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“Realists of A Larger Reality” Conceptualizing Creative Possibilities That Couldwork in Expanding Contemporary Human Rights

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“Realists of A Larger Reality”

Conceptualizing Creative Possibilities

That *Couldwork* in Expanding Contemporary Human Rights

**Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College**

**by
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Mom, Sara, Dad, Erik, Biz. <3

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INTRODUCTION

Only the imagination can get us out of the bind of the eternal present, inventing or hypothesizing or pretending or discovering a way...¹

The eternal present. The naturalized inevitability of the now. In human rights, urgency is needed when lives are on the line. Projects that prioritize rights and champion who has access to them bring focus and illumination to some of the most terrifying realities for people living around the world that need action now. Considered in this context, human rights as a larger institutionalized project of the global community offers relief and answers to some of the most paralyzing displays of human degradation: acts that transcend culture and difference in their ability to wield destructive power to a collective spirit. Yet this singular aim of rushing to aid leaves a vacuum of unanswerable calls for justice in the context of the local, of the stateless and of those who desire the strength of lasting grassroots movements - *of the future*. Paired with a tendency towards grand and generic language that aims to fight injustice, contemporary visions of human rights leave much to be desired; one only need look at the various critiques and essays that debate the future of human rights to hear this call for more. The human rights project needs to diversify its tactics in order to elevate its project of championing the human.

¹ Kathy Rudy.. "Ethics, Reproduction, Utopia: Gender and Childbearing in "Woman on the Edge of Time" and "The Left Hand of Darkness"" *NWSA Journal* 9.1 (1997): 22-38.

What can be so attractive about the fledgling field of human rights work and activism is its relative youth as a political discourse. In reading work under its vast umbrella, it becomes clear that human rights is a pedagogy that borrows and absorbs perspectives, tactics and ideas from multiple intersecting modalities of thought. Before unpacking this notion, it's helpful to know what what sorts of criticisms are being deployed at human rights.

Critiques of human rights come from alarming angles. Claims that it serves a market-driven, capitalist agenda, that its reach recalls a moral imperialism in this new age of technological globalization, that it is a system of empty gestures that punish developing countries and allow global powers to remain unexamined, are hard to ignore completely; while all of these have interesting and real elements to act on, the fact remains that human rights as a language, a framework and a system have achieved substantial movements towards a more just world. The issues that I will be exploring in this paper, the methods and tactics of grappling with race gender and class, are often thought of as more civil rights than human rights. This grouping is a hard niche to approach in comparison with more universal agreed upon right “froms;” the right from torture and the right from state abuse. They are relatively new as rights in the constitutions of many states and thus are less visible on the larger radar of human rights.

These socio-political rights that I am so interested in addressing are often seen as being unsolvable, embedded within monolithic matrices of culture, power and capitalism, webs too sticky and pervasive to approach with normalized legal frameworks. The tactic of many state-sponsored human rights bodies is to address what is addressable and leave

larger social momentum and individual state apparatuses to deal with the complicated nature of socio-economic rights.

Yet, there *are* theories as to what a reconfigured human rights could look like if the critiques were taken seriously and human rights discourse entered into a more fluid, local and empowered phase of itself. Ariella Azoulay calls for a new mode of civil discourse of human rights that tries to, “heal the situation of inequality that has been imposed on them in the name of universal grounding principles,”² moving the grounds of rights from “everyone has them” to “no one has them until we all do.” In light of this call for a human rights of actual solidarity built into its formulation, it can be said that many contemporary movements for equality embody these principles, yet are not considered projects of human rights per se. Left with this pedagogical conundrum, how do people doing activist work in the political realm of human rights move toward a more liberatory and critical movement to protect and elevate the human? In a field that utilizes multiple intersections of method and areas of study, what *has not* been considered as helpful, inspiring or possibly successful in confronting the aforementioned vacuum?

This thesis aims to thoughtfully consider this question of missing methodologies and what it could mean for the future of human rights. Engaging in a human rights oriented education at Bard College, I’ve been exposed to many incredible ideas about the future and possibilities of human rights that have allowed me to form my own ideas about how to begin answering the question of “What’s missing?” As a queer student of human

² Ariella Azoulay. “What are Human Rights?” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*. Vol. 35, No. 1 (2015): 8-20.

rights, seeing a lack of solidarity on lines of sexuality and gender politics is a site for opportunity within the realm of human rights ignited by feelings of distress. It is imperative that the rights community commits itself to the studying of the creative and theoretical contributions of women of color, queers, intersectional feminist thinkers and those at the margin of cultural production. This is where truly innovative tactics thrive, overflowing with critically important perspectives that are often left out of important human rights dialogue. The angle from which I will make these connections is through the analysis of creative projects by women who embody various identities: queer, black, working class, white. To understand the ways in which these artists use aesthetic and imaginative tools to address political issues and open up space for new political strategies to emerge, pulling out the various tools from within these projects is imperative. The imagination and its labors are often downplayed; one only has to look at the way utopian logics have been relegated to the realm of the impractical or, at least, put into a binary opposition to practicality. I purpose to disrupt this binary and to complicate the idea that utopian thinking closes possibilities instead of opens them up.

I resist this simplistic formulation of the utopian through my use of José Esteban Muñoz's critical text, *Cruising Utopia*, as a theoretical anchor and guide in exploring the various texts and works of this project. *Cruising Utopia* is a formative text that ushers in a new wave of queer theory that offers the genre a critically hopeful position in imagining possibilities of what a queer utopian stance can offer. Muñoz proposes hope as an important stance in looking for liberation tactics, tactics that can offer insight to an expansive vision of human rights, to elevate their inclusivity and to the continued

prevention of human rights as imperialist, monolithic or short-sighted. He sees “...hope as a hermeneutic,³ and from the point of view of political struggles today, such a critical optic is nothing short of necessary in order to combat the force of political pessimism.”⁴ It is a powerful move of activism to build and collect tools that allow liberatory futures to be possible .

In understanding my position within the discourse of human rights, I’ve often slid into despair thinking that my hopes for the work are too lofty and that my interest in utopia and the imagination feel out of place within a framework of present-oriented practicality that is often given priority in human rights work. Trying to negotiate this perspective into a space of legitimacy within the human rights field may require some convincing; this project aims to connect my own inclinations to those who have come before me. As soon as I grew passionate about a lack of diverse tactics in human rights discourse, I realized that intellectuals, writers, creatives and artists that I admire have made manifest these qualities in their works way before I sat down and decided to write. Through the powerful voices of writers like Muñoz, I want to highlight a lineage of critically hopeful art that interrogates the possibility of human rights. There needs to be something flexible, something akin to and mirroring a new discourse of human action in the human rights field; yet this something is not new, nor does it claim to embody a whole discourse. What I offer, in this beginning place, is the start of a framework that

³ “Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

⁴ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

aims to tease out embodiments of what it aims to describe. Desiring a title that kept open the characteristics of inclusion and the possibility, I decided to call my curated collection in this paper *couldwork*.

What is Couldwork?

Fostering and searching for new articulations and frameworks is the kind of work we *could* be doing in order to gather an array of tools in fighting for these social human rights. Wanting to portray this framework as a matrix of possibility and fluidity, I am calling it political *couldwork*. Couldwork operates in multiple ways in this project; it looks to absorb and center the characteristics and tools of whom it protects. Couldwork is materialized through investigating and highlighting unique experiences, personal tactics and the creative expressions of contemporary struggles. It is a way of utilizing material that performs a kind of radical hope for other futures, that is, material which offers glimpses into how we could wriggle free of the present (heavy with harassment, hate crimes and oppression) towards a belief in an alternative future that makes up for the lack in the past (or the present). Couldwork is an intersectional endeavor. Its focus in this paper is on women identified people whose work illuminates feminist, queer, black and white experiences. It sees the work that is being done from these identity standpoints and calls them forth in order to avoid paralyzing political despair in a contemporary space. Resurrecting certain discourses of the past and exploring their elements can give us perspective on our present positions and give us information about what has changed, (or not), about particular realities.

In calling this *couldwork*, I am attempting to agitate known ways of conceptualizing political activism and am encouraging alternative possibilities through poetic subversion of language tactics and analyses of different creative processes. If we do not try something, how are we to know that it could (or could not) work? Couldwork framing looks to see how *else* we could organize our political lives. In this new articulation, the world could divest from the current ways in which articulating human rights, liberation and the demand for equity is understood yet it does not present a certain way, goal or end other than the hope of liberation for all. Keeping the realm open to new additions and revisions, couldwork's ability to withstand an uncertain present is of the utmost importance. The political reach for more than what is available is a call to rally what author Ursula K. Le Guin called "realists of a larger reality."⁵ These "realists" are those that couldwork celebrates: writers, poets and artists that not only demand an expansion of reality, but show us glimpses of its augmentation through certain creative methods.

Knowing that historical context and a grounding in the present are important aspects of radical political work, I am not proposing that other paths, articulations and experiences should be forgotten. Enough violence and injustice exists in the world for activists to incorporate a diversity tactics into their strategies. Couldwork, then, is not unique in its retroactivity. Looking back is not unique to creative discourses. As Muñoz stresses in *Cruising Utopia*, the backwards look is not one of melancholia that idealizes

⁵ Arons, Rachel. "'We Will Need Writers Who Can Remember Freedom': Ursula Le Guin and Last Night's N.B.A.'s." *The New Yorker*. Last modified November 24, 2014. Accessed December 4, 2016.

the past as much as it is of learning and building in order to survive *and* thrive, using joyous performance as a mode of political inspiration. The project of using the past to build up the future is influenced incredibly by Muñoz's use of a queer utopian hope.

In my search for material to include in this exploration of couldwork and its tactics, it became clear that this project was one of opening, releasing and expanding. While critical knowledge is an invaluable skill in both art and human rights theory, the crux of couldwork understands and embraces the idea that radical ideas can come from surprising sources. In that vein, another salient text that guides me is the essay, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," by critical theorist Eve Sedgwick. Sedgwick's text examines the ways in which queer theorists in particular, but critical thinkers in general, have been swallowed by a paranoid positioning in their approach to reading, researching and articulating discourses. The adoption of this stance has allowed for the proliferation of rigid positions in approaching critical theory, for the cynical turn away from a multiplicity of hopes and the foreclosure of opportunities to heal, be moved or change one's mind. Sedgwick theorizes the use of a paranoid stance to be incredibly useful in moments of crisis,⁶ yet explores the reasons how it could be limiting if it becomes the only way people interact. Alongside the paranoid stance, Sedgwick offers up another: reparative. This position "stays local, gives up on hypervigilance for attentiveness; instead of powerful reductions, it prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy, and

⁶ For her, this moment is highlighted by the AIDS epidemic as an influential force in the establishment of queer theory and its penchant for paranoid stances.

making whole.”⁷ Muñoz was highly influenced by Sedgwick’s essay in his writing of *Cruising Utopia*; many of his ideas around utopia and hope come from outside queer theory, written by philosophers like Martin Heidegger (criticized for his Nazi affiliation) and Ernst Bloch (who notoriously did not care for homosexuals⁸). Instead of disregarding these ideas due to their sources, he chooses to pull out the ideas that have value and to appropriate them redemptively.

While the majority of the artists and writers I focus on in this paper exude thoughtful, radical and intersectional thoughts, there are some whose contextual history include less than desirable positions from our contemporary standpoint. My desire is to build, instead of deconstruct, and because of this, Sedgwick’s notion of the reparative is important to the ethos of couldwork. A paranoid stance can be incredibly useful and is an active partner with the reparative; without the paranoid perspective, injustices and rights violations would have never been exposed or become part of larger political dialogues. Naming and shaming figures and states, a huge aspect of human rights work, has been a successful tactic in uncovering many atrocities. Thankfully, there are plenty of scholars, researchers and thinkers who act from this stance and their work has been unparalleled in its importance to movements for rights and justice. The duty of couldwork as I envision it is to balance out the context for both reparative and paranoid thinking, giving reparative notions of reading and organizing information a chance to exist within a political human rights world that uses paranoid thinking. “Sedgwick’s readers describe being

⁷ Love, Heather. “Truth and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring 2010). Accessed December 4, 2016. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/421589>.

⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, 2.

pushed—pleasurably—to the limits of what is knowable for them and then over the edge.”⁹ I believe that couldwork is a manifestation of what I, and many other readers, identify as an intellectual need they didn’t even know existed.

The Project

Understanding the project of couldwork as one that attempts to notice, celebrate and encourage holistic measures and apply it to human rights means crossing over into territory not usually connected to the human rights world. Couldwork came about as a way of trying to explore how alternative political tactics could be excavated from other discourses outside of human rights. This was done out of a desire to see the project of human rights listen to the concerns of its critics and to utilize its fluid nature to build up a more nuanced, intersectional future of its work. It was clear from the beginning that couldwork is a project of personal passion; my own work as an activist has been heavily influenced by queer theory, science fiction, poetry and socially engaged art.

My time at Bard has yielded numerous opportunities for me to expand upon the idea of couldwork. Women’s Rights Human Rights, Cultural Anthropology, Critical Political Thought, Dystopian Fiction, Performing Queer; these classes introduced me to a spectrum of texts and concepts that have invigorated my work on my journey through my senior project. After following my instincts and my interests, I find myself holding a

⁹ Love, "Truth and Consequences,"235.

theoretical quilt of political speculation with the hope that I can weave together suggestions and ideas for what *couldwork* could do for reimagining the human rights landscape, and thus, working towards a broader, more diverse reality of justice.

Using *Cruising Utopia* as a lens and employing Sedgwick's reparative reading principles as a guidepost, I will investigate three different creative "sites" that contain promising material in order to build up couldwork principles. With this in mind, my expression of couldwork in this paper is not depleted by its ending. The curation of particular works and artists therein are only the beginning of the spectrum that is couldwork. What is particularly attractive about finding ways of putting couldwork, *Cruising Utopia* and reparative reading into kinship with one another is that they form a super investigatory tool, one which is never actually exhaustible, but that can be continuously reinvigorated. Keeping that close to heart, I chose three creative sites that I have been personally inspired by and embody unique qualities that hold political potential in accordance with my chosen theoretical texts.

In my first chapter I turn towards another creative genre that holds the ability to contribute to new ways of thinking about what human rights tactics could look like. Poetry serves a revolutionary purpose when wielded by those who desire to see it describe, imagine and speculate on their current reality and how it could grow. I focus my gaze on three poets whose explicitly creative work navigates issues of justice and rights through experimental language, yet go beyond their chosen craft (the poem) to expand their message and their reach. I will be exploring the first two poets, Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, beyond the inspiring personal relationship they had, one filled with

teaching and mutual support. I will investigate their use of the essay as tactic to push their political messages into a dual realm of creativity and efficiency, exemplifying Muñoz's idea of utopian kinship networks. Through this genre transcendence, necessary narratives become available to people beyond the reach of poetry and thus could have more impact.

After looking at Lorde and Rich, who are operating mostly in a contextual moment in the past, (looking to the past to accurately see the present in order to build the future), I will explore the contemporary work of Claudia Rankine. Author of the genre-bending prose of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine uses her medium to respond to the insidious nature of white supremacy and the current racial landscape via examining police brutality on black bodies. Her work is moving, uncomfortable and does a lot of active work on the mind of the reader by transporting them into various racialized scenarios, both imagined and autobiographical, leaving them with questions and homework. *Citizen* alone is a strong couldwork document, but Rankine was not finished with the project after its publication. Her most recent collaborative endeavor with Beth Loffreda, *The Racial Imaginary* chronicles a forum amongst writers and artists on the role of race and whiteness in the imagination. In this way, Rankine continues the legacy of genre expansion in order to fully explore the important ideas contained in her work.

The second chapter will be a glimpse into the genre of speculative fiction¹⁰ to see what kinds of reparative, utopian leaning tactics exist in the novels of Octavia E. Butler and Ursula K. Le Guin. Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood* is a "minor masterpiece,"¹¹ but

¹⁰ Clute, John, and David Langford, eds. "Speculative Fiction." www.sf-encyclopedia.com/. Last modified April 2, 2015. Accessed December 5, 2016. http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/speculative_fiction.

¹¹ "A minor masterpiece...her prose is lean and literate, her ideas expansive and elegant." On the back of the novel.

disregarding this backhanded from the Houston Post review of the novel, there is no escaping the brilliant depth and pull of Butler's world building. Outwardly political, she uses fiction as a way of inserting the black body into the future; a place not normally envisioned for them in the genre. I will explore this tactic and its contemporary significance in social justice movements by also looking at the book *Octavia's Brood*, a collection of science fiction stories inspired by concepts of social justice. In the second part of the chapter, I will utilize Muñoz's concept of failure as a political tactic through a critical analysis of *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Le Guin. Using critiques from Fredric Jameson and Le Guin herself, I aim to explore how failure can act as a catalyst towards creative breakthroughs in imagining alternatives or more expansive realities. Ultimately, I look to see how speculative fiction and thought experiments have the power to alter and diversify conceptions of reality.

The last chapter of this thesis is an exploration of my time with social practice artist Jeanne van Heeswijk's work and to distill the particular tactics she used in her classroom at the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies (of which I was a student), entitled Spaces of Resilience. I'll start by looking at what Social Practice art is and situate van Heeswijk's work inside this new and multi-dimensional genre. The chapter will finish by outlining the tactics that were hashed out in van Heeswijk's classroom. Using the theory and methods of couldwork, social practice frameworks respond to Muñoz's call for disrupting "straight time,"¹² to deploy new agitation devices in order to start building up

¹² This is a queer-oriented way of talking about a historically naturalized present, ie a present that has no alternative and is seen as inevitable. Muñoz uses queer utopian hope to battle the stagnancy of this formulation of time, to make space to both wrangle with urgent issues and to build up liberatory futures that celebrate larger realities.

away from the hopelessness of the present. While not engaging directly with issues of gender and sexuality, van Heeswijk's approach to social practice art offers a template to insert these realms.

Through looking at these three sites, I hope to elaborate and fill out the couldwork formulation of expanding the possibilities of a new era of human-oriented political action that engages with what human rights scholar Samuel Moyn understands as a choice “between human rights as catastrophe prevention and human rights as utopian politics.”¹³ The question that is articulated by this paper and by couldwork in general is whether or not there needs to be such a binary. Concluding with an engagement with Moyn's text *The Last Utopia*, I hope to close with the radical hope that there are ways to build and elevate the spirit of human rights work through activating new dimensions of it.

¹³ Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

CHAPTER ONE:

Activating Possibility Through Poetry

How does the work of poetry transcend its aesthetic bounds into something that *activates*? Conceptualizing poetry as a malleable form that can confront or reject its past as a practice that excluded so many experiences is an important component of the couldwork toolbox. Given the diversity of voices writing poetry now, the form itself has liberatory potential. It has continued to flourish outside of the classed, sexed and raced academic context of its origins to include a range of experiences unimagined one hundred years ago. My investigation wherein attempts to touch upon these liberatory potentials of poetry through excavating some distinct qualities and forms that I believe could highlight couldwork's usefulness. Couldwork, as a way of collecting methodologies, lineages and tools, can frame poetry as a major site of imagination, articulation and activation. Due to its contradictory nature of being both rigid and flexible, (having rules but being known for breaking them), poetry has the political advantage of being an interesting site for a multitude of different positions and players. It has the ability to shake foundations and surprise its viewers into action.

The Poetry Foundation has a blog (humorously named Harriet the Blog), where there exists a forum post of different voices sharing contemporary feelings on one

subject: how literature and activism can be seen as parallel and interlocking projects. Each entry is particular to a certain author and their understandings of what/how/why they connect poetry and activism and yet there appears to be an undeniable connection to all the responses: that there needs to be a continuous challenge to the supremacy of certain voices in the canons we teach, read and depend on to shape a larger reality. From these perspectives, creative language and creative form are seen as spaces of confrontation, of opportunity, negotiation and questioning. In our contemporary culture, there is little to no space (or time) for bodies to work through their experiences or their concerns; inequitable systems prevent the majority of people from ever getting the time and space to be able to heal or rant or dream. Literature gives the space for activating these ignored and suppressed necessities. In considering this, we can turn to certain cultural moments, pivots that were crucial to the opening up of experience, space and possibility. Like Muñoz stresses in *Cruising Utopia*, excavating moments of the past, moments where newly expressed positions and identities were appearing is a crucial contemporary political project. In taking an intersectional stance, responses by women of color to the women's rights movement of the 1970's and 80's have Groups like the Combahee River Collective and collections such as "This Bridge Called My Back" edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa were expanding the creative/political voices that were demanding to be taken seriously.

It could be considered pastiche in a postmodern vacuum to focus on identity but where the idealism and theoretical understandings of possibility come to desire different historical articulations and narratives is where poetry becomes useful and exciting.

Addressing the question of who has the historical (and thus contemporary) position and privilege of abolishing historical narratives to elevate themselves to a postmodern moment is of utmost importance to consider. If a rich history of literature, art and poetry does not reflect your personal or cultural experience, what does it look like in a postmodern moment to insert your experience of reality? Like Muñoz, artists and writers that I consider part of the couldwork continuum are working towards excavating legacies that elevate hidden and often ignored realities. Muñoz recognized this process as a looking to the past to activate the present towards a hope for the future. These realities are being explored for political reasons on multiple levels for as the phrase popularized by the feminist moment goes, “the personal is political.” Poet Audre Lorde writes from the position of a black lesbian, an identification that was not being thoroughly explored when she began being published. Her desires, fears and hopes went beyond her experience; her legacy as both a creative spirit and a political force can attest to this. There are many contemporary movements, especially that of queer and intersectional social justice work that have been inspired by her writings.

Poetry is a site where I see major contributions of couldwork articulated in the creative sphere. Poetry is a perfect example of artistic endeavor that is full of duality, of fluidity, of leaving space open. Language in poetry is manipulated beyond formal boundaries and rules that are upheld in textbooks, novels and conversational speech. It is full of both mysterious interpretation and analysis; it contains information both given and withheld in order to provoke. Poetry is, in and of itself, an interpretation of perception and reality, so its inclusion in the couldwork toolbox is easily understood. It is writing

that lends itself to interaction. The courage of poetry often appears as an attempt to pin down that which is unsayable: it is most interested in that which cannot be described and tries to lie in the bed of a thought, an idea until it feels satisfied that it touched the essence of it in some way. Couldwork connects poetry's methods to that of other fictional thought experiments speculative fiction, yet poetry is a grouping of methodologies all its own. Poetry offers alternatives to reality but does not tell where or when or why. Its similarities and disconnections from other forms of writing like literature allow it to both complement and fill in the philosophical holes left open in the novel and to also challenge the structural formalism of prescribed human expression. In the expression of fiction as a tool, variety is fundamental to the success of its engagement. Within couldwork, poetry can be an effective method for communicating inner emotional, cultural or political work, whether the subject is the terror of bodily existence or national outrage over the extrajudicial killings of the black community. The flexibility of poetry makes it an ideal form to explore political possibilities and articulating a critical hope of a larger reality.

I see couldwork here because poets love to ask questions about the legitimacy of reality. These inquiries, whether forthright or hidden, are in and of themselves creations. They move beyond our normal expectations of the form through their role as instigator. Building up questions in poetry is not about answering correctly. There is no correct answer. Is there even an answer? How could you answer? Approaching poetry with Sedgwick and Muñozian perspective, the questions and answers are bound to come from many sources and to change over time. This fluidity is key to couldwork and to appropriating new tools for exploring a human rights framework of expanded action. The

exercise that asking questions involves itself with is the never ending expansion of possibilities. Questions in poems are the trigger for thinking up alternatives or perhaps, of even acknowledging the possibility of an alternative. Poets use questions within their pieces to both drive home points and to incite further questioning in the mind of the reader. Spiraling away from the original thought or line that sparked an idea, the reader travels through their own capacity to imagine and react. The formulation of poetry is to foster a building up and an adding to of the author's original imaginary; it is about the process of a continuous assemblance of the future. That being said, there is an intrinsic invitation of collaboration between addresser and addressee. This is a major connective quality across sites of couldwork; a resistance to finality and stagnancy. There is always more we can imagine and the poet acts as a cultural prompt. Poetry's ability to foster real and prodding cultural inquisitions can also be attributed to one ironic point, brought up by Amy King in the "What is Literary Activism?" forum: "poetry continues to enjoy one of the more remote luxuries of disregarding monetized allegiances, at least as the least popular and packageable medium, which is why you'll find numerous poets in the vanguard of articulating the least popular but most transgressive and challenging ideas going in any given period, including the present."¹⁴

In order to negotiate poetry as a site of couldwork, reading formal works of poetry by women and queers of color is one dimension of that work. What helps *fulfill* poetry's inclusion in the couldwork framework is the multiplicity of methods that couldwork poets

¹⁴ King, Amy, and Kim, Eunsong. "What Is Literary Activism?" *Harriet the Blog*. Entry posted August 18, 2015. Accessed December 4, 2016. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/08/what-is-literary-activism/>.

employ to fully characterize their political aspirations beyond the poem. This occurs both through the manipulation of accepted poetry forms and through the straightforward use of more normalized, bounded forms of writing such as the essay or the manifesto.

Connecting these diverse forms and articulating the couldwork elements of the poets Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich and Claudia Rankine will be the main project of this investigative site. By joining forces with the connective characteristics of couldwork across the creative spectrum, this chapter looks to highlight a poetry specific methodology of couldwork. These wordsmiths share in common a desire to branch out beyond the poem; it is through this investigation into their multiplicity of writings that I understand them to be couldwork producers. Critical and emotional information is stylized in multiple forms in order to create a multi-dimensional fullness that delivers many entry points into the poet's work. Form becomes a major instrument of articulating possibility; simply put, the depth and proliferation of multiple forms to which poets attend in their articulations craves critical investigation. Form will be considered both historically and contemporarily in order to map out the need to revisit critical moments. In addition to this focus on particular poets and their multiplication of form, I will also examine how reparative reading can be a useful tool in cultural excavation and how Muñoz's idea of queer kinship articulates political collaboration through investigating the personal friendship between Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde.

The Political Forms of the Poet: Audre Lorde's Diverse Methodologies

While exploring historical inquiries of how poets came to their craft, lesbian, black and queer writers often speak of a drive to create in response to the absence of work that described their experience. Poetry can assist couldwork in its attempt to focus on how the physical realities of many people have to rely on imaginative processes in order to see the success of their desires or experiences played out. Burgeoning poets would read the reams of romantic or epic poetry written largely by a white, western and male canon and while no doubt being moved by some of the work they found, what they did *not* find within the mainstream canon. Black, lesbian poet Audre Lorde put it as such: “it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are- until the poem- nameless and formless, about to be birthed but already felt.”¹⁵ These ignored identities and realities were not explored in popular poetry and the next logical (and radical) step was to attempt to translate these disregarded experiences. Representation leads to engagement with reality, both positive and negative, critically and reparatively. It is one way artists are able to reflect on the greater social conditions of the moment they are writing in; who is reflected in novels? Whose lives are being given space to be explored or even acknowledged? These ideas of representation belong in critical conversation with human rights. Being denied access to basic human rights makes it clear that *inclusion* has had to have been first *imagined* by groups in order to be seen as valid by the dominating culture.

¹⁵ Lorde, Audre. “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984.

How is poetry defined by these poets? What do they see as their part in its reinvention or perhaps, more accurately, in its other implications. “I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean- in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.”¹⁶ In this rendering of poetry, it is not merely an aesthetically pleasing organization of words (although that is part of its effectiveness). Poetry is a tool in forming understandings of oneself, the world, the unimaginable, the yet-to-come. It is a survival mechanism when Lorde reminds us that “for women, then, poetry is not a luxury.”¹⁷

Facing a gendered world and racist realities, a lack of generative solutions calls for experimentation, a fanning out in all directions to find ideas that fit. If you are meant to be excluded from an understanding of reality in order to keep sound the structure of a racialized status quo, then seeking out underground, alternative, hidden and subtle accounts of your perception may be the only way to stay alive.¹⁸ Lorde desired a reframing of poetry as a liberatory art: instead of a privileged game that calls notice to the beauty of a certain reality while ignoring countless others, let it act as a calling card out of isolation and towards solidarity. Creatively working one’s way through something confusing and difficult can bring one closer to a personal truth and can also bridge that truth to the reality of others. Possibility is only a reality when it can be held and expressed; enter the written word, enter poetry.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury” 36.

¹⁷ Ibid.,37.

¹⁸ The idea of what gives life, what is needed to live is often understood in physical terminologies but what about

The first poet that inspired me to expand couldwork to the genre was Audre Lorde. Lorde was born in New York City in 1934, a child of West Indian immigrants. As a child, language in all its forms were both fascinating and formative to her home life. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde remembers her mother's emphasis on nonverbal communication in their household.¹⁹ Intuiting ideas and feelings from a young age, Lorde was drawn to poetry as expression that suited her deep, emotional inner life. Lorde explores the complicated reality her skin, her sexuality and her political ideas are held back by. In her work, she often speaks openly about the act of writing poetry, a sort of breaking down of the fourth wall that asks the reader to consider her writing as something subversive. A black woman poet was not possible in this reality for far too long. In trying to articulate that subtle victory, she often writes about being a writer, into her work. In her poem "After a first book," this practice comes out in full force. She writes, "All the poems I have ever written/ Make a small book / The shedding of my past skin in patched conceits/ Moulded like snake skin, a book of leavings/ Now / I can do anything I wish / I can love them or hate them / Use them for comfort or warmth / Tissues or decoration / Dolls or japanese baskets / Blankets or spells.." ²⁰

The last line of this intimate exaltation is "Or fold them into a paper fan/with which to cool my husband's dinner." Written in an earlier moment when she was married to her children's father, it's clear that Lorde is already in tune with her positionality but in conjunction with her new possibilities as a published poet, still keeping alive her

¹⁹ Audre Lorde. "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich." By Adrienne Rich. *Signs* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1981).

²⁰ Audre Lorde. "Power." *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1997.

awareness of herself as a black working class woman. Holding a physical copy of her own interior struggles allows her to own a particular part of herself that could not be “validated” by the rest of the world until its publishing. Yet it’s clear she understands how fragile that validity is; it puts into question the role of who gets to endeavor in cultural production and the privilege that comes with the naming of mainstream (read: white, male) cultural making. Is it possible for her to be as flippant about her own work as some of her predecessors? If being published as a black woman rarely happens, what does that do to one’s relationship to one’s work? One of Lorde’s greatest strengths as a couldworker is her strength and conviction that it is necessary that she do the work. Not only an obvious political maneuver, it is a calling card from within the lines that invites others to question their own position and to question validity as a marker of self worth.

While calling attention to the subject of cultural production (and who gets to do it and why) is an important part of Lorde’s poetic project, another is her poetic accounts of personal and social political happenings. Some of these stem from actual events, news stories and collective, historical violence. Fictional characters like ancient ancestors and real life people weave themselves together in Lorde’s landscapes. Here is where Lorde’s own influences by the Feminist movement are both highlighted and complicated; while “the Political is Personal” was a slogan of the moment, this position often excluded the personal experiences of black women. Lorde injects her own feminist vision with an intersectional force. In this, her conceptions of feminism line up with groups like the Combahee River Collective²¹ and the collected writings of Chicana feminists a la This

²¹ A Boston area group of black intersectional feminists active from roughly 1974-1981.

Bridge Called My Back. Articulating a need for women of color to write of their experiences, she strived for a larger reality: “There are only old and forgotten ones [ideas], new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves- along with the renewed courage to try them out.”²²

In many of her poems, Lorde attempts to interrupt whom the larger culture considers human and what constitutes human suffering. The poem “Power” is one of Lorde’s most haunting pieces. It begins with another self-aware notion of poetry and writing: “The difference between poetry and rhetoric / is being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children.” This stanza stands alone, a statement that is both separate and a part of the larger piece through its call to the reader. Grounded in this forwardness, the poem moves through Lorde’s reaction as she processes the real life story of the killing of Clifford Glover, a ten year old black boy from Queens. Harkening back to her own idea that poetry is about working through the unworkable, the poem is the resulting emotional labor that Lorde can’t help but put down on paper; for if she doesn’t attempt to put these things out into the world, who would in 1973?

The poem’s effective form comes from its mixture of quoted facts and personal reflections. Using lines from newspaper articles, transcripts from the trial and her own heavy creative lens, Lorde transformed the landscape of racial reality in the moment by writing about it, by refusing to soften her words or her feelings. By calling forth the narrowness of a reality as it was perceived by white hegemony, she highlights the absurdity of a “post-civil rights” moment, of the everydayness of a racialized and racist

²² Lorde, “Poetry is Not A Luxury.” 37.

society. This poem's stark realism highlights the precarity of the black experience that Lorde wants to call attention to. Lorde is vigilant in her intersectional lens throughout her poetry and her prose. Towards the end of 'Power' the perspective changes to that of the one black person on the jury: "And one Black Woman who said / 'They convinced me' meaning / they had dragged her 4'10" black Woman's frame / over the hot coals / of four centuries of white male approval / until she let go / the first real power she ever had / and lined her own womb with cement / to make a graveyard for our children. / I have not been able to touch the destruction / within me."²³ The poem was sparked by the death of a black boy, but Lorde understands that the effect of that violence does not stop after the murder. Lorde is quoted in an interview with Adrienne Rich in *Sister Outsider* about the birth of "Power:" "I was just writing and that poem came without craft."²⁴ Stepping back from the experience of "Power" one is reminded that creation is not just imagining the unimaginable, it is also attempting to connect the past and the present. In light of the Black Lives Movement, Lorde's poem connects the contemporary horror of black deaths in the hands of the police to its disturbing historical commonality.

Audre Lorde crafted poetry out of necessity and yearning, out of a drive that she contributes to a desire for transformation, for herself and her community. That transformation can be read as both micro and macro; poetic expression is just as important as other forms of communication. Her poetry soars into emotional depths yet she made sure to place her energy into other forms of writing, largely the essay and the

²³ Lorde, "Power." 216.

²⁴ Lorde, "An Interview," interview, 107.

speech. The need to share her personal and political outlooks perhaps came from the parts of her that were librarian and educator, to that within her that felt compelled to transmit, inform and archive. This a compellingly element that situates Lorde into the realm of couldwork. Besides her vast collection of indispensable poetry, Lorde made herself available for frank political engagement such as is archived in *Sister Outsider*. Using multiple avenues to work through her own experiences the importance of her messages open themselves up to diverse audiences outside of the poetry community. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” is an essay by Lorde that has experienced unparalleled quotability by new waves of those doing social justice work. In a taped interview, Adrienne Rich once asked Lorde how she imagined the purpose of her more unapologetically political essays.

Not a *Adrienne*: What do you mean when you say that two essays, “Poetry is Luxury” and “Uses of the Erotic” are really progressions?

Audre: They’re part of something that is not finished yet. I don’t know what the rest of it is, but they’re clear progressions in feeling out something connected with the first piece of prose I ever wrote. One thread in my life is the battle to preserve my perceptions - pleasant or unpleasant, painful or whatever...²⁵

This articulation of her work as progressions is radical and feels at home in a couldwork framework. She was such a groundbreaking intellectual in her diverse methodologies that it is impossible not to lament the kinds of words and revelations she could have brought about if her life had not been tragically ended in 1992 when at the age

²⁵ Ibid., 81.

of 58, she passed away after a long battle with breast cancer. Her self identification with her poetics and politics as an unfolding project is couldwork in and of itself; to embody expansion and change. In understanding the various projects as interlocking and complementary, activists have so much material to generate. Sometimes the work goes beyond what artists initially intended and sometimes the form that comes spilling forth strays far from that of poetry. Working outside a medium of choice allows many things to come about; it furthers the reach of the message and it reclaims a reparative interconnectedness between creative work that allows space for social and political possibility. Poets, writers, artists and activists working within and around the feminist movements of the 1970's and 80's took this methodology to heart and no one did it with such courageous agency and trailblazing beauty as Audre Lorde.

Queer Feminist Kinship and Reparative Reclamations

Attempting to understand my proposed notion of couldwork within poetry lead to the necessity of a particular relationship; Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich were poets who were able to highlight the integral possibility of experimenting with multiple forms through a personal dialectic. Their historical emergence and alliance was shaped by inviting form in all of its beautiful diversity; contemplating tactics of civil rights, gender struggles, class oppression and of course, the blooming understanding of political intersectionality. It was a creative and enduring personal relationship of accountability in a time where nuance, fluidity of identity and feminine imaginations were not yet given serious consideration. Sharing similar experiences of personal discovery as writers, these

two very different women saw their position as poets as both excavators of hidden personal histories and the greater relationship to the world at large. In “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich”, Rich interviews Lorde on many aspects of her life and work. In the three hours of tapes they recorded, the two poets wove together an intersectional picture of whiteness, racism and the possibility of a collaborative feminism. They visit the site of language and its reparative possibilities in their frank conversations about appropriately pejorative vocabulary and images in order to agitate a racially aware reality.

Coming together over personal imaginations of a different world can be integral to forming larger radical collectives, groups and movements. Speaking about “An Interview” poet Marilyn Hacker describes the transcript plainly as “...two poets talking to each other. And that was a time when the line between poetry and politics was very permeable.”²⁶ “That time” was during the 1970’s and 80’s when feminist and lesbian culture was erupting, an undeniably intimidating time to those whose power was/is in question. Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich’s relationship to poetry can be seen as parallel, intersecting and individual. Relating on all these discrete levels allows for their experiences of their craft, their particular political moment and their lasting impressions to be a fascinating part of the couldwork spectrum.

Together, their collaborative interviews and the relationship they shared is a special microcosm of what radical creative relationships have the potential of achieving;

²⁶ Lisa L. Moore, "Sister Arts: On Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Others," www.lareviewofbooks.org, last modified February 8, 2013, accessed December 4, 2016.

challenging understood notions of reality, creating dialogue and fostering new ideas about political life. In and of itself, their creative relationship is one of the radical notions of poetry; it opens a personal experience up to be interacted with. Lorde conceptualizes that there are no new ideas only “new ways of making them felt.” Pluralized couldwork, as seen in the written back and forth between Lorde and Rich is indicative of a radical network. Queer kinship networks are an important element in Muñoz’s vision of queer utopian future. These are social creations that break down the inflexible and naturalized present and rebel against state-sanctioned relationships. “Queers make up genealogies and worlds.”²⁷ In this articulation of reality, Muñoz underlines the importance of “alternative chain[s] of belonging, of knowing the other and being in the world.”²⁸ The lesbian poet world that included Lorde and Rich was one in which women were constantly encouraging cultural agitation and expansion, to question the “natural” truths of their reality and work through the political work of this together. (say something here about why this is interesting couldwork/good for HR)

Always Open: Artistic Work as Cultural Overhaul in Adrienne Rich’s

Writing

...But most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an “I” can become a “we” without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers.²⁹

²⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*. 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁹ Rich, Adrienne.

Adrienne Rich is another poet deeply entangled in the same movement and notions of couldwork as Audre Lorde. The two were friends, collaborators and instigators of each other's politics and work. Until she became highly involved in the radical feminist movement of the 1970's and 80's, her early forays into writing were largely uncritical of the white male dominance that shaped poetry. As she became more directly involved in women's issues, her scope was relatively narrow in its intersectional framing. Rich was not to remain beholden to an exclusive feminism, however. Her couldwork comes out of a transformation, of a moving away from white positionality and to a place of intersectionality. The ways in which I see her as integral to this collection are connected to poetic form yet also to her reparative use of time. Rich's project and contribution to couldwork involves this crafting of a politics of inclusion, questioning and of vision. The historic sweep of her work is fascinating in both its depth and its continuity; she wrote many volumes of poetry alongside books of personal essays such as *Arts of the Possible* and *What is Found There*. Rich had never stopped revisiting her earlier work, commenting on her own lack of knowledge and highlighting texts and thinkers that have elevated her understanding of the world.

Intersectionality was not incorporated into the mainstream (read: white) feminist movement until much later in the game. Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective were formative to Rich's reconstruction as both a writer and an activist. She has attempted over the years, to embody the call at the end of the Combahee River Collective's statement in 1977 which states,

“One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.”³⁰

Without being self-congratulatory and instead getting to work, Rich has seemingly taken this call to become accomplice very seriously in her work. This accountability is complementary to that of the work black activists do and can be seen as a move to use racial privilege in elevating the voices of black activist and artists. Ignored by generations of white activists who had the option to forego the question of race, working within a racial justice framework is also admitting the position of whiteness as the supreme position in all areas of social life. Rich weaves in questions of identity and privilege into her prose, injecting these contemplations with different perspective aims be it sexuality, racial identity, gender or class. Her intellectual position is deeply influenced by larger pedagogic projects such as Marxism and Feminist theory yet her prose conveys a distillation of ideas that lay more humbly at the feet of lay readers.

The poem “Diving Into The Wreck” is one of her more iconic poetic works. As an allegorical approach to the queer ritual of coming out ___ (as homosexual, as feminist and as a radical), this work Her evaluation of a personal yet culturally transferable performance is a kind of an inward imagination, a kind of couldwork that doesn't ask for

³⁰ Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *The Combahee River Collective Statement* (Boston, MA: The Combahee River Collective, 1978)

such a radical reach as some other poems. The verse is built around unfamiliarity and liberation and how the two become intrinsically tied up when attempting to understand positionality. “I came to explore the wreck. / The words are purposes. / The words are maps... the thing I came for: / the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth.”³¹ Like Lorde’s bravery in her personal transmissions of her black queer experience, Rich wants to explore the loneliness (and the connective potential) of describing the indescribable through imaginative scenarios. This means that there exists within, a potential for using radical formulations of language to push real social possibilities. Transmission became a point of connection and collaboration in poetic networks in the past; how could this tactic be distilled in a larger human rights context in the now?

Couldwork can be as radical or familiar as it needs to be. There is an imperative in exploring couldwork in its most simple expressions. It doesn’t necessarily have to be about describing that which is unsayable. One person’s understanding of couldwork is another person’s reality. The description of reality or realistic scenarios, such as in Lorde’s poem “Power” reaffirm some realities while expanding a truth for other audiences. The expansive nature of “Power” is in its interrogation of its white readers, who hear about such experiences of racially motivated killings and are challenged in their positionality by that which that they are often shielded from. How does the way we see

³¹ Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," in *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York, NY: Norton, 1978) 162.

the world experience disjunction not just through challenging new visions but also through the transmission of horrifying banality?

It is my understanding and position that both Rich and Lorde embodied this question in and outside their poetry. The complexity of conveying both the abundant potentiality of what could be and the everyday range of varying experience is what makes these ongoing projects liberatory. Asking what could work is not just about coming up with new ideas but dissecting the power of old ones. This is not limited to accessing the work of others; it can become true when articulating one's own creations. Couldwork is a categorization for Rich that perhaps is only possible from a temporal position in the contemporary. Reading her work as a series of successive buildings, of retrospective contemplation in Rich's bibliography is expansive in both its scope and its constant evolution. In an attempt to understand how political ideas shift over time, she, like Lorde, has adopted the essay format in order to work through cultural inequities. These have ranged over the decades from outlining notions of radical feminism such as her piece "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" to musing on the political role of the artistic creator. In the essay "'When We Dead Awaken': Writing as Revision", Rich writes, "Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves." Fast forward a few essays in the same volume *Arts of the Possible*, Rich continues this statement when she writes, "It can be difficult to be generous to earlier selves...yet, how except through ourselves, do we discover what moves other people to change? Our old fears and denials - what helps us let go of them? These introspective questions that appeal to the very core of a reparative stance within couldwork would not

be possible without Rich's long prolific career and also a mode of self-critique that like Lorde's conception of progressions, aims to be forever building upon one's place in the world.

Couldwork 2016: Claudia Rankine and New Forms of Possibility

Articulating justice and rights through the use of poetic and artistic forms continues to evade serious considerations of political value from various levels of academic rigor. Skepticism of critical future oriented utopian elements prevents the proliferation of any alternative movements of social justice or human rights. A possible way of inserting couldwork frameworks into the political realm is through a proliferation of action-oriented texts, an ever-growing wave of ideas that cover multiple grounds, even beyond the duality of poets using prose to excite their reach.

Enter Claudia Rankine; poet, professor, instigator, facilitator. After many years of contributing creative force through her published poetry, Rankine has plugged into the current political moment around issues of race, white supremacy and governmentality. In 2014 she published an entirely new sort of poetic manifesto called *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Responding to the social mourning surrounding the police killing of unarmed black men and boys like Trayvon Martin, *Citizen* is utterly unique in its engagement with uncertainty, memory, terror and straightforwardness. Through her linguistic and

methodological tactics, Rankine stitches together a range of creative responses to state and racial terror. The rich diversity of form in *Citizen* calls to mind a deep contemplation that goes beyond poetry; the urgency of the topic requires a deep cultural analysis. She uses contemporary visual media such as the work of Nick Cave and Mel Chin to highlight contradictory racial realities and absurd juxtapositions of whiteness. Switching between sharing hard moments in the first person narrative and then switching to the third, she invites the reader to experience these moments of tension for themselves. Using different formulations of words, empty space and images, Rankine comes at the reader's psyche from all sides, urging the world to look at what she's offering and be brave enough to take it in.

Through the work of a collection such as *Citizen*, poetry is both celebrated and expanded. Rankine has opened up the expectations of what a book of poetry looks like and how it operates through breaching the boundaries of what should be conceived of as poetry. "I'm committed to an interdisciplinary investigation of cultural dynamics. The reason I will forever identify as a poet is because I think poetry is the one genre that privileges feelings. And so no matter what I'm working on, I'm also interested in the impact of the reality with the human psyche."³² Her words are both beautiful and horrible. *Citizen* was not created for the sole purpose of being imaginatively transported, although that is certainly part of its brilliance.³³ It asks much more of its readers than other works

³² Claudia Rankine, "Claudia Rankine: why I'm spending \$625,000 to study whiteness," interview by Steven W. Thrasher, *The Guardian*, last modified October 19, 2016, accessed December 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/19/claudia-rankine-macarthur-genius-grant-exploring-whiteness>

³³ Being transported by this piece includes making the reader face their own critical experience of race, a feat many Americans are reluctant to do.

of poetry. Its subject matter is both of the emotional realm and of our current political landscape. When *Citizen* is finished, those who have experienced it are reminded of its questions and its proddings of its evocations when they turn on the news, interact with friends on Facebook or simply navigate through the day. Rankine is certainly asking a lot of questions in *Citizen*, forthright and otherwise, and is looking for answers.

She does not end the conversation with *Citizen*, however. In inviting readers to experience their own relationships to race in reading *Citizen*, Rankine's work paved the way for thoughtful dialogue and the uncovering of new, critical questions amongst other writers. What is particularly noteworthy about Rankine's work is its incessant building up of itself. Like Lorde and Rich, poets have often put out politically minded works that address certain injustices; what makes Rankine particularly fitting in this couldwork framework is her insistence that writers continue to engage with these issues in their own world.

After the creation of such an important work like *Citizen*, Rankine continues to build and elaborate on her role as artistic mediator in this new era of politics and race. With the continued collaboration of a variety of fellow poets, writers and thinkers, Rankine has been facilitating an online forum space for writers in various literary genres to engage with each other about what she dubs "the racial imaginary". In 2015, a few years after the beginning of this network of cultural investigation, Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda edited a compilation of the collected writings of those who contributed to the forum. *The Racial Imaginary* is full of writings that confront how creativity operates around issues of race, imagination and creation in the age of Black Lives Matter, political

correctness and white supremacy. In the introduction, racial imaginary is described as “something we all recognize quite easily: the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors.”³⁴ It offers a critical center of a uncharted universe; one in which Rankine wants to discover and work through with writers executing the thought experiments that are so important to cultural production. The work of parsing out tense creative realities of the mind is imperative if imaginations are to be free to “do” expansive couldwork. This idea, that the imagination is only as free as the culture that raised it, is critically important to absorb into any politically minded labor. Engaging in critical self-reflection, especially by those who benefit from white supremacy, is an interesting marriage of both paranoid and reparative tactics; while its initial push may cause people to scramble in an attempt to “ward off negative feeling”³⁵, it is done with the hope of a better understanding of a racialized reality. Human rights projects, creative or otherwise, would benefit from this investigative excavating tactic.

Rankine was a recipient of the MacArthur genius grant in October 2016; this prize is given to a number of cultural visionaries each year with a sizable monetary stipend attached and fellows are allowed to spend the \$625,000 however they please. Speaking to Stephen W. Thrasher in *The Guardian*, Rankine surprised many by saying she was going to spend it studying “whiteness”. While acknowledging that this is an odd move,

³⁴ Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap. *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*. Albany, NY: Fence Books, 2015.

³⁵Love. “Truth and Consequences.” 237.

racializing white identity is a subverting tactic for understanding its realities, “its paranoia, its violence, its rage.”³⁶ This, for Rankine is a continuation of the work she facilitated in *The Racial Imaginary*. Desiring the expansion of the analytical interactions of the forum, she wants to open a physical “space which allows us to show art, to curate dialogues, have readings, and talk about the ways in which the structure of white supremacy in American society influences our culture.”³⁷ Instigating a new form of critical racial discourse in downtown New York City, amongst some of the world’s most expensive art galleries and creative institutions is certainly a critically hopeful move towards agitating cultural work. The proposition is an incredible example of how creative spaces offer new forms of human action.

³⁶ Rankine, Claudia. “Claudia Rankine: why I’m spending \$625,000 to study whiteness.” Interview by Steven W. Thrasher. *The Guardian*. Last modified October 19, 2016. Accessed December 4, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/19/claudia-rankine-macarthur-genius-grant-exploring-whiteness>.

³⁷ Rankine, Claudia. “Claudia Rankine: why I’m spending \$625,000 to study whiteness.” Interview by Steven W. Thrasher. *The Guardian*. Last modified October 19, 2016. Accessed December 4, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/19/claudia-rankine-macarthur-genius-grant-exploring-whiteness>.

Chapter Two:

Science Fiction-Writing Liberation and Building Off Mistakes in a Couldwork Framing

“Why did you want to snoop through other people’s cultures? Couldn’t you find what you wanted in your own? Lilith smiled and noticed that Tate frowned as though this were the beginning of a wrong answer. “I started out wanting to do exactly that,” Lilith said. “Snoop. Seek. It seemed to me that my culture-ours-was running headlong over a cliff. And, of course, as it turned out, it was. I thought there must be saner ways of life.” “Find any?”³⁸

Couldwork conceived as a spectrum of creative political tools allows for interpreting what is included in its breadth of genres. The hope is to gather tactics that open up space for radical, liberatory political aims in the realm of human rights. This translates to an interest in very specific angles; intersectional positions and feminist frameworks bring out a rich variety of narratives, open-ended questions and a critical posture up against a naturalized reality. Often, political types of thought experiments are relegated to a niche interest, kept separate and far away from projects that claim a mastery over political reality. While there is no doubt a reason and need for all sorts of approaches, speculative investigation is crucial if we want to get out of what Muñoz refers to as the banality of straight time. We need to open up new kinds of tactics in order to address the countless desires and needs disregarded, waiting until other projects are

³⁸ Octavia Butler. *Lilith’s Brood*. New York, NY: Grand Central, 1989.

accomplished first before we can move onto more “lofty goals” of equity and equality. These “idealisms” are often ignored in normative frameworks of human rights. They are deemed unachievable, relegated to the space of civil rights, without understanding that what is considered real is always up for negotiation.

Science fiction writing, speculating, designing; all of these human projects do work that act “as a reminder of the possibility of alternatives, as somewhere to aim for...”

³⁹ Given Muñoz’s reparative notion of the queer utopian, a concept from the past can be teased out and carved down to fit the needs of those who are doing the work in the present. Critically building for the future is not done for the purpose of finding ultimate solutions; it is done to open up the realm of possibilities of numerous and simultaneous outcomes. Utopian projects, couldwork and radical possibilities are relationships that contain tension and unpredictability, qualities that foster cultural growth. To treat them otherwise is to misunderstand the entire project of liberation. The couldwork tactics explored within these creative projects, help us understand that there are as many solutions as there are creative minds willing to think them up.

In looking at authors who challenge narrow realities through speculative experiments, I will explore how science fiction facilitates a possible expansion of how people negotiate desires and imaginatively build possibilities. By conducting a multi-dimensional analysis of the methods these books employ, I hope to come away with a complicated yet comprehensive picture of how fictive writing facilitates

³⁹ Dunne, Anthony, and Fiona Raby. "A METHODOLOGICAL PLAYGROUND: FICTIONAL WORLDS AND THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS." *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. N.p.: MIT, 2013. Print.

couldwork. Using the writing of Butler and Le Guin, fiction can be seen as a site which facilitates imaginative political speculation beyond what is offered in a classic human rights context. These authors formulate their narratives around notions of human liberation, identity categories, community, feminism and queerness that crack open the realm of contemporary reality and to build towards a place of the future. The novels I will focus on leave the reader wondering what kinds of constructs are in place that prevent politics from reaching further and from demanding more from our political systems. Engagement with cultural narrative production is not merely a form of escapism or entertainment. As M. Kathy Rudy frames it, “Fiction may be seen not as a disguise or falsification of what is given but as an active encounter with the environment by means of posing options and alternatives, and an enlargement of the present reality by connecting it to the unverifiable past and the unpredictable future.”⁴⁰ By highlighting certain aspects of the novel, new couldwork concepts emerge. In looking at Lilith’s *Brood* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I aim to pull out interesting interactions that make speculative fiction useful for the betterment of political reach and the political framing of the thought experiment.

Couldwork is often contingent on the potent ideas of our most recent political successes. When looking to what has been dubbed possible or impossible, the activist in the 21st century has many to turn to that challenge hegemonic ways of doing business. American Civil Rights, the Women’s Movement, Marxism, Socialism, Decolonization,

⁴⁰ Rudy, Kathy, "Ethics."

Queer Theory, Black Lives Matter: all of these ways of imagining the world differently were predicated on ideas that challenged a narrow reality. While many of these frameworks have faced challenges and critiques from many sources, their tactics and influence persist thanks to their emancipatory effects. How do we honor these narratives when we shout “Equality!” on the streets? What does it mean to have an intersectional human rights framework in the face of larger political threats such as climate change, white supremacy and heteronormativity? If it's a challenge to see articulate examples of this in the real world, speculative fiction and couldwork has the possibility of at least opening up our eyes to the issues.

Tackling the definition of a large sprawling genealogy of narrative genre such as science fiction is a difficult feat that still has fans and academics alike engaged in debates. Speculative fiction pivots away from tackling questions of hard science and technology led to new terminology, subgenres that would better encompass the aims of science fiction that looked more closely at the human aspect of these stories. Robert A. Heinlein is considered the first science fiction writer to coin the term “speculative fiction” in a symposium in 1947 in which he stated, set out “to describe a subset of sf [science fiction] involving extrapolation from known science and technology ‘to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action.’”⁴¹ Writers like Le Guin and Butler have used these parameters in their novels in order to imagine political possibilities beyond what is being currently offered, to challenge what British Margaret Thatcher once

⁴¹ John Clute and David Langford, eds., "Speculative Fiction," www.sf-encyclopedia.com/, last modified April 2, 2015, accessed December 5, 2016, http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/speculative_fiction.

famously said: “There is no alternative.” Understanding the aim of these specific speculative works is important to incorporating their tactics within the frame of couldwork.

Her inclination to use the framework of anthropology to lift up the genre of science fiction is clear in most of her books. Her strategy of world building is one that insists on keeping things both familiar and new; change the details to reflect radical hope yet She projects diversity into her imaginative realities in order to champion the idea that anthropology has a place in understanding “futuraity.” In his essay, “Sail on!” Samuel Gerald Collins unfolds the shortcomings of anthropology in its relation to time. Anthropology of the (not so distant) past was often a methodology of cultural othering, of studying outside cultures not as contemporaries but as subjects suspended outside of time. Science fiction has the ability to understand this methodology of a future oriented anthropology and Le Guin uses it in her collage of cultural influences that seep into her thought experiments, using cultural tools and tactics from outside a Western, white, capitalist framework to highlight possibilities for diverse futures.

The novels I will analyze in this chapter utilize many themes and stances to establish a collaborative link to thinking the future. While they inhabit a personally important role in my own understanding of radical possibility, their lasting effects on both queer communities and feminist politics is worthy of note. Anthologies like *Octavia’s Brood*, a collection of science fiction from social justice movements, claim a direct lineage to Butler’s novels and draws inspiration from her ability to incorporate ideas into her writing that give space to ignored realities. Due to these legacies, Butler’s

Lilith's Brood trilogy and Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* are considered essential in a coudwork framework for more than just their utopian traces. These important texts can be read as performing hope, to insist that the present moment is not the only thing we can hope for, striving and looking for other modes of being is critical to surviving *and* thriving.

Representation and Possibility in Octavia Butler's *Lilith's Brood*

Octavia Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood* is a sweeping experiment in what science fiction can offer in understanding what being human means. Butler was one of the first black female science fiction writers who experienced popular renown and her novels are rich with radical ruminations on race, sexuality and the human condition. Spanning three novels, *Lilith's Brood* focuses on the story of Lilith, a black woman mysteriously spared from an apocalyptic doom on a war torn earth. She and other survivors wake up after being put in suspension for hundreds of years. After the dangers of nuclear fallout have passed, they are given the opportunity to start over on the Earth again. Her saviors are an alien race called the Oankali, are self identified "biological collectors"; their cultural imperative is to constantly mix and change their genetic makeup. They roam the universe in search of dying races to salvage by cross-breeding their own advanced DNA with. Their physical bodies are meticulously detailed by Butler (yet remain fascinatingly alien); their technology is both organic and infinitely more advanced than anything that had

existed on Lilith's Earth. The Oankali have complicated kinship relationships and part of their sexuality structure includes an asexual being who facilitates emotional and neurological connection between sexual mates. The series chronicles the unfolding of this new era of Earth - the Oankali give the humans an ultimatum; if they want the new beginning, they have to repopulate the Earth through mating with the Oankali.

Couldwork is exemplified in Butler's vision when it comes to imagining what a post-human world may look like. It does not contain a typical vision of utopia: it is about the labors and temporal realities of striving towards something. It is a snapshot of *a* process. Through the book's refusal to simplify a grand narrative of the future, it creates a formative example of what hope can offer us. Lilith and her brood of reluctant (and often violent) human comrades are offered a hope that is uncomfortable, alien and unlike anything they ever thought possible and so the story begs to ask: how will we deal with offers of hope if they come from unexpected sources? This is a question that a critical turn in human rights could ask itself. Butler's work is exemplary in its exploration of empathy and negotiating otherness. It begs the reader to dig deeper into the intertwining narratives that Butler offers around diversity, in the tackling of the Oankali's strangeness and the underlying connections to contemporary racial position. The series' vitality comes from a struggle between the Oankali offer of a new hope and the reluctant nature of humans facing deep transformation, between different levels of power and control over how culture is progressed and what stifles it.

"The Human Contradiction again. The Contradiction, it was more often called among Oankali. Intelligence and hierarchical behavior. It was fascinating, seductive and

lethal. It had brought humans to their final war.”⁴² What the Oankali call “The Human Contradiction” can easily be seen in the political behaviors of not only our history but our present. While this can easily come across as a kind of biological essentialism (all men are violent and humanity is doomed to fail because of genetics), I find it part and parcel of an interesting thought experiment Butler is setting for the reader. She pits the chaotic nature of the humans against the more balanced culture of the Oankali in a binary, yet it’s possible that through the invention of the Oankali, Butler was creating a story of the human binary. This would mean that we contain both the Human Contradiction and the Oankali imperative, a human puzzle that could mean a new era of socio-cultural political work for us. It’s thoughts like this that make *Lilith’s Brood* a fantastic thought experiment that can radically hope for the possibility of culture being expanded and opened, for new, just ways of being to be championed. In this light, Butler’s intentions regarding a seemingly limited view of humanity can be abstracted and nuanced.

What is most critically interesting about *Lilith’s Brood* is its refusal to bow down to naturalized time even in the face of The Human Contradiction. While mirroring realistic cynicism and despair can be an illuminating tactic, *Lilith’s Brood* shows us humanity in its dynamic multitudes without completely succumbing to defeat. This methodological choice is rare within the world of science fiction. Apocalyptic themes of violence, war and division in science fiction are often overtly individualistic and give us normalized visions of how humans interact in these scenarios. Butler’s vision of the future disrupts the “racial imaginary” by showing us black characters in the future;

⁴² Butler, Octavia. *Lilith’s Brood*. New York, NY: Grand Central, 1989.

disrupting whiteness of the future is a huge way of breaking with how science fiction normally operates. While violence and desperation is present in *Lilith's Brood*, Butler balances the text with radical notions of what notions of hope/hopelessness can do for the political reality of humans on a large scale via visions of collectivity and diversity.

Through the lens of couldwork, it becomes possible to distill this tactic, not as a naive escapism, but as a kind of elevated labor of courage, the same kind of radical cultural building that Muñoz desires. To do the kinds of broad cultural change that are demanded of them in the book, Lilith and her people become entrenched in serious change that complicates the excitement of the utopian elements. As Lilith gets to know the culture of her “captors,” the books complicate the situation further by exploring her assimilation and journey of identification with the new, hybrid world. There is a reparative approach to the way Butler handles the kinds of conflicts in the narrative by keeping them complicated; she does not make anything in the book easy or straightforward on the reader, be it feelings of joy or disgust for a murder.

By focusing on a story that begins after the end of the world as we know it, Butler decided to highlight beginning, the slow climb of these last humans toward a possible better world. How can we, as readers inhabiting a very different world and time, see both the story and Butler’s artistic choices as being inspirational to struggles going on in our current reality? My position regarding this within a couldwork framework is similar to that offered by Muñoz. In *Cruising Utopia*, he outlines a response to queer theorists who take a turn towards cynicism due to the inability of mainstream culture to allow space for the radicality of queer existence. Muñoz’s argument is about fostering radical, dynamic

and active hope in place of that cynicism with the intention of not just surviving but the ability to survive through choosing the future, through building up a new culture. In relating this to Butler, I see a connection in the way she centers hope and the possibility for cultural change in the form of Lilith. Through Lilith's navigation of her new life with the Oankali, Butler is presenting her readers a model of posturing: while acknowledging the forces that bring connective possibilities down and relegating them to "other," don't forget to build new ways of being, of creatively celebrating the unique and incredible parts of the community. It is not enough to spend energy attacking the systems that fail people (queer folks, people of color, disabled people, etc.), Actively opening up space for other ways of being and encouraging a multiplicity of techniques to be thought up is an imperative for political movements like human rights. Butler does not want the energetic struggles of today to fall victim to despairing exhaustion. Butler structures her narrative around the idea of approaching cultural work with a sense of radical creativity and openness that places *Lilith's Brood* in an interesting relationship with couldwork and human rights.

The legacy of this kind of approach within science fiction is hard to quantify in an explicit academic context, if that indeed is the desired approach. Since this thesis aims to blur the line between art and activism, evidence that something is effective is about how the work has given birth to a creative lineage. There have been a few academic papers that endeavor to analyze the radical narratives and techniques of Butler, but not enough. One way in which her ideas, her spirit and her tactics have been adopted into a more contemporary, material existence is through the notion that creating new articulations of

social justice starts with the imagination. While this complicates Claudia Rankine's notion of the racial imaginary, it does not cancel it out; it acts as a counter-hope. Following the sense of political and representational bravery they felt from reading Butler, activists Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha wanted to create a collection of science fiction stories that exemplified imaginative possibilities for the future.

With inclusive imagination and a spirited sense of wonder, the contributors bridge the gap between speculative fiction and social justice, boldly writing new voices and communities into the future.⁴³ This collection is a manifestation of Butler's writing as toolkit, and, appropriately, it is entitled *Octavia's Brood*. Writers of varying experience flexed their creative muscles and invented scenarios they felt intimate with, struggles they might be a part of and how they envisioned humans coming up with solutions about some of our biggest problems. The editorial team, well versed in language and tactics used in liberatory movements, refer to the fiction within their anthology as "visionary fiction." In her introduction, Imarisha sees the process of decolonization as being the most crucial when done within the mind. Claiming it to be the place where "all other forms of decolonization are born,"⁴⁴ Imarisha sees the source of political freedom to start in a mind that is free to first imagine beyond the current reality. Equating organizing politically as science fiction ("We are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world,") the editors and contributors see the

⁴³ Imarisha, Walidah, Adrienne M. Brown, and Sheree R. Thomas. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Oakland: AK, 2015. Print.

⁴⁴ Imarisha, Walidah, Adrienne M. Brown, and Sheree R. Thomas. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Oakland: AK, 2015. Print.

importance of the imagination as being championed in Butler's novels and take direct political inspiration from it.

Origins and the Hopeful Mistakes of *The Left Hand of Darkness*

“...the deepest subject of Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* would not be utopia as such, but rather our own incapacity to conceive it in the first place.”⁴⁵

"Hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now and can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds for hope. We will need writers who can remember freedom. Poets, visionaries, the realists of a larger reality."⁴⁶

Writing science fiction in the late 1960's that centers issues of gender, war and culture (the long standing socio-political aspects of everyday life) was a shift away from the more technologically rigorous visions of space and fantastical alien worlds that framed the genre. Science Fiction moved beyond an obsession with space; it opened itself up to exploring the human condition in order to understand it better. Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* came out in 1969, amidst the student and cultural upset of the 1960's and its immediate effect on the climate of science fiction was swift. Le Guin was awarded a Hugo Award for the book but did not enjoy the honor without an accompanying barrage of critique, praise and confusion. Pursuing a thought experiment about what could happen when rigid gender dynamics are eliminated from a cultural

⁴⁵ Jameson, Fredric. "World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative." *Science Fiction Studies* 2.3, *The Science Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (1975): 221-30.

⁴⁶ Le Guin, Ursula K. Transcript of script from 2014 National Book Awards

reality in 1969 was a process of discovery for Le Guin. She used fiction as a tool for personal exploration. “Along about 1967, I began to feel a certain unease, a need to step on a little farther...I began to define and understand the meaning of sexuality and the meaning of gender in my life and in my society.”⁴⁷ Her vision was brought about by personal inquiry and posturing that was created out of a position of urgent exploration. This understanding of Le Guin and *Left Hand of Darkness* is important to deciphering its relation and importance in considering its couldwork toolkit contributions.

In this chapter, I look to complicate and celebrate the tense processes that went into writing the *Left Hand of Darkness* and the continuing attendance to its legacy. After briefly exploring Le Guin’s use of anthropological fiction, I will address the interesting ways in which Le Guin’s book fails, but by using Muñoz’s idea of failure put forth in *Cruising Utopia*. This failure is unique in that it leads to a continuation, a proliferation of attention towards its failure that one must almost consider it a success. *Left Hand of Darkness* and its many shortcomings have led to numerous conversations, revisions and critiques that have furthered the development of how imagination can be yielded by political thinkers, philosophers, activists, etc. One thread of these critiques put forth by Fredric Jameson is that Le Guin fails to imagine a world radically different than our own and reinforces truths and norms that fail to elevate the utopia as a viable genre. Holding up scripts of an oppressive cultural system (in this case, one that values the actions, stories and language of masculinity) is a barrier to challenging these very systems;

⁴⁷ K., Le Guin Ursula. “Is Gender Necessary?” *The Language of the Night*. New York: HarperCollins, 1989. Print.

subverting these scripts often begin at the level of language. How does Le Guin's position as woman writer in a male-dominated genre become indoctrinated by language and cultural norms in order to prevent her from liberating her text from limiting positions? Her failing to transgress beyond the script of her time is illuminating in and of itself, if we are to judge it within a couldwork framing. It highlights both the limitations and the successes, but also upholds a starting point by which many have been able to follow. By putting *Left Hand of Darkness* in conversation with Fredric Jameson, Muñoz and Le Guin herself, I will pull out the helpful elements of these processes that can lead to extracting radical possibility of liberation out of the *Left Hand of Darkness*. The theoretical failure of the novel and response by fans and critics alike highlight couldwork in *Left Hand of Darkness* through its insistence on the ability to revise and its insistence on keeping the concept of utopia alive as an inspirator.

The Left Hand of Darkness came to Le Guin in an early moment in her career, when her genre and life was dominated by men. Growing up in Berkeley, California in the house of two esteemed academic anthropologists, Le Guin was well versed in intellectual environments. These circles did not give into more progressive notions of social mobility, however. In an interview, Le Guin remembers her mother Kroeber possessing conflicting notions of the growing presence of feminism by calling it "those women-lib people" and then giving her Virginia Woolf's novels. Le Guin's writing science fiction was a personal pathway to understanding outside of the outdated mode of her class reality when it came to feminism and other social movements. As much as radical academics and activists alike hold *Left Hand of Darkness* in high esteem in its

role in opening up such inquiries as queer theory and feminism, there is a lot that Le Guin fails at in writing *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I'm particularly interested in this failure of hers, in the way it has operated in a temporal context. It has become a failure that produces, that has inspired, been contested and continues to be investigated- even by Le Guin herself.

In the *Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin created a novel that attempted many things; one that to remove gender from a culture to see what would happen. Using a mixture of straightforward narrative chapters, field note entries, diary accounts and mythological stories to fill out the story, her strong ties and practice in anthropological framing are undeniable. The intimate relationship between these two fields of inquiry may appear to be separated by notions of science, empiricism and objectivity yet they share orbits of perspective. In his important book, *The Interpretation of Culture*, Clifford Geertz offers a reading of ethnography (and thus, the work of Anthropology) as “themselves interpretations, and...thus fictions; fictions in the sense that they are ‘something made,’ ‘something fashioned.’”⁴⁸ Weaving ethnographic elements into the *Left Hand of Darkness*, Le Guin builds upon this notion of interpretations and although the culture of Gethen does not actually exist, it's clear that she is motivated and influenced by real cultural phenomenons of our contemporary Earth via certain details such as the Presence, which is clearly a nod to Buddhist meditation.

Focusing her narrative on a cold, wintery planet called Gethen, Le Guin uses her understanding and skill in anthropological ethnography to unfold a culture that is affected

⁴⁸ Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973. pg 15

by its planetary reality. She introduces many intertwined narratives around the nature of the world; because it is cold, energy conservation is key. Energy conservation is key so war is almost unheard of. Sexuality is one of conservation as well; the people of Gethen are androgynes most of their lives. During a few days each month, people enter a phase called Kemmer, a time of heightened sexual energy. Partners engaging in sexual contact interact until one person develops a set of sexual organs; their partner then reacts “accordingly” (Le Guin does not explore same sex relationships in the novel, that is, her characters are limited to penis/vagina sexual interaction.⁴⁹) As one of the former Ekumen investigator implies in one of the field note chapters, “No physiological habit is established, and the mother of several children may be the father of several more.”⁵⁰ On Gethen, there are multiple continents with countries spread throughout yet nationalism is a new and burgeoning concept. The arch of the story follows a stranger to Gethen named Genly Ai who represents the Ekumen, a group of federalized planets that covers over 100 light years. He is the sole representative sent to Gethen on a mission of observation and information exchange with the intent of deciphering Gethen’s readiness to join the Ekumen. Genly Ai, a human male, has come to Gethen during a shifting tide; two countries are fighting over the same territory and whispers of nationalism and war are lingering in the air after thousands of years of relative peace. The novel follows Genly Ai as he tries to convince the rulers of the planet that his aim (and thus, the aim of the

⁴⁹ “For instance, I wouldn’t lock the people from the planet Gethen, where the story takes place, into heterosexuality. The insistence that sexual partners must be of the opposite sex is naive. It never occurred to me to explore their homosexual practices, and I regret the implication that sexuality has to be heterosexuality.”

⁵⁰ Le Guin, *Left Hand of Darkness*, pg 91

Ekumen) is one of good faith. Genly's story runs parallel with that of Estraven, the former Prime Minister of one of Gethen's rising municipalities, Karhide. Estraven and Genly's stories become intertwined when both are exiled from Karhide in a flurry of political upheaval. Both end up reunited at a work camp in Orgoreyn, Karhide's new political rival state. Escaping and vowing to help each other back to Karhide in order to signal Genly Ai's Ekumen ship. The second half of the novel follows these two people, one human man and one Gethian androgyne as they help each other

Interjected with data entries that Ai sends back to the Ekumen about the culture of Gethen and the reality of his visit, the arch of the story is made convincing through the addition of mythologies and stories of Gethen's history and Estraven's journal entries. This deepening of the story is not possible without Le Guin's anthropological persuasion. Done with elegant efficiency, Le Guin manages to unfold an entire political drama of a different world, populated with different (yet familiar) bodies in 300 pages exactly. In fusing ideas of fiction and ethnography, Le Guin positions herself as a believer in seeking the alternative; while her alternative cultures are fictive in their entirety, their components pay homage to real cultural details. In his collection titled "Fragments of An Anarchist Anthropology, David Graeber sees ethnography and the discourse of anthropology as having a critical position for addressing political alternatives like anarchism. Le Guin facilitates this notion within science fiction and utopia as well. If we understand ethnography as a "fiction" looking to extrapolate a certain reality and to "tease out the

hidden symbolic, moral or pragmatic logics that underlie its actions”⁵¹ then writing fictional ethnography, which Le Guin has arguably done, can play with unique cultural positions within the thought experiment framework. Graeber describes the role of a radical intellectual doing this work as such: “look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities-as gifts.”⁵²

Turning a critical eye towards the *Left Hand of Darkness* can yield what feels at first, to be an unsettling amount of critique. For a novel supposing to erase the gender binary, anyone who’s read it is quickly astonished at the overwhelming *maleness* of this neutral reality. The queer and feminist perspective of 2016 may have much to lament in the *Left Hand of Darkness*. Without the desire to rationalize away this reality of the novel (for seeing mistakes played out often produce interesting results) analyzing Genly Ai’s position as similar to Le Guin’s leads to fascinating thoughts. Both Le Guin and Ai are products of their social and gendered framework. The reader’s perspective and empathetic relationship to Genly Ai is transformed over the course of the book; as he becomes closer to Estraven in exile, his notions of gender, behavior and bodies start to lose their bi-sexual bias. His inability and reluctance to overcome his own linguistic and cognitive shortcomings when it comes to Gethen’s unique sexual reality is a mirror of Le Guin’s own cultural shortcomings. Not surprisingly, no one is more aware of this than Le

⁵¹ Graeber, David. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004. Digital file.

⁵² Graeber, David. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004. Digital file.

Guin herself. In an aptly named pair of essays titled “Is Gender Necessary?” and “Redux” in her collection titled *The Language of the Night*, she engages in a revisionary back and forth dialogue with herself in both 1976 (seven years after the publication of the *Left Hand of Darkness*) and in 1988 (almost twenty years after.) This willingness to participate in engaging past selves is a quality that could work finds both useful and liberating. A logic of this tactic is that people can be open to learning from themselves, to see themselves as a changing entity and seeing the work of their life and their craft as a never-ending, continuous process. Positioning thinkers and artists in this reparative frame, while does not necessarily absolve them of serious grievances, allows the archiver and the activist to see the moments of critical work that can transcend present oriented political framing in order to be put to transformative use.

Beyond the critique of Le Guin’s gendered androgyny by her own hand, she is also subjected to critique of her handling of utopian vision. The world she created in the *Left Hand of Darkness*, through its realism and relatability to our world in its ethnographic elements is also seen as an inability to actually produce an utopian vision. Fredric Jameson, philosopher and Marxist critic, wrote about these dimensions of the *Left Hand of Darkness* in an essay titled “World Reduction in Le Guin.” His investigation of the novel focuses on Le Guin’s intentional flattening of socio-political realities on Gethen; that is, describing the ways in which she glosses over the kinds of histories that create the need for utopian visions in the first place. War on Gethen is historically unknown. Nationalism is new and technology has remained unchanged for many centuries. The Ekumen and Genly Ai coming to the planet is conveniently in tandem with

the rise of these new (and familiar to us) urges that reflect capitalistic competition and normalized liberal politics. “What is this to say but that Karhide is an attempt to imagine something like a West which would never have known capitalism?”⁵³

Le Guin’s formula of tension on Gethen is offered a solution in the form of the Ekumen, a federalist body of planets that aims to spread liberal homogeneity across the stars. Jameson’s reflection brings up a ripe point; how is Le Guin’s thought experiment different than other bodies in our own reality such as the UN, that do little to agitate political thinking outside of a regulatory framework? This designation of how the novel fails to offer us new and interesting tools about imagining beyond this familiar formulation is acknowledged by Jameson as perhaps, a conscious effect of Le Guin’s intention. Going back to Le Guin’s sexual structure in the novel, this inability to negotiate beyond what she knows is also apparent. The thought experiment ultimately suggests that sexuality is a huge block to our own possible liberation. Androgyny and regulation offer a solution to this in the *Left Hand of Darkness*. While the neat packaging of sexuality is almost painfully convenient in its solving of many socio-political tension on Gethen (and currently impossible in our own world), Le Guin’s proposition of sexuality’s role in the lives of people is a conceptual origin of many feminist writers reimagining gender and sexuality for political purposes. This is a trend that has far surpassed its faulty beginnings. Novels such as *Woman on The Edge of Time*, where Marge Piercy offers a future where babies are artificially produced is a critical

⁵³ Jameson, Fredric. "World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative." *Science Fiction Studies* 2.3, *The Science Fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin* (1975): 221-30.

appendages of Le Guin's questions about the possible role of human sexuality in our collective inability in imagining equitable politics.

The reappropriations of our own systems and the seemingly limited options of the future are what make Le Guin's failings so fascinating and crucial to my understanding of it as having couldwork connotations. With the idea of how failure can be helpful in mind, the Jameson quote that opened this chapter is what best illuminates the focus of discussing Le Guin and in particular, the *Left Hand of Darkness*, in this archive; couldwork is both about elevating tools that build up our options for imagining a radically different politics *and* learning from the wonderful mistakes of our own political fore-mothers. Her failure reach outside her own limited imagination in attempting to create an alternative world could be formulated as an incomplete utopia *or*, as investigators looking for helpful tools in a own quest to distinguish new ways of pulling out possibilities, it could be seen as as successful process of couldwork. Taking up Sedgwick's reparative lens, Le Guin's unsatisfying vision offers up a bare bones configuration with which one can build out, ask meaningful questions to and use as a location for striving beyond. While there may be much in *The Left Hand of Darkness* that reminds us of the static, unsatisfying reality that is the contemporary moment, Le Guin also gives us glimpses of other ways of being that feel inspiring in the work of imagining radically liberatory futures.

The application of couldwork to this conundrum of lack in *the Left Hand of Darkness* can help us elucidate the framing that Jose Muñoz purposes in *Cruising Utopia*. Queer utopian thought in Muñoz's framing champions the kind of revisionary tactics I

desire couldwork to embody; for if it is the desire of couldwork to build new matrices of tactics, tactics that can give birth to diverse factions of existence and desire, then something that comes with that is failure. “Within failure we can locate a kernel of potentiality.”

Chapter Three:

Social Practice Art and Couldwork

Artists tend to want to lend themselves and their energy and abilities to social betterment and utopian dreaming, but not necessarily as participants within the sanctioned institutionalized frames.⁵⁴

Couldwork as I envision it in this thesis has a particular origin story and it begins with Jeanne van Heeswijk. Hailing from the Netherlands, van Heeswijk has been a key player in a new movement of art production and creation aptly named social practice art. Maria Lind, writing in the collection *Living as Form*, describes social practice art as “simultaneously a medium, a method and a genre.” Granted that this is a more complicated formulation of art than what most people are used to, the concept of social practice art is often contested, ignored or scoffed at by players in the larger art world, largely in part to the fact that social practices generally operate outside of museums and the art market. Social practice art is notoriously harder to curate in larger museums, as it

⁵⁴Rosler, Martha. “The Artistic Mode of Revolution: From Gentrification to Occupation.” *e-flux* 33 (March 2012). Accessed December 4, 2016.
<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/33/68311/the-artistic-mode-of-revolution-from-gentrification-to-occupation/>.

often finds itself more at home in the community spaces, public squares, libraries, etc. This does not give it the same kind of capitalist value of paintings or sculptures because how does one put a price on political agitation, civil disobedience and cultural change? It blurs categories of civic and cultural production in a way that makes us ask “*What is art?*” all over again. van Heeswijk is an important contributor to these formulations of social practice art through her long-duration civic engagement projects that provide anecdotes to the powerlessness of communities across the world today through collaboration, adaptation and creativity.

This recent wave of rethinking the artistic practice is not surprising giving the trajectory and context of the political time in which it’s happening. van Heeswijk’s work, and thus the interest of her framing, is intimately tied to the political policies and patterns of the last thirty years. Tying this timeline of social practice’s emergence back to Moyn and the concept of the Last Utopia, the foreclosure of communism had a metaphorical and literal connotation beyond the victory of a capitalist mode of world building. As the Berlin Wall fell and ideologies of socialism dwindled in the imagination of the world, there was a consolidating of the ways in which capitalism liked to operate best: competition, individualism and scarcity have become normalized conditions of this view of globalization. Institutions of all kinds embodied these qualities and championed them as “the way” to do things. Yet these systems have created, in their path, some greater disparities in the realm of socio-political human rights. Corporations and states have yielded to the global market in ways that have changed the game (the art game, the

political game) forever. In response to this new era of neoliberal⁵⁵ globalization, (the latter can be argued as both positive and negative), and growing socioeconomic disparity, the question of what we need art for has changed. Social practice art, social interventionist art, public art, participatory practices: all of these have been responses to the shift in global dynamics of politics, people and cultural creation.

Perhaps beyond speculating their historically contextual need and invention, it is most helpful to see social practice as coming into being as evidence that art and creative practices can offer a vital supplementation to any radical political agenda of liberation. Those with a social practice framework are utilizing intersectional visions; they are engaging in intermedia and desire to use whatever is available to them in order to agitate culturally stifling situations. Many social practice projects are cultural interventions, that is, they consciously situate themselves in places where they are in direct contact with real policy, laws, social systems, events or institutions. The interactions that then occur unfold not with the expectation of a specific result, but that some kind of tension will emerge. These hidden tensions, tucked into the normalized bureaucracy of modern civil life, are often the bits and pieces that can produce change and other opening effects in local communities. van Heeswijk is particularly interested in this uncovering or reclaiming of public spaces by communities. “As an ‘urban curator,’ van Heeswijk’s work often

⁵⁵ Neoliberalism is a term fraught with instability. Researching its meaning gives way to many diverse definitions, mostly at odds with one another, depending on the aim of the writing. In the context of social practice art, it is often viewed as all encompassing ideology, one that cares for the market more than the community. In her straightforwardly titled essay “What is Neo-liberalism?” I quote Stephanie Lee Mudge in a simplified way: “In all its modes, neo-liberalism is built on a single, fundamental principle: the superiority of individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization.”

unravels invisible legislation, governmental codes and social institutions, in order to enable communities to take control over their own futures.”⁵⁶

Couldwork comes directly out of the existence and purpose of social practice as it is being implemented by van Heeswijk in her work and in her pedagogy. It is about looking at what is needed in any given situation, seeing what tools and methods are already being applied (and whether or not these are working) and asking, “What’s the craziest thing we can think of that could maybe help us solve this question?” Lofty utopian ideas often come from a place of heightened imagination, a suspension of disbelief and a knowledge that there are as many good ideas as there are individuals to think them up. Respecting and honoring the “crazy idea” is about understanding the practical nature of their potential. Reclaiming a practicality of the imagination is key to both couldwork and social practice art. While patterns, research, data, and politics are more often associated with the word practical, can one challenge their fealty to this word if they don’t live up to their promise of action? If the actions that occur out of practical policies and movements help keep systems of oppression in place while temporarily relieving its symptoms, where do we go to expand the definition of practical? Artist Fia Backstrom outlines the need for new tactics as, “It’s doubtful whether moments in history can be more or less historical. Rather, what is needed is a more sophisticated understanding of what the political can be. Every generation must enact its own viable procedure for the political...”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ van Heeswijk, Jeanne. “The Artist Will Have to Decide Who to Serve.” *Social Housing—Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice*. Edited by Andrea Philips. Compiled by Fulya Erdemci. New York, NY: Sternberg Press, 2012.

⁵⁷ Backstrom, Fia. “Wrong question!” *art on paper*, January/February 2007, 58-59.

In Merriam Webster's dictionary, one of the definitions of practical refers to that which is, "disposed to action as opposed to speculation or abstraction." Defining practical this way forecloses the possibility of the imagination as a space of practicality (if the world is precarious, unpredictable and closed off to alternatives, then acting without speculation could lead to defeat and despair, one could argue this is antithetical to practical). The idea of couldwork and of social practice art is that the most interesting and liberating results occur when action and speculation are not separated at opposite ends of a binary, but are rather raised together, cohabitating in a space of creation and experimentation. As it is currently conceived of, practicality has the opportunity to be given more context when it is put in conversation with speculation. It does not owe allegiance to an ideological agenda, yet it ends up taking on a certain tone within political thought, one that overshadows the choices activists make in doing their work. Proposing the marriage of these terms as a process (rather than two opposite terms) could be what allows social practice art as well as couldwork methodologies that can be applied in other realms of pedagogical thinking. Understanding and applying this different kind of practicality is essential to the work of van Heeswijk and other social practice artists. Through articulating this iteration, couldwork can become available as a framework that shades many diverse approaches under its umbrella. In order to grasp the powerful potential of a more radical practicality, van Heeswijk's artistic tactics and projects deserve a closer analysis.

The Social Strategies in Jeanne van Heeswijk's Work

van Heeswijk's specialty and interest in the world of social practice is within the realm of the urban landscape and the communities that live there. Regarding the citizen as the key player in the shaping of an urban space, van Heeswijk works as an active mediator between a community and the larger bureaucratic forces that physically and emotionally form urban scapes such as municipalities, institutions and private property holders. Her projects are long term investigations into communities that are experiencing modern urban problems such as gentrification, space competition, poverty or disenfranchisement. The point of her interventions are never to train the communities in a certain school of thought or to offer righteous wisdom as an educated outsider.⁵⁸ As a mediator, she acts as a conduit of ideas rather than a monolithic generator of social engineering. Her role as mediator entails active engagement with the community on many levels; in order to understand a particular project and a particular community, van Heeswijk must come to an area and see what is already there. This is one of the few constants of van Heeswijk's projects: "Start working on site with people in the conditions that are there. I think it is vital that all projects should be site-specific, context-specific, people-specific. There is no recipe for that because every situation is really different."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ This is an interesting element of social practice work that has not been fully researched in my writing this analysis. While I focus mostly on how Jeanne herself describes her role as mediator and practitioner, it would be wise to develop a more nuanced notion of how the artist is received in communities.

⁵⁹ van Heeswijk, Jeanne. "Stop waiting, start making: Lessons in liveability from Jeanne van Heeswijk." Interview by Alma Viviers. <http://www.capetownpartnership.co.za/>. Last modified April 2, 2013. Accessed December 4, 2016. <http://www.capetownpartnership.co.za/2013/04/stop-waiting-start-making-lessons-in-liveability-from-jeanne-van-heeswijk/>.

Honoring the diverse realities of a locality often means believing that the answer to a community issue is likely available already within and unique to, the space. What Jeanne offers, is simply herself as a willing conduit and a storehouse of information and energy, ready to experiment with different methodologies to tease that solution out from its hiding place. In this regard, van Heeswijk's social practice methodology reflects the notion of the anthropologist: someone from the outside not ensnared in the web of the specific culture who can notice patterns and tensions and offers that knowledge back to the community. Using this positionality holds a precarious power akin to human rights activism: the ability to cross into the realm of cultural imperialism. The thin line between the work that van Heeswijk does and short-sighted political art/ humanitarian projects is often only emboldened by the temporal aspect of her visions; van Heeswijk's projects, more often than not, live long lives.

At the same time, as Ailbhe Murphy points out in her essay, "Should I Stay or Should I Go Now? Temporal Economies in Socially Engaged Arts Practice," there needs to be more criteria than just duration for reflecting on social practice art that works to avoid cultural imperialist pitfalls or the critique of being labeled "NGO art."⁶⁰ Murphy's idea of scrutinized intentionality is best, "when we consider our long-term investments as artists, we must remain vigilant to what it is we may be seeking to extract through our durational engagements. And whether or not, despite our collaborations over time, our situated practice, our declarations of co-authorship, at the end of the day the real

⁶⁰ This concept is explored by BAVO, a research team made up of the "architect-philosophers" Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels from the essay *Always Choose the Worst Option - Artistic Resistance and the Strategy of Overidentification*.

destination for our work – its legitimizing home – is always elsewhere.” van Heeswijk’s self-identified position as conduit opens up space to this formulation. Though she often moves in and out of the spaces where her projects live and have roots, the work itself is reintegrated into the hands of the community, often going through different phases and building upon itself over time. In response to the critique that van Heeswijk’s work is complicit or perhaps not radical enough in its engagement with the tangled up reality of modern urban spaces, (or that it does not get its hands dirty in the process), it can be helpful to remember that van Heeswijk’s projects are not looking for specific outcomes or following rigid ideologies. The realm in which social practice art can exist is not without critique or contention. Artists and cultural theorists alike point to the possibility of social practice art’s interesting approach to the social being co-opted by that which it seeks to avoid, mainly, being corporatized by the very entities it critically engages with.

It’s clear that van Heeswijk politics are aligned, through the exploration of her tactics and her desires as an artist/citizen, with an agenda that aims to open up the power of collectivity. Relegating social practice art into a binary alongside non-profit or human rights work into, “a two-pronged system of hard, economic sectors as its right hand, and soft, social sectors as its left hand,”⁶¹ simplifies the cultural work and tools that artists like van Heeswijk champion. Yet, of course, in keeping up with a reparative notion of collecting tactics, critiques such as these become helpful in the continuous process of

⁶¹ BAVO. “Always Choose the Worst Option - Artistic Resistance and the Strategy of Over-Identification.” www.bavo.biz. Last modified October 30, 2007. Accessed December 4, 2016. <http://www.bavo.biz/texts/view/45>.

mending and accounting for the ways in which frameworks can always build themselves up.

van Heeswijk enters these relationships with groups and people in order to highlight their own active citizenship and to empower it further by acting as a conduit or magnifying glass for their action. This formulation complicates her position as artist by acknowledging that social practice work is only possible with the collaboration of community members. By stepping up to cultural processes as a mediator, van Heeswijk attempts to embody the theory that social practice art exemplifies: that intervention as a performance attempts to lure out the tensions within a community in order to figure out how to combat them with the direct collaboration of community members. Much of this tension, as van Heeswijk sees it, comes from the individual and the community being stripped of activity and of collaboration. The lack of agency and the disconnect from the decision-making processes that form the physical and psychic landscape of cities can leave communities feeling powerless to the changes going on around them. van Heeswijk often uses global capitalism's complete dominance of production as a lens with which to frame disfunction in localized communities. Siting community production of cultural acts as a kind of Marxist reclamation is the force behind statements like: "I think at this moment in time we need to claim the right to produce culture; to produce cultural relationships and the cultural sphere."⁶² In this formulation, the power to steer and shape

⁶² van Heeswijk, Jeanne. "Stop waiting, start making: Lessons in liveability from Jeanne van Heeswijk." Interview by Alma Viviers. <http://www.capetownpartnership.co.za/>. Last modified April 2, 2013. Accessed December 4, 2016. <http://www.capetownpartnership.co.za/2013/04/stop-waiting-start-making-lessons-in-liveability-from-jeanne-van-heeswijk/>.

our own communities is commandeered by market capitalism, (in that banks, corporations and the market are the real creators of urban space), and in order to gain access to that power, active citizenship is crucial.

The Blue House

In 1996, the Amsterdam City Council decided to proceed with the construction of IJburg, a residential area on a cluster of manmade islands. Set for completion in 2012, the new district will provide 18,000 dwellings for 45,000 residents. Typical of a new habitat like IJburg is that the entire project is devised in the conference room and on the drawing board and in this process, nothing is left to chance. But some qualities and elements, such as a history - a social and human history - stories, life and a beating heart, must grow and cannot be planned on the drawing board or built by a contractor.⁶³

The Blue House is a project that is critically representative of van Heeswijk's interest in producing models of social relationality rather than producing artwork with an explicit capitalistic value. It was able to exist through an interesting combination of events that aren't necessarily normal; the Blue House was able to come into being first and foremost because Amsterdam was *creating* an entirely new neighborhood where there were no previous inhabitants. Regardless of this circumstance, the project has lots of interesting aspects to explore in relation to couldwork. van Heeswijk used her capital as a known artist to petition the process into letting her "test the terrain" of this experimental moment in the understanding of the culture of urban neighborhoods. What this entailed was an intentional carving out of space that was to be explicitly used for the sake of community research.

⁶³ www.jeanneworks.net

In 2005, “van Heeswijk arranged for a large cobalt-blue-coloured villa in a housing block, designed by Teun Koolhaas Associates (TKA), to be taken off the private housing market and re-designated as a space for community research, artistic production and cultural activities.”⁶⁴ This articulation of community space was directly inspired by *Casa Azul*, Frida Kahlo’s house in Mexico City, a space of hospitality and community for painters, artists and thinkers during Kahlo’s lifetime. van Heeswijk envisioned her space, The Blue House, as an incubation habitat, one where the cultural and physical processes that go into creating a city were able to be collectively and collaboratively explored through social interaction, public discourse and research. The idea was that artists, thinkers, writers and educators of various nationalities and backgrounds were to come to The Blue House for six month long residencies, interacting with the community members of IJburg about the reality of their new space. It acted as an intentional meeting space that went beyond the city hall or the town board in that it was operating independently of civic funds and bureaucracies. By focusing on the everyday interactions and realities of the community members in dialogue with creative thinkers, ideas and speculations on cultural creation of a localized space were collected and explored. “By describing and simultaneously intervening in everyday life in this area, The Blue House facilitated the acceleration and intensification of the process of developing a cultural history.”⁶⁵ Without having certain expectations, this experiment looked at what it could look like if people had more say in the production of the physical space that they inhabit.

⁶⁴ O’Neill, Paul. *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*. Antennae. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Valiz, 2011.

⁶⁵ http://www.aoui.mur.at/frameset_org_tbh.html

Much of the daily work in the Blue House was that of collective networking and the expansion of ideas. By experimentally decluttering and streamlining an explicitly creative and incubative space, The Blue House was able to get deep into what true collaboration and accountability between people across disciplines could look like. The roles of both the visiting thinkers and the participating community members were given the time and space to interact, argue, contradict one another; in other words, to dive deeply into what a community *could* look like. In terms of her own participation, van Heeswijk described her role in The Blue House, “as that of a ‘participating embedded observer’ who, like other members, observed and steered the operational aspects of the project, with particular attention to public permission, civil legalities and other outside forces that form the house and its activities.”⁶⁶ Implementing herself as tool, rather than the hand that holds the tool, van Heeswijk acted as a point of contact for the many networked individuals.

Through collaboration in process over product, The Blue House became a space of dialogue *and* artistic creation. “At the same time, the house temporarily provided urban functions not yet provided for in the new neighbourhood: a children's library, a cheap restaurant, a flower shop.”⁶⁷ Everyone involved in The Blue House was exposed to ideas, confrontations and aspects of collaboration that led to tension within the space, but tension does not have to have a static connotation. Tensions in any kind of process-oriented collaboration bring hidden information and meanings to light. Built into

⁶⁶ O’Neill, Paul. *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*. Antennae. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Valiz, 2011.

⁶⁷ <http://www.spatialagency.net/database/van-heeswijk>

the desire of social practice art is the instinct that nothing useful or liberatory is possible without conflict or collaboration. Paul O'Neil points to this in his analysis of the Blue House: "communication and exchange lead not only to improvements in the ways in which people live their lives, but also to their acquisition of political agency by contributing to socio-cultural life through their active participation within its everyday formation."

Looking at work like The Blue House, it can be understood that long durational social practice art endeavors may not share the same kind of immediate impact as the kinds of human rights campaigns that are typical of the contemporary moment, but surely there is room for diverse forms of organizing to exist. One of the points of writing about and collecting examples of couldwork is to see what is going on outside of a mainstream human rights context. In learning the dynamics and organizations of projects like the Blue House, a spectrum of tools reveal themselves to those who are looking. By participating and supporting a variety of tactics and actions, the world of the activist and the human rights worker can expand their reach, only providing for a more engaged, deeper understanding of conflict.

Social Practice Thoughts/Human Rights Bridge in the Classroom

In *Spaces of Resilience*, van Heeswijk's classroom and syllabus was a loosely curated toolkit for understanding social practice art and its contextual relationship to human rights. As much as her own work (and social practice art as a whole) is often highly individualistic and ever-changing, siphoning off the successful elements of her

long range of artistic experimentation became possible in the classroom. These takeaways were not rules or criterion per se, but rather results of her experimentations. They were offered as trialed and errored entry points, framings that had brought forth moments of clarity, breakthroughs and cohesion within projects of the past. Serving as loose guidelines, van Heeswijk's way of introducing her tactics to the class was through expressing them as keywords, phrases and, sometimes, exclamations. None of these were too specific and often were presented in language that only offered more questions instead of answers. This is where van Heeswijk's work really gives possibility to the notion of couldwork. Open-endedness, fluidity of method and a diversity of strategies, van Heeswijk's pedagogical tools for aesthetically intervening in political reality can offer human rights a perspective that fits quite well on the couldwork spectrum. What this could mean for human rights is perhaps a proliferation of new ways of entering into the work. Looking at social practice art tactics is a useful way of seeking the diversity needed to approach unique and localized human rights projects. This analysis is driven by van Heeswijk's use of social practice art as a potentially influential practice for human rights to conduct itself in ways that sustain momentum, promote change and avoid imperialistic claims of morality.

van Heeswijk's personal focus on the reasons why we need social practice is where her classroom toolkit begins: precaritization, mechanization, cultural production—these are all processes that constantly produce the world around us. In order to reinstate communities and citizens back into the process of producing expanded realities, (and to build it up in a way that serves everyone), we need systems for human rights *and*

organizing justice. For human rights to continue to serve those searching for justice in a world that is operating more and more like a corporational entity, it's important to look for revelatory tactics. What I mean by revelatory is something that allows new information to come to light; in van Heeswijk's work, playful strategies are important in order to get reactions. Reactions lead to *revelations* about a situation that helps the community to be better equipped to handle problems they face. Opening up the reach of their citizenship is not a democratic imperative, but a kind of subversive reclaiming of what citizenship can entail.

“Playful” strategy is one of van Heeswijk's key phrases. Playful, in this context, reaches to a conceptual meaning beyond something that is done for pure amusement or entertainment. In the context of social practice, it takes on a connotation of “experimental” or, rather, encapsulates a rogue spirit such as some of playful's synonyms suggest (frisky, lively, even mischievous.) In order to expose the political tensions of communities affected by disenfranchisement, being a little frisky seems appropriate and necessary. With this being said, playful does not connote a lack of intention and accountability. van Heeswijk explored this concept mostly through the work of other social practice artists. Spaces of Resilience was an exploration of sorts of a curated collection of social practice creators who exemplified a diverse spectrum of tactics, struggles and, ultimately, strategies. Getting into specific projects that used integrative, social practice framings was the best technique for showing how experimental strategy can get. The syllabus focused on artists of varying national origins and who were working in various political conditions and communities. Many of the artists were

making work in response to the plight of precarious and displaced populations, working alongside real communities.

Playful strategies within these projects take on an air of mimicry; platforms like the Silent University, which is “a solidarity based knowledge exchange platform by refugees, asylum seekers and migrants” that is “presented using the format of an academic program.”⁶⁸ This self-aware experiment on mimicry is done intentionally to tease out real issues experienced by intellectual laborers. The Silent University’s aim is to challenge the idea of silence as a passive state and explore its powerful potential through performance, writing, and group reflection. These explorations attempt to make apparent the systemic failure and the loss of skills and knowledge experienced through the silencing process of people seeking asylum, those who Hannah Arendt refers to as the “the stateless.” This is a powerful framing within the realm of human rights, as statelessness is not a position of protection within modern conceptions of human rights, which, in reality, only apply when one belongs to a state. What projects like Tthe Silent University do is call attention, like Arendt, to the gaps and holes in the current formation of what a human rights framework can (and cannot) offer us.

While theory has long existed to take up the critical aim of uncovering these holes, social practice engagement has the power to do so *as well as* show so. Social practice art encourages artistic experiments that offer themselves up as “life lite,” that is, real formulations of actions that involve real spaces and people for the sake of civic exercise. Calling this “testing the terrain,” the Spaces of Resilience syllabi suggested

⁶⁸ <http://thesilentuniversity.org/>

experiments as a way of figuring out the conditions of a place. If these exercises and tests move things into a desirable direction, they can be integrated into cultural life at large. Perhaps social practice endeavors can be imagined as the intermediary step between theory and policy; in conversation with *couldwork*, it certainly fits nicely into this formulation. When one is born into a state, into civic life, there is no explicit training for how to be an active citizen. Social practice art is one way in which aesthetic knowledge can become useful to collective agendas of moving politics in a more equitable direction by engaging with ways in which one can activate their various identifications with citizenship.

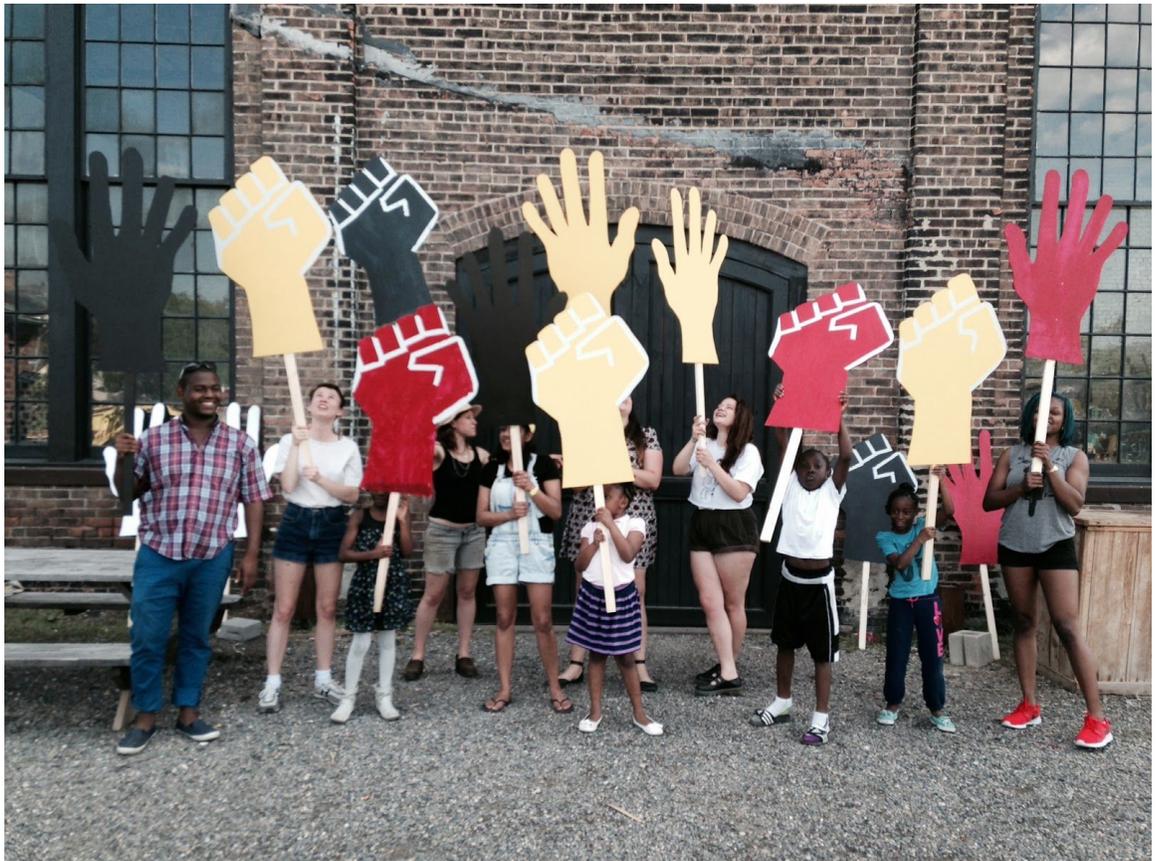
Much of what social practice art looked like in van Heeswijk's classroom was a collecting of tactics through the investigation of projects like *The Silent University*. Organizing politically on a smaller scale was a particular point of interest in the direction of our engagements with both the material and the active encounter with these tactics in the last part of the semester. van Heeswijk reached out to different grassroots organizations in the city of Hudson, New York, where I currently reside, to come together with the class on different projects they could use creative input on; among them was the Hudson's community garden, an after school program for young girls called *Perfect Ten*, *Kite's Nest*, and the *Staley B. Keith Social Justice Center* (known as *SBK*).

In the class I was part of a group that paired with *Kite's Nest* and *SBK* jointly to share thoughts on the possibilities of merging creativity and activism. *Kite's Nest* is an alternative learning center for youth of all ages that focuses on exploratory engagement and experimental notions of curiosity, knowledge and skills. *SBK* is a "black led

community-based organization committed to overcoming the long standing social and racial injustices that breed economic and social distress within the city of Hudson and Columbia County.”⁶⁹ These organizations enjoy political companionship on multiple levels: from the Social Justice Leadership Academy, a 5 week workshop and training around social justice fundamentals for teens to Space 101.⁷⁰ Kite’s Nest and SBK have a dynamic encapsulation of the ways in which creativity and activism can highlight each other. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, SBK desired to have a potent racial justice presence at the multiple parades that Hudson is known for. Working together, we devised a plan with SBK and Kite’s Nest to create multi-purpose props that were able to relay a racial justice message and be visually arresting.

⁶⁹ <http://www.staleybkeith.org/>

⁷⁰ “It’s a place where teenagers can have open dialogue about issues around the world, in Hudson, and in their lives. It’s a place where teenagers can develop the skills to organize for social change, and where they’re encouraged and provided with the tools to follow their own interests.” kitesnest.org



Researching the ways in which visual culture and protest art had been portrayed in the past, our group decided to construct a movable “fleet” of handheld signs that could be used to convey various racial justice messages that fit the mood of each parade, which in Hudson were the Pride and Flag Day parades, respectively. This fleet contained multiple wooden signs that were cut into the shapes of hands either portrayed in a fist of solidarity or splayed open with the fingers reaching towards the sky, in red, yellow and black. We also created a long, banner-esque sign that was to act as the head of the fleet. It had a span of roughly five feet and was intended to highlight the message of the particular march and had interchangeable foam letters stuck on two velcro tracks.

My position as someone who both attended Bard as an undergrad but also lived and worked in Hudson was an interesting intersection to inhabit in this process. I knew what the reality of the town was in its continuous battle to take care of its own, dealing with real neighbourhood segregation and the practical struggles of employment, food availability and the price of living. While our work with van Heeswijk did not directly address these important aspects of daily Hudson life, the parade fleet embodied an interesting need: political visibility. The Flag Day parade has been a staple in Hudson, NY for decades; its festivities and fanfare draw crowds from all over Columbia County. Promoted as a Fourth of July alternative, its overt nationalistic tones are not perceived as political by the general (read: white) public. Yet, there is an obvious lack of diversity in the parade's participants. When we inserted the Black Lives Matter fleet into the formulation, the community had an interesting variety of reactions; unable to walk the whole route due to work, I nevertheless witnessed two parade organizers talk about how they didn't want the parade to be politicized. "Why don't they just say 'All lives matter?'" The presence of Kites Nest, SBK and their collaborators in the parade was a reminder to the greater community that there was a sizeable black population in Hudson and their concerns were not being addressed. This insertion into the conversation has been one in a series of political invigorations happening by and for the black community in Hudson: the continuous social advocacy of SBK and the work of alderwoman Tiffany Garriga has kept the conversation about black livelihood in Hudson alive in the minds of citizens, the Common Council and in the media.

If the aesthetic help of a social practice artist is to act as mediator, encourager and idea unfold, creatives looking to make communities a place of social negotiation and collaboration have something in common with political activists from various movements. My work with the Hudson chapter of SURJ⁷¹ has made it clear that one of the most effective ways to understanding the systems operating around and in daily life is to go to city council meetings, to insert yourself into the dialogue and, like Butler does for her black protagonists, write yourself into the future of your place. On the most basic level, this may be a missing element in the civil work of municipalities and local governments: to have someone in the room who isn't swept up in the paralyzing infinite loop of political negotiation, who disrupts any and all processes for the purpose of building it differently. While it would be difficult to avoid any kind of pushback from those in these spaces who have grown comfortable with the kind of unmotivating regularity of politics, who claim these discussion spaces for themselves and avoid negotiating, nothing will ever move towards liberation without agitation at this level of civil life. Artists who occupy positions of privilege could use their status to gain access to these governmental spaces, to perform and embody a kind of creative ambassador.

In the space of my project, social practice art has embodied a more physical aspect of the couldwork framework. Considering Spaces of Resilience was a class offered in partnership between the Center for Curatorial Studies program and the Human Rights Project at Bard College, the relationship between human rights and social practice art has

⁷¹ Showing Up for Racial Justice - a national organization that organizes white people around issues of racial justice and solidarity.

a grounding beyond the other couldwork sites I've visited. It embodies work that is already being done in the present, the work of building up a larger reality. For this reason, social practice art offers human rights a real, fleshed out set of ideas of what organizing around a human oriented justice practice could look like.

Conclusion

Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile, a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake. In other words, we rebuild our immediate surroundings, one might even say our belief in a future.⁷²

In an attempt to weave together a sense of radical utopian hope of the future, (a theoretically complicated endeavor), couldwork is an interesting lens through which to inspect the current atmosphere of human rights. While operating alongside Muñoz, Sedgwick and Jameson's theoretical realms, couldwork attempts to ground these critical texts by juxtaposing them with material examples of poetry, speculative fiction and social practice art. Creative writers, poets and artists may not offer the kinds of practical solutions the world of larger human rights projects are used to, but in a contemporary

⁷² Hanson, Ellis. "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 101.1 (2010).

moment that needs diverse articulations of justice, being open to different kinds of political and tactical inspiration *is* practical for many communities.

Using Muñoz's queer, utopian framework to set up my couldwork investigation firmly grounds it in an intersectional and liberatory matrix. "The queer utopian project addressed here turns to the fringe of political and cultural production to offset the tyranny of the homonormative."⁷³ This is a position that, while critical of straight, white hegemony (and thus desires alternatives to state-sanctioned power and capitalist globalism), could offer an illuminating set of ideas and methods to the field of human rights through its championing of diverse strategies. These are more closely aligned with social justice projects and civil rights; but as Samuel Moyn brings up in *The Last Utopia*, it may be time to reconcile what the spirit of human rights wishes to achieve.

The Last Utopia is a critical investigation into the role of human rights in the 20th century and where, as a movement, it is headed in the 21st. Moyn, who teaches law and history at Harvard University, is one of the most active human rights intellectuals. Often coming from a critical posture, *The Last Utopia* is seen as compatible to couldwork in that it questions the contemporary vision and direction of human rights; it becomes necessary to considering human rights expansion in a reparative light. "The last utopia" refers to human rights as the dominant system of organizing around justice and the human; it is the last because it "won" in the battle of ideologies against communism in the political arena of the 1970's. Once communism, offered as a utopian alternative to

⁷³Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

capitalism, was laid to rest, human rights took over as the preferred framework for pursuing crimes against humanity and human oriented justice.

The current conundrum of human rights according to Moyn is the capability of its ideological scope. Initially offering itself as an anti-political framework, the past few decades have seen a proliferation of groups and language that appropriate the human rights spirit explicitly for political ends. Existing outside of politics is no longer a viable choice for human rights: the needs of marginalized people on a global scale have now been articulated in rights language. Moyn frames this in his conclusion to *The Last Utopia*: “But not every age need be as unsympathetic to political utopia as the recent one in which human rights came to the fore. And so the program of human rights faces a fateful choice: whether to expand its horizons so as to take on the burden of politics more honestly, or to give way to new and other political visions that have yet to be fully outlined.”⁷⁴ This polemic, while sounding quite rigid in its vision of either or, fits well with the call for a *couldwork* stance within human rights. The difference between the positions put for in *The Last Utopia* and what I am putting forth is that I am interested in theory as much as I am in experimenting with new human rights actions; the three creative sites I’ve explored in articulating *couldwork* are a move to go beyond merely imagining and theorizing while at the same time specifically championing creative processes that center the imagination. I am eager to see more materializations of creative *couldwork* practices in the realm of politics and to reinvigorate the scope of what human

⁷⁴ Moyn, Samuel. *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010.

rights are possible of addressing. What couldwork desires is twofold: centering a critical hope that opens up political and social space and to collect tactics, clues and methods that describe what building up a future could look like. Complicated as this desire may be, the reparative spirit of Sedgwick reminds us that complexity leans towards a possibility for healing and for justice. Couldwork in its complexity is not an endeavor that can be neatly wrapped up by the dusk of an undergraduate paper. The sites and projects that I have investigated are but a fraction of possible couldwork articulations. In exploring this new matrix of ideas, I have come away with an evocative and refreshing framework with which to approach creative work, one that examines an artistic process from a human rights perspective, embodying an excitement that evokes a utopian move towards new possibilities.

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