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Confirmation and not Revelation: The Radical Imagination and Visions for the Future

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Confirmation and not Revelation: The Radical Imagination and Visions for the Future

Nicole Salazar

Positionality and Foreword:

The imagination, in my own experience, was always constructed as something internal and an escape from current realities. My sketchbook became a space where I could visually manifest my imagination. I created Quechua characters with floating hair, sharp teeth that could bite out throats, and ones that could exist as they were (Figs. 1). It was also through these characters that I began to reconnect with the language my grandma taught me. Robin Kelley's *Freedom Dreams* (2002) helped resurface these memories and influenced this work as well. Kelley validated personal feelings and gave me the words I was searching for.

I want to think of this not as an essay but as an exploration of what I've learned and what I've experienced. There are gaps and this narrative is not complete. It's also not supposed to be romanticized- the imagination and these experiences were born out of violence and survival. They are in conversation with history. As a Brown person (Quechua from my grandmother, some sort of Latine on paper) I also want to emphasize how I found what I was trying to say through Black and Indigenous voices. They are at the center of this exploration and I am just trying to analyze my own experiences and art through this.

Confirmation and not Revelation: The Radical Imagination and Visions for the Future

Surrealism originated in 1920s Paris, initially as a writing movement and later on as an artistic one. André Breton, founder of Surrealism, denounced the conventions of society and the rational mind, defining them as oppressive. In his manifestos, he not only called for a rejection of the conventional and logical, but for a complete revolution of the mind (unbridled imagination). Through games and practices such as automatism, collage, and cadavre exquis, surrealists centered dreams, the subconscious, and the unrestricted imagination to challenge conventional society and rational thinking. Because of its revolutionary nature and denouncement of oppression, such as colonialism (French surrealists were especially critical of France and voiced support for affected rebelling groups), Surrealism attracted the marginalized and oppressed, one such being Aimé Césaire.¹ Césaire, one of Negritude's founders, stated "Surrealism provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for. I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation. It was a weapon that exploded the French language. It shook up absolutely everything."² Because Surrealism was a "confirmation" and not a "revelation,"

¹ Martine Antle, "Dada and Surrealism Faced with Colonialism," *South Central Review* 32, no. 1 (2015): 116

² Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 83.

The colonial and post-colonial: The formation of the Conventional

Césaire was already *living* the politics of the movement, rebelling against convention. Robin Kelley, in *Freedom Dreams*, follows a similar idea with their own introduction to the movement. Kelley was also interested in Surrealism, but didn't learn about it through Andre Breton or the French, "but under my nose, so to speak, buried in the rich, black soil of Afrodiasporic culture."³ Surrealism did not pioneer the use of the imagination and dreams, as it is often framed as in art history. Unbridled imagination, dreams- *the radical imagination*- were already being put into practice (manifested, written, painted, created) by marginalized identities *before* its formation. Radical imagination in this context and exploration is one born out of necessity, informed by respective histories, and manifested through practice. Radical imagination is the imagination that demands change, the destruction of oppressive conventional (what is seen as "standard" or "normalized", as accepted by dominant society), and creates (imagines) an alternative reality without said conventions. Radical imagination is a form of liberation- not only from ideas and definitions imposed by colonizers (the conventional), but also because it derives power from potential (what *is* possible and what will the future look like). It is the beginning of action, because once you can imagine it, you can start planning from it. Drawing from Black and Indigenous thought and practice, personal experience and work, we can see how the radical imagination is born out of *necessity*. Furthermore, we can apply this language of the imagination into current movements and use similar tactics for our own (personal, communal, global, etc) liberation. There is no one way of imagining so this is a collection of various imaginations.

To talk about the "post colonial" we also have to talk about the word "colonial." David Kazanjian in "Colonial" from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition*, traces the origin of "colonial" to the Roman empire, where it was used in the context of conquest and settlements and roughly translated to "settlement away from one's home state."⁴ Through the tracing of these roots, we can see how conventions were formed, and are defined by those in power. Colonial, even during the Roman Empire, describes the colonial through the actor and not the *acted on*. Furthermore, the use of settlement - originating from the word "settle," connotes passivity, and even a quietness of the action. Violence is not mentioned or even implied. How can we disrupt something that does not even begin to acknowledge its harm? The passivity embedded in the term disregards the histories of people affected by the violence of colonialism and is even perpetuated through art, such as John Gast's *American Progress (1872)*. Gast's representation of colonization is gentle, as the floating woman leads groups of people across the plains. Colonial ideologies and practices, because they are defined by those in power, become the conventional- something that is deep-rooted and perpetuated.

Post-colonialism, as defined by Britannica, is "the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism; the term can also be used to describe the concurrent project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of

³ Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams : The Black Radical Imagination*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002) 4.

⁴ David Kazanjian, "Colonial." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies, Second Edition*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, 2nd ed, (NYU Press, 2014): 48.

imperialism... Postcolonialism should not be confused with the claim that the world we live in now is actually devoid of colonialism.”⁵The structure of the term itself signifies a time *after* colonialism with the latin prefix *post*. Even though Britannica asserts that it should not be read as a time “devoid of colonialism,” the term’s structure implies it. “Post” represents a future, a moving on from. Colonialism then is suggested as something from the past, which is definitely not true since the byproducts and its children are still present today (capitalism, current imperialism, etc- It is the same thing just under the guise of other names). Post-colonialism is then a misnomer.

Theory and term both have their respective contradictions as well. Anne McClintock states that the prefix “post” also signals “the idea of linear, historical progress... haunted by the very figure of linear ‘development’ that it sets out to dismantle.”⁶ The construction of the term also signifies a very linear history of events: the pre-colonial, the colonial, and post-colonial, in that order. McClintock’s critique that the construction of the term *influences* the theory part as well, arguing “if ‘post-colonial’ theory has sought to challenge the grand march of western historicism with its entourage of binaries... the term ‘post-colonialism’ nonetheless re-orientes the globe once more around a single, binary opposition: colo- nial/ post-colonial... theory is thereby shifted from the binary axis of power (colonizer/colonized)... to the binary axis of time, an axis even less productive of political nuance.”⁷ In this critique, it seems like the problem lies more in the structure of the word. It is pushing for the creation of binaries, the use of

time as the center, and linearity. Linear time has been accepted as the conventional and is further cemented as the *only* acceptable perception through construction of language and theory. How can we get rid of the notion of linear time that is embedded in these terms? And if we accomplished this, would movements manifest differently?

The flaw of the term post-colonialism is rooted in language. In language and construction of words there is power. However, it also depends on *who* is using language. Franz Fanon emphasizes the ties between dominant (colonizer) language, its fluency, and intellect through Andre Breton’s comment on Aimé Césaire, stating “Here is a black man who handles the French language as no white man today.”⁸ Fanon follows this quote with his own statement “And, even though Breton may be stating a fact, I do not see why there should be any paradox, anything to underline, for in truth M. Aimé Césaire is a native of Martinique and a university graduate.”⁹ Similarly, the fact that I am even writing this in English is another topic on its own. *Academic* English is also another different language as well. The term post-colonialism, constructed and defined in English, gets caught up in this academic, English, linear web and reflects the conventional- what is accepted by a dominant society.

In terms of this exploration, I want to frame, but not limit, post-colonialism as a personal experience. There will be overlapping themes but it is so many things at once because it is *personal*. Every person brings their own history while building this narrative (it’s many histories at once as well). It is a response to

⁵ Duncan Ivison, “Postcolonialism,” (Britannica: 2021) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postcolonialism> I opted for Britannica’s definition to make it more open and web-accessible. By turning towards Britannica, I want to turn away from *only* looking towards academia as it often closes accessibility (*who is it accessible to?*) and to emphasize that these experiences and conversations exist *outside* of theory and writing.

⁶ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism.’” *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 85

⁷ McClintock, 86

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. (London: Pluto Press, 1986): 39

⁹ Fanon, 40

colonialism (historically and currently), it's a way to understand identity and deconstruct and rebuild. It is not a moving on from colonialism, but confronting it, being in conversation with it when it's already been marked as something from the past. Most of the critique is coming from a simplistic interpretation and not understanding that it is something complex, fluid, living, and ever-changing.

Aimé Césaire and Surrealism: A Confirmation and not a Revelation

Surrealism's narrative often starts with Andre Breton and his French group, emphasizing a "revolution of the mind." In his manifesto, Breton is advocating for a break from tradition and the socially acceptable. Dreams became a focus because they were foils to Western rationalism and the conventional. However, French surrealists were more interested in the individual subconscious and psychoanalysis. Even so, surrealist ideals of rebelling against tradition, society, and Western rationalism were relevant to marginalized identities and in most cases, already being practiced.

Aimé Césaire was absorbed by the French surrealist group. He was described by Breton as a surrealist. I would like to reframe this. Césaire's tactics were similar to those of the French surrealists out of necessity. He was already engaging in the antitraditional, and unconventional because of his marginal identity, and Surrealism just offered him labels to a practice he was already familiar with. The imagination and *reimagining* of what the world, what society could be is already in the language of the oppressed. Anja Jovic Humphrey in "Aimé Césaire and 'Another Face of Europe'" reaffirms Césaire's practice was not pioneered by French

surrealists, but just happened to overlap with their anti-traditional ideologies (emphasis own):

"Guberina argued that Césaire's ostensibly surrealist tropes and the splintered quality of his work did not stem from his immersion in French Surrealism, *but were instead the result of his own fragmented history*. In other words, Guberina tried to show that Césaire was less motivated to use the surrealist technique in order to discover the more important world of dreams hidden beneath the concrete reality—as the surrealists did—than to use the subconscious in order to reveal the much more important concrete reality through the language of dreams. *Césaire could not just be another surrealist because he did not have the luxury to try to escape from the concrete world into his dreams. He desperately needed his dreams to become real*. Césaire himself claimed that he had "discovered" that certain techniques in his poetry overlapped with those used by surrealist writers after the fact:

'I listened to André Breton, thinking: "Who knew, I'm practicing surrealism, without even knowing it, because, at the bottom, the goal of surrealism is to get rid of all conventions(...) Let's get rid of all conventions, the salon French, the Martinican imitations of French literature, that entire embalmed thing...'" (*Césaire in Louis 54*) "¹⁰

Césaire was already engaging with his own radical imagination without the help of French surrealists. When the conventions of society do not let you exist as you should- as whole- the basic response is to get rid of them-

¹⁰ Anja Jovic Humphrey, "Aimé Césaire and 'Another Face of Europe.'" *MLN* 129, no. 5 (2014): 1130-1131

or to imagine a world where they do not exist. Césaire's fragmented history is one he grapples with throughout his work and lifetime. It seeps into his work not because of surrealist influence but because it is something he is living.

Struggle and the Imagination: Black and Indigenous Education

Césaire was not the only or first to use the imagination as a tactic for liberation from societal norms. Radical imagination is born out of struggle, discontent, and marginalization. It is a way to reimagine the world, and its conditions, as something that could be. It is created out of survival and necessity. I would like to acknowledge and center the importance of Black and Indigenous voices and experiences in the radical imagination. The radical imagination, in the hands of the oppressed, can be used to dismantle bigger structures than the self.

For example, the fight for education in the US is rooted in struggle and oppression. The narrative often starts and ends with *Brown v Board*. In "Perceiving Learning Anew: Social Interaction, Dignity, and Educational Rights," Manuel Luis Espinoza and Shirin Vossoughi re-situate and center education around enslaved peoples' narratives. Harriet A. Jacobs, enslaved at the time, recounts how Uncle Fred wanted to learn how to read in order to be closer to God through the bible. She reminds him of the illegality of reading, but goes on to teach him in a "quiet nook."¹¹ Here, two different worlds and realities overlap. Outside of the nook, reading is punishable and illegal for enslaved people. Inside this space, Jacobs created an alternate world where reading is a possibility. From the imagination, a new reality was birthed. Espinoza

and Vossoughi explain it best through the following excerpt (emphasis own):

Wartofsky (1979) posits the existence of "imaginary worlds . . . embodied alternative canons of representation" (p. 209) and theorizes about their dialogic relation to the governing nomos of our world. To establish theoretical clarity, these rare and powerful mediating artifacts are not dreams or mental representations but actual "visual pictures [to] be lived in" (p. 210). Moreover, experiences in these *neighboring worlds carry the potential to color our perception of what is possible in ordinary life*. Neither products of fantasy nor heralds of a more just society, *imaginary worlds are grasshopper-scale fragments of the future alive in the present*. To the extent that activity in these worlds transcends immediate necessity and *prepares participants for needs that lie "only in the future"* (p. 208), *imaginary worlds are emancipatory spaces*.¹²

The imagination is not only a break in the "traditional" current world but also a preparation for the future. In *Hidden Education Among African Americans During Slavery*, Grey Gundaker makes a similar point, where " 'hidden education' in the Quarter addresses both the world as it "is" and the world as it could or should be; the world that outsiders control and the one that insiders are continually educating each other to make."¹³ In these fugitive spaces, enslaved people were able to give life to realities where learning was a possibility and a right.

¹¹ Manuel Luis Espinoza and Shirin Vossoughi, "Perceiving Learning Anew: Social Interaction, Dignity, and Educational Rights," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, (2014): 297.

¹² Espinoza and Vossoughi, 298.

¹³ Grey Gundaker, "Hidden Education Among African Americans During Slavery," *Teachers College Record* 109, (2007): 1609.

Gundaker's conclusion also emphasizes the importance of creation.

Education's history in Indigenous memory is also rooted in violence and loss. The legacy of boarding schools and its effects are still felt within the community today. The suppression of Indigenous languages is a recurring tactic across the globe. Because "traditional" schooling was never constructed with Indigenous, or other marginalized identities, needs in mind, the reimagination of what school and education *could be* were necessary for survival. Native language immersion schools are one of several spaces where schooling is rejected and education takes place. Education that is actually meant to serve the people. The very practice of speaking Indigenous languages in school is a challenge to contemporary ESL programs and the general push for English in these settings. Reimaginings of education also take place on smaller scales. In my own context, my grandmother taught me Quechua when she first visited the US. At home while my parents were at work, we would read the Bible in Quechua (which holds layers of other meanings that I'll delve into later). It was only when my parents were gone and in this house where the language was acceptable. This was also one of the only times where history came to life. My grandmother would tell me stories of Atahualpa and Rumiñahui, of Taita Chimborazo and Mama Tungurahua as I fell asleep. There was no such thing as actual history and folk tale because they all converged when she would tell these stories. I never questioned why Chimborazo and Tungurahua had a baby when they were both volcanoes because it just seemed so possible in this space. Something else I learned from these moments was re-envisioning connections to the land as well- land as something living.

Space and Land

In the 2021 International Roundtable "Critical Research and Activism: Student Protests and Movements Globally", panelist and professor Joshua M. Myers from Howard University touched on reimagination in terms of land and space. Myers stated that there needed to be a rejection of the plantation as the relationship to land. Through this rejection, new relationships with land (and resources) can be imagined and formed. It is important to note that he does not mean discarding the *history* of it. The plantation created by those in power, defined it as the sole relationship to land for enslaved people and turned this relationship into the "conventional" (the *only* way to relate to land). Exploitation of labor and violence was justified through this formed relationship dictated by those in power. Myers is challenging these rooted notions and relationships, stating that the power to define relationships to land and space is *within* the self.

On a similar theme of rejection, Taiiaki Alfred, a professor from the University of Victoria, suggests radical imagination as a refusal of "old visions and conquests of the empire," specifically directed towards Euroamericans.¹⁴ The future is often conceived in terms of progress and of moving away from the past. How can this be done when violence from the past has not been addressed and continues today? In their message, Alfred is proposing a rejection of colonial ideals as well as rethinking relationships to land as a sort of healing (emphasis on my part):

"From an Indigenous point of view, radical imagination is not an exercise in pie-in-the-sky dreaming, nor does it even require much creativity. Radical imagination is simply Euroamericans

¹⁴ Alfred Taiiaki, "What is Radical Imagination? Indigenous Struggles in Canada," *Affinities: A Journal of*

Radical Theory, Culture, and Action, Volume 4, Number 2, (Fall 2010): 5

deciding to leave the old visions of conquest and privileges of empire behind and focusing on their responsibilities as human beings today. Learn the history of this land. Find your own place and that of your family in the story of North American colonization. This will tell you what you need to do to make amends for that history and point the way to grounding yourself as a true person of this place. Ask Indigenous people about the promises that were made by your ancestors, the commitment that allowed for your existence here, and then decide to honor those promises right here and right now in the best way that you can. Live up to the basic tenets of universal concepts of justice: do not tell lies. Give back what you have stolen. If you could imagine a renewal of our relationship built on these premises, on your responsibility and your action to undo colonization, and if you have the integrity to dedicate yourself to working with us Indigenous people towards its realization, towards a renewed regime governing this land, then and only then could you truthfully call yourself a radical.”¹⁵

The conventional often forces us to forget certain historical narratives and promises. Radical imagination is not only a rethinking of relationships and putting into action, but here it is a will to remember. It is a challenge to this imposed, “clean-slate” memory.

The Personal: Spirituality, Religion, Art

Religion was weaponized as well in order to justify the atrocities of colonialism. The “discovery doctrine” laid claim to land and people, on the grounds of racial and religious

superiority. The convoluted history of Catholicism is something I am still grappling with. My family is Catholic, my grandma being the most devoted out of my family. Is devotion a survival tactic then, considering Christianity’s destructive history? Considering my grandmother’s identity? Considering our ancestral history?

For my grandma’s birthday one year, I gifted her a crudely drawn Virgin Mary. I was around 8 so my memory is hazy but my grandma always comments on this particular drawing from years back. Instead of adhering to the canonical Virgin crushing a snake image, I drew her feet melting into the Earth- the land- she was standing on (I probably did this because I didn’t know how to draw feet). My grandmother said another name for her (the Virgin) was Pachamama, the closest translation in English being something like Mother Earth (but if I remember correctly meaning more than Earth- including space and time). When she was a child, she remembers there being festivals for her (Pachamama Raymi), in order to thank her and the resources she provides but even these memories are blurry. Christianity was forced on Indigenous people through different tactics, one was equating existing Creators with the Virgin Mary (Pachamama, Tonantzin, among others). In my grandma’s case, Pachamama was reimagined as the Virgin Mary- they are one in the same. The imagination is sometimes not a preparation for the future, but a way to remember the past and challenge imposed oppressive colonial ideologies. It’s not some romantic gesture, but one done out of survival.

Performance and sculpture helped me organize and understand the resentment of colonial Christianity and feelings of marginalization in my own community because of it. Throughout these creations, I was coming to terms with my own sexuality and gender, which I had been rejecting for a while due to

¹⁵ Taiaiake, 7.

ideas Catholicism had embedded. In *Patron Saint of Broken Hearts* (2018) (Fig.2), I tried to visually recreate the feelings Catholicism planted in me by asking audience members to throw eggs, hearts, and dyed water into my fiber cocoon while I sat inside (humiliation, visibility, and rejection). At the end, I emerged as my own saint (Saint of Broken Hearts), ripping through the cocoon. I reimagined what religion and spirituality could be- not as something confining but as something liberatory for me. During *Pop* (2018) (Fig. 3), I wanted to confront gender and heteroromantic roles imposed by both my community and Catholicism. Initially dressed in a veil and layered white slips, I eventually end up popping a big tulle heart and balloons around the set up scene and shed my initial costume. In both of these works, I was preparing for and accepting transformations that would happen later in my life (in terms of ideologies ,self acceptance).

Past, Currently and the Future

In today's context, the radical imagination is at play in every movement. In the 2020 Twin Cities Uprising, police abolition was one of the many conversations that were brought up. Violence is embedded in the police, dating back to before their formation and originating from the slave patrol. Police brutality in the US disproportionately targets Black people, so police abolition is not something new. Black abolitionists already provided us the tactics and language for dismantling the police and other oppressive systems (prison complex, etc).

Police abolition is not something of 2020, or 2016, but has been a constant: as long as the police have existed, there has been a future imagined without them *by those who have most been affected by its violence*.

CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) employs the radical imagination by re-envisioning what Ecuadorian politics could look like if it took Indigenous people into account. CONAIE was part of several uprisings, many caused by the government looking to take away land and natural resources. Distrust of politicians, state violence, and constant threat of resource and land theft by the government pushed CONAIE to move towards the political scene (policy making, Pachakutik, etc).

The imagination is not a foil to reality, but holds potential for re-envisioning an existing reality. The term "radical" in radical imagination implies action. We cannot just imagine and stop there. In order for the imagination to become a tool for (personal/ communal/ global) liberation, it needs to be paired with action. There is no such thing as the "standard" or the "conventional" because it is constructed by those in power. Because of this, the radical imagination has existed for years in the language of the oppressed. Everyone has something to offer, because people, as an individual and as a group, are also full of potential.

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Figures

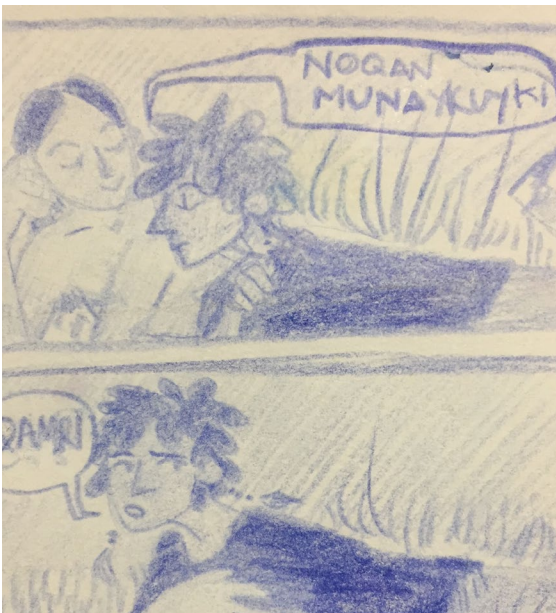


Figure 1a.



Figure 1b.

Figure 1 (2014-15): Panels from comic, in second panel “wañuspa” misspelled and character is not dead, but undergoing some type of transformation (alluding to Saint Sebastian)



Figure 2a.



Figure 2b.

Figure 2 (2018): Patron Saint of Broken Hearts



Figure 3a.



Figure 3b.



Figure 3c.

Fig. 3 (2018): Pop

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