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Laboring Toward Liberation: Literature as a Tool of Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Creative works are often framed as a 'labor of love.' Literature, however, is produced by a person through many hours of work. Not only is creative writing a labor—it is a labor that can serve communities; the creation of literature can challenge readers to work toward liberation. This paper examines liberation and coalition building in fiction, with *A Minor Chorus* by Billy-Ray Belcourt, *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow, and *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* by Larry Mitchell serving as particular examples for analysis.

KEYWORDS
queer literature, LGBTQ, liberation, labor, coalitions, creative writing, radical imagination, fiction.

> "Nothing exists in a vacuum. A text—like a letter, a poem, a story, a piece of art—exists in a historical, social, and political context. All you have to do is look at when it was created and ask yourself, *What else was happening then?*"
>
> Maggie Smith, *We Could Make This Place Beautiful*

Radical Imagination & Community

Often, society is quick to dismiss stories as mere entertainment, a way to distract ourselves for a few hours and nothing more. In part, this comes from capitalist constructs that frame money as *the* signifier of value; art and literature are often circulated with little to no monetary profit for the artist/writer, especially in digital spaces.[1] Because of these cultural contexts, literature is frequently not linked to labor. Politics scholar Frederick Harry Pitts writes that "'social products' like creative services 'resist calculation' because they inhabit a 'commons' of knowledge unenclosable within the confines of private property, and beyond capital's capacity to manage and quantify. Value production 'no longer takes place primarily within the walls of the factory' but 'across the entire social terrain', immeasurable through conventional means" (par. 3). Because art is so closely linked with our social and cultural lives—both in its production and in its distribution—traditional confines of production (like a lab, a factory, or a retail store) do not apply in the same way. Even how literature is composed is not quantifiable, a combination of past experiences, years of expertise, and the ever-elusive quality of 'inspiration.'[2]

At best, creative works are framed as a 'labor of love.' Literature, however, is produced by a person through many hours of work. One would not likely say that a marine biologist should not be paid, even if they have a passion for the work. And people tend to place more value on the time of those in the sciences or technology fields. They are more likely to see funding to get the work itself to get from Point A to Point B (i.e. a capitalist, money-based demonstration of value).

But we can take this a step further, too. Not only is creative writing a labor—it is a labor that can serve communities. Novelist Daniel Heath Justice, writing from a queer and Indigenous

[1] Publishing search tool ChillSubs lists 3,067 literary magazines as of January 2024. Filtering these magazines by only those that pay writers narrows this list down to 863 magazines, and it's not uncommon for them to only pay $10, $15, or $20 per piece. Further filtering to magazines that pay and do not charge a reading fee narrows this list down to 677 literary magazines. In other words, only 22% of the thousands of literary magazines listed pay writers and don't charge a reading fee.

[2] It bears questioning whether part of the tech-realm interest in AI-as-creative comes from discomfort with these realities, as what artificial intellgience does can ostensibly be more reliably traced in terms of how output is achieved. Even this is an oversimplification, if for no other reason than AI programs have to 'learn' to write, and this 'expertise' is often not counted toward the overall value.

perspective, argues that "story makes meaning of the relationships that define who we are and what our place is in the world; it reminds us of our duties, our rights and responsibilities, and the consequences and transformative possibilities of our actions. It also highlights what we lose when those relationships are broken or denied to us, and what we might gain from even partial remembrance" (75). Literature, as a part of the humanities, is one way to study what it means to be human—as Justice puts it, "our duties, our rights and responsibilities" and our relationships. But he keys into this idea of the "consequences and transformative possibilities of our actions," which begins to make connections between fiction and the real world. This positions literature as something which can cause change, even if only insofar as it demonstrates a different world in its fiction that we can work toward in our own reality. The literary texts analyzed here—*A Minor Chorus* by Billy-Ray Belcourt, *The Once and Future Witches* by Alix E. Harrow, and *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* by Larry Mitchell—will provide three examples of how liberation and coalition building can be incorporated into fiction. Ultimately, this study will examine how fiction holds the potential not only for personal, local-level change (i.e. subversion), or even for systemic single-axis change (i.e. reform or revolution), but also for offering perspectives on what more inclusive and intersectional liberation could look like.

In *A Minor Chorus,* Billy-Ray Belcourt's narrator wonders if "rather than change the world,"

> the writing of a novel… enabled one to practice a way of life that negated the brutalities of race, gender, hetero- and homonormativity, capital, and property… a novel could index a longing for something else, for a different arrangement of bodies, feelings, and environments, one in which human flourishing wasn't inhibited for the marginalized, which seemed as urgent an act of rebellion as any. (25)

While Belcourt's narrator focuses on the novel form, this "act of rebellion" can be expanded more broadly to other forms, like the essay, poetry, or hybrid work. For example, creative writers Margot Singer and Nicole Walker's *Bending Genres* includes chapters that link the essay with "a longing for something else" (Belcourt 25), as well as hybrid forms. Gender and Sexuality Studies scholar Kristin LaFollette claims that "Poetry confronts dominant social structures like patriarchy and uses language to question and break down ideologies that have oppressed women throughout history. In doing so, poetry acts as a 'blueprint' for social action and change; women can articulate the issues, push back against the oppression, and create space for activist movements" (179).

Literature can uphold hegemonic values and the status quo. At its most radical and exciting, however, the creation of literature can challenge readers to work toward liberation. Sociologist Max Haiven and anthropologist Alex Khasnabish argue that "the ability to believe

that things can be better" and "the ability to imagine the world, social institutions and human (and non-human) relationships otherwise is vital to any radical project" (iii). We are limited by our imaginations. Not all people think true change is possible. In fact, most people probably don't. (This is, it should be noted, by design—the system perpetuates because it is made to seem inevitable.)

Artist Natalie Loveless writes about "art with an activist impulse," which "offers speculative frames through which to *defamiliarize* and *reorganize* the local" (101). But it's possible to dismiss these kinds of imaginings as too radical, or as mere fantasy, or as overly idealistic. This is, after all, the cultural attitude toward many of the policies that would widely benefit society, such as free healthcare, universal income, free childcare, free (or even low-cost) college education, guaranteed housing, etc. We are limited not only by what we personally think is possible, but by what those around us think is possible due to a complex network of sociocultural factors. A system does not only come into being by *what it does*, but also by *what it makes seem impossible.* A system that's built to last often achieves this longevity by making that system seem inevitable, like the only possible way that the world could be. Our current societal systems create obstacles like capitalistic overwork, high-cost healthcare, and steep student debt, all of which make it difficult to even survive the world as it is, nonetheless imagine the world as it might otherwise be. In turn, working toward the world as it might otherwise be seems like a foolish endeavor, entirely out of reach within our lifetime.

Fiction offers an opportunity to imagine the world as it could be. It is not bound by practicalities of time and resources the way the real world is; it is not beholden to majority votes or political accountability; it does not require the same kind of slow-moving everyday labor that real-world change requires. Fiction has the freedom to imagine, to propose ideas and societies and systems as potential futurities if we desire them and if we work toward them. We will not wake up tomorrow to an equitable world. But we could potentially open a book right now where an equitable world has been established, and we could use what we learn (consciously or subconsciously) from this imagined world to start real-world work toward liberation. In *Art on My Mind,* race and feminism scholar bell hooks quotes Gender and Women's Studies scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha as writing that

> 'Liberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty. Displacement involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities, of pleasures, of intensities, of relations, which also implies the continuous renewal of a critical work that looks carefully and intensively at the very system of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance.' (XIV)

Naturally, literature alone cannot achieve real-world liberation, but what it can do is give us tools

to imagine what liberation might look like and how we might get there.

Acknowledging the Intersections

In Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus,* the narrator muses that

> the news coming out of North America as of late was, in a sense, an ongoing refutation of the novel, of anything that wasn't direct action, that didn't have to do with an immediate insurgency against those whose disregard for the livability of the oppressed amounted to a politics of socially engineered mass death. A novel, then, could be an indictment of the novelist, evidence of his inaction, his carelessness. (26)[3]

How, then, can fiction be positioned in terms of the fight toward liberation? This is where consideration of the labor of creating literature becomes an important context. Belcourt's novel did not spontaneously arise one day like Athena from the head of Zeus. Italo Calvino poses "Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable" (qtd. in Ristow 17). *A Minor Chorus* is an amalgam and a synthetization of what was surely not only months or years of literal composition, revision, and editing of the text itself, but also research and reading to infuse that text—both thematically and narrationally—with ideas from scholarship, culture, and creative writing texts.

But, as bell hooks warns, "Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing toward this end" (61). Literature is no more inherently "healing, liberatory, or revolutionary" than theory is. The real author must make a choice to craft their work in this way (and, in thinking about this more holistically, the writer must make many choices to achieve this ethos). A writer may ask themselves, just as a theorist or a casual reader might: How can literature represent strategies for building intersectional coalitions that work toward collective resistance? And how might literature inspire a generation of more equitable systems of power? Ultimately, how does the labor of writing contribute to community?[4] After all, Audre Lorde writes that "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor

[3] It is important to note here that, often, it is art that is shared (alongside news articles and donation links) when oppression ramps up. For instance, when Russia invaded Ukraine, it was common for people to post poems from Iyla Kaminsky, or to post art. In the wake of the late 2023/early 2024 intensifying of genocide in Palestine, it has been popular to share poems on social media such as Noor Hindi's "Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying," alongside recommendations of fiction and nonfiction, as well as on-the-ground reporting and donation links. Even something that might be indirect action still holds weight in our cultures, whether it's because people feel at a loss for words themselves or because they believe in the power of literature to generate empathy, understanding, and connection.

[4] This contribution to community can occur in a range of ways; while the argument here will have a focus on the liberatory, literature can certainly uphold the status quo in myriad ways and to various degrees.

the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist." Coalitions allow for this maintenance of individual identity. A transgender political group joining with a group of Indigenous water protectors to combat police violence benefits both groups with a similar goal against a similar threat, but this union doesn't demand that either group assimilate or sacrifice their own identities (either as groups or as individuals within those groups). Assimilation is a pressure of oppression; assimilation is not a tool toward liberation, and often will only serve one particular (often more privileged) group over others.

There are two distinct yet related ways to analyze liberatory impulses in fiction, at least insofar as it will be discussed here. The first point of analysis is the ethos of the fiction: do the tone, positioning of craft elements, and thematic explorations seem to suggest the need for multifaceted, intersectional, and radical reimaginings of the world at systemic levels? The second point of analysis is that of the tools used in the text itself. These tools can demonstrate ways of existing in the world, which can theoretically be applied in real-world scenarios. The tools of liberation, in fiction as well as real-world activism, likely include some combination of: coalition politics; mutual aid funds; self-determined communities; free gender and sexual expression; sharing of resources; societal rearrangement that decenters hegemonic norms like heterosexuality, cisgender identity, etc.; and societal reimagining that dissolves hierarchies, especially hierarchies based on identity factors alone. Here, the focus will center on coalition building in fiction. This is political, but also emotional, in nature. In *Communion,* bell hooks quotes *The Eros of Everyday Life,* wherein Susan Griffin writes that

> It is not for strategic reasons alone that gathering together has been at the heart of every movement for social change… These meetings were in themselves the realizations of a desire that is at the core of human imaginings, the desire to locate ourselves in community, to make our survival a shared effort, to experience a palpable reverence in our connections with each other and the earth that sustains us. (qtd. in hooks *Communion* xx)

Belcourt's *A Minor Chorus* recognizes the need for being intersectionally-minded. The novel is a nexus of fiction, scholarly musings, and philosophical musings, and includes direct references to critical texts throughout. Creative writers Margot Singer and Nicole Walker write that "hybridization infuses wild energy into familiar forms. The hybrid is transgressive, polyvalent, queer. The hybrid challenges categories and assumptions, exposing the underlying conventions of representation that often seem so 'natural' we hardly notice them at all" (4). The multi-genre form that Belcourt uses highlights and complements the many social identities and associated concerns reflected in the novel. *A Minor Chorus* demonstrates wide-ranging intersectional considerations about different kinds of positionalities, oppressions, and lived

experiences. These considerations include ones about Indigeneity, sexuality, gender, class, location, settler-colonialism, the carceral system, and the academy, among others.

A Minor Chorus oscillates between the narrator's extreme loneliness and isolation on the one hand and search for/leaning on community on the other. For example, there is a sense of longing, and perhaps even a shade of grief, when the narrator is speaking with someone from back home. This character, Lena, says "I think everyone sympathizes with her struggle. We all think about her," and, in this moment, the narrator "was struck… by this 'we,' a pronoun as vast and emotional as history. Lena, on account of having been on the rez her whole life, could marshal this collective voice. She was one of many in a chorus that sang of flourishing and grief" (126). Much of the narrator's inner turmoil is linked to his desire for liberation, and the extreme awareness of injustices at multiple systemic levels, which seems to reflect the overall ethos of the novel. Though no coalitions are formed per se during the plot of the narrative, it is not difficult to see the narrator's desire for liberatory goals such as self-determined communities, free gender and sexual expression, and societal reimagining that dissolves hierarchies.

The narrator is queer and Cree, and so this intersection is foregrounded often. When Lena asks why he hasn't been home to northern Alberta in a while, the narrator admits that he "wouldn't be able to live openly as a queer person here, wouldn't be able to love and be loved in the way I wanted" (129). He feels like he has to make a choice between places and between aspects of his own intersectional identity. As someone with identities that put him at risk, it is difficult to fault the narrator for such concerns. There are, of course, the issues pertaining to where one can be their most authentic self, a kind of micro-level liberation. But there is also the risk of actual bodily and emotional harm—as a Cree person, as a queer person, and (perhaps especially) as a queer Cree person. Hate crimes happen against both groups. Even back home, where he should theoretically feel safer as a Cree person, the narrator encounters a racist white lady who threatens to call the cops when the narrator visits an old residential school's grounds. So it is not even a choice of where to go that is *safe,* but where to go that is saf*er*, because sometimes nowhere is completely safe for a person at risk for particular discriminations or hate crimes. The system works in the white woman's favor simply because of her race privilege (as well as colonialist/racist cultural narratives about saving white women from Indigenous men). This incident, in addition to facing the history and cultural context at play, enhances the understanding of the policing system—and, by extension, the prison industrial complex—as an arm of Indigenous oppression later in the novel.

When the narrator goes to visit his cousin, Jack, in prison, Jack says "*Being neglected, not being raised by my parents, I'm no psychologist but I think that's how this all began. That history, and the history of the country too. My fate was determined from the start. The drugs, the*

dealing, the alcohol, they let me be more than what I was… But I can be more than that. I can escape that cycle" (158). This acknowledges how many systems come together—racism, colonialism, poverty, and the prison industrial complex—in order to perpetuate certain forms of oppression. And it even echoes the previous incident at the defunct residential school with "the history of the country." One might extrapolate from this the need to join together groups fighting for anti-racism, Indigenous sovereignty, economic justice, and prison abolition (as a few examples). One or more coalitions between these groups could work toward common goals of liberation. Belcourt's narrator doesn't directly call for coalitions as such in the narrative, but a social-justice-minded reader is certainly capable of connecting those dots based on the narrator's musings.

Coalition Building in Literature

Alix E. Harrow's *The Once and Future Witches* has direct formations of coalitions, with much attention paid in the narrative to how they are formed and the difficulties that arise in their formation. While the women across various identity and social groups join in the fight, and while they want to be liberated from the tyranny of patriarchy, they are more technically staging revolution to cause reform. The ethos, then, errs more toward revolutionary. However, *The Once and Future Witches* provides a study in forming coalitions, which can be framed as a tool used toward liberation to some degree or another. Harrow's novel grapples with the idea that "categories such as gender, race, and sexuality, while operating according to distinct logics, are interdependent and interrelated" (850), as Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies scholar Vrushali Patil phrases it in 'From Patriarchy to Intersectionality: A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We've Really Come."

The basis of this coalition is perhaps most obviously found in the women's suffragette movement. In this fantasy novel, the right to vote and women's rights are tied to the literal power of women as witches. Juniper, one of the three sister protagonists, is disabled and works with the suffragettes, who have conflict within themselves about the most appropriate tactics to use to get the women's vote. (Juniper, who uses a cane, thinks at one point about how "her daddy never used a cane, though he should have; he said they were for grannies and cripples, not proud veterans of Lincoln's war" (87). This is only one example of the ableist attitudes that intersect with her oppressed status as a woman.) Agnes, another sister protagonist, involves her fellow factory workers, which ties in workers' rights and class in the coalition. (Agnes is also pregnant and must make the decision of whether to have the baby or get an abortion in secret, and so reproductive rights come into play with her.)

Black women, primarily represented by Cleo, are skeptical of what the coalition can do

for them, even though they do ultimately join it. It doesn't even occur to the most intelligent of the three sister protagonists, Bella, that Black women have preserved spells and maintained power through the generations like white women have, or that the secret society of Black witches actually exists beyond folktales, or that enslaved Black people were conscribed to rebuild the city after it first burned. It stands to reason that the Daughters of Tituba would wonder what the all-white (or, at minimum, predominantly-white) Sisters of Avalon have to offer them, since even the smartest among the Sisters' ranks recognizes neither the power nor the oppressions that Black women face until she is told directly. Cleo and Bella, it should be noted, are also queer women; Bella in particular suffered state violence for her queerness.

This coalition—formed of the women's suffragette movement, factory workers, and Black women, with significant contributions from queer and disabled people—aims to bring magic back to empower women again as witches so that they can change the system to access civil rights. The villain instead wants to horde this magic/power for himself, as he benefits greatly from the patriarchal status quo. This antagonist is in some ways a stand-in for patriarchal power writ large. It is never, of course, so easy to be liberated as overcoming one man with power, but his character operates in the narrative as a representation of that which must be overcome.

Larry Mitchell's *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* can be read as something between a queer fable and an allegory for queer liberation. This 1977 text not only demonstrates its characters forming coalitions; it also examines the dangers of not forming coalitions alongside its glimpses of paradise (where true liberation has been attained). In the 2019 introduction, Morgan Bassichis writes that

> In the shadow of structural abandonment, political alienation, family rejection, chronic illness, state violence, and medical neglect, queer friendship saves us. Queer friendship—that thing that is sometimes called mutual aid, solidarity, disability justice, care, organizing, abolition, or maybe just love—is what raised me in San Francisco, and what forms the lifeblood of this book.

This text centralizes the importance of coalition-building. The "queer men" featured here assimilate into the heterosexist, oppressive society, some going as far as living closest lives. These assimilationists not only abandon the cause of queer liberation and their queer kin, but they also make the world more dangerous for everyone. The coalition, on the other hand, is directly named in its title: *The Faggots and Their Friends.* This coalition includes or tries to include nearly everyone but "the men," who are positioned as straight and cisgender.[5] Groups

[5] This coalition was once open to the men, as mentioned in the mythic history of this world, but they are now the oppressors that "The Faggots and Their Friends" must fight against.

that join the fight include the eponymous Faggots (i.e. gay men who prioritize community), Strong Women (who represent feminists), Women Who Love Women (i.e. Sapphics), The Women with Color (i.e. women of color), Faeries (who are gay men who escape society), (Drag) Queens, and others. When these groups work together and reject the roles assigned to them, it causes chaos and violence from the men, but it also causes change. This potential for change is exactly what the men fear.

The Faeries in particular, with their gardens and peaceful lives, seem to offer a glimpse of what life *could* be if society were not trying to eradicate difference and dissidence. The goal is to leave "the men's reality in order to destroy it by making a new one." In these liberated oases, "The great gardens of the fairies begin to expand, producing food in abundance. The fairies shower the plants with so much love that the plants, with gratefulness, produce all they can." This is specifically in response to the "need [for] access to food and to warm spaces, to hiding places, to excitement and to each other." This text was influenced by the real-life presence of Lavender Hill,[6] and so life affected the text produced; the text produced, in turn, can also affect real-world events, ideas, and choices. The line between literature and culture is not a solid, end-all/be-all boundary, but rather a permeable line wherein culture and literature have the potential to affect one another, even in ways that may not be immediately obvious.

Limitations: Practically Speaking

How does the precarity of creative labor—especially for marginalized writers who are so often responsible for emotional and invisible labor—encourage a deficit of revolutionary and liberatory storytelling? When time and resources have to be allocated to basic everyday survival, it makes it less likely that marginalized writers can take the risk of creative labor, and therefore makes it less likely that they can contribute their ideas to their communities and beyond. This is a feature of the system, not a bug. Time and resources dedicated to physical survival (in terms of housing and food) cannot be dedicated to spiritual, emotional, and physical survival (against the systems which oppress).

Further, narratives around the status quo are frequently intended to paint it as inevitable. Any questioning of the system can be dismissed by it being 'the way things are.' It is designed to be daunting so that change is either as slow as possible or, even more ideally, doesn't happen at all. Limiting collective imagination of freedom makes it less likely that people will work together

[6] *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* was first published in 1977, while "Lavender Hill was established in 1973 and remained intact for about a decade before beginning to splinter. The center of the group, according to Bunn, was the couple of Hirsh and Allan Warshawsky. After they broke up the commune began to come apart. The dissolution was also impelled when one of the members fell ill with AIDS in the early '80s. His death in 1988 was the final convulsion" (Chaisson par. 4).

toward those goals (even if they do find the time and resources to do so). This is furthered by divisions stoked between, for instance, different groups within the working class.

This comes to examining possibilities in creative writing and literature. Sociologists Francesca Polletta and Beth Gharrity Gardner write that "Stories' configurational and emotional dimensions are important here. Stories turn discrete events into an evolving whole. They link past, present, and future, and invest events with moral significance and an emotional charge" (537). Keeping this in mind, we might ask: How can we adjust tools (including literature) to push further toward liberation when possible? Can we ever truly achieve liberation if we're bound, in some way or another, by the ever-present histories that will never vanish or be erased? Even if liberation is a goal that can never fully be achieved, is it still worth pursuing to continue to push society toward more personally tenable and more systemically equitable conditions?

Fictional stakes are different, of course, from real-world stakes. It is possible to use fiction to see how different scenarios may play out, but everyday oppressions in economic, social, and educational realms will always carry more weight. Real-world stakes can perhaps be illuminated in fiction. However, it is important to hold in mind that people suffer under current systems, that every day and every minute that we do not engage our radical imaginations to make the world a more hospitable place has lived consequences, not just theoretical ethical ones. And clearly there is a true threat that liberatory literature poses, or else book bans wouldn't be a front-and-center target of the so-called 'culture wars.' Fiction may help us to envision ourselves as free, but at its most powerful? Literature holds the potential to help us envision *all* of us as free. Each individual has complex intersectional social identities, and oppressions are often linked in insidious ways. Power only grows in cases of coalition building and solidarity, where one might imagine not only their own life transformed, but the lives of others transformed as well. Literature, scholarship, and activism are not discrete realms occupied by different groups of people. When we begin to think of ourselves more holistically—as writers or readers, as scholars, but also as people who exist within cultures and communities more broadly—then we can let these spaces and these ways of enacting change become more interdependent, and from there the possibilities only proliferate.

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