

RHYTHMS

Counter
Media
volume 2

Fall 2026

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Counter Media *volume 2*

Edited by
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RHYTHMS chronicles a
community of scholars — our
vibrations arising through texts
and conversations, in the flows
of shared space and departure,
making each other and ourselves
to an uncommon beat.

Rhythms is a publication of the Center
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Going Off-Script...

What modalities of encounter does this historical moment need? What solidarities must we cultivate to meet the challenges of our interconnected worlds? What social, cultural, and political energies are still available in a time of dizzying acceleration and heightened fatigue? These are not mere theoretical questions waiting for endless abstractions. These are existential anxieties compounded by ecological decay, socio-economic uncertainties, technological burnout, institutional complicities, and intellectual disorder. The role of the University, centers of research, and the classroom has gained exceptional urgency in light of these deep mutations.

At the Center for Media, Religion and Culture, the responsibility of our weekly research seminar under these conditions has become a central point of concern. Through the years we have come to understand our fellowship beyond the conventional modes of academic assembly. What began as a mere reading group twenty years ago has

matured into a community of deep sharing and listening, a forum where we don't hoard knowledge and confer degrees. Our Center has achieved a lot in its short history and we will persist in our commitment to lead research in the study of media and religion, but we wish to deepen the radicalism we have been long cultivating in our praxis, and to explore in new ways how the understanding of global religious and mediatic imaginaries can open doors to liberation, in our community and far beyond.

In 2024, we launched "Religion in Emergent Media Spaces," a three-year research and outreach project funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and designed to build infrastructure for media experimentation at the intersection of religion and liberatory social change. The heart of this project is a reconfiguration of the space of our weekly seminar and its modes of academic delivery. We imagined a dynamic site that cherishes the value of intellectual defiance and truly believes in activating the power of encounter and fellowship. We dreamed of a practice of study that embraces our complex world in all its brokenness, its aspirations, its loudness, and its discreet softness. We hoped for a classroom that is never afraid to pause while the world is burning, that remains awake in times of genocide and ongoing imperialisms. We opened the door to an expanded community of scholars and activists who think, write, and organize beyond what the University has designated as "proper" academic work. We read about counter-archives, counter-stories, cowardice, resistance, fear, truth-telling, exhaustion, taking risks, solidarity, creative disruption, among other

things. When our readings and conversations felt performative or detached, we pivoted to heighten the tone of our texts and our voices. There was a generative sense of urgency in our fellowship, and despite the overwhelming sense of despair gripping the world around us, the two hours we shared every Wednesday turned into a smuggled space of undefeated hope and determination.

Through this collective energy, the seminar has become a breathing ground for a deep sense of relationality and accountability. Empathy and indignation in a world of endless spectacles of systemic injustice have become weak responses and tools of affect management. Instead, our work in this project aspires to what Tina Campt (2021) calls “adjacency,” “the reparative work of transforming proximity into accountability; the labor of positioning oneself in relation to another in ways that revalue and redress complex histories of dispossession” (171). We are collectively learning how to share this space of entanglement and cohabitation while insisting on fostering a pedagogical practice that turns learning and academic labor into accountability.

Our five external fellows this year are eloquent expressions of this re-orientation. They collectively pushed us to think about accountability in relation to a range of topics: digital borders, erasure and other archives, survival and creation in abolitionist theology, beauty as method and defiance against dominant religious institutions, theory in the flesh and organizing as a refusal to accept our numbing tolerance for calamity, and Blackness, transgressive temporalities, and other techno-social imaginations. Their projects, funded

through a counter-media residence, insist on exploring other practices of creating meaning and fostering life in precarious times. Storytelling, imagination, transnational organizing, counter-archiving, slow media, and alternative servers and digital platforms are mobilized in these projects to repair broken relations and recommit our energies to the ongoing struggle of imagining and creating infrastructures and strategies of liberation for everyone.

This *Rhythms* special issue on resistance reflects this spirit of defiance. Defiance in our modes of encounter, in our terms of study and fellowship, in our refusal to accept critique and diagnosis as an end, and in our insistence asking, “what can we do together?” *Rhythms* is a journal off-script. It invites contributions that explore alternative forms of writing and other modes of thinking in an academic publishing world increasingly dulled by silence and convention. It is the disobedient answer to an institution plagued by its own discordance, its privileged temporality, and its inability to be in and with the world. This is not an anti-intellectual indictment. Far from it, it is a critique of a hyper-intellectual elitism and professionalism that are conveniently divorcing us from the unbearable realities of our world and absolving us from our obligation to accountability.

We should be outraged by conferences that don’t say much, universities that refuse to issue resolutions, or journals that pretend everything is fine because, one day, the verdict of history will reserve harsh words for our kind.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand (2001) writes, “I am not nostalgic for a country

which doesn't yet exist on a map. ... I am not nostalgic. Belonging does not interest me. I had once thought that it did. Until I examined the underpinnings. One is misled when one looks at the sails and majesty of tall ships instead of their cargo." Brand is suspicious of the extractive histories of nation-states and the foundational myths of fixed identities, but we could extend her suspicion to institutions like universities which have lost their way, turning into muted machines of politicized neutrality and at times instruments of oppression.

The "cargo" of tall ships is an apt metaphor for the state of academia, an institution that speaks in lofty terms while varnishing its own complicity and shirking its responsibility of dissent and truth-telling. In confronting such a dangerously polite institution, our fellowship in the Center and through the writings in this journal is not focused on changing the University as much as it is invested in repairing the harmful practices of weak and compromised systems in our midst. We are not breaking new ground here. We are simply reconnecting with a prior aesthetics and energy of the university which was not afraid of reaching for the off-script button. As Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2013) write, "Before there are grants, research, conferences, books, and journals there is the experience of being taught and of teaching. Before the research post with no teaching, before the graduate students to mark the exams, before the string of sabbaticals, before the permanent reduction in teaching load, the appointment to run the Center, the consignment of pedagogy to a discipline called education, before the course

designed to be a new book, teaching happened” (27).

In fact, we believe now more than ever that before all this, there is first the small, slow, and nonetheless audacious incubation of the seminar space. Before all this, there is writing as a collective act of adjacency. Our goal is to build stronger and sustainable coalitions that transcend the privileged temporalities and isolating conventions of the University. We meet to think and write together, but our concern is learning how to surpass the tempting authority of the podium. Our prompt for the seminar and this journal is a simple and yet profound question: what does it mean to hold a seminar in the tumult of our times and what should a journal read like against the barrel of a gun?

Nabil Echchaibi, Boulder, May 2026

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Philip Butler

Socioform

Immaterial aspects of nature are often considered to be ...

Social engineering is invisible and intricate work. A thing of influence. An influencing thing. Engineering interactions resulting from an unseen force acting through constellation(s) of meaning and consequence.

Conquest.

Con — with. Sequence — chain of events, levers, cogs, or a series of offsetting interdependent and sometimes indecipherable nodes that think they are alone yet somehow maintain a living organism that they are too far buried within to recognize as an extension of themselves.

I am right in believing that we all are “buried within,” and it is up to each one of us to find the truth

that will set us free? I have no intention to sound cliché.

Pessimistic.

Meaning within an unrelenting and vividly increasing weightiness. Regardless of whether that weightiness is unbearable or, simply, clarity in awareness that comes from seeing things as they are.

A tornado that reifies our lives. With a calm.

Still, there is a push to move away from what had been engineered. Because what has been has also been evil. It quietly, but not so silently has allowed for certain sacrifices to be made. It has justified who is worthy to live and who is fit for slaughter. Animal.

Shape.

What is the form of a social reality? How do people move within it? What are the contours that allow for it to be navigated? How do you know its boundaries? Nobody knows. That does not stop it from needing to be molded and reinforced and cajoled. Social realities need persuading.

Socioforming becomes an intentionally formative invisibility of the physical bounds of the shape of interaction. Who you can, will, are willing to, directly and indirectly connected to. The socio-political, gendered, religious and racial landscapes and the cultural interlockings and overlappings

that emerge, are codified and cultivated. Formed. Reiterated. Denied. As being malleable.

Terrain.

Locales are vast. Cartographies, being less-than-delineated (to the uninitiated) require testing, experimentation and questioning. Stumbling upon the physics of a geography suggests an acknowledgment of its reason. That it has reason or something that makes it legible? Even to itself. Even if it (read subject-object) does not understand the strings that make its form, configuration/orientation and materialization possible. How do you excavate, add to, harness and sculpt ... something you are so entrenched within ... if not through intention and repetition and maybe a compass. Where do you get a compass for the unseen. Systems. Thinking. Reverse. Engineering. Presence. Stopping. Taking inventory of the state of your being.

That — some might say — is the first community.

But ... what do we know anyways?

Ifat Gazia

The Algorithm Is a Border

In Istanbul, I learned that silence could have a texture.

It lived in the pause before a young Uyghur woman said the word “mother.” It appeared when someone lowered her voice to describe a message that had gone unanswered for years. It sat between sentences when people spoke of fathers, sisters, brothers, cousins, and friends whose lives had become unreachable.

For a while, I stayed in a Uyghur women’s dorm in Istanbul. Evenings there had a rhythm of their own. We drank tea, ate sunflower seeds, listened to music, played cards, and talked for hours. Sometimes the conversations were light and funny. Sometimes they turned heavy without warning. Someone would remember a mother’s cooking. Someone else would describe a neighborhood she could no longer call. A song would play and suddenly the room would become quiet.

The women often spoke about what felt like their “past lives”: life before exile, before estrangement,

before the long silence that now divided them from home. They remembered parents, siblings, streets, kitchens, routines, and ordinary details that had become almost unbearable in their tenderness.

I had come to these conversations as a Kashmiri scholar whose work has long circled questions of communication, silence, and political uncertainty. I wanted to understand how exile is lived not only through distance from land, but through the conditions that make ordinary contact feel unsafe. Among Uyghur communities displaced from East Turkestan, I encountered families suspended in an uncertainty that was both intimate and technological. Many did not know who was safe, who had disappeared, who was ill, or who was alive.

Between 2023 and 2025, I spent months with Uyghur communities in different parts of the world. Uyghurs are a predominantly Muslim Turkic people native to East Turkestan, a region officially governed by China and referred to by the Chinese state as Xinjiang. Much of my fieldwork took place in Istanbul, where many people from East Turkestan live in exile. For many Uyghurs I met, “East Turkestan” was not only a geographical name but a way of holding on to a homeland whose official naming, representation, and accessibility were deeply contested.

The people I met were living with profound disconnection. Many had not spoken to their families in years. In the twenty-first century, when instant messages, video calls, and constant connectivity are treated as ordinary, they lived with a silence so complete that it seemed to belong to another time. Their separation was not simply

produced by distance. It was produced by fear, surveillance, blocked communication, and the knowledge that even a message sent with love could place someone at risk.

There was, of course, a territorial border separating them from their families. But there was also another kind of border, less visible and harder to name, embedded in the very systems through which people are supposed to reach one another.

And yet, borders never only separate. They also change the shape of relation. In that dorm, I began to see how people learned to move around silence without ever fully escaping it. A song became a way of remembering. A joke carried more than it seemed to carry. A game could become a channel. A recipe could become a map back to someone's kitchen. These were not grand acts of resistance. They were smaller, quieter forms of trespass: ways of reaching across a border that had made direct contact dangerous.

Listening to them, I was struck not only by the scale of their loss, but by the impossibility of that loss in a world that claims to be always connected. How could so many people be so fully cut off from those they loved? How could a phone, an app, a message, or a platform become not a bridge, but a source of danger? There was, of course, a territorial border separating them from their families. But there was also another kind of border: less visible, more intimate, and harder to cross. It was an algorithmic and infrastructural border, one that made communication itself feel dangerous, fractured, or impossible.

One night, as I was drifting to sleep in a room I shared with two young Uyghur women, I asked

quietly into the dark, “So you never had a chance to connect with your family after you left?” From the bed behind me, one of them answered, “For a short period, yes. I found some of my cousins through a gaming chat.”

That sentence stayed with me.

It stayed with me because it revealed something larger than an individual story of improvisation. It named a condition that more and more people now live inside: a world in which separation is not only enforced by states and borders in the conventional sense, but by the digital systems through which communication has to travel. A world in which people can be online and still unreachable. A world in which connection is never simply a matter of access to a device or signal, but of whether one’s messages, one’s voice, one’s very trace can move safely across infrastructures shaped by surveillance, moderation, ranking, and control.

This is what I mean when I say that the *algorithm is a border*.

I do not mean it as a loose metaphor. I mean that algorithms increasingly function as systems that sort, filter, block, delay, redirect, and govern passage. Not physical passage across territory, but another kind of passage: passage into visibility, discoverability, communicability, and public recognition. They shape who can find one another, whose words travel, whose realities surface, and whose pain remains hidden under layers of silence, noise, or substitution.

When we think of borders, we usually think of fences, checkpoints, documents, and armed men deciding who gets through. But borders have always done more than stop movement. They

classify. They sort. They cast suspicion. They decide who must explain themselves and who passes without friction. They separate the legitimate from the suspect, the welcome from the unwanted, the grievable from the disposable. Increasingly, platforms do something similar. Their systems decide what can circulate easily and what gets buried. They determine which narratives rise to the top and which fade before they are even encountered. They decide, often quietly and without explanation, what counts as visible enough to exist.

By platform governance, I mean the systems through which digital platforms decide what can appear, circulate, become visible, be buried, or disappear. These decisions are made not only through public rules or human moderators, but also through algorithms, interfaces, search rankings, translation systems, advertising models, and categories of harm. This is why platform governance cannot be reduced to the moments we most easily recognize: a deleted post, a suspended account, an explicit ban. Governance also happens in less obvious ways. It happens through down-ranking. Through search results that yield state narratives, tourist images, or lifestyle content instead of testimony. Through recommendation systems that reward polished propaganda while burying documentation of suffering. Through translation gaps, broken links, vague moderation categories, disappearing archives, silent throttling, and the constant uncertainty of whether one has been unseen on purpose or by accident.

In my research on digital erasure, I study how politically vulnerable communities lose visibility online not only through censorship, takedowns,

or account suspensions, but also through quieter systems of displacement. Across my fieldwork with Uyghur communities and my broader analysis of platformed narratives about contested and heavily governed regions, I have come to think of this as a form of erasure that exceeds removal. Sometimes the truth is not deleted. It is displaced. It is crowded out by more pleasant images, more profitable stories, more acceptable aesthetics. A state or platform does not always need to eliminate a narrative outright if it can surround it, soften it, or replace it with something easier to consume. This is how digital Potemkin villages are built: curated images of normalcy, beauty, development, or harmony that overwrite the violence beneath them.

The border, then, is not only a line that prevents entry. It is also a system that manages appearance. It decides what gets to cross into public view.

This matters deeply for understanding Islamophobia in digital life. Islamophobia is often described as prejudice, hostility, or dehumanization directed at Muslims. It is all of these things. But it is also a structure of suspicion that shapes how Muslim life is read, governed, and rendered visible. It determines whose speech is treated as threatening, whose grief is considered excessive, whose political testimony is marked as dangerous or unbelievable, and whose ordinary forms of self-expression are made to carry the burden of explanation.

In digital spaces, this does not always appear in dramatic form. Often it appears through asymmetry. Muslim communities are hypervisible when they are being surveilled, categorized, or discussed

as risk. But they become strangely invisible when they speak in their own voices about harm, loss, or dispossession. Their images circulate, but not always on their own terms. Their suffering becomes data, headline, evidence, or policy problem, while their own attempts to narrate their worlds encounter friction. They are watched, and not heard. Documented, and not recognized. Present, but persistently disbelieved.

For Uyghur communities, this asymmetry takes especially devastating forms. The silence that separates families is not empty. It is structured and is produced through fear, censorship, surveillance, technical restriction, and the collapse of trusted channels. To be unable to reach your mother or father in the age of smartphones is not simply to experience distance. It is to live inside a kind of digitally enforced uncertainty. Every unanswered message becomes a site of speculation. Was it blocked? Was it too risky to reply? Was the phone taken? Is the person gone? Under these conditions, communication itself becomes unstable. Silence is no longer just an absence. It becomes a method of power.

And yet, what moved me most during my fieldwork was not only the scale of rupture, but the ingenuity with which people still tried to reach one another. That woman's quiet comment about finding her cousins through a gaming chat was not just a surprising anecdote. It pointed to a broader truth. When ordinary channels become dangerous, people do not simply give up on connection. They reroute it. They search for one another through platforms not designed for intimacy or survival. They turn gaming environments, secondary

accounts, coded language, voice notes, screenshots, fragments, and indirect pathways into fragile infrastructures of contact.

This too is part of the story.

Resistance, in these contexts, is often small-scale and unspectacular. It may not look like open defiance. Sometimes it looks like improvisation. A message sent through an unlikely platform. A family member located through a digital game. A piece of memory archived before it disappears. A testimony preserved in fragments. A workaround so ordinary it might be missed if one were not paying attention. But these practices matter because they refuse the terms of total isolation. They assert that even under conditions designed to interrupt relation, people continue to make one another present.

I do not want to romanticize these acts. They emerge from unbearable conditions. They are often exhausting, temporary, and precarious. They do not undo the violence that made them necessary. But they reveal something important about life under digital repression: that people are not merely passive recipients of platform power. They are readers of systems, tacticians of survival, builders of alternative routes. They learn where visibility breaks down and where it might still be possible to slip through.

That is why the phrase *the algorithm is a border* feels important to me. Older vocabularies like censorship are still useful, but they are no longer enough. Censorship suggests prohibition: something is blocked, removed, forbidden. A border helps us see more. A border filters. It ranks. It delays. It casts suspicion unevenly. It allows certain

things to pass while holding others back. It creates gradients of passage rather than simple binaries. And it often does all this while presenting itself as neutral administration.

Like territorial borders, algorithmic ones are not experienced equally. Some people move through digital systems with ease. Their stories are legible. Their aesthetics are rewarded. Their speech is amplified. Others meet friction at every turn. Their names trigger scrutiny. Their grief is deemed too political. Their testimony is made less searchable, less visible, less trustworthy. The system may appear technical, but its effects are historical. It carries forward older racial, colonial, and civilizational logics about whose voices count and whose can be safely ignored.

This is why platform governance must be understood as part of the architecture of contemporary dispossession, not as a side issue to more “real” forms of violence. Platforms are not outside the histories of occupation, securitization, and racialization. They are one of the places where those histories are now reproduced and managed. They help determine what the world sees, what it does not, and what it is taught to doubt.

I keep returning, in my mind, to that dorm room in Istanbul. To the warmth of tea glasses in our hands, the crack of sunflower seeds, the music drifting through the room, the card games, the laughter that sometimes gave way to silence. I think about those young women speaking of “past lives” even though they were talking about a present that had only just been taken from them. And I think about that answer in the dark: “For a short

period, yes. I found some of my cousins through a gaming chat.”

There is heartbreak in that sentence. But there is also a way of understanding the present.

It tells us that some of the most consequential borders now lie not only at the edge of the nation, but inside the infrastructures that decide what can be seen, what can be said, who can be reached, and who remains out of view. It tells us that visibility is political, that communication is fragile, and that disappearance is often engineered rather than accidental.

But it also tells us something else. Every border produces its own forms of trespass. People still find one another. They still build pathways through hostile systems. They still carry memory across blocked routes. And in doing so, they remind us that even when the algorithm functions like a border, relation does not disappear. It survives in detours, fragments, and improvised acts of reach.

Refusal and Re-Orientation

People across the planet are overwhelmed with the cost of survival, displacement and dispossession, decreased mobility, and the foreclosure of possibility and futures with no horizon for change or a better life. Death is omnipresent. The basic feelings of people are captured by usage of the following words in conversations: “defeated,” “disoriented,” “unwell,” “overwhelmed,” “disassociated,” “foreclosed,” “no-recourse,” “unable to imagine,” “exhausted,” “no hope,” “no option,” “no space,” “no time,” “isolated,” “alienated,” “alone,” “deprived,” “grief,” “loss,” “scarcity,” “trauma,” and “powerlessness.”

Sensing the world and making sense of reality are constantly being shaped and contested by power. The colonial matrix of power has a tight grip on how we live on a planetary scale. On the one hand, we have fascist/liberal governments advancing the capitalist project with the aid of tech-bros making technological advancements; and, on the other hand, communities across the planet are

defending their own existence, territories, and way of life. Palestine has made clear they have a blueprint for the future. Cities like New York and Dubai are examples of the model life, one reserved only for some, where algorithms construct social relations and communication platforms can shadow-ban anything that deviates from script. Gaza especially has shown us how technologies of control, surveillance, discipline, death, experimentation, profit and speculation work together as an ecosystem and networked infrastructure that neutralize anyone posing a threat, actual or perceived, or who refuses to conform and assimilate. These same technologies are acquired and/or developed by nation-states today to subjugate their own people and others beyond their borders. The ongoing genocide in Palestine has also lifted the veil on the coloniality of institutions like universities, museums, biennials, etc., in this dehumanizing project, whether by suppressing the encampments, curtailing freedom of speech and thought, or by competing for funding to advance these technologies of death.

What is to be done today must be done differently, and there is no one way of doing things. The current system is working to totalize a brutal reality for all of us, eliminating possibility and making our experiences a monolith. We are also faced with a devastating contradiction that our living is a social death. Our memories are held by our enemies. Our sources of sustenance are controlled by a few. Our imagination has been seized by the violence. Our algorithmic lives shape our desires and deform our spirit. It makes us chase the unreal, while rendering us unable to believe. "Progress"

and “development” are peddled as the only option for a future, whether meaningful or not. We are expected to accept all this and internalize its cost to ourselves, our communities, and the planet. Refusal to accept this trajectory/tragedy is the first step in the De-assimilation Project.

De-assimilation from the entire genocidal system is a daily practice. Each refusal enacts endless exits and is not about purity or binaries. When one refuses one also chooses where to place their attention and energy and why. Acts of refusal both big and small are a necessary method to re-orient towards other possibilities. This reorientation facilitates building a consciousness that is aware enough to defend land and life, human and non-human, as part of defending itself. This reorientation/process takes place in community in struggle. It involves recognizing, cultivating, and proliferating practices of de-assimilation, autonomy and commoning. The work is both singular and collective, inward and outward. From this work a new non-dual consciousness emerges over time, and a new “being” takes shape. Such consciousness recognizes that life, land, body, memory, knowledge, and relations are not separate domains, and it refuses the colonial hierarchies that turn difference into instruments of domination. It is through these recognitions that the iron grip of the genocidal system/world order on our subjectivities is weakened and broken.

This process is not outcome/ideology driven and the horizon is unknown and indeterminate. Linearity of time is broken. Relations are re-arranged. Autonomous infrastructure oriented towards basic components of life like food, shelter,

medicine, movement, education, are worked on. Skills are identified and nurtured, including electricians, plumbers, educators, farmers, architects, doctors, engineers, programmers, carpenters, steel workers, etc. are valued. We are the infrastructure needed for each other. Gaza teaches us this. The practice of re-orientation is not easy and is often accompanied by fear, fear of the unknown, and the lack of stability. Manufactured scarcity and dependency make the pursuit of any other option feels unrealistic, irresponsible, unsettling, or even crazy. For those who don't feel that way, family structures and even friends and loved ones may say so. This is the most effective form of counter-insurgency we face today. Its antidote is togetherness. The threshold is high. One must leap. This is possible with trust, friendship, generosity, and care. Generosity with those who refuse becomes the basis of relationality, sociality, and coalition. Abundance not scarcity is the true reality of things. Affinity is also an important tool and value. We are never alone.

The body is always the primary site of struggle. In a world that separates consciousness from matter, and treats the body and planet as sites of conquest, our consciousness has been shaped to accept the status quo. Our bodies have been enslaved, sexualized, fragmented, and colonized, always in need of fixing, always falling short of "standards" and "benchmarks," always being restricted and constricted by their architecture of space and time, always made sites of extraction, annihilation, disposability, mutilation, and disappearance. The violence enacted on and through the body shapes consciousness and seeks to comport the body to

their design. However, the body is also the site of where practices of refusal take shape. The body's relationship with the "self" becomes the primary candidate for the initiation of re-orientation. When we reorient from a mind-over-body logic we change our relationship to our sense of self, time, and surroundings. Only when the body experiences license, autonomy and courage through enacting refusal does the self become available for re-orientation.

The body is also the most potent place to nurture and practice autonomy. Autonomy is hard to translate into language. When we change the subject-object relation, non-duality becomes an important strategy to change our relation to land, water, and air, away from private property (legally a "bundle of rights") to that which is part of the self and extension of it. We start orienting our daily lives from an individuated, extractivist approach to one that cares for our surroundings and relations. Such orientation disrupts the binary of the mind and body to a feeling towards sensorial networks of awareness. Even the inside and outside of the body gets disrupted, where one body "really" stops and another begins? The boundaries get muddled but do not merge into one another. The sensorial knowledge within and across bodies is altered, shedding layers of coloniality around our understandings of "self," "the other," "one another," thereby arriving at a changed being.

This project requires infrastructure to sustain itself. Practices of de-assimilation must figure out how to address material needs that do not sever our relationship to the land but further help recognize our relationality to it. The goal of the

networked autonomous infrastructure across territories is to broaden and strengthen those relations. Basic pillars such as food, shelter, medicine, movement, and education have their own relationships to land and autonomy. These practices that sustain life make us sense the world differently.

Lauren Kelly Benson

Holding Safe as Service

*How to Serve If God
Is an Abolitionist*

Written with my beloved's consent.

Recently I learned from experience what it is to put abolition principles into action in the name of community care. In the middle of my fellowship with the Center for Media, Religion and Culture, I found myself unexpectedly in a remote caretaking role. My beloved friend (she/they) had a manic episode and mental breakdown in the face of personal and political poly-crisis that ultimately required hospitalization. They are more than a friend, we refer to each other as platonic partners. She is a Black queer disabled femme who the world has not treated well. Unfortunately, I, a mixed race Black queer disabled femme, was on a disability leave of absence from my job, and couldn't travel to be with her. So we formed a team made up of folks along the eastern seaboard who love her. Working together with her, we got our beloved through their episode and into relative safety. This process taught me so much about what it is to center

care and hold someone's safety and dignity at the forefront in the face of institutions and processes that would have them harmed and forgotten. Together, we made it through.

How Does One Retain Dignity and Safety ...?

With our beloved's input, the care team determined that the support we were able to offer during this episode was not enough. We arrived at a difficult decision; despite what we know about the racist and ableist origins of mental institutions in the United States,¹ despite what we know about the system's insufficient resources and capacity to care for intersecting and generational complex traumas, and despite our beloved's well founded fear of losing her autonomy to an industry² historically proven to be violent to Black and disabled people, we made the decision to have her hospitalized. My beloved, at the height of their "episode," was unsafe. Her behavior, while non-violent, was attracting attention that had already led to police involvement. With the lives of Elijah McClain, Tanisha Anderson, Stephon Watts and too many more held in our hearts, we chose the hospital over the police.

This was a difficult decision because it required that I engage in a system that I want abolished. It

1 Read Antonia Hylton's *Madness: Race and Insanity in a Jim Crow Asylum* for more on this topic.

2 Read Harriet A. Washington's *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* for more on this topic.

required that my beloved give up her autonomy and freedom to access medically informed treatment. In the United States' current medical system, for those of us without funding to circumvent insurance policies and the police, if someone in a hospital is diagnosed as experiencing a mental health crisis they are, more often than not, by law, required to be held in the custody of health practitioners in said hospital for 72 hours, minimum. This is referred to as the "72-hour hold." During this time, you cannot leave on your own recognizance, you cannot deny certain treatments, you lose self determination, agency and freedom.

By advocating for my friend to subject herself to a 72-hour hold and go to the hospital, I was forced to confront opposing values — my politics of abolition against my love for my friend and desire for their safety. Throughout this experience, I was faced with one of the main questions and practices surrounding modern-day abolition: How does one retain dignity and safety within a world built on systems that need to be abolished? Here is where a moral, theological, philosophical inquiry was forced into action. In my perfect world, I would see all mental health institutions abolished and rebuilt as community spaces of care, holding, ease, and healing. But for safety in this moment, I needed to get my friend into a carceral system.

Care Inside Carcerality

One thing I learned throughout this process is that survival is not a theory. It's an action. What was required of me in my remote care work was not only

emotional and logistical holding, but consistent and constant advocacy in the name of ensuring my friend received care. I had to hold strong to my belief in the fact that my friend deserved safety and dignity despite the system she was forced to engage. As the only person of color on their care team, I had to consistently remind everyone what we were dealing with: we had a physically disabled Black queer nonbinary beloved trying to heal while inside a carceral system. She needed to be there to be held safe from the very systems of carcerality that would punish her for divergent behaviors during her manic episode. And yet, even though hospitals are meant to be places of healing and care, they too often are not when it comes to folks with any of our beloved friend's overlapping identities. And so, my actions — my abolition in action — required constant phone calls and emails checking and double-checking not only on care plans but ensuring my beloved was heard while they were in there. They have chronic pain that was exacerbated by their lack of access to support tools in their altered mental state and it took far too long for their pain to be considered, let alone treated. I had to remind people, constantly, that a mental health “break” did not mean that we don't listen. I had to remind us that she remained the expert in her own needs and care, regardless of how she had acted in that hotel lobby the week prior. I had to *live into* my abolition by understanding that practice in this moment looked like consistent advocacy. Like believing her. Like *insisting* on her dignity and safety regardless of the situation, perceived limitations, or impressions others had of her. Regardless of the fact that the world I dream

into, where mental hospitals equal deep care and healing, does not yet exist.

It wasn't easy. It took hours of time and a deep emotional toll. But it was ultimately an invitation into a practice I have been coming to understand and leaning into throughout this fellowship and throughout the past years of developing my interfaith, interdisciplinary, justice-oriented, abolitionist, theological orientation to the world.

How Can I Live into the World That I Believe Can Be?

I'm developing a theology of abolition. Some incredible spiritual leaders and practitioners like my teacher Lama Rod Owens are at the forefront of marrying spiritual and religious practice around this concept. Spiritual abolition is two things.

1) It is the theological, moral, and philosophical framework of understanding at the meeting point of spiritual religious conviction and abolition, and 2) it includes the daily actions and practices that that understanding demands of us in order to be a part of the shift towards abolition. Those actions were what I came to know in these past months of care and support.

As an abolitionist, I cannot only work towards the end of systems of harm. I cannot only be about tearing things down. My theology of abolition requires that I focus, instead, on what I can *do*, how I can *be* in relation to current systems of harm in order to counter those harms today and *practice* into a world that may one day be. How can I live into the world that I believe can be?

Theology, according to Merriam Webster, means “the study of religious faith, practice, and experience, *especially*: the study of God and of God’s relation to the world.” Modern-day abolition, while having many meanings, is extensively covered by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s scholarship and thinking and can loosely be understood to be about building a world beyond prisons and carceral thinking. We must define prisons widely, here, and expand to other carceral spaces such as grade-school detention rooms, mental health institutions, and even the ways we punish others and ourselves interpersonally. This work requires not only the end of all these types of prisons, but the building of something else in their place. In speaking about her 2022 book, a collection of essays written over 30 years, called *Abolition Geographies*, Gilmore reminds us: “we create the conditions for our everyday lives by organizing ourselves and materials and environmental resources. And, in putting those things together — sometimes institutionally as states or corporations or communities or unions and sometimes in more free-flowing ways, let’s say, how mutual aid societies work — what we’re doing is we’re creating a place.”³ And so — I found that I had to work with and for my friend to have her in a current place out of necessity while holding faithfully to a belief and practice of the creation of a new place of healing that has not yet come to be.

3 Kolhatkar, Sonalii, “Envisioning a New World Through Abolition Geography,” *Yes! Solutions Journalism*, 2.7.2023, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2023/02/07/ruthie-wilson-gilmore-abolition-geography>

God. Love. Abolition.

My work, which began as an exploration of an interfaith theory that I have about some universal justice rooted values that most religions and theologies hold, has developed into an exploration of a new theology. Within this theology, I see God as Love. Since the carceral systems that we are forced to survive function in ways that make expressions of love and care near impossible, then abolition — an alternative to these systems — becomes a way to express love within and beyond them. If I see God as Love, and Abolition as Love, then God is Abolition. My theology is one that declares God an Abolitionist.

Religions and theologies require the presence of sacred texts (or oral histories), shared community understanding, lineages of elders and ancestors and their wisdoms, shared community values and practices, and faith. I have come to realize that my orientation to abolition contains all of these elements. My faith lies in the abolitionist knowing that there is a better world for us that we can bring about through praxis and practice. My sacred texts have been written by everyone from Angela Davis to Ruth Wilson Gilmore to Frederick Douglass to Octavia Butler. My sacred abolition ancestors include Mother Harriet Tubman, Audre Lorde, W.E.B. Dubois, and so many others. This lineage of prison and institutional abolition lives in the lineage of the abolition of slavery. I value, alongside my comrades, accountability, care, collective praxis, transformative justice, and healing. I have, here, a faith and study based theological orientation to my

activism. And I was called to put it into action by my beloved friend.

Just as my grandmother needed to believe in the cleansing blood of Christ to survive and dare to thrive in the face of the difficult realities of her life as Black American woman born in approximately 1900 Just as a witch needs to believe in the healing power of their incantations in the face of injustice I need to believe in abolition. Yet, belief is not enough. I cannot just believe that a world beyond prisons is possible, I must practice bringing it into being. Practice is not perfect. Especially within the confines of our shared reality of carceral, punishing, white-supremacist, patriarchal capitalism. We are too often required to practice what we believe inside conditions forced upon us, as my friend was as she attempted to heal. As I was while helping her choose the lesser of two carceral possibilities. And yet — we deserve dignity, safety, love, and access to all the good things today while we hold faith in the future. So, despite the realities of the system, we practice. We must show up to each other with the same consistency, faith, and fervor with which any religious person shows up to their sacred teachings. I believe in a world beyond this one. I believe in a world in which systems of harm are abolished. It is this belief in a new way that helps me survive this one. I need my faith in abolition like I need air. The practice, like breathing, gets me through this moment and into the next. It supports me and my beloveds in their deepest times of need if I can hold their safety, dignity, and care with a faithful fervor. Theology of Abolition is about a faith in the future and a practice for today.

My beloved is through the “worst” of it. She is safe and held and moving forward. I have her to thank for inviting me into a marriage of my beliefs and my practices. For a return to what I know in the face of what is difficult. I can only pray, continue reading the sacred texts from Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis, Lama Rod Owens, and more, and continue to practice this sacred dance of bringing about a world that goes beyond punishing and surviving and into thriving. I believe it can be. And so it is.

Jamie Manson

The Church Is Cool Now

*What's a Catholic Queer
Feminist Activist to Do?*

The death of Pope Francis on Easter Monday 2025 was my first wake-up call.

When a pope dies, the world stops, at least for a moment. And media from all over the world head directly to one place: Rome. The journalistic frenzy that was unleashed around the conclave that followed Francis' funeral was put into overdrive, not only because of his global popularity, but also by the recent Oscar-winning film of the same name. Reporters were practically ecstatic in their awe at the medieval rituals and arcane practices of a papal election. No one seemed to notice that all of the electors, indeed all of the people with all the power, were men. And if they did realize it, they didn't appear terribly concerned about it.

This led me to a tough realization: there was no longer an appetite for robust critique of the Catholic church. Few journalists would focus on activists struggling for women's ordination and reproductive rights; even LGBTQ issues — which saw some slight movement towards justice during

Francis' papacy — were not particularly top of mind for reporters.

This may have been, in part, because of a 10-year media-fueled depiction of Francis as under siege by the right-wing faction in the church. For years the dominant narrative was that the pope had been such a victim of the so-called rad-trads, so perhaps reporters — seeking to protect him posthumously — thought it would be in poor taste to also give airtime to the radical left.

But media attention at the May 2025 conclave was so unlike the previous one, which functioned almost like a referendum on the legacy of Pope Benedict XVI, whose reign was characterized by high church camp and an unabashed rejection — if not outright suppression — of any claims that the church might need to reconsider its positions on women, sexuality and reproductive health. Benedict, of course, did not die in office, but instead made the shocking decision to resign, citing deteriorating health (he would go on to live for nearly a decade). So the 2013 conclave was free of the usual somber climate, perhaps allowing journalists more freedom to be hard-hitting in their treatment of the church's many crises and neuralgic issues.

Journalists at the 2025 conclave appeared to lack any objectivity and instead seemed overwhelmed by the global sadness of losing Pope Francis, the “pope of surprises” whose well cultivated media image, off the cuff remarks and bold acts of humility in front of the cameras made him a global media superstar. I got the sense that any attention given to those of us who dissent from the church's continued hardline stances on gender, sexuality,

and sexual health would be viewed poorly, almost like a disgrace to Francis' sacred memory. It was as if reporters were in total agreement that, given the pope's purported radicalness, there really should be nothing to complain about.

That sense of irrelevance continued to haunt me for the rest of the year. I had spent my entire career campaigning, sacrificing and, in some cases, burning bridges for the sake of getting the church to change its positions on what I believe are profound issues of injustice with global consequences. Would anyone or any platform ever care again, or had the gentler face that Francis gave the papacy rendered the Vatican invulnerable to any reasonable criticism?

The conclave was a stunner: Robert Prevost was elected the first pope from the United States. From the moment Pope Leo XIV first appeared on the Loggia of the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, the media immediately characterized him as an obvious foil to Donald Trump, even though they had little sense of the new pope's politics or stances on social issues (the mild-mannered Prevost published tantalizingly little during his pre-papal times). So great is Trump's capacity to swallow the daily global news cycle that journalists even saw the election of an American pope through the lens of U.S. presidential politics.

One year into Leo's papacy, this juxtaposition has become even more exaggerated, with Lent and Easter seasons of social media feeds filled with memes — some of them fake or embellished AI renderings of bold condemnations from Leo — pitting the American men against one another.

Early in the Francis pontificate, the media realized that many clicks could be gained in the narrative that popes were cool — even heroes — now. But the seemingly shy, reserved and, as is becoming clearer, more traditional Leo was no showman like his predecessor. What has emerged in response to his reticence seems to be a strange pantomime of the goodie pope versus the baddie president.

This binary seems simplistic at best given that the right-wing Catholic conservatives that got Trump elected share the very same convictions about women's inequality, the sinfulness of same-sex relationships and gender transitions, the unnaturalness of artificial contraception, and the need to ban abortion under any circumstances.

Of course, the vast majority of U.S. Catholics disagree with both Trump and the Vatican on these topics. Nevertheless, the heroic narratives around Francis and Leo remain so robustly popular that they even seem to be winning converts.

In April 2026, the New York Times reported that the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S. is seeing a surge of people seeking sacramental initiation. "Bishops are buzzing about the surge, and confounded by what is behind it," wrote Elizabeth Dias, who recounted a story of bishops huddled at a conference asking one another what their "number" is.

Though Pope Leo did not necessarily get the credit for this wave of conversions, the political, social and technological dynamics into which he has been enmeshed are key among the theories. The anxiety of political instability, isolation of Covid, and the loneliness brought on by AI and social media has led people — particularly those in

the crucial 18 and 35 age group — to seek community, stability and spiritual fulfillment.

Catholic podcast stars also get a share of the credit, as do YouTube stars who spend their videos doing Catholic apologetics. These platforms have become so valuable to the Vatican that they were invited to Rome in July 2025 for the Jubilee of Digital Missionaries and Catholic Influencers. Not surprising, these influencers are overwhelmingly male and ordained. There's Fr. Giuseppe Fusari who shares his passions for art history and body-building; Fr. Mike Schmitz who uses his all-American good looks to teach the Bible; and, of course, there is the industrial complex called Word on Fire, founded by Bishop Robert Barron, a good friend of Trump who is also keen to spotlight his body-building friends. And that's just scratching the surface.

What is a queer Catholic feminist activist to do in this milieu? As this new reality set in, I received the amazing opportunity from the University of Colorado Boulder's fellowship program from the Center for Media, Religion and Culture. I applied in the very early days of Pope Leo, still very uncertain what his reign might look like. Nothing in his past suggested he was going to be reactionary or a hard-liner, but there were indications he might be less progressive, in both word and action, than Francis.

I proposed a podcast that would carry forward my work from the previous decades: An unflinching look at the profound harm done by the Catholic Church's teachings on vulnerable people and populations around the world. The church is the largest non-governmental provider of both healthcare and education around the world. It's

also the most hardline religion, standing in fierce opposition to any form of reproductive healthcare under any circumstances as well as the world's biggest opponent to comprehensive sex education. Given the large-scale services provided by the church, hundreds of millions of people globally are impacted by these teachings — whether they are Catholic or not. The Catholic church is also the only religious tradition that qualifies as a city-state at the United Nations, giving it permanent observer status and, with that, the power to negotiate (and therefore obstruct) any resolutions or treaties related to sexual and reproductive health-related sustainability goals.

I proposed using this podcast to look into my usual topics associated with the church's disproportionate, worldwide power: its impact on women, LGBTQ people, abuse victims and other vulnerable populations. And I'd take pains to point out that, even if the media wants to depict Pope Leo and Donald Trump as polar opposites, the reality was that the president's people and the pope's men were in deep agreement about gender essentialism, opposition to marriage equality, and bans on reproductive and transgender healthcare.

But as the academic year rolled on, the climate in the U.S. seemed to become even more extreme than even the most pessimistic among us could have imagined. It became clear that the second Trump administration would have no guardrails and, even at this writing, there seems to be no bottom to how bad things can get. In the middle of the CMRC seminar's third session, on September 10, 2025, Charlie Kirk was murdered, thrusting into

the mainstream the Christo-fascist movements that had been ascendent since the first administration.

As our first semester neared its conclusion in December 2025, I was at an absolute loss as to how to meet this moment. With things so profoundly ruptured, what could “the counter” mean at this point? The situation was so dire that even Vatican officials were starting to look like progressive, honest, principled men. Lobbing criticism at the church would seem more like a failure to read the room than an act of counter.

In the end, I decided that the world didn’t need more divisiveness. Creating something beautiful could also be a method. Trying to make real meaning of the situation felt like the best counter message I could offer.

I wondered if this change in approach would also help me find a new, broader audience for my work. The sad reality is that the generation of Catholics who had come out of the 1960s energized to change the church were moving on to the next life. For well over a decade, they were key supporters of my writing. And I played to their sensibilities, their understandings of Catholicism, their hopes and dreams for a renewed church. When my platform was last at its peak the Catholic church had gotten so out of step and irrelevant to the reality of millennials and Gen-Zers that no one would have dreamed that young people would turn back to church. But now, here they were.

For a long time, those who disagreed with my work had tried to paint me as a hater or an adversary, a destructive force who most certainly was not a Catholic. How did I get here? The situation forced me to take a step back and reconsider my own

origin story. I re-read some chapters from a draft memoir I had started nearly a decade ago.

I rediscovered what made my own role in this work unique. From pretty much the start, the church had rejected me in every way possible. At my first Holy Communion, I watched as my mother sat in the back of our parish, unable to receive the Eucharist with the rest of the parents, because she was divorced and remarried outside of the church. I wanted to be a priest but am barred because I am a woman. I am gay, which means the church sees my relationships as disordered and denies me marriage. I've been an advocate for contraceptive access and abortion rights for years, which some would say means I've excommunicated myself.

And yet, I still dig in, insisting I am a Catholic, carrying on work to transform this institution, knowing full well that in my lifetime I will not see the changes I seek. I do it because I still see something good and beautiful and true in this tradition, and it has helped me make meaning of my life, especially in times of suffering and feeling lost.

Re-reading my old writing also forced me to face a tough question: am I pursuing the church the way one would an unavailable partner? My father abandoned me when I was young, and my childhood was pretty troubled after that. Is Catholicism just a meta-father, and am I the lost daughter desperate for his approval and love? Are all of my years of betting on this losing proposition just evidence of an obsessive, spiritual co-dependence on a church that I know will just keep pushing me away?

Or is there a chance that what seems like dysfunction is actually a vocation? In the midst of

these psychodynamics is there a real calling from God to seek justice and to give marginalized Catholics a greater sense of belonging — or, at least, help them clarify their own connections to this tradition, which is at once old and troubled, powerful and punishing, relevant and comforting?

After these two semesters of reflection, the answer, I still believe, is yes, this is a vocation. It was love and longing, hurt and hopefulness that had led me down this path, and it is still love that keeps me moving forward. Love and, perhaps, a little divine intervention now and then. I've tried many times to get free of this work, but somehow, some way God always seems to find a way to pull me back in. CMRC, this go-around, was the lure.

Perhaps these shiny new Catholics and I had more in common than either of us could imagine? Love and longing, hurt and hopefulness are also what seems to have brought them to the church's doors too.

Is there a chance that this new generation might find my work of some use though? A helpful chat with CMRC's Nathan Schneider proved illuminating. A convert to Catholicism himself, he told me that my work had been helpful in clarifying and articulating what in this church was worth hanging on to, even in the toughest circumstances. If I could hang on, how couldn't he?

Talking with him, I realized that, at some point, every one of these Catholics would experience that moment when the honeymoon ends and their lives — or the lives of someone they love — collides with some of the church's rigid, harsh doctrines. Maybe they'll have a daughter ask them why they can't be a priest. Or they'll fall in love with someone

of the same sex. Perhaps a sibling will come out as trans. Maybe they'll hear an especially horrifying story of abuse at the hands of a priest and an ugly coverup that followed. What if they find themselves in circumstances where they need an abortion?

As much of a renaissance that the Catholic church is having with the media and with influencers, no one is out there helping new Catholics, or even longtime Catholics, adjudicate and discern these morally complex, all too common scenarios. What, Nathan asked, if that were the role of my podcast?

Me? An advice columnist to the newly converted? The absurdity of it was delightful. But also ... perhaps this is one of the truer ways to be authentically counter in this bizarre, upside-down moment?

I'm still trying to find my way through the possibilities of this new identity and new movement in my unfolding vocation. Like the times we're living in, it is disorienting to say the least. It's hard to resist old patterns and talking points, and I'm being forced to think and create ideas outside of my old frameworks. It's a challenge, and I'm figuring it out as I go along. What I know for certain is, I don't want to add to the enmity, anxiety and ugliness that are waiting every morning to greet us. I'd like to try instead to offer something more sustaining.

My love for the church that formed me runs deep, and I'm leaning into it — but that doesn't cancel out my instinct to question it; if anything, it demands it. And I feel an obligation to care for the new communities giving their lives to it. The

work now is to discover ways of challenging the church that are generative: ways that open conversations rather than shut them down, that make space for honesty, complexity, and healthy vulnerability.

Though not everyone sees it this way, I have devoted my life to the church. I have criticized the men in its highest echelons, condemned its ongoing injustices, and performed bold protests at some of its holiest sites. Each act came with sacrifice: I gave up status, stability, professional security, and more than a few relationships along the way. But I did these things not in spite of my love for the church, but because of my profound care for it. If I did not love the church, I could have walked away long ago.

And so I have remained — arguing with it, grieving it, demanding more from it, and still having faith that this is all worth it. My criticism has never been rooted in contempt, but in the stubborn belief that the church can still be transformed, and, in fact, it must be. This, to me, is an essential aspect of love: not unquestioning loyalty, but the refusal to abandon something to its worst instincts in the hope that repair, maybe even redemption, is possible.

Warren Liu

Approaching a Decentered Design through Scholar-Designer Collaboration

As a media scholar studying the video games industry and culture, I am always interested in how video games are used as a medium to impact society. Heavily discussed by media and culture studies scholars, design is an aspect of all video game production that creates powerful discourses in society. Design here is not an unbiased process but is considered an action influenced by human factors, resulting in products with discursive construction (Bogost, 2008). In the past, culture and media studies scholars (Mukherjee, 2018; Šisler, 2008) had argued that game content, shaped by game design, led to a discursive formation of identities, making the act of design itself a discriminatory practice. Design as an action with discursive power to make an impact is not exclusive to video game production, but specifically in the study of game design and its impact, there is a debate between the study of game design and the

application of those theories to design. For example, Patterson and Fickle (2024) noted that scholars studying game design focused solely on pointing out injustice, failing to recognize the challenges designers face in incorporating those remediations due to technical, political, and economic difficulties. In other words, there is a lack of conversation and collaboration between scholars and designers to merge theories and design practices to create social impact. In this research report, I intend to share my brief collaboration with the designer, Dr. Philip Butler, of Halo Wireframes, with the aim of informing and interrogating the scholar-designer collaboration and its significance.

I was paired with Dr. Philip Butler and his Halo Wireframes project during the CMRC spring of 2026 as a collaborating fellow. Halo Wireframes is a mobile app that uses AR technology to transform social interaction across different settings. Specifically, the app redefines the boundaries of physical spaces. With AR glasses, users can see (unspoken) rules and the culture set for venues and personal spaces. This is a novel design idea that foregrounds personal “data” in social interactions, using emergent technology to criticize the discursive construction of human beings in social relations through their social classes and identities, and rebuild a networked public in virtual space where people are defined by personally curated data. Though the design idea is novel, the app is currently in content design and is not operational due to technical issues with the AR technology.

My role as a collaborator is to review the design by contributing my unique knowledge of video game design and my global perspective as a Chinese person, since Halo centers on Black communities and experiences. I met with Dr. Philip Butler every week to discuss my thoughts and criticisms through write-ups as I reviewed Halo's design features and ideas. Below, by reviewing Halo's designs as a Chinese user and comparing them with game design, I will demonstrate that a scholar-designer collaboration is not only a practice of reflection but also a means to approach an understanding of decentered design.

Since Halo is not yet operational, Dr. Philip Butler shared with me a screen-by-screen design map of all the app's features, including login, avatar settings, and the space-defining mechanism. Besides building a personal profile and sharing stories, which is common to social media apps, Halo is unique in that users must set a preferred way to be approached physically and a preferred distance at which they are visible to other users in the system. Like a common social media app, Halo can be used to leave online footprints and build a social network. However, those social networks are built not through "likes" and "dislikes" or feeds and algorithms. All online networks must be built through physical interactions, in which only respectful and physically aligned people can extend these relations online. Therefore, Halo is suitable for indoor venues and events, where specific rules apply, making the app spatial and political.

Halo is designed strictly following Dr. Philip Butler's work, "Thinking of a Master Plan: Data

Citizenship/Ownership as a Portal to an Unfettered Black Universal Basic Income.” Building on Afro-futurism thinking, Halo is designed as a powerful network for curating Black users’ data and online bodies, delineating a social space that carves out individual data-bodies and data-oriented venues. It is a “Black data technosphere” imagined by Dr. Philip Butler, and there is immense potential to imagine the future of online identity defined by our personal data. In other words, Halo, after its deployment, is a lifeworld application of the theoretical foundation, imagining the Black community’s future with concrete technological designs.

When it becomes a finished product, Halo in the market faces all users, not only Black audiences. As a Chinese pilot user reviewing Halo, my first question is: how do the app’s affordances welcome all users? In other words, am I, as a Chinese user, also able to curate my personal data in Halo and build my space around the Black community interactively in the app? After reviewing all the aesthetics and functions shown in the design map, the app is welcoming, and its design lacks exclusive features that cater to the Black community. Of course, a globally inclusive design is not the main concern for Dr. Philip Butler in designing Halo, yet to all game developers, inclusive design means it has a better chance of building a larger community, making more money, attracting more funding, and receiving more awards, all of which lead to a greater impact. From a participatory culture study perspective (Jenkins, 2006), inclusive game design also means opening to criticism and inviting players to contribute to the design,

making not only a better product but also a de-centered one. My write-ups on Halo's design as a reviewer with a different ethnic background serve as a decentering approach. They are not only criticizing Halo's design to make it a better product, but also challenging the authority of a single-party designer over the act of design. No matter whether these write-ups are incorporated or not, they narrate a story of Halo's design being decentered and thought through from completely different standpoints. From a reviewer's perspective on Halo's design, this scholar-designer collaboration demonstrates a decentered design approach, achieved through both the designer's actualization of theories in practice and users' reflection on their experience.

Besides being a user reviewing Halo's design, Dr. Philip Butler also asked me to compare Halo's design with common video game designs to draw inspiration from them. I am not a video game designer myself, but my research interest has led me to interact with video game developers and learn basic coding languages. Though at the coding level, app design and game design are different, there are video games that heavily rely on AR technology, such as *Pokémon Go*. The aim of this comparison is not for Halo to learn from video game design specifically, but to imagine a future Halo community inspired by "ongoing" video games (a game language for describing video games that run for a long time online) with strong community support. In other words, here, I serve not as a user but as a pretend video game developer, imagining how Halo's design curates a community from a different field developer's perspective.

The leading question Dr. Philip Butler and I discussed is: how can we envision the class, aesthetics, and user experience in Halo's design from a future-oriented view, such as 3, 5, and 10 years down the line? The question might seem convoluted. In fact, it asks how Halo's design will shape users' identity through their interaction. As I discussed at the beginning, this is a key question scholars have asked over the past few decades about video game discourses. Since the overwhelming majority of scholars argue that designers construct a hierarchy between themselves and players through rules and embodied play as discourse, I warned Dr. Philip Butler that a rigid design of Halo's spatial-political formation may do the same to its users. I raised the case of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) in my write-up. After years of operation, WoW has developed its own ecosystem. Players construct spheres in and out of the game world to separate players by type, creating a unique social class system and killing in-game players whose playing styles differ from their own. This trend, initiated by players with high self-esteem and supported wholeheartedly by the designers, becomes a symbol of the game's ecosystem. Behaviors in the game world are now tied to lifeworld social class, reinforcing a social hierarchy that extends into the virtual world. With Halo running for years, such self-identified groups can arise. I challenged Dr. Philip Butler about how designers can maintain boundaries between groups or start to intervene in users' behavior.

The insight of reviewing Halo's design as a pretend game developer does more than make Halo a better product. Like reviewing Halo's design as a

user, reviewing it as a designer from a different field also deepens understanding of a decentered design. However, this approach needs a nuanced articulation. Past scholars usually argue that designs are a discursive construction of users' identity through their experience. Therefore, a decentered design demonstrates a negotiated design accomplished by both the designers and users, where the tension lies. Here, as pretend game developers, the scholars and their collaboration with the designers challenge the authority of the single-party designer through a different authoritative lens. In other words, there is no imbalanced tension between the two parties, making this decentered design approach actually a multi-centered design. Since the scholar here is not actually the designer's partner, the collaboration remains critical. This differs from a strategic alliance business model, in which the goal of collaboration is to benefit both parties financially. The scholar, acting as a pretend designer from a different field, decenters the design via different expertise and critical questions, leading to practical revisions. This multi-centered design checks the authority of the designer and makes the design process more democratic.

Design is the process of bringing theoretical concepts into actual products. This process is identical in video game and mobile app production. Through my collaboration with Dr. Philip Butler on the design of Halo as both a user and a pretend game designer, I aimed to draw insights to address questions in design discourse. Through the collaboration, the discourse exerted on users is visible, as some design features are made inclusive

and others are made less attractive to certain users. Along with the theoretical foundation of the design, Halo has the capacity to accomplish its goal within Afrofuturism, but not to create a global community. Patterson and Fickle (2024) pointed out that scholars need to collaborate with the designers to address the issues raised by design discourse, and Costanza-Chock (2020) and Jenkins (2006) suggested a decentered design collaboration through both the designers and the designated users, addressing the design discourse through equalizing the power imbalance between the two parties. My collaboration with the Halo designer as a user confirms this decentered design approach. Moreover, as a pretend game designer, I counter the authority of the Halo designer with different, applicable expertise, making a decentered design through a multi-centered approach. It is hard to say a decentered design is necessary if money-making is foregrounded. Nevertheless, design actualizes theoretical concepts and makes a social impact. For that to happen, design, as a powerful tool wielded by designers, needs to be challenged by other powerful sources to ensure the product takes a decentered and democratic position.

Samira Rajabi

On Being Iranian American in Times of War

In what follows you will find my meditations on existing proudly in an Iranian American body, in the classroom, in the news cycle, in diaspora, and in my home with my daughter. In poetry, rather than in prose, I can articulate a voice that counters those that silence and erase the complexity and confusion of the voices of my family, my people in my homeland and my diaspora. The rhythms and syncopations of a poem illuminating more to me in times where coherent sentences defy me. It feels as though this was inscribed in me through my ancestry, a way to show pride in who I am in a world of erasures of my culture. When prose fails me poetry catches me, a boon for and a salve on a wound that is inarticulable, inaudible, untraceable and yet so deeply felt in every moment. We are a people in between two aggressors — imperial war and authoritarian regime — my family does not know what to believe in, and hope is elusive. Those in Iran ostensibly hope to skirt death long enough to fight for a life that would allow them to be free.

I hope they live until tomorrow, I cannot see or hear or think past then. Of course, at this moment, coherence escapes me. I only have the rhythms of the words, in solitary echoes, that beat like drums against my heart, beckoning me not to give up in a time of despair. We write about counter media, discuss how we counter the injustice in this life, this is how I counter the darkness that seeks to descend on my soul.

Irooni, Amerikayi

A woman who stands
Outside of the boxes
On your forms
And in your narrow conversations

Who sees and feels and breathes
Her identity
Beyond your case law
Your structural, status giving bureaucracy
Not white enough for the WASPs
Who sting me
But not dignified by your laws
With a brownness that may save me

Who knows her histories
Her ancestors
Her love
Her poetry

And her life
Deep in her bones

I am so proud to be me, *Irooni, Amerikayi*
I am proud to check your box of diversity
And disability
Only me swimming in a sea
Othered by the waves that crash against me

A safe haven for my students
A space for understanding for every different
ability from yours
A space of learning where disparate bodies are safe
A home for the ones that don't fit the way
You think we're supposed to

Proud to learn and live
In an imperfect body
To strive and create
In an unruly, messy container

You cannot contain
This container

I am not like you
I am not like them
I am me
Deserving
Earning
And thriving
In this body
That is both so different
And so alike yours
It scares you

Terrifies you
When it should electrify you

But you are safe with me
Even when I am not safe with you

And for the others out there
Who beckon me
To grapple toward
Whiteness
To find belonging
Not in my culture
My heritage
And the olive tones of my skin
That the light plays on

I don't want their power
It is thin
Empty
It veils their hatred and their fear
And it's never been for us
We are for us
I am for us
And so damn proud
To be only me
Irooni, Amerikayi

To you
Who
Regardless of what I call myself
Wants to rid the hallowed hallways of my voice
My voice booms
And will continue to bellow
Long after all this is gone

May it ring in your ears
As you lay down to rest your head
If it's too much for you
If this is too much for you
If I am too much for you
Please
Go find less

Hope

What does hope look like
And sound like
Under the thumb of oppression
Violence
And the silence of the world?

Is it bombs crashing in the air?
Familiar beats of imperial drums of war?
Is it the muted breath of dead authoritarian
clerics?
Maybe.

Or is it birds singing
While their wings twinkle in sunshine?
Is it laughter ringing in streets
Filled with free little girls?
Is it the smell of fresh *Barbari* in the street where
you grew
To know who you are, and who you'd become?
Maybe.

How do you hope when the sense of violence is too
deep?
Too loud?
Drowning out the ordinary
Leaving only fear to be felt?

It is impossible to know what to hope for now.
So instead, we hope for our loved ones
To wake another day.

I am sick

I am sick
Every day
When I wake up
And when I go to sleep

When I tuck in my baby
Alongside her sheep
No bombs over head
But I close my eyes
And imagine the bombs over my aunts' skies

How can I rest
When theirs is disturbed
I sit up in bed, deep breath, dry my tears
While explosions from tyrants ring in their ears

I am sick when I wake
And when I go to sleep

From fears of the monstrous
The rot that runs deep
From theological regime
To imperial empire
It seeps
A dehumanizing threat
That steals my sleep

How can I rest
Each night in my bed
When every time they lay down their heads
The threats never end

Hanging

I always forget the word
In Persian
For execution
Not of a task
Or a protocol
Rather, it's a hanging
Or to be hanged
Not to hang out
But to be executed

It's like my mind
Refuses it
Resists it
The reality of bodies
Aloft in the street

I know the word
But when people say it
In Persian
I flinch
I pause
My brain
My body
Refusing to understand

I won't let in
The danger
The despair
The hopelessness
Of how typically
I hear this word

E'dam
No
What does it mean
I cannot remember
I will not remember

But the reality is
I must.

I am only raw

My sentences lost
To the tiredness
In my bones

And my eyelids
And my soul

Somehow
Instagram
Is my only access
To a family
Once distanced
By phone cards
And planes

It's been so long
Since I undertook
That two-day journey
Home
But away

I'm in flux
Unsettled
Unmoored
Only raw
Feelings
But numb

I've long suffered from fatigue
But this is different
The ache of fear
So tiresome
So unyielding
So unforgiving
So relentless

Sleep won't fix it
Won't touch it
Cannot come

For fear
Of waking
To worse news
Than what you dozed off to

I am only raw
Emotions
Anger
Fear
Resignation
Resilience
Hope
Faith
More anger

More anger
More anger
More anger

My sentences lost
To the rage
In my bones
In my eyelids
In my soul

All that is left
Is the drumbeat
Of my heart
Left in poems
And verse
Legacies of my ancestors

This fire may cease
And I hope that it does
But it seems the rage will not be extinguished in
me

I saw a bird today

It was different from any bird I'd seen before
It was more delicate
Red lines
Under its beak

It just stood there
In my driveway
While I watched it
Out the window

I wondered
What kind of birds
Did my cousins see
Did my aunts see
When the bombs rained down

I wondered
Can you see the delicate red
Below their beaks
In the smoke of bombs

Had the birds fled
The way I urged my family to flee

I begged
In voice note
After voice note

They assured me they would
But I feared that they lied
As we often do
To keep one another's hearts
From breaking

I saw that bird today
And I hoped for a day
Where the people I love
Could quietly see her too

I wish for you (a letter to our detractors)

That when the bullies came for you
You held the line
And stepped into the power
That the she-wolves that came before you
Granted you
In your skin
Your hair
The texture of your flesh

And that the only reason to ever look back from
that line you held
Was to see how far you've come

My wish for her is bigger
My baby girl
She's not from she-wolves
She's from *shirezan*
Lionesses
Who fought for what they have
For the air they breathe
And the wind in their hair

Brown
Radiant
Honoring her ancestors
With the curl of her hair
And the twisted dance in her hand

The hairs on her face
Declaring for her
Before she even speaks
Pride in who she is
Where she's from
Not to be erased
To fit in with the ones
Who thought they knew power

They don't know power

My wish for her, for my little one
Is when the bullies come for her
And they always come
For the ones they can't know
Can't take
Can't devour
That she stands in her power
With the ones that came before her
Running through her veins

Her ancestors' rumble
Loud in her ears
Shirezan shirezan shirezan
And you will all hear her roar

With these poems I offer my heart and a refusal to accept the terms of either injustice in Iran or external destruction. I refuse to abandon hope in favor of overly simple solutions that perpetuate suffering in all the places I call home. I offer my power, as a *shirezan*, a lioness, who will fiercely protect my family, my heritage, my culture and the spirit of my dual, dueling homelands.

Adriana do Amaral

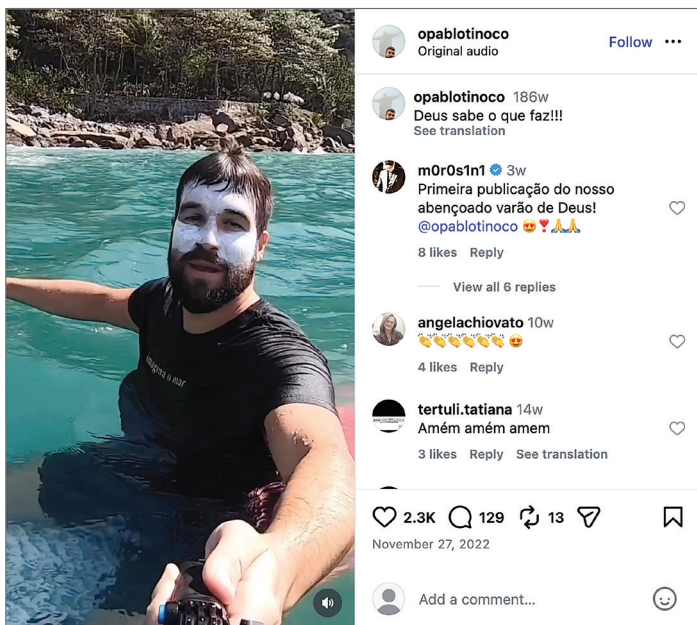
A Faith Influencer on Social Media

*Changes in the
Religious Sphere*

Introduction

While analyzing the activity of religious leaders on social media in previous research (Freire, 2018), we observed the intense utilization of these platforms to promote the public image of religious leaders. In that study, we described the digital practices of religious leaders who — beyond their ecclesiastical positions — enjoyed a status of media recognition typically reserved exclusively for major celebrities. Notable Brazilian examples in our research included the Catholic priests Fabio de Melo and Marcelo Rossi, and Evangelical pastors Edir Macedo and Silas Malafaia. In the present article, however, we examine a different type of persona: one who, unlike the aforementioned leaders, holds neither an ecclesiastical position nor prominence in traditional media outlets, yet achieves a level of digital visibility that far surpasses the majority of regular internet users.

We refer here to a Brazilian digital influencer who claims no affiliation with a specific religious denomination, even though he disseminates Christian discourse and mobilizes an outstanding following across digital networks. Various definitions of the term digital influencer have been established in the literature; Valente (2018, p. 19), for instance, navigates through digital market terminologies to describe a digital influencer as a “person who exerts interpersonal influence through digital or electronic means.” The concept of “Influencer” originates in Marketing and Consumer Behavior theory (Kotler, 2003), which identifies individuals like digital influencers as early adopters who drive broader consumption patterns. In this context, the notion of consumption extends beyond commercial transactions; it is grounded in Bourdieu’s (1986) framework of symbolic capital, in which influence itself serves as a non-material asset for establishing authority and social position. Influence is symbolic capital, and Instagram users consume and engage with the content disseminated by digital influencers, who sell lifestyles, products, services, goods, arts, information, and so on. On Instagram, he operates under the handle @Opablotinoco, with a first post dating back to November 27, 2022. In his debut video, the influencer introduces himself as a “Christian surfer.” Speaking in a homiletic tone, he offers counseling and quotes the Christian Bible, without citing which books, but affirming “the bible says” or “Jesus said,” while sitting on a surfboard in the ocean, with his face painted white — likely with sunscreen.



Screenshot taken from content published on Pablo Tinoco's profile in November of 2022.

As of December 2025, Pablo's Instagram following reached 1.4 million. In his short biography, he self-identifies as a digital creator¹ and the founder of the "Instituto Jesus é Bom" (Jesus Is Good Institute). His profile provides a link to the Institute's webpage, which features a prominent banner at the top appealing for donations via the PIX system — a widespread instant payment platform in Brazil. The webpage is minimalist, containing select videos and photographs documenting his social initiatives alongside a description of his objectives. Without downplaying the significance of Pablo's social work, our analysis focuses on his digital content; it is observable that his videos adhere to the typical patterns of Instagram Reels — they are brief, edited for high engagement, and almost exclusively filmed outdoors in locations of remarkable natural beauty. Pablo's aesthetic of the outdoors serves to de-territorialize the religious message, moving it from the temple to the limitless "surf/nature" space.

- 1 Scholars such as Kiso (2025) maintain a distinction between "content creators" and "digital influencers," arguing that their primary objectives differ. This distinction remains a subject of academic debate, as most influencers produce their own material, while creators inherently possess the potential for significant social influence. For the purposes of this study, we have opted to employ the term "digital influencer" to characterize Pablo Tinoco's activity on Instagram, despite his own self-designation as a "content creator." This choice is grounded in the understanding that, while the terms are complementary, it is the mechanics of influence — rather than the act of production itself — that exerts the most profound impact on the contemporary shifts in religiosity explored in this article.



Screenshot taken from content published on Pablo Tinoco's profile, from October 2025.

The influencer addresses internal human conflicts common in contemporary contexts of crisis — such as the post-pandemic landscape, global geopolitical instability, and threats to food security. Adopting a model of pastoral discourse² characteristic of “evangelical styles” (Patriota, 2003), Pablo quotes biblical passages to address everyday themes, utilizing a projected vocal tone that mirrors oratorical styles prevalent in evangelical settings. For instance, one video citing Isaiah 43:13 garnered over 300,000 likes. His content follows a standardized formula, almost invariably beginning with the phrase: “And the word of God for your life is . . .” He then introduces a biblical passage, contextualizing it through interpretations of common struggles such as anxiety, loneliness, and grief. We highlight a significant escalation in engagement: while his inaugural video in 2022 received just over 2,100 interactions, a post from October 2025 secured over 308,000 likes. This represents a staggering increase in the volume of interactions over a span of roughly three years.

The influencer offers visually compelling content, driven both by his own aesthetic appeal — as a young, athletic figure — and by his selection of outdoor locations that provide a serene contrast to the visually cluttered imagery of urban centers. Pablo connects with his audience by adopting the

- 2 Paraphrasing Mariano (1998), Patriota (2003, p. 31) characterizes the oratorical style of religious leaders as utilizing a methodology of “aggressive proselytism.” In the contemporary digital landscape, this approach has effectively dissolved “sectarian boundaries,” facilitating a form of outreach that transcends traditional denominational constraints.

relatable attire of his peers — typically T-shirts and shorts — while conveying an optimistic message designed to help followers navigate personal hardships. Although he lacks institutional authority, his use of charismatic discourse and an oratorical style effectively mimics the speech patterns of traditional religious leaders. This formula is visibly successful, mobilizing a high level of engagement and consistent interaction from his followers.

This study employs netnography to analyze the digital discourse of @Opablotinoco on Instagram from 2022 to 2025. The research combines a longitudinal observation of the profile's content with a theoretical revision of the symbolic market. Data collection focused on the influencer's oratorical style and visual aesthetics, utilizing two representative screenshots to demonstrate key engagement metrics and the "nature-centric" branding of the posts. This qualitative approach allows for a direct comparison between digital charisma and traditional religious materiality.

From Physical Materiality to Digital Spirituality

Before the advent of the internet, a traditional preacher disseminated messages of faith through door-to-door visits, the distribution of pamphlets, or street preaching — practices defined by a physical, localized religious adherence. While the underlying missionary logic bears some resemblance to "Opablotinoco's" Instagram's activity, the traditional preacher's presence was anchored in physical public spaces and tied explicitly to a specific institutional or "material" religious

identity. This distinguishes them sharply from contemporary faith influencers. In the digital environment, the approach shifts toward a “spiritualistic” framework,³ where the message is detached from physical infrastructure and institutional branding, favoring a de-territorialized, fluid presence.

Silva (2024) analyzes the practices of religious leaders on social media, offering conclusions that resonate with the central issues of this study. As she notes, “Even if a digital influencer shares content related to Catholicism, this does not necessarily constitute an act of evangelization.” This insight is essential for understanding the current transformations within the religious landscape. As exemplified by Opablotinoco — and thousands of others across Instagram and TikTok — these messages often lack clear institutional affiliation. Their primary objective does not appear to be traditional proselytization; instead, their activity is structured around a “Christian-based self-help” logic. Because these influencers operate without institutional oversight, their discourse is not static; they maintain the autonomy to alter their message at any moment, guided exclusively by their own volition and the demands of the digital market.

- 3 This conceptual duality between materiality and spirituality is grounded in the work of Philip Butler (2022), specifically his exploration of “Digital Spirituality” as a technology of resistance. While Butler applies this framework to distinct sociocultural contexts, this article adapts the dichotomy to analyze the competition between institutional religious structures and unmediated digital discourse.

The practices of such influencers align with Hervieu-Léger's (2000) theory regarding "fragmented" churches. Writing in the years preceding the ubiquitous rise of digital networks — and referring specifically to Christianity — Hervieu-Léger posits not the demise of religion, but rather a process of "metamorphosis," wherein individual religiosity displaces traditional institutional structures. Corroborating the case study presented here, the author states: "The emphasis has been on change and fragmentation. Fluidity and mobility are the keywords in modern religion, which finds itself in a world that is pluralistic through and through; and the metaphor used *ad nauseam* to describe the pattern which religion has assumed in this context is that of a symbolic market" (Hervieu-Léger, 2000, p. 163). This conceptualization of religion as a constituent element of a "symbolic market" illuminates how modern faith practices must compete — both directly with other religious entities and indirectly with secular organizations — within a dynamic and fluid marketplace.

Final Thoughts

The rise of the Faith Influencer lends support to the notion of a transformative trend within the landscape of religiosity. Silva (2024) further discusses "spirituality as a political strategy to mobilize followers," as well as a "modern spiritual battle" unfolding across "digital frontiers, fostering hostility among religious groups and polarization." At this juncture, it can be argued that digital networks function as indirect competitors to traditional

religions, acting as a significant catalyst in this process of metamorphosis. Social networks have established themselves as a vast marketplace, hosting thousands of professionalized profiles. They represent a genuine business model driving a digital economy that generates new avenues for employment and monetization — a “source of income and wealth accumulation” (Teixeira and Leal, 2025, p. 45).

While religions are materialistic institutions — defined by temples, employees, managers, physical assets, and optimized infrastructures — the spirituality present in the discourse of religious influencers competes with these materialities. The digital discourse of spirituality does not require religious affiliation, nor does it require the individual to possess specific goods or be in a specific location. Ultimately, it allows for a connection with the sacred without the mediation of traditional religious institutions.

Religious messages serve as fuel for numerous accounts that address spirituality, aiming to capture the interest of internet users in the current attention economy, where individuals create digital content to feed social media timelines and aspire to become famous digital influencers with monetized profiles. By itself, accessing faith through social media and outside the religious domain is already a change of paradigm. When social media competes with religions and their traditional methods of attracting and maintaining believers through ecclesiastical discourse and the infrastructure of temples, the spirituality present in the discourse of religious influencers

stands in opposition to the materialities of traditional religions.

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Colleen Ahern

Reading Tarot as a Practice of Resistance

Reading tarot offers a way to confront complex problems while simultaneously cultivating hope for the future. It is a counter-practice that rejects familiar formations in the pursuit of novel configurations. Tarot challenges readers to avoid attaching hopes to a fixed outcome and to constantly reinterpret cues based on new contexts. Every tarot reading is an opportunity to rewrite your story. With every card you pull, plotlines shift, new characters enter. Each reading welcomes you to choose which narratives to commit to, which ones to reject, and which ones to try on for size. Every card is a new chance to question preconceived notions and to envision more just futures. To read tarot is to play in the realm of possibilities. Step back and let the cards speak among themselves. Look for meaning within and between them. Allow the cards to speak to you and through you. Invite the insights of other practitioners into your readings as a declaration of collective authority. Ask questions of tarot that refuse the status quo. Use your deck

to lay out your vision for a better world. Coax from the cards possibilities you have yet to consider. In these ways, tarot can serve as a technology of collective transformation. An ever-evolving hybrid of game, spiritual tool, conversation partner, and storytelling aid, tarot has long been lauded for its transformative capabilities. Today, it is a catalyst for critical, creative, and cultural revolutions. Will you heed tarot's call to do media differently? What changes will you cultivate through your practice?

The Hermit

Affirmation

My practice is a place of refuge.

Description

The Hermit welcomes you to come home to yourself. A reminder to tend to your inner sanctum, The Hermit invites you to treat both the home and the imagination as reservoirs of wisdom.



The Hermit (2025).

Ace of Wands

Affirmation

My practice connects me to my hidden power.

Description

A garden scene is dismantled and reassembled, highlighting how symbols of power are hidden throughout everyday life. The powerful unicorn evokes the magician's wand, remarking on the inextricable link between magic, myth, and modern fantasy aesthetics.



Ace of Wands (2025).

Queen of Pentacles

Affirmation

My practice gives me confidence to create.

Description

The Queen of Pentacles explores the broad spectrum of materiality, including textiles and creative technology. They weave together traditional and contemporary techniques, acknowledging the complex reality that even the most ancestral art forms take place in extractive contexts and are often mediated through digital forms.



Queen of Pentacles (2026).

Ace of Swords

Affirmation

My practice helps me to speak with clarity and conviction.

Description

The Ace of Swords asks you to consider the relationship between language, technology, and violence. A revolutionary piece of communication technology that changed the very nature of speaking and listening, this phonograph loudly announces its arrival with an unsettling distortion of familiar phenomenon.



Ace of Swords (2026).

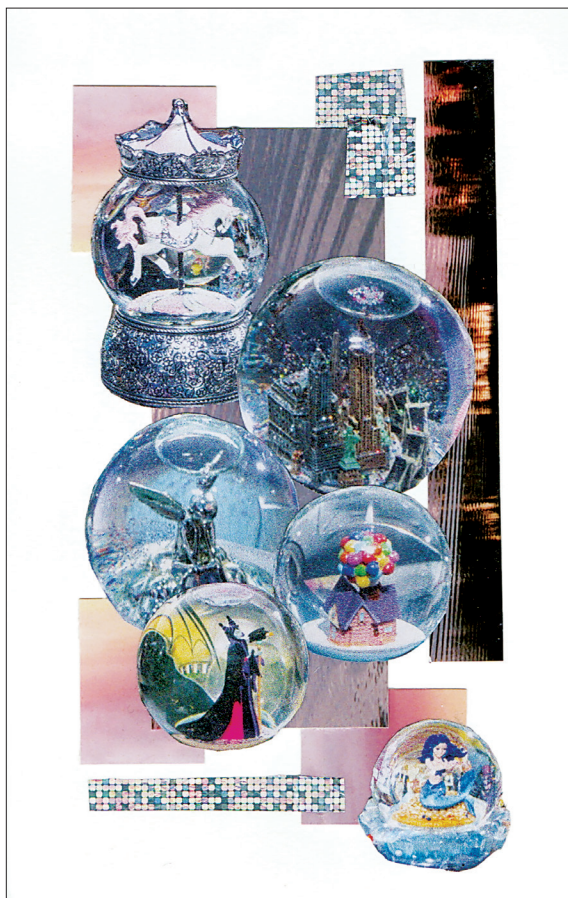
Six of Cups

Affirmation

My practice treats my most tender parts with care.

Description

The Six of Cups is an invitation to connect with your inner child, to identify the most vulnerable parts of yourself and tend to them with compassion. Cultivating this practice makes it easier to extend this same kindness to others.



Six of Cups (2026).

The World

Affirmation

My practice brings me perspective and reminds me every day that I am enough.

Description

Often representing the end of a road, The World offers a moment of safety to step back and observe the parts of your story that have reached full bloom.



The World (2026).

Death

Affirmation

My practice holds space for grief.

Description

All living beings linger in the liminal space between birth and Death. This card is an invitation to contemplate the unknown and acknowledge those who have already crossed the threshold.



Death (2026).

The Winds

This story extends a brief piece of fiction that appears in my current book project. It is part of an ongoing practice of using fiction as a method for developing theory. I've found encouragement in the speculative work of Philip Butler, whose writing also appears in this issue, among others. By providing citations throughout, I also explore here a remark from the religion scholar Bruce Lincoln that has fascinated me throughout my career — that “scholarship is myth with footnotes.”¹

May the gusts and gales find you prepared.

You know by now, Abbess, why I write. I am pleading again for the release of my daughter Ulhar Zenefi Beholden from the order that binds us all as sisters. You also know what accords with the Winds' desire and what is good for the order. The

¹ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 209.

compact will acknowledge only your stamp to nullify her compact.²

At the time of Zene's birth, the order was our refuge. The country had just ended rightful citizenship, so one had to pay more than I could ever afford.³ The Lordists required that all their apostles have a designated father.⁴ Zene had none — not one worth mentioning — and I could not allow her to be claimed by some daughter-hungry apostle. Their apostles, you remember, roamed the rooftops of New City looking for people like us to abduct into their salvation.

I lived in a room near the top of a building with no guards or drones.⁵ Zene's birth came early, and for two weeks she had to remain in a hospital that my former citizenship would no longer cover. I had collapsed on my roof that night, and a neighbor

2 Primavera De Filippi, Morshed Mannan, and Wessel Reijers, "The Alegality of Blockchain Technology," *Policy and Society* 41, no. 3 (2022): 358–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puac006>; Samer Hassan and Primavera De Filippi, "Decentralized Autonomous Organization," *Internet Policy Review* 10, no. 2 (2021), <https://policyreview.info/glossary/DAO>.

3 Raymond Craib, *Adventure Capitalism: A History of Libertarian Exit, from the Era of Decolonization to the Digital Age* (PM Press, 2022); Peter Ludlow, ed., *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias* (MIT Press, 2001).

4 Veronica Beechey, "On Patriarchy," *Feminist Review* 3, no. 1 (1979): 66–82, <https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1979.21>.

5 Stephen Sims, "A Shakeup Is Coming for the Nation-State," *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2026.

found me and called the hospital where he had a subscription. He couldn't have asked or known if I did. There, the Winds led us to the order.

The doctors ripped me apart and tore Zene out. When I woke I was in a bed under a bright light, unable to move. But my body was no longer bursting with Zene inside, and I could turn my head enough to see her asleep in a steel bassinet next to me. I couldn't move enough to touch her before a shadow appeared at the door, then rushed toward me and blocked my view of her.

"Don't move," said the nurse, as if that would comfort me. I would learn this was Sister Ost. Back then her sisterhood was a secret, of course.⁶ She turned and picked up the baby, and it was she who first brought Zene into my arms, and she moved my arms to hold her. And then Ost's eyes drifted into mine and rested there.

"You aren't a subscriber," she said plainly.

She explained what I already knew — that my daughter and I were nameless, countryless orphans now, wards of the Caring Corporation. I remembered how I had meant the birth to go, how my room was all ready and friends were planning to help. But instead I was in this hospital. It had its

6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Stanford University Press, 2013); Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton University Press, 2010), <http://archive.org/details/mysterycultsofan0000bowd>.

own debtors' cells in the basement. The debtors made the food and cleaned the beds.⁷

Ost then began whispering about the Winds that had brought me here, and how beautiful and wise they were. Then she put gentle Zene back in the bassinet and left.

An hour later she returned with supper, then stayed with me while I ate, feeding Zene with a bottle. She put my daughter back in my arms, which I had re-learned to control. She asked me the baby's name, and I told her. I had prepared that, too. She smiled, and then she began making a soft whistle through her lips. It was my first Wind sitting. I began to shed my terror.

As I regained my strength during those weeks, Ost stayed with me, helping me begin to feed and hold Zene. When the doctors were gone and Zene slept, she instructed me about the Winds. With each Wind sitting, my strength returned. Unlike the dogmas of the Lordists, the Winds appeared to me as a simple and forthright teaching—a true one, which asked nothing of us but to live in consonance with breeze and storm alike.⁸

My fears returned the day I heard a doctor saying to Sister Ost that it was time for me to go. When the

7 David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Melville House, 2011).

8 Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (Yale University Press, 2008).

doctor left she turned toward me and opened the wallet on her screen and showed me the symbol of the order—a signed compact with the Winds.⁹

“This can get you out of here,” she whispered. She assured me that we would have safety in the order together, as mother and daughter. The hospital would never know what paid the bills.¹⁰

That night I signed for both of us. People signed a lot of compacts in those days, not knowing what would turn out to have any real weight. But for me this was real and true. I wanted to blow with the Winds.

I signed us to the order in good conscience and by necessity. Zene and I lived under the sisterhood’s care and served it as we could. I became a midwife myself and brought hundreds of new mothers under our protection. We always practiced our daily sitting with sisters everywhere in the world.¹¹

9 Youssef El Faqir, Javier Arroyo, and Samer Hassan, “An Overview of Decentralized Autonomous Organizations on the Blockchain,” *Proceedings of the 16th International Symposium on Open Collaboration*, August 25, 2020, 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3412569.3412579>.

10 Jørgen Møller, “The Cycle of Monasticism: Understanding the Nature of Medieval Economic and Political Innovation,” *Politics and Religion* 17, no. 4 (2024): 674–83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048324000300>.

11 Nathan Schneider, “Can Monasteries Be a Model for Reclaiming Tech Culture for Good?” *The Nation*, August 27, 2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/can-monasteries-be-model-reclaiming-tech-culture-good/>.

Zene grew to become a Rose of the Wayfinders. Thanks to our discipline and her time at Tailwind University she became the scientist the world now knows, the discoverer of the Beruth Channel. This knowledge persuaded even the Lordists to redirect their turbines and protect the Northern Stream, the basis of weather patterns that feed and comfort a billion people of many faiths.¹² Who else has loved the Winds as Zene has?

You would not know it from the order.

The higher she has blown, the harder the order has tried to cling to her. It is as if we could own her and possess her, the way the country used to do.

No longer does the order seem to remember the simple wisdom that I first learned and have taught. When I joined, we worked secretly in the hospitals of others. Now we sisters have become powerful, controlling many preserves and hospitals. The teaching has meanwhile become crowded with the Yellow Storm obsession.¹³ I think we know it's ridiculous, but it lures people's attention away from the Lordists' ranting. Now we have fallen for our own tricks. And in the order's longing for apocalyptic purity, it is demanding that my Zene

12 Jaime B. Palter, "The Role of the Gulf Stream in European Climate," *Annual Review of Marine Science* 7, nos. Volume 7, 2015 (2015): 113–37, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-marine-010814-015656>.

13 Finn Brunton, "The Financial Millennium," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, March 15, 2024, 0, <https://doi.org/10.16995/zygon.11011>.

deny where the winds have brought her, as if a sister is all she is or capable of being.

The order has threatened to call the debt function on the compact, demanding the repayment of all it has given and all she is worth, under threat of drone swarms. We are listening to the code of the compact more closely than to the Winds.¹⁴

This is about more than the compact. We see the lands where she has become chief, and we want them for our preserves. Those are the lands of her ancestors, the Mala, and the Mala have taken it back.¹⁵ New City is gone; Malalai is in its place. The Winds blow freely there again, and yet our order wants to govern them. We see her hair blowing wildly during her speeches and tours, and we want to hold it down in a habit. We do not recognize her sons only because they are sons. Now they are Mala, which was not a compact possible when she was born. There were no habits then either, except

14 Primavera De Filippi, Morshed Mannan, and Wessel Reijers, "Blockchain Technology and the Rule of Code: Regulation via Governance," *George Washington Law Review* 92 (2024): 1229–80, <https://www.gwlr.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/92-Geo.-Wash.-L.-Rev.-1229.pdf>; Wessel Reijers, Iris Wuisman, Morshed Mannan, et al., "Now the Code Runs Itself: On-Chain and Off-Chain Governance of Blockchain Technologies," *Topoi*, ahead of print, December 17, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-018-9626-5>.

15 Vanessa Racehorse, "Achieving Climate Justice Through Land Back: An Overview of Tribal Dispossession, Land Return Efforts, and Practical Mechanisms for #LandBack," *Colorado Environmental Law Journal* 34, no. 2 (2023): 175–212.

those that other people's hospitals forced on our nurses. Now we force them on ourselves.

Zene appeared at the door of my cell yesterday. It had been months since I had been alone with her, without guards or one of her sons halfheartedly playing under us. They live in such fear that they never seem to lose themselves in anything.

"*Abla*," she began, and then reamed me as usual for not learning to speak Mala.¹⁶ Her boots still had the dust of outer Malaland on them, and she looked at me with the same intensity I used to have before I learned Wind sitting. But all the sitting didn't take it from her. Without a pause she went on about how they had been fortifying the borders, setting up checkpoints to scan for Lordists and other infiltrators.

This pained me, because it was the collapse of borders that marked the end of the country.¹⁷ Our generation still remembers how that felt. But keeping the Lordists out is the only way to keep the Mala mountains from being mined, the air clean,

16 Peter Morin, "Tahltan Knowledge as a Form of Language Performance: Reflections on my Beginnings with Indigenous Performance Art," in *Breaking Protocol*, ed. Maria Hupfield (Inventory Press, 2023).

17 Nabil Echchaibi, "(B)Orders of Immobility: Politics of Movement and Poetics of the Frontier," *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 5, no. 2 (2020): 283–311, <https://doi.org/10.30965/23642807-00502002>.

and the people safe.¹⁸ Malaland is like one of our preserves, except people get to live in it and enjoy it.

Then she turned to her business with me. "Get me out of the order," she demanded. "Get the order out of me."¹⁹

I did remind her of all the order has given both of us. I held my strength with Wind sitting while she raged, but it broke me when she took out her screen and showed a picture of Tire, her older son, with gashes on his forehead. It was the deep, repeated marks of a drone blade, and in his arms below was the damaged culprit, a machine with the mark of the Wind. It had followed her into Malaland and decided the boy was a threat to her.²⁰

18 Neil M. Dawson, Brendan Coolsaet, Eleanor J. Sterling, et al., "The Role of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Effective and Equitable Conservation," *Ecology and Society* 26, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12625-260319>; Racehorse, "Achieving Climate Justice Through Land Back"; David Treuer, "Return the National Parks to the Tribes," Ideas, in "May 2021," special issue, *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/05/return-the-national-parks-to-the-tribes/618395/>.

19 Trent J. MacDonald, *The Political Economy of Non-Territorial Exit: Cryptosecession* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019); Mark E. Warren, "Voting with Your Feet: Exit-Based Empowerment in Democratic Theory," *The American Political Science Review* 105, no. 4 (2011): 683-701, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23275347>.

20 Antti Tarvainen, "The Modern/Colonial Hell of Innovation Economy: Future as a Return to Colonial Mythologies," *Globalizations*, ahead of print, March 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2022.2048460>.

Things like this happen all the time, and worse. Last month the Knights sent a swarm into a Mala village and burned down a house. A Lordist raid abducted a family near the border. All the faiths seem to think they can do what they want with Mala people, and take the land. They think the universe gave it to them, whether for a mine or a preserve.

Everyone seems to be forming a country again, and so soon after we rid ourselves of that. We have our order only because the countries are gone. Now the order claims to own us just as much as countries did.²¹

I made compacts for Zene with other faiths, too, you know. The order was practical and sensible then, and so was I. I bound her with the Servants, who were active in neighborhoods like ours, always hiding from Lordist drones. They were less sensible than the order, more prone to fanatical dogmas, but they at least would recognize my daughter as mine. Now they have drone swarms, too. Their training is crude, and they will not honor the sanctity of our preserves. But they protect their people. Zene is one of them.

We tore down the country so that people could be free to choose their faith and live within it.²² Now

21 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961; Grove Weidenfeld, 1963).

22 Rachel Lara van der Merwe, *We Are Not South African: Mediating National Identity in a Postcolonial and Postapartheid State* (Rutgers University Press, 2026).

we are denying our children the same right we
secured for ourselves. The kind hand of Sister Ost
has become the blade of a drone on my grandson's
forehead.

I submit myself to the breath of the order. I am a
sister until the world is still. But the Winds have
taken my daughter elsewhere. Let them blow. Let
her go.

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