# PRECARITY IN CONVERSATION

Invitation: The text (any style) with image (to include a caption) should be about precarity you have experienced during this past year since VCG volume 15 was published Sept. 15, 2020. An overview of ways to think about precarity is at <a href="https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/precarity">https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/precarity</a> with a section quoted below:

Philosopher Judith Butler's writing is a cornerstone for the growing body of literature on precarity. Butler draws a critical distinction between 'precariousness' and 'precarity'. She sees precariousness as a generalised human condition that stems from the fact that all humans are interdependent on each other and therefore all are vulnerable. In her scheme, precarity is different precisely because it is unequally distributed. Precarity is experienced by marginalised, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. Further, social value is ascribed to some lives and bodies, while it is denied to others, and some are protected, while others are not. (Kasmir, 2021, para. 7)

You may draw on Butler's theory or any framing of precarity from lived, witnessed, or other modes of learning/knowing of ontological conditions heightened for days, months, or ongoing since September 2020.

## The Colors of Our Resilience

By Yen-Ju Lin

The year 2020 began with tranquility and hope like other years for me. However, it all went down in an instance. Starting with shocks, denials, and disbeliefs, then came overwhelming fear, turbulence, and struggles. Gradually, throughout the year, the pandemic became a political battlefield in many respects. From the argument over mask-wearing, public health measures, to the debates of vaccines, it is obvious that this world is not built on consensus, but rather, disagreements and compromises. As debates on the origin of the virus continued, the hatred and bias toward the Asian communities grew and heightened. Being an Asian family that works hard to achieve a bright future in the U.S., my family keeps our heads down, trying not to make a fuss over the situation that is already making everyone's life harder. The news flashed with events of violence and discrimination toward Asian communities. Reporting of these hateful attacks ignored the victims' nationality, country of origin, and ethnicity. The victims were being targeted with no reason other than the appearance of Asian genetics. Physically and mentally, we kept our distance with the world we live in. We avoided making eye contact with people we encounter on the road, at the supermarket, and in the parking lot. Fear of becoming targets most often trumped our fear toward the virus. Anger overwhelmed our minds, for the isolation and the futility that resulted from nothing about us and nothing we have power to change. The precarity of losing control of what we are used to is something that is hard to adjust.

Nevertheless, I am grateful that I have my family to keep me strong. For the prolonged duration of the pandemic that is nowhere near the end, I watched my two little boys grow every day and night. My husband and I watched how their happiness and their resilience built under our care with hope that we could protect them. We want them to be proud of who they are, to be fearless of their pursuit,

to love this world with all their heart and know that we live and thrive on our differences. My son once asked me why he has different hair color than all of his classmates. I told him that because you are my son and this is one of the things that make us different and stronger.

I invited my husband and my son to join me in a color play. We squeezed colors on the paper that was placed inside a cardboard box and let four balls rolling on top of the paints. It was hard to get the balls rolling because the resistance of the paints. We held the box together on the ends and tried different ways—shaking, swaying, lifting the box up and down, to get the balls rolling. The balls did not always go the ways we want, neither did the mixing of the colors. Just like the world we strive to dwell in today and tomorrow, we walk carefully on the unknown and prepare ourselves for the unexpected that comes our way (Figure 1).



Figure 1. (Left) *The Colors of Our Resilience*, a collaborative color play by the author's family. Mixed media on paper, 2021. (Right) The author's son and husband holding both ends of the cardboard box trying to get the balls rolling on the paints. Included with permission, courtesy of the author.

# **Experience in Times of Precarity**

## By Yiwen Wei

I told my partner that I was writing an article about "precarity." She asked, "What is precarity?" Such a situation happens to us daily because neither of us are native English speakers. Sometimes I feel frustrated, but we have always helped each other to learn new words. Therefore, I explained that precarity is a state of persistent uncertainty and powerlessness experienced by a person exposed to disadvantaged situations, including those involving health care, employment, or home security. As immigrants to the United States, we have had the experience of disenfranchisement now and then because of the limitation of our language abilities, resources, and connections. However, when we return to our home countries, we regain our support systems, and our feelings of security dramatically increase. Thus, I have realized that a person's social status and perception of their existence change depending on their context.

Since the pandemic, my U.S. students and I have witnessed the economic inequality contributing to educational disparity. One of our practicum sites, for example, is located within a financially disadvantaged and predominantly Black and Brown community. According to the cooperating teacher, some children had experienced trauma from losing their family members, classmates, and neighbors due to gun violence and COVID-19. Moreover, we observed learning loss in the students over this past year. They often kept their cameras off. Even when they tried to participate in a discussion, the background noise and inconsistent Internet connections made it extremely difficult to hear their answers.

Since May 2021, Taiwan has also experienced a sudden surge of COVID-19 cases, which caused school closures and shifts to online instruction. One art teacher's project caught my attention (see Figure 2). This teacher worked at a remote middle school in Taiwan. As with my U.S. students, many of her students were economically disadvantaged and did not have adequate art materials at home. To overcome this barrier, she came up with the idea of using found objects at home but took the project up to a notch by focusing on meaning-making. For example, she introduced several modern artists renowned for mobile sculptures and guided her students to use hangers and pieces of paper to express their feelings on that day.

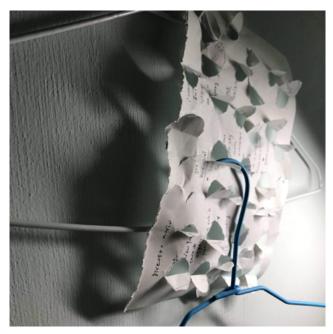


Figure 2. 掛心 [Gua Xin], "Holding You in My Heart," 2021. The teacher expressed her exhaustion during the pandemic through this example. Included with permission, courtesy of Pin-Hsuan Tseng.

Reflecting on the topic of precarity, I first felt overwhelmed. The class and racial inequalities caused by capitalism on a local scale and colonization on a global scale seem too large for an individual to manage effectively. I then sought a more grounded way of approaching the issue. Her project reminded me of what an art teacher can do to provide care and a safe learning environment. Furthermore, learning from my experience of precarity, I believe that we can always help each other and create a better context for all.

## **Precarity Estrangement**

By Elham Hajesmaeili

Precarity, for me, is being disenfranchised from traveling home to Iran due to my U.S. immigration status. Students from Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, who came to the United States to reach for the stars, found themselves stuck in a dreamland prison (see Figure 1). With former U.S. President Trump's 2017 travel

ban, I, among others, did not know when, or whether or not, we could return home and then back to the United States to resume studies or have visits from family and friends from our home country. Time did not stop as I aged far away from my beloved, while feeling estranged from family and friends and alienated from where I call home. As an Iranian woman, familial and cultural expectations impact the social tracks of life. Unable to control time and movement during the four years of the Trump travel ban profoundly affected lives, subjectivities, and perceptions of the U.S. as a safe place. Star-crossed, I felt a screeching halt and vertigo like on the precipice of a roller coaster.



Figure 3. Star-crossed by Elham Hajesmaeili. Acrylic on canvas, 2021. Included with permission, courtesy of the author.

U.S. President Biden, on his first day in office, on January 20, 2021, revoked the Trump travel ban. The roller coaster anxiety-producing four-year pause leaped forward with the momentum of exhilaration when I finally got my ticket to travel back home to Iran. My ticket was for June 2, 2021. I cried tears of

joy when I got my ticket. I cried tears of sadness when my flight got canceled due to needing an approval stamp on my passport from the United States Citizen and Immigration Services (USCIS). Anxiety and vertigo returned in the slow crawl up the roller coaster, not knowing if and when I would be able to travel home. Eventually, USCIS contacted me to set an appointment to get the passport stamp to travel outside the country. Back on the roller coaster, moving forward, when a flat tire made me miss my USCIS meeting.

I arrived in the United States in 2015; living between hope and fear, happiness and sadness. Riding the affective roller coaster's turns and switchbacks of precarity, new complex subjectivity emerged that reordered a sense of self as a stranger to my homeland and the United States. Living in precarity due to my marginalized social status in the United States created a complex "psychological shift accompanying a judgment" about the world I live within (Brennan, 2004, p. 5). My subjectivity is remade of inseparable contradictions as a stranger to self, where I reside, and even to my home, Iran.

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# Interregnum Art Concerning Pandemic Affects of Migration Precarity

By Xalli Zúñiga

We are presently experiencing the "morbid symptoms" of an interstice between crises that Gramsci (1999) described as an interregnum wherein "the old paradigm is dying and the new cannot be born" (p. 773). Gramsci's thoughts reflected on the Wall Street crash of 1929, whose effects foreshadowed the global financial crisis of 2008. The subsequent economic instability of the 2000s resulted from the hyper neoliberalization of institutions of governance, and the consequent deterioration of systems of sustenance. As a result, those of us born in-between face constant, contingent instability when pursuing dignified livability. Most of us "Millennials," fall within the Precariat; a class that, characteristically, has a higher level of education than the level of labor it can expect to obtain (Standing,

2015). Those constituting it are over-prepared while severely underpaid, and to worsen the deal, we are blamed for our own entrapment within what Berlant (2007) theorizes as cruel optimism, creating forms of slow death (where the very structures of desire and support that are meant to secure our development and wellbeing are the causes of our wearing out in work and life). One thing is to share an ontological-embodied grounding in precariousness, as Butler (2016) contends, namely in the fundamental and vulnerable need we have for one another in survival. But another is to understand the more salient effects and affects behind our positioning within the spectrum of capitalist precarity.

The coronavirus pandemic unleashed an ocean of madness that exacerbated the abuses by which Millennials are forced to produce as workers; I was hospitalized as a result. However, I am currently developing a community drawing project focused on migration and based in feminist art pedagogy<sup>1</sup> at a local residency program in Querétaro, Mexico, which invited artists from South America. There, I met the incredible Greissy Vecchionacce, a contemporary dancer from Venezuela who migrated to Mexico with a refugee status. Greissy is a force of nature who surfs life's maelstroms with a relentless spirit. "We all need something to believe in," she tells me between sips of black, Oaxacan coffee (see Figure 4). I am enthralled by the pungency of her will in the face of adversity. Selling arepas by bicycle around Mexico City became her main mode of sustenance. Dancing has also kept her afloat these past years. She has exhaustively trained indoors during lockdown and taught online. That process led to a dance project involving movement in life, that she is magically developing at this residency. For her, the pandemic created a loss of rhythm, where structures of affect dissolved in the face of political powerlessness. She panicked about losing touch, since bodily proximity is crucial to her wellbeing. In spite of the hardships, her inner fire compels her to stick close to the utopia of her own reality. Through

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Conceiving drawing as a feminist-dialogic practice geared towards building transnational, mycorrhizal coalitions for social justice and liberation, my art praxis envisions a futurity grounded in the possibility of *otherwise*. In the sense that I'm imagining, to draw is to cast lines of light into the sea of spacetime: as a practice of self-reconstruction, drawing helps us remember how we dreamed ourselves before experiencing the multiple violences of colonization. I have conducted drawing workshops designed for a variety of social spaces, including: correctional facilities, museums, schools, and the public sphere. My workshops have taken place in Lusaka; Zambia, Accra; Ghana, Chiapas; Mexico, Bellefonte; PA, and currently in Querétaro, México.

an embodied sense of orientation, from the horizon within, she is ready for the birth of the new. Her approach to dance unfolds as a joyful frenzy that grounds her belief in the goodness of humanity, in spite of all odds. Dancing the pandemic toward whatever the future awaits.

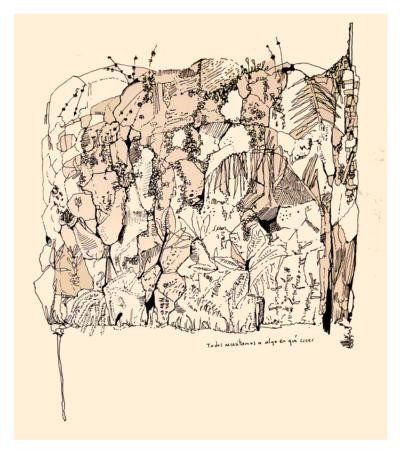


Figure 4. Todxs necesitamos algo en qué creer / We all need something to believe in by Xalli Zuniga. Black ink on paper, 8.3 x 11.7, 2021. Included with permission, courtesy of the author.

This is a drawing that I made while Greissy and I interviewed Teresa, a nun that helps run a local migrant shelter in Querétaro. Drawing for me is a way to reach the affective threads, the connective hyphae, of others while engaged in creative dialogue. It is a way for me to find rhythm among the chaos in precarity.

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Actualmente vivimos los "síntomas mórbidos" de un intersticio entre crisis que Gramsci (1999) describió como un interregno en el que "el viejo paradigma está muriendo y el nuevo no puede nacer" (p. 773). Los pensamientos de Gramsci reflexionaban sobre el colapso de la bolsa de valores de 1929, cuyos efectos presagiaron la crisis financiera mundial de 2008. La posterior inestabilidad económica de la década de 2000 fue el resultado de la hiper-neoliberalización de las instituciones de gobierno y el consiguiente deterioro de nuestros sistemas de sustento social y reproductivo. Como resultado, aquellos de nosotros que nacimos en el limbo nos enfrentamos a una vida de inestabilidad y a un constante sentido de contingencia ante la falta de oportunidades para sostener nuestra autonomía con dignidad. La mayoría de nosotros, los "millennials", pertenecemos al precariado, que es una clase que tiene la característica histórica de poseer un nivel de educación superior al nivel de trabajo que pueda esperar obtener (Standing, 2015). Aquellos quienes lo constituimos estamos sobrepreparados mientras recibimos una remuneración mínima o carente, y para empeorar la cuestión, se nos culpa de nuestra propio aprisionamiento dentro de lo que Berlant (2007) teoriza como un optimismo cruel, que crea formas de muerte lenta (donde las mismas estructuras de deseo y apoyo que se supone están destinados a garantizar nuestro desarrollo y bienestar son las causas de nuestro excesivo desgaste en el trabajo y la vida). Una

cosa es compartir una base ontológica encarnada en la precariedad, como sostiene Butler (2016), es decir, en la necesidad fundamental y vulnerable que tenemos unos de otros para sobrevivir. Pero otra es comprender plenamente los efectos y afectos más destacados detrás de nuestro posicionamiento dentro del espectro de la precariedad en el capitalismo-patriarcal-suprematista.

La pandemia de coronavirus desató un océano de locura que exacerbó los abusos por los que los millennials nos vemos obligados a producir como trabajadores. Como resultado, fui hospitalizada recientemente. Sin embargo, actualmente estoy desarrollando un proyecto de dibujo comunitario enfocado hacia la migración y basado en pedagogías feministas del arte en un programa de residencia local en CasaVerde, Querétaro, que incluyó la presencia de artistas de Centroamérica y América del Sur. Fue ahí donde conocí a la increíble Greissy Vecchionacce, una bailarina contemporánea de Venezuela que emigró a México en condición de refugiada. Greissy es una fuerza de la naturaleza que navega por los remolinos de la vida con un espíritu implacable. "Todos necesitamos algo en lo que creer", me dice, sonriendo entre sorbos de café oaxaqueño. Estoy cautivada por la acritud de su voluntad frente a la adversidad y en ausencia de privilegios básicos conforme al sentido de vida que dicta la modernidad capitalista. Vender arepas en bicicleta por la Ciudad de México se convirtió en su principal medio de sustento durante la pandemia. Pero sobre todo ha sido el baile lo que la ha mantenido a flote durante los últimos dos años. Se dedicó a entrenar exhaustivamente en el interior de su residencia durante el encierro y ha logrado dar clases en línea, para salir adelante. Ese proceso llevó a un proyecto de danza alrededor de la noción del movimiento en la vida, que ella está desarrollando mágicamente en esta residencia. Para ella, la pandemia generó una pérdida de los ritmos, donde las estructuras de afecto se disolvieron súbitamente ante la impotencia política. Le entró el pánico por perder el derecho al tacto, ya que la proximidad corporal es imprescindible para su bienestar. A pesar de las dificultades, ella se guía por un fuego interior que le recuerda lo fundamental que es apegarse a la utopía de su propia realidad. A través de un sentido de orientación encarnado, desde el horizonte del interior, Greissy se prepara con gusto para recibir el constante nacimiento de lo nuevo. Su enfoque de la danza se desarrolla como un gozoso frenesí que se nutre de la fe que le tiene a la bondad de la humanidad, enfrentándose a cualquier tipo de adversidad. Bailando la pandemia es que uno puede estar abiertx a lo que nos depare el futuro.

# Pandemic Precarity of Women of Color: Healing Uncertainties through Art

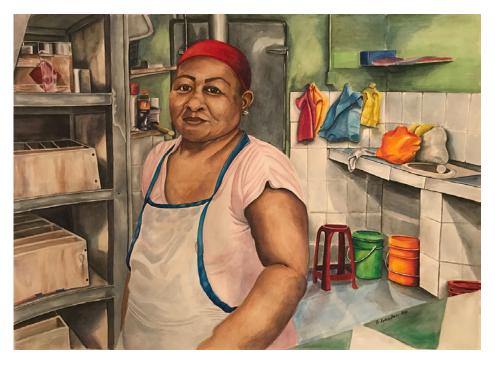
By Indira Bailey

Twenty-twenty started as the best year of my life; I defended my dissertation. I excitedly submitted applications for employment to various educational institutions. I began receiving emails for interviews. Then the interviews came to a halt. The COVID-19 pandemic closed schools. Where do I go when the world has shut down and is quarantined? I was afraid to open my email to find the institution had canceled the job search. I suffered with anxiety, panic attacks, and depression with the uncertainty of employment and economic challenges associated with the pandemic.

For women of color, the pandemic precarity was more severe, facing more challenges economically and mentally (Rattner & Franck, 2021). Sharryn Kasmir (2018) explains Judith Butler's precarity of the job market is experienced predominantly by disenfranchised and marginalized people. Rattner and Franck (2021) reported, "Black and Hispanic women, in particular, have suffered some of the steepest spikes in unemployment and largest drops in labor force participation rate since the pandemic began" (para. 7). They also stated that the economy's recovery is lower for women of color, and many remain jobless. As a Black woman, I questioned the plight of my livelihood.

According to a survey of Black and Latino respondents in the United States, "Thirty-nine percent of women reported significant mental health concerns related to COVID-19, 13 percentage points higher than men" (Getachew et al., 2020, para 6). To help with my mental health, I started painting a new watercolor of a woman from my artist residency in Portobelo, Panama. As I painted this woman (Figure 5), I found myself wondering how the pandemic affected her. How does a year of shutdowns and quarantines affect a rural village? Two hours north of Panama City, Portobelo, Panama, is on the UNESCO World Heritage Site with an estimated population 10, 723 residents and 5,084 women (Portobelo, 2020). The nearest grocery store was 30-minutes away, and the hospital was 45-minutes away. The unemployment rate in Panama was its highest of 18.50% in 2020, and women make up an estimated 53.18 % in 2020 (Trading Economics, 2021). Panama's

yearly wage rate is approximately \$4,140.00 (Minimum-Wage, 2021). Most job opportunities for women in Portobelo are domestics and cooks for tourists.



*Figure 5. Untitled*, Watercolor, 30" x 22", 2020. Included with permission, courtesy of the author.

As I look into her eyes, I remember meeting this woman in the back of the general store cleaning. With limited resources before the pandemic, I wonder what her life is like now. Many of the women lives were taking care of the children and household chores. She represents so many women worldwide enduring economic hardships, food insecurities, and mental health challenges from the pandemic I could not think of a title.

This past year has taught me, as women of color, we found ourselves in the same position of the uncertainty of employment, mental and economic challenges locally and globally. I did obtain employment; however, I cannot forget the woman I painted thinking about her plight. I learn to turn inward and paint to help me mentally and look at women's pandemic precarity worldwide.

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## **Separating Grains from Husks**

## By Veronica Hicks

Enslaved Africans and African Americans in the United States made coiled baskets, a form of weaving, creating vessels used both as strainers and as containers. Coiled baskets block environmental conditions to preserve delicate materials. Without a basket's protection, seeds would degrade in wet or arid places.

I have experienced professional and personal precarity--giving birth during a pandemic, furloughs, finishing my first year as tenure-track faculty, and teaching virtually during fall 2020 semester. My tenure promotion file needed refinement and cluttered my home office. My office was in the garage near a deep

freezer, a pandemic purchase that housed over 100 six-ounce storage bags of breastmilk for my infant son.

My ancestors used coiled baskets to organize their homes. I assemble the coils to fit my immediate storage needs, but the basket has longevity; it endures frequent, vigorous use. After using a basket, I clean it for the next time it will be employed.

We drove to Napa's Farmer's Market for a breath of fresh air during California's wildfire season. As I unbuckled my son's car seat, an elderly couple said hello. They shared how they fled St. Helena to escape the poor air quality. I checked my phone's real-time wildfire locations map. Coming from the south, from the east, and the north, wildfires slowly encroached towards our area. We had to go home, pack what we could, and leave for the coast.

Cotton yarn slides easily through my hand when coiling it around thick rope. Carefully wrapping the center, a spiral expands outwards into a curl that twists along my fingers. I encase the rope with twine until the coils need a stabilizing double stitch. A pattern emerges with each double stitch as I count one, two, and onward.

Ash gently fell on the garage roof, irritating my asthma. My open tenure file documents lay untouched, due by 5 o'clock. I had to decide: Submit my tenure file, or pack my breastmilk? I stuffed bags of breastmilk from the deep freezer into an insulated thermos. My son cooed at me from his car seat. We locked the house and drove west.

Finishing a coiled basket is easier than starting one. All that is left to do is to secure the last piece of yarn. This requires a final wrapping of twine and a tuck of the ending thread, neatly hidden behind the rows of cotton.

The 2020 fire season has been unparalleled, scorching over 2.5-million acres of California land. Because of a shelter precarity in my city, many families had to make the decision of leaving without securing different housing options. We have since moved from Vallejo to the Central Valley in the middle of the state.

By isolating what is worth protecting, coiled baskets accumulate grains,

then flex and exhale. Wheat, barley, and oats are tossed in the air, or are poured from one basket to another. Air sifts the undesired husks away and the process is repeated. Refined, only the seeds remain.



Figure 6. Separating Grains from Husks by Veronica Hicks, 2021. Included with permission, courtesy of the author.

## In the name of ...

By Leslie C. Sotomayor II



*Figure 7. Gritos* by Leslie C. Sotomayor II. Mixed-media on canvas, 9' x 5', 2021. Included with permission, courtesy of the author.

Gritos was created during a one-year studio documentation process during the Covid-19 pandemic from fall 2020 until its completion in June 2021. Gritos documents layers of struggles, resistance and difficulties captured in everyday life navigating private, domestic spaces as a single mother at home with her 15 and 5 year old children connecting to the world via virtual realms while attempting to build community.

In the name of geography...

I am torn from my mother's womb-Entrails, stretched---

Snapped, broken---

Gapping heridas, holes----deep gnashes throughout, within

In the name of history.....

I yell, i scream---

Gritos

Gritos

De la tierra--

The dead--

Reborn--spirits

Roam with me

In the name of the land.....

Who has withstood---feet---

The warm blood escape--leak Onto her earth, her soil--

Absorbed in the cracks, fissures of drought

In the name of my--our

Geographies-his-her-their stories
The cradle of my land--s--I mourn, i yearn for new images--imagined
Within me---you--us.

#### **About the Authors**

**Yen-Ju Lin**, Ph.D., is an art educator, instructional technologist, and graphic designer. Her research interest is centered in instructional design and digital technology in art education. She is the Associate Editor of *Visual Culture & Gender* and the Managing Editor of *International Journal of Education and the Arts*. You may contact her at pundai915@gmail.com

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Xalli Zúñiga is a multidimensional, Mestizx artist/academic/curator born in Mexico City. She obtained a B.A. in Visual Arts at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México U.N.A.M. From 2013 to 2015 she completed the Erasmus Mundus "Crossways in Cultural Narratives" M.A. degree from three universities in Europe: University of St Andrews, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, and Université de Perpignan Via Domitia. Xalli is currently completing a doctorate degree in Art Education and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University.

Xalli has engaged in drawing as a means to deconstruct and dismantle narratives of oppression by stimulating people's capacity for meaning-production. She has conducted experimental drawing workshops in Lusaka, Zambia, and Chiapas, Mexico. She is currently undertaking a P.h.D. in Art Education from the Pennsylvania State University, for which she has contributed to the Restorative Justice Initiative at Penn State, by imparting drawing lessons for women at the Center County Correctional Facility in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania. You may contact her at xcz1@psu.edu

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