

collaging carceral entrapments and reorienting to the imagination

abstract

In this article I interrogate attachment to ‘the imagination’ as a site free from the weed-like tentacles of carceral systems and structures, and thus a solution to ‘stuckness’. Building on Lauren Berlant’s theorisation of ‘cruel optimism’, I draw on my own sticky, cruelly optimistic methodological engagements with the imagination in qualitative research, whereby collage was used to explore what participants wanted in response to the injustice wrought by sexual violence. Drawing on scholarship that seeks to examine the edges of the carceral imaginary, I instead suggest a gentle, yet significant, reorientation to imaginings and what I see as their weed-like capabilities. Thus, rather than holding on to the imagination as a solution for coining futures free from the violence of carcerality, I instead call for a deeper attention to, and staying with, the stuckness that exists when utilising the tool of the imagination.

key words

sexual violence justice; the imagination; cruel optimism; stuckness; weeds; collage; thinking with

introduction

Early on a Saturday morning in July 2022, while wading through the early stages of data analysis, I found myself unpleasantly stuck in the weeds of carcerality, desperate to get out. Visceral feelings of futility bubbled within me as I stared at hundreds of pages of interview data and collage printouts—data amassed from interviews with twenty-three frontline sexual violence support workers and four individuals with experiences of homelessness for PhD research that explored understandings of justice in response to sexual violence. As I read and reread the words of those I had interviewed, I was reminded over and over again of the cruelly optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2011) each participant had to the criminal legal system in relation to justice that addresses sexual violence: how, despite being offered a space to imagine even unlikely and impossible things, and despite being clearly aware of the ways in which the carceral actively gets in the way of achieving justice for survivors, when it came to imagining what they wanted in response to the injustice wrought by sexual violence, participants consistently struggled to create collages that were free from carceral systems, structures and logics. Like weeds, these findings were unwelcome but unavoidable. Not only did I feel frustrated and pessimistic by these difficult, complicated and carceral ‘weed-like’ findings, but I also I felt the urge to flatten them so that I could avoid facing how the participants had been unable to imagine a future that they—and I—longed for: a future that goes beyond the limitations and failures of the carceral.

This article charts the magnetism of ‘the imagination’ as a tool for creating new futures, and the relationship this has with a state of ‘stuckness’ that pervades much of contemporary Anglophone feminist sexual violence politics and work. ‘Stuckness’ here refers to a simultaneously cyclical and stagnating state of being that is defined by the urge to move forward and enact change to ‘get justice’ for survivors, while not being able to do so.¹ Through this article I think through and analyse the feeling and embodiment of stuckness in the research process, for both participants and researchers, so as to elucidate how it is experienced in the present.

First, I begin by sharing and reflecting on my experience of researching sexual violence and justice with frontline sexual violence support workers and people with experiences of homelessness. Next, I argue that my desire to squash and ignore the pervasive carceral weed-like imaginings I saw in my participants’ collages, rather than learn from them, is indicative of a broader cruelly optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2011) to imagined clear-cut solutions to the injustice of sexual violence. I explore how this attachment is magnetised by the promise of the imagination as an inherently liberatory device and its pervasive presence in critical feminist academic scholarship that addresses justice after sexual violence, including my own work. I claim that this attachment is intricately connected to what Alison Phipps (2020, p. 63) refers to as the political whiteness of mainstream feminism. As Lauren Berlant (2011, pp. 4, 10) writes, such cruelly optimistic attachments ‘ignite a sense of possibility’ yet simultaneously makes ‘it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving’. Through an examination of my preconceived fantasies, the expectations I placed on the imagination as a tool, and the stuckness this generated in and through my research, I ask: 1) what do we as feminist researchers demand from our participants when we engage in a process of imagining change through fieldwork, and 2) how do imagining future-focused sites free from the weed-like tentacles of carceral systems and structures further embed us in stuckness?

Importantly this article does not disavow the device of ‘the imagination’ and its potential to foster futures free from violent systems and structures; in fact, quite the contrary. Drawing on Ruha

¹ Stuckness is also a useful concept when thinking about the relationship between the relentless elongated, crisis-infused present in which many of us find ourselves and from which we are desperate to move out of, and the futures that increasingly appear to be difficult to access and recede.

Benjamin's (2019) work on the carceral imagination, I call for a gentle yet significant shift in approach to the fast-growing, difficult to unroot, weed-like characteristics (Keenan, forthcoming) of the imaginings of research participants. Instead of firmly holding to 'the imagination' as a means to exclusively coin futures free from the violence of the carceral present, I call for a reoriented and deeper attention to and thinking and feeling with the weeds that inadvertently sprout from the imagination. I argue that rather than flatten, rip up and garden away unwanted imaginative growth that may not appear to go hand-in-hand with a desired, pre-conceived radical future, critical feminist researchers should reckon with the various ways in which different weeds operate and the potential for 'less imaginative' imagined future to be radical in a 'minor key' (Manning, 2016). I propose that it is only through reorienting to the imagination in this way that feminist research can come to understand the continuing impact and operation of the carceral.

the enduring injustice of sexual violence, and my fantasy for solutions

The purpose of this part of the interview is for you to use collage to explore any, or all, of the things you want to happen after sexual violence, and what this would look like ... The things you want could be things that seem likely or possible. But they could also be things that seem unlikely or impossible here and now. The type of collage is also totally up to you. You can make pictures, shapes, symbols, or it can be totally abstract. And there's also no pressure at all to produce a type of object or 'art work'

- excerpt from instructions for research participants, 2021

In December 2021, shortly after gaining ethical approval from Birkbeck College's ethics committee, I commenced my fieldwork with cautious confidence in my project's mixed-method approach and its ability to elicit data that would answer the central research question of my PhD research: how and why does contemporary feminist anti-violence work and politics remain attached to carceral systems, structures and logics of justice, despite our knowledge—and experiencing—that these approaches largely do not facilitate justice for survivors of sexual violence? Departing from the approach of qualitative work on sexual violence and justice that focuses on gathering spoken understandings of justice through semi-structured interviews (Herman, 2005; Jülich, 2006; Clark, 2015; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2018), I instead chose methods that seek to counter the ways in which 'the criminal justice system's presence is so woven into the fabric of society that most of us cannot envision what society would look like otherwise' (DasGupta, 2003, p. 16). Proceeding with these methods, as well as designing the project specifically with my participant groups in mind, I believed that this research would produce something novel and useful to scholarship in the area of sexual violence and justice.

Beginning with collage-making, interviews began with participants being asked to imagine things that they wanted to happen after sexual violence—from the likely to unlikely, the seemingly possible to impossible. I took this approach following Dawn Lyon and Giuilia Carabelli's (2016, pp. 3, 11) work on how young people imagine the future and collage-making's potential to enable 'participants to disrupt the unity of time or aesthetics' regardless of artistic ability and to generate reflections and meaning that can 'not be contained within language'. Aware that arts-based methods such as collage are neither inherently empowering (see Cuthbert, 2021) nor more likely to 'give voice' (see McCulloch, 2015) to the imagination, I was nonetheless confident that participants would be able to produce different, more imaginative knowledge through collage-making when approached as an alternative mode of communication. Following the art-making, I conducted unstructured interview with each participant in order to garner their reflections on their collage. I then asked each participant to discuss what they felt prevented their imagined desired outcomes from becoming

realised. The interviews concluded with participants talking through how their imagined desired outcomes connected with understandings of justice. In following these steps, I sought to generate different – less carceral – knowledge around justice after sexual violence, as well as data on the varying ways that ‘stuckness’ arises in understandings of justice.

As a white, middle-class woman with around a decade of experience in various roles in the English frontline sexual violence sector, the stuckness I was researching was also something I had experienced firsthand. Indeed, it was my own slow and disorientating realisation that a circular, stagnating stuckness was plaguing my work and the sexual violence sector more broadly that drove me to undertake PhD research in the first place. I most clearly felt this state of stuckness during the summer of 2018, when I spent numerous days supporting survivors at courts across London as an Independent Sexual Violence Advocate. None of the survivors I worked with obtained justice in this period through the criminal legal system, even with my professional support. And yet, regardless of how many instances of injustice I witnessed—of how many ‘not-guilty’ verdicts I saw issued in cases of assault brought forward by survivors I supported—and even as I came to know that this system could not and would not give my clients the justice they desired, I remained attached to the idea that it is important to support survivors of sexual violence through the criminal legal system.

Undergirding my personal experience of being unable to ‘get justice’ for those I supported was an ever-widening ‘justice gap’ across England, Wales and Scotland for survivors of sexual violence (Krahe and Temkin, 2008). Several high profile court cases led to the rolling back of hard-fought feminist reforms (for example, see EVAW, 2016). Feminist anti-sexual violence organisations publicly expressed that it was as though rape had become decriminalised (CWJ, EVAW, Imkaan and Rape Crisis England & Wales, 2020). For many doing feminist sexual violence work, it felt as though the criminal legal system had become impossibly broken and unable to facilitate any kind of justice for survivors of sexual violence; if decades of reform work could be eradicated in months, then many questioned whether this system could ever really be trusted to provide justice (for example see Munro, 2022 and CWJ, EVAW, Imkaan and Rape Crisis England & Wales, 2020). Yet, this sentiment did not lead to wholesale rejection of the system; instead, feminist services, workers and organisations remained staunchly, stagnatingly and cyclically invested in reform of and within the criminal legal system.

Donna Haraway’s (1988, p. 581, emphasis in the original) assertion that ‘feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*’ is central to feminist methodological critiques of objectivity and neutrality. According to Haraway (*ibid.*), because researchers bring their situated selves into the research process, what we see—and in turn produce—will only ever be partial. Prior to undertaking this research, I had been certain that my bringing to the research my experiences of stuckness and insider status as a professional sexual violence survivor support worker would enable me to better see, and in turn reckon with, a participant’s state of stuckness when it surfaced in interviews (see Coy, 2006). At the time, I was not aware of how who I am in the world and the experiences I carry with me might shape what I see in the data and alter the visions and fantasies I had for my project’s ability to produce unequivocally successful and transformative solutions to the problem of injustice and, concurrently, the utopic potential of the imaginations of my participants.

Looking back, I can now see that in 2021, my research participants and I were deeply enmeshed in the crisis that is the systematic injustice of sexual violence. In the first instance we were acutely invested in a justice that could solve or fix the awfulness of sexual violence for survivors. Nonetheless we were also all working within services that had been increasingly gutted by an austerity that continues to shape the UK and its politics. This is especially true for those services supporting Black and racially minoritised survivors (Imkaan, 2015). As such, justice of any kind seemed increasingly out of reach. Alongside this, my own positionality meant I was also deeply

invested in the feminist narrative of taking back control to facilitate justice (Westmarland and Alderson, 2013). As Phipps (2020, pp. 76–78, 6) observes, although small changes that foster a sense of restored control may be useful for individual survivors, the broader feminist mantra of ‘take back control’ is entangled with the political whiteness of mainstream feminism and its characteristics of ‘narcissism, alertness to threat and an accompanying will to power’. Central to this narrative is the privileging of ‘bourgeois white women’s wounds at the expense of others’ and a need to eradicate any kind of threat (*ibid.*, p. 80). Drawing on Phipps’ (*ibid.*, p. 79) focus on how this politics risks ceding control to ‘punitive technologies of the state’ and Haraway’s (1988, p. 585) contention that ‘vision is *always* a question of power’, I would argue that my investment in the feminist project of survivors taking back control following sexual assault also shaped how I interacted with the device of the imagination and, in turn, my participants’ collages.

Together my experiences and investments bolstered a profound attachment both to 1) visions of clear-cut, well-manicured, weed-free, utopic solutions to the problem of injustice and 2) the idea that my project could facilitate this. I propose this attachment can be best understood through Berlant’s (2011) work on cruel optimism, in which they theorise that cruelly optimistic attachments form when a subject has lost something in which one was invested. In a bid to endure the loss while living through an exhausting neoliberal present that is infused with crisis after crisis, a subject undergoes a ‘logic of adjustment’ (*ibid.*, p. 10) and becomes attached to ideas, concepts or fantasies that act as a tantalising balm, even when these attachments evidently get in the way of the expansive transformation that the subject truly desires. At the heart of a cruelly optimistic attachment is a cluster of magnetic but false promises, including those that come from the imagination and its false promise to ‘always exceed’ the prison’ (Wang, 2018, p. 316). While Berlant analyses the loss of the American Dream in *Cruel Optimism* (*ibid.*), their theoretical approach is also applicable and relevant for analysing the loss that workers who support survivors of sexual violence experience—more specifically, the loss of the dream of the possibility that justice will solve the trauma and pain of sexual violence for survivors. In my case, I began my research aware that the imagination is constrained and shaped by the world and aware of the limitations of academic research, but this knowledge was overridden by a broader cruelly optimistic attachment and need for the imagination to facilitate utopic visions of the future: imagined visions that I optimistically believed would be free from the carceral systems and structures that were central to the injustice that survivors with whom I worked were experiencing.

the demands critical feminist academic work makes of the imagination

Demands similar to those that I made on the imagination can be found in critical feminist work on sexual violence and justice that engages with the imagination (for example, see Taylor, 2018; Cossman, 2021; McGlynn, 2022b). A literature that is also enmeshed within Phipps’ (2020) political whiteness of mainstream feminism, and its urge to support survivors to ‘take back control’. At times, these works argue that those who are ‘carceral’ must ‘let go’ of carcerality (Cossman, 2021, p. 175); in turn, so-called ‘carceral feminists’ and survivors are encouraged to ‘remain open’ to new possibilities whilst also ‘shifting’ away from (Downes, 2019, p. 220) or ‘expanding’ (Mulla, 2014, p. 228) their failing (Kim, 2011, p. 18) or limited (Taylor, 2018, p. 10) imaginations. For example, in separate works, Kristin Bumiller (2009, p. 163) and Elizabeth Bernstein (2010, p. 47) call on carceral feminists to start thinking ‘creatively’ about resource redistribution, thus suggesting that creative thinking has not existed in the work of so-called carceral feminists before. In ‘Challenging anti-carceral feminism’ (2022b, p. 7), Clare McGlynn simply states that ‘imagination is needed’. Crucially across this literature the device of the imagination – and in turn the invocation to *imagine* – is optimistically proffered as a solution with the power to produce change.

Mainstream approaches to sexual violence are stuck at an incredibly frustrating impasse. Despite decades of feminist work to remedy the failures and harms of the legal punishment system, consistently high levels of attrition (Kelly *et al.*, 2005; McMillan, 2011) and low conviction rates (Angiolini, 2015; MOPAC, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2021) alongside ever-present levels of systematic re-traumatisation (Campbell and Raja, 1999; Maier, 2008; Brooks-Hay, 2020) repeatedly highlight the limits of criminal ‘justice’ to provide justice to those who experience sexual violence. Indeed, much of the feminist work on this topic acknowledges that the criminal legal system does not provide justice for a vast percentage of survivors (Fileborn and Vera-Gray, 2017; Froio, 2018; Press, 2018; McCulloch *et al.*, 2021) and that it is perhaps a ‘circle that cannot be squared’ (Munro, 2022) when what survivors often want more than anything is ‘just living’ (Mulla, 2016). Yet, despite this, investments in—and attachments to—improving and reforming the system continue; this tension is often justified through the contention that facilitating survivor choice is of utmost importance (McGlynn, 2022b). As the argument frequently goes: if a survivor wants to report to the police, then not only should the survivor be supported in this action but also the system should operate in a way that does not cause the survivor further harm (Herman, 2005; Jülich, 2006; Clark, 2015; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2018). In much of the literature, support for this argument exists alongside an awareness of how, for many survivors, it is a lack of alternatives that makes it difficult to understand or truly conceptualise justice outside the confines of ‘criminal’ justice (Clark, 2015, p. 30; Downes, 2019). Perhaps the imagination and the creative methods that facilitate it are proffered as a tool to escape the entrapments of criminal justice and carcerality (for example, see McGlynn, 2022a) quite simply because it is so difficult to think of alternatives.

Despite this, the optimistic attachment to solving the problem of injustice by imagining better, more radical and utopic solutions is a crucial part of the state of stuckness that shapes this work. This is in part because, as I explore in the following sections, the device of the imagination is not actually able to produce solutions to the problem of injustice. The imagination’s failure to deliver on this expectation—even while it offers us different ways of understanding the present and, in turn, the future—generates a cyclical return that exemplifies cruel optimism. This attachment also risks reifying a carceral logic whereby ‘less imaginative’ imaginations are ignored, as can be observed in critical feminist texts where so-called ‘carceral feminists’ are encouraged to let go and expand to something more ‘transformative’ and which suggests that that they are bad, wrong or limited if they do otherwise (for example, see Kim, 2011). Critical feminist texts rarely acknowledge the variety and range of imagined proposals made by feminist ‘others’, or the ways in which these may be useful to creating and envisioning different futures. They are instead ignored, or depicted as a threat to a radical less violent future (for example, see Bumiller, 2009). Alongside this, due to the lack of qualitative work around the imagination in this scholarship, the call for new imaginings is rarely fully formulated or empirically supported. This romanticised, optimistic depiction of the imagination and the solutions it can offer thus creates a binary logic of good and bad (for example, see Kim, 2011; see also Terwiel, 2019). A binary which only further deepens division within this literature, reifying an immovability within the wider discourse, and cementing the state of stuckness. By embedding stuckness into both the present and future, feminist discourse that looks to the imagination to solve the injustice of sexual violence arguably makes the act of imagining futures free from violence feel impossible.

becoming stuck in the weeds

The collages created by those I interviewed were far removed from the manicured carceral-free utopias I had optimistically envisioned, and which I saw as central to my project’s transformative success. Instead, I found that despite acknowledging the inadequacy of the criminal legal system, those I interviewed were cyclically pulled back towards it, and the process of collage-making and

describing these images revealed the pervasiveness of the stuckness I had experienced as a frontline worker. In some instances, the circular aspects of stuckness were visible within the collages themselves. For instance, Theo, a white-British cis-female counsellor located in Wales, created an image that included what she described as 'weird grey, black kind of blocks' to depict the importance of 'statutory justice, I guess like the criminal justice system [and] convictions', even as she herself questioned the adequacy of this type of justice. She explained that not only do 'people often want other types of justice' but 'even if it [the criminal legal process] all went beautifully, and police officers were amazing, and the process was timely, and that conviction happened and it all felt very fair...I just I don't think that would be enough'.

For other participants, while a concern with carcerality did not overtly appear in their collages, and they shared in their interviews that they struggled to see any 'good outcome' from the criminal legal system as 'justice', their descriptions of their collages highlighted paradoxical attachments to carceral systems. For example, Leslie, a white, female, sexual violence support worker based in Scotland, created a colourful collage depicting a blooming flower that was able to open due to, in her words, 'all the nourishment and healing that comes from the sun' and the support of a 'happy little stream'. She also explained that central to her image was the incarceration of perpetrators because she 'want[ed] them not to be polluting the river, and not to be chopping down the trees'. A desire that sat in tension with her awareness that the criminal legal system is a 'huge, huge um oof blockage' when it comes to securing justice; in other words, Leslie was stuck, as was each participant I interviewed. What made this stuckness all the more disorientating was that many participants also reflected on how freeing they had found the process of collage-making. One instance of this was my interview with Robbie, a white, European advocate for sexual violence survivors working in Scotland. As they reflected: 'it's very easy to get stuck in language' and that, during art-making, it can feel like 'okay, you can just [pause] use symbols, you can use colours, you can use other things. And I think it's quite freeing in a way to be able to use that instead'.

While Berlant (2011) suggests a cluster of promises is magnetised by cruel optimism, across these interviews I observed that my participants' cruelly optimistic attachment to the criminal legal system was magnetised by a cluster of tension and ambiguity. As with Berlant's (*ibid.*) cluster of promises, this cluster appeared magnetised by a much larger, more sustaining force: the cruelly optimistic pull of a criminal legal system that proports to offer some kind of solution to some survivors. While participants described different fleeting moments of optimism towards the criminal legal system and its ability to facilitate justice, the overriding feeling they shared with me was of pessimism and futility. For example, Ria, a white, Antipodean worker on a national helpline, created a collage that depicted the eradication of the bad feelings survivors feel after sexual violence, a provision of safety, time travel to prevent sexual violence and a balancing of the karmic scales. However, Ria's utopic fantasy very quickly overwhelmed her and she turned away from her collage of the imagined things she desired, which she saw as being 'kind of naïve'. Ria said, 'I suppose when you start thinking about it [what you want to happen] ... it just suddenly, it's like a flood of like things'. When I asked her to expand on this, she began to cry and said 'it's painful and too much I suppose. It feels almost like what's the point in asking cuz it's just too big a question to tackle'. After a brief pause, Ria returned to the interview and, in an attempt to find ways of tackling the 'big question' of imagining outcomes she desired, she began to speak about 'fail-safe methods' such as flagging and incarcerating dangerous people to keep survivors safe, which are markedly carceral. Ria explained that carceral approaches are 'this world's version' of her collage. Although pessimistic about this version to fulfil the desire for justice, Ria's attachment to addressing the injustice of sexual violence drew her back to the carceral systems, structures and logics she critiqued. In this way then, across each interview an investment in the promised solution of a vague 'justice' that could resolve some of the injustice of sexual violence underpinned and sustained the cruelly optimistic—albeit seemingly pessimistic—attachment to the criminal legal system.

Haraway (1988, p. 583) contends that attempting to be ‘answerable for what we learn how to see’ is central to feminist objectivity. Pertinently then, after completing data collection I was not able to offer the above analysis of stuckness, or see how this state of being existed across my interlocutors’ understandings of justice. Instead, I found myself affected by the same attachment to an abstract solution that rippled through my participants’ collages and interviews.² Facing piles of printed material—the physical manifestation of a stuckness in which I felt unable to move while I was cruelly and optimistically attached to solving the lack of justice for survivors—forced me to confront one simple truth: that my project had not, and could not, provide the solutions for which I longed.

My predominant memory of that period is that, along with feeling a pessimism similar to that expressed by my participants and desperate for a solution to the injustice of sexual violence, I longed to eradicate the carcerality in my participants’ collage. Instead of reckoning with the seemingly irrepressible carcerality in the imaginations of my participants, I attempted to squash the carceral growth by pretending it was not there. Whenever I sat down and attempted to write, I felt something akin to what Gail Lewis (2010, pp. 211, 212) describes in her reflective work on ‘how “we” as feminist researchers reveal and come to terms with what it is that motivates the selection of particular sections of data for scrutiny’, namely ‘a secretively held undercurrent pulling some of the subsequent work with the data in a particular direction’. The direction in which I was pulled was towards the promise of the more ‘imaginative’, less carceral collages, which I optimistically believed could offer some type of solution, and away from the data that I sought to flatten.

To analyse and better understand these emotions, I turn to Berlant’s (2011) exploration of what happens when cruelly optimistic fantasies fail the characters in Charles R. Johnson’s short ‘Exchange value’ (1981). In Johnson’s short story, Cooter and Loftis are two poverty-stricken brothers who break into the home of their neighbour, Miss Eleanora Bailey, where they find her deceased and decaying, and steal US\$879,543 along with valuable items. Cooter goes out and spends his share immediately, and Loftis chastises him, stating ‘as soon as you buy something you *lose* the power to buy something’ (Johnston, 1981, cited in Berlant, 2011, p. 40, emphasis in the original). Loftis chooses to spend nothing, hoarding his share, for to do otherwise risks losing the *potential* for change. For Loftis, this potential is too valuable to let go, and so he continues to hoard even as this means the insecurity of his life continues. Through Loftis’ actions, Berlant (2011, p. 24, emphasis in the original) shows how, for cruelly optimistic subjects, ‘whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world’.

Through Berlant’s (*ibid.*) lens, my desire to ignore and squash the carceral growth that appeared in my participants’ collages can be understood as an unwillingness to let go of the *fantasy* of my project’s potential—and therefore of the imagination—to realise imagined futures free from carceral systems, structures and logics that would resolve the problem of injustice. Focusing my attention on (the impossible task of) eliminating the weeds not only allowed me to hold on to my fantasy of clearcut solutions free of carceral weeds, it also allowed me to hold off the heartbreak and disappointment that comes with the loss of a dream and to avoid confronting messy, carceral-weed laden reality. However like Loftis, whose desire for power in the form of financial potential ensured a lifetime of impoverishment, my hunger for an imagined justice achieved for survivors of sexual violence through neoliberal academic success risked impeding work that – rather than being stuck –

² A certain amount of overwhelm is to be expected in the process of analysing and writing up qualitative research; or women PhD students like myself, this is often heightened by imposter syndrome that stems from systemic bias and exclusion (Tulshyan and Burey, 2021) combined with the awareness that we need to prove our worth and that ‘it is this fieldwork and the data gathered that will make or break careers’ (Schneider, 2020, p. 184)—experiences that are often heightened for those with additional intersecting oppressed identities. However, and as I explain in the article, my inability to grapple with my data was not only because the task was daunting.

sought to grapple with stuckness. Indeed, as any gardener will tell you, weeds can never truly be eradicated, not least because their seeds escape in the wind. As I come to see and accept this reality, rather than garden out the weeds, I seek to learn from them.

learning to sit amidst the stuttering, sprouting, imaginative weeds

What if abolition isn't a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event? What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows? What if abolishing the prison industrial complex is the fruit of our diligent gardening, building and deepening of a movement to respond to the violence of the state and the violence of our communities with sustainable, transformative love? (Gumbs, 2008, p. 145)

To be clear, I do not advance that the stuckness plaguing feminist work on sexual violence and justice is impossible to move through. On the contrary, understanding stuckness as produced by a cruelly optimistic attachment raises a question that opens the possibility of movement: how can we imagine new futures if optimism cements us in a relentless present 'of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward' (Berlant, 2011, pp. 259, 4)? Usefully, Berlant (*ibid.*) does not merely diagnose the causes and consequences of cruel optimism; they simultaneously encourage ways to interrupt these cruelly optimistic attachments, making it clear that cruel optimism is not all-encompassing and that there are more sustainable ways of being to explore and live, which may at times feel awkward, threatening and devoid of optimism.

Thinking with Berlant (*ibid.*, p. 249) then, one way to challenge the pull of the fantasy and lure of the cruelly optimistic attachment is to stay with the stuckness of the present—to pay careful and deliberate attention to the attachment, which interrupts it even if just for a moment.³ In other words, Berlant (*ibid.*, p. 263) encourages us not to find solutions in the future but instead 'see what is halting, stuttering, and aching about being in the middle of detaching from a waning fantasy of the good life'. Berlant's lens encourages a thinking and feeling with *all* parts of the imagination including those parts that make us feel stuck—as opposed to thinking and feeling against 'less desired' aspects of it—thereby slowly shift away from the cruelly optimistic imagined fantasies of the future that keep us in a stuck present.

One can hear similar calls for thinking- and feeling-with all parts of the imagination—including carceral weeds—in feminist prison abolitionist literature that explores the imagination and its role in creating new presents and different futures. For example, Jackie Wang (2018) engages with the work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2008) to explore how the imagination is confined by the prison, meaning that it can often seem as though 'the way we imagine work, our relationships, the future, family, everything, is locked down' (Imarisha *et al.*, 2017, cited in Wang 2018, p. 316); in other words, for Wang, the imagination is not inherently freeing. At the same time, Wang (2018, pp. 317-319) highlights the importance of paying attention to small moments that might impart vibrational experiences to awaken our desires for different futures. Wang (*ibid.*, p. 316) asserts that it is important to do the hard work of tuning into the frequency of non-carceral imaginations that exist in the broader imagination, which 'will always exceed' the prison.

Benjamin's (2019, p. 11) work also speaks to the importance of paying attention to the carceral growth of the imagination. Through differentiating between carceral and liberatory imaginations and

³ Berlant (2011, p. 249) analyses how projects, such as activist art group Ultra-red's *Organising the Silence*, play with sensorial experiences to interfere with 'that pattern of treading water in the impasse'.

draws on Arjun Appadurai's (1996, p. 31) formulation of the imagination as 'a form of work'. Benjamin (*ibid.*) also locates carceral habits within collective and individual mental structures, and thus within the imagination. In other words—and as was evident in the collages made by my participants—Benjamin (*ibid.*) advances that non-carceral imaginings grow alongside the carceral. However, according to Benjamin (2016), individual choices and the systems in which they are made nurture habits that often invisibilise how and when carceral weeds 'sprout'. This invisibilising can lead to the weeds entrapping, incapacitating, capturing, containing and eventually fixing in place and controlling the 'individual bodies *and* collective visions of the future' (*ibid.*, p. 151). Following Benjamin, it becomes clear that attending to how abolitionist imaginings frequently exist alongside carceral imaginings—sprouting weed-like through the darkness in the wet places of our minds—is essential to the practice of thinking- and feeling-with, and that both need diligent attention.

Staying with the metaphor of the imagination as a weed-filled garden,⁴ Gumbs (2008) calls for diligent gardening. While the invocation of "diligent gardening" may evoke images of ripping up unwanted, undesired growth, Gumbs (2008, p.145) instead uses this to call for the deepening of a movement rooted in 'transformative love'. For building and nurturing rather than simply de-weeding. As I have laid out above, not only are the weeds of the carceral imagination (Benjamin, 2019) powerful and difficult to extract but attending to them may foster methods to disrupt the stuckness of the present. With this mind, Gumbs' (2008) call for diligent gardening can be taken up as an invocation to attend to the imagination and all it contains, which includes paying attention to the weeds of carcerality and what they can teach us.

In my work, I find the process of thinking and feeling with the weeds of carcerality immensely uncomfortable. I desire to cut, chop and eradicate each and every weed. I have to force myself to spend time amongst the weeds and to learn from them. Yet, this practice has led me to trace the deep-tapping roots of the weeds, observing the different ways in which they break through the hard soil of the imagination, and to tentatively notice how their growth indicates the conditions needed for cultivating something different. Through slow and care-filled analysis—which recognises how those I interviewed were perhaps content with their imaginings because they too were embedded in structural violence, because they too were affected by cruel optimism—I have come to understand that the imaginative gardens of my participants are radical but in a 'minor key' (Manning, 2016). In the collages that are especially overrun by weeds, I observe the conditions that allow these plants to flourish. I observe that non-carceral growth often stutters when the pragmatics of the present seep in, and in the mere beats of a moment when non-carceral growth pauses or hesitates, wary of taking up too much sun, the carceral weed sprouts tall. This 'minor key' observation (*ibid.*) may not spark a feeling of optimism, but it is nonetheless useful. It opens up a small path towards new growth that may offer different ways to reckon with the carceral as and when it shows up and potentially disrupt the violence of the present.

As I have illustrated, it is not possible to truly eliminate the carceral growth that sprouts up within the imagination by pulling them out. Moreover, attempting to remove weeds risks leaving both researchers—including myself—and participants in a state of stuckness; ironically, we become ever more invested in activity that fails to lead to solutions and less able to take stock of our present reality of stuckness. Instead of fruitlessly trying to weed ourselves out of stuckness, I propose that we acknowledge when we are stuck and accept that perhaps it is a state that cannot be wholly eradicated. I propose that we attend to stuckness without judgment or impatience and with a

⁴ There is much to be learned from visualising the imagination as a weed-filled garden. Further to this, Sarah Keenan (2022; forthcoming) observes that examining the hidden rhizomatic growth of the widely feared 'Japanese knotweed', which can interfere with and destroy property, 'offer[s] insights into how life and land might be understood and arranged differently from how we live in the Anthropocene, but also starts bringing those arrangements into being'.

degree of feeling. Like the imagination, stuckness is a state we can learn from and play with in the process of building new worlds.

conclusion

For as long as I can remember, I believed that the imagination housed the solution to the violence of the carceral present—something fully formed in the minds of ‘sleepwalkers under the spell of prison’ (Wang, 2018, p. 316) but trapped and biting at the bit, only waiting to be unleashed. However, and as this article has explored, this cruel and optimistic attachment to the imagination has at times obstructed both my and wider critical feminist academic work on sexual violence. To be clear, in tracing this cruel optimism, this article does not dismiss the importance of the imagination or the process of creating new imaginings. Through the metaphor of the weed, which consistently finds new ways to seek out light, I encourage a slower, care-filled engagement with imaginings: one that resists over-gardening in favour of attention to both the carceral and liberatory tendencies within the imagination and seeks to learn from them. It is only by attending to the ways we are currently stuck in the present, trapped within the weeds, that we will ever be able to grow the wild feminist futures we all so desperately want and need.

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