MEMORIES AND IMAGININGS: LEARNING TO PREFIGURE HOW THE MOUNTAINS BECOME THE BLUFFS

by

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Abstract

Addyson Frattura-Kampschroer’s thesis is made within the tradition of humanities-based research. The thesis is a form of literary philosophy that practices pre-qualitative methods. Frattura-Kampschroer’s work is in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Arts in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. The thesis is a form of literary philosophy insofar as it is a philosophical work written in the literary form of a narrative. In essence, the claims are made narratively and then supported and analyzed throughout the use of metaphors, themes, and figures. The narrative is comprised of childhood vignettes of the rural Midwest. The vignettes carry the concepts through to provide particular sites for questioning and conceptualizing. Frattura-Kampschroer functions as the narrator as she tells stories in the style of creative non-fiction.

However, the narrator, places, and stories are not of primary importance; they and unimportant things in unimportant places. What is of extreme importance are the concepts: prefigurative politics and freedom. Rather than addressing the concepts qualitatively, in the methodological style of the social sciences, the narrative itself is the method. More specifically, the thesis utilizes a pre-qualitative method. Finally, the narrative also exposes the pedagogical experience of a continually evolving learner, a learner who questions the context in which they are questioning. The supervisory committee is formed by four faculty members from the University of British Columbia. The committee is comprised of: Carl Leggo, Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, William Pinar, and the primary supervisor being Sam Rocha.
Lay Summary

The vision of this project is to take two conceptual ideas, within activism and organizing practices, and describe them in an accessible way. The concepts are described through a literary narrative (i.e. short story). A conceptual idea is something that exists within the mind, rather than a practical or physical object. Activism and organizing are the histories, traditions, and practices that go into Social Movements (i.e. Civil Rights, Women’s Suffrage, Queer Liberation, Worker’s Rights). The concepts narrated in the thesis are: prefigurative politics and freedom. The idea of prefigurative politics originates from the work of Wini Breines and Carl Boggs. Prefigurative politics is essentially an activist tactic. It is a performance that attempts to create a legal right that does not exist yet. The concept of freedom is approached as an unknown. It is an idea that is envisioned within the possible futures that Social Movements are working towards.
Preface

The following thesis, by Addyson Frattura-Kampschroer, is comprised of original and independent work that has not been previously published.
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For my family, who taught me to be for others.
sometimes the night wakes in the middle of me.
and I can do nothing but become the moon.

-nayyirah waheed, Salt
Introduction to the Narrative

The following work is a thesis in partial fulfillment for the Master of Arts in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Broadly, the thesis is two things. It is academic research as well as a creative endeavor, both rigorous in their respective ways. The following thesis is academic research, as it necessitates the rigor of philosophical and educational foundations within humanities-based research. It is also a creative endeavor, as it involves an aesthetic and literary rigor, due to the narrative form. Throughout the introduction to the narrative, I will address a foundational claim: the thesis is academic research and a creative endeavor. To do so, I will provide support for the claim by drawing on selections from the narrative thesis. I will then provide a framing and introduction to the work. In the Introduction to the Narrative, I outline the thesis in the following sections: Humanities-Based Research and the Pre-Qualitative, Literary Philosophy, The Concepts, My Place Here, and Conclusion. Following the introduction, the narrative begins with the Prologue and continues through ten sections, the Epilogue, and is further developed through the Appendix: Annotated Works Consulted.

Humanities-Based Research and the Pre-Qualitative

The thesis is academic research insofar as I utilize a pre-qualitative method within humanities-based research methods. In an interdisciplinary department, such as Educational Studies, it is common to research the concept of education broadly, and through various research methods. When I refer to humanities-based research methods, I am referencing a tradition of


2 Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, “The Plural Worlds of Educational Research,” History of Education Quarterly 29, no. 2 (1989), 213. Lagemann writes, there is the “…urge that the history of educational research be conceived and studied broadly, as encompassing significant studies of teaching, learning, socialization, and growth, even if those studies were not explicitly labeled ‘educational,’ and even if they were not carried on within recognized centers of educational research.”
scholars that conduct their research through conceptual ideas. Humanities-based research typically deals with concepts that exist within the conceptual mind, rather than percepts that exist materially. However, this is not to say that the work of humanistic scholars is not tangible.

The work of humanistic scholars is in continual and collective dialogue with questions of human existence. Humanities-based research engages with methods that are rooted in historical, interpretive, and analytic traditions. Contrastingly, the natural and social sciences may employ data as evidence to confirm conclusions. The humanities are committed to the particulars of the questions one asks, rather than empirical answers. A possible objection to humanistic research could be that it does not accomplish anything beyond a mere thought experiment. However, when humanistic research utilizes questions as the content, it is not an inactive form of thinking. Rather, the act of thinking, imaging, and creating is intimately active and practical, for it propels us forward to ask better questions about necessary possibilities of human futures. For this reason, humanities-based research is essential.

Within a tradition of humanistic research, I claim the following thesis as pre-qualitative. By this I mean, the concepts are the method. The pre, within the pre-qualitative, is the foundational

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4 Stanford Humanities Center, "How Is Humanities Research Conducted?" http://shc.stanford.edu/how-humanities-research-conducted.

5 Samuel D Rocha, "Unscientific Science and the Insignificance of 'Significance': James, Kuhn, and Flyvbjerg," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 9, no. 2 (2013): 19. As Rocha writes, “Thinking, thought, contemplation, creative imagination—all of these words that describe the same reality—are wildly active…Thinking is dynamic and deeply practical…”


theoretical, and philosophical work that is done prior to qualitative research (or perhaps in place of). It is the reading, the thinking, and the writing. The following thesis is pre-qualitative insofar as it builds a narrative around chosen concepts and questions.

**Literary Philosophy**

Rather than addressing the concepts qualitatively, the narrative is the method. Through the use of the pre-qualitative, I present a narrative that examines childhood vignettes, insofar as they provide particular sites of self-formation. The flow of the narration moves between internal monologue and first-person story-telling. For this reason, the reader is able to bear witness to the intricacies of personal experience as the stories evolve. The narrative reveals the mundane and the outrageous of rural life in such a way that one is confronted with oneself. The stories function to discover how to move forward by first returning. In this sense, it is a return to formative years of childhood and the questioning of the questions themselves. The narrative asks us to dwell within the concepts, as well as to question the possibilities.

The narrative is thus a literary philosophy, underneath the umbrella of humanistic research. Initially, I set out to write a thesis responding to the conceptual question: how is freedom prefiguratively performed? Instead, it became a response to questions of foundation: where does this curiosity come from? Why ask *this* particular question? Why not question liberation or justice; *why* freedom? In order to respond, the thesis became a literary philosophy. By this I mean that the thesis is, in essence, philosophical work that is written in a literary form. I make philosophical claims through the use of narrative. For example, the first sentence of the section, titled Bluffs, provides the following claim: my breath is a performance. It is a narrative claim, rather than a literal statement. For this reason, the section continues to defend the claim of my breath as a performance, through the use of literary themes, figures, and stories.
The Concepts

The preliminary work began with the question: how is freedom prefiguratively performed? While the work became a literary philosophy to answer questions concerning curiosity and foundation, the concepts have carried through. The concepts that the narrative draws on are: prefigurative politics and freedom. The sense of prefigurative that I began with is derived from the practice of prefigurative politics, as referenced by Wini Breines and Carl Boggs.\(^8\)

Prefigurative politics is a tactic and form of political protest. It has been used within social movements to interrupt the status quo and to perform what does not yet exist, but should. Prefigurative politics are performative. As in, they do what they say. They perform a sense of a particular reality, rather than a non-performative statement that does not enact what it says.\(^9\) A useful example of this are the Sit-Ins of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, in which Black folks would physically take up space at a lunch counter, that was not a right afforded to them.\(^10\) The imagined, planned, and performed taking up of space is the prefigurative performance of living an intended reality. However, that reality is not protected legally, politically or socially. A contemporary example could be the performing of marriage services for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, before marriage equality was a legal and federal right in the US. Prior to June of 2015, queer couples may have performed symbolic and authentic marriages, without obtaining a

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legal marriage certificate and the rights afforded by the legal document. The performances highlight the prefiguring aspect of creating a future in which it is legal to marry whomever one loves. However, it must be clarified that prefigurative performances do not exist apart from legal, political, and social action. The prefigurative, is a piece within a much larger and intricate organizing of social movements.11

Throughout the narrative, the two essential concepts are prefigurative politics and freedom. I do not claim what freedom is. But rather, I question the desire for freedom and the limitations and possibilities of understanding freedom. The form of freedom I question has not yet been realized, insofar as a future, that is more free, has not yet been prefigured. I contend with freedom in an Arendtian12 sense when I claim, “I choose to breathe anyway. I believe it is what makes me free,” in the section titled Bluffs. However, this is not a sense of freedom that ever settles within the narrative. It is continually questioned and challenged; it is inconclusive.

For this reason, a prefiguratively performed freedom is never realized. However, this is not to say that the prefigurative is devoid of a practical and necessary intent. Surely, it has been historically and presently, necessary in the actions and visions of social movements and organizing.13 The prefigurative is purposeful insofar as it imagines, plans, and practices a performance. For example, in the prologue of the narrative there is a particular scene depicting


12 Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought. Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1969, 165-6. As Arendt writes, “Man does not possess freedom so much as he, or better his coming into the world, is equated with the appearance of freedom in the universe; man is free because he is a beginning and was so created after the universe had already come into existence…Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom.”

the interaction between the narrator and a horse. The narrator was just bucked off the back of the horse that was spooked by cars horns blaring. The scene reads: “I cautiously walked towards him with a flat palm facing outward. I took one step forward and he backed away. So I stood there, with my hand out and my feet trotting forward.” This action is a prefigurative practice, insofar as the end is not entirely realized, but performed. The utopic properties of the prefigurative is a necessary component that the narrative intends to highlight.

For example, Eduardo Galeano’s book, *Walking Words*, is useful in the understanding of a utopic and prefigurative walking towards. In the section “Window on Utopia,” Galeano writes,

> She’s on the horizon, says Fernando Birri. I go two steps closer, she moves two steps away. I walk ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps ahead. No matter how much I walk, I’ll never reach her. What good is utopia? That’s what: it’s good for walking.14

Throughout the narrative, I question the elements and possibilities of a prefigurative performance through the framing of a utopic walking towards. The intent is to dream up radical possibilities of a future, and to question the possibilities of a performative notion.

My work contends with the concept of prefigurative, in its preliminary stages and imaginations, rather than the performed reality within a political and activist realm. Instead of addressing my former question, “how is freedom prefiguratively performed?” the narrative became an almost backwards motion. It became a figurative endeavor, in that the stories are figurative tales rather than literal. It is a going backwards to examine sentiments, memories, and truths, in order to prefigure a future. The journey into this kind of work was developmental. The narrative exposes the pedagogical experiences of a continually evolving learner, a learner who questions the context in which they are questioning. The pedagogical piece is the work itself as the stories unfold. I began with a few concepts of interest. Through each progression of reading

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and writing anew, the work was challenged, pushed, molded, and recreated. The performance of imagining stories is living out what is not yet true, in the strived for reality that it will become true.

However, I do not claim that I have written the prefigurative. Instead, it is the space of feeling and remembering, a preparatory imagination perhaps. There are the beginnings of a prefigurative, in the form of literary figurative elements. Although the realities are not fully performed or realized. In essence, it is the self-preparation in order to imagine, prefigure, and perform a particular future, one that might be more-free. It is the non-literal moments within the imaginings. The themes and performances throughout the narrative are the figurative within the pre-figurative. As in, many of the moments are not literal happenings, but rather figurative imaginings. For example, in the end of the section Bluff, I write:

They are fragments of a future and scraps of truth. I scoop them from the land with my hands cupped like shovels. I cradle the curious fragments in my arms. I decide to dress myself in these fragments until I am disguised as a patchwork quilt. I wear the quilted futures until they become real, until I become the quilt itself.

The figurative provides the preliminary foundation for the prefigurative. For instance, the figurative performance is not yet realized within its own political, social, historical, or legal context. In continuation of the figurative, the prefigurative is the dreaming, creating, planning, and the enacting of a performance. It is the imaginative and performative work that pushes the figurative into the literal. Additionally, the figurative and prefigurative work function as a preparatory foundation for future philosophical analysis.

My Place Here

I enter this conversation and have crafted the narration as a Masters student at the University of British Columbia. I am a white, queer, cisgender woman who is able-bodied and minded. I am a white settler, as in I have lived and currently live on unceded indigenous and first
nations lands in North America. I am a United States citizen from a middle-class family, in which I grew up in the rural Midwest. I intend to be conscious of how my intersecting identities influence the work.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, I intend to be attentive towards how I am situated within this discourse through my predominately privileged identities.\textsuperscript{16} However, the claiming of these identities and the proclamation of my intent is non-performative, in Sara Ahmed’s sense of performativity.\textsuperscript{17} The claiming of positionality does not do what it intends to do. Claiming myself as a white, privileged student does not disrupt systems of power and oppression. Conversely, it perhaps functions to maintain them and continues my own complicity within them. In essence, claiming privilege is not equivalent to acting against oppression.\textsuperscript{18} The claiming is non-performative.

It could be asked, why does my identity and my voice matter in a conversation within social movements, about prefigurative performances of freedom. In short, it does not matter. My identities and voice, as depicted in the narrative, are not of importance. The experiences and stories that I write are not prescriptive. By this I mean, the narrative is not intended to prescribe or suggest any particular actions for others. It is a narrative that is meant to be relational and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ivan Illich, “To Hell with Good Intentions” (Address, Cuernavaca, Mexico, April 20, 1968). However, it must be noted that my intentions, however “good” they may be, are irrelevant. As Illich states, “To hell with good intentions. This is a theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions. There is an Irish saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions…”
\item Mia McKenzie, Black Girl Dangerous: On Race, Queerness, Class and Gender (Oakland, CA: BGD Press, 2014).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
pedagogical. What is important in the narrative are the concepts: prefigurative politics and freedom.

The narrative thesis provides the elements of a story from a mundane place. The visceral elements and analytical experiences, within the rural Midwest, are hermeneutical and pedagogical devices. They are interpretative and educational tools because writing through created and imagined futures, is necessary in the ultimate struggle for a more just world. The scenes, themes, and sentiments of the narrative, are crafted in order to be in dialogue with prefigurative politics. The narrative functions to discuss, examine, and question the extremely intricate and necessary practice of prefigurative politics, that exists within the larger realm of social movements. The narrative does not provide a mirror experience of the prefigurative. Rather, it questions the raw concepts within a perhaps irrelevant place and space. This practice, is intended to highlight and bring forward the concept of prefigurative politics within a decontextualized space. The narrator and narration should not be universalized, nor should they be normalized.

Consequently, there are potential dangers and harms of this work that must be addressed. For which, the author must be responsible. First, the positionality statement itself is non-performative, it does not do what it intends to do. It does not disrupt systems of power and oppression, but rather affirms them. Secondly, there is potential harm done in the detaching of the concepts from a highly political and intentionally activist realm, in which they formally existed. Lastly, there is a huge risk in the white narrator’s discussion of a prefiguratively performed freedom. The risk is in the assumption that if one dreams, imagines, and prefigures

hard enough, they will become free. The ideas and sentiments then become an unintentional promotion of the American Dream. This is why it is not a prescriptive text.

For example, it would be ludicrous to claim that because a white, cis-gender, educated narrator prefigured a more free future, in turn she became free and so can you. This particular intersectional experience of privilege does not account for the histories and present realities of institutional, structural, and systemic oppression and violence. My ability to navigate and succeed within those systems is no doubt a privilege. For this reason, the narrative explores the prefigurative on its own terms as a concept, not a political practice.

Additionally, the experiences I am speaking from cannot be imagined out of. For instance, as a queer child in the rural Midwest, I could not prefigure myself out of potential spaces of homophobia-infused harm and violence. Those were realities that I continually have to live within. The realities cannot be prefigured away. However, the prefigurative is realized in tandem with the activism and organizing that take on political, legal, and social actions to change realities. The prefigurative is thus, the imaging of these new futures and the performance of them. It is a dangerous and risky performance. There are also dangers and harms that I may not be aware of as of yet, for which this work continues to be risky.

Conclusion

Within humanities-based research and a pre-qualitative framing, the narrative I present as my thesis, is literary philosophy that developmentally explores the concepts and questions of a prefiguratively performed freedom. The following pages are comprised of a Prologue, ten literary sections, an Epilogue, and an Appendix: Annotated Works Consulted that discusses how the thesis is in conversation with each reference. The Annotated Works Consulted may be read prior to or after reading the thesis. It is perhaps more useful to read prior, as it provides the
grounding of the literature from which the work was created. Please note that the thesis is formatted in the Chicago-Turabian Style 16th Edition.
The Narrative

Prologue

I have tried to write as honestly as I can. Ideas and feelings fly. I stretch and twist my limbs in order to grab just a piece of truth, something real. Finally, I think I’ve caught something. I take the tiny scrap of real and hold it up to the sun to examine it further. The sun easily pours through the material. “How odd that this truth is translucent,” I consider. I put the scrap piece in my mouth to chew on it like bubble gum. The earth rumbles beneath my bare, gravel-toughened feet. The horses are running wild in the pasture. I wonder if they remember a time before the fence though they were born within the gates. I spit the piece of truth out, and like spoken word it flies and bounces off the walls. I used to spend chosen moments of solitude singing in the barn, sending my voice to the rafters. It didn’t matter if I was in tune. I sang to fill my body. Fragments of the truth escape through pockets and holes in the paint-chipped, red walls. Bits of light force their way through the cracks. The light illuminates the dust swirling around me. “I am magic,” I exhale.

I remember riding the horses bare-back around the house, beyond the fence. My mom was talking with our horse trainer. My sister and I were riding wild. We had just learned the rhythm of a walk, trot, and canter. I was young and fearful. Riding bare-back meant less control, but more freedom. “Loosen your grip on his mane and relax your legs. He can feel that you are scared,” my mom reminded me. I was riding atop our white Arabian. He was skittish and awkward. He would flinch at certain movements from a history of learning the hands that intended to hurt. We were alike in a way, fearful yet trusting. “Lay down and let yourself feel his breathing,” my mom guided me. I lay there with my limbs hanging loose on each side. I could feel his nervous muscles begin to relax and I felt his breath slow. My body rose and fell with his.
I closed my eyes and inhaled his smell. He smelled of hay and warmth, like a dusty barn jacket, comforting and sturdy.

The words of this story are meant to be witnessed and held. My hope is that the words amount to something and, in turn, do something. But first, they must be felt. That is up to me as the writer. It is also up to you as the reader. For some of my favorite literary works, I repeat the lines aloud in order to savor the words a little longer. A friend calls this “tasting the words.” When I taste the words, I am trying to live deeper within the pages. There is room for you here within these pages. The point of this work is to illustrate a particular pedagogical experience through narrative. The experience is of an evolving learning, who questions the context in which they are questioning. The narrative and the work is the questioning of the questions themselves, within the imaginative possibilities.

Once the white Arabians’ breathing slowed, we trotted around the house in a two-beat rhythm. We were free beneath the shadowy maple trees. One, two, one, two. Up, down, up, down, up, down. No thoughts, just breath. I used to braid delicate bouquets of grass and hay. It was my special gift to the horses. I would pluck from the greenest and tallest grass, that lay just beyond the fence. One, two, one, two. I was beginning to feel confident in our new-found stride. Beyond our mere eight-acres of land, beyond the corn fields and farms, lay the bluffs. They always looked like the mountains of the Midwest to me.

Down the road, a car horn blared and a motorcycle growled. The Arabian spooked and reared. His front hooves fearfully punched the wind. I slid on my belly and dismounted safely from his side, like I had just learned moments earlier. “Uffda! That was a close one,” I

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20 For the reader, perhaps you are thinking, “What’s the point of this? You say it is an experiment in literary philosophy, but what does it do?” It is not what it does, but rather how it is felt. The stories are meant to be breathed in and exhaled, to be a rising voice in a dusty barn.
announced in relief. He ran jumping and bucking as his mane flew back and forth. Minutes later, he calmed and trotted over to me. I cautiously walked towards him with a flat palm facing outward. I took one step forward and he backed away. So I stood there, with my hand out and my feet trotting forward. Time was irrelevant. It was only this moment that mattered. There were crickets in the bushes and pollen in the air. Eventually, he timidly dragged his hooves forward and lowered his head, as if to bow. He touched his grey nose to my open hand. I felt his nostrils roll as he exhaled fear and breathed in calm. “It’s okay, easy there, easy there,” I reassured him, as if to reassure myself. And then he walked away, towards the bluffs.

I have tried to write through delicate truths and deliberate imaginings. If my mom or sister, or passerby wrote this story, it would no doubt be different. I bet it would focus less on the smells and more on something else. Sometimes my memories fail me. The stories are as real as they were felt. There are the porous memories. And then, there are the prefigurative performances. The sun shines through both. The performances are imagining stories of living out what is not yet true, in the strived for reality that it will become true.

The scrap of truth, translucent in the sun, is stretched and folded. I throw and bury it. It is trying to free itself by prefiguring a particular reality into existence. With this, the following stories are creative non-fiction that are crafted through an emergent method. By this I mean, I write until I can feel the buried truth; I find a tender spot and press on it. I dig into my mind which confuses my mind. Once I feel something visceral, something that I can smell and taste, I write through that until I get deeper into the details. There is no plan of how to transform the mountains into the bluffs. There is merely an experience of writing and hoping it works.

I have been asked what it was like to grow up in the “fly-over country” of rural Wisconsin. These pages are my response, in all its glory and insignificance. The entirety of this
work began in a closet, quite literally. It began within the fabrics of a quilt and unraveled from there. Who would have known that the closet could be a beginning? In this, I hope you find some tenderness that warms the soft and vulnerable parts of you. I hope you taste the sweetness amidst the bitter. I hope the pages carry you. I hope you listen to the stories of others as well as your own. For our most ordinary stories and places are what make us; they are mundane as they are marvelous.
Lilac

When I return home, the land is frozen and unyielding. I rest here, pretending to smell the lilacs. My nose wrinkles at the thought. It is a trickster lilac bush, always gone before I arrive again. We lay in a snow that blankets frozen manure. I shut my eyes tighter until they wrinkle and fold. I am trying not to lose how the lilacs smell. They smell of sweet earth and herbs. I am tempted to lay down on any piece of land when I am away from home. Even the patch of grass that makes the median on the highway seems nice enough. I crave the way the land holds me. The pasture at home is the safest place to witness the stars and taste their healing.

I rest in the pasture daydreaming. In the dreams, I am a poet. Each sound rumbles underneath my tongue. I carry enough basil from the garden to release each breath with tenderness. The words carefully strung by the lines of my palms render each word essential. A horse ventures near me to block the sun. I am shadowed by the possibility of being an artist and an activist. Maybe I will be free in the culmination of the two. “What will it be?” I question. “Later, it will come later,” I whisper to myself. For now, I lay in this snow-covered meadow pretending I am in a bed of wildflowers.

I dream up what tenderness tastes like. Honey soaked in mint tea trickles down, warming my ribs. It is thick and generous. I envision what truth sounds like. I listen for the boom the mountains must have made as lands collided, forcing stoic peaks to rise. I question what freedom feels like. I wake in the morning, remembering what it is like to fill a body with breath. Unrestricted and naked. And yet, I worry that these imagined words are too big for my shoes. But within the stories, they fit just right. They fit the mold of the future that is yet to be filled, for it is all in the prefigurative vision. I open my eyes to catch two horses standing and the other laying near me. It is a rare and humbling occurrence. They are standing guard while I dream.
Cream City Brick Towns

I am the vines of ivy that grow on the cream city brick houses in the cream city brick towns. My seeds, planted in the city, began to break free. I was scooped from the earth, repotted and transplanted to the rural lands near the bluffs. My roots anchored there. I grew to the sky, climbing cream city brick that is rough like sand, but delicate in color. I leave and return. Each time, my vines transform. When I leave, I am asked what home is like. “Where is Wisconsin?” they question. I summarize my home in hasty terms. I explain the cows, the beer, and the cheese and nothing else. If there is space, I expand.

I was raised with the dirt and land, from maple trees that grow soggy in the snow. My home is filled with polenta and homemade gnocchi. It is occupied by never-ending stories. We have a warm home, cold floors, lavender air, safe and sound. Each day there are train horns at five a.m. and owl hoots and coyote calls at midnight. I grew up alongside the weeping willows, muggy lakes, and forested hills. I am made of late night ice cream runs, even at -20 below. We are the family mantra, “be thankful, be grateful, count your blessings, don’t fight with your sister.” I am the poem Desiderata, “keep peace in your soul.” I was born in the home town of Pabst Blue Ribbon. I dream from within the unsolved and constantly analyzed, from pain and confusion, from manipulation and surrender. I am her voice singing “Amazing Grace.” I was cultivated from these moments, pig tails, messy hair, overalls and dirty chores, ketchup stained face, and broken hearts.

I was five when we moved into a Swiss chalet atop the bluffs. Everything was brown. The house, the barn, the woods, even the railing on the balcony complete with carved out tulips and hearts. I used to imagine the cut-out shapes as cookie cutters that could make the perfect

sugar cookies loaded with frosting. I was seven when we moved the horses to our cream city brick home below the bluffs. The new soundtrack of our lives became the Dixie Chicks’ “Wide Open Spaces.” The timeline of events seems peculiar and invented.

I reimagine it like a wild west novel: the commanding story of a mother and her two young children leave behind the city and venture to a rural life of labor and grit. The series of events unfolds in the novel as follows: kids are born in a city, parents’ divorce, mother and children move to the country, buy horses, take the kids to Farm and Fleet to buy tack, horse grooming supplies, books about horses, Shania Twain and Dixie Chicks CDs, barn boots and barn jackets, start watching Green Acres, go to first rodeo, actually buy leather chaps and cowgirl hats, and finally, learn how to take care of the horses, the land, and each other. My mom purchased a gold F250 truck and we headed to the bluffs. She is a five-foot tall Italian powerhouse of strength and love. She would climb into the driver’s seat as countless men questioned, “How’s such a little lady like you driving a big ol’ truck like that?” Our life in the country was continuously met with disbelief. I never understood their question. She is the strongest person I know; of course she would drive a truck like that.
The Trimmings

Since buying horses, I learned essential information. Horses like to lick blocks of salt and suck on sugar cubes. Although my sister and I reserved the sugar cubes for ourselves. I learned that one should never wear steel-toed boots when working with horses. I still have this terrifying image of a steel-toe boot slicing my toes off beneath the weight of a horse’s hoof. I learned that Cowboy Magic detangler is best for manes as well as child’s hair, matted down by dirt and ketchup. Maybe it was the detangler, but maybe it was the magic. We purchased used, western saddles and learned how to tack up a horse. The most curious of new instruments was the trimming equipment for hooves. I loved the rubber boots we used to soften the hooves for trimming.

We would fill black rubber boots with warm water and strap them on the horses’ hooves. They would trot around lifting and kicking as high as possible. It was the silliest thing. We scrubbed the barn clean and waited for soft hooves to arrive. I swept and shoveled in my overalls, hay and dust spitting up every which way. One of the fouler cleaning jobs was when the horses peed in the barn. They left a lake-sized puddle and an odor that choked the fresh air. We had a designated pee-clean-up-bucket of wood shavings to soak it up until we could sweep and shovel it away.

I was quite young, so my job was to firmly grip the reins while my mom did the trimmings. Beforehand, I got to pick mud and rocks from their hooves. I would use my favorite pick, made with a soft, wooden handle. I would stand beside the horse, pet their coat and softly push on their shoulder so they knew to shift their weight to the opposite side. Most of our horses were trained and responsive to this motion. As in, they knew they had to lift their hoof up at the right time for you to pick out any foreign item. Ritzy was fifteen hands of stubborn, forcing hundreds of
pounds into the ground. Her leg was impossibly strong and resolute. I would make a *tich, tich, tich* noise, tapping on her hoof until she agreed.

My mom curled over in her heavy barn coat and slid the file back and forth at an angle. She moved at a quick and rhythmic pace until it snowed a hefty pile of shavings. Trimming the bottom of a hoof is like slicing tough cheese. She would put the hoof on the stand, or stabilize it on her knee, and shave old layers away. I would become impatient as my legs wiggled back and forth. The old barn radio, covered in cobwebs, played the latest country songs, the crisp twangs interrupted by sparkling static.

After all the trimmings, we would dance. These were the softest of moments. We would turn up the radio as loud as it would go, switch the lights off, say goodnight to the horses, and let our zealous spirits carry us through the barn. This was our barn dance. In these moments, I was not fearful of the dark. I spun and moved to the beat of the radio and the crickets. A hard day’s work was lifted from our bodies. Each night was a celebration. We would dance among the stone walls in the basement of a clean barn. Sometimes the horses would return to the barn after feeding. They stood there, curious and intrigued. I’ve seen them dance too, around the pasture at night.
Thistles and Burrs

I am becoming anger. I do not remember the moments, I only feel the bothersome reminder of a scratch and pull. I study the thistles and burrs in the pasture. They have no smell. The landscape is brown, everything. It is the death and regrowth just before spring. A few thistles latch onto my gloves. I fearfully rub them off, only for them to transfer to my pants. They blend into the everyday landscape like camouflage and attach to whatever they can. They are cunning tricksters, trying to scatter their seeds. Sometimes they cluster and hide behind my ears, whispering and tangling in my hair. Telling me secrets I believe for truth. The burrs are so matted and snarled that they have become a part of me. What’s left is anger and I am becoming that. I tell the thistles that I hate them. The words seem cruel and combative. I am afraid to speak the words aloud. I fear that it will make them real. And so, the words become mine. They become my responsibility, my cluster of thistles and burrs.

I feel I have to force tears out of my eyes to prove they once had fallen. Instead, I write about the beautiful and ordinary. At times, I intentionally neglect the thistles and burrs. Unless they are poetic; unless they are whimsical and taste good. We used to spend hours brushing, pulling, and tearing burrs out of horse manes, donkey tails and dog fur. Negotiating each move. If I pull this cluster of hair, something else will surely get stuck. From mane to gloves to pants to socks, impossibly stuck. Mostly, I am bitter about what the thistles and burrs have made of me. The things I said and did in defense of myself. I am becoming the thing I hate the most. I am becoming the thistles and burrs. And so, I collect all the beautiful pieces that have made me whole. I live within those memories.

The small, scratchy annoyances that have stuck with me. They must be ripped off, carefully and intentionally. Their prickles have made me a bit sour, a bit cranky. I sit on our tree
swing beneath the old maple. My sister and I painted the old barn wood seat. I am covered in burrs and thistles. I am wearing a scuffed-up pair of green converse that we bought in the city. They made me feel cool, less country. Tiptoeing backwards, I push off. I fly and fall. Pulling my head to my heart, I twist the rope into a corkscrew. I spin so fast that thistles and burrs fling from my clothes. I swirl and twirl, clinging on for dear life. The sun is sinking into the belly of the bluffs. A warm breeze runs over me and I fill my lungs. I am not the thistles and burrs. They are mistaken. The swing peters to a slow rock back and forth. I close my eyes faintly so I can still catch remnants of orange sun. I announce to myself, “I carried the thistles and burrs with me, I did. But I have always been magic.”
Bluffs

My breath is a performance. I hike in the bluffs of the Kettle Moraine for an escape from calculated movement. I choose to breathe anyway. I believe it is what makes me free. Although it doesn’t exist yet. The bluffs are mundane and outrageous; with every glance, they confront me with myself. As I walk, I pray that the swift pace dampens my thoughts. And when they return, I run. I stumble over tree roots and rock. I don’t know if I am running towards or away. My breath becomes liberated the higher I climb, the farther I scramble. I have always wanted more space for breathing. When I tire I meander through the woods and let my heart calm. I move so quietly that I can hear the snow as it lands on branches above. This is a sound I have neglected to pay mind to before. Today, this sound is solace.

There are times I am not attentive to my breath. It is as if there is nothing moving within my lungs. They make subtle, hasty movements. I reckon this is disheartening for them, never to be completely filled. But when I am in the bluffs my breath is deliberate. It is an exposition. I am learning how to breathe with intention but also without thought. The wooded bluffs are full of living breaths. Somewhere there are birds, toads, deer and rabbits. They fill the bluffs with their permission to breathe here. “I have to begin,” I exhale. For it to become real, I have to begin.

I turn around to make my way out. I look up one last time and catch a glimpse of a cardinal. Bashful, my eyes fall to my worn boots. The snow is shaped by travelers in boots. I decide to meander within their tracks. I am thankful. The bluffs have held me when I didn’t have the energy to bear my own weight. I am grateful for their histories, for all the feet that cleared way for trails. In this place, one is free to breathe.

I do not know what it means for my breath to be free, but I believe it makes me so. I study my own memory when I am alone. I cannot trust it, but I do it anyway. There are no
physical remnants. There is nothing but my mind which turns on my mind. I have no evidence. What I have is a world full of desire. I desire tenderness, truth, and freedom in each breath. I am still walking as I become cloaked in dusk. Deliberately, I wander off trail to search for tomorrow. Instead of one, I find many. They are fragments of a future and scraps of truth. I scoop them from the land with my hands cupped like shovels. I cradle the curious fragments in my arms. I decide to dress myself in these fragments until I am disguised as a patchwork quilt. I wear the quilted futures until they become real, until I become the quilt itself.
Ritual

I fear falling out of the sky, off a mountain, down the stairs even. I fear the feeling of my body forcibly falling downwards while my ribs, chest, and stomach plunge upwards towards the air which has let me fall. It is a fear of falling to my death. When there is plane turbulence that feels insurmountable, my mind goes into a tailspin of negative and relentless fear. I cling onto the arm rests, bite my lip, and pray to something, anything.

The fact that I pray is interesting. I was baptized Catholic and raised by a mother who went through Catholic schooling. Yet, she believes that I might find religion in the experience of nature. That, and Jesus Christ Superstar. She would often take me to sit on the fence in our pasture as the sun sank and the lightening bugs glowed. I would happily climb up next to her, sit there in my dirty overalls and ask her about religion. She had gifted me a Bible after my incessant curiosity and purchase of porcelain angels from a garage sale. We would watch the horizon atop the Midwest bluffs and miles of cornfields. She would say to me, “This is the only church you need.” And so, when turbulence hits, I pray to anything that might hear me. Perhaps the bluffs on the horizon will catch me.

As a child, I would read the Bible in my closet on a quilt made from the hands of my mom. One side of the quilt was full of quirky patterns, my creation, and the other full of horses that resembled our own in the pasture outside my window. I would methodically lay down the quilt, position my garage-sale porcelain angels on top, open my purple and green Bible to a random page, and begin to read. This ritual was almost ironic. I imagine a possible headline: Closeted Queer Midwestern Child Reads Bible in Closet. Propelled by a curious discontent, I looked for answers in the patterns of my quilt. I am intrigued by the independent ritual of prayer.
in my closet. I sit with it, analyze it, and try to validate it. It all amounts to stories of a child intrigued by seemingly mystical things, by questions I could not answer nor justify.
Unyielding Hands

The curious patterns scattered themselves throughout my rural life as the country equipped me with peculiar skills, albeit necessary. I learned how to sensorially discern types of shit. There is an obvious discrepancy between the smell of cow shit versus horse shit. Every day we drive by the dairy farms, windows rolled down. Smells of the Midwest fill the car. Once, my mom let my sister and me ride in the bed of the truck. I had spilled pasta sauce on my shirt that day, so I spun it around. If I couldn’t see the stain, it didn’t matter. I climbed through the tiny, square window of the truck and tumbled out. I was a messy-haired and stained-shirt gymnast.

My mom drove down our country road, as we waved to the tractors rolling by. Each gust of wind brought a new smell. We giggled and hollered as the sweet and tangy, grassy aroma of cow shit tickled our nostrils. The truck slowed to a crawl giving us just enough time to address the cows with, “hey there moo cows!” My mom turned the truck around by beer cans in the overgrown ditch. The cows lifted their heads, curious of the smelly creatures in the truck. Heat rose up from the new blacktop rode. The cows swatted at the flies with their tails and we waved goodbye.

We pulled up on the grass right next to our white fence with green gates. The horses hurried over to the truck. They decided to greet us with fresh manure. It had a warm, autumnal apple aroma. It is so familiar I almost don’t smell it anymore. If I grew up in a different area, perhaps I could tell you about pig shit versus sheep shit, but I cannot. With this skill, I have learned to decipher what kind of animal has died. I intuitively know the type of death before I see it: a dead mouse, from a dead bird, from a possum that merely smells but is not dead.

Night is for shoveling dead animals into the old silo so the coyotes will not come for the rotting carcasses and harm the horses. My childhood stories are filled with silos as animal graves
and herding the donkeys that “came with the house.” Donkeys are curious and manipulative creatures. My sister and I herded them with a Pop-Tart after mistakenly leaving the gate unlocked. After that, we always bought one extra box of Pop-Tarts for the donkeys. My stories of the night are filled with events like the time my mom woke me up at midnight to clamber outside and burn the tree infested with silk worms. “We have to do it at night,” she convinced me. “The worms go back into their nest. We have to burn while they are asleep, otherwise the tree will die.” My child mind painted horrifying imagines of lighting the tree in flames while, nasty white worms swarmed out of their silky nest and attacked. I curled my hooded sweatshirt tight around my face and held the flame in my hands.

I will never have delicate hands. To see them is to be reminded of how strength builds; they are unyielding. They are beautifully calloused and scarred. They lifted fifty pound bales of hay off the trailer in the wet heat of August. Twenty bales in, my mom, sister and I would sit on the castle of hay to take a break. We savored our pink lemonade made from powder. From our resting spot atop the castle, I challenged myself to the game of “Which Shit Smell Is That?” I always won. I assess my hands with thumbs facing outward. They have been lived-in and well loved.

I fastened my scarf tighter around my face and inhaled the unrelenting, icy air. The skin on my palms began to crack and dehydrate from hauling a frozen hose out to a frozen trough that morning before school. I carried a recall petition for the Wisconsin State Governor like ritual through the hallways. The bottom of my boots smelled like horse manure while I sat condemned in the principal’s office, alternating between counting how many people called me a communist before 10am and playing “Which Shit Smell Is That?” I looked down at my calloused hands and
settled into a resounding silence. Chunks of manure eventually evacuated their home within the tread of my boots. I left them lying there in the principal’s office as evidence.
Potted Stars

When I neglected to do my chores, my mother invented clever and productive forms of punishment. One particular summer day, my sister and I had done it after avoiding our chores. She placed a massive black pot, as big as my torso, in my arms. I held it there, admiring the white speckles on black glaze and the vastness inside the pot. “It feels like the night and the stars, it feels safe. Maybe I could climb in there for a while,” I pondered while missing out on my reprimanding. I tuned in for the final note, “Don’t come back inside until you fill that pot with grapes.” Gloomy and sulking, I trotted outside to fill the pot. I never realized how small grapes are. It took hours of hesitantly maneuvering my calloused hands into vines invaded by spider webs. While I picked grapes, my sister defiantly sat in expectant waiting. I turned inward to busy myself with my own creation of universes and stories in my head. I picked grapes and looked for the potted stars.

When we dressed for chores, we always checked our barn boots for critters. Earlier that day, my sister clambered down our rickety basement stairs to grab her boots. Today she forgot to check. She slid her sock-covered toes in, only to touch something peculiar. “It must be burrs,” I entertained. I, pretending to be the brave younger sibling, stuck my bare hand in the boot. I felt around for a while and pulled out the clump. It was hollow and felt like burrs and fur. I opened my hand to reveal a hollowed-out mouse carcass. After canning grape jam in our mouse-free boots, we headed to the pasture to feed. We found a clean patch of grass and laid down, boots aligned. The sky was a dark purple and indigo. It was heavy with stars. We rested beneath the night sky until my sister and I got spooked from a coyote call in the distance. Giddy with a touch of panic, we ran inside carrying with us the potted stars.
Quilt

I write the stories that were. I scribble over them, leaving remnants of old ink. I create the stories that never were, in the hopes of creating the stories that could be. It is now sixteen years later and the patterns on my quilt are faded, but remain curiously creative. The horses have passed and the pasture is overgrown. I have lost my garage-sale porcelain angels. I no longer wake at six a.m. to help my mom and sister with the morning chores before school, hands frozen numb as we shovel and feed. The quilt has lived in eight closets and I still have just as many questions as the first day I arranged the angels.

As I write my mind traces back, trying to pinpoint peculiar moments within the story. I travel backwards until I am standing in my kitchen. My bare feet feel the cold, stone tile beneath them. My feet desire stability. A steady ground to walk, to run, to be lost, and to become found. I freeze here in this body. My naked feet are searching. I work to ground my body through gratitude for what it can do, what it can feel, what it is capable of. I remind myself that I am thankful for this body and these naked feet on stone tile. Yet there is this disconnect. Is it real or imagined? I can’t tell since I can’t feel anything. I don’t know if I am breathing.

There is no longer light outside and I have neglected to expose myself with the faint, artificial light inside. I remind myself to be unyielding. Breathe, mustn’t forget. I am a body, wrapped. Naked, exposed, vulnerable, restricted. I breathe hasty and calculated gasps. I breathe strategic articulations. I breathe cautious movements as to deflect historical, manipulative forces. Yet, I am a carefully constructed self in its wrappings. My mind returns to my naked feet on stone floor. I wrap myself in the quilt. I am full, complexly so. My body trembles and sweats. My body breathes. Each new day I learn to feel, learn to love. My feet are trying to find stability in my own, capable body. Until tomorrow.
Truth

I make tea when I have the shakes. I pray that the tea will calm the shakes. I say it out loud like a mantra, performing what I hope to be true, “The tea will calm the shakes. The tea will calm the shakes.” I grab my green and purple Bible, lay down the quilt, this time horse side up, and retreat to my closet. I have not practiced this ceremony in years. But the tea isn’t working. The memory seems false, seems fabricated. Maybe this memory is fiction. I write so that I can remember, but to write I have to expose. I am still a body, wrapped up. I breathe strength and the wrappings stretch. I breathe courage and the wrappings expand a little more. I breathe vulnerability and community into the fabric and it separates. I try to breathe trust. A tear appears. I breathe growth into the tear and the wrappings separate even further. Yet it clings back to the body and repairs itself. “I will try again tomorrow,” I tell myself. Perhaps I just need more breath.

This is the first time I have opened my Bible in nearly six years. My bookshelf is the same. It is piled high with childhood books. My dad and I painted and filled this shelf. We found the old bookshelf in the barn, which was once filled like an antique shop from previous owners. Bookshelves, desks, clothes, boxes upon boxes, even a fancy red car rested under blankets of dust and webs where cows once fed. Now the barn is occupied by Paint, Arabian, and Quarter horses. We spent one summer day sanding the old shelf until it was as smooth as the Paint’s coat.

I stand in front of the bookshelf letting it witness me. I find the purple and green Bible between Mark Twain and Toni Morrison. “It is there, therefore it is real,” I assure myself. Although, I am not convinced the memory is real. I rest the Bible in my palms. The colors are not as vibrant as I once remembered. But the cover is as soft as ever. Fingertips to leather, I can
feel that it was once real. I open the book in half, bending the spine a bit. I thumb through as I let the pages fly. And there it is.

The breath pushes more severely on my ribs. “There isn’t enough room in there,” I think. My shoulders fall forward. My chest hollows. I feel I may be trembling, but I am unsure. There, nestled in the pages, is proof of a reality once challenged. I spend a few minutes in this positon, staring evasively. I almost hoped that my memory was fictitious. It would be easier that way. This was the book I once exhausted for sanctuary. The angels are gone and the quilt is folded in a closet, two thousand miles away. But this is here. I pluck the scrap of paper tucked in between the pages. The handwriting is young and certain. I read the scribbled journal entry as a message to myself. Something fills me. Relief or fear. Perhaps both. I must have known. I must have known that I would need someone to confirm this reality, the thistles and burrs. That young child, fearful and proud, left evidence.
I close my eyes and I am asked to imagine freedom. I try to do that thing where you let your mind wander and follow where it leads. My eyelids quiver. I have had too much caffeine today. I follow my mind to the pains in my body, the tenseness in my muscles. I am distracted. I scratch every itch. “You usually love this shit, why can’t you focus?” I mumble to myself, annoyed and restless. I am searching for that scrap piece of truth, translucent in the sun. There is a collective exhale of the group. I peel one eye open to examine the room of imaginings. We are in an elegant and scholarly room that smells of history and dusty books. My horse died today, the white Arabian. I was here. And he was there, growing tragically and rapidly sick. There was a bit of chaos. Then, my mom and sister had the vet put him down.

Outside it is pouring, which is strange for this place. “It’s raining like a cow pissing on flat rock,” I think to myself. The sentiment feels out of place. A thunderstorm is coming, I can smell it. I am used to the storms from summers at home. Apparently, it is uncommon here. People are riled and frantic. I follow my mind again as it swerves and crashes. I want to smell freedom. I want freedom in the form of the lilacs. I want the scent where you catch a whiff and the air is knocked out of you. It halts you and fills you. There is a pain in your chest as your body scrambles to respond. This is not a painful pain however. It is the sharp viscerality of a memory, perhaps a desire. I want to know what freedom smells like. I am asked to imagine freedom, so I imagine it in smells.

Gandy, the white Arabian, was our last one. I have watched almost all our animals die, except the cats. Somehow, they are still alive. I did not watch Gandy die because I wasn’t there. Although, I can imagine it. I remember the day when our Paint, Ritzy, died. She was old and in
pain. She would stand out in the pasture, motionless and firm. Life would be swirling around her and she wouldn’t move, it hurt too much. There is something stark and painfully dramatic about putting a horse down. Putting a dog down is somewhat docile and gentle. They merely fall asleep.

I never really connected with Ritzy. She was stubborn and cranky. However true this was, she was patient with me. Often times, late at night after the chores, my mom would kneel next to Ritzy. The cement ground of the barn had cracked and pulled apart. The cracks were incessantly filled with a collection of manure, hay, dirt and dust, thick as grout. There was one particular crack that expanded to a crater. It was impossible to sweep, so I would brush over it, barely moving a speck from the grout-filled crater. My mom knelt by the crater and made a step by clasping her hands. I’d hesitantly place one foot on top. Her hands were covered by barn gloves, skin exposed by weathered holes. She would hoist me up atop of Ritzy’s back. Ritzy was the one that would hang around during chores and return to the barn after feeding. At night, her eyes looked gentle and kind. I laid atop her coat until it was time to go inside. Ritzy never spooked. She was stoic and calm, no matter the scrambling child she carried on her back.

The day that Ritzy died, first they stopped her nerves. The vet placed a temporary shunt to block pain signals in her legs. This was supposed to show what a healthy horse looked like. Healthy, as in not in pain. For an hour, Ritzy galloped and trotted around the pasture, giddy and unrestricted. We watched in amazement. When the shunt wore off, she was tense and pained. She no longer moved at all, just stood there, vacant. My mom let out a gasp and a few tears. We stood there soberly, in a row of peeling birch trees, knowing the death to come.

The last one. The last horse to go. The death of a horse is sad. But there is something more. Maybe the sentiment is that this time in our lives is over; it’s finished. What we created is
gone. The pasture is glaringly empty. Every time I pass by the open gates, an instinctive fear washes over. The vet prepared us for the moment. She explained how since the horse is standing, it may seem scary. “She will go stiff and then fall. She will not feel any pain,” the vet clarified. I couldn’t imagine what this might look like. I had assumed I was prepared, “It will be scary and sad and then it will be over. It will be better, she will not be in pain anymore.” I remember the sun setting and the orange and pink glow above the bluffs. Although, I do not know if this was true. The poison was injected. Ritzy’s body went stiff. In that moment, she became stone and all air was evacuated from her body.

“How strange to die standing up?” I thought to myself. The packed earth beneath our feet, dense from winter, shuddered or trembled or quaked. I do not have the right word for this sound of death and vibration of land. She froze and then fell, legs firm, body motionless. “This is it, this is the time to cry,” I sunk into the moment. My mom advised my sister and me to go into the house. She didn’t want us to witness the John Deere machinery forcing the horse’s body into the deepest grave. I do not know if Gandy’s death was like this, I wasn’t there. But I imagine it just the same. For months after Ritzy died, Gandy would frantically run around the pasture. Each day he would stand on top of her grave, mourning. Each night, after my sister and I were in bed, my mom would go out to the barn with a mug full of wine. She would sit with Gandy and mourn with him. A painful reality and a tender and loving performance.

I am imagining freedom. I am back in the bluffs and searching for the smell of truth, something so powerful I can taste. I once thought that I had to go to the mountains to find it. I assumed I would find the quilted futures nestled deep within their crevasses. I scrambled up the

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22 As I write this, I think about how cliché it is to leave the narrative with the notions of death. However, this walking away is about the sentiments, the depths, and the possibilities within the feelings themselves. It is perhaps a walking forward, a movement towards the stars. It is about being flamboyantly human, as my dad calls it. Through the pain and beauty, through trying to create a particular reality.
switchbacks with such a desperation, trying to prove I was a mountaineer. I found beauty and possibility in the mountains. Although, I couldn’t find the quilted futures. Perhaps we don’t have to imagine what we already are. Or maybe it is about memory. I think through the phrase “I am freedom.” I repeat it aloud to examine the taste. Perhaps we can perform what we already know to be true.

My mom picks me up at the airport and drives us home under a dark, Midwestern sky. We listen to music and catch up. I tell her about the incredible view of the mountains from the plane. She tells me about the happenings in her life. The gravel crunches beneath the tires as we pull up to the house. There are candles in each window that glow a soft, yellow hue. The pasture is empty. But our home is full. I hop out of the car and look up. Tears flood my eyes and spill over, rolling down pink cheeks. I sob silently. “I forgot what it is like to witness the stars,” I exhale. “It’s okay, easy there, easy there.”
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Appendix: Annotated Works Consulted


Sara Ahmed is a scholar whose work centers around intersections of four branches of social theory: feminist, queer, critical race, and postcolonial. Sara Ahmed’s paper reflects on “institutional speech acts.” Ahmed refers to the claims that are made on behalf of an institution. The acts of speech are non-performative, as in they do not do what they say. The words do not compel and promise a person or institution into action. Ahmed highlights and analyzes how many “declarations of whiteness” are non-performative. Additionally, the declarations may function to maintain and support systems of racial inequality and violence. Ahmed provides the following example, if an educator were to claim their classroom as an “anti-racist space,” the declaration would be non-performative. The claiming of the space as anti-racist does not perform and create an anti-racist space. In essence, it is a dismissive attempt.

I am in conversation with Ahmed’s text through the non-performativity of identity claims in the section My Place Here. The identities that I claim do not perform any sort of justice or allyship. Conversely, they perhaps function to maintain dominant systems of power and privilege. However, the narrative intends to expose performatives of the identities claimed, while recognizing the privileged and problematic aspects. Additionally, the dialogue continues through the themes of the performative within the narrative. Declarations such as “I am freedom” do not make one free. This instance within the narrative is a question of imagining and prefiguring in which the narrator is “tasting” the words aloud in order to envision a possible future. Within the history and
practice of prefigurative politics, the imagined futures must not only be dreamed but practiced.


Hannah Arendt’s work is concerned with power, authority, and totalitarianism. Arendt questions the conceptions of freedom within the chapter titled “What is Freedom?” Arendt does not claim a particular understanding of freedom, as she qualifies that as a “hopeless enterprise.” Rather, she raises particular questions and framings of possible conceptualizations of freedom, with the framing that the reason for politics is the pursuit of freedom. I am in conversation with Arendt in a way that inspired and propelled the questions of freedom. Initially, I was challenged by her notions of inner freedom and man already being freedom. Arendt discusses the ability for one to be free within oneself in the midst of external realities, in which one is not free. In essence, one can be free within their mind.

Additionally, Arendt discusses her claim that one does not possess freedom. Rather, one is already free on the basis of their coming into the world. One is free because they are a beginning within an already created universe. Arendt writes, “…to be human and to be free are one and the same. God created man in order to introduce into the world the faculty of beginning: freedom.” My work comes into dialogue with Arendt’s as the narrative entertains the two conceptualizations of freedom literally. The stories, themes, and sentiments function to question the performative possibilities of an Arendtian inner freedom and freedom as beginning. However, these senses of freedom are not claimed
realities. The thesis became distanced from Arendt’s claims for the reason that one can feel the inner freedom and knowledge that one is already free. Nevertheless, one can feel the external realities of a world in which their experience and identities place barriers and experiences of being unfree on them. The thesis intends to position Arendt’s notions of freedom alongside Ahmed’s claims of the prefigurative in the question of a prefigurative freedom.


The video interview with Hannah Arendt was translated with English subtitles. The original audio is in German. Forty-one minutes into the interview, Arendt comments on the abhorrent violence and crimes of a Nazi-dominated Germany. Arendt says, “…we had the idea that amends could be made for everything else…but not for this, this ought to never have happened…something happened to which we can never reconcile ourselves…” My thesis is not in a direct conversation with Arendt’s statement. However, it is reflective on the contention that an individual or society cannot perform out of something which ought to have never happened. Thus, a performative freedom cannot reconcile abhorrent harms committed against particular identities and communities. The narrative does not directly deal with this contention. Additionally, it does not offer a promise that the prefigurative will reconcile.
Carl Boggs’ article intricately discusses the movement for workers’ control through the analysis of various movements and revolutions. My thesis does not attend to the particulars of Boggs’ work. Rather, the thesis is concerned with Boggs’ use and framing of prefigurative politics. The article works through the history of the prefigurative tradition, which began with the nineteenth century anarchists and the New Left. I directly take up Boggs’ understanding of the prefigurative. By prefigurative he means to refer to the “the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal.” While I do not directly address the concept in its collective, historical, and political foundations, I take up the imaginative and performed task to live and embody particular goals.

Wini Breines discusses and reflects on the characterized failure of the New Left within a United States political history. Breines describes how the New Left was considered a failure because it was assumed to be utopian, antiorganizational, and perhaps antipolitical. Breines writes to reject these assumptions and reframe the theories, practices, and tactics of the New Left. Breines claims that the New Left was rather a grassroots social movement that was dedicated to creating a participatory democracy, rather than an overly formal and centralized movement. With this contrast, Breines
introduces the strategic versus the prefigurative. For Breines, prefigurative politics refers to the antiorganizational quality of a social movement as well as the personal embodiment of the values, and the vision of a participatory democracy. My thesis is in conversation with the concept and conceptualizations of prefigurative politics. However, the thesis does not address or respond to the particulars of Breines’ work. Rather, the narrative takes up the idea of embodying the values and vision of the organization in order to plan and prefigure.


Angela Davis and Noam Chomsky were featured in a videotaped discussion, hosted by the Berklee College of Music. Within the video, Angela Davis suggests the notion of working towards “radical possible futures.” The thesis does not directly contend with or address this idea. Rather, the notion of “radical possible futures” is taken up within the notion of the prefigurative. In essence, the thesis discusses the possibilities of prefigurative performances that intend to plan, create, and realize, “radical possible futures.”


The poem, Desiderata, is a reference that is directly cited within the thesis. It is referenced within the section titled, Cream City Brick towns. The poem is used as a claim by the narrator, “I am the pome Desiderata.” The poem does not have direct correlation to
the themes and work of the thesis. However, it was influential for purposes of inspiration and form.


Paulo Freire was a Philosopher of Education from Brazil, concerned with liberation theory and interrupting institutional oppression of race and class in schools through the work of his literacy campaigns. I reference the translation by Myra Bergman Ramos. Freire’s work has been instrumental in my philosophy of education training. Additionally, this particular work was inexplicitly referenced through the themes and claims within *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire claims that a pedagogy of the oppressed must be forged by the oppressed and of the oppressed. The movement by and of the oppressed is intended for the process of humanization. Because of Freire’s work, I cannot claim my narrative as a prefigurative politic.

Rather, I explore the concept on its own terms, rather than a political tactic. It would be harmful to claim my narrative as a prefigurative politic, as that would tie it to a pedagogy by and of the oppressed. I do not claim the ability to liberate. For this reason, the narrative is not a prescriptive call that shows a possible prefigurative politic. Additionally, Freire’s text was useful in the preparatory conceptual work for the concept *freedom*. Freire’s conceptions of freedom were interesting to position alongside Arendt’s as he writes, “…Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.” In a similar way, he claims that freedom is not an external thing to be
grasped. However, in distinction from Arendt, he is claiming that is a necessary foundation for human completion.


Eduardo Galeano was a journalist, writer, and novelist. The book, *Walking Words*, is a collection of tales that are rooted in an oral tradition. I referenced the English translation by Mark Fried. The tales are presented alongside the artist, José Francisco Borges and his woodcut art. Galeano is directly cited within the discussion of the concepts in the Introduction to the Narrative. As Galeano writes, “The unborn can’t be explained or understood: you can feel it, you touch it when it moves. So I stop explaining and I tell him the stories. I tell him the stories of ghouls and fools that I’d like to write, voices I’ve collected in my dreamlike wanderings or heard in my wakeful dreams, realities made delirious, deliria made real. I tell him the stories, and this book is born.”

It was not until I went back to Galeano’s work that I realized the obvious influence of his work on the feeling and visceral aspects of the thesis. The aspect of the visceral feeling of story is not directly referenced in the thesis, however it was formative in the shaping of the tone and form. Additionally, I necessarily cite Galeano’s piece on the utopic movement towards the horizon, in the Introduction to the Narrative. The sentiments of the utopic movement are in direct dialogue with the perhaps utopic elements of the prefigurative.

Octavia’s Brood is an anthology of speculative fiction that was organized and edited by Walidah Imarisha, Adrien Brown, and Sheree Thomas. It is a cultivation of stories from organizers, artists, and activists that write to create and envision more socially just worlds. For example, the anthology provides the readers with stories that imagine worlds without war, prisons, or capitalism. The book is inspired by Octavia Butler’s compelling science fiction and speculative fiction. While Octavia’s Brood is not in direct conversation with the thesis, it was influential in the decision to question the questions themselves and to question the possible outcomes. The book inspired concepts and narration within the thesis on prefiguring and imaging other possible worlds; worlds that are beyond our current constraints.

Illich, Ivan. "To Hell with Good Intentions." Address, Cuernavaca, Mexico, April 20, 1968.

Ivan Illich was a philosopher and a Roman Catholic Priest whose work concerned education and society. Illich’s address was referenced directly in the Introduction to the Narrative as to critique my own declarations of intent within the positionality statement. As Illich states, “To hell with good intentions. This is a theological statement. You will not help anybody by your good intentions. There is an Irish saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions…” With this sentiment, I am claiming that while I intend certain experiences of the text, good intentions are perhaps a non-performative action in Sara Ahmed’s sense of performative.

Allan Johnson was a writer and public speaker who worked on issues of privilege and identity. Johnson’s work is directly referenced in the Introduction as to cite the discussion on “privileged identities.”


Mary Karr’s book offers the essential elements of literary memoir through lessons and concepts like memory and identity. The book is not in direct dialogue with the thesis. However, it was a necessary foundational text in the writing of the auto-biographical pieces.


Rupi Kaur is a poet, writer, illustrator, and performer. Kaur’s work is in dialogue with the narrative in the section Bluffs. Kaur’s poem titled “A Valentine’s Day Ode to the World,” was an inspiration to the creation of the section Bluff. Particularly when I write, “I wander off trail to search for tomorrow. Instead of one, I find many. They are fragments of a future and scraps of truth. I scoop them from the land with my hands cupped like shovels. I cradle the curious fragments in my arms. I decide to dress myself in these fragments until I am disguised as a patchwork quilt. I wear the quilted futures until they become real, until I become the quilt itself.”

Lagemann’s work was briefly used to form a claim in the Introduction to the Narrative that educational research can be studied broadly. As Lagemann writes, “The plural worlds of educational research: “…urge that the history of educational research be conceived and studied broadly, as encompassing significant studies of teaching, learning, socialization, and growth, even if those studies were not explicitly labeled ‘educational,’ and even if they were not carried on within recognized centers of educational research.”


The Hour of the Star is a book written by Clarice Lispector. It was originally published in Portuguese. I referenced the book as translated by Giovanni Pontiero. The book was an influential reading because of Lispector’s tricky use of the narrator. While the thesis does not directly parallel or reference the book, the particular narration style was cultivated alongside my re-reading of The Hour of the Star. Lispector is able to jolt the reader out of being lulled into trusting the narrator and then challenges the narrator’s identity and thoughts. The narration style of the thesis then became an experiment of alternating between first person storytelling and an internal analytic of the narrator.

The Border Trilogy is a series of novels from Cormac McCarthy. The book is not in direct dialogue with the thesis. However, it was a necessary foundational text in crafting the form and tone of a rural, North American aesthetic.


Mia McKenzie is a writer, activist, and creator of the website, Black Girl Dangerous. McKenzie’s work was directly referenced in the Introduction to the Narrative as to discuss the non-performativity of identity claiming.


Tamara Myers is an educator and activist. Myers is a friend, mentor, and teacher that inspired and supported much of my undergraduate work. The reference here, is of a class taught by Myers in the Comparative History of Ideas Department at the University of Washington. The course was instrumental in early understandings, curiosities, and questions within the realm of activist imaginations. The class and content are not directly cited within the thesis. However, much of the conceptual foundations for the thesis were cultivated and inspired by Myer’s course on activist imaginations.

Sam Rocha is a philosopher of education at the University of British Columbia (UBC). He is the primary supervisor for my Master’s research at UBC and has been a huge influence as a humanistic researcher, scholar, and artist. Rocha’s foundational work on the pre-qualitative was necessary for the framing of the thesis within the Introduction to the Narrative. With reference to Rocha’s work, I claim my thesis as pre-qualitative.


Sam Rocha's article was directly cited in the Introduction to the Narrative for the claim that thinking is an active process. As Rocha writes, “Thinking, thought, contemplation, creative imagination—all of these words that describe the same reality—are wildly active…Thinking is dynamic and deeply practical…”

Stanford Humanities Center. "How Is Humanities Research Conducted?"

http://shc.stanford.edu/how-humanities-research-conducted.

The Stanford Humanities Center was directly referenced in the Introduction to the Narrative as to provide a foundation to the claim of the thesis as Humanities-Based Research. The Stanford Humanities Center describes the intricacies of Humanities-Based Research while responding to questions of distinction in relation to the natural and social sciences.

The US History webpage was used as a direct reference in discussing the Sit-In Movement within the larger fight for Civil Rights in the US.


Nayyirah Waheed is a poet and author who published the book of poems titled, Salt. While this book is not in direct conversation with the thesis, it was an influential reading for its poetic form and rigor. Additionally, one of her poems is cited in the epigraph.