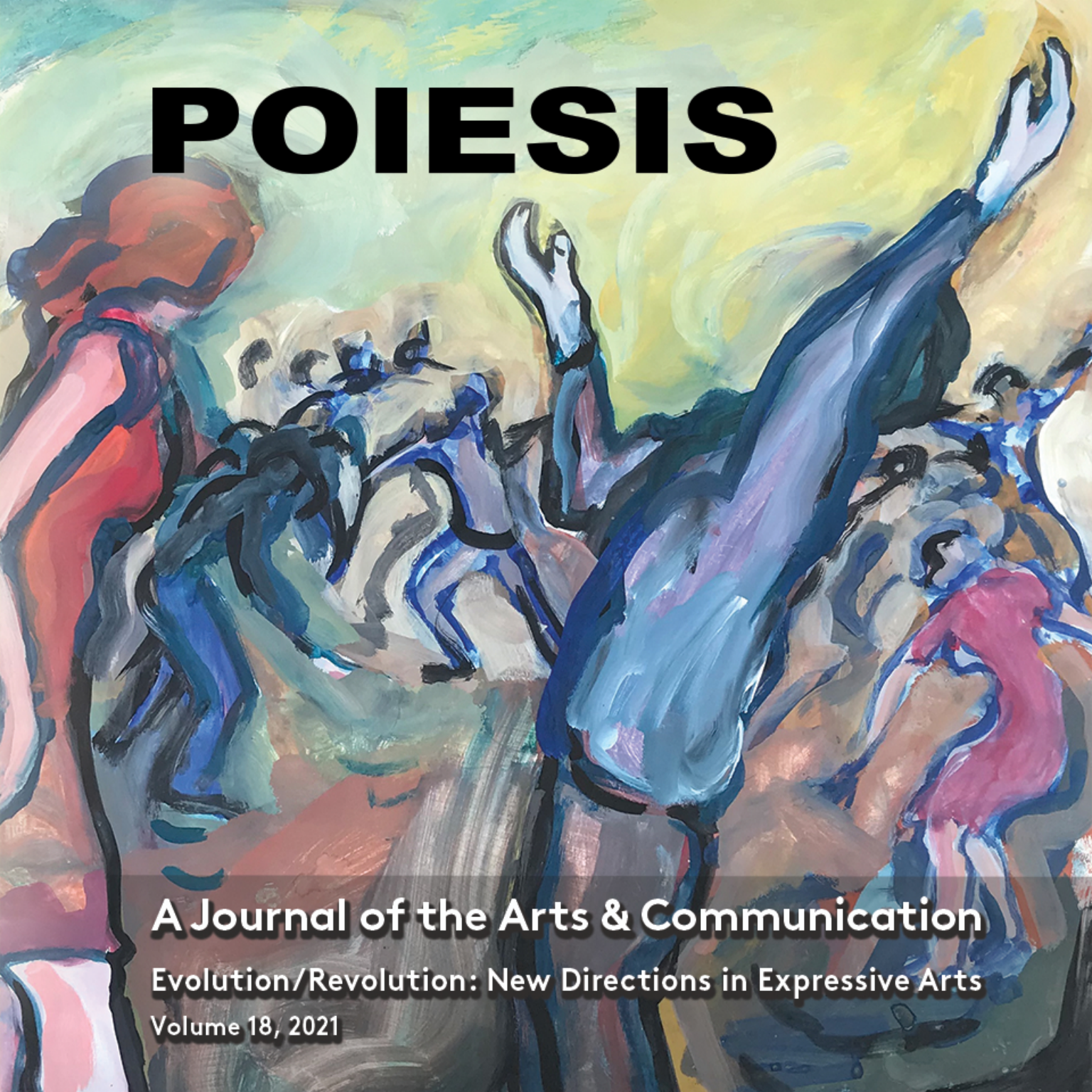


An abstract painting featuring several figures in a dynamic, expressive scene. The figures are rendered in bold, gestural brushstrokes with a color palette dominated by reds, blues, and yellows. The composition is energetic, with figures appearing to be in motion, possibly dancing or performing. The background is a mix of warm, glowing colors like yellow and orange, suggesting a bright, intense atmosphere. The overall style is reminiscent of modernist or expressionist art.

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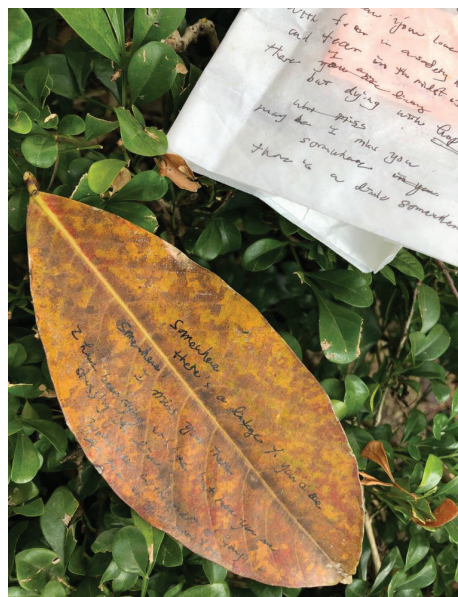
Evolution/Revolution: New Directions in Expressive Arts

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City as Studio, City as Wound: Dreaming Abolitionist Futures

Gracelynn Chung-Yan Lau

What does it mean to be an expressive arts therapist in the abolitionist movement? This question came to me when I was invited to participate in "Abolitionist Dream-Mapping," a collective research project in collaboration with thirteen other researchers based at Queen's University, Canada. The prison-abolition movement is the struggle to do away with imprisonment and the prison-industrial complex, and to find alternatives to incarceration as a way of building a more equitable society. Taking the abolitionist scholarship framework beyond the link between slavery and mass incarceration, we seek to experiment and recover abolitionist methods for disman-



tling carceral-colonial institutions and building freer, healthier, and more just communities in various community-based projects. Our research collective re-purposes “map” as a creative tool for navigating oppressive structures, activates the collective power to dream as a critical research method to experiment with ways of making alternatives, and translates abolitionist practices into hybrid cultural spaces. We ask ourselves: How do maps, images, and other forms of creative story-telling contribute to the transdisciplinary work of decolonial abolition? How do artists and researchers practice abolitionist and decolonial ethics in their work? As a co-researcher, I contextualized these research questions in Hong Kong in the Spring of 2021. This paper reflects on a six-month community collaboration with “From Trauma to Transformation,” a self-organizing initiative formed in response to the collective trauma in the aftermath of the civil unrest and protests in Hong Kong since late 2019. One of the focuses of our collaboration is experimenting ways to process traumatic memories and experiences in specific sites and neighbourhoods in the city through expressive arts-based “grief walks,” turning the wounded city landscape into the “studio” for play and imagination. I will reflect on the possibilities and challenges of facilitating healing spaces for social trauma outside the therapist’s office, and offer my self-reflexive inquiry as an expressive arts therapist in the dreaming of abolitionist futures.

Scholar-activist and feminist Angela Davis, a founding voice in abolitionist movement-building, has argued that abolition is not only a critical practice of dismantling oppressive structures, but also a creative process of building up and creating new relationships, practices, and institutions that would make oppressive structures obsolete (Davis, 2003). Initiatives such as *Harriet’s Apothecary* (inspired by the healing practice of Harriet Tubman) and the *#8toAbolition* campaign clearly demonstrate that abolition entails not only defunding police and freeing people from prisons, but also cultivating safe housing, health care, education, and co-creating accessible, all-body and all-gender loving community healing spaces. In the recent Black Lives Matter movement, Black feminists show us that abolition is a project and on-going practice of healing from the violence of policing and incarceration. As Queer Black poet-activist Alexis

Pauline Gumbs puts it, abolitionist work is “being partners in radical healing” in the here and now. In the essay “Abolition now: ten years of strategy and struggle against the prison industrial complex,” Gumbs invites us to imagine:

What if abolition isn’t a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event? What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows? What if abolishing the prison industrial complex is the fruit of our diligent gardening, building and deepening of a movement to respond to the violence of the state and the violence in our communities with sustainable, transformative love? (Gumbs, 2008, 145)

Could this abolitionist vision inform and inspire a socially engaged expressive arts therapy practice? In expressive arts therapy (EXA) the making of art, as *poiesis*, is a sensitive, sensible and sense-making process of shaping the world while being shaped by it (Levine & Levine, 2011). EXA therapists have observed that those who search for healing perceive themselves as incapable of responding to their situations or challenges. By engaging in a process of *poiesis* in which they give up control, the clients act and respond within the creative constraints given to them by the therapists, and through which they rekindle a sense of their own capacity for imagination and action (Knill et. al., 2005). Can *poiesis*—the human aesthetic response to what has been given to us by making something new—facilitate abolitionist imagination in the midst of political uncertainties and hopelessness? Can expressive arts therapists create healing spaces and resources outside the therapist’s office to process systemic pain and social grief in the wounded city? Carrying these thoughts and questions with me, I responded to the call to work with social trauma in the land of my origin—Hong Kong—after the former British colony had been through months of civil unrest, social wounding and flight.

When grieving becomes too political

I met with my local project partner S at the Kowloon Park, a city park in the busiest downtown district right beside Nathan Road and the regional police headquarter. As we walked underneath the aerial roots of the Banyan trees, she showed me where the water cannon was deployed and where the police fired tear gas. There were vaguely visible traces of torn down protest slogan graffiti, and posters remained on the walls. S said that during the months' long pro-democracy demonstrations, countless memorable and traumatic moments changed the ways people feel and experience the city forever. Several metro stations, intersections, roadside fences, even the bricks from the sidewalk and post-it notes, have taken on new layers of meaning to those who call this city home, reminding them that once they were reclaiming ur-



ban spaces and voices in a political process. While a new sense of belonging and identity has emerged, powerlessness and fears are simultaneously reshaping the city. "Public urban spaces and the streets mean something very different now, but we have to pretend nothing's wrong and that everything returns to normal," S told me.

If the city is filled with unbearable memories and unresolved feelings, isn't it like living in a haunted house? Isn't it more brutal than accidentally walking by special places once shared between lovers after a heart-breaking breakup? There were times people com-

memorated a metro station or landmark by leaving floral tributes in front of the exit to remember those who committed suicide or went missing during the protests. There were times “Lennon Walls,” covered in sticky notes and other creative displays, sprang up on walkways, sky bridges, underpasses and storefronts, carrying messages that expressed protesters’ mottoes and feelings. But even such gestures of mourning and expression have now become too politically risky and forbidden. S told me that she had the idea of “Hong Kong re-visit,” a map/journey of revisiting those areas and locations to acknowledge the grief, pain and other emotions that come with the city-wide traumatic social events. She once shared the idea with others, and a few counsellors and teachers responded, but no follow-up took place thereafter.

“Let’s do it,” I said to S, not knowing how to do it yet. My gut feeling told me that the land, the plants, and the other-than-human beings in the specific locations were the witnesses of the happening, and they would show me how to do it. Perhaps I could create location-specific, self-guided expressive arts activities as community resources, like a grief-walk map, that people can download for free, follow the guide to interact with the space, and ceremonially re-create a new experience with the city. Politically people may experience themselves incapable of responding to their situations or challenges, and expressive arts therapy may seem far from practical at the moment. But in the face of systemic despair and grief, the least I could do is to create healing spaces and invoke the sacred. I remember Harriet’s Apothecary facilitator Erika Totten saying in an interview that, “There’s a level of alchemy in creating healing spaces. Even in the midst of these systems of oppression, we are still calling ourselves sacred” (Sostaita, 2020).

a group of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) practitioners and media professionals, alongside clinical psychiatry consultants. The initiative believes that sustainable transformation starts from building civic culture and community resilience, and therefore approaches social trauma as opportunities for collective transformation at the societal level. Since late 2019, they have been offering courses and educational materials to introduce NVC, The Work that Reconnects, and other models, raising public awareness about trauma, empathy, conflict mediation and emotional capacity-building.

Initially, our collaboration plan was to offer a three-month expressive arts-based inquiry group for people seeking alternatives for personal and social healing, and to create resilience through imagination, art and nature. But soon after I have arrived in the city and listened carefully, I heard the “unanswered call” to hold space for invisible grief in visible spaces. Two other projects emerged spontaneously: “Bring Wood to the Fire”, a series of bi-weekly online creative ritual spaces for deep listening, grief and empowerment; and the expressive arts-based “grief walk”. If the city landscape is where the wound is, is it possible to turn the city into a moving therapeutic “studio”?

Grief walk: making studio in and with the wounded city as we walk

Where is the studio? The studio is right here, nowhere and everywhere. In an individual grief walk session, I have to constantly remind myself as we walk that the changing space where we find ourselves is the studio. I cannot bring a fancy “portable studio” with me, so I must keep it simple. For each walk we meet with a different person at a different location, following the person’s lead to see how they prefer to revisit that area. Often times strong feelings or body sensations, memories, scenes or faces come up randomly as we turn a corner, or walk by a particular building. Knowing neither the place nor where the journey takes us, I can only rely on the architecture of an expressive arts session,

shaping time itself and the things we encounter in the moving scenery into the studio. The temporal-spatial experience of the walk becomes poesis—I have to prompt “materials” for the person to work with and respond to aesthetically as we walk. The sun, the shadow, fallen leaves, and sometimes random road signs found on the street become the art materials. It feels like creating magic out of nothing. Usually I bring some basic items, such as masking tape, colourful sticky notes, sharpies, some cotton string or yarn, with me. But the key is to

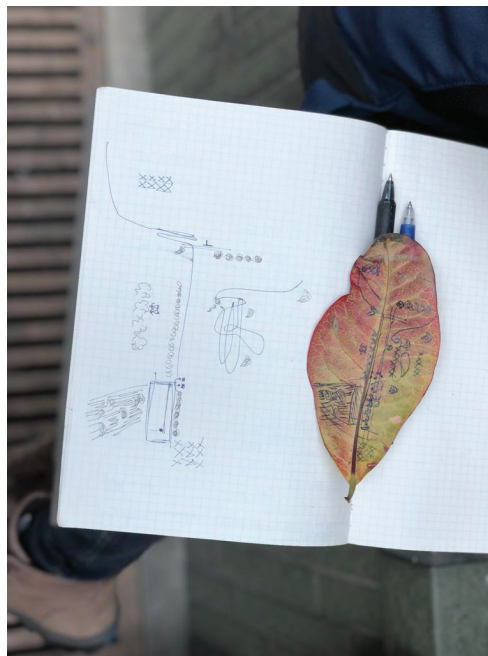


listen to what arises in the person at the moment, and follow their curiosity. One time I turned a seven-storey old building's rooftop in the heart of downtown into an improv dance performance stage; the clotheslines, the antennas (and the possibility of angry residents showing up) became the dance backdrop. Another time I asked the person to interview a pedestrian bridge,

and make an installation with found objects right outside the entrance of a no-entry zone where the unofficial “designated” smoking area is.

The challenge, and also the opportunity, is that the wound is where the studio is. When unbearable memories and unresolved feelings come up, the person either feels the urge to retell the stories, or intuitively ignores the feelings by focusing on something else. My job is to sensitize the person in their

immediate surroundings at the present moment, so that they can pay attention to their body awareness and curiosity phenomenologically and start to notice what attracts them. But this is only the preparation work. The therapist's role is more than a companion. My aesthetic responsibility is always to create art-based creative play through whatever is available in the space and alive for the person. I keep in mind the principles of "low-skill, high-sensitivity" and "less is more." When people feel something strongly, a tiny little play is more than enough. As simple as putting some words down on sticky notes as we walk down the streets, it can turn into writing a poem that becomes a gift to honour something or someone special in the neighbourhood. To quiet down the desire to retell the stories and move into the art, I once asked the person to draw a map as we walk, to document the routes with two different colours – one colour records the route of the memories that emerged; another colour records the route of what attracts them at the moment – but only with symbols or shapes, no words allowed. The little "game" then evolved into a silent walk during rush hour in the business districts, and spontaneous intimate moments at specific spots and with the street-lined trees.



Grief is a long-term project and cannot be rushed. I can open the door

by making up “studios” as we walk, but in order to experience the space and themselves anew, the person must walk through the door themselves. When the feelings of grief and pain are intertwined with the socio-political situations, the experience is more challenging and complicated by self-censorship, fear, and various restrictions and risks. How do I handle the censoring of emotional expression? As a therapist, it saddens me to know that even grieving for the city has become too politically risky. But at least we can reclaim the sacred by nourishing safe spaces and moments of healing and connection to witness and honour the truth of our experience.

These “grief walks” are part of the research laboratory process to create a resource kit as a self-guided social grieving map, with written and audio materials, that people can download, use for their own grief walk in the city and create their own rituals. After a few experimental sessions, my project partner S has observed that often-times transformation takes place in and through the body during the creative or healing process, but that it takes time for the mind to register and understand what has happened. We need new languages and ways of speaking to articulate our bodily experience in order to make sense of such transformations. The research process also leaves us with more questions: What kinds of grief is the city going through collectively, and how do we carry these feelings in our daily bodily experience? Why is grief work essential to the city and to social transformation both personally and collectively? Can we sense the grief and pain in different parts of the city? And if we can, how are we to tell the difference between the personal and the collective in the grieving process?

The intention behind translating “sessions” into open source community resources is that we want to make it accessible for the wider audience who do not want to be reached or seen. There are many people who do not feel safe to join real-time programs, either in-person or online, due to various politically sensitive reasons. This practical consideration prompts us to walk the extra mile to create free self-guided materials on a mobile app that facilitates expressive

arts-based experiences beyond individual and group sessions. It also forces me to rethink my role as therapist and ways to adapt my therapeutic skills in the dreaming of abolitionist futures.

Dreaming expressive arts therapists' participation in abolitionist futures

As the project goes on, it continues to ask me what it means to be a therapist in the abolitionist movement. The process challenges me to reconsider ways to practise abolitionist ethics in my expressive arts therapy work, invoking alternatives to facilitate healing spaces in the midst of political crackdown and systems of oppression. There are three areas of self-reflexive inquiry I would like to highlight:

First, abolitionist practice invites us to imagine a world without police and prison, and to work toward abolitionist societies beyond surveillance, imprisonment, and militarization. It requires not only the dismantling of oppressive structures, but also the nurturing of radical mutual aid and collective care outside these systems. What does it look like to be a therapist dreaming such abolitionist futures? I would take it further to envision a world without therapists. Can we democratize and normalize therapeutic experiences outside the therapist office and work hours? Can we imagine that there will be no need for therapy sessions, but communities of mutual support will be capable of holding spaces for healing in and with and by the communities themselves? Can we imagine that healing will not be monetized but accessible to all people, and that the ultimate goal is to abolish our private practice? What will be the therapists' roles in the post-therapy future?

This dreaming of abolitionist futures without therapists prompts me to examine my current practice during this project. How do I self-identify in the process—as therapist, educator, or activist? As a therapist and researcher based in Canada and working in Hong Kong, what privilege and power do I hold, and how do I navigate such positionality? In what areas of political analysis do I need to learn so that I can deepen my understanding of power, oppression and

privilege in the local context? How do my privilege, role and class shape how I offer services, and how do I decide when and what do I charge, or not charge?

Lastly, when imagination and grieving become “risky” in the political context, where do I stand as a therapist, how do I respond and adapt? Expressive arts therapy embraces the phenomenological notion that human beings have the innate creative capacities to shape and create the circumstances in which they live. When people experience their inherent healing potential of imagination, and see their own capacity in responding to their situations, they are fully capable of making personal and social change (Levine & Levine, 2011). The art itself has the capacity to hold grief and pain and restore imagination, but facilitating the art and imagination in this socially-engaged context could possibly put myself and people at risk. How do I balance and protect the vulnerable ones in the alchemy of holding healing spaces in dangerous times? Can I reframe the practical challenges and limitations as creative restrictions in the creative play?

At the time of writing this article, the project is still evolving and shaping itself. While I do not pretend to have all the questions answered, I do hope that these questions will open up further dialogue between abolitionist practice and expressive arts therapy. The insights offered by abolitionist theorists could be helpful for therapists to examine the socio-political context wherein we practice. The sensible, playful and aesthetic approach in expressive arts therapy could reclaim the sacred in the city by nourishing safe spaces and moments of healing to honour our pain for the city and the world.



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COVER ART: *Dance*, by Shaun McNiff, circa 2004, 19" x 24", tempera on paper.