of courage. My anger is a revolt against concessions. But living in a state of unacceptance means hurting the people I love more. I can't do that.

How do I mourn the abundance of love being peeled away by suspicion, by fear, by shame, by *n*, by *n*, by *n*? I've felt how much the jagged edges of mourning hurt. Somewhere in the waiting, in the death of Navalny, in the waiting for a house search and detention, in the parties overseen by SWAT teams, in the impossibility of visibly loving the person you love, it got lost. Or trampled on? It was turning into bitterness. I was home. And I used all of my mental powers to not be there.

Figure 6. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

How to not give yourself over to loss? Otherwise, your life becomes a memorial, backwards-looking. We have enough memorials. That's not what love is. It has to be able to move, to breathe.

Accepting loss has meant accepting that which has been lost is not what holds me in place. Finding other things to lift you—me—up. It has surprised me how much it has, in a dull-achy sort of way, hurt to see friends find their New home, abroad and not. Because then we are no longer neighbors, not by street nor by sadness. We really are far away. Every meeting is a new meeting.

Home is a place you come back to many times, where you see ghosts and live with them. Like a piece of lined paper you've written on in pencil and then erased what you've written so many times that the lines become blurry, the fibers pilling. It's a mess more than anything else. A new attempt to write shows up faint on the already gray background—the pencil lead can't hold onto the washed-out cellulose.

But we weren't allowed to write with pencils in school. Always a blue ball-point pen. And for mistakes made with ink, you need *White-Out*. You white it out, thick and meaty. You wait for it to dry. You write again. Or you forget and it stays blank. Or you write again and make the same mistake. So then comes more *White-Out*. Layer upon layer. And it all blooms into a little high-rise over the page, inflexible. But you've written with the pen is still there, buried under layers of *White-Out*.

Looking away is a little bit like that. The ink is still there, of my pictures and of the crimes of the state. I can rearrange one but not the other. I can sew them together to know that they are not the same thing, but they are side by side. To look at them and imagine a puzzle that uses these pieces to make a more hopeful picture. My best guess is that homework is hopework. My cat always loved to sit on my homework.

A few flights later, I am back in the New home. I feel lost, as if I've started all over again. During my recent visit to *gorod N*, I slumped down to the loneliness and felt its sickly warmth and melted into it and bubbled with panic. And I came back up wanting to be understood, to be held in the comfortable temperature of known-ness—my friends were there. Feeling the cold bits of bewilderment had made me scared again, made me run, run into walls. I wanted out. And when—running—I was met with the emptiness of my New home apartment, with a place so ridiculously perfect it felt wholly unknowable I felt stranded all over again. And reaching and grasping and grasping and reaching. No rhythm, no people, no space space space. Trying to kill time time time. If I didn't know what to fill it with, it meant I might be empty, too. But inevitably everything—including me—falls into place. And I pull out my pictures because they don't break my heart anymore. I pull them out of my eyes and onto the paper. When you miss something, you see it everywhere.

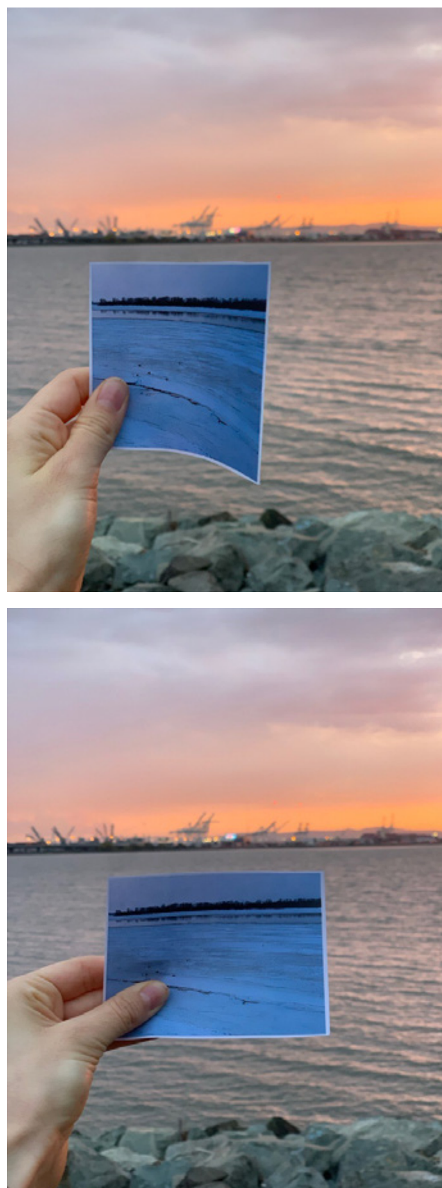


Figure 7–8. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

The images, as they lay on the floor in front of me, scare me a little. While I'm looking at them, while I see them—I know where they are and who I am. But when I look away, they go on by themselves. But I know that they linger somewhere deep in my retinas and that makes me nervous. When I feel their prism, I feel a thin layer of home, of comfort. It's like following someone's footsteps in deep snow. Less work for me. But I don't know whose they are. I don't know exactly where they lead. I become suspicious. I don't trust the people whose footsteps I have always followed. I know where they took me –

to the hurt of February 2022 and beyond. So I don't go. I stand still and I lay. Freeze? But from that stillness, the images become more pronounced. The stillness is like a dark canopy for the movie theater of images. I used to dream of *gorod N* not as a dream but as a reality – it was there, before my eyes. And there was nothing else.

Figure 9. Pasha Tretyakova, *Homework—Hopework*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

So I don't trust the images either. But because I try so hard to look away from them—I am afraid, I am ashamed—they hold me even more. Even here, far away from *gorod N*, that city can steer me. The images creep into my peripheral vision like frames, like blinkers on carriage horses. And they make you keep going down the path. Just forward. I'm not entirely sure how to get off the path. But I think it's time to zoom out. To look down and around, not away.

My cat anchored me. She would climb up to lay on my chest and the weight of her, the warmth, her purr would make everything okay. With her departure, the last warmth of being still, the protections it afforded, has gone. Home is not a place I recognize. And in a strange way, that gives me hope. Because it lets me choose new paths, within it and without it.

We buried my cat very deep in the ground. She's holding down the fort. I am using the threads of the loss for mending.

1. 'February twenty-second. Two thousand and twenty-five. Homework.
A cat should be the first to be let into a new house. But what should one do when leaving the old house? When I found a new home, my cat, who lived in the old one, died. With her went the last feelings of home

as I knew it. In the emptiness of the old home hung the question: "What kind of place is this?"
The cat is playing (was playing?) with a ball of yarn. It unwinds, it becomes threads that catch on the rough surfaces of space.
What are you dreaming about?' (Translated from Russian by the author.)

2. *Gorod N* [Eng. *city N*] is a made-up toponym which commonly appears in Russian literature to denote provincial towns (in the works of Gogol, Chekhov, and Doestoevsky, for example).
3. 'I have *gorod N* everywhere, I say. Except in *gorod N*. In *gorod N*, I keep memories of it: scraps of happiness, postcards of beauty, memories of realness. But not the present. Place is acquired through rhythm, but I don't know what I'm listening to here. My parents? The environment? At least the deafening ring has subsided a little. But my rhythm is lost in the polyphony of the feudal conductors. The polyphony keeps building. So that you run away from it into the silence of the night. There, you only hear your own plaintive note and become sadder yet. You let it screech until it becomes disgusting and then fall into oblivion. In the morning, you wake up and again: you hear it. You aren't listening, but you still hear it. And it's already unclear where to go.
Peace and quiet. Where is it? You look from the high bank—all seems calm. But the Volga current grabs from the bottom. Is the sky quiet? Closed airspace over Moscow, downed planes. All these sounds. Neither up nor down.' (Translated from Russian by the author.)

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the FEBRUARY journal

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Interview / Audio

Phone-a-Friend / Звонок другу: Hopelessness as a Tool of Politicizing Queerness in Today's Russia. Interview with Philosopher and Activist Kolya Nakhshunov

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Phone-a-Friend / Звонок другу: Hopelessness as a Tool of Politicizing Queerness in Today's Russia. Interview with Philosopher and Activist Kolya Nakhshunov

Pasha Tretyakova and Kolya Nakhshunov

Two friends and scholars talk about hope in the context of Russia, touching on Russian history of thought and the contemporary struggles for queer rights. Pasha wonders how to go on. Kolya talks about how the absence of hope opens up the possibility for political action. Together, they think about what being queer in Russia today entails — and how one can find community in the midst of dark times.

This is an audio conversation with a transcript for accessibility.

Keywords: community, hopelessness, queerness, resistance, Russia, Silver Century

You can listen to the audio of the conversation between Pasha and Kolya here

This piece is intended as an audio piece first and foremost. We provide a supplementary transcript for accessibility and referencing purposes.

[transcript]

Pasha: Hi, this is *The February Journal*. I'm Pasha Tretyakova, a researcher of Russia and editor of *The February Journal*.

I'm here with my friend Nikolai Nakhshunov, Kolya, a philosopher, author, and activist based in Russia. We're here to talk about hope and not having any. Kolya, I'm not going to ask you "*как дела?*" which is Russian for "how are things?" I'm going to ask you "how are you?" They mean the same thing, but their language connotations are very different. So how are you?

Kolya: Hi Pasha, thank you for calling. I'm fine, it's quite a formal answer, but I'm fine, and you?

Pasha: Yeah, I would say I am well. I'm always kind of caught in that question in knowing that I have a lot of things to be very thankful for, but sometimes I don't feel very good about them.

Kolya: You know, today in Russia, I can say for the last three years, when asking "how are you?" or "what's going on?" they usually add "I hope you're okay today, and I hope all is well in these circumstances." And I can say that I am okay. I'm a terrible one. But anyway, thank you nonetheless for this question. Even one question is quite supportive.

Pasha: The English language question does not necessarily invite a real answer, but it still shows solicitude, and I think that that does count for something. But I think there's also the question of what do we hope for when we ask that? Do we hope to hear something positive, or are we okay with not hearing something positive? Andrei Zavadski, one of my fellow editors here at *February*, remarks that admitting to not doing well is a sign of close friendship. And that's one of the things that is transversive, and it's one of the things that you and I both look at, how friendship and intimacy can surpass some of the walls that violence builds. But I think it's still hard to answer, and it's hard to work up the courage to ask, to really ask. I think we are taught to brood on emotions more than process them, which I blame Russian novels for. And I think a lot of people do this — there's a certain valuing of the process of brooding rather than sharing. It is something that can really anchor you down. But I do hope for solidarity and hope for being able to show up in some form of sincerity. What do you hope for?

Kolya: I can support you, support this thesis. To hope, first of all, it is a process. It is an emotional process, and I can't answer if it is easy to hope or it is hard to hope. Because in different epochs, in different contexts, hope, as I know, it's a particular activity. A particular activity of creating of an image of a particular future. Hope which is really close to utopia in political imagination, why not. But hope, the feeling of hope is not close to my own views. It's not my cup of tea, because hope... Here, I'm quite close to Hannah Arendt and her writings about freedom, especially on humanity in dark times. Where she writes about hope as a positive equivalent of fear, because in fear one shrinks back from reality. And in hope, the soul overlaps reality. It breaks the real circumstances. It helps us to forget about the reality.

And the thing that I'm really afraid of is forgetting the reality. Forgetting that the war is ongoing, that we live in a dictatorship, that the whole world, it seems, is crazy. Especially today, and of course, I feel fear. Of course, I feel hope as some primordial part of my human essence, of my feeling scenario. But I can't say that hope helps me. I can't say that hope is a tool which I want to use, which I want to practice, because I can't feel that hope, especially *feel* but also *think* that hope may make things better. I don't believe that hope can struggle against Putin. I don't believe that hope can improve the current situation. Of course, I can't hope and I can't believe that only hope, only quite idealistic feeling, can end the war or just imagine the end of the war.

Pasha: You said something about hope not being helpful. And I'm wondering what is the difference between hopelessness and helplessness?

Kolya: Thank you for asking. When you're hopeless, I think you are still free. You can still feel freedom. You can still realize your personal freedom. When you're hopeless, you still can see your face, can feel your arms, can act, politically speaking. But when you're helpless, I think you can't act. You can't even think and when you're helpless, you are in a quite terrible state. I'm afraid that hope breaks us, that hope leads us to the state of some kind of helplessness. Because when we hope, we feel really atomized. I mean, the social atomization is caused partly by hope, by hope in quite unpractical ideals. But helpless, can you a little bit elaborate?

Pasha: Yeah, I think something that you just said, social atomization, is interesting because it's something that I have experienced in Russian circles. Not with close friends, but in wider circles of Russians abroad, or in Russia since the beginning of the full scale invasion of Ukraine. I mean, I think that was a moment of helplessness then, and we have been learning how to become less helpless. A feeling of not knowing what can be done, and of finding tools to do something. Helplessness. When I say the word, I see the image of a child standing by their mother with their arms pulled up, like asking to be held. That is what I see when I think helpless when you just, you want help because you can't give it to yourself. And it was a scary place to be. But I like that in your thinking, you have highlighted some of the ways that we have historically dealt with a sense of helplessness, particularly through the work of Nadezhda Mandelstam. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Kolya: Yeah, exactly. An image of a child who cries, but when we see a child crying, we can say exactly, we can say they're helpless. They need a parent to support, to find the right way, maybe to give hope. And in this sense, hopeful and helplessness are quite close, but hopeless is… sometimes it can give us a special force, some spiritual force. And of course, Nadezhda Mandelstam, I really like the Silver Century in Russian poetry.

Pasha: Which is the beginning of the 20th century and the period of the Russian Revolution, which is when Nadezhda's husband, Osip Mandelstam, lived and was celebrated and then repressed. And so Nadezhda wrote a memoir of the period, which is hailed as an important artifact of the feeling of the time.

Kolya: Yeah, it is a pure historical document and not only historical document, but a piece of witness, but not a struggling witness, but a participative witness. I remember some lines from this book, Nadezhda asks herself a question. A question: what to do when you lose hope? Most people of the Silver Century, and I think they're quite popular and familiar for the intellectual public such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam, and of course Nadezhda Mandelstam.

And in this memoir, which is named "Nadezhda against Hope," which means hope against hope, because Nadezhda, the Russian name, translates as hope. And Nadezhda tells us that when you lose everything,

when you lose all your relatives, all your siblings, all your friends, it seems that you can't do anything. It seems that the situation is totally ruined, that the life is ended. But you still can hold, you still can cry, you still can manifest about the situation. And this performative action, I think this action is very performative because it's active and it's visible, you can see it and you can feel this whole. You can feel these nerves under your skin. And when the hope leaves you, you can still manifest. Manifest that you live, manifest that the life still goes on. And I think this manifestation, this perhaps tragic manifestation is quite active form of resistance, an active form of witnessing and not only documentation, but of acting, of transforming the regimes of visibility, regimes of feeling, emotional regimes, that you give a starting point for new emotionalities, new sensitivities. You give rise not to hope, but to an understanding that you are not alone, that people like you are not alone.

And in this sense, I find the experience of Nadezhda Mandelstam, the experience of many people of the Silver Century—they were superfluous people. A concept which is quite widespread in Russian literature, not only Russian speaking literature, but superfluous people, those who lost hope, but still can be themselves, still can feel their authenticity. And I think they still can create communities. They could create communities during totalitarian Stalin's rule, and they can still create communities of action, communities of co-feeling, co-struggling. Even today in Russia, which is quite exclusive. When I say Russia is exclusive, it's not hostile only to queer people.

Putin's Russia is really hostile to every difference, to every authenticity. It states the regime, the structure of power. It states unification, unification of style of thinking, unification of behaving, unification of everything. And in this way, any uniqueness, any authenticity, it is a crime. I can't say that it is illegal, but when the system, the system of repressive power finds you in some sense attractive, behaving abnormally, they find the legal grounds, some laws or norms that you've broken and they capture you and put you on the table of repression.

Pasha: That's an interesting way to put it, because there is this feeling that the state operates kind of like a floodlight in the darkness and you don't know what it's going to pick up on and it can be super random, in some sense. As in, a clerical mistake or somebody saw something... and then it can also not pick up on something, but once it does, it really tries to hold it in that light of preparation of ... as in on a table, on a surgical kind of a table, and unpick it. And we see that happening to NGOs, all kinds of initiatives. It just gets harder and harder to do any kind of work that is not directly sanctioned by the government.

And now that we've been to the past a little bit and have returned to the present, I want to ask about the future because in this issue of The February Journal, edited by Isabel Bredenbröker, '"Hope"' to Solve Some "Problems" Here? Investigations into the Agentive Potential of Ambiguous Terms,' we're thinking about hope as a future-oriented political practice. So my question for you is, when there is an absence and a loss of hope, where does that point us? What direction? Can we still look to the future?

Kolya: Honestly speaking, I don't know. But I don't know the exact translation of the phrase '*дорогу осилит идущий.*' Is there any equivalence in English, maybe you know?

Pasha: Yeah, the literal translation would be 'the one who is walking is the one who will manage the road.' I can't think of anything right now of an English language equivalent, but that's a good phrase.

Kolya: I believe in this, sincerely. Hope gives kind of foggy ideals, very foggy and we can't see them clearly. Another good example is Bolsheviks, because Bolsheviks are also a product of an epoch ... of an epoch of the late Russian Empire, as well as the Silver Century is a product of this historical epoch. Bolsheviks were very hopeful people. They hope in communism, they hope in a type of ideology that will make everyone really happy, happy and joyful. But on the one hand, we can see Bolsheviks with their Gulag state, with their totalitarianism. And on the other hand, we can see people without hope, people of the Silver Century, people of the Dark Times. And these people are much closer for me. I mean Mandelstams, Tsvetaeva, Ahmatova, Gumilyov, and many others. Their hopelessness, their authentic feelings, their believing in the moment right now, their true adventurism. It gave them and now it gives us not a hope, but a responsibility. A responsibility for the future, because everything we do, everything we create can influence what will be tomorrow.

And this responsibility, it's hard for me to say—is it personal or civic responsibility? But a responsibility not only for the polity, not only for the political community, but a responsibility for our close ones, for our significant others, for our parents, for our friends. Responsibility for those who we truly love. I can say that losing hope is not scary, but on a personal level. Because you still are among these close people. And with these people you can create and use spaces. And use spaces out-of-placeness, because these people and you aren't in these repressive regimes. Of course physically we're still in Russia—I'm still in Russia—but you create spiritual realms in which you can still laugh, you can still create political projects, you can still fight for rights, you can still write articles and create texts. You can still create creativity in its very sense, creativity as a natality of creating something new. It's still possible. It's still possible on the personal level or in some semi-public or subaltern public level, but it's still possible. If you choose this particular responsibility for your community, for your identity, you should understand that all official publicities, all official public practices are quite far from you. They are not with you and you are not with them. Because repressive official publicity is about repressive visibilities, repressive regimes of how the state and the authorities see, feel or dictate you how to feel.

So to resist, you should find your place. You should find your place in the space where the placeness is impossible in the very sense. Different examples of such outside-of-placeness, we can find again in literature, because the concept of Howl, the concept of howl, or *voj* in Russian, isn't unique for Nadezhda Mandelstam. It's also quite acquainted for those who

know American literature, especially Ginsberg. His *Howl* is a classic of Beatnik literature. And I think that Ginsberg's Martyrs,[1] those who struggled but still loved each other, still create new intimacies. This is a space, it is a starting point of new order, of a future. It's not an ideological future, it's not an ideology, it's not an utopia, but it is a life. It is a new form of life in which we are not foreigners for each other, we are friends, good friends and lovers. And I think this future is not an ideological future, it's our common future as a humanity, because I said a lot about human authenticity, about special traits of a human character. This authenticity is really important, because the true authenticity of a person is love, it's love, it's loving each other.

Pasha: I really like how you position the out-of-placeness, because that is definitely… I don't live in Russia full time right now, but I have in the last couple of years. And even upon visits that out-of-placeness that I feel really scares me often, because it does feel like a void that you can keep falling through. And it has made that fear manifest in different ways. I have felt disidentification, which is something that José Muñoz talks about as both the desire to see and the inability to see. And so that feeling of unsafeness, it can just really penetrate very far into what you are able to even recognize.

Kolya: Sometimes you find out that in this state, the state of out-of-placeness, you're not alone. For example—

Pasha: Right, that's what I want to ask about. How do we find each other in there? And in your work, you talk about how queerness links to friendship. But I think in the context of fear, it can be harder to find each other in the dark or to show up authentically. So I was wondering how you see that ambiguity of interpersonal relationships becoming a space for something that can be safe.

Kolya: I believe, I really believe, I think maybe not only believe, but I *know* that love and friendship is some kind of eternal phenomenon. It's impossible not to say about epochs and not to say about history, because we are speaking about the future and futures and about imagination and about who. Because all of these concepts are quite related to history, the history of humanity. And love and friendship as a phenomena of closeness, of intimacy. We can find them in everything and everywhere. And for every queer person in Russia, it's an unimaginable experience when we read books and articles of Irina Roldugina, Dan Healey's articles and Rustam Alexander's books about queer people in the USSR.

And we find that even in that totalitarian regime with criminal punishment for same-sex relationships and with the pathologization of homosexuality, queer people still could find places, still could find languages of communication, of meeting, of co-feeling. Maybe it's one more idealistic example and very romantic, but it will be unjust if I don't share this example. The film and the book 'Жар-птица,' 'Firebird,' I know that in London it's quite

popular play and a book and a film about two soldiers in the USSR army who felt a mutual love, homosexual love. And they could create a place in their Soviet flat, place of love, place of mutual understanding and mutual romantic feeling. This story had a really dramatic ending and you can read it, you can watch this film. I won't give spoilers, but it's really inspiring. It's really inspiring when you see people in repressive, much more repressive order and much more repressive fields than today.

But today we still can politicize each other. We still can find languages, we still can find means of communication, we still can find the types of environment in which we can see each other, speak with each other and to share ideas, to share not hope, but share beliefs, beliefs, perspectives, creating future for each other. I really like to say that everything that we do ... me, for example, I still participate in Russian academic life. I still write texts in Russian on queer problematics and LGBTQ+ problematics. I still try to cultivate some kind of political thinking among Russian queers abroad and in Russia. I always repeat that I feel responsible, but I feel responsible for those people with whom I am, for those queers, for those political resistant people, for resistant groups of students. I don't feel responsible for authorities, for example, for loyal professors, loyal to Putin's regime.

So this is liminal, of course it's liminal, it's liminal place of co-responsibility is linked with co-feeling and co-acting, is the place where we can see each other purely, see the soul of each other. This practice of... maybe Foucault would call it asceticism and I can agree with it because it is co-asceticism when you see each other and try to improve the force of each other. Force of the soul, force of political agency, force of being those who you are. It's really important because when you are alone—and this is the fantastic ending of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—when you feel alone, it's the scary thing because when you feel alone, you can't act, you can't create future today and you can't feel responsible because there is none to feel responsible for — you are alone. And we should by all our forces, by all our thoughts and reflections resist this political loneliness. It's hardly possible to name it political because it's unpolitical in its essence, but it's loneliness. It's totalitarian loneliness which today is really probable, but we should resist. I don't hope—I believe in it.

Pasha: I love that. You were making me emotional actually. But before we drop off, I want to think about the positionality of queer people in Russia a little more. On one hand, Russians hold enough power to command international attention and empathy, somewhat inconsistently. You, Kolya, recently spoke to Judith Butler about queerness in Russia and that is no small feat. There is attention or there can be. There is space for that. And on the other hand, there is a very real sense of unsafety that people live with day to day. And so I'm wondering what this privilege of visibility and attention affords in the reality where it doesn't enact a lot of change on the world around you. And I guess you're still left with hopelessness at the end of the day.

Kolya: Maybe you know that many gays in Russia, they still try to participate in techno raves and go to clubs, special gay clubs for feel free, for dance, for drinking, for... hanging with each other, for hooking up. And when they come to these clubs, it's some points that were shared by my friends. They come to these raves and clubs and try to feel hope. Try to feel hope that today, maybe today, the police officers, the police guards wouldn't come to this club and wouldn't oppress all of the staff and all of the people in this club. And this is a good example of bad hope, parallel with bad faith by Sartre. I'm not afraid, but I'm really upset that it's a quite widespread orienter. But I'm really upset and I can say that I'm depressed. But Judith Butler, you mentioned a talk with them, and Judith Butler told me and told us that a tactical defeat maybe is not the end of the whole process. It means that the loss of political thinking, which is a characteristic of the current situation with queer people in Russia, the loss not of hope, but loss of political action and loss of trying to be in your own way. It's not an end. It's a good point to reflect about yourself, about your means of transforming the reality, about your strength, because we are really strong. And I'm really inspired by all queer people who are currently in Russia and try to resist. I'm impressed by everyone who are abroad and inspired by queer people in Russia, because it is a kind of responsibility. Responsibility for those who are not close to you physically, but in some virtual space, we are still in one community. Not long ago I met Katya Gordeeva, a Russian-speaking journalist, antiwar, and her interviews are quite widespread, not only among Russian-speaking persons. And Katya told me a really inspiring thing: that she doesn't feel hopeful, that she isn't a hopeful person, but she's sure that the future will start, that the future will begin, and the future begins right now.

It's not evident reflection, but I can say I believe and I'm sure that future is today, not tomorrow, only because we are creators of this day. The future is not an ideological concept. The future is not utopia or dystopia. The future is us. And our possibility of acting, our possibility of refuting from the oppressive reality, all of this gives us our own future, and we are responsible for it. So we can stand with this ideal, and this ideal is life-giving. I believe in it, and I can say yes, I'm sure you, too.

Pasha: I think this is a great place to end. Thank you, Kolya, for this talk.

Kolya: Thank you, Pasha.

Pasha: And well, be responsible.

Kolya: You too, promise me.

Pasha: *Веди себя хорошо!* Behave. And I will talk to you later.

Kolya: Thank you. See you.

Pasha: See you.

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Book review

Shaked N (2022) Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections. London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 978-1-350-04576-7

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Shaked N (2022) Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections. London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 978-1-350-04576-7

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This review focuses on Nizan Shaked's *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections* (2022) and its dissection of the system of philanthrocapitalism in the financing of museum operations. The review asserts the importance of engaging with Shaked's analysis as a means of recognizing the complicity of museum workers with these systems of wealth accumulation. Shaked demonstrates how existing systems of philanthropic giving uphold white supremacy and imperial hegemony by concentrating wealth and decision-making power in the hands of boards of trustees. To enact liberatory museum practices and ethics, therefore, museum workers and activists must also transform funding and governance.

Nizan Shaked's *Museums and Wealth: The Politics of Contemporary Art Collections* (2022) is essential reading for anyone and everyone working in and with museums. Her book is especially crucial for those interested in the role of twenty-first-century museums in promoting equity and justice—without engaging with and responding to her analysis, museum workers, leaders, students, and theorists will inadvertently continue undermining all genuine efforts at transformation. In *Museums and Wealth*, Shaked pursues the age-old maxim to 'follow the money,' recentering a historical materialist analysis of U. S. art museums to reveal how the philanthropy model, which 'at its best... can perform some ameliorating triage' (p. 5), in actions and structure works to enrich the already wealthy, perpetuate white supremacy, constrict artistic creation, and threaten equity and democracy via the economic system of philanthrocapitalism.

Throughout the book, Shaked exposes what is essentially insider trading among the philanthropic class, mapping how wealthy board members benefit from their roles on museum boards. She highlights both the financial benefits to collector-board members (increasing the economic value of their personal art collections and wealth) and how these roles also serve political ends: wealthy donors are able to 'art-wash' their reputations, e.g. gaining positive public relations stories through their philanthropic giving which overshadows knowledge of immoral and at times illegal business practices, *and* gain ideological control of culture and society through an outsized influence on what is exhibited and collected in the name of public heritage. Shaked points out that all of that is not only perfectly legal but is subsidised by government funding (as through the National Endowment for the Arts).

The American nonprofit system, in other words, serves as 'a vehicle for the privatizing of the welfare state and of civil society,' ultimately benefiting only the ultra-wealthy (p. 35). Lest museum workers and thinkers in other countries breathe a sigh of relief for public funding, Shaked also raises the alarm for global institutions that have been gradually shifting towards embracing similar private funding models in recent years.

To arrive at these conclusions, Shaked presents an incisive and clear-eyed account of what and how 'the collection' as a unit of inquiry functions in society and in relation to governance since the widespread financialization of the art market, which she dates to the 1980s. Noting how contemporary collectors have embraced the title of 'modern day Medici,' Shaked examines what that actually means, filling in the gap in the historical development of the museum as an institution between cabinets of curiosity and revolutionary state museums. She devotes an entire chapter to the Medici family, and the critical role that a collection catalogue played in externalizing the private act of collecting towards something that holds public value. It is the daily labor of museum workers in producing every exhibition, catalogue, press release, wall label, public tour, grant proposal, and condition report that provides the validity and authority required to stabilize an artwork's (astronomical) financial value. As Shaked notes with stomach-churning precision: 'This is the brilliance of this system: it forces those who participate in it, whether they accord with it or not, to work in support of wealth and power concentration' (p. 28). Hence the alarm.

Again and again throughout *Museums and Wealth*, it is Shaked's clear and irrefutable prose that eviscerates all well-meaning attempts to serve the public good in and through the museum. As a museum worker, with deep commitments and intentions to advancing equity and justice through my work, reading this book felt like a series of successive punches to the gut. Shaked's analysis demonstrates how such efforts, however well-intentioned, are all surface-level concessions. Reflecting on my education initiatives through this lens—implementing high school tours with explicit social justice themes, stewarding community-led programming around an exhibition that challenged the wall at the U. S.-Mexico border, and fostering critical self-reflection on whiteness among part-time educators, for example—reveals how any and all advances towards equity are undercut by the structural funding models, in which '...public money for the arts serves private wealth accumulation and sustains the status quo, which is widely understood today as having been, and continuing to be, white supremacist' (p. 2). Each of Shaked's decisive statements—'If the museum is being instrumentalized to stabilize or boost the status of asset-class and other market art, we have a conflict with the museum's claim to public benefit' (p. 16); 'Significantly, this system serves both a right-wing agenda and a democratic establishment...Those who believe that the system has the capacity to evolve toward more social justice end up fighting harder and harder for less and less' (pp. 34–35); 'When the role of the public is passive we have absolutism, even if tamed and disguised' (p. 150)—is contextualized in well-crafted and expertly reasoned analysis. No number of

radical exhibitions or educational programming can dismantle white supremacy and ideological hegemony while these existing funding structure exists.

There is hope, however. In the final chapter, Shaked offers 'Blueprints for the Future' (p. 151), immediate and actionable policy solutions that assert that '...it is not the role of the publicly subsidized institution to be an agent of inequality by supporting the financial industry' (p. 41) and delineate a pathway out of this mess. She reassures us: 'That we have inherited this system from history does not mean that we have to accept it' (p. 6)—if we can build the political will and collective power necessary to demand these transformations. Shaked refutes the reform-based models that institutions have prioritized in recent years, such as diversifying boards and collection policies, insisting instead on a fundamental and explicitly antiracist restructuring of the financial and economic structure of the arts. As a starting point, Shaked traces various grassroots, BIPOC-, queer-, and women-led efforts to effect change in museums, offering visions of shared governance through peer- and community panels alongside presenting a concrete proposal for a marginal tax on the resale market for art with requisite information transparency, a dual-pronged approach of organizing and legislation that just might begin to shift the balance of power.

Ultimately, however, she acknowledges that the fault lies with the capitalist system itself, which is a larger project than any one institutional board restructuring can attain. Yet it is precisely in museums, she maintains, that we might find a 'proving ground to test the potential and possibilities' of democratic funding based on solidarity and connection over competition and greed (pp. 180–181).

Author's bio

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