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## Everyday Moments of Disruption: Navigating Towards Utopia

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### Abstract

*Representations of utopia are often streamlined into being an end goal, a concrete vision for a better future. For mainstream sexual violence response organisations, utopia is largely simplified into being a world without sexual abuse, and the path to this utopia is breaking the silence to end the violence. Using utopic theory, this article will unpick this concentration, and suggest a re-direction towards the granular parts of utopia. Davina Cooper's concept of everyday utopias will be utilised, alongside the radical work of adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha to highlight the positive alternatives that lie in everyday utopian social justice practices. Drawing on the work of three groups the author currently organises with, Hollaback! London, Sisters Uncut and the Silenced Museum, an opposition between the teleological narrative of early feminist movements and the everyday utopianism of grassroots organising will be drawn. In doing so the article expands upon three core practices fostered in these groups: intersectional prefiguration, visionary fiction-ing, and everyday disruptions. It will thus be suggested that mainstream sexual violence response organisations in the UK engage in a process of unlearning and learning to better navigate towards an everyday utopian world free from sexual violence.*

*Keywords: Sexual violence; Rape crisis; Hollaback!; Sisters uncut; Everyday utopia; Emergent strategy; Octavia Butler; Intersectional prefiguration; Visionary fiction*

### I

*'All that you touch you change, and all that you change changes you'.*

*-- Octavia Butler<sup>1</sup>*

Break the silence. End the Violence.

Rape Crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Open Road Integrated Media, 2012), 2.

Rape.

Crisis.

These are the words and phrases around which many UK-based sexual violence response organisations grew and remain rooted. They conjure up a feeling of energised yet panicked movement. Movement forwards. Movement out of the past. Movement out of abusive structures. Breaking, stopping, violence. Movement towards an end.

It is perhaps due to this seemingly inherent push away from the violence of the past and present into something else, something assumed to be better, that feminism and mainstream anti-sexual violence organisations are described by some as ‘intrinsically utopic’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as is increasingly made evident through the scholarship around utopia and utopic activism,<sup>3</sup> envisaging and aiming for a better ending is not enough; especially when, as is the case with the UK sexual violence sector, this focus is often simplified into being nothing more than that – an ending.

It is with this in mind that this article will use utopic theory to build upon the increasing body of critical yet empathic literature commenting on the misdirected strategy of mainstream sexual violence response organisations.<sup>4</sup> Through focusing on the UK sexual violence sector, it will thus be posited that while there are many difficulties plaguing the movement, at the crux of these are faults stemming from a flawed approach to utopian navigation. Rather than envisaging new ways of imagining and creating everyday present-future utopias,<sup>5</sup> mainstream sexual violence organisations are stuck in never-ending, and at times hopeless future oriented cycles. As will be illustrated, these detrimental cycles stem from the unsubstantiated idea that breaking silence will end violence. Notably this strategy, created in the consciousness-raising era of the 1970s, has been heavily relied upon alongside an unwavering belief in the violence ending power of the criminal justice system through a period of expansion and professionalisation of the sexual violence sector.<sup>6</sup>

In traversing and exploring the issues that lie in the sexual violence sector’s approach to utopianism, the work of Davina Cooper and Ruth Levitas<sup>7</sup> will be utilised, alongside that of adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha.<sup>8</sup> Together they will highlight the positive alternatives that lie in everyday utopian social justice practices; many of which bring theoretical ideas from the fictional work of Octavia Butler<sup>9</sup> into a practical context. These

<sup>2</sup> Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 108.

<sup>3</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein, “Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 1 (September 2010): 45–71, <https://doi.org/10.1086/652918>; Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence* (Duke University Press, 2009); Sameena Mulla, *The Violence of Care: Rape Victims, Forensic Nurses, and Sexual Assault Intervention* (NYU Press, 2014); Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Adam and Chris Groves, “Futures Tended: Care and Future-Oriented Responsibility,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 31, no. 1 (February 1, 2011): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610391237>.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Serisier, “Speaking out against Rape: Feminist (her) Stories and Anti-Rape Politics,” *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, no. 16 (2007): 93.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), <http://gen.lib.rus.ec/book/index.php?md5=2eed067c7b733267d90ca22ba04f2064>.

<sup>8</sup> Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, eds., *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (AK Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

peripheral alternatives will be developed further through an exploration of the practices and principles of three groups with which the author currently organises: Hollaback! London, Sisters Uncut, and The Silenced Museum. Rather than pitting community groups against those that sit within the mainstream, this essay suggests that mainstream organisations at the centre must take the time to engage with the principles of these contemporary grassroots groups—many of which are explicitly set against older feminist practices. It will therefore be suggested that there is tremendous learning that can come from engagement with a peripheral grassroots approach to change oriented everyday utopianism. This approach resists the break the silence mantra and instead embraces intersectional prefiguration,<sup>10</sup> alongside practices of visionary fiction-ing and everyday disruptions; two concepts coined and developed in this paper as an extension of the work of Octavia Butler (2012) and Davina Cooper.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as will be argued, this approach allows these groups to foster the most important learning to be taken around navigating towards utopias; a move away from a fixed teleological narrative towards one that fluidly fosters everyday disruptions within (and also outside of) everyday utopias.

Octavia Butler teaches us that change is an essential facet of our future, and that without embracing its unknowable messiness we will not survive, nor we will eradicate violence.<sup>12</sup> This article cannot provide easy solutions. Instead, it proffers potential new change-oriented directions, towards creating a world free from sexual violence, rooted around the premise that ‘all organising is [and always should be] science fiction’.<sup>13</sup>

## II

Coined in 1516 by Thomas More, utopia ‘is widely understood as an imagined perfect society or wishfully constructed place which does not ... exist’.<sup>14</sup> Others like Russell Jacoby have taken this further, and suggested two types of utopian thinking and being: iconoclastic utopianism, which ‘articulates a longing that cannot be uttered,’ and blueprint utopianism, which ‘maps out the future in inches and minutes.’<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the work of UK frontline sexual violence response organisations seems to fit both types. The push towards breaking silence to end sexual violence revolves around an unarticulated ending, and the professionalised services that these organisations offer creates the illusion of a structured map to escape sexual violence.

Nevertheless, it is vital to question what makes something utopic, and in turn to question the utopic ideologies and actions of mainstream sexual violence response organisations. As Nina Lykke notes, ‘utopian thought has been criticized for its modern focus on linear time, and for universalizing hegemonic, homogenizing and, thus, exclusionary blueprints for the “good life” and society.’<sup>16</sup> Here, the work of Davina Cooper<sup>17</sup> and Ruth

<sup>10</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1989): 139; Armine Ishkanian and Anita Peña Saavedra, “The Politics and Practices of Intersectional Prefiguration in Social Movements: The Case of Sisters Uncut,” *The Sociological Review OnlineFirst* (22 January 2019), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0038026118822974>.

<sup>11</sup> Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

<sup>13</sup> Imarisha and brown, *Octavia’s Brood*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 113, xiv.

<sup>16</sup> Nina Lykke, “Academic Feminisms: Between Disidentification, Messy Everyday Utopianism, and Cruel Optimism,” *Feminist Encounters. A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* 1, no. 1 (2017): 5.

<sup>17</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*.

Levitas<sup>18</sup> becomes particularly relevant, for both authors speak to the importance of ongoing practices in radical utopian organising. Levitas notes that in utopian work, such as anti-sexual violence work, there is a need for an ‘emergent future’; one that while ‘characterised by militant optimism’ is focused on an emphasis on present day, everyday, practices that groups can undertake.<sup>19</sup> In Cooper’s later exploration of activist utopianism, this theory was extended to the concept of everyday utopias.<sup>20</sup> In relation to the term, Cooper notes that:

Everyday utopias don’t focus on campaigning or advocacy. They don’t place their energy on pressuring mainstream institutions to change, on winning votes, or on taking over dominant social structures. Rather they work by creating the change they wish to encounter, building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life.<sup>21</sup>

Cooper goes on to state that ‘the dynamic quality of everyday utopias is an important aspect of what it is to be a contemporary utopian space...they are not the realisation of a blueprint’ and, consequently, there is huge potential for ‘everyday utopias to contribute to a transformative politics specifically through the concepts they actualise and imaginatively invoke.’<sup>22</sup> In this regard, utopia is not simply a future-oriented aim, but it is a method and a practice that can, and should be, adopted when undertaking utopian work. Notably Cooper’s definition of utopia, as something that does not just exist in the future but in our everyday actions, speaks clearly to the work of Octavia Butler and her fictional writing around change. It is also akin to the politics of prefiguration, which stresses that ‘rather than ends justifying means, the means...reflect, or are somehow equivalent to, the ends’.<sup>23</sup> Bearing in mind this newer, more adaptive, practice-based and emergent definition of everyday utopianism, it is vital to question and explore the utopic nature of sexual violence response organisations, and to assess whether they are currently practicing everyday utopian work.

### III

Much has been written around the difficulties that plague mainstream UK sexual violence response organisations, with the overwhelming criticism being that ‘most high profile feminist groups and actions [in Britain] have failed to take intersectionality seriously’ and are consequently overly reliant on carceral approaches to ending violence.<sup>24</sup> Significantly however, blame for this is rarely placed strictly onto or into the sexual violence services themselves. Instead, the overwhelming consensus is that the roots of the movement were, and remain, utopian in their radical and transformative desires, yet this character has been lost over time due to the slow grip of professionalisation, outside the sector’s control.<sup>25</sup>

The argument posited is that firstly, an increased ‘demand’ for services, which came from this early consciousness raising, from ‘breaking the silence’, resulted in the need for rapid expansion of service provision.<sup>26</sup> This, in turn, led to a dependency on government resources, and as Jennifer O’Connor notes, ‘professionalising the movement means that there’s somebody else in charge of deciding whether or not you’re able to assist another woman, and are capable or competent based on the criteria that’s often set by the state. And

<sup>18</sup> Levitas, *Utopia as Method*.

<sup>19</sup> Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*.

<sup>21</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Luke Yates, “Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements,” *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (2 January 2015): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.870883>.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Evans, “Intersectionality as Feminist Praxis in the UK,” *Women’s Studies International Forum C*, no. 59 (2016): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2016.10.004>; Bumiller, *In an Abusive State*.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer O’Connor, “Rape Crisis: The Debate over Professionalized Services,” *Herizons* 18 (2005): 28.

<sup>26</sup> O’Connor, “Rape Crisis.”

the state is a very conservative body.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless while services continue to have to make huge compromises to ensure they can provide basic services during the current age of austerity and competitive tendering,<sup>28</sup> the debate around the utopian nature of sexual violence organisations it is not quite this simple.

In this regard a recent blog post by the Black feminist organisation Imkaan<sup>29</sup> responding to the trans exclusionary, and often racist, nature of many mainstream sexual violence organisations is indicative, stating that:

It is a painful truth that as the women's sector has grown and become more and more formalised, it has developed in a way which reflects broader society, rather than disrupting some of the core elements of structural inequality. This means that racism and xenophobia, for example, have been woven into some of parts of the work, albeit in more nuanced ways. It is, therefore, necessary that we continue to learn, challenge, and grow together; moving through the discomfort of this truth to find meaningful ways of working.

The poignant part of this extract rests in the idea that there is some degree of choice, conscious or subconscious; that there have been some deliberate decisions made to move away from conflict, away from disruption, away from the challenges of intersectionality and refiguration into something easier and more in line with structural inequality. Or to put it simply, away from a world without sexual violence, because freedom cannot exist while any woman is unfree.<sup>30</sup>

## IV

To be able to explore the possibilities that lie in everyday utopian social justice practices, it is important to question if UK mainstream sexual violence organisations have moved away from transformative utopian strategic visioning and utopian orientated work, or if the work was ever truly utopian. Some possible answers to this can be found with a look to the impacts of working in and around trauma. Sexual violence frontline work is difficult, challenging, and exhausting. Moreover trauma is, in and of itself, traumatising, and the longer workers are exposed to it the more damage it causes. Well-documented problems include an inability to manage complexity and an urgency of need, which narrows creativity. Speaking of the violence against women movement, Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky notes its ties to 'vicarious trauma':

By paying too little attention to the complexities of the issue, it (the sexual violence movement) found itself floundering in an ever-urgent, perpetual-crisis maelstrom of criminal legal response. The work required to build and sustain this response consumed most of the movement's resources, diverting energy away from community-based strategies that took into account the limits of a criminalized response. As a result, the movement inadequately addressed the concerns most expressed by survivors— breaking isolation, building community support, meeting children's needs, and fostering economic stability.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> O'Connor, "Rape Crisis", 27.

<sup>28</sup> Josh Halliday, "Sex Abuse Charity Funding Crisis Sees up to 10,000 in UK Wait a Year for Help," *The Guardian*, sec. Society, 11 August 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/aug/11/sex-abuse-charity-funding-crisis>; Frankie Mullin, "What the Funding Crisis Faced By Britain's Sexual Abuse Charities Says About Our Attitudes to Rape," *Vice*, 19 August 2015, [http://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/read/sexual-abuse-clinics-funding-333](http://www.vice.com/en_uk/read/sexual-abuse-clinics-funding-333).

<sup>29</sup> Imkaan, "Statement on Women's Aid," February 2019, <https://www.imkaan.org.uk/statement-womens-aid-recent-develop>.

<sup>30</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 1 October 1981, <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/wsq/509>.

<sup>31</sup> Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk, *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 77.

This suggests that the anti-sexual violence sector has been unable to map a path towards a world without sexual violence—to engage in the methods of everyday utopia—because of the complex impacts of the work itself, combined with the push to professionalise.

Nonetheless, it is vital to question whether this is the only reason the movement has diverged from more radical utopian practices. A look to the foundational principles of the movement is thus significant, especially given that these principles are what continue to affect the present-day strategic approach; for ‘it is a backwards glance which enacts a future vision’.<sup>32</sup> . With this in mind it is noteworthy that the early consciousness-raising work of the 1970s is rarely criticised or interrogated. In much of the literature that exists, early consciousness-raising and feminist work is spoken of with great nostalgia for a time when radical, creative and transformative work was possible.<sup>33</sup> But what if this early work was not utopian or transformative? What if consciousness-raising developed a streamlined focus on amplifying and unifying, and in effect homogenising, that has actually prevented the truly radical work from ever beginning?

Story sharing is often spoken of as being transformative, and in many ways it is. The sharing of stories allow survivors to name previously unspeakable experiences, to be validated, to feel less isolated and eventually shift the heavy weight of shame. But what role does story sharing have in transforming the actions of those around us, and what role does consciousness raising have in the prevention of sexual abuse? As Tanya Serisier has recently explored, in her re-examination of herstories from the 1970s and 80s, the iterability of these stories ‘construct[s] a commonly accepted and indeed orthodox history of the anti-rape movement, grounded in the epistemological primacy of the politics of experience’.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, this story, this utopian map, is rooted in the unsubstantiated claim that breaking silence ends violence, which has become ‘a teleological narrative of feminist progress and inevitable triumph’.<sup>35</sup> In many ways, a story of triumph feels safer and stronger than one of complication and struggle. Nevertheless, the important issue here is not that survivor stories are being shared—which is essential for so many reasons—but rather that the purposes of the sharing have been lost along the way. There is consequently a lack of engagement in the possibilities of everyday actions due to a deep-rooted belief that our focus on building awareness and challenging myths will one day lead to the end – an end that has yet to be defined by the sector itself, but which is increasingly and inextricably tied to the criminal justice system.<sup>36</sup>

A particularly clear example of this lack of engagement appears in a video by Rape Crisis England and Wales and the University of Leeds in 2015, entitled ‘Communicating Feminism: A Case Study with Rape Crisis’.<sup>37</sup> The video communicates the importance of engaging with and responding to the media; it suggests the vital transformation of a reactive ‘promotional culture’ into a ‘proactive’ one, encouraging viewers to ‘harness social media in order to put out some more positive proactive messages...rather than constantly reacting to the obviously quite negative media agenda’.<sup>38</sup> Superficially, this recalls Cooper’s

<sup>32</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009): 4.

<sup>33</sup> Serisier, *Speaking Out*; Bumiller, *In an Abusive State*.

<sup>34</sup> Serisier, “Speaking out against Rape,” 91.

<sup>35</sup> Serisier, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Bumiller, *In an Abusive State*.

<sup>37</sup> Cultural Institute, University of Leeds, *Communicating Feminism: A Case Study with Rape Crisis*, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpCkL\\_eGGvk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpCkL_eGGvk).

<sup>38</sup> Cultural Institute, University of Leeds.

commitment to ‘building and forging new ways of experiencing social and political life’<sup>39</sup> in relation to everyday utopias. In spite of this, the ‘proactive’ national social media campaign stands in stark contrast to any utopian agenda with its stated aims: (1) raise awareness of the impacts of sexual violence; (2) amplify survivors’ voices; (3) show rape crisis as sexual violence experts, providing life-saving support; (4) show the public they need the network to survive. These four aims remain largely unchanged since 1970.<sup>40</sup> In fact, the goals are almost identical to the demands of the earliest sexual violence organisations, yet there continues to be an inability to explore the intricacies of what is needed day in and day out to achieve any of this—not just an end to sexual violence, but an end to the various issues powerfully raised by Imkaan earlier in 2019.<sup>41</sup>

Serisier notes that ‘the transformative potential of survivor speech is shaped not only by what survivors say, but the circumstances under which they are heard, and the relationship of feminist politics to other discourses’.<sup>42</sup> It is also vital to simultaneously acknowledge that utopianism is limited by circumstances. Its transformative potential is undermined when it is fully worked out, or trapped by an ‘apparatus of self containment’, and it is arguably this which has resulted in the flawed and incomplete map out of sexual violence drawn by mainstream UK organisations.<sup>43</sup> It thus appears that while there are utopian aims within the UK sexual violence sector, these aims have not adapted over time: it is this continuous backwards glance which prevents sexual violence organisations from ‘constructing ... futures through imagination and action’.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless it is the premise of this paper that this backward glance can be reoriented.

## V

Judith Butler discusses how ‘the failure of identification’ in social movements may become ‘a point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference’.<sup>45</sup> It is this concept of departing from a movement that is of particular use in relation to exploring the ways in which marginal, outside groups such as Sisters Uncut, Hollaback! London and the Silenced Museum have diverged from mainstream organisations and can therefore offer utopian alternatives. Moreover, it is arguably only through understanding these points of departure that the above-mentioned reorientation can begin.

It is important to note that these groups are not perfect. Nevertheless, they do not claim to be so, and it is this acceptance of imperfection and mistakes that arguably allows them to offer radically different and transformative utopian approaches. Instead of endlessly driving to an unknown end, they offer lessons and practices that support everyday action. From these groups’ approaches, three core learnings can be expanded upon: an implementation of intersectional prefiguration; an embracing of the practice of visionary fiction-ing; and a focus on fostering and engaging with everyday disruptions within their everyday utopias.

Formed in reaction to the cyclical nature of sexual violence activism since the 1970s, Sisters Uncut, Hollaback! London and the Silenced Museum hold on to intersectional hope

<sup>39</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Serisier, *Speaking Out*.

<sup>41</sup> Imkaan, “Statement on Women’s Aid.”

<sup>42</sup> Tanya Serisier, “Speaking Out, and Beginning to Be Heard: Feminism, Survivor Narratives and Representations of Rape in the 1980s,” *Continuum* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1404675>.

<sup>43</sup> Bammer, *Partial Visions*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Adam and Groves, “Futures Tended,” 158.

<sup>45</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Routledge, 1993), 219.

and vision as powerful tools which ‘resists telling’.<sup>46</sup> It is in these spaces that ‘disidentifications, intersectional storytelling, differential consciousness, identities-in-difference, figurations and worlding practices’, key everyday utopian tools suggested by Nina Lykke<sup>47</sup>, are utilised to ‘anticipate and facilitate work towards futurities which in a multiple and open-ended feminist sense are ‘better’ than the here and now’.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, this concept of defining is of tremendous importance for proposing new directions towards useable and adaptable utopian methods, which may in turn support everyday reimagining out of sexual violence.

In all of the aforementioned groups, intersectional prefiguration is paramount. First coined by Boggs, prefiguration is ‘the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those social forms of relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal’.<sup>49</sup> The term ‘intersectional prefiguration’ is a newer model, created by Ishkanian and Saavedra<sup>50</sup> in relation to the ongoing work undertaken by Sisters Uncut, an anti-austerity domestic and sexual violence direct action group formed in 2014. Notably the group was, and remains, largely made up of survivors and sector workers who felt silenced in other spaces. In their analysis, Ishkanian and Saavedra explore in depth how the careful creation of a culture of intersectional organizing was and is navigated from the very beginning. In fact, it is evident that a crucial part of intersectional prefiguration is the ‘willingness to have the uncomfortable conversations’.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on my own personal experiences, I can attest to the significance of the check-in, or temperature checking, culture that exists at the heart of each action and meeting, and there is a tremendous amount of care that goes into every aspect of the organising work. It feels clear to the group, and most who enter it, that a large part of the work to end violence involves creating a safe space first. We see this as a radical act – for how can we push towards something if we have no idea what it should be like to exist within it?

The Silenced Museum is in many ways radically different from Sisters Uncut, and it is because of this that the similarities in terms of utopian building and navigating are particularly interesting. Created in partnership with Hollaback! London, the London chapter of a global movement to end street harassment, the Silenced Museum aimed to find both ways of exploring possibilities for the future, and ways of fostering increased understanding of alternative bystander intervention in the present. Unlike Sisters Uncut, the meetings of this group were largely one-off sessions including groups of women and non-binary people. The impetus of the meetings included learning and sharing together, unpicking the present and visioning various possible futures according to practical, step-by-step plans. In this respect, this manifestation of intersectional prefiguration was different from that of Sisters Uncut; yet like Sisters spaces the lack of an ‘expert’ or ‘leader’ was essential in these meetings. During the course of the various discussions, time appeared to be far from linear, and there was a unique ebbing and flowing between past, present and future. While the sessions were led by two facilitators, different viewpoints were embraced and there was no right or wrong with

<sup>46</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1242, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia the Then and There of Queer Futurity*.

<sup>47</sup> Lykke, “Academic Feminisms,” 6.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Carl Boggs, “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers and Control,” *libcom.org*, 1977, 100, <https://libcom.org/library/marxism-prefigurative-communism-problem-workers-control-carl-boggs>.

<sup>50</sup> Ishkanian and Saavedra, “The Politics and Practices [ . . . ]”

<sup>51</sup> Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith, “Intersectional Feminism beyond U.S. Flag Hijab and Pussy Hats in Trump’s America,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 24, no. 5 (May 4, 2017): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1343284>.

facilitators owning these divergences. For example, some in the group imagined a wealth of noise in the future and others a lot of silence, but crucially this did not feel like a road bump to the work of all who attended; it was, in fact, commented upon as productive. The space was clearly and deliberately rooted in radical democratic politics, and in turn it ‘acknowledged relations of domination and sought to transform them’.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to intersectional prefiguration, the Silenced Museum and Sisters Uncut also routinely engage in a practice that will now be referred to as ‘visionary fiction-ing’. The term is influenced by Joan Haran’s ‘imaginactivism’,<sup>53</sup> and expands upon Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown’s concept of ‘visionary fiction’.<sup>54</sup> It is an active process aimed at ‘creating more futures’ and also ‘cultivating the muscle of radical imagination’ alongside ‘time travelling emotions’ to prevent burnout and vicarious traumatising.<sup>55</sup> Visionary fiction-ing is therefore a way of thinking about, and imagining, a host of futures as a means of strategizing—and also avoiding the harm that comes from trauma work.<sup>56</sup> This can be observed quite clearly in the presentation of the Sisters Uncut ‘Feministo’—a document available on the group’s website which details a clear, utterable and potentially attainable list of demands for the future.<sup>57</sup> These demands are not a blueprint, but they also create a clear vision for potential oppression-free futures. Much like the group’s safer spaces policy, it is important to recognise that the Feministo is designed to ‘change as [the group] learn and grow’. Moreover, the process of creating the newest manifestation of this Feministo, which began in November 2017 and was completed in January 2018, involved deep and thoughtful discussions around the infiltration of structural violence into society, and how to stand against these through future-oriented demands. It is therefore clear that the utopia towards which the group was navigating had to feel achievable and adaptable, while truly challenging all systems of oppression. A similar process of imagining multiple futures, engaging in a process of what could be described as generating science fiction, can also be observed in the Silenced Museum workshops. Here detailed, subversively joyous conversations were had around a future without sexual harassment, some of which included Elon Musk taking all those with unchangeable views to Mars. Further, more concrete vision-ing included the creation of a world described by some participants as a ‘carnival star wars’ future, and also intricately imagining the various bystander intervention tools that could be archived in a museum of the future, dedicated to sexual harassment.

It is by embracing intersectional prefiguration and visionary fiction-ing that these groups are able to foster the most important learning possible: the process of discovering new ways to navigate towards utopias while fostering everyday disruptions within (and also outside of) everyday utopias. The term ‘everyday disruption’ draws on Cooper’s<sup>58</sup> notion of everyday utopia, but also integrates learning from Brown’s emergent strategy.<sup>59</sup> Much like everyday utopias, everyday disruptions ‘contribute to a transformative politics specifically through the concepts they actualise and imaginatively invoke’.<sup>60</sup> Yet unlike everyday utopias, these disruptions are not as rooted in and around ‘sites’ but are often pushed outside of these

<sup>52</sup> Ishkanian and Saavedra, “The Politics and Practices of Intersectional Prefiguration in Social Movements: The Case of Sisters Uncut,” 1.

<sup>53</sup> Joan Haran, “Instantiating Imaginactivism: Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* as Inspiration,” *Ada New Media* (blog), 6 October 2017, <https://adanewmedia.org/2017/10/issue12-haran/>.

<sup>54</sup> Imarisha and brown, *Octavia’s Brood*.

<sup>55</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 57–59, 107.

<sup>56</sup> Lipsky and Burk, *Trauma Stewardship*.

<sup>57</sup> Sisters Uncut, “Feministo,” Sisters Uncut (website), 2018, <http://www.sistersuncut.org/feministo/>.

<sup>58</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*.

<sup>59</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

<sup>60</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, 4.

spaces. In this way, they arguably define movement ‘between imagination and actualisation’.<sup>61</sup> Imagination brings with it a new approach to disruption; a slow, creative storytelling that is far removed from the storytelling that dominates narratives of the mainstream. As can be seen in both #MeToo and the Rape Crisis movement, there is a continual, traumatic and public reliving of sexual violence with incarceration of perpetrators often perceived as the end goal.<sup>62</sup> Everyday disruptions represent radical, intricate, and creative re-writings of the present and the future, and in the process there is an actualisation. These disruptions involve being present in conflict, whilst also radically thinking about the future in all of its intricacies; this in turn creates the ‘queer lines’ referenced by Cooper.<sup>63</sup> The actualisation of this is epitomised in both groups’ focus on disrupting public space, but also in their focus on continuously disrupting their private organising spaces. We see this clearly in the public, large scale pieces of direct action undertaken by Sisters Uncut, and the Silenced Museum’s push towards encouraging participants to engage with creative bystander intervention outside of the workshops.

It is thus evident that slow paced creativity, imagination and a refusal to avoid conflict are what lead to the subversive power of Sisters Uncut, Hollaback! London and the Silenced Museum; and arguably climax in the everyday disruptions they foster. Nevertheless while it is evident that these disruptions cannot be seen in isolation, for they stem from a combination of intersectional prefiguration and visionary fiction-ing, they are also far from rigid in the ways that they can be adopted; and in many ways, this is their power.

## VI

Marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation. . . . It is also the site of radical possibility . . . for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. . . . It offers . . . the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.

bell hooks<sup>64</sup>

Break the silence. End the Violence.

Rape Crisis.

Rape.

Crisis.

In ‘Emergent Strategy’, adrienne maree brown tells us that ‘we have to create more futures’.<sup>65</sup> She tells us this because she knows that over-simplification of utopia, strategy and collective

<sup>61</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> Victoria Law, “How Can We Reconcile Prison Abolition With #MeToo?,” *Filter* (blog), 25 September 2018, <https://filtermag.org/2018/09/25/how-can-we-reconcile-prison-abolition-with-metoo/>; adrienne maree brown and Autumn M Brown, *The Apocalypse We Need: #metoo and Transformative Justice Part 1*, 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/endoftheworldshow/the-apocalypse-we-need-metoo-and-transformative-justice-part-1>; adrienne maree brown and Autumn M Brown, *The Practices We Need: #metoo and Transformative Justice Part 2*, 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/endoftheworldshow/the-practices-we-need-metoo-and-transformative-justice-part-2>.

<sup>63</sup> Cooper, *Everyday Utopias*.

<sup>64</sup> bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Turnaround, 1991), 149–50.

<sup>65</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 57.

aims prevents us from creatively ‘applying lessons from our past to our future’.<sup>66</sup> Yet more importantly, she tells us this because she knows that social justice and trauma work need to move away from the hopelessness of imagining an end that seems impossible because it hasn't yet been conceived.

In this vein, to return to phrases of breaking and ending feels somewhat rigid. Endings are important; nevertheless, they also hold a wealth of unknowns. They are a closure, a full stop, as opposed to something more continuous. It is because of this that the idea of ‘breaking the silence’ to end violence feels hugely limiting: it simplifies the transformative potential that is held within the sexual violence sector itself.

While the concepts fostering everyday disruptions within everyday utopias – and incorporating intersectional prefiguration alongside visionary fiction-ing – are tools, they never lead to a solution. Nonetheless, this is perhaps their value – instead of providing the answers, these practices propose new and radical directions for engaging with, and feeling our way towards, utopia.

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<sup>66</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 198.

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