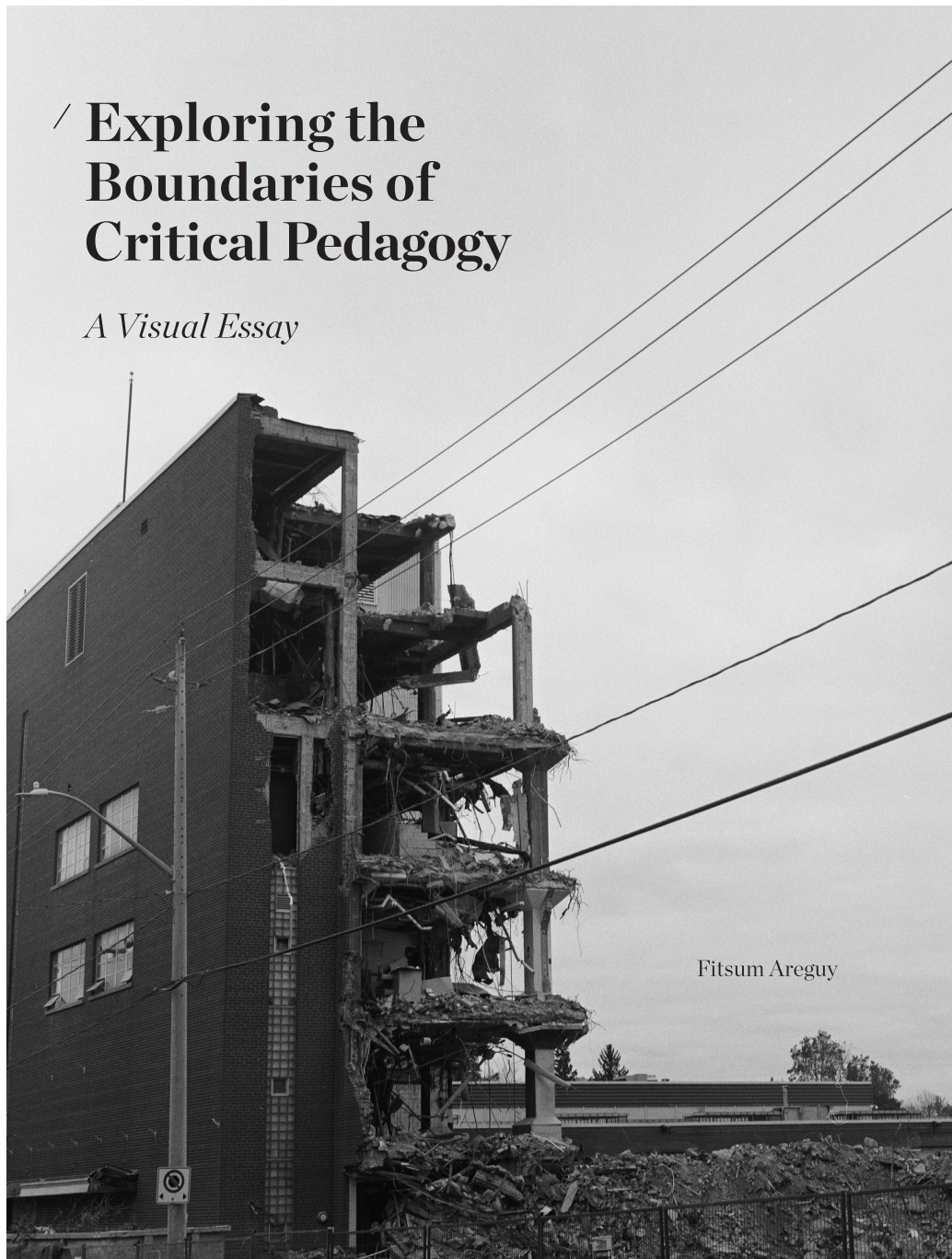


/ Exploring the Boundaries of Critical Pedagogy

A Visual Essay



Fitsum Areguy

/ ABSTRACT

This visual essay attempts to evoke an aesthetic and affectual entry into the social-spatial terrains I navigate as a Black man and graduate student in Southwestern Ontario. I arrange the relationship between photographs of a factory in my hometown and short reflections into three scenes: The first scene touches on the racial and colonial violence that lingers and manifests in academia, as illustrated through my personal experiences. The essay moves to a second scene, touching on the settler-colonial legacy of the factory, as well as reckons with the anti-colonial implications of photographing the demolition and the troubling of subject-object relationships. The last scene emphasizes that, despite pedagogical efforts, the residue of racial and colonial violence in academic settings will still have some degree of impact on racialized students. Critical pedagogues must contend with the reality that racialized students, by virtue of being and existing in academic spaces, embody a pedagogy that could potentially disrupt and deconstruct learning environments into transformative, radical, respectful and caring spaces.

/ I

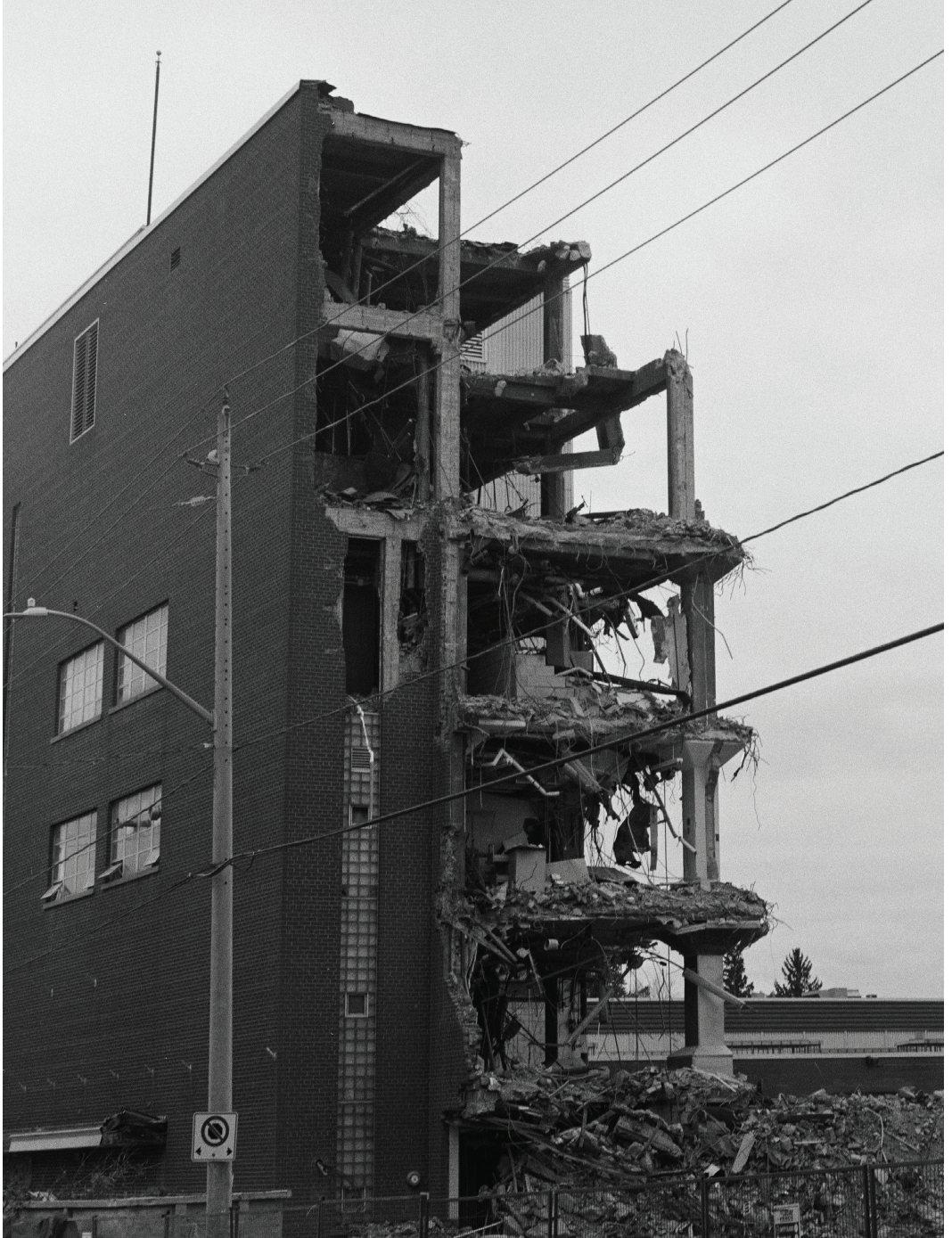
In September 2018 I watched a demolition crew descend on the old Schneiders meat processing plant down the street from where I live. Though I had known about the factory for years, this was the first time I saw inside: cracked slaughterhouse tiles and rebar jutted out from crumbling brick walls. Piles of rubble towering almost three-stories high, never static, the construction site in constant movement. As the buildings became mountains and the mountains disappeared, I became frantic wanting to capture this process. I knew I wanted to use a medium format film camera, but I didn't own one. Luckily, I found someone who did, and we met one early morning that Fall to document the demolition.¹

At the time, I had no definite plan for the photos, so they sat in a folder on my computer for a year while I struggled to acclimate as a graduate student at the University of Guelph. I stood out among a sea of white faces. I found white supremacist recruitment stickers not far from the Guelph Black Student Association. I was called a "fuckin goof" and a "nigger" by a stranger while waiting for a bus on campus.

I shared my experience of being harassed in a public post online. People were shocked; Guelph has a reputation for being a progressive utopia full of environmentally friendly, down-to-earth folks who "buy local" and go to slam poetry events in coffee shops. The University of Guelph as an institution is held in high regard by the larger community, so I imagine it came as a shock when it recently came to light that three founding colleges that formed the University played a significant role in the eugenics movement at the turn of the 1900s. It was in these colleges where destructive ideas that targeted Indigenous, Black, and other racialized populations for segregation in institutions, cultural assimilation and sterilization were perpetuated and taught (Guelph Civic Museum, 2019).

Many Guelph students, most of them white, stroll through campus unbothered and unaware of what it is like for Black people to move through a campus steeped in colonial and racial violence. The combination of being involved in racially-targeted experiences at Guelph, the surge of other institutional racism in my community, and the stress of graduate school became too much for me. I took an official leave from my program over the summer to reset. Like the precarious structures of the Schneider's factory, I, too, was broken over time.





/ II

J.M. Schneider started his meat processing business in 1886, and it lasted over 100 years. The Schneider factory used to be one of Kitchener's gems, a giant of industry respected nationwide. His legacy will continue—the developers who bought the land held a contest for the public to decide on a name for the new development. Of all the names offered up, they elected The Metz, a tribute to the Schneider family (Metz was J.M. Schneider's mother's maiden name and his middle name).

Colonial power structures reward colonial-settlers; J.M. Schnieder and his ilk will always be lauded by those with the power to claim and name land in the Region. Which bodies do we celebrate, contest, and/or politicize? The factory's spatial and historical importance says something about which people are valued here; I will never meet what Audre Lorde (1984) would have deemed the "mythical norms" of Waterloo County—white, European, cishet, Christian, German, Mennonite.

The collective industrial pride of the county was wounded when Schneider's was taken over by Maple Foods in 2003, and finally desecrated when the factory shut down for good in 2015. If architecture is an act of world-building in the name of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism (Soomal, 2020), then perhaps the tearing down of Schneider's factory could represent something more hopeful.

To be honest, I often fantasize about leaving to start anew. The push and pull of this place, my hometown, is a process of becoming and unbecoming. I have lived in Kitchener my whole life—I exist, yet in many ways I am rendered invisible. In its demise, the factory's corpus becomes the focal object of this visual essay. However, I have not unwittingly replicated my own invisibilization through this project—I retain my right to opacity (Glissant, 1997). Teju Cole (2019) writes that "photography during colonial rule imaged the world in order to study, profit from and own it." Given the history of the camera as a dire instrument of imperial subjugation, perhaps I reclaim some power by reimagining the factory through my own lens; though I still wish to "study" the world, I intend to reckon with and trouble ideas of "profit" and "ownership" that extend from this lens.







/ III

In 2019, as a requirement for a University of Guelph Fall course entitled *Re-Thinking the Human*, a group of students and I attended three sessions over the summer to co-design the course together. As one of my classmates astutely stated, the course was structured to resist neoliberal ideologies and market-driven learning: from our troubling of the professor-student relationship (as “co-instructors” we took turns teaching each week), to the emphasis on engaging deeply with a multitude of theories, this course became my oasis.² In our first class a white person from Brampton declared that as a child she did not see herself as white. She felt that there used to be a freer exchange of culture with other non-white kids in her neighbourhood. She wondered whether these kinds of “innocent” interactions was something we lose the capacity for in our adulthood. In response to this, a racialized student in our class spoke up and countered with her experience, the perspective of a Brown person who grew up in the GTA. The room fell silent as she recounted painful memories of questions about her culture from white kids. From the perspective of this racialized student, these were not innocent interactions, and in fact were the source of much shame and trauma in her life. I watched in awe as she tearfully and powerfully presented a diametrically opposed viewpoint of virtually the same kind of encounter the white student had described with fondness.

The buildings, and my ability to document them, have a limit. Machines break them open, expose their insides, and then destroy them. On campus I experienced being pushed to my limits—and, as I discovered throughout this course, there were limits to the degree to which critical pedagogy could eradicate racial and imperial violence from academic settings. The racialized student was impassioned and eloquent in the heat of the moment, but for one unguarded second, I saw her reflection on another student’s computer screen. She looked pensive and exhausted. This moment of resistance stayed with me: in educational spaces there will always be a toll exacted on racialized students vis-à-vis an embodied pedagogy, making this a tricky but critical reality that students and educators must contend with.

We co-designed the course in such a way that, despite inevitable trauma and harm that comes with being radically vulnerable (Nash, 2019), we would always be striving to that place of difficult knowledge and difficult learning (Britzman, 1998). Unfortunately, the white student from Brampton and several other students ended up dropping the course before we could arrive at that place together. Through photography, the deconstructed Schneider's factory is briefly enshrined. Just like our classroom, for a moment, the fluxing deconstruction that is the learning process seems stable.

As I gaze upon crushed concrete and stripped asphalt, I consider violence beyond the boundaries of this essay. Like the ephemerality of the Schneider buildings, there were many moments throughout the course where I felt it was necessary to lean in and lean out. My difference and moments of resistance as the only Black graduate student in the room (historically, the first Black person to enroll in the course) felt magnified during such moments of white fragility and emotional friction. My experience in academia, like these buildings, is defined by both a presence and absence, of being and nothingness.





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¹ Su Buehler, a local photographer, graciously worked with me to capture the shots I wanted. She took them with her Mamiya C220; the colour photos were shot on CineStill 50 Daylight film, and the black-and-white on Ilford HP5 Plus 400. As well, my dear friend and ongoing collaborator Bill Watterson helped me with the design and layout. My kindest thanks to Su and Bill—"doing art" in community proved once again to be a life-giving and transformative process.

² Special thanks to Dr. Carla Rice for creating this radical, critical, and vulnerable space to learn and teach together, and to my "support group", Skylar Sookpaiboon, Jade Da Costa, and Shehnoor Khurram.

Author Biography

Fitsum is an MSc student in Family Relations and Human Development at the University of Guelph. Broadly, Fitsum's research interests follow two paths. The first is the dynamic processes that underlie expressions of coping, adaptation and identity across the lifespan. The second path is concerned with how structural inequalities and inequities impact social determinants of health among Black and Indigenous peoples. These paths of interest merge in his commitment to critical qualitative inquiry and community-based scholarship. He is the co-founder and project director of Textile Magazine, a mentorship program and literary publication for marginalized writers and artists in Kitchener-Waterloo. As a scholar-activist, he is passionate about research and artistic practices that support greater collective liberation and solidarity.