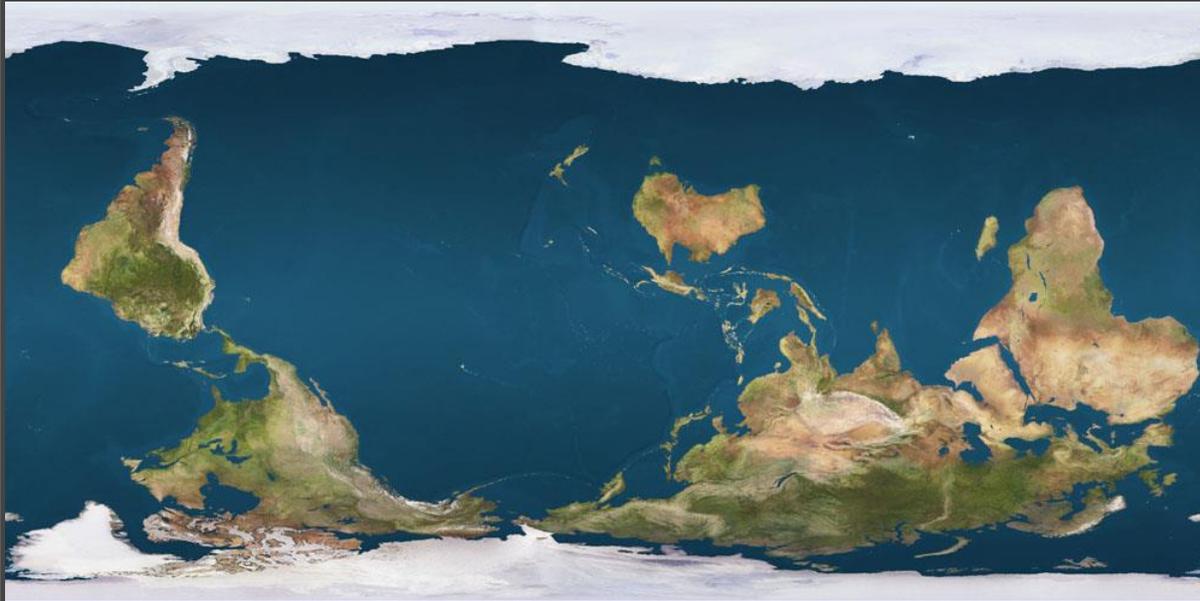


# Experiments in Abolitionist Dream Mapping:



## Abolition in the Nursery?

**W**hat we love sensitizes us to notice different features of the world.

Usually, on Friday nights each of my two young children is allowed to choose a show they would like us to watch together. Despite care in selecting the range of shows from which they can pick, I am regularly struck by ways that even stories told in the nursery can set us on distortive and unhelpful paths. Many people are aware that, in recent years, major film corporations and publishers have been widely criticized for dehumanizing caricatures and culturally insensitive representations contained in the stories they produce and market. The Disney+ channel has added an advisory message before several of its films warning viewers that these programs contain racial stereotypes. While there is a wealth of more diverse and inclusive stories being widely distributed today, companies continue to profit from stories that perpetuate sexist and racist stereotypes.

From an abolitionist perspective, there are also much less interrogated assumptions in children's media and stories, which orient our imaginations in unhelpful directions. For example, one day, my children happened to select episodes from two different popular children's cartoons that turned out to involved basically the same plot, and a plot that was recognizable to me from other stories, as well. In both programs, a child and a creature friend are playing together outside their home and accidentally send a ball over a neighbor's fence. The neighbor is a cranky old man who will not allow the children into his yard to retrieve the ball. In the programs, the children try to navigate the challenge of retrieving their toy. One child tries to sneak over the fence without touching the ground, reasoning that this will mean technically avoiding being "in" the yard. This plan fails and the children ask forgiveness for trespassing. They notice that the man is lonely and invite him to join them in their ball game. While there is much to be commended in these series generally, and even in these particular episodes, the stories include several embedded assumptions about land and property that are never interrogated, and which might even be taken as the shows' implicit lesson.

Living an abolitionist life as a parent involves, among other things, cultivating practices of attention and imagination, developing sensitivities to the narrative webs that distort our relationality and maintain carceral worlds. What kind of responsibilities do we have to place and to each other? How might love lead us to imagine richer worlds of care and connection, where people belong to the land and carry responsibilities to care for, not possess, it? In addition to seeking out and sharing indigenous stories, such as *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*,<sup>1</sup> *Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids*,<sup>2</sup> and *The Gift Is in the Making: Anishinaabeg Stories*,<sup>3</sup> I have also begun to experiment with creating my own storytelling circles for kindergarten or early elementary children that would raise awareness about culturally embedded assumptions around property and our relationship to land and place.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children*, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Leitich Smith, *Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for Kids*, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *The Gift Is in the Making: Anishinaabeg Stories*, 2013.



*Sitting in a circle, I spread a blanket out on the floor. I then reveal felt animals (two monkeys, a tiger and an elephant), a tiny ball, and a set of magnetic blocks that may stand as a wall or fence. I begin the story with three animals on one side of the wall playing ball together, and the other animal just over the wall. When the ball is accidentally kicked over the wall, I ask the children "what happens next?" Without further prompting, they tell a story (repeating the cultural narrative they have already internalized), in which the lone animal initially keeps the ball, but then returns it and the creatures play together. Drawing on some of Augusto Boal's techniques in Theatre of the Oppressed,<sup>4</sup> we reimagine the story together several times. In each retelling, the children begin as a different character. At any point in the story, anyone can pause the telling and take the part of a different character. Everyone uses their position in the story as a point from which to create a new alternative. Often this takes paths I don't anticipate, as when one of the animals transforms into a robot and begins jumping on the other animals. We talk about the assumptions informing our stories, especially about the relationships between the animals, possessions, and place. Sometimes we alter the initial conditions. In one iteration, I lay the blanket across my chest and set the scene upon it. We start the story again. The children erupt in laughter when one of the animals argues that the fence means half of my body is their property. Amid our laughter we talk about things that can't be owned.*

Telling, dismantling, and reimagining stories, provides opportunities for children to express their agency in playful ways, while considering consequences and unnoticed alternatives together. The exercise helped each of us to take a variety of perspectives and become more conscious of our taken for granted assumptions. Redirecting the story creatively and co-operatively enabled us to explore strategies for generating different outcomes.

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<sup>4</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride, 1993.

## Abolitionist Dream Mapping: Unlocking Dreams Old and New

The Abolitionist Dream Mapping project has provided me with opportunities to continue to learn from the dreams, visions, practices, and imaginative flights of my abolitionist heroes and co-conspirators. Angela Davis, Thomas Mathiesen, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Dean Spade, Joy James, Mariame Kaba, Dylan Rodríguez, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, and many others have generated analysis and lived examples that have helped me to make sense of my world and attempt to live an abolitionist life within it.

Research during the pandemic has also deepened my understanding and appreciation for practices of restorative justice and peacebuilding, circle processes, capacity building, mutual aid, care work, refusal, conflict transformation, healing ceremonies and rituals of lament. I have been able to practice, falteringly and with struggle, care work and processes of individual and community formation that I hope may help in small ways to prefigure and sustain work toward interconnected flourishing.



While I prefer to center and amplify the work of others, the Abolition Dream Mapping framework has also given me an opportunity to experiment with how to open up my own imagination, both through contemplation and in collaboration with my peers and community. I have tried to make imagination a practice myself. I have played with parable/fable (re)making, stations of remembrance and mourning, and practices of sabbath and jubilee.

My experiments have also involved creating activities that educators might use at various levels (not only university, but also high school, community

groups, grade school, and even kindergarten) to stimulate social imagination for creating alternatives to colonial and carceral power. I explored point of departure exercises, such as journal reflections in response to prompts, including: *What is your first memory of policing and prisons? What were you raised to believe about policing? What did your parents/community communicate about prisons as you were growing up? When was a moment in your life that you really had to face what you think about policing, punishment, or prisons?* I played with different kinds of circle processes, problem posing activities, and storytelling approaches.

In what follows, I describe in more detail two of the workshops that I developed as experiments in abolitionist dream mapping in the spaces and communities that were within my reach. The workshops are alike in using art as a bridge between apprehension and comprehension. In these sessions, I attempted to raise consciousness about deeply held and uninterrogated assumptions, while also playing with practices that might contribute to shared dreaming and world-making.

In my judgment, the workshop on metaphor is valuable in particular contexts. The participants in early iterations of the workshop had already completed significant study and reflection about social justice and theories of social change before they attended the workshop. For abolitionist who feel stuck in certain patterns, experiments like these can productively force new associations and possible openings. As I was developing this workshop on metaphor, I had in mind those already involved in abolition. As I considered the workshops applicability in other contexts, I recognized that this experiment depends upon certain sensitivities being cultivated in advance, such that the metaphors posited can also be evaluated thoughtfully and without ignorance of ongoing injustices and systemic violence. Without appropriately developed sensitivities to such matters, seeming newness may simply create new harms by perpetuating uninterrogated and damaging assumptions. The mapping workshop (described further below) seems to me to offer a more widely accessible entry point for talking about the local and the global, our interconnection, what we love, and the kind of world(s) we want to build together.

## **Workshop: Structural Metaphors of Abolition**

Imagining and prefiguring a world without prisons is an essential abolitionist praxis. Prison abolitionists continue to invoke imagination with urgency and to speak of the significant challenge that confronts them in trying to imagine such a world. Mariame Kaba, for example, calls for a “jailbreak of the imagination.”<sup>5</sup> Aaron Rose invites abolitionists to “feel for the edges of our imagination,” cultivating shared practices that expand what we can imagine and produce a more helpful range of conditioned responses to interpersonal and systemic harm.<sup>6</sup>

There are many entry points into explorations of individual and collective imagination. One way to gain a sense of the larger patterns in which particular problems arise and ultimately shift some of these patterns, says John Paul Lederach, is by identifying and analyzing the metaphors that orient individuals and communities embedded in a situation.<sup>7</sup> My interest in metaphor includes how it contributes to the formation of particular sensitivities and insensitivities, and to various ways of being in and making the world. I am also curious about metaphor’s capacity to disrupt patterns of apathy, injustice and containment, breaking open new possibilities for life.

In the midst of my own research on imagination and social change, I developed a workshop exploring metaphors that structure our experiences of abolition. I attempted to create processes that might help to disrupt well-worn paths of thought and create opportunities for serendipitous and salutary connections. During the COVID Pandemic, I had opportunities to present versions of this workshop online to undergraduate and graduate students at Queen's University. The first Zoom session was offered for students taking a course on critical perspectives on social diversity. This was followed by a workshop for Minorities and Philosophy (MAP).

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<sup>5</sup> see <https://truthout.org/articles/a-jailbreak-of-the-imagination-seeing-prisons-for-what-they-are-and-demanding-transformation/>

<sup>6</sup> see <http://imaginealternatives.tumblr.com/> see also “What To Do Instead of Calling the Police: A Guide, A Syllabus, A Conversation” <http://www.aaronxrose.com/blog/alternatives-to-police#>

<sup>7</sup> John Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation: Clear Articulation Of The Guiding Principles By A Pioneer In The Field*, 2003, ch5.



My goals for the workshop included helping participants to: (1) appreciate the influence metaphor plays in perception, thinking, and action; (2) reflect on some of the metaphors that we employ around abolition and decolonization; and (3) consider what the adoption of new metaphors might disclose.

After acknowledgements, a short centering exercise and warm-up, I asked each participant to build an ABC list, by writing down 1-2 words that come to mind for each letter of the alphabet.

## ABC List

A - (Alchemist, Anvil, Avalanche, Archives, Acorn...)

B -

C -

D -

E -

F -

We set these lists aside for a time, to consider ways metaphor influences our thinking and action. Some participants came to the workshop having already read decolonizing works in which metaphor features prominently, such as Leanne Simpson's *A Short History of the Blockade* and/or Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang's *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, and I drew attention to these authors for those who had not. Tuck and Yang's analysis of certain problematic deployments of metaphor is an important reference for any reflection on metaphor's potentials and limits with regard to abolitionist decolonization. Simpson's powerful reframing of blockade is a brilliant and inspiring example of imagination and retrieval. By drawing attention to beaver dams, Simpson shifts the sense of blockade from one of simple refusal, to something astonishing, generative, healing, and creative.

A slight shift in metaphor helps us to see something that was there all along, but had remained largely unperceived.

Conceptual metaphors are pervasive. They structure how we perceive and think and act to such a large extent that the metaphors we employ regularly go unnoticed. Since the 1980s, cognitive scientists, philosophers, and linguists have been demonstrating that metaphors are fundamental elements of our cognitive lives. Using a series of slides and examples, I offered a brief introduction to conceptual metaphor which paved the way for a group exercise. I drew participants attention to the work of Paul Ricoeur, George Lakoff, Mark Turner, Benjamin K. Bergen, Mark Johnson, Douglas Hofstadter, John Pollack, James Geary, and others. Lakoff and Johnson explain that the essence of conceptual metaphor is "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."<sup>8</sup> This seeing as, or through, rather than sorting into fixed categories, is at the core of human cognition. It shapes how we think about everything, including freedom and flourishing.

## Identifying Dominant Conceptual Metaphors Related to Abolition

With a space of about a minute between each word, I read four words aloud (also showing them on a shared screen). I asked participants to rapidly write down any images that came to mind for each word: prisons, police, abolition, and decolonization.

We then moved to breakout rooms, where participants were able to respond to prompts, such as the following: *Share images that came to mind and identify areas of overlapping association. Were there commonalities? What patterns do you notice? Did any images surprise you? Do certain words have more positive or more negative associations? What do you think are sources for these associations? Do you notice any patterns in the sources for certain words? What global metaphors might be structuring your associations?*

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<sup>8</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 2003, p5.

We came back together and the small groups shared highlights of their discussions. We talked about our collective metaphors related to the terms. After inviting observations, comments, or questions, I offered for the larger group's consideration that the metaphors we use reveal much about who we are. Owen Barfield, a twentieth century philologist, argues that metaphors persist in our language. "Every modern language, with its thousands of abstract terms and its nuances of meaning and association," says Barfield, "is apparently nothing, from beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors."<sup>9</sup> Exploring the history of particular metaphors reveals much about the development of our collective imaginary. The metaphors we use also say a great deal about our individual experience. Poet and novelist Ocean Vuong says figurative language, when done well, creates "the DNA of seeing" and a strong metaphor "can enact the autobiography of sight." Vuong reflects: "what does it say about a person who sees the stars in the night sky – as exit wounds? What does it say about their history, their worldview, their relationship to beauty and violence? All this can be garnered in the metaphor itself... How we see the world reveals who we are. And metaphors explicate that site."<sup>10</sup> The metaphors we use reveal a great deal about who we are, our perceptions and what lies behind them.

At the same time, new metaphors have the capacity to unsettle and disrupt old habits and formulas by introducing new possibilities and connections. James Geary reminds us that metaphor is not just the detection of patterns, but the creation of patterns. Geary writes "metaphor systematically disorganizes the common sense of things... and reorganizes it into uncommon combinations."<sup>11</sup> Metaphor builds (discloses) connections between things we know and things we don't, as such, it can lead to new insights and discoveries. Paul Ricoeur likewise argues that metaphor is about semantic innovation. A metaphor creates clashes between distant semantic fields, forcing the reader to new interpretations and perceptions. Ricoeur helps us to appreciate that a metaphor, such as *the community is a roadmap* always involves both *a seeing as* and *as not*. Every metaphor is untrue as a simple reduction. There is always a remainder. But every metaphor, even those that initially strike us as quite strange, also expose particular patterns and possibilities into which we might choose to live.

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<sup>9</sup> Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, 1973, p.63.

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/stories/ocean\\_vuong/2450390457495446707/](https://www.instagram.com/stories/ocean_vuong/2450390457495446707/)

<sup>11</sup> James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*, 2012.



## Putting New Things In Reach

What does it mean to move from the conceptual metaphors we currently inhabit to new framing metaphors? Vuong, Ricoeur, Geary and the others mentioned above help us to see how shifting metaphors can create fresh connections and put new things in reach. Metaphors and analogies always involve both similarities and dissimilarities: The man is a baby. The man is an adolescent. The man is an ass. The man is a snake. Each metaphor shifts the criticism, along with the entailing assumptions and analyses. Considering several metaphors alongside one another may lead to increased awareness and insight, possibly different metaphors, as well. Owen Barfield writes: “There may be times when what is most needed is, not so much a new discovery or a new idea as a different ‘slant’; I mean a comparatively slight readjustment in our way of looking at the things and ideas on which attention is already fixed.”<sup>12</sup> Even a slight shift in metaphor may disrupt, or differently integrate, our patterns of thinking and action.

Returning to our ABC lists, I asked participants to move through the alphabet, considering for a moment what might be disclosed if the words they had chosen became metaphors for abolition. Where associations did not strike a person as interesting or relevant or helpful, I encouraged them to simply move to the next word, spending more time where metaphors helped them to see a distinctive pattern or appreciate something new.

In small group breakout rooms, attendees were invited to share their responses to the following prompt: *Which association/image/metaphor presents the most interesting connection in your mind?* The groups reported back on this, as well as new images or associations that arose

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<sup>12</sup> Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, 1988.

during conversations in the smaller groups. I also asked participants to type in the chat some of the possible metaphors for abolition that they found most interesting or exciting.<sup>13</sup>



Examples of possible new metaphors for abolition that came up in the sessions included: mothering, a unicycle, tending a garden, (un)settling, breaking chains, ice-cream, a hammer, bees, a tree frog, an alarm clock, roots, resuscitation, ecology, dandelions. We talked about some of these, and, in particular, about the things that different metaphors foreground or obscure. We discussed the merits and weaknesses of the exercise, and reflected together on what might result if we employed, or lived into, one of these metaphors.

I shared Roger Robinson's *Portable Paradise* and asked what we can discover by considering this poem as a metaphor for abolition? After reading the poem aloud, I left it on the screen and asked participants to take 1-2 minutes to sit with the poem. In breakout rooms, or directly in the larger group, participants discussed the poem, including the images, ideas, or phrases that spoke to them? We talked about what it means to carry paradise with you, how this might sustain collective work for liberation. We talked about the role of concealing and revealing. We talked about trauma, about ways that we have threatened what is dear to others, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Had we gathered in person, I might also have encouraged participants to draw images of any metaphors that struck them as particularly intriguing, provocative, or life-giving. After more experience collaborating with Zoom, I would now make use of Jamboard or similar software for developing a collection of metaphors visually together in real time.

possibility that our personal or collective paradise might be a source of harm to someone else.

We brought some of the metaphors that moved us into conversation with definitions of abolition given by Ruth Wilson Gilmore and other members of Critical Resistance.

The ABC list is just one tool for creating surprising connections, the usefulness of which can then be considered. Other approaches might be to use story cubes or a small box from which word cards can be drawn at random. I find the newness and serendipity of such exercises exciting. Raising unexpected connections can stimulate imagination and provide opportunities for individual and shared reflection on the commitments and metaphors that enliven us.



## Workshop: Mapping A Sense of Place and A Sense of Hope

**H**ow might we find orientation by attending to webs of connection and intimacy in the particular places and situations where we already live? The goal of this next workshop was to engage participants actively, increasing our sense of connection to place and to one another, as we all grow in our understanding of what it means to map our collective dreams.



During the COVID Pandemic, I had opportunities to present versions of this workshop online, first to members of the Abolitionist Dream Mapping Collective, and then in four separate workshops for local high school students.

Had we been able to meet in person, I would have supplied art materials for the workshop. Since we were working over Zoom, I invited participants to bring to the workshop art material they already had access to and would enjoy. A simple pen and notebook worked just fine where that is what participants had available. Larger, blank sheets of paper offered more space for exploration. Some participants used the opportunity to experiment with pencils, charcoal, pastels, watercolors, etc.

The first part of the workshop involved acknowledgements, a warm-up, and a brief introduction to alternative practices of mapping. This was followed by a time for sketching/map making. The final part of the workshop involved conversation about the experience and other possibilities for dream mapping together. Especially as the workshop was taking place over Zoom, I invited those present to participate in whatever ways may be available to them in the place and contexts where they might find themselves.



## Models of Dream Mapping

**W**hat does mapping entail? Are there aspects of mapping that are problematic for, or even antithetical to, abolition? What is at stake in particular practices of mapping and for whom? Such questions are central for our current project of abolitionist dream mapping.

For other groups, reflection on processes of mapping is no less relevant. How do we orient ourselves in the world by what we know and love? What traces of such orientation do we record, how, and for whom? What might we do if certain ways of mapping make invisible what we love and know about the world and ourselves? How can our mapping be more conscious, intentional, and (where appropriate) transparent? How can maps orient us to one another in more life giving, generative, and reciprocal ways?

After drawing attention to examples of mapping/story-telling here in Kingston, such as the Stones project (<https://www.stoneskingston.ca>), and inviting participants to bring other exciting projects/practices to the conversation, I shared slides and offered some explanation about conventions of modern maps. Most of us have become increasingly reliant upon web-based satellite maps, owned by Google or Apple, to find our way in the world. The authority and objectivity of modern maps is taken for granted to a large degree, and their particular biases are not foreground in our experience. I compared such maps with two other approaches to mapping. Awareness of different practices of mapping may help to inspire

an expanded sense of what dream mapping can be for us. It can also support more conscious and inclusive reflection about the assumptions and commitments informing our own practices.

## *Mappae Mundi*

I showed the participants an image of the *Hereford Mappa Mundi*, a large map created on the skin of a single calf around the year 1300. *Mappae mundi* are maps produced in the medieval period and with conventions that differ in several ways from those of modern maps. While the detail of the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* is striking -- it records over four hundred cities and towns from its time -- in several ways, the map is oriented differently than what we have been trained to expect. Jerusalem sits at the center of the map, and the top faces east (rather than north) where paradise, the garden of Eden, is depicted. The map also includes a host of images portraying stories and legends. The concern of the artist that created the *Hereford Mappa Mundi*, as well as those that commissioned it, was not to represent geographical and spatial relationships alone, but to map reality as they understood it in the largest sense. They tried to foreground dynamics and narratives that may seem irrelevant for, or remain invisible to, other forms of mapping. While we may bring different worldviews to our mapping projects, considering the *Hereford Mappa Mundi* alongside satellite maps can provoke our reflection about the assumptions we think should inform our dream making/mapping. What would it mean for abolitionist dream mapping to be centered on what we love and oriented toward horizons set by our individual and collective paradises?



## Common Ground // Parish Maps

Another alternative practice of mapping that might inspire and orient us comes from the U.K. based group, Common Ground. In 1986, Common Ground commissioned several artists to produce what it referred to as Parish Maps (<https://www.commonground.org.uk/parish-maps>). I described the project for workshop participants and shared images of some of the maps produced for it. The conventions of these community maps are quite different from those of maps registered to Apple or Google. For example, these maps do not maintain a fixed orientation or consistent scale. 'Parish' is used to describe a range, or scope, in which people feel a sense of familiarity and connection to place. Parrish maps are often filled with hints of personal experiences. This way of mapping is designed to emphasize locality and help communities to recognize what they value about the places they live. Maps produced for this purpose may be less helpful for other uses, including some forms of navigation and acquisition. Again, I asked participants to reflect on what they know and love. How might we place this love and knowledge at the center of our dream mapping? How can our individual and collective longings orient us in our wayfinding and truth telling?

## Sketching our own Dream Maps

I asked each participant to choose a place they love. We could also do this exercise for a shared locality; however, as we were participating from many different locations over Zoom, I encouraged each person to follow their heart and attention and whatever images might come up in the process. As entry points into this artistic exploration, I provided prompts: *What do I notice and love about this particular place that doesn't register on Google Maps? What would I miss most if it disappeared?*<sup>14</sup> I encourage participants not to worry about cartographic conventions. Whatever medium a participant happened to be using, I encouraged them to think of this work as a sketch, in the sense of being exploratory and unfinished.

As the participants worked, I continued to share my screen and scroll through images of the community maps. After participants had been sketching for a few minutes, and as they continued to work, I also read poems, such as *From Blossoms* by Li-Young Li, in hopes this might also inspire their dream mapping.

Depending on the size of the group, this was followed by discussion and sharing either in breakout rooms or directly in the larger group. Participants had an opportunity to share their maps, if they wanted to. Following this, there was a chance for anyone to share observations or questions about the activity. We talked about possibilities, practices, and problems entailed in dream mapping. We also discussed the importance of un-mapping, and considered particular practices of (un)mapping we find helpful and lifegiving.

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<sup>14</sup> These were drawn from a longer list of prompts developed in Common Ground's parish map project (<https://www.commonground.org.uk/places-people-parish-maps-%e2%80%a8by-sue-clifford/>).



While much more could be said, I hope something in the brief sketches of these experiments in abolitionist dream mapping might prompt further conversation about how to imagine well together, orienting ourselves around and toward what we love. I hope we can continue to learn together how to do this more critically, consciously, and hopefully. May we each be sensitive to ways that the things we love might be a source of harm to others and ourselves. While these experiments are imperfect, and offered only as a very minor supplement to more significant projects, I hope that sharing them will inspire a few readers to dream their own dreams, and schemes, and collaborations that herald our collective freedom.



Photo credits.

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