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Abstract

This article reflects critically on “The Radial Imagination: A Research Project About Movements, Social Change, and the Future,” an engaged social movement research project conducted with self-identified “radical” activists in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. In so doing, the authors explore a research strategy that seeks not merely to observe the radical imagination—the ability to envision and work toward better futures—but to convoke it: to mobilize the singular location of academic inquiry to create a research environment within which the radical imagination can be better understood. Through a critical examination of the project’s theoretical architecture and methodological framework the authors investigate the promises, possibilities, and difficulties implicated in critical social movement research carried out through a strategy of convocation, contrasting it with more conventional approaches to social movement research.

Keywords

radical imagination, social movements, dialogic methodology, prefigurative research

This article aims to do two things: first, to meditate on the methodological and ethical problems of studying the radical imagination in solidarity with social movements, and second, to offer an example of an experimental project aimed at doing just that. In the first section, we consider strategies of social movement research and propose a “prefigurative” strategy for “convoking” the radical imagination. In the second, we provide an overview of the successes and failures of this approach as experienced in the course of our experimental research project in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Strategies of Voice: Invocation, Avocation, and Convocation

Until recently, the absence of the radical imagination in the Global North was a cultural malaise bemoaned by radical academics and social movement participants alike. Until the dramatic events of Tahrir Square, the antiausterity uprisings in the Mediterranean, and the emergence of Occupy Wall Street and the broader Occupy movement, many felt that the incessant ideological and material pressures of neoliberalism and its attendant growth in corporate power and right-wing backlash had largely stifled the possibility of a broad-based reimagining of social and economic life. At the so-called end of history, social movements seemed to have retreated from expansive visions of a radically different society and satisfied themselves with either making localized or

particular demands or carving out modest spaces of autonomy, creativity, and solidarity in an otherwise triumphant and totalizing capitalist climate. While the alter-globalization movement made headlines in the late 1990s, and while the subsequent movement that rose to contest the “War on Terror” saw some of the largest mobilizations in human history, social movement participants and scholars alike felt the past 20 years to be characterized by the retreat of radical visions of alternative futures. Whether and how today’s occupations and antiausterity movements will overcome a broader culture of political resignation, hopelessness, and backlash is yet to be seen. For our purposes, we want to think about how social movements keep the radical imagination alive in dark times, and in particular, how social movement research can be part of this process.

Doing research with (rather than on) social movements has never been easy, but our inquiry comes at a time when the status of academic scholarship as a *vocation* is in crisis.

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Academia may be the only field of work that has gone directly from medievalism to neoliberalism without the intervening stage of industrialization. As a result, as numerous scholars—notably the feisty Edu-factory Collective (2009) and their interlocutors—have noted, the idea of academic inquiry as a “calling” or “labor of love” has merged with new forms of precarious employment characteristic of a shift toward “cognitive capitalism.” As universities frantically restructure to cut costs and achieve maximal efficiency, the “norm” of full-time tenured work has been rapidly eroded, ceding ground to an army of part-time, insecure, contract-by-contract research and teaching staff competing for scant positions in a hostile market (Bousquet, 2008). The idea of academic research as a *calling*, a vocation, a place of privileged speech, has lost much of its institutional authority with recent political attacks by the right on critical researchers and instructors. But the idea or ideal of the university continues to motivate a great many emerging researchers, perhaps because so few other venues in society allow for any measure of critical response or opportunity for voice.¹ More students than ever are pursuing advanced degrees in the social sciences and humanities, in spite of the grim prospects of finding academic work. More cynically, the administrative compulsion to increase lucrative and grant-friendly graduate programs, with their large pools of cheap and easily exploitable research and teaching labor, may also account for the swelling ranks of underemployed scholars.

Such a situation has led to a new moment of inquiry into the relationship between social researchers and social movements, one coming to a head as activists—many of whom came of age in the heyday of the alter-globalization and antiwar movements, as well as more recent iterations of migrant justice, international solidarity, and antiausterity campaigns—take their place as young scholars in the halls of academe (or their ever-expanding anterooms of precarious intellectual labor). In addition to being committed to paths of critical pedagogy in higher education trod by their forebears (veterans of New Left, feminist, Civil Rights, queer, and other struggles), this generation of scholars-in-solidarity (if we may call them that) has also been inspired by the more “anarchistic” turn in recent social movements, with its relentless intolerance for hierarchies, its refusal of intellectual or political vanguardism, its objection to the overprivileging of class as the fulcrum of oppression, and its feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial attention to the way power operates not only through overt political composition but also through knowledge, speech, and interpersonal behavior (Day, 2005; Rebick, 2009). This has led to a great deal of experimentation in what we might call “real research ethics” and a great deal of reflexivity around the space and place of social research in solidarity with social movements (see, for instance, Dixon & Shotwell, 2007; The Research Group on Collective Autonomy, Breton, Jeppesen, Kruzynski, & Sarrasin, 2012).

We are part of and inspired by this current in research activism and this article and the research project of which it is a part are attempts at working through the possibilities for research with social movements in a moment of change and possibility. Reductionistically, we have identified two broad political research *strategies* within the current idiom. We have characterized these approaches (and our own, third strategy) with reference to the idea of “voice” as charted by Couldry (2010) for whom the ability to come to a critical voice in public is both what neoliberal capitalism has confiscated from us, and that ability which the university must struggle to rekindle.

On one hand, many scholars have chosen to maintain a relatively traditional methodological strategy. Those adopting this approach have tended to suggest either that the values of avowedly empiricist research methods are consonant with social movement aims (the pursuit of truth and knowledge against the forces of falsity and ignorance, the dispassionate revelation of the injustices of the world, or the sanctity of the university as a critical but detached social institution) or that more traditional inquiry into social movements offers those movements validation and legitimacy within the university and in society more broadly. While this strategy is associated with many different research methods (qualitative and quantitative, policy-oriented, or ethnographic), we might call this a “strategy of invocation” because its political efficacy stems from the iterative power of the academic and her invoking of social movements as legitimate and important sites of social intercourse and creativity.

On the other hand, many scholars have rejected these more traditional approaches and sought to put their scholarly skills directly at the disposal of social movements themselves. Highlighting the ways movements create, critique, and teach their own forms of critical knowledge (in many cases, much more successfully than the university, at least by social movement standards) these researchers stress methods that take direction from and integrate themselves within the struggles of social movements, especially when they are centered around constituencies usually marginalized in society and (rightly) distrustful of academic inquiry. Once again, this strategy, largely inspired by and growing out of feminist action research, has mobilized a wide diversity of methods from conducting surveys of movement and community participants to writing policy alternatives with social movements to seeing researchers drop all pretence of producing “knowledge” and instead “getting their hands dirty” in organizing or even taking up arms. We call this a “strategy of avocation,” a calling-away-from, to signal the difficulty of working between vocations, and being “called away” by both social movement solidarity and academic work, of being torn. Those practicing this strategy astutely note the power and privilege academic researchers wield and many have done the slow, difficult, and often

painful work of building trust and solidarity with social movements and of developing a reflexive, critical accounting for their participation, as well as the heartbreaking work of justifying their scholarly work to unfriendly colleagues and administrators obsessed with “peer”-reviewed research “outputs” and distrustful of work that, by its very nature, calls attention to the fact that all research is political.

Both of these broad strategies have, at times, been extremely successful, in terms both of serving social movements and of producing valuable academic text, and it is not our desire to level a criticism at either. Our objective is to consider another strategy. We are led to do so by some hard thinking about the particular location and responsibility of university-based social research in neoliberal times as well as the current state of social movements with regards to the radical imagination. Our experiment begins with the question: What are the unique features of our own subject locations as university researchers that would allow us to make a *meaningful* and *unique* contribution both to social movements in our locality and to our academic community? Can we imagine and experiment with a *strategy* of social movement research that (a) strives for a recognition of the specificities of the social location, privilege, constraint, and power of researchers, (b) mobilizes or leverages this locationality to provide social movements with a *space* or a *time* that they cannot or do not provide for themselves, and (3) continues to contribute to critical academic scholarly dialogue?

For us, the strategy of invocation is insufficient, although we have both practiced such a strategy in the past. We feel that merely reporting on and affirming social movement activity do not answer the spiraling crisis complex we now face, and the ways this strategy contributes to social movement struggle is not direct enough. While we may use our academic work to point out promising new developments in social movements, or the way they “prefigure” a better future, who is really paying attention? Certainly not most social movements who find our scholarly publications inaccessible or simply don’t have time to engage with them. Indeed, in an era of academic hyperproduction, most of our colleagues don’t even have the time to read our work! Similarly, while our more dispassionate and distanced research on social movements may offer us useful pedagogical tools with which to attempt to radicalize our students, does this justify yet another study of social movement X or Y? Do such projects risk offering up knowledge to forces hostile to the movements under study, such as conservative politicians, the police, or marketers eager to grasp onto images and spectacles of authenticity? Finally, if we leverage our privilege as academics to valorize social movements, do we not risk reaffirming our privilege as guardians of the knowledge factory? And who, in the end, is the real beneficiary? In short, while the strategy of invocation has produced important, influential, and inspiring work, it all too often relies on outmoded liberal notions of the purpose of the university and the sometimes arrogant assumption

that social movement actors and the general public should automatically recognize the value of independent scholarly research.²

On the other hand, a strategy of avocation, deep work within movements, while incredibly valuable, does not answer all of the challenges we have laid out. Scholars who have chosen this path have done invaluable work challenging the hubris of the academy and working with specific social movements to chart new paths for responsible and ethical social research. They also often provide key resources to those movements. But in some ways we felt this approach can cede too much of the unjust autonomy of the academic. To be clear, we are not befuddled by the myths of the university as the ivory tower on the hill whose autonomy is a sacrosanct good that can never be challenged. By autonomy we here mean a critical element of “play” within the network of social power relationships, a limited and always tenuous wiggle-room within the neoliberal confiscation of all things public or common. Making a fetish of our odd (almost perverse) freedom (where we are lucky enough to retain it) is unacceptable, but jettisoning it is irresponsible. By folding ourselves within social movements, we risk ceding this problematic yet productive space in which it might be possible to create something different. More practically, our particular circumstances—which we discuss in more detail below—are such that the social movements we are working with have not yet cohered to the point of being *able* to realistically host scholars and maintain their own autonomy. While well-established and highly organized movements may be able to imagine a constructive role for scholars in their midst, our situation is one of extreme fragmentation and, in the eyes of our research participants, inertia and fragility among social movements.

In other words, location and situation have a hand in determining what sorts of research strategies are most apt. Hence, our desire to find a different strategy, one inspired by both tendencies but which meditates on and experiments with the particular social relationships among and between social movements and social researchers at this time, in this space. It is instigated by the general agreement among both our academic and activist colleagues that what seems to be lacking today, both in social movements and in society at large, is the radical imagination: the ability to envision and work toward better futures based on an analysis of the root causes of social problems (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010).

In order to do so, we have been in the process of developing an experimental research strategy that, in contrast to strategies of evocation and avocation, we call convocation. The objective of this method is to critically and self-reflexively mobilize the privileged and conflicted position of the academic researcher to create a new “space of encounter” where social movements and their participants can rediscover one another. “Data” here are a byproduct of a process inspired by, but not entirely folded within, social movement

practices. The objective of this convocation is both relatively modest and resolutely utopian: to open a new, temporary zone for the radical imagination to flourish. But before going into more detail about this strategy, we first discuss what we mean by the radical imagination.

The Radical Imagination as Dialogic Process

The idea of the imagination is as muddled as it is popular or powerful. Today, it is enjoying a mainstream vogue, seen not only as a means of personal expression in the arts but as an economic boon to be harnessed for corporate profit. Yet the imagination has and continues to be mobilized by social theorists as a key to radical social change. Without the ability to project the world as it might otherwise be, we lack the inspiration that motivates resistance. Elsewhere we have provided a history of the “radical imagination” where we charted and critiqued the Western, Euro-enlightenment, patriarchal notion of the imagination as a personal possession (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2010). Instead, following critics like Robin D. G. Kelley (2002) and Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis (2002), we argued that the imagination is a collective *process* rather than an individualized *thing* and that it emerges not from unique geniuses in their romanticized autonomy but from communities and collectivities as they work their way through their world. For these critics, the imagination is not a universal human gift so much as it is a locational and, in Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis’s (2002) formulation, a “transversal” capacity that emerges from the lived experience of people as they struggle with the power relationships that intersect them. Drawing on the legacy of feminist standpoint theory, they invite us to consider the “situated” imagination: the way the experience of being embodied in a racist, sexist, and oppressive society gives shape to what we can expect, anticipate, and hope for. Rather than trying to synchronize our imaginations to a singular political project, Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis argue for the constant work of making “common” imaginaries that pay real attention to oppression and demand the unending labor of solidarity.

It is on the basis of these interventions that we propose an approach to the imagination that is, in contrast to an “accumulative” model, one based in *social acts*. We do not “have” a radical imagination, no matter how dearly we wish for revolution or how unpopular our ideas might be. The radical imagination is something we *do*, and something we do *together*. Imagination, our capacity to project into the present and the future, is constantly in the dialogic process of reweaving itself in both explicit and subtle relation to those people, institutions, and forms of power that surround us. For this reason, the radical imagination is never one thing and is always changing. We cannot grasp it or measure it or define it. But we can *convoke* it. That is, we can call it into being as part of collaborative praxis. Indeed, social movements are convoking the imagination all the time.

This is not to diminish the importance of durable radical ideas like, for instance, the radical imagination evoked by a Marxian narrative of the working class as revolutionary subjects, or to diminish the importance of individuality and the ability of certain people to crystallize a shared imaginative landscape in a unique way. It is to say that these ways of imagining are always part of a social nexus and are constantly in the process of being *reproduced* through social actions.

Such a model helps us understand the ebb and flow of radical imagination: It is contagious, manifesting in different ways at different times, swirling and eddying throughout social networks, meeting resistance and barriers at the lines of social division, language and geographic barriers, and transcending them. For instance, as Alex Khasnabish (2008) notes, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, was not only a phenomenal mobilization of indigenous peoples in that country but one that resonated with a global Left in search of signposts in a post-Cold War world. The transnational resonance of Zapatismo was more than merely romanticization: It was a means by which Northern activists found a shared moment of radicalizing hope and, through it, built shared imaginaries, such as those that animated the spectacular manifestation of the Global Justice Movement in Seattle in 1999.

Such an approach moves us beyond neoliberal accounts of the imagination as the product of gifted individuals who contribute the fruits of their genius to a “marketplace of ideas.” Understanding the imagination as a “dialogic” process allows us to see how we all contribute to the imagination and how the imagination changes us. For this reason and others, the imagination, radical and otherwise, is always at play, both settling into durable themes, ideologies, relationships, and ideas and merging, eroding, and breaking them apart. As Max Haiven (2011) illustrates in his examination of the memory of radical events, the radical imagination and collective action are intimately intertwined, and the imagination works precisely at the intersection of the individual and society, of habit and ingenuity, and of power and possibility.

As these examples illustrate, a dialogic model of radical imagination understands this powerful term as part of the ineffable substance of solidarity. As such, it turns our methodological imagination away from questions that focus on “understanding” social movements and their strengths and weaknesses and instead forces us to imagine research as social action and activism: an imaginative act, shaped within a shared imaginative landscape that, in turn, helps shape the radical imagination.

Toward a Prefigurative Methodology: Beyond Ethnography

Social movements have, of course, long been objects of social scientific inquiry and much of this scholarship critically informs our approach and does the important work

of locating social movements within existing structures of political power. A historical corpus on resource mobilization (Zald & McCarthy, 1979), political opportunities (Meyer, 2004; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Piven & Cloward, 1977), movement cycles (Brand, 1990; Tarrow, 2005, 2011), and “framing” (Benford & Snow, 1992) has been joined by more recent work on biography, identity, oppositional consciousness (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Jasper, 1999; Mansbridge & Morris, 2001), networks (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Keck & Sikkink, 1998), and transnationalism (Bandy & Smith, 2005; Della Porta, 2006, 2007; Della Porta, Kriesi, & Rucht, 2009; Olesen, 2005; J. Smith, 2008; Tarrow, 2005). But, as Fitzgerald and Rodgers (2000) point out, this research is largely insufficient for the study of contemporary radical tendencies whose ambition and practice is a direct challenge to the very *form* of the sociopolitical itself and which is spread out across a broad range of actors, not only those visibly engaged in or identifying with established organizations (Blaug, 1999). In other words, many methods have encountered difficulty recognizing, accounting for, and respecting the power of the radical imagination with its complex and rhizomatic appearances and conflicted and sometimes contradictory patterns.

In response to the inability of more conventional methodologies to *see* and *make sense of* radical challenges to the status quo and attempts at cultivating alternatives to it, we have turned to methods of ethnography and participant-action research to develop an approach patient, intimate, and reflexive enough to do justice to these new radical tendencies (Conway, 2004; Graeber, 2009; Juris, 2008; Khasnabish, 2008; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Plows, 2008). Grounded in a strategy of convocation, of participating in the collective process of *calling something that is not yet fully present into being*, our methodological approach disavows the fundamentally elitist pretensions of the politics of knowledge production enmeshed in a strategy of invocation that at once presumes and elevates the power of the academic to recognize and legitimate social struggles after the fact. Equally important, such an approach refuses the strategy of avocation because from where we stand right now, particularly in the north of the Americas, there is a striking absence of radicalized mass movements into which an engaged researcher espousing a strategy of avocation might disappear.

Crucially, our method seeks to work with social movements not as discrete organizations or projects, but as complex, shifting, and conflicted milieus. This is based in the recognition that, in our present moment, many social movement actors and activists work outside of, between, or only temporarily within actual movements and that geographic “scenes” of social movement activity are something more than the sum of their parts. Studying an activist milieu made up of many movements (sometimes working in concert, often sharing members, rarely on the “same page”), rather than particular social movements, offers up a much

richer picture of the radical imagination at work and is an important theme for those who would devise research strategies aimed at working with social movements.

Engaging social movements as living spaces produced and reproduced through the interactions of those individuals and groups that constitute them—as well as through the engagements and interactions undertaken by movements themselves in relation to the wider social world in which they seek to intervene—demands a research methodology that takes seriously and treats as primary living social realities rather than approaches that map movements onto a political landscape overdetermined by dominant sociopolitical and economic institutions, powerful actors, and their attendant ontologies and epistemologies. Understood not just as a set of research methods, including participant observation and qualitative interviews, ethnography is a mode of analysis and writing that aims to give voice via “thick description” to rich social realities. This attention to reationality lived is the crux of ethnography’s analytical utility as well as the basis for its potential political significance. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that ethnographers have been compelled—not least by the people with whom they have worked—to address the politics of knowledge production if for no other reason than because our work is grounded in the lived realities of others’ lives. Critiques of ethnographic research are certainly nothing new, having been raised by feminists, indigenous peoples, postcolonial critics, and a host of others from marginalized communities who found themselves *objects* of ethnographic inquiry and (mis)representation (Lal, 2002; Said, 1994; L. Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1988). Within anthropological circles, it was the “crisis of representation” in the mid-1980s that shook objectivist and positivist approaches to ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), advancing the rather banal but nevertheless fundamental observation that every act of representation (written or otherwise) is also an act of power and naming anthropology’s historical imbrication with systems of power and domination.

Rather than simply disavowing its practice, however, a diversity of politically engaged scholars have, in recent years, convincingly demonstrated that ethnography is a research method particularly well suited to research with social movements, not least because as a methodology it insists on the explicit positioning of the researcher in relation to his or her research “field” and those who occupy it. This self-reflexivity and the willingness to be a part of and, potentially, transformed by the act of engaged research highlights social movements as spaces of knowledge production rather than simply objects of research interest (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Advancing his claim that ethnography could be a model for the “would-be non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual,” anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber explains that this could be so because ethnography offers the possibility “of teasing out the tacit logic or principles

underlying certain forms of radical practice, and then, not only offering the analysis back to those communities, but using them to formulate new visions” (Conway, 2004; Graeber, 2009; Juris, 2008; Khasnabish, 2008; Maeckelbergh, 2009). Jeffrey Juris has articulated a similar vision of radicalized ethnographic practice that he has termed “militant ethnography,” which rejects the valorization of “objective distance” and the all-too-common tendency within the academy to treat social life as an object to decode (2008, p. 20). Instead, Juris argues that in order “to grasp the concrete logic generating specific practices, one has to become an active participant,” and, within the context of social movements, this means participating in and contributing to the work of these movements themselves (2008, p. 20). Hence, horizontality, collectivity, self-reflexivity, and a commitment to radical social justice struggles are fundamental hallmarks of this approach.

Militant ethnography resonates with our own methodological approach, yet it still resembles what we have identified more as a strategy of avocation. In the absence of radicalized mass movements, in the midst of concerted attacks by political and economic elites on the fabric of social justice, and faced with the waning of previously compelling imaginations of radical political possibility, our research-based intervention in the field of radical imagination must do more than explore atomized and fetishized invocations of it; it must participate in the process of collectively calling it into being.

In order to do so, we draw on social movement knowledge to fashion a “prefigurative” method. In recent decades, social movements have been inspired by feminist efforts to bring together the personal and the political and to reimagine the connected politics of relationships, identities and subjectivities, aspirational horizons, and movement forms and organization. With the rise of the alter-globalization movement in the 1990s and antiwar organizing in the 2000s, these tendencies coalesced around what some have characterized as an “anarchist turn” in movement dynamics (Rousselle & Evren, 2011). This began in the 1960s with a rejection of hierarchical and rigid movement forms that focused on winning concrete political victories and a turning toward movement-building as a priority in order to build horizontal, nonhierarchical, and antioppressive communities of struggle. Richard Day (2005), among others, characterizes this as a prefigurative “politics of the act,” one that prioritizes building the world we wish to create in the here and now (see also Katsiaficas, 2006; Polletta, 2002). This orientation is deeply skeptical of efforts to influence power holders or even “take power” in any traditional sense, and, at its best moments, brings the work of confronting power relationships (especially those based around race, class, gender, and other vectors of privilege and oppression) to the heart of political activism (Solnit, 2004).

With this idea of prefigurative politics in mind, we want to, cautiously, imagine what a prefigurative methodology might look like. What would research look like in the world we want to create and how can a vision of research-to-come animate a radical research strategy in the here and now? We do not believe that the world we can create will be some sort of magical utopia in which all social divisions, oppressions, exploitations, and inequalities will evaporate. Our experience in and research on egalitarian and radical movements tells us that, if these are to be the models of and vehicles to a radical society, there will still be a need for social “research” in terms of a concerted, premeditated, transparent, and methodological sociointellectual process aimed at elucidating social dynamics and confronting ingrained injustices and forms of oppression. But this research, we feel, will have more to do with bringing communities together in order to create new spaces and possibilities for dialogue and debate and new zones of possibility, reflection, contention, dissonance, and discovery. While we are skeptical that the university (as we have become accustomed to imagining it) will continue to exist in the world to come (at least with the levels of privilege and exclusion we are familiar with), the importance of “research,” and in particular “sociological” research, cannot—and, indeed, should not—be so easily dispensed with.

So what if we “borrow” a research method from the future, or a future? What if we understand research not as the accumulation of facts or the mobilization of knowledge but as a unique and special way of creating new zones of encounter? We tentatively imagine that “prefigurative research” might name a potential strategy that understands research methods and ethics as vehicles for bringing that future into being by creating something that would not otherwise exist: a moment or possibility that allows for the difficult cultivation of new solidarities.

Convoing the Radical Imagination in Halifax, Canada

Our project seeks to develop a research environment to study the radical imagination in action. If, as we argue, radical imagination exists only in dialogue, this project does not merely seek to observe the radical imagination but to convoke it: to mobilize the singular location of academic inquiry to create a research environment within which the radical imagination can be better understood.

In August 2010, our four-person research team began “The Radical Imagination: A Research Project About Movements, Social Change, and the Future,” seeking to “convoke” the radical imagination in collaboration with activists self-identifying as “radical” in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Halifax, a former garrison and navy base for the British Empire and today home to Canada’s East Coast naval command, is a city of about 300,000 of which

some 60,000 live in the relatively condensed peninsular core. The choice of Halifax as the research site was a matter of neither convenience nor accident. As engaged researchers we sought not only to mobilize our preexisting knowledge of the city and its activist history but also to shed light on a unique and understudied location. The Maritime city's one-time colonial prominence has given way to a marginality in national and global politics and economics. Halifax is by no means a substantial influence on national, let alone global affairs: It is the 12th largest city in Canada, the capital of a province that represents a meager 1/33 of the nation's whole population, and it is about 1,000 kilometers (625 miles) from the next large city (Quebec City). While once a thriving Atlantic port, today Halifax has one of Canada's poorest populations. But in an age of globalization, as De Angelis (2007) has pointed out, power is at work everywhere, and every place becomes a site of contestation, experimentation, and possibility. Furthermore, while many social movement scholars are attracted to distant, romantic sites of social movement innovation and success, we feel it is important to intervene in one's local social movement milieu, even (and in some cases especially) if it is marked by setbacks, impasses, frustrations, and a perceived lack of traction. When viewed more as a catalyst and less as an observer, the researcher's duty shifts.

Indeed, in June 2007 Halifax played host to the Atlantica summit of Canadian and U.S. political and economic leaders eager to develop an unprecedented agenda for economic integration for the shared Northeastern seaboard, one that would take advantage of the region's economic and political marginalization to advance, unimpeded, a template for neoliberal restructuring and post-9/11 continental securitization (2007). This summit was the target of vigorous mobilization for radical activists in the Halifax area and beyond, but the protests resulted in what almost all participants report to be an unmitigated disaster. Entrenched disagreements over protest tactics led to a ruinous polarization between protesters content to stage conventional street protests and militants engaged in melees with police. Veteran activists note that the event ruptured networks of trust and cooperation that had been building for decades, demolishing the established landscape of radical activism. In the wake of this leveling of the field of radical politics, we are left both with fragmentation, atomization, and polarization in the Halifax activist community and a unique opportunity to study the radical imagination in action. Where radical movements seek to rebuild and reweave themselves in a relatively small sociopolitical space, we encounter a moment where the radical imagination is profoundly at work in a community with which we are intimately familiar and with which we have already established research ties.

Our research project was made up of several interlocking and mutually supporting components aimed at integrating spaces for reflection and conversation into and alongside

already existing movement spaces and practices: one-on-one interviews with movement participants, public panel discussions of key issues, an online interactive forum to hear other perspectives and share thoughts, and a selection of public talks and presentations. The aim was to construct together a new architecture of reflexivity and dialogue within the milieu and see what came of it.

It is important here to disclose who we are and what we bring to the table. As Stoezler and Yuval-Davis note (above), our locations as humans intersected by multiple systems of oppression and exploitation shapes our imagination, including the research imagination, and therefore, the shape, tenor, and potentials of our projects. Both of us are read as relatively young, straight, male, and (by and large) White academics who have had some measure of success in our fields and lead relatively middle-class lifestyles (in spite of debt). We've both been political organizers at different moments of our lives, both in the trade union and student movements, and we both are parents. Throughout the course of this project, neither of us were involved directly in social movement organizing, though we are both friends and colleagues of many of the research participants. We were fortunate enough to win a sizable grant that, among other things, allowed us to hire two research assistants, one who was quite active in the Halifax radical milieu and one who was less active. While we strove to create a research team that was intensely collaborative, and while we seriously considered many collaborative models, for various reasons we (the authors) elected to maintain leadership over the project, though we are deeply indebted to our research assistants for their contributions, including their reflexive and theoretical insights that significantly advanced the project.

The active research phase for this project began in September 2010 and is primarily based on interviews and focus groups, augmented by our attendance at movement events and the keeping of research diaries. Project outreach has been carried out via several different methods, including placing advertisements in local alternative media sources (print, radio, and online), posterizing and pamphleting in public spaces, the use of preexisting research and activist connections with groups and individuals, and "snowball" participant recruitment. Since September 2010, we have conducted nearly 30 one-on-one in-depth and open-ended interviews with diverse members of the Halifax activist milieu. Focused on getting research participants to reflect on their own political biographies, notable moments of radicalization, perceptions of opportunities and barriers to radical social transformation, and visions of the future, these interviews aim to collect an archive of radical activism in Halifax at a particularly urgent time considering the crisis complex currently confronting all those not ensconced within elite enclaves. This kind of archive has utility not only for social movement scholars but also for future generations of activists and organizers, particularly given the

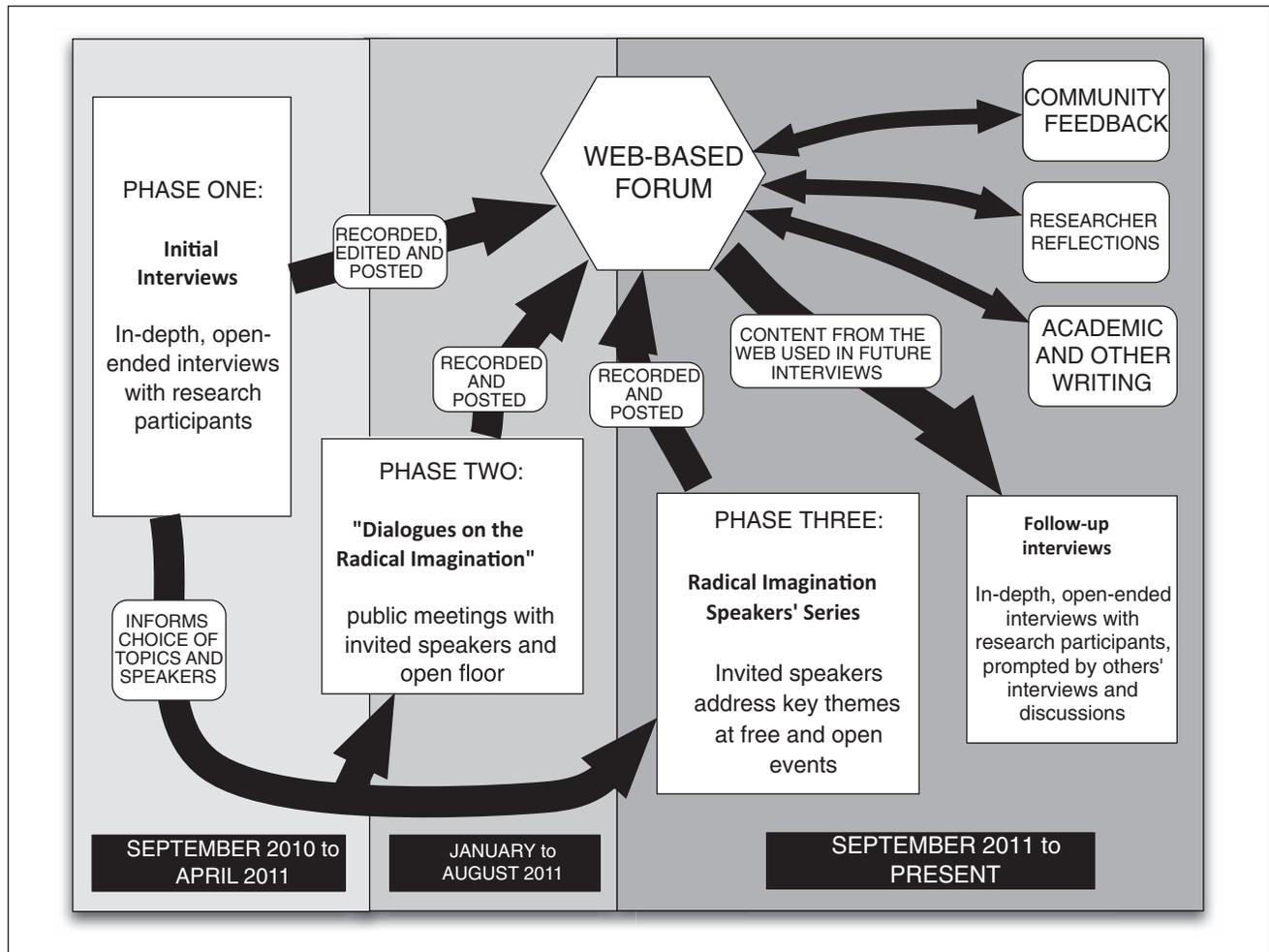


Figure 1. Research process

absence in so many grassroots, noninstitutional movements of a place or process to intentionally cultivate and preserve the collective memory of struggle. This approach garnered a relatively wide cross section of activists involved in a variety of struggles including grassroots anti-poverty organizing, student radicalism, feminist activism, community media production and anti-capitalist protest. We also interviewed many self-identified radical activists involved in more institutionalized struggles, including publishers, academics, non-governmental organization staffers, labour representatives, lawyers and social workers with ties to the broader activist milieu.

The interview stage of this project also constitutes our initial attempt to provoke a wider dialogue among the activist milieu in Halifax. The two most significant processes flowing from the interview gateway are the building of a web-based audio archive and interactive forum for the project and the organizing of a series of public events configured as "Dialogues on the Radical Imagination" and held in

the winter and spring of 2011. The project's online, interactive digital archive on our project website (<http://radicalimagination.net/>) allows visitors not only to listen to thematically organized clips from consenting interviewees but also includes summaries and analysis of the project so far, spaces for anonymous discussion and invited contributions, a self-reflexive "blog" about the research processes and methodology, a section geared toward academic readers explaining our process and methods, and an anonymous and nonanonymous opportunity for research participants and their community to "speak back" to the research methodology.

The dialogues were free events, held in a community rather than an academic space, and open to the public involving project participants invited to serve as speakers who initiated critical discussion on distinct themes that emerged out of the project's interview process. Rather than simply being a forum for the research team to present our analysis to the community, these dialogues allowed participants to offer short and often provocative statements based on

personal experiences of organizing and activism that were then used as a springboard for moderated, critical, and open discussion among research team members, project participants, and broader members of the community. Lasting two hours each, these dialogues were constructed around three key problematics, framed in such a way as to highlight and reveal tensions within and between movements and movement actors identified in the interview process. These were whether the struggle against “austerity” was defeatist in nature or whether it opened doors onto broader social change; whether and how anticapitalist organizing excluded and or included struggles against other modes of oppression and exploitation, including racism, sexism, and homophobia; and whether or not more anarchistic and ad hoc organizing forms needed to be replaced by more highly centralized, institutionalized, systematic structures in order to achieve meaningful social change. These dialogues, segments of which will also be posted to the project website, will in turn serve as a springboard into a final round of interviews with project participants who have taken part in all of its elements. These interviews will be structured to solicit participants’ critical reflections on the implications and efficacy of our attempt to cultivate a space and a process within which the radical imagination might be convoked. This final round of interviews are also important given that the larger political landscape has changed so dramatically in the time since we began the project in light of the Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the antiausterity struggles sweeping the Mediterranean and other parts of Europe, and the student-led struggle in Quebec. Giving participants the opportunity to reflect critically on the project against the backdrop of these eruptions of defiance, hope, and possibility seems not only to make good methodological sense given the importance of context to political action and the radical imagination, it also aligns with our commitment to facilitating a process to convoke the radical imagination by inviting participants to reflect critically on their local experience in relation to these inspiring uprisings. Coinciding with this last set of interviews, the final element of the project is a speakers’ series, curated by the research team in consultation with the broader research communities through which local and out-of-town speakers are given an opportunity to help stimulate the radical imagination.

Preliminary Affects: Successes and Failures

At the time of writing, almost 20 months into the project, we are concluding the final dialogue sessions and organizing and reflecting, with our community partners, on the successes and failures of the project. Many participants have reported positive experiences. Many found the initial phase of interviews stimulating and unique and admitted having very few opportunities to articulate and elaborate

their activist histories and ideological orientations. Many found the experience refreshing and some found it illuminating. Most appreciated this unorthodox means of social movement dialogue. Some expressed skepticism that other community members would take the time to listen to each others’ interviews via the online forum and that it would materialize a substantial space of dialogue. Others felt that the overarching themes of “dialogue” and “debate” were overvalued and may even disguise deep, irreconcilable ideological and personal tensions within the community. Still others refused to participate, or participated anonymously, either for fear of state surveillance or out of concern for their reputation within what they perceived to be a highly judgmental community. Several participants asked the recorder be turned off for segments of their interview where they spoke frankly about individuals and histories, or asked these segments be deleted. Many participants were critical of our sample, suggesting that “activism” and social movement participation cannot be limited to those who self-identify as radicals, noting that such self-identification in Halifax will highlight the voices of those with social privilege (largely university-educated White youth). One common response we found particularly telling was the acute awareness on the part of many participants of the academic knowledge economy and the wry suspicion that our project was primarily designed to cultivate academic publications and credentials and only secondarily to benefit the community. Relatedly, several participants questioned the ethics of the project given that, while we aimed to study generally antihierarchical movements, we devised and executed the project as a whole with community consultation, but not with formal community direction and oversight.

Similarly, the dialogue sessions proved to be unique opportunities, but not without their own drawbacks. Many participants reported enjoying a space they perceived to be neutral for discussing big ideas and sharing motivations and political commitments. Many felt that their groups and movements did not create such spaces effectively, and most agreed that very few forums exist for people from across a range of movements to discuss such ideas. Many reported being inspired by the dialogues and having their imagination radicalized. We as researchers were gratified by relatively high attendance (in excess of 30 people) at each session, with many returning for all three sessions.

One of the successes with which we and many of our participants were particularly pleased was the capacity for the dialogues specifically, and the project more generally, to set the stage for intergenerational dialogue between and among social movements participants in the city. Many interviewees, both elder and emerging activists, noted the difficulties they experienced in creating meaningful and empowering collaboration and learning. A wide variety of reasons were posited for this problem: the disenchantment of many seasoned activists with activism in general or

radicalism in particular; their preference for more modest, moderate, or patient pathways to social change (working within established NGOs, universities, unions, and political parties), which conflicted with the general antiorganizational and spontaneous direct action orientation of many younger activists; the failure of the “baby-boom” generation to develop effective strategies or institutions of intergenerational dialogue, themselves being the product of a political generation heavily invested in understanding themselves as a “break with the past”; the feeling that younger activists created movement structures that were not welcoming or tenable for older activists whose jobs, mobility issues, or life and community obligations made movement participation more challenging; as well as tensions around time, space, resources, ideology, and public presentation. Many elder activists felt that their copious experience and expertise was not being sought out by younger activists and were pained to perceive “the same mistakes” they made being made over again. But many younger activists felt that older generations were not supportive enough of their efforts and could rarely be found at events and actions, leading many to theorize the depoliticizing and co-optive effects of participation in mainstream culture and economics.

The success of this project in helping movements overcome these intergenerational difficulties is impossible to measure, but several participants reported that they felt the project brought these issues to the fore. In the dialogue sessions we strove to select panelists from across different generational lines, and in interviews we brought up intergenerational issues with participants. On the basis of this experiment, we are more convinced than ever that intergenerational frictions seriously impeded movement solidarities and possibilities. They echo broader social trends that have divided younger and older generations along cultural, economic, and political lines. While we reject reductionist accounts that would identify this tension as an emerging political paradigm (the war of the old on the young), we do feel that this tension is a key place for social movement research to intervene. Since radical movements have largely abandoned the organized “party” model, they have lost much of their—in Alan Sears’ (2007) words—“infrastructure of dissent” (including day schools, summer camps, youth wings, workers’ education centers, publishing houses, newspapers, and other education and training materials and processes), which has made intergenerational dialogue and learning more haphazard and disorganized (see also Shantz, 2011). We imagine that social research can help fill this gap by orchestrating new forms of convocation.

Another promising aspect of the project was its ability to stage a dialogue between a surprisingly wide diversity of radical political perspectives. As social movements scholars and participants have noted for a long time, the past

century-and-a-half has been characterized by a tremendous degree of sectarianism between both established parties and tendencies and more amorphous ideological or strategic formations. The milieu of radical activism in Halifax, like practically every other one elsewhere, is cross-cut by multiple affiliations and organizations and shot through with rivalries, tensions, and open conflicts, old and new. The objective of our project was not to reconcile these differences and we are critical of approaches that assume there is a hidden underlying consensus among social movements that can be realized through civil dialogue. Instead, we view conflict as productive to the extent that it allows for the generative power of the radical imagination to be put to work. Put otherwise, these deep-seated conflicts over movement organization, priorities, and strategies can become stagnant and corrosive to the extent they are based in suspicion, assumptions, and hearsay, but can become transformative, multidimensional, and incisive when actually articulated in common spaces. In selecting interviewees and panelists and in inviting participants to our dialogue sessions, we aimed to foreground difficult ideological and organizational tensions rather than avoid them or cover them up.

The results were largely positive. Participants were generally impressed with their capacity to articulate clear and differentiated positions and cut through what many perceived to be a layer of rhetoric and euphemism that they feared would overburden the discussions. As moderators and interviewers, our team drew upon interviews with other participants to ask interviewees and panelists to articulate their own positions clearly and in contrast to those of other activists and were able to set a tone of dignity and respect. On one hand, this largely led to people finding greater common ground with their presumed rivals, but on the other it led to “agreements to disagree” on generally congenial terms. For many of the younger, less experienced, or less attuned members of the audience, these dialogues offered a view into ideological and strategic tensions and differences within and between movements that otherwise would have remained vague or opaque. For these participants, having these positions laid on the proverbial table demystified a political culture that had been alienating or off-putting, or which felt unduly hostile or petty.

But one of the key findings of this aspect of the project was also that clear, concise, and well-developed political agendas are not the hallmark of Halifax-based movements. While we had selected panelists and participants partly on the basis of their participation in more established and defined parties, groups, or tendencies, the vast majority of attendees at the public events were ambivalent or agnostic, and many felt frustrated that the more theoretical, ideological, and strategic questions appeared to hamper and diminish the possibilities of solidarity and action.

Indeed, in the absence of highly articulated agendas, the majority of the participants in the dialogue sessions tended

to express their opinions in terms of personal feelings and narratives. At two of the dialogue sessions, following panelist presentations, we went around the room and each participant in attendance was invited to speak their mind. A large proportion of those who participated took the opportunity to express their personal, emotional, and biographical thoughts about the social movements in which they had participated, and a great number of these focused on feelings of being an outsider, experiencing burnout, and/or rejecting or feeling rejected by movement subcultures. One research participant, a more seasoned activist and one of our panelists, confessed their displeasure at the “therapy” atmosphere that was created and felt that it did little to advance movements and played in to a culture of privileged individualism, rather than radical transformation. Other participants felt that these sessions offered an unexpected catharsis for a movement milieu that created no other opportunities for community healing.

Our efforts at convoking the radical imagination were sometimes much less successful than we had hoped. For example, in arranging the dialogue sessions, it was often difficult, due to reasons ranging from schedule conflict to outright disinterest, to recruit featured speakers who were sufficiently diverse in terms of their backgrounds as well as their organizational and ideological positions. Particularly in instances where speakers were relatively well trained and polished, this convergence of background, organizing experience, and ideology resulted in a premature foreclosure on the field of the radical imagination itself. Propelled by a confluence of circumstance (disposition to participate, availability, topic, interest, investment), our attempt to collectively facilitate the convocation of the radical imagination became, at times, just another instance of partisan recruitment and sloganeering. The dangers of processes like ours becoming vehicles for those with the most social capital to mobilize is something that needs to be addressed head on from the outset lest the project itself be hijacked by other, much more organized interests.

Beyond these issues, more experienced activists felt that the open nature of the meetings meant that they could not engage one another in more sophisticated—and often conflictive and difficult—strategic debates for fear of alienating or mystifying those they perceived to be less seasoned. Similarly, many of our participants from marginalized communities felt that the events’ open-ended and lightly moderated format did not allow for an effective antioppression politics. Indeed, the limits of our process really came to the fore when our attempts at convoking the radical imagination came face to face with deeply entrenched, systemic forms of privilege and oppression.

A powerful example of this occurred during our second dialogue session, which aimed to stimulate a critical and engaged discussion about the connections between oppression and capitalism and oppression within social movements.

Following three productively provocative, powerful, and generative presentations from speakers who drew on their own experiences of organizing and activism in the midst of this fraught intersection, the discussion—dominated primarily by White, middle class, university-educated men—turned sharply toward philosophizing about solidarity and oppression through abstract concepts and hypothetical conjecture and decidedly away from the tense, conflicted, living terrain of social change action as it both seeks to meet and is shaped by these dynamics of violence and possibility. Particularly telling was the tacit refusal on the part of the group in attendance to address issues of patriarchy, sexism, heteronormativity, violence, and rape culture, despite the explicit invocation of these issues by one of the panelists through an eloquent and powerful recounting of her own experience with them. In this case it seemed as though a focus on the radical imagination actually facilitated a means to avoid the difficult lived, material realities that constitute activism and the possibility of social change on a daily basis, especially as they would have called some participants to come to terms with their participation in forms of privilege and oppression or demonstrate their ignorance of these key issues in public.

Such an occurrence might have been chalked up to a failure of facilitation if not for the fact that in the lead-up to the final dialogue session, ostensibly focused on the structures and goals of radical organizing, serious and troubling issues of patriarchal, sexist, misogynist, and violent behavior were once again brought to the fore by a number of activist participants in relation to the wider radical milieu in Halifax and one of our potential speakers. In many ways, this is the moment of rubber-meeting-road as our desire to facilitate a convocation of the radical imagination was met by the highly complex realities of living with social justice struggles. While many participants felt that our research project should focus more particularly on helping the community work through these issues and we, as researchers, agreed wholeheartedly, we have struggled to envision and articulate a mechanism that would allow us to achieve this beyond simply raising these dynamics in public settings and, in line with activist practice for decades, challenging men to “deal with their shit.” These events vividly reminded us and other members of the activist community that sexism in particular, both when expressed as sexual violence and as a more subtle aspect of people’s (typically men’s) behavior, remains a key reason solidarity breaks down and movements fail. But beyond this moment of clarity, there has, to date, been no sustained attempt to challenge and transform these dynamics in the context of the Halifax activist community. Troublingly, this compels us to wonder whether our project and others like it are forms of collective catharsis: interventions that raise issues without ever exhibiting the capacity to facilitate a sustained, critical, and transformative engagement with them. At the very least, events like these indicate

that if we have, to some degree, crafted a method capable of convoking some aspects of the radical imagination, we nevertheless have much work to do if we are to bring it to a place where it is capable of offering something in terms of addressing pervasive and pernicious dynamics of violence and oppression.

Despite these significant reservations, we have so far been pleased that the response of the community to the project as a whole has ranged from ardent enthusiasm to skeptical disinterest, but has rarely manifested as outright hostility. It is difficult, if not impossible, to measure the impact of the project, given that, from our perspective, the radical imagination is both a subterranean current in collective thought and an everyday manifestation and process. But many of our community partners report positive experiences and a broader capacity to collectively envision the future. Yet we as researchers have also felt that the debates as articulated in interviews and dialogue sessions did not manifest the forms of innovation and inspiration we, and many of our participants, had hoped for. Our sense, confirmed by many of the more experienced activists with whom we spoke, was that the debates that emerged tended to tread familiar ground, orbiting a half-dozen or so major issues and fissures that have occupied radical milieus in the Global North for generations. While no one was particularly surprised, and many found great utility in revisiting these venerable conundrums, this turn of events stimulated us to develop a third phase of the research project.

Starting in January 2012, the team continued to organize dialogue groups but did so by inviting speakers from afar to address the local convocation. In collaboration with community partners we have been selecting inspirational organizers and commentators from around the world and, via in-person dialogue sessions or online teleconferencing, asking them to share their thoughts and experience with our local audience. Talks are followed by an extended moderated local discussion. The hope is that voices from outside the Halifax community will catalyze and instigate new ideas and conversations that might not be possible or plausible within the community itself. This is not because our research participants lack the imagination that others can provide, but because, as we have discovered in our interviews, dialogue sessions, and conversations, many key issues cannot be broached through the tangled webs of personal relationships and political and ideological allegiances, and the dense palimpsest of local activist histories.

Conclusion

The objective of this research project is not to produce knowledge about social movements but to foster the gestation of knowledge and imagination within them. The academic writing that emerges out of this project, including this very article, is a secondary byproduct of the process. In

this sense, we locate the value of the research in the process itself, echoing Shawn Wilson's (2009) summation of indigenous research methods in *Research Is Ceremony* and many other inspiring, community-integrated scholars. We have strayed from these examples to the extent that we have opted to research and convene not a single community or social movement but an entire nebulous and fractured activist milieu. Our most optimistic objective through this project is to develop the framework for a method of "convocation" that, if successful in our context, might be lent out to others. According to our research participants and our own observations, the sorts of reflexive, intentional—almost ceremonial—spaces such as those our project seeks to temporarily create are rarely an automatic aspect of radical milieus. Perhaps this is because, like in academe, staunch position-taking and ideological coherence and conviction are valued highly within radical activist circles, diminishing the possibility that any single organization or tendency would take the time to create a welcoming and nonjudgmental space for discussion (many of our research participants admitted they would be highly distrustful of the project were it not run by nonpartisan academics).

It is our hope that the space of convocation we are building will enable activists in the community in which we work to overcome many of the challenges they report facing as they seek to work together (or, alternatively, as they seek to distinguish their positions and more clearly map the conflicted political landscape): cliquishness, jealousy, the incompatibility of activist or theoretical vernaculars, the reproduction within social justice struggles of structures and relations of oppression, competitiveness, insularity, purism, and, perhaps most pressingly, the tendency for activist initiatives to get so caught up in day-to-day on-the-ground and organizational struggles that the "big picture" gets lost and key strategic questions and shared visions become taken for granted. The methods we have outlined here have met some success in this regard. Our broader objective in this article is to trace the contours of the "strategy of convocation," which guides our project and which we hope may help others frame their own social movement research initiatives.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, the forthcoming volume 28 of TOPIA: *Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* titled *Out of the Ruins: The University to Come*, edited by Bob Hanke and Alison Hearn.
2. We still believe there is a value to this work, but we are cautious about the way many scholars take umbrage when this value is not automatically recognized in wider communities. Antiintellectualism is symptomatic of our current moment but blaming people for it is neither astute nor helpful.

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