

DREAMING PEER SUPPORT FUTURES

By CALVIN PROWSE, B.A., B.S.W., M.S.W

A Research Paper submitted to the Graduate Program in Critical Disability Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

York University

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ON FINDING UTOPIA

Walking through the streets of Toronto in early May, following a dinner with the PeerWorks board and staff, I was stopped in my tracks.

“What happened?” queried my colleague Colene, puzzled by my abrupt stop on the way to her car.

“I just found utopia”; scrawled with sharpie on the side of a payphone – not once, but twice.



“Found Utopia,” May 7, 2023

I have spent the past year thinking about dreams and the future, searching for utopia; and here it was, right in front of me, mere moments away from Spadina Station, as if it was an omen, a sign, telling me I was on the right path – or, at the very least, one of many (Butler, 2000).

One thing that I have learned throughout this process is that utopia can be found anywhere, if only you care to look for it. I have been looking for traces of utopia within the histories, values, and practices of psychiatric consumer/survivor peer support, and have discovered so much utopian thought that has largely not been recognized as such. One of the goals of my major research project has been to read these legacies through the lens of utopia, so that we can begin to understand peer support as a dream for a better world, and strengthen our future-oriented thinking skills instead of getting trapped in the short-term logics of late stage capitalism. We need to hope; we need to dream: of a better world, a better future – an elsewhere, an *elsenhen* (Kafer, 2013a, p. 3) – and dedicate our energies to transforming our dreams into reality.

I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream. Hope is an ontological need ... We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water.

— Paulo Freire, 1994/2021
Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 16

But of course, although I retain my insistence that searching for echoes of utopia is an urgent and necessary task to facilitate the re-awakening of our imaginations, the primary goal of utopian thought is to *imagine* utopia (Levitas, 2013), not merely recognize it. In contrast, I see the field of (critical) futures studies as being more concerned with the task of transforming our dreams into reality (Inayatullah, 2013): a practical utopianism. It is not enough to simply *look* for utopia – *we have to dream it; we have to make it ourselves*. Utopia is here, if only we let it be.

What does it take to make utopia? Sometimes this can be as simple as finding a moment of reprieve in a bustling city, a space in the shadows of perpetual surveillance, to step outside the boundaries of “acceptable behaviour” (and by this I mean laws that are more concerned with the preservation of property than the flourishing of life). Sometimes all we need to make utopia is a sharpie and two or three seconds of spare time.

This act is deceptively simple but remarkably profound. It is planting the seeds of utopia, prompting thousands of passersby to wonder:

What if things were different?

— Andi C. Buchanan, 2020
Ōmarino
in *Rebuilding Tomorrow*, p. 168

This small act of civil disobedience is a call for revolution and a micro-lesson in what Michael Godhe and Luke Goode (2018) refer to as “futures literacy” (p. 154): the ability to imagine, anticipate, evaluate, and respond to a wide range of possible futures.

One of my hopes for my major research project has been to accomplish a similar task: to prompt a renewed attention to notions of futurity within the realm of consumer/survivor peer support, albeit in many more words. And, perhaps even, *too many* words: this same task may be just as easily accomplished by a single word scrawled on the side of a payphone, as an offering and a call to action, as if to ask of us:

“utopia...?”

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I want to acknowledge how this research project has been shaped by a variety of lifeforms-in-relation: my MRP supervision team; peer support communities; friends, colleagues, and acquaintances; and cats, fungi, and plants. My thinking process over the past year has been heavily shaped by these conversations and intra-actions, through which I have been encouraged to explore new ideas, entry points, and ways of knowing and being and thinking and feeling and dreaming.

Thank you to my supervisor and advisor for this project, Rachel da Silveira Gorman and nancy viva davis halifax, for encouraging me to re-connect with creative scholarship this past year through poetry, storytelling, and zine-making – practices that I have spent years longing to find my way back to. Thanks as well for directing me toward readings which (re)sparked my interest in topics of temporality and futurity – particularly Sami Schalk’s (2018) *Bodyminds Reimagined* and Alison Kafer’s (2013) *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, a book that had been sitting on my reading list for several years. Special thanks to nancy for directing me toward practices of diffractive reading, and to Rachel for the recommending the book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013). Thanks as well to my “secret advisor” Ameil Joseph at McMaster University for agreeing to supervise my directed readings course this spring, giving me the opportunity to further immerse myself within theories of futurity, as well as for listening to my MRP plans and encouraging me to dig deeper into the stories and lessons held within plant and fungal life as an entry point for dreaming new futures.

Over the past decade, I have learned so much about the ethics and practices of peer support, mutual aid, and community care: through practice, in relationship, in community. This work is dedicated to these communities: the Hamilton Mad Students’ Collective (2012-2016), the Gay Delivery Service (2018), MSU Maccess (2018-2021), and the Pandemic Park Pals (2021-2022). Thank you for teaching and learning with me.

I want to thank a number of people for listening to me describe my ideas over the past year, engaging in discussion, and adding their own perspectives for me to dream on. Some of these conversations have been one-time events, while others have been prolonged discussions.

So, thank you:

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My thinking for Chapter 1 originally emerged as I prepared my “dreaming together” workshop for the 2022 OPDI conference (Prowse, 2022b). Through facilitating this workshop with a small group of attendees, I came to truly understand – in an embodied sense – how necessary dreaming is for our sector, selves, and souls.

I presented an earlier iteration of Chapter 2 at the 2023 PeerWorks conference (Prowse, 2023). During our discussion afterwards, I was amazed at how quickly attendees were recognizing the discourses of “work as recovery” at play even within our own sector, as well as diffracting experiences of exploitation through other discourses which justify and naturalize a reliance on un(der)paid labour. I hope that, as a sector, we can continue to draw these connections between oppressive systems as one small step toward constructing futures of cross-movement solidarity.

The foundation for Chapter 3 was developed initially through conversation with my friend Roché Keane, and was further developed through discussion with the students of Social Work 744 at McMaster University. This experience was particularly meaningful to me, as I began to truly understand how making space to trouble the dominant “origin story” and reification of peer

support opened up possibilities for people to identify naturally-occurring practices of mutual support that were always already occurring within their communities.

Ameil Joseph, my supervisor for my directed readings course, encouraged me to continue thinking about the role of fungi and flora – characters which play a starring role in Chapter 4. This chapter was also developed in conversation and collaboration with my purple basil plants, by reflecting on the memories and lessons they hold for me.

Thank you to my purple basil plants for the delicious lemonade and the embodied reminder of community. Thank you to all the plants I share home with, for being in community and relation with me: for purifying the air, for keeping me company, and helping me keep track of the days during the past three years of isolation.

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Lastly, thank you to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for supporting this research through a Canada Graduate Scholarship.

The views and opinions expressed throughout this research paper are my own, and do not necessarily reflect the position of any organizations or groups with which I am affiliated. Likewise, the perspectives I share within this paper reflect my thinking process in the present, and will likely continue to develop and shift over time.

ABSTRACT

Drawing on practices of diffractive reading supported by zine-making methods, throughout this major research paper I explore the question: “what could a lens of futurity offer the world of consumer/survivor peer support?”

In Chapter 1, I engage in a theoretical dialogue between the realm of peer support and notions of futurity to demonstrate the benefits and alignment of a futural (re)turn within the peer support sector, setting the stage for the rest of my analysis.

In Chapter 2, I explicate the ways – the whys and hows – that peer supporters are exploited by the psychiatric industrial complex under neoliberal rule, grounded in a historical approach that draws on the frameworks of confluence (Joseph, 2015) and neoliberalism (Moussa, 2019) so that we may “learn from the past” (Butler, 2000, p. 166) in order to better anticipate the future.

In Chapter 3, I explore how the peer support sector is itself implicated in upholding systems of oppression (white supremacy, Western dominance, colonization, and colonialism) by troubling the “peer support origin story” and the current demographics of the field, as well as identifying what futures are currently in construction.

Lastly, in Chapter 4, I explore how we can draw on the lessons of funga and flora to both locate ourselves within the present and dream peer support futures beyond the limits of realism.

OVERVIEW

The purpose of this research project is to explore what a lens of futurity could offer the world of psychiatric consumer/survivor (c/s) peer support. To think around this research question, I draw on notions of futurity/utopia/dream(ing) and engage in practices of diffractive reading supported by zine-making methods. The following chapters can be read separately or together, in any order: none of them require the context of earlier chapters to be understood, although reading them together will support a more entangled understanding of their premises.

In Chapter 1, I read the pasts and philosophies of c/s peer support through a lens of futurity, looking for echoes of futurity/utopia/dream(ing) within the development and practices of the field. To do so, I explore the origins of mental health peer support within the c/s movement, as well as key texts within the contemporary field – the values and theories of peer support. My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate how notions of futurity are always already at play within the discipline of peer support, thus demonstrating the relevance of bringing a (renewed) futural turn to the world of peer support scholarship and practice and setting the stage for the rest of my research. Drawing on my own experiences as a peer worker currently engaged in macro-level work within the sector, I argue for the need for a renewed attention to notions of futurity and the development of dreaming practices within the peer support sector on an organizational and sectoral level.

In Chapter 2, I identify and trouble an emerging discourse of “work *as* recovery” which frames the value of peer support in terms of its benefits for peer support *workers*. I diffract this discourse through two comparable discourses across time: the discourse of work (as) therapy within 19th-20th century insane asylums (Reaume, 2006) and that of “work as rehabilitation” underpinning contemporary sheltered workshops (Linton, 2021), as well as connecting these phenomena to the prison industrial complex and the legacy of slavery. This process of re-turning allows me to identify some of the potential future material impacts of this discourse if it were permitted to become

dominant. This chapter draws on an analysis of confluence (Joseph, 2015) and neoliberalism (Moussa, 2019) to reveal how these discourses serve common projects of state cost-reduction by justifying the labour exploitation of Mad, chronically ill, disabled, incarcerated, and marginalized people more generally under the guise of psycho/social/vocational intervention. In doing so, it offers a warning sign for possible dystopian futures within the peer support sector, and points toward the need for an increased commitment to solidarity and cross-movement organizing.

In Chapter 3, I re-turn (to) the “peer support origin story” outlined in Chapter 1 that identifies peer support practices as originating from within the psychiatric c/s movement, with the goal of troubling and complicating this dominant narrative to reveal what other stories and genealogies of mutual support are obscured in the process of its (re)telling. To do so, I trouble the (largely unacknowledged) white/Western underpinnings of the historical and contemporary c/s and Mad movements (Gorman et al., 2013; Reaume, 2021; Jackson, 2002) and the current demographics of the peer support field (Taylor Newberry Consulting et al., 2014) to identify how c/s peer support theory and practice is shaped by white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021). This analysis allows me to explore what (colonial and colonizing) futures are currently in construction through the exaltation of this narrative and the reification of peer support,¹ as well as to explore alternatives. I outline possibilities for ethical engagement with other genealogies of mutual support that arise from distinct historical, social, cultural, and material contexts that are currently obscured by the telling of the “peer support origin story” as if it is the only story to tell.

In Chapter 4, I explore what the field of mycology – the study of fungi – can offer the peer support sector, exploring the lessons we can learn from parasitic fungi as well as (mycorrhizal) mycelia: the underground network of fungal roots that is deeply entangled with all other plant and

¹ By “reification of peer support” I mean the development of “peer support” as a term which refers to more than just the sum of its linguistic parts (support provided between peers); the solidification of peer support into a “thing” of its own which carries its own implicit values, practices, and standards: Peer Support as a proper noun.

animal life (Stamets, 2005). I develop my thinking by designing an imaginary “mycosystem” – an ecosystem connected via a common mycelial network – inhabited by purple basil plants. I explore the stories of relationality that these plants represent, as well as a more functional exploration of how fungi and their symbionts operate, reproduce, interact, and connect in interdependent and entangled relationships. Drawing on fungal and floral life as an entry point to imagine alternative futures grounded in ethical and relational engagements allows me to circumvent the trap of realism and dream beyond the boundaries of the “futur[al] imaginary” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 124). The goal of this chapter is to develop a dream for the peer support sector grounded in an ethics of relational entanglement, so that we can begin to intentionally move towards it. It begins to develop a model for the peer support sector which is explicitly personal, partial, and provisional; and, therefore, flexible: it serves as an invitation for readers to re-turn their own relational stories and to bring new life – plants, animals, bugs, bacteria, &c. – into this emerging collective mycosystem.

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INTRODUCTION

What could a lens of futurity offer the world of consumer/survivor peer support?

This is the overarching research question I explore throughout my major research project,² by drawing on notions of futurity as articulated across a broad variety of disciplines, including futures studies, utopian studies, Afrofuturism, disability/crip futurism, speculative fiction, politicized dreamwork, and critical pedagogy. Although there is a clear link between the peer support sector and themes of dreams, futurity, and utopia – connections which I begin to outline in [Chapter 1](#) – few scholars have explicitly explored the realm of peer support through this lens (with one notable exception being Mx. Yaffa A.S., 2022).

Following a theoretical dialogue between the realm of peer support and notions of futurity ([Chapter 1](#)), the remaining three chapters are loosely structured around Sohail Inayatullah's (2008) framework of *The Futures Triangle*, a futures studies methodology which explores the “weights of history” (barriers to change; [Chapter 2](#)), “pushes of the present” (current trends and emerging issues; [Chapter 3](#)), and “pulls of the future” (imagined alternatives; [Chapter 4](#)) to identify which futures may be possible.

Throughout my major research paper, I draw on methods of textual analysis as a way of thinking *around* my overarching research question. I explore texts in the form of theory, discourse, and story, along with their material impacts, by drawing on the postqualitative new materialist methodology of diffractive reading, as developed by Donna Haraway and Karen Barad (Ulmer, 2016). Diffractive reading is a method of “slow scholarship” (Mountz et al., 2015; Murris & Zhao,

² I use the term “major research project” to describe both this write-up (or “major research paper”) as well as the more practical, pedagogical components of this exploration and intervention: developing my thought process and encouraging the use of a lens of futurity through workshops, presentations, and discussion.

2022, p. 112), a process of “re-turning” (Barad, 2014, p. 168) by reading texts through one another – as well as our own experiences – to reveal what new insights may emerge:

Diffraction functions as an analytical kaleidoscope; with each turn of the kaleidoscope, analyses multiply as data are diffracted into different arrays of patterns.

— Jasmine Ulmer, 2016

Diffraction as a Method of Critical Policy Analysis, p. 1382

We might imagine re-turning as a multiplicity of processes, such as the kinds earthworms revel in while helping to make compost or otherwise being busy at work and at play: turning the soil over and over – ingesting and excreting it, tunnelling through it, burrowing, all means of aerating the soil, allowing oxygen in, opening it up and breathing new life into it.³

— Karen Barad, 2014

Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart, p. 168

To develop my analysis, I engaged in practices of diffractive re-turning through zine-making methods, which provided me a low-pressure space for me to play with ideas and explore their “intra-actions” (Murriss & Bozalek, 2022) – the ways that ideas/texts/bodyminds are not separate “beings” per se, but rather, entangled phenomena, always in a process of “becoming” (Kuby & Zhao, 2022) through relation (Murriss & Bozalek, 2022). In other words, intra-action asks: “what is *produced* among/between/within relationships of humans, more-than-humans, plants, animals, discourses, policies?” (Murriss & Bozalek, 2022, p. 36, emphasis added).

Last year, as I was beginning to work on my MSW thesis on peer support institutionalization (Prowse, 2022a), I had the pleasure of listening to my friend Twoey Gray read from her new zine, *Not Home: True Stories from Abandoned Places* (2022) over Instagram live. Although I have made several zines over the years, I have found this practice to be difficult to maintain under the weight of the academy; Twoey’s zine reading inspired me to return to this practice. Over the course of my MSW

³ Thanks as well to nancy davis viva halifax, who shared this earthy diffraction with us during class.

thesis, I made a series of zines that helped me explore the alignments between peer support and my research methodology (institutional ethnography).

The insights I developed throughout this process led me to continue drawing on zine-making by making it central to this major research project. Over the past year, I created a series of zines exploring notions of futurity and peer support, through which I diffracted texts through one another as well as my own experiences as a peer worker. The majority of these zines were comprised of diffractive mini-essays, many of which currently remain as drafts in states of half-completion. I also created another zine – a “DreamBook” – containing quotes and images relating to topics of futurity, which I could consult throughout my research process in order to (re)ground myself. The following chapters are yet another re-turning of these ideas, as they took new form.

Throughout this diffractive zine-making process, I draw on/in a broad range of theoretical contributions through an ethico-onto-epistemology (Kuby & Bozalek, 2022) – an entangled orientation towards ethics, being, and knowing. This ethico-onto-epistemological orientation supports a holistic exploration of consumer/survivor peer support in relation to a wide range of topics, including: futurity, utopia, dream(ing)s, hope, and recovery ([Chapter 1](#)); labour exploitation, work therapy, sheltered workshops, prison labour, and slavery ([Chapter 2](#)); storytelling, discourses of inclusion, white supremacy, Western dominance, colonization, and colonialism ([Chapter 3](#)); and funga, flora, alienation, rest, and community ([Chapter 4](#)).

I am particularly drawn to Paula Cameron’s notion of “seamfulness” in relation to zine-making and depression, described within a zine (2012b) nestled within a PhD dissertation (2012c), both of the same name. Seamfulness is an “ethical-aesthetic strategy” (Cameron, 2012a, p. 423) that embraces loose threads and discontinuities as a way of demonstrating vulnerability and subjectivity in (re)presenting the limits of our knowledge.

for me, out of the space of “illness” grew a way of living these questions [like “how should we live?”]. i call this way of being “seamfulness” – the rough-edged beauty that comes from gathering piecemeal stories of experience, stories building and re-building us from the inside out.

— Paula Cameron, 2012b

Seamfulness

in *Seamfulness: Nova Scotian Women Witness Depression Through Zines*, p. 32

Zines, too, are seamful: the act of turning a page creates a temporal opening that serves as an invitation to pause, contemplate, and diffract content through our own experiences. Much of this major research paper is the result of stitching together a variety of zine entries, which, through zine-making and thinking *around* my research topic, I began to recognize as be(com)ing in relation to one another. And yet, I have attempted to maintain some of these generative discontinuities when reconstructing them in the form of larger essays. Throughout, I draw on the use of quotes and empty space as a way of momentarily pulling the reader out of the text and into the seams: as an invitation for personal contemplation.

Over the past year, my reflections on futurity have continued to develop, as they have been re-turned through new experiences and ideas. This major research paper serves as a record of the development of my thinking process, in and through time, shaped and re-formed by time itself: originally, Chapter 2 was written during the winter; Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 were drafted in the spring; and Chapter 4 sprouted during the early summer. Each of these chapters reflect the topics I was thinking about at the time – and how – which, at times, are only tangentially related to other chapters. This is to say, these chapters are seamful: temporally, thematically, and methodologically.

This major research paper is only one component – the academic write-up – of a larger research project dedicated to encouraging a futural (re)turn within the peer support sector. During the 2022 and 2023 OPDI/PeerWorks conferences, I facilitated two workshops (Prowse, 2022b; Prowse & Allen, 2023) and one presentation (Prowse, 2023) relating to notions of futurity, with the

goal of developing our “futures literacy” (Godhe & Goode, 2018, p. 154) skills – our ability to imagine, anticipate, evaluate, and respond to a wide range of possible futures. In other words, they functioned as an encouragement for us to flex our dreaming muscles: to practice imagining the world otherwise. As well, I gave away copies of my zines to attendees at the 2023 PeerWorks conference, including my DreamBook and three illustrated comics summarizing my MSW thesis.

My analysis is fundamentally shaped by my temporal and social standpoint: the pasts that have shaped my perspectives; what has become visible and obscured from my standpoint in the present; and the futures I want to dream into existence. My pasts have been shaped by my own identities and social locations, as a chronically ill/pained, disabled, Mad, queer white settler living on lands known by the Neutral people as Attiwandaronia, and studying on lands known to the Mohawk people as Tkaronto – two areas governed by the Dish with One Spoon covenant. My politics and perspectives on peer support have been shaped by my past involvement within peer support communities, primarily within grassroots, student, community, and consumer/survivor contexts.⁴

Likewise, what is in/visible to me is shaped by my presence in the present: as a graduate student in the field of critical disability studies, a board member of the organization PeerWorks, and as a peer supporter currently taking time off from the realm of direct support. These roles shape which phenomena I can perceive from my current standpoint, and how. Just as these standpoints allow me to become aware of certain phenomena, they simultaneously obscure others.

This research is also shaped by my own politics and desired futures, for the peer support sector and the world as a whole. It has been shaped by my commitment to an ongoing process of (un)learning and experimentation in pursuit of discovering how I can best act in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities and peer workers: to work toward be(com)ing a “co-conspirator for decolonial futures” (Habtom & Scribe, 2020, p. 1; Myers, 2021). As a white settler, I

⁴ I describe my history with peer support more fulsomely in Chapter 1 of my MSW thesis (Prowse, 2022a).

feel an ethical obligation to leverage my power in service of unsettling and decolonizing; yet, I acknowledge that my perspectives will always be limited by my identities and social realities, even as they are guided by the insights of racialized activists, artists, community members, and scholars.

I invite you, the reader, to continue the work I begin here: to learn *with* (rather than from) me, to infuse and cross-pollinate this research with your own experiences and knowledges. This research is not intended to (re)present “objective” or “expert” knowledge – all knowing is subjective. I reject the very notion of expertise, because, as Tyrone Gamble (as quoted by Prowse, 2022a) notes, it reinforces the colonial notion that “[only some people] have knowledge that’s essential and outside of that ... other people’s expertise don’t compare” (p. 91). We all have valuable knowledge, and all of our knowledges are essential in the path toward liberation; toward dreaming and crafting new futures, by transforming the world, together.

Instead, I encourage you to read this major research paper as an offering and an invitation for collaboration: to explore new lenses through which we can diffract our experiences, to explore the seams further, to think and feel and dream *with* me about and through these ideas. At its heart, this paper is a journal: it reflects a journey of (un)learning, of discovery, of finding new ideas to play with, new lenses through which to understand our work. Process in both description and design, the goal of this paper is to be *generative*, rather than offer conclusions per se.

Throughout the following pages, I explore a wide variety of topics and themes. Think of references like landmarks: as resources to learn more about the ideas I am building upon, in order to re-orient yourself. At times, you may find yourself getting lost. It is OK to get lost: wandering through the forest can be a generative process, through which we can discover new terrain and species of fungi. This may be an invitation to pause in the seams: to see what ideas are coming up for you, even if they feel disconnected (everything is connected). Trust that at some point we will find our way back to each other.

①

THINKING THROUGH FUTURITY:
PEER SUPPORT AS A DREAM

Utopia is within us — it is not something that we need to learn the theory of in a classroom, it is built from deep within our lived experience.

— Mx. Yaffa A.S., 2022
*Beyond Utopia: The Building Utopia Guide
for Queer and Trans Muslims*, p. 544

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, large numbers of psychiatric patients were released from hospitals across Turtle Island.⁵ This policy change was known as *deinstitutionalization*, and represented a movement away from institutionalized care toward providing mental health care in the community.⁶

Inside psychiatric hospitals, patients faced abuse, coercion, and dehumanization.⁷ However, a lack of community supports following deinstitutionalization left mad people feeling isolated, lonely, and without the supports they needed.⁸

As a result, former psychiatric patients started coming together to hangout, build community, and support one another.⁹ Sharing their stories with each other allowed them to see how their experiences of mistreatment were shaped by forces of oppression, which later became known as *mentalism*¹⁰ or *sanism*.¹¹ They started organizing and advocating: for the right to choose (and refuse) treatment,¹² for the right to vote,¹³ for alternatives to psychiatric care such as peer support,¹⁴ and more.

Peer support began as a dream for the future: a dream that we could support one another instead of (or as well as) accessing clinical care. Fifty years later, peer supporters are living proof that we can make dreams come true!

⁵ Barbara Everett (1994); Geoffrey Reaume (2002)

⁶ Marina Morrow (2013)

⁷ Jean Campbell (2005); Barbara Everett (1994); Anne Scott & Carolyn Doughty (2012)

⁸ Jean Campbell (2005); Nancy Tomes (2006)

⁹ Barbara Everett (1994)

¹⁰ Judi Chamberlin (1978/2012b, p. 66)

¹¹ Michael Perlin (1992); Jennifer Poole, Tania Jivraj, Araxi Arslanian, Kristen Bellows, Sheila Chiasson, Husnia Hakimy, Jessica Pasini, & Jenna Reid (2012)

¹² Shinjini Bakshi (2021); Judi Chamberlin (1990)

¹³ As described by Geoffrey Reaume (2003), psychiatric patients in Ontario gained the right to vote in provincial and municipal elections in 1985 as a result of advocacy from the ex-patient group On Our Own alongside lawyers from the Advocacy Resource Centre for the Handicapped (ARCH) – a right that was extended to federal elections in 1988.

¹⁴ Barbara Everett (1994)

This is a story that I have told many times over the years, in many forms, to many audiences. At the 2022 Ontario Peer Development Initiative (OPDI) conference, I shared this story as the introduction to a workshop I facilitated encouraging peer support workers to dream about the futures we want to see, so that we can intentionally move towards them (Prowse, 2022b).

There are three main reasons I share/d this story. First, it serves to locate (present) practices of mental health peer support as one component of a larger social movement – the psychiatric consumer/survivor (c/s) movement – as well as to contextualize them within the historical, social, and material conditions from which they emerged.¹⁵ Second, this story frames c/s peer support as inherently counter-professional:¹⁶ as a response to the limitations and harms associated with professional care, and as an alternative (or complement) to mainstream models of support.¹⁷ Third, this story demonstrates how the c/s movement emerged as a dream for a better future, proposing alternative ways of understanding and responding to experiences of mental distress.

Social movements emphasize the importance of both imagining and building alternative futures, in order to respond to the challenges and limitations of the present. In the context of the c/s movement, peer support emerged as a method for transforming this dream into reality, by creating alternatives to mainstream models of mental healthcare and the institutions within which they reside. Clearly, a lens of futurity is relevant to the field of c/s peer support; dreaming has always been at the heart of the c/s movement as a building block for utopia.

¹⁵ At the same time, I acknowledge the harms of re-centring this dominant narrative – I return to trouble it in [Chapter 3](#).

¹⁶ Although psychiatric survivors tend to be associated with a more abolitionist antipsychiatry stance (Adame, 2014; Burstow, 2017; Daya et al., 2020), the same cannot be said of psychiatric consumers, which are more likely to work towards system reform with/in the system (Everett, 1994). I found the language of “counter-professional” as a common orientation by reading analyses of Black women’s speculative fiction, through Sami Schalk’s (2018b) discussion of how “the use of metaphor and nonrealism are both essential to this *counter-(rather than anti-)* historical task of the neo-slave narrative genre” (p. 37, emphasis added).

¹⁷ Another story that emphasizes the counter-professional nature of c/s peer support is that of the formation of the Mental Patients’ Association (MPA) in British Columbia, in 1970. For more on the origins of the MPA, see Lanny Beckman (1997), Lanny Beckman & Megan Davies (2013), and Judi Chamberlin (1978/2012b); for more on the operations of the MPA, see Judi Chamberlin (1978/2012c).

NO; FUTURE:

HOPE AS REFUSAL OF THE MENTAL PATIENT ROLE

We need to start encouraging people to dream, and to articulate their own visions of their own futures. We may not achieve all our dreams, but hoping and wishing are food for the human spirit.

— Judi Chamberlin, 1998
Confessions of a Noncompliant Patient, p. 52

In this first section, I read theoretical perspectives on peer support through a lens of futurity. These contributions include Shery Mead, David Hilton, and Laurie Curtis's (2001) theoretical conceptualization of recovery and peer support vis-à-vis the mental patient role, Judi Chamberlin's (1998) *Confessions of a Noncompliant Patient*, and the identification of hope as a core value of peer support. These theoretical contributions allow me to reveal how notions of futurity are already at work and play within peer support theory and practice.

Shery Mead et al. (2001) describe how mad people internalize a mental patient role through our interactions with the psychiatric system. Through this process of patient-becoming, we learn to doubt our own judgement and submit to psychiatric "expertise" (Chamberlin, 1978/2012a). In *Confessions of a Noncompliant Patient*, Judi Chamberlin (1998) describes how dependency is enforced in psychiatric hospitals under the language of compliance, through which mad people are made to believe that professionals know what is in our best interests better than we do ourselves; she writes that "patients are constantly indoctrinated with the message ... that we are defective human beings who should not aim too high" (p. 51). Mental patients become figured as symbols of "no future,"¹⁸ as our hopes and dreams are reframed as evidence of "'grandiosity' and 'lack of insight'" (p. 51).

¹⁸ I am thinking here of Alison Kafer's (2013b) description of Noam Ostrander's (2008) interviews with young Black men with spinal cord injuries in Chicago. For these men, futures of imprisonment and/or paralyzation/death by gunshot wounds are interpreted by others as an inevitability; disability, then, becomes "the sign that one never had a future in the first place" (p. 33). However, whereas "loss is not the defining frame [for these men] because there was nothing to 'lose'" (p. 33), Shery Mead et al.'s (2001) mental patient role is articulated as a loss of self-determination and futurity.

However, frameworks of recovery and c/s peer support stress the need for mad people to reclaim our futures and dream for ourselves. Shery Mead et al. (2001) write that “recovery lies in undoing the cultural process of developing careers as ‘mental patients’ ... by practicing relationships in a different way” (pp. 135–136) – through peer relationships grounded in principles of mutuality and interdependence, as opposed to hierarchal and professionalized relationships that foster dependence. Likewise, Judi Chamberlin (1998) reframes compliance as coerced dependence, and non-compliance as a form of healthy assertiveness that enables us to move toward our own self-determined goals, instead of “internaliz[ing] the staff’s very limited vision of [our] potential” (p. 51).¹⁹

Being a good patient helps to get you out of the hospital, but being a bad patient helps you get back to real life.

— Judi Chamberlin, 1998
Confessions of a Noncompliant Patient, p. 49

It is no wonder, then, why hope has repeatedly been emphasized as one of the core values of mental health peer support (Chamberlin, 1998; Cyr et al., 2016; Mead, 2019; Peer Support Canada, n.d.; Stratford et al., 2019; Sunderland et al., 2013). The model of *Intentional Peer Support* (IPS) developed by Shery Mead (2019) describes the importance of “moving from fear to hope and possibility”; instead of a focus on moving away from the things we don’t want in our lives (a deficit/fear-based approach, often focused on goals of “symptom reduction”), IPS emphasizes moving towards the things we *do* want, and the lives that we want to live (a strengths/hope-based approach).

¹⁹ In [Chapter 3](#), I return to this characterization of recovery to explore who is believed to have “never had a future in the first place” (Kafer, 2013b, p. 33): a future to ‘lose,’ and thus, reclaim.

(NO) TIME FOR THE FUTURE:

NONPROFITIZATION AND/AS MACRO-LEVEL PEER DRIFT

It would be easy to claim we cannot afford the luxury of speculating on positive futures when all our critical energies are required for fighting battles in the present. ... But this may be a false dilemma: not only can the rearguard fight for survival co-exist with contemplation of better possible futures, it can surely be energized and enriched by it.

— Luke Goode & Michael Godhe, 2017
Beyond Capitalist Realism – Why We Need Critical Future Studies, p. 126

In 1991, the Ontario NDP government led by Premier Bob Rae invited each ministry to submit proposals for its economic investment strategy. The Ministry of Health proposed an investment of \$3.1 million in funds for the development of *consumer/survivor initiatives* (CSIs): organizations run by and for psychiatric consumers and survivors. As a result, the Consumer/Survivor Development Initiative (CSDI) was developed to fund and support these new organizations.²⁰

Under this framework, CSIs were required to be independent from mainstream mental health services, and were not permitted to replicate traditional client/provider service paradigms. Instead, they were meant to develop new models of support grounded in principles of mutuality and collectivity.²¹

However, in 1996, under a new Conservative government led by Premier Mike Harris, the Ministry of Health became concerned by the organizational challenges that were faced by CSIs.²² Because these organizations were completely staffed by people hired for their lived experiences, rather than their ability to run a business, some growing pains were to be expected.²³

However, instead of providing temporary mentorship and support to these new organizations,²³ the Ministry of Health removed the requirement of independence, thereby allowing CSIs to merge with mainstream mental health services and setting the stage for the institutionalized futures of the present.²²

Over forty autonomous CSIs emerged in Ontario throughout the 1990s; today, only eight or so remain independent.²⁴

²⁰ John Trainor & David Reville (2014)

²¹ John Trainor, Marnie Shepherd, Katherine Boydell, Allyson Leff, & Elaine Crawford (1997)

²² Geoffrey Nelson, Rich Janzen, John Trainor, & Joanna Ochocka (2008)

²³ Tanya Shute & Laura Hall (2019)

²⁴ A. Lee de Bie (2020); Tanya Shute & Allan Strong (2023)

As this story demonstrates, in many ways CSIs were set up to fail. Over the past decades, c/s peer support has faced rapid institutionalization within healthcare systems and governmental funding regimes; like any social movement that threatens the status quo, our radical politics and philosophies have been absorbed, assimilated, and domesticated to provide the illusion of progress while further cementing the status quo by impeding our ability to create meaningful change.

In the context of peer support, institutionalization is typically referred to as “the system-level process by which the field gained legitimacy, became embedded within the official administrative structures of the mental healthcare system, and expanded” (Adams, 2020, p. 3). However, this definition obscures how c/s peer support in Ontario had already been institutionalized prior to this development, through the incorporation of CSDI and CSIs within the non-profit industrial complex – a development which directly led to the absorption of CSIs within the mental health system, despite the initial funding agreement being designed to preserve their autonomy.

In this section, I re-turn the histories of the peer support sector through the lens of the non-profit industrial complex to reveal how the sector has been shaped by its acceptance of systematic funding from the state: in short, as our goals and politics have been co-opted and corrupted, we have forgotten how to dream. Acknowledging the non-profit industrial complex as another site of institutionalization helps us understand how this development has shaped the pasts, presents, and futures of the c/s peer support sector, thus allowing us to engage with the numerous critiques of the non-profit industrial complex more generally as well as its impacts.

The Consumer/Survivor Development Initiative (CSDI) has gone by several names since its conception in 1991: in 2001, it was renamed the Ontario Peer Development Initiative (OPDI), and

in 2022, the organization changed its name once again, to PeerWorks (PeerWorks, n.d.).²⁵ I have had the pleasure of serving on the OPDI/PeerWorks board of directors since 2019, working alongside board members, staff, and peer workers from our member organizations across the province. This experience has given me the opportunity to advocate for the needs of the sector, as well as deepen my understanding of peer work on a provincial level.

Over the years, however, I have come to notice how much of our work and planning as a non-profit organization – on both an organizational and sectoral level – has related to meeting the demands of funders (i.e. the state), as well as responding to the many interconnected threats currently faced by the sector: peer drift, institutionalization, loss of CSI autonomy, and years of chronic underfunding. In other words, it seems to me that much of our planning work is coming from a place of *fear* rather than hope.

Peer drift refers to a process through which peer support workers “[lose] their grounding in peer values and [adopt] more clinical approaches” (de Bie, 2020, p. 725) such as “telling peers what they should do instead of listening; focusing on people’s diagnoses instead of their recovery; or being uncomfortable or ashamed of one’s lived experience and recovery story” (World Health Organization, 2019, p. 27). Peer drift may be more prevalent within institutionalized peer support settings due to systematic and structural pressures for assimilation; in my previous research (Prowse, 2022a), I heard stories from peer supporters about how they were expected by their organizations and colleagues to adhere to clinical expectations around documentation and disclosure.

Although peer values are typically described in relation to direct support work, I believe that they can and should be reflected in the way we conduct work on a macro level as well – both as organizations, and as a sector as a whole. And yet, I do not always feel like we are embodying the

²⁵ Throughout this paper, I refer to this organization by all three names, depending on what it was called during the time period I am referencing.

value of hope in our organizing work. I conceptualize this dominance of fear-based organizing strategies as another manifestation of peer drift, operating on a macro level: as a result of our institutionalization within governmental funding regimes, we have lost our grounding in hope and began to operate more like our bureaucratic and clinical counterparts.

This trend is reflective of systemic and structural pressures that result from the trap of nonprofitization more generally. Madonna Thunder Hawk (2007) describes how the emergence of the non-profit industrial complex impacted native organizing by deflecting attention from (and limiting) activism goals under the manufactured scarcity and urgency of securing and maintaining governmental funding. When our work becomes institutionalized within the non-profit industrial complex, our actions become ruled by the fear of funding loss, a structure which rewards meeting short-term goals dictated by funders over long-term dreaming and strategizing from within.

The focus turned to raising money to keep the organization going, while the actual work of activism became secondary and watered down. And when the money disappeared, the work did too. Before, we focused on how to organize to make change, but now most people will only work within funding parameters.

— Madonna Thunder Hawk, 2007
Native Organizing Before the Non-Profit Industrial Complex
in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, p. 105

Environments of fear and urgency are enforced and internalized through the logics of the non-profit industrial complex. Tema Okun (2021) identifies fear and urgency as two characteristics of white supremacy culture: “the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, *teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value*” (p. 4, emphasis in text). This ideology is constructed around “the norms of white middle-class and owning class culture” (p. 6), and specifically targets Black, Indigenous, and racialized people for violence, harm, and domination. Yet, as Tema Okun (2021) notes, white supremacy is toxic to all of us:

White supremacy culture invites white people into a silencing, a numbing, and a disconnection from our basic humanity in service of a false safety based on the idea that those of us who are white are both better and normal.

— Tema Okun, 2021
White Supremacy Culture – Still Here, p. 5

Within the nightmare of white supremacy culture, hope, rest, and dream can be powerful tools in refusing the colonial status quo (Hersey, 2022). How, then, can we learn to dream once more? How can we (re)centre the value of hope – not just within our direct support work, but our macro-level organizing as well? This has been one of my goals in the creation of this research project: in addition to exploring a variety of potential futures for the peer support sector, I have developed several workshops for the peer sector focused on exploring topics of futurity. This has been an exercise to develop our “futures literacy” (Godhe & Goode, 2018, p. 154)²⁶ skills and flex our dreaming muscles, so that we can (re)centre our hopes and dreams in organizing for change – and begin once again working to transform these dreams into reality.

During my initial workshop in the fall (introduced at the beginning of this chapter), I invited participants to reflect on their personal values and brainstorm / freewrite on ideal futures – futures both for themselves, as well as the broader world. This values-based dreaming process was inspired by my understanding of peer support as a values-based practice grounded within the histories of the c/s movement, and designed to provide an entry point to discussions of futurity that would feel both relevant and familiar to peer supporters. Our personal and collective values provide us with an entry point \ a portal \ to imagine new worlds; a prybar with which we can begin to open up the future, to wonder: “*what if things were different?*” (Buchanan, 2020, p. 168).²⁷

²⁶ “Futures literacy” refers to our ability to imagine, anticipate, evaluate, and respond to a wide range of possible futures (Godhe & Goode, 2018).

²⁷ In this short story set in a post-apocalyptic world, the two main characters – one Deaf, one autistic – come together to imagine (and build) a new community grounded in their auditory sensory needs.

NO FUTURE?:

(RE)IMAGINING PATHWAYS FOR PEER ADVANCEMENT

One pressing concern within the c/s peer support sector is the lack of opportunities for professional advancement. Although some opportunities exist in the form of becoming a peer support supervisor or the manager of a peer support program, these positions remain few and far between. This lack of opportunities can make it difficult for peer support workers to imagine a future for themselves, within which they can move on from direct peer support to a different role.

Similarly to Shery Mead et al.'s (2001) articulation of the “mental patient role,” the peer support role is figured as future-less: there is little room to imagine ourselves doing anything other than what we are doing at the present. At the same time, there *are* possible futures beyond the realm of direct practice, and many peer supporters do move on to other roles. However, not all of these roles are within the realm of peer support.

The temporality of the peer support role is complicated and contradictory. At the same time as being futureless, peer support has also been conceptualized as a “stepping-stone back into employment” (Walker & Bryant, 2013, p. 29), presumably referring to employment outside of the peer support sector.²⁸ This interpretation is supported by the research of Griffin Epstein, Dawnmarie Harriott, Andre Hermanstynne, Suwaida Farah, Madelyn Gold, Lindsay Jennings, Michael Nurse, Maria Scotton and Julia Walter (2023) on the experiences of peer workers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), who found that mainstream social service organizations typically conceptualize peer roles as “a form of ‘supported’ employment” through which peers can work towards moving into “more ‘mainstream’ [non-peer] work in service provision” (p. 11).²⁹ The pull

²⁸ The white supremacist construct of “professionalism” – which I explore in [Chapter 3](#) – also raises questions about for whom peer support is a “stepping stone,” and for whom it is a “dead end” (Epstein et al., 2023, p. 28). Griffin Epstein et al. (2023) note that Black and Indigenous peer workers in particular are often passed over for job opportunities.

²⁹ In [Chapter 2](#), I explore how discursively framing peer support as a “stepping stone” and a form of “supported employment” shapes the experiences of peer support workers by creating avenues for labour exploitation under the guise of psycho/social/vocational rehabilitation.

away from peer futures is strong: the low wages provided for c/s peer support workers as well as the high rates of part-time and precarious work (Taylor Newberry Consulting et al., 2014; Government of Canada, 2022) may make moving out of the field an economic necessity for many.

As such, peer support also occupies a position of liminality: the role is conceptualized as a temporary step along the way to a brighter occupational future on the horizon. There is no future within the field of peer support; even as peer support is positioned as a “stepping-stone” toward a better future, the only future presented for peer supporters is leaving the field. Although moving into different fields remains a possibility, it may be difficult for peer support workers to imagine what these possible new directions may be, or how to get there.

As such, it is necessary for the sector to respond to the inability of peer support workers to imagine futures for themselves. As a critical intervention into the future-less figure of the peer support role, my colleague Colene Allen and I facilitated a workshop (Prowse & Allen, 2023) on the topic of peer advancement opportunities as a part of the 2023 PeerWorks conference.

The purpose of this session was to brainstorm a diverse range of possible pathways for advancement for peer support workers, in order to open up the future. Participants were asked to brainstorm and reflect on six discussion questions, in order to explore what opportunities currently (and possibly could, in the future) exist both within and beyond the peer sector, as well as what different employment contexts could benefit from peer-related skills and lived experiences.

This session was an attempt to open up a “futural public sphere” (Godhe & Goode, 2018, p. 153) to provoke discussion and engagement with a wide range of possible individual futures, through which peer supporters could explore possible employment futures for themselves. We have since compiled these responses and published them on the PeerWorks blog (Allen & Prowse, 2023), to serve as a source of inspiration and reflection for peer workers considering the next steps in their careers.

Ultimately, I believe our session was successful in meeting these goals. Afterwards, one participant told my colleague Colene that they appreciated the space to have these conversations, and other participants mentioned they wished we had more time for discussion – indicating a need for more ongoing conversation and reflection around this topic as a sector. When reviewing participants contributions, I was excited to see ideas for possible career options which I had never considered before, such as “peer marketer/advertiser.” However, one suggestion for career advancement stood out as my personal favourite: “retirement.”

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TROUBLING WORK *AS* RECOVERY:
PEER SUPPORT AND THE SOCIAL RELATIONS OF LABOUR EXTRACTION

When organisations discursively frame work as ‘therapy’, their goal is to put marginalised groups to work in underpaid or unpaid jobs, while justifying workers’ low or non-existent wages with unfounded claims of medical treatment.

— Erin Hatton, 2022

Work Therapy: Extractive Labour as Therapeutic Intervention, p. 1

Peer support is an underpaid and undervalued form of labour, with many mental health and substance use peer supporters working on an unpaid volunteer basis. Low salaries are a source of tension for peer support workers (Prowse, 2022a); according to a study conducted by Taylor Newberry Consulting on behalf of OPDI and the Self-Help Alliance (2014),³⁰ less than half of peer supporters in Ontario feel that they are equitably or satisfactorily compensated for their work, with those working in CSIs receiving significantly lower annual salaries than those working in mainstream mental health agencies (\$22,000 vs. \$35,548). Of survey respondents, 28% of peer supporters indicated they worked on a volunteer basis, indicating a high reliance on unpaid labour within the field. According to the Government of Canada (2022), wages for peer support workers in Ontario range from \$18 to \$39.06 per hour, with a median hourly wage of \$25.50.

In this chapter, I explore how poor wages for peer support workers are shaped by broader discourses which facilitate labour exploitation. My analysis is informed by institutional ethnography’s (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Smith & Griffith, 2022) emphasis on how social relations (or “connections among work processes”; DeVault, 2006, p. 294) are shaped by the interplay of text³¹ and action. Texts (e.g. discourse, policy, legislation, and research) operate as “mechanisms for

³⁰ Based on the scope of the organizations involved in initiating, facilitating, and recruiting for this research, these results likely reflect the experiences of peer supporters in the mental health/addictions field, rather than broader articulations of mutual support.

³¹ “Text” refers to “documents ... in spoken, written, or graphic forms” (Foo et al., 2021, p. 508) “that exist in a materially replicable form” (Dorothy Smith, as quoted by Kearney et al., 2019, p. 19).

coordinating activity across [settings]” (DeVault, 2006, p. 294); in other words, the discursive realm has material impacts.

I draw on an analysis of confluence (Joseph, 2015) to trace the discursive and material connections between the labour conditions of mental health/substance use and chronic pain peer supporters, unpaid patient labourers in 19th century insane asylums, and people labelled/with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) in contemporary sheltered workshops, as well as people incarcerated within the prison system. Through an attention to confluence, I explicate the social relations of labour extraction that enable and justify a reliance on the un(der)paid labour of marginalized people through discourses which position work as a form of intervention or treatment characterized as therapeutic, rehabilitative, educational, and contributing to the process of recovery.

To study a confluence is to trace how more than one idea, system, factor, or influence run or merge together at a similar point or junction ... an appreciation of confluence acknowledges that all categories and systems of difference are suspect and focuses or redirects our attention to their common projects as well as their resulting fields of knowledge, practices, and technologies.

— Ameil Joseph, 2015

*Beyond Intersectionalities of Identity or Interlocking Analyses of Difference:
Confluence and the Problematic of “Anti”-Oppression*, p. 17

Lastly, I draw on Ghaida Moussa’s (2019) framework of neoliberalism as an analytical tool to explore how “psychological interventions ... mould the brains, thoughts, and behaviours of the sick to match neoliberal interests” (p. 152) – a framework originally developed to explore how the experiences of queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and people of colour with fibromyalgia are shaped by the intersection of neuroscience and neoliberalism. Although the time period I explore extends prior to the emergence of neuroscience and neoliberalism in the 20th century (Moussa, 2019), the framework of neoliberalism allows me to trace the echoes of these ideologies *backward* in time, to draw connections between neoliberal presents and pre-neoliberal pasts. With an

attention to neoliberalism, I trace how the discourse of “work as recovery” mobilizes peer support in service of projects of rehabilitation aimed to reduce both individual and organizational reliance on the state.

WORK AS RECOVERY:

FRAMING THE BENEFITS OF PEER SUPPORT WORK

As a peer support worker, I have found myself troubled by how academic literature has emphasized the benefits of peer support for workers themselves. Practicing peer support is believed to facilitate personal growth and skill-development (Simpson et al., 2018), result in increased confidence, self-esteem, and social networks (Walker & Bryant, 2013), and support the process of recovery (Simpson et al., 2018). Alan Simpson, Candice Oster, and Eimear Muir-Cochrane (2018) also note the “therapeutic effect of helping others” (p. 662) associated with providing peer support.

Researchers also reference the “benefits of being employed” (Simpson et al., 2018, p. 662) for paid peer support workers. Gill Walker and Wendy Bryant (2013) claim that “peer support workers [see] the ... role as a stepping-stone back into employment” (p. 29); likewise, Griffin Epstein et al. (2023) note that the majority of mainstream social service organizations frame peer roles as “a form of ‘supported’ employment” through which workers “can practice for more ‘mainstream’ work in service provision” (p. 11).

Engagement in peer support is framed as having therapeutic effects that support the psychological, social, and vocational rehabilitation of workers, reflecting a discourse of work *as* recovery. Although this discourse may not (yet) be the dominant way of framing peer support work, its presence is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO; 2019), who describes the belief that “peer support is vocational rehabilitation for persons working on their recovery” (p. 6) as a misconception of peer support. Likewise, Aimee Sinclair et al. (2023) note that “benefits to [peer

support workers are] conceptualized as evidence of effectiveness” (p. 547), positioning workers as in need of “fixing” through employment.

This discourse shapes the way that peer support work is understood: instead of being viewed primarily as a career and a source of income, our labour is framed as a part of our recovery. As I will demonstrate further below, framing labour in terms of its therapeutic (rather than economic) benefits for workers both enables and justifies practices of labour exploitation within the field of peer support as well as for marginalized workers more broadly. As such, this chapter serves as an early warning sign for possible dystopian futures wherein peer support is further devalued, as well as a call to action and solidarity.

WORK AS TREATMENT:

NEUROLIBERALISM AND THE MATERIALITY OF DISCOURSE

Discourse has material effects: it has the power to shape actions, experiences, and material circumstances. This is especially salient when considering the influence of scientific research on the healthcare system through the dominance of “evidence-based practice,” whereby results from studies are transformed into interventions, policies, and “best practice.” These practices are inevitably shaped by the ways that research is framed: what questions researchers ask and how they try to answer them. Under evidence-based practice regimes, randomized controlled trials are often viewed as providing the highest quality “evidence” for treatments; as a result, the value of alternative supports that cannot easily be proceduralized – such as peer support – are obscured by more “evidenced” interventions such as CBT.

By analyzing the *Canadian Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Fibromyalgia* (Fitzcharles et al. 2013, as cited in Moussa, 2019), Ghaida Moussa reveals how recommendations for care are shaped by neoliberal interests. Fibromyalgia is framed in neuroscientific terms, resulting in an emphasis on psychological interventions such as CBT-based pain management courses designed

to “transform ill bodies into good neoliberal subjects” (Moussa, 2019, p. 152) by encouraging patients to control their response to pain with the goal of maintaining productivity.

As a result of the discourses expressed within these *Guidelines*, physicians are oriented toward encouraging patients to reduce their consumption of social and healthcare services while maintaining or increasing their participation in the labour market. Fibromyalgia is framed as an “economic burden” (Moussa, 2019, p. 168) on the healthcare system; in fact, the use of healthcare services is framed as the *cause* of illness, by suggesting that “people become and stay sick because they rely too heavily on healthcare” (p. 164). Furthermore, labour is framed as a medical intervention by “link[ing] better health with employment” (p. 168).³² As a result, CBT-based pain management courses encourage strategies of self-management with the goal of promoting adherence to neoliberal norms.

SAVING THE SELF:

CHRONIC PAIN PEER SUPPORT AS AUTO-INTERVENTION

In the realm of peer support, discourse has the potential to shape our labour experiences through the ways that the benefits of peer support are studied and articulated. Paul Arnstein, Michelle Vidal, Carol Wells-Federman, Betty Morgan, and Margaret Caudill (2002) describe the benefits to chronic pain peer support volunteers, including improvements to levels of pain, disability, self-efficacy, and depression; they also note that volunteers appreciated “making a connection” and the “sense of purpose” (p. 94) associated with their role. In other words, they highlight the physical, psychological, and social benefits of volunteering as a peer supporter.

At no time do these researchers appear to consider paying these volunteers. These peer supporters’ unpaid status, as well as the overall purpose of the study – to measure the benefits for

³² Both of these discourses of association reflect “the ways in which the consequences of illness are pathologized and transformed into its causes” (Moussa, 2019, p. 164): as noted by Ghaida Moussa, people access healthcare services *because* they are sick, and “fewer or less severe symptoms might be what *enable* patients to work” (p. 168).

peer supporters, rather than the peers they support – functions to frame *volunteering* as a medical intervention. Paul Arnstein et al. (2002) project this discourse and intervention into the future, noting that the study “supports the viability of peer support volunteers for clinical and research endeavors” (p. 101) – thus recommending engagement in (unpaid) peer support work as a form of treatment in itself.

This discourse frames peer support as an auto-intervention: an intervention of the self, by the self, in pursuit of clinical outcomes dictated by the medical system. Although the peer value of mutuality means that both peers can and in fact *should* benefit from the peer relationship (Mead, 2019), this articulation of mutual self-help can be differentiated from discourses of auto-intervention based on how intended outcomes are determined: in conversation through the peer relationship, or imposed externally by the medical system. Similarly to Ghaida Moussa’s (2019) analysis of CBT-based pain management courses, this auto-intervention enables a further retreat from medical provision by shifting the responsibility of care onto patients themselves.

WORK (AS) THERAPY

UNPAID PATIENT LABOUR IN 19TH CENTURY ASYLUMS

The framing of peer support in relation to its psychosocial benefits for workers resembles the discourse of work therapy underlying earlier forms of mental patient labour in moral treatment era insane asylums. Geoffrey Reaume (2010) describes the legacy of the patient-built wall at the Ontario Provincial Lunatic Asylum,³³ where patients were tasked with the role of “building the very walls behind which they were confined” (Reaume, 2006, p. 74) without pay. A reliance on unpaid patient labour was commonplace in 19th century provincial insane asylums; by the year 1900, 75% of psychiatric inmates in Ontario were engaged in various forms of labour, including construction, laundry, tailoring, and agricultural work (Reaume, 2006).

³³ Now known as the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

Under the framework of moral treatment, idleness was considered a contributor to poor mental health (Reaume, 2006; Toms, 2013). As a result, moral treatment emphasized the importance of work, which was thought to “promote ... well-being of body and mind” (Reaume, 2006, p. 71; Toms, 2013). Work was considered therapeutic for psychiatric inmates (Digby, 1985/2004), and their “industriousness” (Terbenche, 2005, p. 38) was viewed as evidence of improving mental health.

The discourse of “work as therapy” (Reaume, 2006, p. 69) embedded in moral treatment shaped the ways that patient labour was understood, enabling material experiences of labour exploitation. Because labour was framed as a therapeutic intervention for patients, the work was considered payment in and of itself – thereby justifying Mad peoples’ status as unpaid labourers.

Although the therapeutic benefits of labour were emphasized for patients, a different story emerges when considering how the discourse of work therapy was articulated from an institutional standpoint. The rise of unpaid patient labour throughout the 19th century was a result of asylum administrators advocating for its use as a cost-saving measure, revealing that work therapy was motivated primarily by economic rather than therapeutic factors (Reaume, 2006). Labour costs decreased as paid staff were replaced with unpaid patients, and material costs were reduced by an increased reliance on food grown by patients in their agricultural work (Reaume, 2006). Relying on patient labour to reduce the operating costs of asylums also translated into increased savings for the provincial government responsible for funding these institutions (Reaume, 2006).

SAVING PSYCHIATRY:

PEER SUPPORT AS A “CHEAP ALTERNATIVE”

In my research on peer support institutionalization, I learned how peer support has been framed as a “cheap alternative to other supports” (Tyrone Gamble, as quoted by Prowse, 2022a, p. 87), allowing it to be positioned as a cost-saving measure for mental health organizations – much like the reliance on unpaid patient labour within 19th century asylums. During our discussions

together, Tyrone Gamble described how some organizations choose to hire several peer supporters instead of one clinical worker because of the lower salaries required to hire peer support workers.

Organizations might make these staffing decisions to increase the amount of support they can provide under a limited budget. However, in addition to devaluing both the contributions of peer supporters and peer support work more broadly (Prowse, 2022a), this strategy enables organizations to do more with less. This practice accommodates austerity funding regimes which leave organizations with insufficient funding to meet demand for services. It also enables further budget cuts, as organizations appear to be managing with limited funding.

Similarly to the reliance on unpaid patient labour within 19th century asylums, peer support has been mobilized as a mechanism for reducing the cost of the mental health system through a reliance on the un(der)paid labour of Mad people. Both forms of labour have been credited as a cost-saving measure while simultaneously being framed as a form of psychosocial rehabilitation, suggesting that peer supporters may be un(der)paid for similar reasons as unpaid patient labourers: because our labour is considered therapeutic, the (“opportunity” to) work is considered payment in and of itself. Ultimately, these practices serve neoliberal interests by reducing the amount of funding needed from the state to provide mental health services, thus saving the psychiatric industrial complex from collapse under austerity funding regimes and concealing the state’s gradual retreat from the provision of health and social services.

WORK AS REHABILITATION:

CONTEMPORARY SHELTERED WORKSHOPS

The framing of peer support in relation to its occupational benefits also resembles the discourses at play within sheltered workshops, segregated workplaces for people with disabilities. Megan Linton (2021) describes how the red poppies worn in Canada for Remembrance Day are assembled by people labelled/with intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) in sheltered

workshops, who are paid at a rate of \$0.01 per poppy. In sheltered workshops, disabled workers engage in a variety of types of labour; they “build wooden crates, pick garlic, assemble windshield wiper tubes, make dog food, package student exam care packages, and pin poppies – usually for a few pennies per item” (Linton, 2021, para. 25).

Sheltered workshops have been framed in terms of their occupational and social benefits for disabled workers, influencing how the labour of disabled people is understood. Sheltered workshops “claim to provide ‘employment and employability skills training’” (Linton, 2021, para. 16) for disabled workers, framing labour as a form of vocational rehabilitation. Meaghan Gillmore (2018) describes how sheltered workshops have also been framed in terms of social benefits, noting that although they were originally created to develop job skills, “over time, families began to see them as a safe place for their children to ... build relationships outside of the family home” (para. 9).

This discourse of “work as rehabilitation” has tangible impacts on how the labour of disabled people is conceptualized under the law. In Ontario, employment rights are dictated by the *Employment Standards Act* (ESA; SO 2000, c. 41); this legislation explicitly states that work done for the primary purpose of rehabilitation is exempt from labour protections:

This Act does not apply with respect to ... an individual who performs work in a simulated job or working environment if the primary purpose in placing the individual in the job or environment is his or her rehabilitation.

— *Employment Standards Act*, SO 2000, c. 41
ss. 3(5) & 3(5) para. 6

By operating through a discourse of work as rehabilitation, sheltered workshops have been framed as a *service*, rather than a place of genuine employment. Sheltered workshops are exempt from the *ESA*, thereby allowing people with disabilities to be paid less than minimum wage (Gillmore, 2018; Linton, 2021). In other words, because labour in sheltered workshops is framed as

primarily rehabilitative, disabled workers are made exempt from labour law protections; the discourse of work as rehabilitation has been codified into law as the justification for this exemption.

Despite recommendations to close institutions for people labelled/with I/DD stretching back decades, it was not until 2017 that the Ontario Liberal government introduced the *Fair Workplaces, Better Jobs Act* (SO 2017, c. 22) to remove the exemption of sheltered workshops from the *ESA* (s. 2(3)) and close all sheltered workshops by 2019 (Linton, 2021). However, in 2018, the newly elected Ontario Conservative government introduced the *Making Ontario Open for Business Act* (SO 2018, c. 14), delaying the removal of the exemption for sheltered workshops from the *ESA* indefinitely (Sched. 1, ss. 2 & 29(2); Linton, 2021).

SAVING THE STATE:

PEER SUPPORT, UN/EMPLOYMENT, AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

Similarly to the discourse of work as rehabilitation underpinning sheltered workshops, the discourse of work as recovery frames peer support as “a form of ‘supported’ employment” (Epstein et al., 2023, p. 11) that functions as a “stepping-stone” (Walker & Bryant, 2013, p. 29) back into the labour market. The emphasis placed on the benefits of employment more generally indicates that peer support work is being contrasted with unemployment, rather than involvement in other sectors of the labour market. Framing peer support in terms of the “benefits of being employed” (Simpson et al., 2018, p. 662) rests on the assumption that the alternative to working in peer support is unemployment, rather than employment in an alternative occupation.

In some ways, this may be true: Mary O’Hagan, Heather McKee, and Robyn Priest (2009) note that government funding of CSIs is commonly framed as “an investment into the employment of people who might otherwise be unemployed and receiving social assistance” (p. 65), suggesting that Mad people may face fewer barriers to employment in peer support than in other occupations. In fact, when CSDI was funded in 1991 as a part of the Ontario NDP government’s anti-recession

strategy (Trainor & Reville, 2014),³⁴ 75% of those employed had previously been receiving social assistance; as their income increased, 60% of these peers either had their benefits reduced or were taken off social assistance entirely (O'Hagan et al., 2009).

The high rate of peer workers previously receiving social assistance suggests that Mad people have been excluded from the labour market more generally. As a result, peer support salaries need not be competitive with those of other occupations, but rather with the rates of social assistance. This may explain why “consumers usually work for lower salaries than professional staff require” (Tomes, 2006, p. 725) – because of a lack of accessible alternative options for employment. According to a supervisor interviewed by Griffin Epstein et al. (2023), “it’s a more desperate workforce that’s willing to do jobs that many people are not willing to do at a lower rate” (p. 29).

Under the discourse of work as recovery, peer support is framed as a form of economic and vocational rehabilitation; this discourse is mobilized in service of neoliberal interests by presenting peer support employment as a strategy to reduce reliance on social assistance. Not only does this discourse frame peer support as a cost-saving mechanism for the state, it simultaneously legitimizes the state by celebrating “investments” that obscure its abandonment of the most marginalized through the gradual dissolution of the social safety net.

³⁴ See [Chapter 1](#) for a more detailed description of this development as well as its long-term impacts.

SAVING CAPITALISM:

THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX AND THE LOGIC OF SLAVERY

After the thirteenth amendment [was] passed—which banned slavery, except for those in prison—Black people previously enslaved through the slavery system were reenslaved through the prison system. ... Thus, we can actually look at the criminalization of Blackness as a logical extension of Blackness as property.

— Andrea Smith, 2016
Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy
in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, p. 67

Of course, these discourses are not unique to the realm of madness or disability. The prison system is yet another context where workers are exempt from labour law protections, and within which labour is framed as rehabilitative: the Government of Ontario (2021) notes that “work programs are intended to provide practical skills in a real-life environment to help inmates prepare to return to the community.” In addition to people labelled/with I/DD in sheltered workshops, Remembrance Day poppies are also assembled by people incarcerated within the prison system – a task for which they are compensated a maximum of \$6.90 per day (Linton, 2021).

These connections and similarities between discourses are not coincidental, but rather, demonstrate a confluence. Vanessa Jackson (2002) notes how, in the late 19th century, the superintendent of the Georgia Lunatic Asylum Dr. Powell “believed that the hygienic and structured lives led by slaves served as protective factors against consumption and insanity ... To sum it up, freedom made us nuts” (p. 15). Echoing moral treatment conceptualizations of “idleness,” framing freedom as the cause of insanity (and slavery as its cure) functioned to promote the maintenance of slavery as a form of labour extraction.

Writing from the US, Andrea Smith (2016) describes how the prison industrial complex is underpinned by anti-Black racism and the logic of slavery: a logic which equates Blackness with slaveability and property. This logic serves as the anchor of capitalism, which she identifies as one

of the three pillars of white supremacy.³⁵ Although “the capitalist system ultimately commodifies all workers” (p. 67), the logic of slavery applies a racial hierarchy to this system which “tells people that as long as you are not Black, you have the opportunity to escape ... commodification” (p. 67). And yet, this commodification is the foundation upon which capitalism is constructed; discourses which enable and justify the extraction of labour are necessary for its very survival and sustenance.

AUTO-INTERVENTIONISM:

AUSTERITY FUTURES THROUGH EXTRACTIVE PRESENTS

I began my analysis hoping to explicate the social relations underlying the low salaries provided for peer support workers. Finding myself troubled by the emphasis placed on the psychological, social, and vocational benefits for workers, I came to understand the research literature on peer support as being shaped by a discourse of work *as* recovery, which positions employment within the peer sector as a contributor to recovery.

By exploring the discursive connections between peer support work, chronic pain treatment, unpaid patient labour, sheltered workshops, prison labour, and slavery through an analysis of confluence, I came to recognize how the labour experiences of marginalized people have been shaped by common social relations across time. These social relations are constructed by discourses which frame our labour in medical, psychological, social, and vocational terms, thereby enabling and justifying practices of labour exploitation in service of neoliberal goals of reducing both personal and organizational reliance on the state.

Discourses of auto-intervention aim to transform the undesirable Other into “good neoliberal subjects” (Moussa, 2019, p. 152), specifically marking the bodies of marginalized people for extraction under the guise of treatment and rehabilitation. We become viewed as resources for

³⁵ Andrea Smith (2016) describes the three pillars of white supremacy as: (1) the logic of slavery as the anchor of capitalism, (2) the logic of genocide as the anchor of colonialism, and (3) the logic of orientalism as the anchor of war. These three pillars are enacted through the institutionalization of hierarchy in the form of heteropatriarchy, “a gender binary system in which only two genders exist, one dominating the other” (p. 72).

cost-reduction, as our labour is used to subsidize austerity funding regimes and the social safety net while simultaneously concealing their real social effects. Within these presents, marginalized people are more than just *exploited*: rather, our bodies are marked as sources of untapped capital and as resources to be *extracted* – justified in the name of our own “best interests.”

These extractive presents are mobilized in service of enabling austerity futures, within which the un(der)paid labour of marginalized people continues to be relied upon to offset and obscure the damage caused by systemic underfunding of health and social services, albeit increasingly so. In doing so, they accommodate austerity funding regimes and enable the state to further withdraw from its social responsibilities.

CRAFTING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES:

SOLIDARITY AND CROSS-MOVEMENT ORGANIZING

What alternative futures can we build, and how can we begin to move toward them? By explicating common social relations which enable and justify extractive labour practices across a variety of settings, temporalities, and groups of workers, it becomes clear that these phenomena are not unique to the peer sector; rather, marginalized people have been marked as resources for cost-reduction more generally.

The confluence of these discourses and practices reveals the larger projects they serve. These patterns are deeply ingrained within the fabric of our society: from the foundation of colonial capitalism, through government legislation and budgetary decisions, toward the health and social service system. The social relations of labour extraction are not the result of any one component working in isolation; rather, it is the way they combine, reinforce, and build off one another. As such, efforts of incremental reform appear unlikely to create anything more than surface level change; in fact, despite centuries of reform since the popularization of work therapy in insane

asylums, mental health systems continue to extract the labour of Mad people as a tool of cost-reduction through similar discourses. What we need are *true* alternatives: a new foundation entirely.

To move forward, to build alternative futures, we must remember that we cannot do this work alone. We need to build relationships of solidarity with other marginalized communities to resist our collective exploitation. We must remember that the problem is not the extraction of *our* labour, but rather the justification of labour extraction more generally. We must remember that our liberation is bound up together.

I dream of a future in which the c/s peer support sector has built stronger alliances with other oppressed communities, including disabled and incarcerated people, as well as with Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities that are often pushed out of c/s movement organizing and peer support spaces.³⁶ Together, we work toward challenging the discourses that frame our labour as a commodity to be extracted, as well as the systems that depend on this extraction for their very survival. The work of resisting and refusing extractive presents and austerity futures cannot be accomplished alone: we need to come together in solidarity and through cross-movement organizing to dream and craft alternative futures in which we all can be free.

³⁶ I describe this further in [Chapter 3](#).

③

TROUBLING THE ORIGIN STORY:
UNSETTLING CONSUMER/SURVIVOR PEER SUPPORT

Since Utopia can be inclusionary or exclusionary, the most marginalized can never be found in the Utopias built by those more privileged ... while a Utopia built by the most marginalized inherently makes space for everyone.

— Mx. Yaffa A.S., 2022

Beyond Utopia: The Building Utopia Guide for Queer and Trans Muslims, p. 547

Histories of ‘authentic’ [peer support], often attributed to the c/s/x movement of the 1970s ... silence the long history of mutual aid present within Black, brown, Indigenous, and Queer communities, and expertise challenging the colonial project.

— Aimee Sinclair, Sue Gillieatt, Christina Fernandes, and Lyn Mahboub, 2023

Inclusion as Assimilation, Integration, or Co-Optation? A Post-Structural Analysis of Inclusion as Produced through Mental Health Research on Peer Support, p. 549

In this chapter, I explore the need to trouble the stories that we tell within the c/s movement and the field of mental health peer support by drawing on practices of diffractive reading as a methodology of storytroubling. Diffractively reading the field of peer support through texts relating to white supremacy, Western dominance, colonization, and colonialism – areas that appear relatively unacknowledged and undertheorized within both peer support theory and practice (with two notable exceptions being Epstein et al., 2023 and Shute & Hall, 2019) – enables me to both reveal and (begin to) fill in these theoretical absences.

I read peer support through Ziauddin Sardar’s (1993) analysis of the colonizing tendencies of futures studies, drawing on Chris Bell’s (2006) articulation of *White Disability Studies*, Ramón Grosfoguel et al.’s (2019) framework of *epistemic extractivism*, and Tema Okun’s (2021) description of *white supremacy culture* to support my arguments. This analysis allows me to reveal the futures currently in construction by the c/s peer support sector vis-à-vis whiteness, Western dominance, colonization, and colonialism, and explore possibilities for more ethical engagements with frameworks of mutual support that are not centred around white/Western worldviews or mental health contexts.

At the beginning of Chapter 1, I shared a story about the emergence of mental health peer support practices within the c/s movement. But what issues emerge when we tell *this* story of peer support, as opposed to others? This story functions as an “origin story” for peer support; yet, by presenting this story as *the* origin story, we obscure other practices of mutual support that arise from different genealogies.

I want to draw on stories as a valuable form of knowledge; yet, at the same time, I want to turn a critical eye to the very stories I/we tell by exploring what they obscure in the process of their (re)telling. I want to go back to this story: complicate it, poke holes in it, reveal the gaps and absences (Clare, 2015). I want to trouble this story, and the storytelling process which circulates some stories while subjugating others to the background. Our stories are always partial (Voronka, 2019); there are stories we tell, stories we don’t, and stories we can’t (LeFrançois, 2013).

The stories we tell shape how we understand our pasts, presents, and futures, as well as the broader social contexts from which they emerge. This mode of analysis stresses the need to look for the stories buried underneath the dominant story, and what gets taken for granted, left unsaid, or silenced by the voices of others (Clare, 2015). The stories we tell are always located within particular standpoints, and ethical issues emerge when any one story is portrayed as *the* authoritative story.

Within the mental health peer support sector – most closely aligned with c/s genealogies of peer support – there is perhaps a tendency to refer to our conceptualizations of peer support as if they are the only ones that exist. Peer support literature does not always locate these practices within their historical context; when they do, they rarely acknowledge other models of mutual support beyond those that arose from the c/s movement.

I have noticed similar patterns within professional c/s peer support spaces as well. Some of this may be due to the way that mental health peer support is structured as an institution itself: when

we engage in conversation with other peer supporters, we draw on (what we assume to be) a common understanding of “peer support” as a practice grounded within c/s movement histories.

However, failing to locate ourselves within a broader conceptualization of community care closes off the field to other genealogies and practices of mutual support.³⁷ These alternative philosophies of support, as well as the people guided by them, appear to be largely absent within our conversations and communities – always relegated to an *elsewhere*. The plurality of approaches to mutual support is left un(der)acknowledged within the sector, discursively obscuring both their very existence as well as their absence.

THE FUTURE IS WHITE:

INTERROGATING THE DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES OF PEER SUPPORT

White mad activists tell us that we are responsible for our own inclusion. We don't want to be 'included' in a white movement: we want you to take responsibility for keeping your movement white. The mad movement presents a mad identity based on white people's experiences and white people's theories. Tell us, is madness something that only white people experience?

— Rachel Gorman, annu sains, Louise Tam,
Onyinyechukwu Udegbe & Onar Usar, 2013
Mad People of Colour: A Manifesto, para. 8

By analyzing citations in bibliographic tools, anthologies, and study guides within the field of futures studies, Ziauddin Sardar (1993) delineates the boundaries of the field and demonstrates the dominance of scholarship by Western white men. He notes that the field includes only minimal scholarship by women, people of colour, and non-Western scholars – nor does it significantly engage with scholarship exploring notions of futurity within non-Western contexts and worldviews.

³⁷ As noted by Griffin Epstein et al. (2023), other genealogies of peer work include “abstinence-based self-help programs organized by 12-step communities ... needle distribution programs ... sex worker mutual aid networks, organizing by incarcerated people, radical youth movements, and abolitionist work” (p. 12), as well as anti-colonial, Indigenous, and liberatory frameworks of harm reduction. Pointing to other histories of anti-psychiatry activism more specifically, they note that “captive African peoples fought against the use of psychiatry as one of the many tools of enslavement in the Americas, and Chinese and other East Asian immigrants to Canada refused psychiatric oppression in the late 18th and early 19th centuries” (p. 12).

The scholars who contribute to a field shape the ways it is conceptualized and taken up; the dominance of white, Western and masculine perspectives reinforces these cultures within the domain of future studies, transposing them onto the future of the field.

Similarly, Chris Bell (2006) outlines how the field of disability studies is underpinned by whiteness: the field is primarily produced by white scholars and focused on the work of white individuals, a limitation and social positioning it largely fails to acknowledge. He describes how disability studies has failed to adequately attend to matters of race and ethnicity, thus (re)centring whiteness as the default social position. In his “modest proposal,” he suggests that this field may be better understood as “White Disability Studies,” (p. 275) making explicit the whiteness that underpins the field. Failing to acknowledge the whiteness underpinning (white) disability studies constructs a future within which disability can only be understood in relation to whiteness.

Similar to the fields of future studies and disability studies, the field of mental health peer support is dominated by white and Western perspectives in both theory and practice. C/s movement activists are predominately white (Reaume, 2021), as are the vast majority of peer support workers in Ontario (Taylor Newberry Consulting et al., 2014).³⁸ As well, racism has historically been (Reaume, 2021) and continues to be (Gorman et al., 2013) a significant issue that remains largely unacknowledged (Epstein et al., 2023) within the consumer/survivor and Mad movements.

Rachel Gorman (2017) argues that “madness short-circuits white subjectivity,” thus positioning “antistigma campaigns ... as a project of reclaiming whiteness” (p. 312). In this light, then, the framework of recovery, too, becomes suspect: recovery can be understood as a move towards futures wherein proximity to whiteness, lost via psychiatrization, is recovered and restored

³⁸ In a survey of peer support workers in Ontario led by Taylor Newberry Consulting on behalf of OPDI and the Self-Help Alliance (2014),³⁰ the majority of respondents identified as being Caucasian, White, or Anglo-Saxon (62%), having European heritage (14%), or as Canadian (11%). In contrast, a significantly smaller number of participants identified as Black/Caribbean (3%), Native Canadian or Metis (3%), French Canadian (2%), East Asian (1.5%), or Middle Eastern (1.5%). They report that the “lack of ethnic diversity” (p. 7) within the sector poses challenges in supporting individuals from different backgrounds and cultural linguistic groups which have greater challenges accessing mental health services.

to white mad subjects (Rachel Gorman, 2023, personal communication). Through white supremacist logics, self-determination – the ability to shape our own futures – is framed as a European characteristic “in opposition to the ‘affectable others’ of raciality” (da Silva, as cited in Gorman, 2017). In other words, the recovery of whiteness enables the restoration of both self-determination and futurity, privileges which were never granted to racialized people in the first place.

There were thousands of African-American activists who resisted psychiatric oppression on a daily basis, but many of them are lost to us because they are not recorded in the official history. We can no longer wait for the predominately white consumer/survivors/ex-patients movement to include us as an addendum to their history. We will have to write our own history to celebrate our legacy of resistance.

— Vanessa Jackson, 2002
*In Our Own Voice: African-American Stories of Oppression,
Survival and Recovery in Mental Health Systems*, p. 18

People of colour have always been involved in the Mad movement, but have been pushed out by experiences of racism and racist sanism (Epstein et al., 2023; Gorman et al., 2013).³⁹ Furthermore, stories of their involvement and activism have been obscured by dominant story (re)tellings which (re)centre whiteness (Jackson, 2002); as Griffin Epstein et al. (2023) note, “the mainstream history of peer work centers white-led organizing to the exclusion of movements led by racialized and colonized people” (p. 12). The movement has largely failed to incorporate the contributions of racialized people, respond to systems of oppression circulating within the movement, and unsettle its white foundations (Epstein et al., 2023; Gorman et al., 2013).

The demographics and worldview of the field limits who can access and benefit from peer support. As a result of our social locations, white peer supporters (such as myself) are limited in our ability to provide quality support to racialized people, especially in matters relating to the intersection

³⁹ “We have been called ‘sanist’ for talking about racism in the mad movement. How can it be that we are sanist when we criticize white people for being racist, but white people are not sanist when they call us angry and irrational?” (Gorman et al., 2013, para. 5)

of race and madness. Although we may be deemed “peers” through our lived experience of madness and psychiatrization, these experiences are fundamentally shaped by our own cultural backgrounds and racial privilege; furthermore, there are other identities and experiences through which we cannot claim peerhood.

At best, the lack of culturally-grounded peer support services may prevent racialized and non-Western people from accessing or benefitting from peer support; at worst, these “peer” relationships can inadvertently function as yet another site of racism, colonialism, xenophobia, and social control. The dominance of white/Western frameworks also raises the potential of providing support in ways that equates recovery with conformity to white/Western values and norms, as is common within other (white/Western) “helping” professions.

This context also limits who can enter the field: who is able to become (and continue being) a c/s peer support worker. Griffin Epstein et al. (2023) outline how the working conditions of peer workers at social service agencies in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) are shaped by systems of white supremacy, as well as anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, which manifests in the form of discrimination, surveillance, and accusations of theft.

Outside the scope of peer support, Aysa Gray (2019) notes how discourses of professionalism are “heavily defined by white supremacy culture—or the systemic, institutionalized centering of whiteness” (para. 1). Echoing the findings of Griffin Epstein et al. (2023), Aysa Gray (2019) describes how managerial assumptions that employees who are Black or people of colour are “less competent and cannot be trusted with completing tasks” (para. 18) result in higher rates of surveillance and employment termination of these employees over their white counterparts. Furthermore, racialized employees may also choose to leave organizations on their own terms due to the hostility of these work environments.

Racialized people may not understand their experiences through the lens of disability, madness, or mental health per se, which may prevent them from seeking employment within the mental health peer sector. Sami Schalk (2022b) notes that Black people have historically avoided identifying with the language of disability due to its construction around white experiences and the ways it appears to reinforce associations of Blackness with inferiority and laziness; according to TL Lewis (as quoted by Schalk), “often our survival depends on *not* identifying as disabled” (p. 132).

The psychiatric industrial complex has long functioned as a tool of social control, especially of the most marginalized of society⁴⁰ – histories that may make racialized people reluctant to identify with mental health concerns or madness. Throughout history, Black people have had their desires and demands for freedom labelled as symptoms of insanity through diagnoses such as drapetomania – conceptualized in 1851 as a “‘disease’ that made slaves run away ‘unprovoked’” (Joseph, 2013, p. 267) – and schizophrenia – a diagnosis which was redefined “from a relatively benign condition common among white housewives to a violent mental disability often directly associated with Black men, especially those involved in civil rights activism” (Schalk, 2022a, p. 53).

Racialized people may also be less likely to identify with madness and mental health concerns as a result of the high rate of police shootings of racialized mad people (Reaume, 2021); the conflation of madness with dangerousness makes *identification* with madness dangerous, especially for those already at risk of state-sanctioned violence. Furthermore, Ameil Joseph (2019) notes how discourses of “lived experience” of mental health disproportionately exclude racialized people, whose experiences are more likely to be interpreted and intervened upon through the criminal justice or immigration systems, rather than the mental health system.

⁴⁰ For example, queer and trans identities have been pathologized since the very beginning of DSM: lesbians and gays through the historical diagnostic categories of homosexuality, sexual orientation disturbance, and homosexual conflict disorder (Burstow, 1990; Joseph, 2013); bisexuals through mental health professionals’ interpretation of bisexuality as being unsure about one’s sexual identity, thus contributing to diagnoses of borderline personality disorder (Rand Clayton, personal communication, 2018); trans people through the previous diagnostic category of gender identity disorder as well as its current replacement, gender dysphoria; and asexual people through the current diagnostic categories of male hypoactive sexual desire disorder and female sexual interest / arousal disorder (Gray, 2019).

And yet, there are vibrant legacies of resistance, activism, and mutual support within marginalized and racialized communities; there has been significant effort to reclaim and re-tell the stories of Black psychiatric survivors in particular. Sami Schalk (2022a) describes how the Black Panther Party was actively involved in advocating against psychiatric abuse and oppression during the 1970s, drawing in an analysis of race and making connections between psychiatric institutions and the prison system. Vanessa Jackson (2002) shares the stories of several Black psychiatric survivors, and provides guidance on how to recover additional stories; the Wildflower Alliance (n.d.) has taken up this call to action by compiling stories of Black movement leaders relating to psychiatrization and psychiatric activism.

THE FUTURE IS WESTERN:

PLACING PEER SUPPORT IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Our practices and philosophies always arise from and reflect our socio-cultural context, even in the ways they oppose it. The c/s movement and its genealogies of peer support primarily (but not exclusively⁴¹) emerged in the Western countries of Canada, the US, and Europe in response to psychiatric deinstitutionalization (Chamberlin, 2012d; Epstein et al., 2023; Stratford et al., 2019), and, as such, are inevitably underpinned by Western value systems.

For example, Anthony Stratford, Matt Halpin, Keely Phillips, Frances Skerritt, Anne Beales, Vincent Cheng, Magdel Hammond, Mary O'Hagan, Catherine Loreto, Kim Tiengtom, Benon Kobe, Steve Harrington, Dan Fisher and Larry Davidson (2019) note the difficulties in translating c/s models of peer support to non-Western contexts due to a reliance on values such as “self-determination” – a construct which reflects the individualism of the West, and may not resonate within more collectivist cultures where decision making is traditionally shared between family members or deferred to elders.

⁴¹ Judi Chamberlin (1978/2012d, xvi) notes that ex-patient groups also began in Japan around the same time period.

However, the story of the c/s movement represents only one genealogy of peer support. Many communities have their own genealogies of mutual aid and support, which operate within distinct historical, social, material, and cultural contexts and may or may not be structured around constructs of “mental health.” As such, these models of mutual support may operate quite differently than those emerging from the c/s movement.

For example, Aimee Sinclair et al. (2023) note that within Black, Indigenous, brown, and Queer communities, “practices of [peer support] originated as a response ... to a lack of safe and humane supports for individuals experiencing distress” (p. 544); likewise, Shinjini Bakshi (2021) describes how Black, Indigenous, and queer & trans communities engage in peer support to keep community members safe from police, penal, and psychiatric institutions. However, these models of support may not always be articulated as “peer support”; rather, they may be understood simply as a “way of life” embedded within larger worldviews of community care.^{42, 43}

Similarly, my friend Roché Keane has shared with me how practices of mutual aid enabled Black communities to survive the context of slavery. Ariel Aberg-Riger (2020) describes a selection of mutual aid initiatives within Black, Chinese, Jewish, Mexican, and Puerto Rican communities over the past 250 years, including the New York Committee of Vigilance, founded in 1835: “a multiracial org that took up arms to confront slave catchers, passionately advocated for Black people in court, and provided an array of relief including shelter, food, community, advice, transportation, and activism education” (n.p.). These communities – and many more – have long histories of drawing on practices of peer support and mutual aid as a way to survive inhospitable presents and construct alternative futures grounded in principles of mutuality and interdependence. When we position the c/s movement as the origin of “authentic” peer support, we erase these communities and their contributions (Sinclair et al., 2023), as well as their pasts, presents, and futures.

⁴² See also Rachel Gorman (2013) for a description of how the struggles and difficulties faced by students of colour may be narrated as “just life” (p. 277), and how this results in inequitable access to academic accommodations and support.

Reflecting on these (under)stories has led me to wonder if the reification of mental health peer support as a named practice and/or role – as opposed to a part of a larger worldview of community care – is in fact indicative of the whiteness of the field.⁴³ For white consumer/survivors, the premise of peer support as a form of mutual self-help may have felt like a radical departure from the individualism of white (supremacy) culture (Okun, 2021), and the ways that support has been professionalized, commodified, and individualized within white/Western culture. This departure from white cultural norms may have resulted in the reification of peer support as a way to distinguish the practice from traditional (professionalized) support structures.

However, even as peer support represents a departure from white/Western worldviews, these cultural aspects remain embedded in the practice through an emphasis on individualized values such as self-determination. On the other hand, when practices of mutual aid, support, and community care are part of a larger cultural worldview, they may just be understood as a way of life – a practice so deeply embedded within ontological frameworks that it needs not be (and may resist being) named.

Because these different stories have been obscured, it is necessary for the mental health peer support sector to recognize, honour, and engage with other models of mutual support that arise from different histories. It is not simply enough to increase the racial diversity of peer support workers:⁴⁴ we must also acknowledge that our models of mutual support are neither superior nor the only ones that exist. Refusing to acknowledge different genealogies of mutual support projects a vision of the future in which the field of c/s peer support remains white, Western, and racist.

⁴³ Many thanks to my friend Roché Keane for helping deepen my analysis through our many conversations about the whiteness of c/s peer support.

⁴⁴ As well, prioritizing the increase of “racial diversity” in the sector as an end goal over anti-racism, decolonization, and dismantling white supremacy culture within our organizations may in fact be an act of violence itself; unless we commit to the ongoing work of making these environments safer for racialized peer workers, focusing on their recruitment into the field simply functions as an act of tokenism to improve the sector’s image at the expense of racialized peer workers’ wellbeing.

One way the sector can begin to do this is by making explicit the c/s genealogies of peer support upon which we draw, and acknowledging the limitations that result from building on a foundation of white/Western worldviews. Acknowledging the standpoint from which we theorize and practice can create openings for other stories and models of mutual support to speak through. I have attempted to accomplish this task throughout my paper, by explicitly differentiating between models of c/s (or mental health) peer support and notions of mutual support more broadly. I draw on the language of mutual support as a way to deconstruct and unsettle the reification of peer support by linguistically directing our attention to what has been excluded from this category. Narrow conceptualizations of “peer support” centre whiteness; broadening our definitions creates space for other frameworks to breathe.

Engaging with other models of mutual support may also require some creativity, reframing, and genuine investment in the histories, social movements, and cultural contributions of Black, Indigenous, and racialized communities.⁴⁵ Because other models of mutual support may not be referred to as peer support per se, I have found it difficult to find literature on these practices by using “peer support” as a search term. Instead, we need to learn to read stories for an ethics of mutuality, interdependence, and community care that can be viewed through the lens of mutual support in its broadest sense. We need to understand these practices of community care within their own unique historical, social, material, and cultural contexts, by asking questions such as:

⁴⁵ Vanessa Jackson (2002) provides examples of sources through which the experiences of Black psychiatric survivors can be recovered, such as through oral history, internet sources, books (both fiction and nonfiction), and African-American magazines.

- How do people within these communities show up for one another?
- From what histories do these naturally occurring practices of mutual support emerge?
- What circumstances did/do these practices respond to and resist?
- How do these contexts shape the values underpinning these practices?
- How do community members understand these practices, and what language do they use to describe them?⁴⁶
- How are these practices shaped by cultural values and worldviews?
- How have these practices enabled community members to survive and thrive in the face of violence, oppression, persecution, colonialism, and neglect?⁴⁷

Although still within a white/Western context, reflecting on these questions has allowed me to understand the development of the York Retreat in England through the lens of peer support. The York Retreat⁴⁸ opened in 1796 as an asylum run by and for Quakers, in response to the death of a Quaker woman at a local asylum (Digby, 1985/2004; Tuke, 1813). This development was shaped by a longer history of mutual solidarity within the Quaker community, which emerged as a way to survive the persecution they experienced since the beginning of the religion in the mid-17th century due to their religious and social non-conformity (Borthwick et al., 2001; Godlee, 1985/2004).

⁴⁶ When discussing an earlier version of this chapter with a group of social work graduate students, one student described practices of mutual aid within their South Asian diaspora community as a “lifeline,” and the comfort in knowing that even if someone moves away, they can still count on them. Even if these practices are not named per se, the language used to describe them can provide insight on how they are conceptualized and practiced.

⁴⁷ I designed this list of questions by reflecting on the questions I have asked of the c/s movement over the years to better understand how mental health peer support has been shaped by these histories. However, although these questions intend to open up alternative understandings of mutual support, they remain limited by the assumption that other mutual aid practices operate in similar ways.

⁴⁸ The success of the Retreat as well as the publication of Samuel Tuke’s (1813) *Description of the Retreat* – “the first full-length description of any asylum” (Digby, 1985/2004, p. 52) – led to widespread acceptance of their model of “moral treatment” and efforts to imitate it elsewhere, although they were not the first to develop a form of moral treatment for mad people (Godlee, 1985/2004).

THE FUTURE IS COLONIAL:

THE “COLUMBUS AFFLICTION” & COLONIAL CONQUEST

The futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present; it seems entirely possible that imagining different futures and temporalities might help us see, and do, the present differently.

— Alison Kafer, 2013b
Feminist, Queer, Crip, p. 28

Ziauddin Sardar (1993) describes how the field of futures studies engages in practices of colonization. He describes this colonization taking place in two distinct forms, which he refers to as the *Columbus affliction* and the *More syndrome*.⁴⁹ He describes the *Columbus affliction* as the technocratic, business-oriented approach of “seek[ing] ... new areas to conquer” (p. 181), including the pursuit of corporate interest through mobilizing futures studies as a tool to develop strategies for entering new markets.

It is worth noting here the historical ties between the field of futures studies and the military industrial complex. In the 1960s, futures studies was mobilized as “an offshoot of military and intelligence research” (p. 180), in order to predict emerging threats, maintain US power, and encourage the conformity of non-Western countries to Western interests (Sardar, 1993). In this sense, futures studies was actively used as a tool of the colonial project with the goal of ensuring Western dominance.

The field of future studies has since gained an international stage, and has been taken up around the globe (Sardar, 1993). As a result, white and Western frameworks of futurity have been transposed onto non-Western cultures, displacing indigenous conceptualizations and knowledges of futurity in the process (Sardar, 1993).

⁴⁹ It is worth drawing attention the way that Ziauddin Sardar mobilizes medical language (“affliction,” “syndrome”) to pathologize tendencies towards colonization. As a brief aside, I will stress that colonization should not be understood as reflective of mental illness, disability, or “disorder”; rather, these practices reflect the dominant ideologies upon which the social “order” of colonial capitalist presents have been constructed.

The *Columbus affliction* involves conquering new lands both materially and ontologically: in addition to military and market conquest, the field of future studies engages in processes of colonization by enforcing white/Western worldviews onto different geographical and cultural contexts. As such, the *Columbus affliction* works toward constructing a colonial future within which white/Western knowledge systems and practices (continue to) dominate.

The unconscious goals underlying the formulation of futures studies is to shape the future of all cultures in the images and desires of the West.

— Ziauddin Sardar, 1993
Colonizing the Future: The 'Other' Dimension of Futures Studies, p. 185

Anthony Stratford et al. (2019) describe the challenges in translating mental health peer support to non-English speaking countries, developing an *International Charter of Peer Support* focused on the elements of c/s peer support that appear to be cross-culturally relevant. However, reading the *International Charter* through Ziauddin Sardar's (1993) conceptualization of the *Columbus affliction* raises questions about the implication of the mental health peer support sector in processes of colonialism: namely, why are we trying to bring *our* (c/s) models of peer support *elsewhere* in the first place?

The *International Charter* stresses the necessity of grounding peer support practices within local indigenous knowledges and strengths, noting that “peer support must be flexible enough to build on and reflect the core values of each culture in which it emerges” (p. 629). And yet, their conceptualization of peer support remains grounded within (white/Western) c/s movement histories and constructs of mental health. As well, the authors stress the importance of ensuring that peer support “grows with integrity to its founding [Western] values” (p. 629). As such, the *International Charter* appears to suggest that the values of c/s peer support merely need to be translated and tweaked to become legible to non-Western worldviews and audiences.

Previously, I described how many communities engage in practices of mutual support that may not necessarily be conceptualized as peer support, nor relating to mental health per se. Efforts to bring c/s models of peer support to other countries and/or cultures can be considered an act of colonialism, through which white/Western frameworks are brought over, displacing indigenous models of mutual support in the process.

Illness, “defect,” “deviance,” and disability are positioned as fundamentally damaging to the fabric of the community: polluting the gene pool, or weakening the nation, or destroying a family’s quality of life, or draining public services (or, often, some combination of the four). To put it bluntly, disabled people were—and often are—figured as threats to futurity.

— Alison Kafer, 2013b
Feminist, Queer, Crip, p. 31

The Western construct of mental health has also been mobilized for colonial purposes. Tanya Titchkosky and Katie Aubrecht (2015) describe how the World Health Organization (WHO) frames disease as a “disruption to economic productivity” (p. 71) and mental health as a “threat to the wellbeing of developing nations” (p. 74), a discourse through which the majority world becomes “deemed in need of Western medical intervention” (p. 71). The prescribed intervention for these countries becomes the adoption of Western frameworks of mental health, as well as the purchase of pharmaceutical products patented in the West: a colonial process that simultaneously enforces the governing power of the West while transforming humans from the majority world into targets for the extraction of Western profit.

Furthermore, Ameil Joseph (2019) notes how the rationalization of psy expertise “*fashions* socio-political problems into individual psychopathological ones” (p. 14, emphasis in text); framing distress through the medical model deflects attention from social and political contexts by labelling individuals as disordered and prescribing individual rather than social change. This medicalization of distress becomes an attempt to manage the threat that disability and madness is thought to pose to

the future; yet, the very fact that mad people are perceived as “threats to futurity” implies our agency and power over shaping the future: what futures do we want to threaten, prevent, dismantle?

If we are dangerous, then capitalism and patriarchy are in danger. When we cast spells against capitalism, what alternatives are we building? How do we dream of living? Where? With whom? What alternatives have we created in the meantime?

— Maranda Elizabeth, 2019
 Trash-Magic: Signs & Rituals for the Unwanted
 in *Becoming Dangerous: Witchy Femmes, Queer Conjurors, and Magical Rebels*, p. 26

Drawing on frameworks of peer support, disability justice, and transformative justice, Mx. Yaffa A.S. (2022) describes “decolonized wisdom sharing and reclamation” as one of the elements of Utopia, alongside “understanding intersectionality and assemblies” and “transgenerational healing from colonization work” (p. 545). To build a peer utopia that “makes space for everyone” (p. 547), the c/s peer sector needs to engage in processes of decolonization that allows space for subjugated and de/pre-colonial knowledges room to breathe. Instead of trying to translate c/s peer support into other cultural worldviews, we could focus on acknowledging and enabling pre-existing models of community care. Local communities can (continue to) develop their own models from the ground up, by building on the ways they already engage in mutual support and the philosophies and histories from which these practices emerge – instead of grounding them within Western histories and frameworks and a narrow focus on peer support in relation to mental health.

By doing so, models of mutual support can become/remain grounded within indigenous knowledge systems and worldviews and contribute to the decolonization of peer support more broadly. Instead of working towards building a colonial world where (our model of) peer support is everywhere (albeit with tweaks to ensure its uptake), the field of c/s peer support can contribute to the creation of decolonial futures by enabling and supporting pre-existing practices of mutual support to (re)emerge.

THE FUTURE IS COLONIZING: THE “MORE SYNDROME” & EPISTEMIC EXTRACTIVISM

Decolonizing the Western-centric view of the cosmos and moving toward holistic perspectives is essential to the future of life on the planet. Extractivism is one of the industries that destroys life and encapsulates the destructive rationale of Western civilization.

— Ramón Grosfoguel, 2019
Epistemic Extractivism: A Dialogue with Alberto Acosta,
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, p. 2016

The second form of colonization outlined by Ziauddin Sardar (1993) is the *More syndrome*. While the *Columbus affliction* involves colonization of new lands, the *More syndrome* refers to the colonization of knowledge systems: the appropriation of “ideas, data and experiences of other societies and cultures [in order to] project them as visions of Western, secularized future” (p. 181).

Ziauddin Sardar (1993) describes how futures studies has legitimized itself during times of crisis by incorporating data from non-Western cultures into the field. Here, it is important to recall that the majority of future studies scholars are white Western men, and that the field attends to notions of futurity primarily within Western contexts. As such, these new formulations of future studies are shaped by white/Western interpretations of non-Western knowledge systems, instead of emerging from scholars grounded within indigenous worldviews: much is lost in translation. For example, Ziauddin Sardar (1993) describes futurist Fritjof Capra’s comparisons between theoretical physics and Indian metaphysics as “reducing Indian metaphysics to the confines of science ... degrad[ing] and dehumaniz[ing] Indian thought in the process” (p. 182).

Whenever science is caught in a dead end, it looks around for new terrain. It usually empowers other epistemologies by incorporating them.

— Claude Alvares, 1988
 as quoted by Ziauddin Sardar, 1993
Colonizing the Future: The ‘Other’ Dimension of Futures Studies, p. 182

Ziauddin Sardar's conceptualization of the *More syndrome* bears resemblance with Ramón Grosfoguel et al.'s (2019) framework of *epistemic extractivism*. Ramón Grosfoguel et al. (2019) describe how Western societies are grounded by logics of extraction that enable and justify the extraction of natural resources from non-Western contexts. *Epistemic extractivism* is an extension of this ideology: an extraction of the ways of knowing of non-Western cultures, including those of indigenous peoples whose lands are occupied by Western settler colonial nation states. Under the guise of expanding definitions of science and knowledge to include non-Western epistemologies, these knowledge systems are co-opted and distorted to align with Western epistemologies and interests in ways that rarely work toward justice for the communities whose knowledges have been extracted.

Through these processes, the future is articulated as one in which the field of future studies continues to draw on non-Western epistemologies in order to further legitimize itself, co-opting and corrupting indigenous knowledge systems in the process. Although this future has the outward appearance of “inclusion” due to its incorporation of subjugated epistemologies, it is in effect an act of colonization founded on logics of extraction for the ultimate purpose of Western dominance.

In fact, contemporary peer support within the scope of mental health and substance use has already been shaped by the extraction of knowledge from racialized communities: Aimee Sinclair et al. (2023) suggest that “the C/S/X movement ‘co-opted’ historical practices of mutual aid from Black communities” (p. 549), and Griffin Epstein et al. (2023) note that 12-step programs “appropriate from the healing circles and ceremonies of several Indigenous nations and communities” (p. 13).

In the first three sections of this chapter, I described the importance of the c/s peer support sector engaging with different genealogies of peer support which stem from Black, brown, Indigenous, racialized, and queer/trans communities, as well as the majority (non-Western) world. Ziauddin Sardar's (1993) conceptualization of the *More syndrome* and Ramón Grosfoguel et al.'s

(2019) framework of *epistemic extractivism* provide some guidance on how the peer support sector may be able to ethically engage with models of peer support that arise from different contexts.

It becomes clear that this process of engagement shouldn't be one of taking, extracting, and appropriating. In other words, the c/s peer support sector should not strive towards absorbing other models of mutual support, nor claim authority and jurisdiction over these practices. Instead, this should be a process of recognizing, honouring, and respecting these other models of mutual support as legitimate ways of knowing and being in community.

At the same time, and despite their differences, these different genealogies can be understood within a common ethics of community care. These models of mutual support are bound together by a common thread, and are likely implicated within common social relations that lead to the devaluation of mutual support systems more broadly, even as they are differently impacted by them.

These reflections help me imagine what a future of ethical engagement could look like between these diverse models of mutual support. Instead of appropriating insights from other communities, our role in relation to each other should be one *of* mutual support; in other words, these reflections orient us towards a future in which diverse models and fields of mutual support work together in solidarity.

④

MAKING MYCOTOPIA:
GROUNDWORK FOR MYCELIAL FUTURES

It is past time that humans turn to the fungi to which we are bound, step into our mutual totality, and create space and futures for our wild ways of being.

— Patricia Kaishian & Hasmik Djoulakian, 2020
The Science Underground: Mycology as a Queer Discipline, p. 24

To imagine something new, it is necessary to break away from the old; the old frameworks, the old ways of knowing and being: we must start from a different place entirely. Dreaming from a place of reality is always a trap for our imaginations: a trap of “practicality” and “realism.” Erik Olin Wright argues for a realist turn in utopian scholarship by contrasting it with utopian fantasy; yet, it is the “fantasy” he speaks of here that I am reaching toward:

Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for social life unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Realists eschew such fantasies.

— Erik Olin Wright, 2010
as quoted by Ruth Levitas, 2013
Some Varieties of Utopian Method, p. 45

Liberatory dreaming is always already impossible when we remain constrained to the old systems and logics; capitalist (Goode & Godhe, 2017) and carceral realism (Durose, 2022), as well as the domination of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy (Okun, 2021; Smith, 2016), depend on the assumption that “*there is no alternative*” (Goode & Godhe, 2017, p. 110, emphasis added). To move forward, then, to dream *true* alternatives, we must work to “*undefine* the future” (Inayatullah, 2013, p. 44, emphasis in text)⁵⁰ by moving beyond the limits of realism and the here-and-now. Instead of beginning from problems, my analysis here sprouts from the world of dreams.

⁵⁰ Sohail Inayatullah (1998) writes of undefining the future in critical futures studies through problematizing “units of analysis” such as categories of “population instead of community or people” (p. 44). Here, I bend this term to include a rejection of the limits imposed by realism, thus aligning my perspectives moreso with utopian theories than CFS per se.

When we're moving away from what's not working, we stay tied to the problem.
When we're moving towards what we want, we can create the beliefs and the actions
that we'll need to get there.

— Shery Mead, 2014
International Peer Support: An Alternative Approach, p. 14

Where, then, do we begin? To dream new futures of peer support, I turn to the world of fungi and their symbionts as inspiration for the making of peer mycotopias. Paul Stamets (2005) describes mycotopia as “an environment in which fungi are actively used to enhance or preserve ecological equilibrium” (p. 307); here, I expand this term to encompass utopias beyond the scope of ecology, designed through principles of (fungal) biomimicry: “the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems” (brown, 2017, p. 23).⁵¹ More specifically, I focus on the interconnections with(in) fungal roots (mycelia), in an effort to dream new futures through a mycelial imaginary.

Fungi provide us with a portal through which to dream; to envision new worlds and temporalities, both chemically and culturally. Psilocybin, the psychedelic molecule found in “magic mushrooms,” is believed to activate a “waking dream state” (Pekar, 2016, para. 6) in humans when consumed, resulting in a state of “unconstrained cognition and profound alternations in the perception of time, space, and selfhood” (Tagliazucchi et al., 2014, p. 5442). According to Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian (2020), psilocybin “facilitates the birth of alternative epistemologies in human minds by connecting and energizing regions of the brain that have atrophied in our sterile, individualized, and isolated position atop the self-declared hierarchy of Western philosophy” (p. 17).

⁵¹ I am far from the first to draw on principles of biomimicry to develop my thinking: see, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987, as cited in Fullagar & Kuby, 2022) work with rhizomes, adrienne maree brown's (2017) description of mycelium in her articulation of emergent strategy, and Dean Spade and Peter McCoy's (2021) discussion on the relevance of fungal/rhizomatic networks to principles of mutual aid.

In *Star Trek: Discovery* (Fuller et al., 2017–present), the starship U.S.S. Discovery engages with mycelia via their displacement-activated spore hub drive (or “spore drive”), a technology that allows them to instantaneously “jump” across the galaxy in the blink of an eye – as well as travel to parallel realities. In this chapter, I want to draw on fungi in similar ways: as a source of dreams, as a way to visit and envision alternative realities, alternative futures, and alternative ways of being-in-relation.

My focus on fungi is primarily attendant to mycorrhizal fungi, which form mutually supportive symbiotic relationships with myriad other lifeforms (Stamets, 2005). These fungi connect to plants and trees via common mycorrhizal (mycelial) networks, passing nutrients back and forth (Stamets, 2005). In this chapter, I explore these bio-entanglements by diffracting my experiences through an imaginary mycosystem – a mycological ecosystem – comprised of fungi and (purple basil) plants entangled within a common mycorrhizal network.

In this chapter, I “interview” my plants for the stories they hold within their being-in-relation. Through reflections, readings, and conversations with others,⁵² I have learned how plants hold memories and share stories, especially of and through relationship and community: stories of displacement (Ameil Joseph, 2023, personal communication), of home (Vis, 2022), of world-making (Myers, 2021), of “network[s] of caring relations” (de Bie, 2019, p. 1170). Using plants as an entry point for inquiry draws us toward storytelling practices of and in relation (Myers, 2021).

ON MYCOPHOBIA:

PARASITIC FUNGI AS A CALL FOR DE/CONSTRUCTION

Fungi are seen as poisonous, agents of disease, degenerate, deadly, freaky, gross, and weird—language historically leveled against both queer and disabled people—and as having no positive interrelationships with their environment(s).

— Patricia Kaishian & Hasmik Djoulakian, 2020
The Science Underground: Mycology as a Queer Discipline, p. 9

⁵² Particularly Ameil Joseph, who shared some of his plant stories with me and encouraged me to pursue this funga/flora line of inquiry further.

Fungi provide us with a portal for imagining new futures; and yet, just like disability, madness, and queerness (Kafer, 2013b; Titchkosky & Aubrecht, 2015), they too have been figured as threats to futurity. Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian (2020) describe how agricultural monocultures create vulnerability to pests and pathogens, including fungi, thus earning them the “reputation as the enemy of civilization and, later, progress” (Tsing, 2012, as quoted by Kaishian & Djoulakian, 2020, p. 6). In contrast, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) describes how the Indigenous Three Sisters polyculture draws on the unique gifts and interdependencies of corn, squash, and beans to sustain themselves without the use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides.

When researching the lives of squirrels and raccoons, Maranda Elizabeth (2019) discovered that “the first result ... is not *how they live* but *how to get rid of them*” (p. 28, emphasis in text);⁵³ likewise, their search results for borderline personality disorder and chronic illness were dominated by questions of “how to cope with us [and] get rid of us” (p. 28). Likewise, Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian (2020) note that the discipline of mycology is typically “placed under the purview of plant and/or forest pathology” (p. 9) – fields which, like psychiatry with madness, pathologize fungi “as something to be fought, controlled, and eliminated” (p. 9). These discourses and orientations represent what Maranda Elizabeth (2019) refers to as a “banishing spell” (p. 28), through which we become marked for extermination in the pursuit of eugenic futures (Kafer, 2013b); and yet, like our scavenger friends, we find ways to cope and survive (Elizabeth, 2019).

These perspectives of fungi are driven by mycophobia – the fear of fungi – which Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian (2020) liken to queerphobia, because their refusal to be neatly categorized or controlled makes fungal would-be-subjects “difficult to discern or dominate through heteropatriarchal systems of oppression” (p. 11). Existing outside of the imposed plant/animal binary, “fungi are nonbinary” (p. 10); unconstrained by anthropocentric, heteropatriarchal, and

⁵³ “To encourage squirrels and raccoons, to invite them into your life, to connect with them, do the opposite” (Elizabeth, 2019, p. 28).

allosexual notions of sex, fungi such as *Schizophyllum commune* have as many as 23,000 mating types, whereas members of the phylum *Glomeromycota* are exclusively asexual.

Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian (2020) describe how the “poisonous and destructive qualities [of] a small subset of fungi have become mapped on the character of fungi as a whole” (p. 11), likening this process to how characteristics of individuals from marginalized groups become generalized onto the larger group. The right to individuality is preserved only for those higher on hierarchies of domination, such as plant life (Kaishian & Djoulakian, 2020) and humans in closer proximity to whiteness.

It is no wonder, then, that fungi have regularly starred within dystopian fiction. Fungi represent a threat to the status quo, from the earth below: they threaten the individualism of white supremacy (Okun, 2021) and Western culture, drawing on fears of death and destruction. Fears of bodyminds being “colonized” by parasitic fungi also mirror the violence, extractive, and dystopian histories and presents of settler colonial nations states. For settlers, this may be experienced as unsettling, as a call toward be(com)ing “co-conspirators for decolonial futures” (Habtom & Scribe, 2020, p. 1; Myers, 2021); or, alternatively, as a fictional dystopian nightmare we feel we can “leave behind” due to settler ideologies that relegate colonialism to the distant past.

At the same time, fungi remind us that through death emerges new life: they are an invitation to break through the limits of the realism and imagine the world otherwise; to be led by the most marginalized toward decolonial futures; to dream of resurrection in a mode of entangled queer relation. The vilification of fungi in fiction is a manifestation of mycophobia, a dystopian trope that indoctrinates viewers to fear, reject, and actively fight *against* the crafting of alternatives.⁵⁴

The “poisonous and destructive qualities” (Kaishian & Djoulakian, 2020, p. 11) of fungi enable a process of reconstruction. Parasitic fungi feed off living lifeforms, endangering their health

⁵⁴ See Sami Schalk’s (2018a) analysis of *The Girl with All the Gifts* for an example of how fungi are represented both as a dystopian threat to futurity as well as a roadmap for utopia.

in the process (Stamets, 2005). And yet, parasitic fungi can be beneficial for the ecosystem as a whole, returning nutrients to the ground (Stamets, 2005). By decomposing older trees, fungi can open up the canopy of the forest, letting in light and making room for new growth (Sayner, n.d.).

We might imagine these older trees to represent institutions constructed upon centuries-old logics of colonialism, capitalism, and carcerality, such as immigration, psychiatric and criminal (in)justice systems.⁵⁵ Through abolitionist work, we can reveal the damage imposed by these logics and cause cracks in the institutions themselves. While “falling through the cracks” is typically conceptualized as a lack of access to necessary care, it also allows us to explore creative new pathways to have our needs met in community, allowing us to question what constitutes “care” and what care is “necessary.” These cracks create new openings: a space to reimagine our relations and obligations to one another; our visions for a just world; the ways we allocate our time, energy, and resources; and our methods of responding to distress and harm within our communities – through frameworks such as peer support, disability justice, and transformative justice.

How, then, can we begin to act as parasitic fungi; as destructive and de/constructive decomposers, as enablers of new life? In her short story *The Seed*, Lizzie Hughes (2022) describes a potted plant that was brought into a prison office in an attempt to “bring life into [a] place of death” (p. 20). This plant is neglected; no one waters it, and yet, it continues to grow, silently, steadily, without notice. Eventually, its tendrils dig their way into the bricks of the prison, causing cracks; then, the walls come tumbling down, and the prisoners are set free. This plant operates as a parasite, gradually consuming the lifeforce of the prison to enable new lives for those formerly incarcerated.

In the context of prison abolition, Phil Crocket Thomas (2022) describes the value of “‘non-reformist’ reforms,” which “don’t increase the effectiveness, power, and reach of the system” (p. 38). Drawing on these same strategies, Bonnie Burstow (2010) describes an *Attrition Model of*

⁵⁵ Thank you to Rachel Bromberg, who, through our impromptu conversation about parasitic fungi and black mold, helped me recognize the generative potential of these organisms.

Antipsychiatry that works toward psychiatric abolition by slowly “withering away” at the system over time – much like a parasitic fungus. These acts of destruction and decomposition create a generative space, an opening up of the future, through which we can begin to imagine things otherwise: an invitation towards anti-carceral alternatives.

MYCELIAL ALIENATION: ON DIS/CONNECTION

White supremacy culture ... and its characteristics are toxic to all of us. They are damaging because they are self-perpetuating and promote white supremacy thinking and behavior, which is the source of our social, mental, emotional, and material disconnect.

— Tema Okun, 2021
White Supremacy Culture – Still Here, pp. 4–5

The wellbeing of flora depend on their symbiotic relationship with fungi, passing nutrients back and forth via common mycorrhizal networks. These decentralized mycosystems can be understood as “leaderless and leaderful” (p. 98) – a non-hierarchical organizing strategy that Dean Spade (2020) associates with successful mutual aid groups. We might understand these networks as a call for relation; but also a call to move beyond the (just) human, the (just) living, to consider the interconnections and interdependencies between all things, all forms of life and non-life. Just as fungi and flora are dependent upon one another, so too are they dependent upon the substrate in which they grow. Mycologists believe that the very presence of plant life on land was only made possible due to their interdependencies with fungi (Stamets, 2005). A recognition that *we are all always already entangled*: flora \ fauna \ fungi as one.

How can we build these mycelial networks? – or, rather, how can we recognize the networks that already exist, buried barely beneath our feet? How could we strengthen them, provide them with the love and care and nutrients they need to flourish? Just as mushrooms can only emerge from mycelial networks, so too can practices of mutual support only emerge within the context of

community. But these underground networks always already exist – we are all always already in relation with one another – and yet, we become alienated from them, turning away from these systems of interdependence and relation, refusing to look under the surface.

Karl Marx says that alienation is “the human condition under capitalism” (Chrisjohn et al., 2017, p. 81) and while he is discussing alienation in a different register there is something here that carries over. Capitalism necessitates our alienation from the fruits of our labour, as production is transformed by industrialism and placed under the watchful eye of the neoliberal panopticon; yet, alienation does not *just* involve alienation between labour and product but also from each other, our non-human relations, our inner worlds, and our spiritual selves (Chrisjohn et al., 2017; Hersey, 2022).

Our relationship with production is always already social; yet, under the regime of colonial capitalism these social relations become obscured and anonymized (Chrisjohn et al., 2017). As we are indoctrinated by grind culture to measure our value in productivity, we become isolated and alienated (Hersey, 2022). Capitalism teaches us that the only way to fill this void of disconnection is through consumption, with little awareness or attention to who and what has been involved in the production of goods, how, and under what circumstances. In a white supremacist world where “progress is bigger and more” (Okun, 2021), no amount of consumption is ever enough; and yet, as we consume, we too are consumed.

Capitalism depends on this alienation to enable and sustain care-less practices of extraction. The extraction of labour, knowledge, and the natural world are ontologically intertwined: bound by a common logic of extractivism, body/mind/land becomes viewed as a resource to be extracted until it runs dry – always for someone else’s purpose and power (Grosfoguel, 2019; Hersey, 2022; Smith, 2016). This is the trap of white supremacy and colonial capitalism, a brainwashing accepted as truth, that attempts to transform us from divine beings into machines, to be used until we need be replaced (Hersey, 2022).

PURPLE BASIL LEMONADE: (RE)MIXING COMMUNITY

Years ago, during a meeting of the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective (HMSC), we started discussing favourite colours. Through an informal poll of members in attendance, we learned that purple was a very Mad colour – it was the favourite colour of many of us!

I never used to have favourite colours, but I do now. Since then, I have come to associate the colour purple with Mad community – and HMSC in particular – as well as experiences of madness more generally.

* * *

In the summer of 2021, I went shopping for a basil plant. Next to the green basil, I spotted a different colour of basil – they were purple! I brought a few of them home and started looking for recipes to use them in. One recipe in particular caught my eye: purple basil lemonade. ([Appendix](#))

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic began, I have been filled with a deep loneliness and aching for community. During the second pandemic summer, my friends and I started going to the park on the weekends to read books, eat snacks, and chat about our lives, as a safer way of being in community with one another. It was a welcome break from the chaos of the world and the unrelenting demands for productivity from academia: it was a time for rest. Every week I could, I brought a batch of my purple basil lemonade – it soon became a symbol of our “park hangs.”

Purple basil is a Madgical plant: over the past two years, they have become central to my community building rituals. When I make purple basil lemonade, I think about purple, I think about HMSC. I listen to music from a playlist co-created with a group of friends of mine during the summer of 2018, when we used to get together once a week, often making and sharing food together. I think about the park, this space of connection in the midst of an era of isolation – a place that feels like falling out of time entirely. I think about all the friends that I have lost along the way – and they are here with me, once again. Whenever I make purple basil lemonade, I am transported back to my queer, trans, Mad, and crip communities, past and present. These

communities become entangled, intertwined, (re)mixed together; they diffract one another; a re-turning of community, new meanings laid overtop of and through the old.

My purple basil plants only grow in the summer: so too were our gatherings temporally limited. When school started back in September and the temperature dropped, our park hangs paused. The temporality of purple basil reminds of that communities, too, are seasonal – sometimes lasting for years, sometimes months, sometimes drifting apart only to find their way back together again. Communities form and shift and drift for myriad reasons: I have learned the importance of cherishing these communities while we find ourselves within them, while accepting that they too will come to an end. Yet, our experiences with community continue to re-turn and diffract one another. Our memories of community, and the lessons we learn from them, inform our politics and values, as well as how we engage in future communities: we learn community *through* communities – plural.

ANTHOCYANINS:

RITUALS OF REST

We will no longer be a martyr for grind culture. Grind culture is a collaboration between white supremacy and capitalism. It views our divine bodies as machines. Our worth is not connected to how much we produce. Another way is possible.

— Tricia Hersey, 2022
Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto, p. 12

The purple leaves of the purple basil plant are due to the effects of anthocyanins, a class of pigments responsible for reddish hues in a variety of plant life (Gould, 2004). If “green leaves are engineered to optimise productivity” (p. 314) – to increase a plant’s absorption of the sun’s rays – what then, are purple leaves engineered for?

The reddish hue of anthocyanins block out yellow-green light, providing a variety of protective functions (Gould, 2004). This colour change can make plants a less attractive food source for insects, and make bugs more visible to avian predators. Anthocyanins help plants develop

tolerance to a variety of forms of stress, including freezing, heavy metal contamination, drought, and wounding. Anthocyanins have photoprotective effects: minimizing the amount of light absorbed by a plant's leaves and protecting them against UV-B radiation which can damage plant DNA. They also help repair damage through their antioxidant functions.

Instead of being designed for productivity like their chlorophyll cousins, anthocyanins prioritize protection, rest, and repair. They recognize the hidden dangers of unchecked productivity: they are a reminder to slow down and rest, demonstrating how the refusal of productivity is crucial to survival. And, just like rest, connection, community, and dream⁵⁶ in a late-capitalist society, so too have anthocyanins “long been considered an extravagant waste of a plant's resources” (p. 314).

Tricia Hersey's (2022) *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* is a powerful reminder that *rest is a divine right* – not a reward to be earned through productivity. Grounded in Black liberation theology (Hersey, 2021), Tricia Hersey – also known as the Nap Bishop – outlines how rest can be a powerful tool in the refusal of grind culture and the crafting of alternative futures. Rest opens a portal in our minds \ a DreamSpace \ through which imagining new worlds becomes possible (Hersey, 2022).

FUNGAL FUTURES:

A MODEL FOR THE RE/PRODUCTION OF PEER ETHICS & PRACTICE

[The] dialectic between the imaginary and the material is in constant flux. Castoriadis [1997] uses the metaphor of magma to describe the way the power of the imagination as a social force flows, usually unrecognized, through a society that is made of institutions and identities that are, in fact, the solidified and petrified remains of its previous eruptions of the imagination. Their destiny is to be swept away by future eruptions, which will then harden into new institutional formations. ... For Castoriadis, all of these institutions are, ultimately, structures of the shared imagination that, in their turn, shape the imagination.

— Max Haiven, 2023
*Dreaming Together: Artists Mobilizing Collective Dreaming Methods
 for the Radical Imagination*, pp. 45/50

⁵⁶ Max Haiven (2023) notes that “dominant Western epistemology frames dreams and dreaming as largely meaningless noise produced by the unproductive brain at rest” (p. 41).

Like our imaginations, the growth patterns of mycelia are shaped by the world around them. The earth itself holds history: the soil in which mycelia grow is the culmination of billions of years of natural processes, as rocks form, are weathered into soil, spatially displaced, and shaped by a multitude of lifeforms – plants, animals, bugs, bacteria, worms, and more, as well as fungi themselves. These ongoing historical processes shape the environment in which mycelia take root, as they inch toward moisture and nutrients.

We might imagine mycelia as representing a specific set of ethics, values, and worldviews: an underlying philosophy within which our practices of mutual aid are grounded and grown. Just as the form of mycelia is shaped by the substrate within which they grow, so too are our philosophies of mutual support shaped by the historical, social, material, and cultural contexts within which they emerge. In the context of mental health peer support, our collective values⁵⁷ have been shaped by the historical context of deinstitutionalization and the c/s movement, as well as more recent trends toward professionalization and institutionalization (Prowse, 2022a).⁵⁸ However, there is diversity within the movement as well: our personal philosophies of peer support are also shaped by our own personal lived experiences with madness, psychiatrization, support, and community.

The development of our philosophies can be supported through processes of consciousness-raising (Chamberlin, 2012b; Faulkner, 2017) or *conscientização* (“conscientization”; Freire, 1970/2018; Macedo, 1970/2018, pp. 15–16): the development of critical consciousness, or “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (translator’s note; Robert Barr, in Freire, 1970/2018, p. 35).

⁵⁷ In Canada, the core values of peer support have been described as: hope and recovery; empathetic and equal relationships; self-determination; dignity, respect and social inclusion; integrity, authenticity and trust; health and wellness; and lifelong learning and personal growth (Peer Support Canada, n.d.; Sunderland et al., 2013).

⁵⁸ In Chapters 2 and 3 of my MSW thesis (Prowse, 2022a), I trace the genealogies of the values of mutuality (“equal relationships”) and empowerment (“self-determination”), as well as peer support’s emphasis on lived experience, from the historical context of deinstitutionalization, through the c/s movement, and toward the present state of peer support professionalization and institutionalization.

Consciousness-raising allows us to locate ourselves within the context from which our ethics of community care emerge, as well as understand how this grounding has shaped our perspectives, values, and worldviews – just as mycelia, too, are shaped by the substrate they grow within. Consciousness-raising enables us to connect our experiences to the ways they have been shaped by the world around us, strengthening our roots. It also allows us to draw connections between individual lived experiences (as one does within peer relationships), as well as between the individual and the collective. Consciousness-raising provides the foundation from which we can begin to dream new futures that meet all of our needs.

Within a nutrient-rich environment supported by an ethics of community care, naturally-occurring practices of mutual support may emerge. We might imagine different articulations and practices of mutual support and community care as represented by different types of mushrooms – the fruiting bodies of mycelial networks – sprouting from the substrate in distinct ways depending on their unique environments: a fruit that remains rooted within a mycelial network of connections hidden underground, just beneath the surface. The relationship between mycelia and mushrooms, then, is genealogical: it attends to the ways that our practices of mutual support are shaped by our underlying ethical frameworks, which, in turn, are shaped by distinct historical, social, material, and cultural contexts – even if these may not immediately be apparent, hidden just beneath the surface.

This process of fungal fruiting can be compared to the ways that ethics of community care are put into practice. This process can be supported through the development of praxis (Freire, 1970/2018) – an iterative and ongoing process of reflection and action; one that is never completed, but rather, always in re-vision. Praxis is a way of re-turning our actions to generate new insights, so that we can build alignment between our understanding of the world and the ways we engage with/in it. Through the development of praxis, our philosophical foundations emerge from the earth as distinct practices of community care – with c/s peer support being only one of many.

The next stage in the fungal reproductive cycle is the transmission of spores (Stamets, 2005). Just as spores can be carried far distances on (and in) the bodies of insect and animal life, so too are our ethics and practices of community care transmitted via our bodyminds. When we leave communities and travel between them, we bring our memories and histories of these practices with us – pasts that continue to shape our interactions and relationships in the present. Once these spores land in new places – if the circumstances are right, if the environment is hospitable – they can germinate into hyphae: individual fungal cells which make up mycelial networks (Stamets, 2005). Just as fungi require moisture and nutrients to take root, so too do our practices require environments that are relatively receptive to both peer ethics and practices. Storytelling can be a way of reconnecting these hyphae to the mycelial network – a way of historicizing and contextualizing our practices within our own lived experiences and a distinct collective ethics of community care.

And yet, mushrooms do not last forever – the dispersal of spores is only a temporary stage of the fungal reproductive cycle. Some mushrooms deliquesce – here referring to “the process of autodigestion by which the gills and cap of a mushroom melt into a liquid” (Stamets, 2005, p. 306).⁵⁹ The process of deliquescence reminds me of the powerful (yet painful) role of loss. Yet, fungi are a reminder that the emergence of new life is not possible without death and decay: as we return to the soil, we too are recycled by fungi into the nutrients necessary to sustain new life; we become anew.

We might imagine the pileus (mushroom cap) as representing a home – the place or community within which mutual aid practices take place. Just as the cycle of life depends on death, so too do the evolution of our mutual aid practices. When the homes of mutual support dissolve, they create openings through which new growth can emerge. Just as fungi transform death into nutrients for new life, so too can the dissolution of these homes create space for new philosophies and practices to emerge, which re-turn and respond to earlier iterations.

⁵⁹ Thanks to Ben Prowse for drawing my attention to the fungal process of deliquescence.

The evolution of mutual support is a constant process of re-vision, through which new peer support futures become imaginable – and, therefore, buildable – precisely *because* of the limitations and constraints of peer support pasts.

All that you touch/You Change
All that you Change/Changes you
The only lasting truth/Is Change
God/Is Change

— Octavia Butler, 2000
quoting her character Lauren Olamina from *Parable of the Sower*⁶⁰
A Few Rules for Predicting the Future, p. 166

⁶⁰ For an analysis of *Parable of the Sower*, see Sami Schalk (2018c).

DREAMING LIKE FIRE ANTS

For women ... poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.

— Audre Lorde, 1977/2007
Poetry is Not a Luxury
in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, p. 37

Poetry is not a luxury: it is a way of feeling, of giving our dreams shape; an ancient technology for imagining something radically different than the here and now, buried but never forgotten. Poetry is not a luxury: it is a matter of survival in a world that demands and depends on the death of our dreams; our ability to imagine something different, something better, something new. Poetry is hope: it is the promise and foundation of alternative futures; poetry is resistance, refusal, and revolution: it is an essential way of being, whose qualities have been obscured in the subjugation of feminized feminist feeling under the (masculine, colonial, white) supremacy of logic and rationalism (Kaishian & Djoulakian, 2020; Lorde, 1977/2007) – a cutting away of the soul (Hersey, 2022).

I am reminded of fire ants. Fire ants have a stage of sleep called Rapid Antennal Movement (RAM) sleep, which appears to be a rough analogue of Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep in vertebrates such as us (Cassill et al., 2009). The majority of our dreams take place during REM sleep; I wonder: what do fire ants dream of?

Poetry is not a *thing*, an object, a noun: it is a verb, a *doing*, a dialogue – between poet, reader, listener, and the worldviews we hold within us, always in a process of (re)becoming. Poetry does not happen in isolation: it demands an audience; it is an invitation toward an entangled mode of relation.

Some species of ants can have multiple queens in one colony; such is the case with the fire ant, *Solenopsis invicta*. In fire ant colonies with more than one queen, their sleep schedules synchronize with one another (Cassill et al., 2009): they *move* together. I wonder: how can we synchronize with each other?; how can we dream, together?; how can we move, together?; how can we breathe, together; to be(come) co-conspirators for decolonial futures (Habtom & Scribe, 2020; Myers, 2021), together?

Poetry is not a luxury: it is a bodymind necessity. Poetry is entangled embodiment: when our bodyminds move, in the multiplicity of ways that they do, we become poetry in action. The sleeping patterns of fire ants are a synchronized dance: an entanglement of Self and Other into one Being, one Movement; a moment of rest between stanzas.

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APPENDIX:
RECIPE FOR PURPLE BASIL LEMONADE

This recipe is based on the purple basil lemonade recipe described by Joanne Weir (2009), with some modifications. I characterize purple basil lemonade as a “sipping drink” – its strength means that it is something to be drank slowly and cherished in community. The culture of purple basil lemonade is one of slowness, rest, and (re)connection.

Ingredients:

- 4 cups cold water⁶¹
- ½ cup lemon juice⁶²
- ½ cup loosely packed purple basil leaves
- 4 tablespoons sugar

Directions:

- 1) Mix water and lemon juice in a large bowl.
- 2) Muddle the basil and sugar in a mortar and pestle – just enough until you see the basil leaf start releasing its oils.
- 3) Add the basil/sugar mixture into the bowl and stir – then let it sit for a few minutes for the basil to continue infusing the mixture. The purple from the basil leaf will interact with the acidity of the lemon juice, turning the lemonade pink! ⁶³
- 4) Strain over a bowl or jar, and discard solids.
- 5) Serve with ice and friendship.

⁶¹ To add an extra dimension to the flavour, replace 1-2 cups of water with (cooled) tea made from the flowers of the purple basil plant, by steeping them in boiled water for 10-15 minutes.

⁶² Try adding the juice of one lime as well!

⁶³ I have had several batches of my lemonade turn brown, instead of pink – I think this happens when you grind the basil too much, causing the green chlorophyll to be released into the mixture along with the anthocyanins. If this happens to you, I recommend topping your lemonade with carbonated water to transform it into purple basil “beer.”