



## Art, Heart, and Pedagogy for Social Change

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**ABSTRACT** *This article is a collective discussion with undergraduate students about their work in a second-year gender studies course. The discussion shares how active engagement in collective art production for social change can provide the seeds for decolonial, anti-racist and anti-ableist pedagogical practice. The course encourages students to actively engage in the classroom, raise questions and concerns about social justice, and implement ways to challenge social relations of power. Students work collectively on projects using a range of alternative ways of knowing, including sensory, heart, intellectual, and spiritual knowledge, to connect with the course material in creative ways. The article is a conversation with three students in the course and the work they produced. They discuss the various mediums they used, including poetry, collaging, and a case study of artists' street art. The students touch on the politics of joy, self-care, heart knowledge, politics of suffering, and accessibility, illustrating how combining art with various ways of knowing has helped them develop deeply analytic, compassionate, and relational work for social change. The work affirms ways of knowing that have often evolved outside the colonial academic institution. The anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-ableist, feminist and Indigenous pedagogies used in the course help to pluralize constructive capacities for more decolonizing, equitable, inclusive, anti-racist and expansive educational futures.*

**KEYWORDS** solidarity; allyship; decolonization; anti-oppressive pedagogy

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<sup>1</sup> Work on this essay was shared equally; authors' names appear in alphabetical order.

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## Introduction [Elizabeth Brulé]

As a feminist anti-racist scholar of mixed French and Métis ancestry, my [Liz Brulé] teaching approach has combined anti-colonial feminist and Indigenous pedagogies. In the classroom, I aim to actively engage students, encouraging them to raise questions and concerns about social justice. To do so, I try to establish an accountable class environment and develop assignments that allow for multiple ways of knowing that are collective, and that draw on students' varied knowledge and skills. To further incorporate opportunities for students to engage in creative social justice work, I recently redeveloped an undergraduate second-year course titled "Critical Approaches to Solidarity and Alliance Work" for the Department of Gender Studies at Queen's University in Katoraki (Kingston, Ontario). In our contemporary political era of settler-colonialism, climate change, COVID-19, gender-based violence, transphobia, homophobia, anti-Black racism, ableism, racist criminalization, and Indigenous genocide, I wanted students to have the opportunity to examine how social movements have been taking a critical intersectional approach to mobilize their efforts in addressing these varied and interrelated social processes and inequities.

To this end, students had the opportunity to explore solidarity and alliance work and the relationship that this work has to activism for social change and their relationships to privilege using relational accountabilities drawn from critical feminist, anti-racist, Indigenous, critical disability, and gendered perspectives. These are mutually informing and critically engaged pedagogies that can potentially pluralize constructive capacities for more decolonizing, equitable, inclusive, and expansive educational futures. As such, the course asked students to consider the following questions: How has solidarity and alliance work been used to facilitate or hinder the mobilization of strategies for social change? What strategies for social, political, and activist work have helped to foster a community of mutual aid and situated solidarity building? Adopting a process of critical reflection, analysis and action, students were asked to further examine practices that helped to enhance solidarity, mutual aid, and social justice activist work across a wide range of critical issues.

To help foster collaborative work, I also incorporated opportunities for students to work collectively on projects that addressed a core theme in the course (Appendix A). Because this was the first time that students were in class in person since COVID-19 and, for many, the first time in a synchronous university-level course, I wanted to ensure a gentle and accountable way for them to engage with each other creatively, with an ethic of mutual care and responsibility (see Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Misawa, 2010).

An important concept at the core of my pedagogical practice is the traditional Anishinaabeg understanding of knowledge and personal truth that is related to the heart (Gehl, 2017). The word "debwewin" translates to a personal truth that is rooted in one's heart, and "Gdebwe na?" is a truth question that translates to "Are you speaking from the heart?" (Gehl, 2017). Gdebwe na "is a cultural

mechanism that ensures that knowledge spoken is not merely mind, or intellectual, knowledge; it is a question that ensures that knowledge is also heartfelt” (Gehl, 2017b). Such an understanding of knowledge is at the root of my pedagogical practice and embraces the importance of the heart but also the inclusiveness of the mind or intellect.

Whether students employed sensory, heart-centred, intellectual, or spiritual knowledge or some combination of all four, course materials were selected to allow students to work collectively, creatively, and analytically. The course also included the importance of relationality and collaboration, where students did a substantial amount of research in terms of gaining background knowledge about their chosen topic, sharing resources, meeting every week to share their analyses, and engaging in collective knowledge production (Appendix A). Students had the option of producing a traditional 10-page academic research paper or a creative and activist project that could be articulated in various modalities; storytelling, creative writing, audio-visual media, artwork, scripted performance, and activist action for future academic or non-academic audiences were among the forms of knowledge mobilization students could choose from (Appendix A). This work was coupled with a five-page overview of the project’s objectives. While students had a full range of the types of projects they wanted to engage in, they had to submit an initial proposal. I used this proposal to organize them into themed groups of five to six students (Appendix A). From here, they worked together in developing collective bibliographies where they were able to draw on the academic and non-academic resources that the group researched (Appendix A). They then engaged in developing their projects. The work that they submitted was phenomenal.

What follows are Katya Kredl, Elise Zhao and Juliette Vaillancourt’s descriptions, analyses and conversations about the work they produced for the course. Influenced by the work of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, Audre Lorde, Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and others, they converse together about developing these works, touching on the politics of joy, self-care, heart knowledge, politics of suffering, and accessibility, illustrating how combining art with various ways of knowing has helped them develop deeply analytic, compassionate, and relational work for social change – co-creating capacities that they will carry forward in their everyday lives.

### **The Collective Conversation**

Liz (Interviewer): I am so grateful that you are all able to join in this collective conversation today. I thought that we could start by describing the work that each of you engaged in for the course and the processes that you went through. Then we can carry on from there with the other questions. Katya, would you like to start?

Katya: Sure, my name is Katya Kredl, and I am a fourth-year student in Psychology, minoring in Gender Studies. I choose to express the knowledge I gained from the course through collage-making. Through a reflection on Tuck and Yang’s “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor” (2012) as well as a conceptual representation through collage, my work asserts that discussions of Indigenous issues and decolonization cannot stop at the abstract level. It cannot occur by solely decolonizing the mind. Rather, decolonization can only happen once Indigenous issues are named and examined as real. I designed two collages to reflect on this: the first is a critique of metaphorical tactics of decolonization, and the second represents active forms of decolonization, focusing on the repatriation of stolen Indigenous land. The first collage centers around settler guilt and the invisibilization of Indigenous struggles (Figure 1). This work was inspired mainly by Tuck and Yang’s (2012) critique of settler decolonial activism, and what they refer to as “settler moves to innocence,” which focuses on calming the guilty conscience of settler colonials and does nothing to benefit or support Indigenous communities (p. 3).



Figure 1. Katya Kredl’s Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor: Reflecting through Collage

Liz: Katya, can you explain how you represented this critical dynamic in your collage?

Katya: Sections of this collage, such as the “decolonize your mind” and “he said: ‘sorry’ it’s the same old story...” are empty words meant to relieve settlers from feelings of remorse; the words are powerless unless followed by concrete, decolonial actions. The way that settler researchers describe Indigenous peoples is another settler move to innocence. Indigenous communities are often presented as either being at risk or as “asterisk” groups. By naming communities as such, settler researchers can argue that their studies are representative and inclusive when in reality they are justifying the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples from data sets and adding to the erasure of these communities. Indigenous communities are often not viewed as legitimate members of the North American population and are placed in an intermediate category between existing and replaced. In the bottom corner of this collage, I put the phrase “will be replaced\*” to expose the implicit meaning of Indigenous Peoples being categorized as asterisk groups. To further illustrate this, I put the phrase “invisible – a brand new way to bury people” at the top of this collage. Placing all Indigenous Peoples in an asterisk category of “underrepresented” people is a symptom of Indigenous genocide, reducing their lived experiences and culture to a minority category, undeserving of proper representation and acknowledgment.

My second collage is a response to the first, conveying a direct message about decolonization and land repatriation (Figure 1). As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, the notion that land can be owned by people is itself a settler colonial ideology. I used the phrase “money talks” along with an image of a faceless person ripping a bill, showing that decolonization requires that the homelands and lifeways of Indigenous Peoples be prioritized over the consumerist wealth of settlers. If money is a form of communication in capitalist societies, then decolonization and giving back homelands must also entail returning the wealth that has accumulated through the exploitation of Indigenous lands and resources. I also focused on the ideas of self-determination and government resistance in this collage, indicating that decolonization must include Indigenous Peoples’ self-governance. These ideas work in harmony with the phrases about land repatriation, as the return of land implies the return of freedom and self-governance.

Liz: I love this collage and the reflective process that you engaged in in selecting the images and phrases that you included. Can you tell us how you felt about the process of making your collage?

Katya: I do remember feeling more connected to this work than I ever had for a paper in my studies because I was physically cutting out my words, letter by letter and placing them together rather than writing them as an essay. I was moving these words around physically and seeing how their meanings changed based on their order and how they looked when putting images together to enhance the message. I had a lot of fun with this, and I learned more through making art than any other writing project. This said, I also felt frustrated during

the process because I didn't know how to make changes myself or how to do more than just decolonize my mind. So even though making a collage wouldn't change anything in a major way, I felt that the process allowed for a different way to think about this material compared to just writing an essay, handing it to a prof, having them read it, and giving it back. In many ways, traditional essay writing is more closed off. I was doing the work in my mind but not having anything to show for it. Whereas with the collage, because it's art, I was able to share it with more people and show what I had learned differently. It didn't feel like it was just to be graded and a part of my undergrad. It felt like, it feels like, making art is more part of my life than just part of school. It's more than just decolonizing my academic mind, it's something that I'm going to take with me outside of Queen's University.

Liz: You mentioned that this work has impacted your life more than writing an academic paper. Can you elaborate on this impact?

Katya: You know, it's interesting because I remember when I was making this collage, I had an easier time making the "Decolonize Your Mind" collage. Then, when it came time for the "Decolonize Their Land" collage, I felt stuck. I realized that there was nothing that I could do through this project that was going to give Indigenous People their land back. I just felt very, very frustrated because I knew how to illustrate "how to decolonize my mind," but I didn't know how to decolonize! Even just getting to this point, I realized: "Oh... I've been in these gender studies courses, and I thought I've made progress, I've learned things, but I still don't know how to decolonize someone's land. How can I show this through my collage because it is so different from decolonizing your mind?" So being there, stuck, not knowing how to show it on a canvas, really opened my eyes to how different decolonization is from just learning about it and talking about it and how decolonization must take physical and political change. This learning was more salient. Looking at what I produced on a canvas rather than just writing it out through words challenged me much more deeply. I could have BS-ed my way through writing an essay, but here, there were no photos or cut-out letters that I could put into place that would decolonize land.

Elise: I think your explanation of the difficulty of creating the two collages is a metaphor for how much harder it is to decolonize land than it is to begin to decolonize your mind. I think that's important on separate levels. I don't know if this was intentional, but from what you said about trying to give land back and then using collage to represent that is interesting. Similarly, through a collage, you are cobbling bits and pieces together like what is happening throughout Canada. The land that is left for Indigenous Peoples is spread all over the place and it's unconnected, untethered and it's just like these small pockets. In my mind when I imagine this, it reminds me even of the ways that

the individual letters on the page are these small, isolated islets, yet they come together to form something quite powerful.

Katya: I like that, Elise. And as I'm looking at the second collage, I'm remembering how the words "decolonize their land," "land back," and then "give home back," were inspired by Chandrashekar's (2018) article. It reflects on the notion of home and asks how settler-colonials and immigrant-settlers can call North America home while there is an overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples in homeless populations on their land? It is their home and land, so it's not just the physical land. It's an actual home. And I felt it was important to both distinguish and show how home and land back are connected and how you can't have a home without your land. Both must be given back at the same time. I wanted this collage to show how a dichotomy exists in terms of what land represents to Indigenous communities and settler colonials.

Liz: Your collage reflects this dichotomy so well and is deeply reflective of Tuck and Yang's message, Katya. Thank you for sharing this with us. Elise, can you introduce yourself, the work you produced and the process you went through?

Elise: My name is Elise Zhao (she/they) and I am a 4th-year student completing a degree in Geography and Gender Studies, and hopefully a future high school educator. I wanted to investigate how fictional media such as film and television could provide opportunities for meaningful solidarity through the positive representation of Transgender or genderqueer people. The creative component was a spoken word poem that I wrote entitled "Stop Breathing Fog on the Glass: A Plea for Visibility," which sought to draw attention to the polarizing emotions within a hypothetical genderqueer individual within the context of present misrepresentations, as someone who is genderqueer. So, the poem is looking at the inner conflict that I think a lot of genderqueer people – and perhaps this is transferable for anybody who identifies as part of a historically marginalized group – feel when seeing problematic on-screen portrayals of themselves. On one hand, you think, "Oh, finally, I see myself," but at the same time, you're also thinking, "This isn't me though... this is a version of me and people like me that you believe to be true, and it's not exactly a good version either." It's a manifestation of some false imaginary of a genderqueer person. It's not an adequate representation. And yet, because representations are so sparse in film and television, it can be hard to be critical because it feels as if you're deterring small steps towards progress or expecting too much too fast. My poem looks at that polarization within genderqueer people. It also wished to express, when done right, how representations in fictional media are poised to be powerful allies, influential in connecting continuums of progress. Television and film have so much capacity to be a reaffirming resource for genderqueer people. There's so much potential there, especially to give information, education, and affirmation to people who might

live in environments where that's not readily available. Fictional media can be a way to provide solidarity and ally-ship.

Liz: Can you read the poem for us, Elise?

Elise: Sure!

Stop Breathing Fog on the Glass: A Plea for Visibility

The first time I saw myself was in a funhouse mirror  
An oligarchy of nerves for a purse  
Extra baggage, valise, a lava lamp of dichotomy.  
My palm on the glass, staggering  
Staggering between loathing  
And the leniency of a lover.

Because to be seen, really seen in a wholly meaningful way  
Is to reaffirm my existence in this terrifying paradigm.  
And as my reflection echoes off the walls  
Into the mouths of strange appraisers  
Tasting my aches and pains as gorgeous flavours  
They plug the holes in my soul where my fingers don't go

But this is not me.  
This is dysmorphic me,  
Bathed in bokeh lights, people joking as they usher by me,  
Provoking me, invoking me  
To punch the glass portraying me  
IS THIS YOUR VERSION OF REVERING ME?

Because in this carnival of games  
Is my life on a plate?  
Cut from the 3 am shadow  
Served fresh for a wake  
Even the flowers you throw on my grave  
To demonstrate your pain I know are counterfeit

Because you're still using a kaleidoscope as a monocle,  
And I become the distorted reality of a dream.  
Fog on the glass blurred is the scene  
Oh to be seen, seen, really seen in a wholly meaningful way  
that reaffirms my existence in this terrifying paradigm...  
that is solidarity.

Liz: Thank you, Elise. I love your poem and the reflexivity that it entails. I wonder if you can talk about the process of producing the poem.

Elise: Yes, the process of writing the poem was very different from a traditional essay, or other type of assignment where you are required to sit down at a desk

in front of your laptop and go at it. This was cobbled together very much on the go. It was written on my phone's Notes app, as I went through my everyday life. I'd be at the bus stop and write a line, go from class to class, have a moment and maybe I would see something that inspired me, write a line, but then scrap it later. The whole process was different from a traditional essay, where I would be in the library sitting down, cranking it out for hours. It's hard to say how long I spent on it because I worked on it throughout the whole semester. I knew this was the final assignment, so I don't know the exact timeline, but this began weeks, if not months, in advance. It was a continual, little-by-little work effort that just came together.

Katya: As you were talking about this process Elise, I'm thinking how different this project has been from anything I've ever done in my undergrad. As you say, you don't even remember the timeline. You wrote this in your Notes app, which feels so much more personal. You would never write an essay in your Notes app at the bus stop. That resonates with me because I agree. When I was doing my collage, it wasn't on a set timeline, it wasn't at the library, and I wasn't stressed out of my mind. It was more relaxing – I was in my room, there was music playing, I was cutting things out. I felt I was more connected to the work.

Elise: Yeah. I felt more of a personal investment in what I was doing. Sometimes, with a final essay, you just write it so you can hand it in, pass the class and whatnot, but with this work, I did feel more of a purpose behind it.

Liz: Elise, in your description of the creative process, you mention how fictional media can be a way to provide solidarity and allyship. I'm wondering if you can talk about how the process of writing the poem was empowering and how you think the work can contribute to solidarity building.

Elise: Yes, writing the poem was very empowering. The whole project was on representation and the capacity for representation. In this way, it was interesting that as a component of the course, I got to create my own representation through poetry. At the time, when I was writing, I didn't think anyone else was going to read it aside from whoever was marking it, so this opportunity is great because it gives me the potential to reach a slightly wider audience and serve as a potential piece of representation.

The crux of my poem is this belief in the capacity of representation to be empowering. Being able to engage in the production of the very thing that I believe generates joy is cool. In terms of solidarity, in the last stanza, I wished to emphasize to those with power in the film and TV industry that you can be an ally; you can provide solidarity through your work. It felt necessary to speak to them directly in the poem because in the film and television industry, there's very little Trans and genderqueer representation, and there are even fewer Trans and genderqueer people who are at the helm of film and television

projects. It's the people who can include positive representations for me that, ironically, are not going to relate to the poem. This is why the third stanza ends in all caps. There's genuine anger behind it, behind telling these people who are creating this faulty representation, "You're not representing me adequately; you're representing a distorted version of genderqueer people, and you're just using us as a plot point, or as entertainment but these are actual people's lives." It's my life. I wanted the poem to feel personal to manifest emotion, to make them feel how very serious this is and how much there is a need for immediate visibility, immediate allyship, and immediate solidarity.

Liz: The heart knowledge and empowerment that writing this poem not only inspired but how the work also contributes to both demands for Trans and genderqueer representation and calls for allyship and solidarity, is so powerful, Elise. Thank you for sharing this with us.

Liz: Juliette, can you introduce yourself, your work, and the process you went through in researching and writing about street art?

Juliette: Sure, my name is Juliette Vaillancourt and I am a third-year Gender Studies student. My work illustrates how street art, in particular murals, is a very powerful art form because they are accessible to the public and have the capacity to influence anyone who passes by. Murals help to reclaim not just physical space but also tell an alternative story – they allow artists and community members to speak out, share their own stories and in doing so, expose social injustice. They are the voices that speak when forces of authority and privilege have tried to silence them. Through reflecting on the works by street artists like Pannela Castro and Nychole Owens, and the case studies of Iztapalapa, Mexico City, and Loisaída, a Puerto Rican neighbourhood in Manhattan, I learned how murals can be used to speak back to hegemonic narratives, educate, and raise awareness about injustice. Castro's and Owens' work and the case studies I explored illustrate how art, particularly murals, can help reclaim space, tell an alternative story, and help connect a community through the visual representations of their shared experiences and history.

Liz: Can you tell us about the street artists and the works you examined?

Juliette: Yes, Pannela Castro is a Brazilian artist who creates murals that are the visual voices of collective female anger toward gender-based and domestic violence. Castro also suffered from domestic violence and is most famous for her vagina murals (Figure 2) (Ferri, 2019). What I found important was how her murals influence how people move through space by forcing them to look at images and think about the accompanying text. Pedestrians walking by are instantly confronted with the hard reality of physical and emotional abuse that Brazilian women face daily.



*Figure 2.* Pamela Castro with Vagina Mural

Another artist's work I examined was Nychole Owens, who is a Los Angeles-based mural artist. Like Castro, she focuses on elevating women's voices but emphasizes spirituality, feminism, and anti-Black racism in her work. Her murals aim to control and redefine the narrative around beauty and representations of what is considered relevant to women.

Liz: You interviewed Owens?

Juliette: Yes, I reached out to Owens after encountering her work during my research, and she agreed to an interview. I learned so much from speaking with her. In 2021, she was contracted to create a mural by an organization called No Going Back LA, which strives to confront anti-Black racism through art (Figure 3). No, Going Back LA chose to support Black female artists like Owens, who were a part of a group hit hardest by COVID-19. Her whole aim in creating these murals was to create representations that she didn't have growing up and to bring awareness to the issues of violence that women face (Kim, 2021).

Liz: It is wonderful you were able to interview her. Could you describe the process that you went through in producing your work?



Figure 3. Nychole Owens with *No Going Back LA* Mural

Juliette: Yes, I produced an essay that was based both on research and on interviewing Owens on her street art. At first, I didn't think what I was engaging in was creative. I thought it was more of an essay, but the more we've been discussing our work, I realize that what I produced was far more creative. I was involved in ethnographic interviewing and an analysis of an artist's work and so I think it was more of an ethnographic piece about how murals can be a form of activism, especially with female artists. Being able to interview street artist Nychole Owens was important to my learning and collective knowledge building and brought me so much joy.

A lot of the essays that we are required to write in academia are about individualism and are not collaborative. You typically submit an essay and get a certain grade as both Katya and Elise mentioned, but in the work I produced, I was able to engage in a conversation with Nychole and gain first-hand knowledge from her. This process was more of a form of community building, and she helped me understand the importance of street art to community collaboration and people coming together. In the interview, she also talked about the importance of representation as something that she strives for in her work because it was something that she didn't have when she was younger. She

was also creating representations for other students and was able to create that with them. I thought it important that she was able to create something that didn't exist beforehand. This resonates well with your work Elise, which I find important in terms of how art allows us to produce representations of ourselves that would not exist otherwise.

Liz: Thank you, Juliette. Your statement "representation of ourselves that would otherwise not exist" reminds me of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's work in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (2017) and how she writes for her people, representing them in all her writings. This representation by and for marginalized folks is so important. Simpson also talks about spaces of joy and possibility – essentially drawing on the politics of joy. You have all expressed the joy that you experienced engaging in this work and producing art in its many manifestations. Could you speak to the politics of joy and how this work has contributed to those experiences of joy?

Elise: Yeah. The politics of joy is why I chose to focus on how film and television can bring people solidarity, versus how film and television can contribute to the internalization of shame and inadequacy. I touch on that, but I wanted to emphasize how positive representation could be good because I wanted to orient my work toward Trans genderqueer futures. I wanted to look forward instead of just contributing to more research on violence towards Trans and genderqueer people, or the rates of self-harm. That body of research is important to recognize, but I didn't personally want to contribute more to it. I wanted to face forward, adopt a politics of joy, and investigate joy. I read Billy-Ray Belcourt's *A History of My Brief Body* (2020), and a line from that book that struck me was his desire to orient his book and his poetry, all his work, towards an Indigenous future. So, I needed to echo that type of general sentiment.

Liz: Yes, Belcourt's work especially prefaces Indigenous futures, and it makes me think of the amazing resurgence work that Indigenous Peoples are engaged in. This work centres Indigenous knowledge displacing settler narratives of Indigenous deficit and preface Indigenous stories.

Elise: Yeah. I needed to speak about joy here because often reading about deficits, reading constantly about your marginalization and dehumanization, is emotionally draining and taxing. There's an exhaustion to that. So, to purposefully engage in research and writing that was more joyful was also a deliberate choice for me. That was a form of self-care for me. Even during the semester, when self-care is hard to come by, even just choosing the type of work to dedicate your energy to can be a form of self-care.

Liz: Choosing joyful work as a form of self-care is radical, Elise. Juliette and Katya, did you find doing this work was a form of self-care?

Juliette: Elise, when you talked about how during the semester when self-care is hard to come by, even just choosing the type of work that you decide to dedicate your energy toward can be a form of self-care resonated with me. I think that's so true. When I was writing my essay, I was enjoying myself and I was getting so involved with the process. At one point, I felt that I was doing something wrong because I thought maybe it wasn't academic enough. It is interesting because that resonated with my experience and the importance of self-care.

Katya: As you were talking Juliette, I was thinking about the process of play and how engaging in artistic work and making my collage felt like I was playing. I had my scissors, I had my glue, and I was just moving things around. I think that could also be an interesting route to take; how art is a form of play and how that is an active form of learning. And how play was the process that we took to get here. Often, there isn't a lot of play in academia; it's more of a rigid structure.

Juliette: I also thought that the fun of creating something brings us back to a kind of childlike play. Childlike play in the sense that you are not judging yourself and are not being judged; an air of non-judgement and childlike creative play. And I think we are discouraged from engaging in play in academe. Play is very valuable and something that everyone enjoys. We're completely discouraged from playing in educational institutions because it's not socially acceptable or it's not valued as a form of learning. Also, forms of play and joy within our work can involve neuro-divergent ways of thinking, which are so shut down. I feel like different types of learning should be considered in higher education. Linear forms of thinking and working are so neuro-typical and exclusionary. When we steer away from these restricted ways of learning, there's just so much more possibility.

Katya: For me, I already collage and do artwork when I get stressed, so it was a nice change to do that during final exam season and have it be a required part of my studying. To just sit here and cut out magazines and have fun with it, and while it was something that should have been stressing me out because it was a final, it wasn't. So that was a form of self-care.

Elise: As we were talking about the necessity of joy and play in our work, I was reminded of Chanda Prescod-Weinstein's (2021) work, and I want to read this part of it because I think it's very relevant:

So, the problem isn't just not believing Black joy, but also what happens when a whole professional community doesn't believe in everyone's humanity or in joy for

anyone. The politics of suffering that pervades scientific work produces a lack of social imagination. Our planet is suffering under the white supremacist, colonialist, and patriarchal politics of suffering in science. People are suffering enormously. Inequality, rather than shrinking the advent of automation, is expanding like a terrible unbounded economic space-time. This time pushed outward by greed rather than gravity. (Prescod-Weinstein, 2021, p. 265)

It's from her book, *A Journey into Dark Matter; Spacetime and Dreams Deferred* (Prescod-Weinstein, 2021). She's a Black feminist astrophysicist, writing about Black feminism in physics, which I think are two things we don't associate. So, when she refers to "politics of suffering," she is talking about this trend of equating academia with misery, tracing it to disbelief as she states, "Black joy, but also what happens when a whole professional community doesn't believe in everyone's humanity or in joy for anyone" (Prescod-Weinstein, 2021, p. 265). I thought this was relevant to what we were talking about, because if a community can't even find joy in their work, what are the implications of that? If they have normalized misery, what does that mean for their potential work?

Liz: Chanda Prescod-Weinstein's point of normalizing misery and the politics of suffering begs the question as you ask Elise, how does one embrace joy over misery or suffering in their work? And how can we include joy in our work toward building solidarity and allyship?

Elise: I feel like this also ties back to what we've all been saying about having fun with creative work, and how when you're having fun and when you're playing, that's when you do feel the most like yourself, or you feel full of life. And the fact that is so looked down upon within the institution, it's as though there's no opportunity to be yourself. If you're not allowed to be playful and creative and happy, then how can you be yourself?

Liz: The tension of trying to be playful, and being authentically ourselves relates to Juliette's comment about childlike play. Play fosters a certain curiosity and empathy too, that comes from doing this kind of work, and so it moves us away from this competitive, merit-based approach to learning. This competitive approach to learning doesn't encourage empathy, curiosity, or playfulness, but it's rather accumulative. It's very capitalistic. It supports a politics of suffering as you point out, Elise.

Elise: Interestingly, you bring up how cumulative our educational system is because, in that same chapter, Chanda Prescod-Weinstein talks about how a lot of scientists feel this artificial, totally manufactured sense of urgency which stops them from pausing and thinking about the human impact. She was talking specifically about the big telescope that they are building in Hawaii. Within science, there's this sense of urgency that we need to make scientific progress. A whole generation of physicists' and astronomers' future careers rely on this

telescope, and they are like, “We need to go, go, go!” Because of this sense of urgency to make scientific progress, people are willing to forego the harm caused by this telescope, even though it would harm the Indigenous population as the telescope would be placed on their sacred mountain. It is very significant in the astrophysicist community and so on, but at what cost and at whose expense? And that’s very capitalistic.

Katya: I have a thought about what Elise said about the sense of urgency that comes with being in academia and producing work. As I mentioned earlier in my description of the collage, oftentimes marginalized groups are just written in as an asterisk group, almost to speed up the process. Justifications like “Oh, we weren’t able to find enough people from this group, and therefore we won’t be discussing their experiences.” I feel like there’s some sort of connection there, where there’s this sense of urgency and this sense of making the most in a capitalistic way that validates the exclusion of marginalized groups and how the institution perpetuates this. And if you are pushing for this urgency and you are pushing for the certain cookie-cutter way of presenting work, it’s going to continue to exclude individuals. I feel like doing our work more creatively and maybe working more within lived experiences or doing research that’s not as structured, or not as “scientific” as hard sciences, like the work that we read in class; it’s an interesting and different way to learn.

Elise: Talking about all this, I can’t help but think of Audre Lorde’s “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (1985), especially because I did write a poem. I’m reminded of that essay a lot and how, through creative work like poetry, women specifically, can rediscover the parts of themselves that have been hidden or lost. Audre Lorde talks about this which relates to what we’re talking about too, where creative work has helped us maybe rediscover things, or just learn things about ourselves that we didn’t realize before. This was my experience.

Liz: Yes, it’s interesting because I believe all the creative works that folks engaged with were so engaging. They also had me think and participate in the works differently and at a profound level. I had emotional responses to the various projects, and I had a much deeper understanding of the importance of this kind of engagement with difficult knowledge. This is not easy content. The content of the work that we do within gender studies and Black studies, Indigenous studies and sexuality and gender, and critical disability studies is very much work that is not just political, but it’s emotional, as you were saying, Elise. I was able to engage with my heart. This work is heart knowledge. And to connect our intellectual and our heart knowledge is I think super important. So, I’m grateful for that. And I’m grateful for this opportunity to talk to the three of you and to think about this kind of work in terms of its decolonial, anti-racist, cisgendered and anti-ableist potential within academe. So, my last question to you is, does this work challenge colonial ways of knowing? And if so, how so? It’s a big question, I know.

Katya: I'll start with a small thought. I remember when I was making my collages, I was thinking, this feels more empowering to me than writing an essay, but it was frustrating going through it and feeling like I didn't know if this would make a difference in the big picture. But it feels more empowering now. I guess it's important to acknowledge the difference between personal empowerment or empowerment from helping others and making a difference externally. It was hard to create the work and be unsure what its impact would be because I think I put a lot of pressure on myself making it. When you write a paper, you know exactly where it's going to go. And it's going to come back with a certain grade with a rubric and you'll get comments and that's the end of it. Whereas with this artwork I felt like I was more connected to it, and I wanted it to make a difference.

Elise: This is a really good question. I'm thinking again about the process of creating it. It could challenge colonial ways of knowing because of its emphasis on embodied experiences, and privileging of the qualitative, compared to many "official" research studies with methods that reduce people down to numbers. My work was very far removed from that, but still, knowledge came out of it, so I think that challenges the colonial way of knowing that's often very tied up with the quantitative. Now this is kind of touching on what you were saying earlier about connecting the heart and the mind. As I was researching for this assignment, I was learning because I was reading articles, but at the same time, when I was reading, I felt like I already knew this. Of course, negative representations would have this effect. So, it was reaffirming to me that I could just trust my embodied experiences because you hold knowledge. And other scholars have spoken about this, everyone holds knowledge. The everyday person holds knowledge, regardless of whether they recognize it, and I think the process of creating this work affirmed that and I think that in and of itself is decolonial.

Juliette: Regarding the murals, I think that, in a way, they are decolonial because they resist certain dominant Western ways of knowledge-making. The typical way of sharing and displaying knowledge is the academic essay and that can be classist because not everyone has access to those types of work. So, a mural can be community-based. It doesn't focus so heavily on individualism and is instead community-oriented which is collective knowledge building. Another thing that I find interesting about murals is that people are forced to interact with them. Whether consciously or unconsciously interacting with it, if you see the image, you are still interacting with it. For instance, Panmela Castor's vagina mural had teeth to represent the violence in Brazil. A lot of men and a lot of people vandalized the mural and spray painted over it, but you could still see the mural underneath the vandalism. This is a form of social commentary that people who don't want to be confronted with what's going on express, but no matter what, the message still pokes through, and people are

still confronted with the uncomfortable truth of violence against women in Brazil. I thought that was super important.

Elise: Juliette, you talked about murals and how they can force a confrontation in an urban space to everyone walking by. I find that interesting. Your point especially resonates with how cities are cis, heterosexual, patriarchal spaces, and these murals are cool because the process of making a mural is community building, and the artist who helped create it got a lot out of it. But the mural, once it's completed, also potentially helps decolonize the city or makes the city a more feminist space, depending on what the mural is and the kind of message behind it. So, it's interesting that it has a dual purpose, and the artist got something out of it. Still, also everyone who walks by it is forced to confront the message in a way where a lot of marginalized folks are either invisible or hyper-visible if they are the subject of policing. A mural forces people to acknowledge that marginalized folks are here, they are part of the city too and you can't look away.

Liz: That is a great connection to the power of murals Elise and, to use Juliette's words, the uncomfortable truths that they represent and that you are forced to acknowledge are, I agree, a form of decolonization.

Liz: Was there anything else that anyone wanted to share before we sign off?

Katya: I have enjoyed sharing our work. It's interesting because we've been talking about the process of making the work and the process of reflecting on it through our writing, but then this is an added component where we're able to talk about both, and I feel very lucky to have been able to do this.

Elise: Yes, I've enjoyed just being in conversation with everybody. I don't know if anyone else feels this way, but I think sometimes when I create a work, I'm like, "Oh gosh I do want to just talk to somebody about it, and info-dump on them, my thought process on making it and every single little detail that I had thought about." But you probably wouldn't understand, if you just saw the piece as a whole without investigating that. And I felt that, with your work Katya, when you were explaining your decision to include the asterisk, that was so cool. But without that context of just looking at the work, I would never have made that connection with the articles from our class. That was a very purposeful choice, and I'm so grateful to be able to be let in on that knowledge through engaging in conversation with you and vice versa. I think that was an opportunity that you don't get in academia.

Juliette: I've enjoyed reflecting on what we've all created. In going through this whole process, I think we've come to many conclusions about how being able to talk about our work openly and sharing ideas has been so beneficial. It makes me realize how I wish we were more able to discuss ideas and have a

less linear grading system. If academic work could be less about the final product and more collaborative, it would take a lot of pressure off this push for perfection. I just wish it wasn't that way because this whole process has made me realize how it's so nice to be able to have an open conversation where everyone's supporting each other, and you just get to bounce off each other's ideas. That's what I took away from this process.

Liz: Thank you, everyone, for engaging in this reflexive process, for discussing your work and for sharing your stories of the important knowledge that you gained. I've learned so much from you all and will carry this learning with me in developing and teaching courses in the future.

## **Conclusion**

As a final note, I think it's worth reflecting on the process and how deeply these students engaged in critical self-reflection around issues of solidarity and allyship. As they eloquently demonstrated in their discussion, knowledge generated through reciprocity, experiential learning and sharing stories is an act of decolonization. By exploring different worldviews and ways of knowing, they challenged the Eurocentric, hierarchical and merit-based model of learning that dominates our educational system. This collaborative effort also illustrates that in creating knowledge through our collective storytelling, we can create more inclusive and equitable educational opportunities. By combining art and different ways of knowing, we can also develop work that is relational, analytic, and compassionate, and that can promote social change. Ultimately, I believe that education should embrace "Gdebwe na" or knowledge that speaks from the heart, and that nourishes a student's learning spirit. In doing so we allow for relational and collaborative knowledge building. A decolonial, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-transphobic education is about honouring all our relations. The work that these students shared with us reflects the possibilities of a truly decolonial educational future.

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## Appendix A

### Independent Research Project (Tiered Assignments)

1. **Research Project Statement (100 to 250 words):** Your research project statement should state the who, what, where, when and why of your topic, and how you plan to go about the research (e.g., creative project or essay). Explain your focus in 100 to 250 words and post this in the folder on the discussion board on our OnQ page entitled Research Project Statements. These statements will be used to form research partners and writing groups (see below).

**Topics:** Create a topic for your Independent Study that derives from and connects to one of the major topic areas in our syllabus and that addresses the labour of solidarity and alliance work. Your original and narrowed topic of research should consider a relationship to one or more of these major areas:

- Anti-racist Feminism, Solidarity and Coalition Building
- Understanding Oppression and Allyship
- Black Lives Matter, Police and Pride
- White Privilege, Fragility, and the Politics of Allyship
- Radical Vulnerability and Situated Solidarities
- Intersectionality and Say Her Name movement
- Anti-Black racism and Critical Race Theory: a case study
- Ableism and Storytelling as Activism
- Lessons from Migrant Women’s Organizing
- Gendered Violence and Transphobia
- Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit Peoples—A movement to end settler colonial violence
- Decolonization is not a Metaphor
- Idle No More and the Politics of Reconciliation
- Crippling Queer Politics

- Palestine is a Feminist Issue
- Art as Activism
- Mutual Aid and Transformative Justice as a Politic and a Practice

2. **Research Partners and Writing Groups:** Students will participate in a Writing Group composed of two to three Research Partners. Groups will form after students have selected a topic for the Independent Study. I encourage your group to hold out-of-class meetings and ongoing online contact to help you in your research and writing. Working with your group will be especially helpful in October and November, ahead of your rough draft submissions, and in November and December ahead of your final submissions.
3. **Annotated Bibliography and Thesis Statement (20%):** You will submit a preliminary bibliography with at least four short annotations (200 words each worth a total of 5%). Each annotation will outline the author's main argument, supporting evidence, conclusion and how the source helps in answering your research question/topic. Please reference your sources in either APA or MLA format and provide any online links if available. You cannot use the material in the course as part of your sources. All sources must be new ones. You will then share your resources in your writing groups.
4. **Peer Review of Independent Research Project Draft (10%) (2 peer reviews):**

The purpose of the peer review assignment is two-fold:

  - to encourage you to complete a draft of your project early to allow time for revision; and
  - to receive feedback from your peers on the work you have accomplished to date.

Learning to give constructive feedback to your peers and undergraduate students is an important skill to develop. It is also an opportunity to hone your writing and research skills by reviewing other student's research and writing processes.
5. **Final Independent Research Project (25%):** For the Independent Research Project, you can choose between two formats: a Research Paper (10 pages) or a Creative and/or Activist Project with a 5-page overview of the purpose of the project. Your choice of format will allow you to create a major research project that suits your interests and academic goals. You might choose a Creative/Activist Project if you want to engage with the material in a creative format (creative writing, audio-visual media, artwork, scripted performance, activist action) for future academic or non-academic audiences. For this format, you will have to connect your academic research to your creative/activist work.