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Purple Basil Lemonade: Community Rituals for Crip Pasts/Presents/Futur es

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Abstract

This piece is a collection of stories and reflections on community, loss, memory, access, rest, and dream(ing), developed through the process of making and sharing purple basil lemonade. This practice serves as a method of re-turning (to) the past, refusing the present, and dreaming alternative futures–a re-mixing of temporalities, always grounded in relation, always in an ongoing process of rebecoming. It is a ritual for storytelling, community, memory work, and dreamwork in the era of COVID-19, a time marked by the normalization of eugenic discourses and the erasure of disabled people from the public sphere.

Keywords

COVID-19, storytelling, dream, disability justice, accessibility, memory, peer support

During the first pandemic summer (2020), isolation crept in and made itself a home. But my cats and plants make for good company, reminders that life goes on. Almost every day that summer, my friend, Stacey, and I talk on the phone. Being surrounded by life and love keeps me alive, helps me survive.

Winter comes and goes; my
doctor prescribes a more
powerful immunosuppressant–
what excellent timing.

During the second pandemic summer (2021), I ride a blue bike-share bike to the garden centre to buy some basil. My attention strays, pulled away from the green, drawn to another plant beside–a plant with purple leaves: purple basil.

Over the years, purple has become a colour I associate strongly with community–Mad community, in particular. Years ago, during a meeting of the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective (HMSC)[1] –originally a local branch of the Mad Students' Society (MSS)–we got on the topic of favourite colours. An informal poll revealed that purple was the beloved colour of many Mad folx in the room.

I hold this group, this temporary community, dear to my heart. It was where I found my way to the fields of Mad studies, disability studies, and peer support, and began to unlearn the sanism and ableism I had internalized over the years. It was here that I came to terms with my Mad and crip (disabled) identities and finally started to believe, deep in my bodymind, that *I was not broken*; that *there was nothing wrong with me*–in a world always insisting otherwise.

HMSC faded away in 2016, right after I finished my first degree at McMaster University. During the first pandemic summer, and into the fall, I had an opportunity to gather with some other former members, to mourn the loss of HMSC and explore what this community had meant to us (de Bie et al., 2022). One of the things I took away from this experience was an ethical responsibility for storytelling. Having been eight years now since the group faded away, its existence has almost entirely disappeared from the university's institutional memory. But telling these stories–re-turning them over and over and over–keeps them alive, breathes new life and meaning into them.

These little purple plants felt like a calling: I took a few home and began researching their culinary potential. One recipe in particular caught my eye: purple basil lemonade (Weir, 2009).

Over the past three summers, I have been making and sharing purple basil lemonade as a ritual for memory work, storytelling, community, and world-building. During the intense isolation of an ongoing pandemic, with no end in sight, these plants have helped me feel and find and form community. These plants hold memory:[2] they help me remember; to re-turn these memories; to dream something new within the echoes of the old.

On the process of re-turning–not (just) returning to the past, but continuously turning it over and over and over–Barad (2014) writes:

> 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. (p. 168)

The very fact that disabled people are "figured as threats to futurity" (Kafer, 2013, p. 31) implies our agency and power to breathe new worlds into being. What futures do we want to threaten, prevent, disrupt, dismantle?

[1] The Hamilton Mad Students' Collective (HMSC) was a peer support and advocacy community for students with experiences of madness, mental health concerns, and/or psychiatrization that met regularly in Hamilton, ON between the years of 2012 and 2016.

[2] While writing my major research paper on peer support futures (Prowse, 2023), I began thinking about how plants hold memories and share stories, especially of and through relationship and community: stories of ancestry and displacement (Ameil Joseph, personal communication, 2023), of home (Vis, 2022), of world-making (Myers, 2021), of "network[s] of caring relations" (de Bie, 2019, p. 1170). Attending to plant life draws us toward storytelling practices of and in relation (Myers, 2021).

> 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? (Elizabeth, 2019, p. 26)

During the second and third pandemic summers (2021 and 2022), I meet with a group of friends, outside, every weekend, as a safer way to be in community. We gather in the park,[3] across the ways from a suspiciously tree-like tree, as if crafted from our collective recollection of what a tree "should" look like, from which any and all deviations are measured: a tree which we might understand as an impossibly material manifestation of the arboreal standard.[4]

Arboreal Standard, 2023. A photograph of a tree standing alone in a field, isolated and cut off from community, its foliage lush and suspiciously spherical. Pink clouds linger in the background.

We sit away, just as we purposefully position ourselves outside and in opposition to normality, turning away from a "new normal" that is neither new nor in need of normalization: a "new normal" marked by the reverberations of eugenic futures (Kafer, 2013) through the present, enacted in the everyday by both the collective and individual, through the indoctrination of individuality and white supremacy (Okun, 2021), in the pursuit of a "freedom" founded on (and defined by) the domination and debilitation of anything Other.

And yet, in this space of potentiality, I feel echoes of utopia, of the not-yet-here (Bloch, 1995, as cited in Muñoz, 2009/2019, p. 12): an elsewhere, an *elsewhen* (Kafer, 2013, p. 3). I remember what it feels like to be in community, grounded in principles of liberatory access, described by Mingus (2017) as: "access for the sake of connection, justice, community, love and liberation" (para, 31). I am reminded that another way is possible: that community and safety are not mutually exclusive–an easy thing to forget when the world insists on our indefinite isolation as the price to pay for the illusion of normality.

During the third pandemic summer (2022), I spend my days much like any other pandemic graduate student: thinking, reading, writing, transcribing–all day, everyday, my research always at the back of my mind. It becomes the air I breathe: it becomes inescapable.

And yet, for me, these park days become an escape, a way out from the unrelenting and all-consuming demands of capitalist academia. The weekends once again become a time for rest: a time that feels like falling out of time entirely, past/present/future slipping past one another. I close my computer; I make my lemonade and my way to the park, and once again remember what it feels like to be human, to feel love and care and community. We read books together, share snacks, and chat, switching between speaking and signing[5]–and I feel myself coming alive again, like a parched purple basil restored by rain. And with each sip of lemonade, I become purple once again.

The purple leaves of the purple basil plant are

[3] In this same park, during the first pandemic fall (2020), Stacey meets me in the park to celebrate my birthday. She brings pizza and home-baked cherry cheesecake, and for a second the world around us seems to fade away.

[4] This is a play on the concept of the "corporeal standard," described by Campbell (2001) as "a particular kind of self and body [produced by ableism] … that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability, then, is cast as a diminished state of being human" (p. 44).

[5] During the pandemic, a few of us began taking American Sign Language classes online through Queer ASL, "a 2SLGBTQQIA+ positive environment that focuses on creating a more accessible, affordable, and safer space for folks who want to learn ASL" (Queer ASL, n.d., para, 1).

due to the effects of anthocyanins, a class of pigments responsible for red, purple, and blue hues in a variety of plant life, depending on the pH of their environment (Khoo et al., 2017). When anthocyanins from purple basil mix with the acidity of lemon juice, they interact: purple becomes pink.

If "green leaves are engineered to optimise productivity" (Gould, 2004, p. 314)–to increase a plant's absorption of the sun's rays–what, then, are purple leaves engineered for? Instead of being designed for productivity like their chlorophyll cousins, anthocyanins prioritize protection, rest, and repair (Gould, 2004). They protect plants from bugs and UV-B radiation; increase their tolerance to freezing, drought, and heavy metal contamination; and minimize photooxidative injury by scavenging free radicals (Gould, 2004).

To be clear, my analysis of anthocyanins here is not about neoliberal notions of "resilience," but rather, radical anti-capitalist resistance. Anthocyanins recognize the dangers of unchecked productivity: they are a reminder to slow down and rest, a form of refusal that is crucial to our very survival (Hersey, 2022). And, just like rest, connection, community, and dream[6] in a late-stage capitalist society, so too, have anthocyanins "long been considered an extravagant waste of a plant's resources" (Gould, 2004, p. 314).

In *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*, Hersey (2022) reminds us that "rest is a divine right" (p. 60), not a reward to be earned through productivity. Rest is a powerful act of refusal against the collaboration of capitalism and white supremacy known as grind culture; rest is a tool for liberation: it opens a portal in our minds–a DreamSpace (p. 11)–through which imagining and crafting alternative worlds becomes possible.

Rest nourishes dreams, allowing them to flourish–just as dreams, too, are "food for the human spirit" (Chamberlin, 1998, p. 52). In this temporal opening, this time outside of time itself, my friends and I dream: of a space for community building; for peer support; for consciousness-raising and politicization; for activism and co-conspiracy; for art shows and poetry readings; for gay dancing, for sober crips with bad knees, early bedtimes, and cats at home to feed.

And yet, as I look back on this dream now, I am reminded of the need to keep dreaming. I know now that I was dreaming of this space–a physical place–as a return to a pre-pandemic world. This dream rests on the assumption that the pandemic will eventually end, a future I no longer have faith in. This dream is a dream of what Inayatullah (2008) refers to as a "used future" (p. 5)–a future shaped in the image of the past, a vision which no longer serves us, a dream which we might be better off abandoning completely.

In my musings on futurity, I have typically turned away from calls for realism, believing instead that "utopian fantasies" (Wright, 2010, as cited by Levitas, 2013, p. 45) are exactly what we need to dream new worlds beyond the barriers of colonial, capitalist, and carceral presents. And yet, I find a glimmer of hope in pandemic realism: the assumption and acceptance that there is no post-pandemic "after"; that there is no way out, no escape–but perhaps we can build a home here.

I know I am not the only disabled person who has felt like our futures have been stolen away, placed on indefinite hold: that is, after all, our current public health policy. This loss–the loss of our imagined futures–is important to honour, mourn, grieve.

And yet, equating pandemic presents with an inherent lack of futurity is in need of troubling. It leads to the assumption that if we pretend the pandemic isn't here anymore, we can reclaim our futures–a tempting argument that clearly doesn't quite work. This discourse leads to pressures to return to "normal"–a "normal" which Barbarin (2022) reminds us was always ever "a lie meant to pacify us and discourage challenging a society built around racism, ableism and white supremacy" (para, 5).

We must resist the seduction of a post-pandemic world that is neither here nor there. I

[6] Haiven (2023) notes that "dominant Western epistemology frames dreams and dreaming as largely meaningless noise produced by the unproductive brain at rest" (p. 41).

need us to accept that pandemics are here to stay–and choose to see them as a time of possibility: as "a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy, 2020, para, 4). Dreaming from this place allows us to explore our ethical responsibilities to one another, opening up new possibilities for being(and becoming)-in-relation. We can dream new worlds in this space. We can remake the world to thrive in dystopia.

During the third pandemic summer, I become engulfed in flowers. Every week or two, I dutifully prune the flowers of my purple basil away, to concentrate the plant's energies into their leaves, enhancing their flavour. I learn to make tea with the flowers and start adding it into my lemonade.

That summer, Stacey comes over to my apartment, twice, for the first time since the pandemic began. She brings me a bouquet of flowers, to celebrate a scholarship I had won. We drink purple basil flower tea together. A few weeks later, she died.

Over the next few weeks, I watch the flowers wilt, their lifeforce slowly draining. I consider drying the flowers but cannot find the strength, as if doing so would somehow be the thing to make this nightmare real. I tell our mutual friend, Britt, about these flowers, this final gift, as we sit eating lunch together after saying our goodbyes. Her encouragement gives me the strength to finally take action, and I hang the flowers upside down in my window–simultaneously accepting mortality while refusing to let go.

There is something quite Mad about refusing to let die (Poole & Ward, 2013). I know that Stacey is still with us: somehow, somewhere, somewhen. I refuse to relegate her to the past, instead holding onto her in the present, as if captured in an eternity of her embrace, bringing her with me into the future.

Emunah brings me pasta and we
sit outside my apartment not-
talking about grief.

My purple basil plants only grow in the summer. The temporality of purple basil reminds me that everything is seasonal, that everything is temporary, that life cannot exist without loss.

When the weather grew cold and classes resumed, our gatherings at the park paused. During the fourth pandemic summer (2023), we met only once, fewer of us than usual–on the last weekend in August, as my purple basil plants were already beginning to wither. It rained. Perhaps the sky, like us, was mourning a loss we knew had already happened, but refused to accept. Perhaps the sky was nourishing another purple basil plant, preparing to emerge, elsewhere and elsewhen.

Purple basil lemonade is a ritual for re-turning (to) the past, turning it over and over and over again; it is a reminder that nothing lasts forever and nothing ever truly ends. When I make my lemonade, I am transported back to my queer and trans and Mad and crip communities, past and present; and all that I have lost along the way is here with me, once again. When I share my lemonade, I share these stories; I pass them along, just as I share them today with you. These memories mix together, like anthocyanins and acid: shifting, moving through one another, changing each other in the process. They become entangled and intertwined, new meanings laid overtop and through the old.

Purple basil lemonade is a ritual for refusing capitalist, ableist, and eugenic presents; for crafting alternative temporalities and relationalities outside the false dichotomy of isolation and endangerment; for simultaneously centering the dangers of pandemic life while offering momentary escape.

Purple basil lemonade is a ritual for world-building, for dreaming new futures. The recipe for utopia does not shy away from past and present, but rather, is actively shaped by it: a utopian methodology of mourning incorporates memory and loss as one of its key ingredients, digging into the grief behind the dream, re-turning it over and over and over as new meanings, new futures emerge.

This story, like this recipe, like our dreams for the future, is alive: always shifting, always in flux, always in a process of re-vision and rebecoming.

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Author Biography

Calvin Prowse (they/them) is a queer, Mad, disabled, and chronically ill white settler living in Hamilton, Ontario, on lands protected by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum. For the past decade, they have been a peer worker and community organizer within Mad, disability, and queer/trans communities, primarily within grassroots and student contexts. Calvin is a recent graduate of the Critical Disability Studies MA program at York University, where their research focused on (re)imagining the possible futures of peer support.