

# Collective Memory at Canada's Prison for Women

LISA GUENTHER

**ABSTRACT** This essay proposes a critical phenomenology of the ontological, social, ethical, and political dimensions of collective memory. At an ontological level, the site of collective memory is not intentional consciousness but rather the lifeworld itself, understood as a historically sedimented context for meaning and mattering. The social dimension of collective memory is structured around an antagonism between hegemonic public memory and insurgent countermemory. The ethical dimension issues a command to *anyone* to listen and respond to the countermemory of the oppressed. And the political dimension of collective memory asks us to commit to building a world that refuses to repeat past oppression; it calls for the reclamation and (re)invention of a collective procedural memory of how to care for a common world. This analysis of collective memory unfolds in the context of a proposed memorial garden on the grounds of Canada's first prison for women, which is in the process of being redeveloped into luxury condominiums.

**KEYWORDS** collective memory, prison, abolition, decolonization, critical phenomenology

The Kingston Prison for Women (P4W) was the first and only federal prison for women in Canada from 1934 until the year 2000. Living conditions at P4W were harsh, even by prison standards. Just a few years after the prison opened, a government report recommended its closure due to “disgraceful” conditions,<sup>1</sup> and another report called the prison “unfit for bears, much less for women.”<sup>2</sup> Between 1988 and 1991, seven women died by suicide in P4W.<sup>3</sup> Six of these women were Indigenous. More reports were written, and more recommendations made, but the prison did not close for good until a judicial inquiry into a conflict between prisoners and guards that was suppressed by an all-male emergency response team whose members stripped the women naked and left them shackled on the floor for six hours. Security footage of the event was leaked to the media and broadcast on a national news program.

---

CRITICAL TIMES | 7:2 | AUGUST 2024

DOI 10.1215/26410478-11216992 | © 2024 Lisa Guenther

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). **260**

Since its closure, three of the walls around P4W have been torn down, and it looks more like a quaint old schoolhouse than a notorious prison. In 2007, Queen's University purchased the site for possible use as student housing or university archives.<sup>4</sup> But without heat or electricity, black mold filled the building, making it difficult to repurpose. P4W sat empty for over ten years until 2018, when a commercial developer purchased the prison and the eight acres of land on which it stands for the construction of a hotel, retirement home, and luxury condominiums.<sup>5</sup>

But not everyone is willing to forget what happened at P4W. For more than twenty years, a group of former prisoners called the P4W Memorial Collective has been fighting to create a memorial garden for women who died in the prison.<sup>6</sup> In fall 2022, members of the collective's advisory board (including myself) organized a gathering to bring together survivors of P4W with people who had done time in the new regional system of federal prisons for women to reflect on what has changed since P4W closed, what hasn't changed, and what needs to change. In summer 2023, the collective collaborated with artist Sheena Hoszko to launch an art exhibition called "The Art of Survival," which may eventually form the basis for a permanent or mobile gallery.<sup>7</sup> We are also planning to gather oral histories from women who survived P4W, many of whom are now in their sixties or seventies.

The most profound memory work, in my experience working with the collective since 2018, is the healing circle that takes place on the grounds of P4W every August 10, on Prisoners' Justice Day (PJD). The day commemorates the deaths of two people in solitary confinement at Millhaven Institution, a prison just outside Kingston: Eddie Nalon, who died on August 10, 1974, and Robert Landers, who died on May 21, 1976.<sup>8</sup> For almost fifty years, PJD has been observed through hunger strikes inside prison and solidarity actions on the outside. In recent years, abolitionist groups across so-called Canada have collaborated to broadcast a series of online reports on prison justice issues and movements called PJD-TV.<sup>9</sup> Different regions share a diversity of tactics for keeping prison justice movements alive, both by remembering what was done in the past and by sustaining or reinventing these practices for the present and future.

In Kingston, the P4W healing circle on Prisoners' Justice Day follows Indigenous protocols with a ceremonial fire, a smudge, and a sharing circle facilitated by Indigenous elders on the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. Members of the public are welcome. Each participant in the healing circle is encouraged to share what is on their minds and hearts and to listen in respectful silence to others while an eagle feather is passed from person to person. After the circle closes, we share a simple meal. People come to the healing circle for different reasons. Some were in prison at P4W or elsewhere; others just live in the neighborhood. Not everyone who participates in the healing circle is Indigenous, and not every Indigenous ceremony is meant to be shared with non-Indigenous people

like myself. But thanks to the decolonial prison justice organizing of the Native Sisterhood, which emerged at P4W in 1976, the ceremony of the healing circle has become a core practice of the P4W Memorial Collective and a way to articulate the connections between prison justice and decolonization.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Indigenous women make up 50 percent of the federal women's prison population, and up to 70–90 percent of the population in provincial and territory prisons for women, despite the fact that Indigenous peoples make up less than 5 percent of the overall population.<sup>11</sup> There is no way of addressing this hyperincarceration without remembering, as the Aboriginal Women's Caucus stated in 1989, that “all Aboriginal, First Nations citizens are in conflict with the law . . . [insofar as we are subject to] a system of laws to which we have never consented.”<sup>12</sup> Prior to this nonconsensual imposition of colonial laws, policies, and institutions, there were no prisons or police on Turtle Island; Indigenous notions had their own practices of safety, accountability, and justice that did not rely on forced confinement. In this sense, a world without prisons is not just a utopia to be imagined; it is a set of practices and legal orders to be remembered, revitalized, and enacted.

This idea—that abolition is not just the invention of new, unprecedented worlds but a remembering and reworking of traditions that have been interrupted and suppressed by colonial domination—raises all sorts of questions for me, both as an abolitionist and as a supporter of the P4W Memorial Collective. By *abolition* I mean a critical stance that calls into question the legitimacy of state violence to define and enforce the meaning of justice, safety, and accountability. Building on the collective memory of movements to abolish slavery in all its forms, abolitionists call for the dismantling of prisons and police and for the creation and amplification of practices that make carceral power obsolete, such as nonviolent conflict resolution, restorative justice, mutual aid, and harm reduction. As such, abolition is a world-building project; it requires both a collective memory of the world before prisons and police and a collective imagination of a world beyond prisons and police.

When I first started learning about abolition, it seemed to me that the equation of responsibility with guilt, accountability with punishment, and punishment with justice ran so deep, and was so inextricably bound to race, class, and other forms of oppression, that we had no choice but to wipe the slate clean and start over. But this image of a “clean slate” is arguably itself a modern colonial fantasy, not easily disentangled from the concept of the “new world” as a *terra nullius*. In *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay problematizes the linear temporality that fetishizes the new at the expense of traditions that colonizers have (ab)used to consign Indigenous peoples to the past in the name of progress and civilization but that have nevertheless sustained deep reserves of power for Indigenous survival, resistance, and resurgence. For Azoulay, “The principle of the new has become the source of its own authority; the newness of the new has become its sole *raison d'être*,

and—like colonial expansion and capitalist growth—it has become voracious and insatiable.”<sup>13</sup> Decolonial memory work, embodied in the collective practice of traditions that resist colonial violence, challenges this authority of the new and sustains abolitionist horizons that are immanent to the very world that seeks to foreclose them. For Azoulay, decolonial resistance is at least as old as colonial violence; the work of amplifying this resistance is a labor of remembering, revitalizing, and redressing the past in an ongoing struggle to reclaim the right to care for a common world.<sup>14</sup>

This decolonial relation to memory as a source of ongoing resistance and resurgence has shaped the way I imagine abolition. The slogan “Burn it down!” is arguably invested in the promise of the new. But the practice of *growing* abolition, as Jackie Sumell describes it, “requires daily attention and care” for living beings here and now, beings whose roots dig into a soil formed through the accumulation of past lives and deaths.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing easy about this everyday practice of care; conflicts and misunderstandings spring up at every turn. But this is precisely the point: abolition means not giving up on each other, even when it seems impossible to stick together. From this perspective, abolition is not the outcome of an apocalyptic event that ushers in new and unforeseen possibilities but rather an everyday practice of building and sustaining relationships that support our capacity to heal from jagged cycles of interpersonal, structural, and institutional violence. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes in an essay called “Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina,”

What if abolition isn’t a shattering thing, not a crashing thing, not a wrecking ball event? What if abolition is something that sprouts out of the wet places in our eyes, the broken places in our skin, the waiting places in our palms, the tremble holding in my mouth when I turn to you? What if abolition is something that grows? What if abolishing the prison industrial complex is the fruit of our diligent gardening, building, and deepening of a movement to respond to the violence of the state and the violence in our communities with sustainable, transformative love?<sup>16</sup>

The P4W Memorial Garden aspires to become a place for growing abolition in the prison capital of Canada. But given the endless capacity of capitalism to appropriate, sanitize, and monetize the suffering of others, the garden is also at risk of being used to rebrand the prison as a safe investment opportunity. The collective fought tooth and nail for several years to work out a written agreement with the developer who now owns the prison to “allow” the women to design and create their own memorial garden. No sooner was this agreement signed than the developer used the “collaboration” to market its project as “creating live-work-play-age opportunities while respecting the heritage and history of the site.”<sup>17</sup>

We've all walked past historic plaques with paragraph-long summaries of a complex past that is, in some ways, more profoundly forgotten than remembered through its commemoration. Members of the P4W Memorial Collective are well aware of this; they are determined to create a space that is meaningful *for them*, both as a place for mourning the women they loved and lost and as a chance to educate the public about ongoing conditions in prisons across so-called Canada. Their vision for the garden includes an outdoor gallery of art by women with prison experience and the possibility of a mobile gallery with art and testimonies by people who did time at P4W. And yet, however carefully the garden and outdoor gallery are designed, it may be impossible to prevent the developer from appropriating the surplus value created by the memory work of former prisoners. The more beautiful the memorial garden becomes, the more clients and investors will pay to live-work-play in a place where countless women have suffered and died.

Is there a way to resist this appropriation of the P4W Memorial Garden by those who stand to profit from the selective commemoration and strategic forgetting of those whose lives were interrupted by forced confinement in a carceral-colonial institution? What would it take for the public to be able to hear the testimonies of those who did time at P4W without either reducing them to helpless victims or unruly troublemakers? To what extent might a memory project also become a catalyst for social change, looking forward as well as backward, with a critical eye to the present?

In her profound meditations on listening to what she calls *lo inaudito*, María del Rosario Acosta López argues that the traumatic structure of colonial violence not only produces a “catastrophe of meaning” for those who undergo it but also undermines the frameworks of intelligibility needed to make sense of this violence.<sup>18</sup> As such, colonial violence “*is not only an assault on life but on the conditions of production of sense that make life legible.*”<sup>19</sup> The condition of possibility for listening to *lo inaudito*—both in the sense of unheard voices and in the sense of unheard-of violence—is the creation of what Acosta López calls “decolonial grammars” that refigure the temporality of meaning, allowing survivors to locate their suffering in a past that no longer repeats itself incessantly and indeterminately in the present and future.<sup>20</sup> For Acosta López, “the acts of listening and of making oneself heard are, at the same time, the acts of *producing a world that was not but should have been.* Grammars of *lo inaudito*, therefore, are also frameworks of sense capable of granting us access to an ethical face of both history and memory: the ethical demand of reclaiming the memory of what *should not have happened.*”<sup>21</sup>

No one should have died at the Kingston Prison for Women. The challenge is how to remember these deaths in a way that helps to create the conditions under which no one will ever again die in the name of justice. While it is by no means clear how to do this, and while there are multiple barriers to this process, the P4W

Memorial Garden and the annual healing circle on Prisoners' Justice Day both gesture toward "*a world that was not but should have been.*" The point of this memory work is not to construct a specific narrative or image of the past, the representation of which is all too easily exploited or otherwise deprived of its disruptive power. Rather, its power lies in everyday practices of gathering with others to *remember how to dwell in a world without prisons.* While none of us possesses this memory individually, the practice of gathering to honor the dead and fight for the living *reminds us not to forget each other.* As Ruth Wilson Gilmore teaches us, "abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions."<sup>22</sup> While the P4W healing circle and the proposed memorial garden are not necessarily institutions, and they will not, on their own, bring about the collapse of the prison industrial complex, they embody a commitment to growing abolition, even or especially in soil that bears traces of the dead.

### **Standpoint, Questions, and Method**

I have never done time in prison, and I did not know the women who died at P4W. My collaboration with the P4W Memorial Collective has raised all sorts of personal, practical, and philosophical questions for me about the meaning and practice of collective memory. What does it mean for members of the public with no experience of incarceration to "remember" P4W? What sense of "we" might emerge through a public reckoning with the lives and deaths of women in prison—and what demands would this make on the time, energy, and emotions of survivors? How could a single memorial do justice to the complexity of former prisoners' different, sometimes conflicting memories and desires?

These are big questions, and I will by no means answer them in this essay. Rather, my goal is to develop a basic vocabulary for thinking about collective memory and time, with critical phenomenology as my methodological framework. Critical phenomenology is a method for reflecting on lived experience in the context of power and history.<sup>23</sup> Recent work in the phenomenology of race, gender, sexuality, and disability reflects not only on the transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience but also on the way contingent historical structures such as oppression and resistance shape the lived experience of both hegemonic and marginalized subjects, in different but interconnected ways. These analyses are inspired by Husserl's account of the lifeworld as the historically sedimented context of lived experience, but they also push beyond his account to question the basic norms and structures of the lifeworld and even seek to transform them.

Critical phenomenology seems to me an appropriate method for thinking about collective memory because, on the one hand, remembering is an intentional act, and as such it presupposes a consciousness that *remembers something,*

the basic context of which is a lifeworld that is shaped by power, often in ways that exceed the explicit awareness of its inhabitants. On the other hand, it's not clear that collective memory has the same intentional structure as the individual act of remembering—nor even that it has an intentional structure at all. Collective memory, including monuments and rituals of commemoration, invites us to “remember”—or perhaps to *imagine* remembering—something that most of us have never experienced firsthand. And yet, as I will argue, the past is not separable from the present and future; even the distant past of generations whose actions and perspectives were never recorded continues to reverberate in the highway that was once a donkey trail, or the city that began as a military encampment. We inhabit the traces of countless others, both strangers and kin, and without such anonymous intimacy, the world as such would not exist. Whether we remember the past or not, it holds us in its matrix, for better and for worse—and so it matters what we choose to commemorate or to pave over in silence.

In what follows, I propose an account of four dimensions of collective memory: ontological, social, ethical, political. This is not meant as an exhaustive account, just as a preliminary sketch of the different registers in which collective memory operates, as a way of beginning to address the questions raised by the P4W Memorial Garden project. In the end, I will return to the Prisoners' Justice Day healing circle as a practice of collective memory that weaves together all four dimensions of collective memory.

### **Ontological Dimension**

At an ontological level, the site of collective memory is not intentional consciousness but rather the lifeworld itself, understood as a historically sedimented context for meaning and mattering that functions as both a *repository* for past praxis and a *generative matrix* for present and future praxis. The lifeworld is a repository insofar as it bears the traces of past actions, and it is a generative matrix in the sense that these traces are not inert records of what happened but also patterns that invite further action along the same lines, instituting what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls “a call to follow, the demand of a future.”<sup>24</sup>

Think of a shortcut across a grassy field; as Sara Ahmed reminds us in her account of institutional power, the more people have walked this way in the past, the more they will wear down a path that others are likely to follow, whether or not they are aware of those who came before them.<sup>25</sup> The field itself holds the collective memory, not as an intentional object correlated to the intentional acts of this or that consciousness or even of the group as a collective subject but as a sedimented history whose meaning remains latent in the field itself. This history is both concrete—the traces are there for anyone to see—and threatened with obscurity, at risk of being overlooked or invisibilized. We need to cultivate and

sustain perceptual practices to notice and interpret their call to follow, their demand of a future. This is where the social dimensions of collective memory come in.

### **Social Dimension(s)**

Simultaneous with the ontological dimension, and not as a later stage or moment, there is a social dimension of collective memory, understood as a relation to time belonging to a particular “we.” This dimension is even more complex than the ontological.

In the most general sense, everything I say or do has a social dimension insofar as it unfolds in a world that I did not create from the ground up but into which I was thrown. As Maurice Halbwachs says, “It is in society that people . . . acquire their memories.”<sup>26</sup> Even my most intimate personal memories emerge within a social context, whether or not I share them with others. A playground taunt like “na-na-na-boo-boo” might not seem like a collective memory when I sing it to my friends or enemies, but as Halbwachs notes, “The life of the child is immersed in social milieus through which [they come into] touch with a past stretching back some distance. The latter acts like a framework into which are woven [their] most personal experiences.”<sup>27</sup>

There is also a sense in which collective memories may occupy my embodied psyche at an unconscious level. Think of Freud’s myth of the band of brothers, or the intergenerational trauma of slavery, colonization, and starvation. The way I think, feel, and act today may be shaped by generations of ancestors I never knew and do not “remember” in the sense of a memory with specific content, but whose life experiences reverberate or *remember themselves in me*. We could call these forms of collective memory implicit or background memories; they are usually experienced not as memories but as the taken-for-granted shape of the lifeworld and one’s place within it. In this sense, they are close to the ontological sense of collective memory held in a historical-material field.

But there is also a level of collective memory that is experienced as the explicit recollection of a past. For example, a group of people can experience something together—whether it’s a camping trip or a train wreck—in a way that both generates shared memories and forges a sense of group identity. Living through something together, especially if that event was traumatic, can generate a sense of “we” that goes beyond the additive totality of individual memories, even if not everyone agrees on the details of this collective memory. I want to suggest that imprisonment in P4W has generated collective memories of this kind for those who survived the institution; hence the demand of some survivors for a memorial on prison grounds.

This leads us to a more formalized sense of collective memory that goes beyond a group’s recollection of their own lived experience and finds a more explicit articulation than the psychic or social dimensions of individual memory.

This is the sense of collective memory that Halbwachs is most interested in: the social archive that “provides the group a self-portrait that unfolds through time, since it is an image of the past.”<sup>28</sup> This is the sort of collective memory that finds—or at least, seeks—public commemoration in monuments and rituals. It’s the archive of stories and images that a social group reaches for to express who they are and how they are different from other social groups. These are the things we pass down to our children so they know where they come from and can figure out who they are in relation to a longer intergenerational timeline. This social articulation of collective memory can be weaponized in right-wing movements to “make X, Y, or Z great again,” and it can also be mobilized in liberation movements against genocide, colonization, slavery, and other forms of collective violence. For example, Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel asks in a roundtable on Indigenous resurgence: “How do our ancestors recognize us as Cherokee or Indigenous even when we’re not living on our homelands?”<sup>29</sup> What must one remember, reclaim, and practice in order to continue to exist as part of a Cherokee collective and in order for the collective itself to continue to exist?

The politicization of collective memory could be understood in terms of a tension between public memory and counter-memory, understood as the hegemonic (public) or resistant (counter-) memory of a particular social group that defines itself through intergenerational representations of a past that belongs to that group specifically, in distinction from and often in opposition to other groups. While the distinction between public memory and counter-memory is rarely, if ever, clear in practice, given the complexity of power along different axes and in different contexts, I find it useful as a conceptual distinction for mapping these power relations. From this perspective, public memory is grounded in master narratives and ideology, while collective counter-memory is committed to telling a history from below, a story of fights that have not yet been won or lost. Either way, collective memory makes a possessive claim: this history is *ours*, it belongs to us and not to others, and in remembering this history together, we know who “we” are. Public memory and counter-memory are charged with power and identity; we could think of them as the memory of the homeworld, in distinction from alien worlds.

This dimension of collective memory is more charged than the ontological memory of the lifeworld; public memory and counter-memory pick out certain traces in the lifeworld and claim them for a specific group. These are *our* memories, and the “we” to whom they belong is neither reducible to the totality of individuals in a particular social group nor separable from it; it is also generative of this group as a collectivity persisting through intergenerational time. Such memories have a normative inflection: *You must remember this* in order to share our homeworld. As such, public memory and counter-memory are not just an archive of historical

events or individual memories; they also function as a generative matrix, or what Merleau-Ponty theorizes as a “call to follow,” the institution of a sense.<sup>30</sup>

Earlier, I suggested that the group of people who survived P4W share a collective memory of their experience in the institution, which is not to say that everyone remembers the same things or that they interpret their memories in the same way but that they experienced firsthand what former prisoner Gayle Horii called “the infamous abattoir”<sup>31</sup>—not as employees or visitors but as criminalized women condemned to serve time. And yet, even within a marginalized social group, the perspectives of some members may function as hegemonic in relation to others. Memories of P4W shared by white prisoners, for example, are challenged by the collective counter-memories of the Indigenous women who formed the Native Sisterhood in 1976, of the Black women who wrote about racism in the prison newsletter, *Tightwire*, and of other groups whose memories of P4W are shaped by the longer *durée* of struggles for survival and well-being. These memories and counter-memories are embedded in a world where Black, Indigenous, impoverished, disabled, queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming people continue to be criminalized for resisting, and even for existing, in a lifeworld that is structured by heteropatriarchal colonial racial capitalism.

And so it should come as no surprise that when survivors of the prison approached its current owner in 2018 with the proposal for a memorial garden to remember those who died at P4W and in federal prisons for women across the country, their proposal was not immediately embraced. Not only does a public reminder of death by suicide in a coercive institution threaten the developer’s property values, but it also discloses the lifeworld as a different kind of place from the clean slate of capitalist investment: as a place of suffering and grievance, demand and responsibility, and pleasure and solidarity that cannot be silenced even if it is systematically ignored.

What would it mean for those of us who share neither the group memory of people who did time at P4W nor the collective counter-memory of criminalized social groups to “remember” those who died at P4W and at other federal prisons for women? Is the act of commemoration a form of collective memory, or is it something altogether different? Is the pledge not to forget the same as the act of remembering? These are open questions for me and for other members of the P4W Memorial Collective Advisory Board. They raise ethical and political issues that I will take up in the following two sections of this article.

### **Ethical Dimension**

Simultaneous with both the ontological and social dimensions of collective memory, there is what I propose to call an ethical dimension that issues an imperative to acknowledge past violence and suffering so that they never happen again. To

hear this imperative, to understand that it is directed to *you* and not just to the world in general, entails an ethical structure that arguably goes beyond both the intentionality of first-person consciousness and membership in a particular social group. According to the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, this ethical imperative addresses me in the second person, unearths in me a “you” that is prior to the “I think” or “I remember,” and commands me to infinite responsibility.<sup>32</sup> We could understand this dimension of collective memory as an ethical response to (the memories of) others: a way of remembering forward that relies not on the present recollection of one’s own past experience but rather on one’s *relation to the time of the Other*, to a past that was never present (at least, not for me). Whether or not I have a direct connection to this past—for example, as a descendant of victims or perpetrators—I am ethically commanded to remember that history *so that it may never again be repeated*. This ethical imperative to remember past violence in a way that refuses to repeat it addresses not only members of a specific social group but *anyone* who dwells in a world that is shaped by this violence.

The social and the ethical are deeply entangled here, but I want to suggest that they open up different senses of the *we*, the first of which (the social) is determinate and often agonistic and the second of which (the ethical) remains indeterminate and open-ended, better expressed by the word *anyone* than by *us* and *them*. Most accounts of collective memory focus on what I am calling the social dimension of collective memory, as expressed in the tension between public memory and collective counter-memories. But there is also an ethical sense of the “we” who remembers a history that may or may not belong to us in order to learn how not to repeat its violence. While the social memory of struggles and victories belongs to the particular groups who inherited it, this ethical sense of collective memory belongs to no one; rather, *we belong to it* (with a nonexclusive sense of “we” beyond recognizable identities and beyond the opposition of “us” and “them”). I want to suggest that the ethical dimension of collective memory responds specifically to the counter-memory of marginalized groups. The public memory of hegemonic groups has a vast infrastructure of support to facilitate its own social reproduction. By contrast, the ethical imperative of collective memory orients us toward what Foucault called “subjugated knowledges” at risk of being silenced or buried, such as the experiences of racialized, colonized, and criminalized people of all genders. To listen to these voices and truly hear them would require the creation of Acosta López’s “decolonial grammars”: frameworks of sense for listening to survivors and working through the collective trauma of colonial violence.

The ethical dimension of collective memory exceeds intentionality in a way that is different from the field-like structure of the ontological dimension: it commands me to listen and respond without reducing the other to whom I am listening to an object for study or representation. The field-like structure of ontological

memory may issue a call to follow, such that the past continues to reverberate in the present and future, but the vocative structure of ethical memory issues a command to remember a past that was never present in a way that alters the future, creating and/or reviving alternate paths across the field. While the field of ontological memory holds the traces of a sedimented history, these traces could remain latent indefinitely unless or until someone issues a command to remember—which is why the social and ethical dimensions of collective memory are so important. If no one shows up uninvited at a city council meeting to demand a meeting with the developer and then keeps showing up to meeting after meeting, battling disrespect and bullying, then the traces of the dead may still remain, but they will become harder and harder to perceive, and our collective memory—indeed, our lifeworld and the many homeworlds it supports—will be impoverished as a result.

If Levinas is right, and the Other issues an ethical command that interpellates me as a “you” at a level that is more fundamental than the “I think” and incommensurable with a homogeneous “we,” then it may be possible to hear the ethical claim to remember a past that was never present (for me), and to affirm the responsibility this engenders in me, without imagining that you and I share the same social identity as part of a “we” with determinate boundaries. And yet, if the ethical imperative to respond to the time of the Other is issued to anyone, anywhere, anytime, then it may move people to tears without motivating them to engage in political action. This brings us to the political dimension of collective memory.

### Political Dimension

The ethical command to remember collective countermemories that may or may not resonate with one’s own lived experience is not just a command to acknowledge or recognize those countermemories. It is also a call to action. This is the political dimension of collective memory, which requires *some* of us to commit to a concrete plan of action, improvising and revising as necessary to follow through on the ethical imperative not to repeat or perpetuate oppressive violence.

This political dimension of collective memory is not just identity-forming; it is a praxis of *world-building*. In this sense, it exceeds the scale of both public memory and collective countermemory, the latter of which belongs to an “us” or a “them,” each with their own proper repository of memories. The ethical dimension of collective memory opens up the specificity of countermemory, issuing an ethical command to listen and respond to *anyone*, whether or not they are part of a group whose shared experiences of oppression, resistance, and survival are at risk of being effaced or forgotten. Both of these axes are important, but the political dimension of collective memory can neither fall on the shoulders of a specific social group nor remain indeterminate and open-ended like an ethical command to anyone whatsoever; *someone* has to take action to stop the repetition of past violence and

cocreate a world where such violence is not tolerated. As such, the political dimension of collective memory exceeds both the identity claims of social memory and the indeterminacy of ethical memory, while holding space for both. It calls forth a sense of the “we” based on a shared commitment to abolish oppression and build “otherwise worlds.”<sup>33</sup> This political imperative commands us not only to notice how we have shaped this field with our habitual actions but also to imagine how the lifeworld that has generated these counter-memories could be transformed by collective action and to construct a plan of action based on these aspirations. In this sense, it calls for a commitment to bridge past and future. But in what sense is this still a practice of *memory* if its central focus is on building a different *future*?

The concept of procedural memory may help to address this question. Psychologists distinguish between three basic kinds of individual long-term memory: episodic, semantic, and procedural.<sup>34</sup> Episodic memory refers to an event one has experienced; semantic memory refers to facts one has voluntarily or involuntarily committed to memory; and procedural memory refers to skills or capacities, such as remembering how to ride a bike after many years. While both episodic and semantic memory are declarative, meaning that their content can be articulated in words, procedural memory is nondeclarative; it is held in the body and remains irreducible to propositional form. To put this somewhat differently, declarative memory (both episodic and semantic) is based on *knowing-that*, while procedural memory is based on *knowing-how*.

I want to suggest that, in its political dimension, collective memory expresses itself most powerfully through the committed reclamation and/or (re)invention of a collective procedural memory of the *how*: not just an episodic memory of events or a semantic memory of facts but a procedural memory of actions and refusals, habits and tendencies, capacities and incapacities that we may not yet know how to access as individuals but that are held in the memory of the lifeworld and in the collective counter-memories of specific homeworlds. Unlike the procedural memory of how to ride a bike, the collective procedural memory of how to abolish oppression and (re)build another world is not yet (or no longer) present in our bodies; we must collectively commit to retrieving and (re)inventing such capacities. This collective action draws upon an archive of ontological and social memories, many of which remain latent in overlapping fields of intergenerational time. As Merleau-Ponty writes in a different context, “We can be ignorant of something while knowing it because our memories and our body, rather than being given to us through singular and determinate acts of consciousness, are enveloped by generality.”<sup>35</sup> Such memories are “known by us given a general adhesion to the zone of our body and of our life that they concern.”<sup>36</sup> A social, ethical, and political engagement with the ontological dimensions of collective memory promises to (re)activate this zone of embodied generality in a way that

not only reclaims and represents historical traces but also reorganizes and reactivates them in resistance to ongoing oppression.

To be sure, there is more suffering and injustice in the world than any given person or group of people can be expected to redress through collective action. Different people will be moved to organize around different issues at different moments of intensity and through different relations of proximity. The process of reclaiming a procedural memory of how to build a world without prisons is endless, which does not mean it is pointless.

### **Collective Memory as Transformative Praxis**

This brings me back to the P4W Memorial Collective's annual healing circle. On the one hand, the healing circle has been a major organizing event of my life since returning to Canada in 2018, and working with the P4W Memorial Collective has radically shifted the way I understand abolition: not just as a vision for the future, but also as a practice of collective memory. And yet the healing circle is not mine to describe; it is an Indigenous ceremony that everyone is welcome to participate in, and no one is allowed to record. So the reflections I share on the healing circle will be precisely that: reflections on my own experience, and not representations of an objective phenomenon or event.

It took me a while to understand how important it was for the healing circle to take place on P4W grounds. Even when a severe thunderstorm rolled in last August 10 and the rain poured down on us, we stayed on the land rather than moving to shelter across the road. This is connected to what I have called the ontological dimension of collective memory. The land remembers what you and I may well forget; it holds traces of a past that may be buried and re-signified as an exciting business opportunity, but these traces do not for that reason disappear. It is in caring for this land, even through the opacity of not knowing what or whom or how to remember, that we sustain a practice of decolonial abolition.

Over the next few years, the P4W Memorial Collective will design and create a memorial garden and outdoor gallery for the women who died in the prison and for those who continue to live and die in prisons, jails, and detention centers from coast to coast to coast. This is what I have called the social dimension of collective memory: a site of representation and antagonism. Whatever shape it takes, the memorial will be partial and incomplete; it will inevitably share some names, stories, and images, and not others. There are bound to be conflicts and hurt feelings, and it may be impossible to protect the garden and gallery from capitalist appropriation. But no matter how fraught the process and outcome may be, it will have still expressed a desire that exceeds the bounds of hegemonic public memory that seek to contain it for the sake of profit and propriety. In other words, it will still issue an ethical command to pay attention: to *remember not to forget* those among

us who are most likely to be forgotten. And as long as folks continue to gather on P4W grounds to grow abolition by sharing their presence and fighting to reclaim their right to care for a common world, the political dimension of collective memory will remain open, and we will stand a chance of (re)building “decolonial grammars” for a world without prisons.<sup>37</sup>

This is why the healing circle is so important. It not only creates a space for survivors to share their memories, should they choose to do so, but it also provides a ceremonial framework for listening. People don’t always share specific memories of the past in the P4W healing circle; the orientation of the ceremony is precisely toward healing and transformation. And yet I want to argue that the healing circle is still a practice of collective *memory*, and not only collective imagination or some other form of collective action, insofar as the countermemory of survivors issues both an ethical command to remember what happened here, so that no one will ever again lose their life in the name of justice, and a political command to join with others in reclaiming a collective procedural memory of how to dwell in a world that does not rely on imprisonment for safety or accountability.

Participants in the circle are under no obligation to share their episodic or semantic memories of the prison; nor does every participant in the circle have such memories to share. Some former prisoners would rather see the prison razed to the ground than turned into a monument to the past, although no one I have met relishes the thought of its becoming luxury condos. People with lived experience of imprisonment may agree or disagree about what happened at P4W and what it all means; they need not subscribe to a single narrative nor share a common social identity as “federally-sentenced women.” Whether or not specific memories are shared or documented, the practice of gathering for a healing circle and insisting on people *not being forgotten* in prison challenges (any and all of) us to reclaim a collective *procedural* memory of how to (re)build a world in which no one will ever again die or even be imprisoned in the name of justice. This collective procedural memory is irreducible to the declarative content of episodic or semantic memories, but the latter still function as powerful reminders of resistant countermemory in the face of capitalism’s strategic forgetfulness.

As a praxis of collective procedural memory, the P4W healing circle expresses the memory of the lifeworld, not merely as a repository or archive of past experience but also as a generative matrix for present and future praxis. It’s unlikely that any individual participant in the healing circle, however wise, remembers how to respond to harm and conflict without resorting to state violence; it’s the circle itself that holds this collective memory, issuing an ethical and political imperative to all participants to activate their own relation to this collective memory and to commit to acting in ways that help to (re)build this world. As such, I believe that the P4W healing circle holds open the abolitionist horizon of prison memory work, based not on empathy

or mutual identification but on responding to the other as other and committing to specific forms of individual and collective action that abolish the conditions under which people of any gender lose their lives in the name of criminal justice.

### **Abolitionist Collective Memory**

What are the conditions under which an emergent “we” would *want to remember* a past that exceeds our own experience, a past that does not belong to us and may challenge our sense of social identity, for the sake of building a world that refuses to continue or repeat past violence? This is what an abolitionist memorial would do, I think: it would express the collective memories of a marginalized group, not for the sake of including these memories in a larger group narrative, nor for the sake of recognizing the group as a minor chord in the symphony of history, but rather as a way of reclaiming and imagining different ways of perceiving, knowing, feeling, and acting—different schemas for making sense of (ourselves in) the world—that do not repeat past violence.

I have suggested that the practice of gathering for a healing circle embodies the ethics and politics of abolitionist memory work in a way that resists capture more effectively than a representation of the past in the form of a plaque. By contrast, a memorial garden risks being framed by developers and investors as an ornamental token that indemnifies them from responsibility for the past. And yet, precisely as a garden that lives and grows, this form of living memorial calls for care and attention to the most opaque ontological dimensions of collective memory, demonstrating how to dig roots into the soil to bring forth new life. In “Freedom Seeds,” Gumbs calls on readers to

reflect on the place you stand. Maybe the ground you stand on is thick with screams, hard with the caked silences of those who resigned themselves to pain . . . [But] this dirt is as strong as we are, as full of alternative histories and forgotten resistance as our skin cells. The place that you stand is ready with queer potentials that contradict the market that has been draining it all this time.<sup>38</sup>

Reflect on the place that you stand and turn it over with the names of the ancestors who fought here, turn it over to the rhythm of the silences that allowed people to survive, turn it over in the memory of queer love and struggle that was buried here. This is the queer thing. Everything that has been buried still lives. Everything that is suppressed is waiting in the soil, ready for our need. Dig deep and turn it over, turn it over, turn it over, turn it over.<sup>39</sup>

An abolitionist memorial garden would call forth this praxis of reflecting on the place where we stand. It would express the determination of survivors not to

forget and not to be forgotten. It would also issue an ethical command to *anyone* to reflect on where they stand in a lifeworld that has been shaped by carceral-colonial power. And it would activate a collective procedural memory to “turn over” the soil of a violent and painful history to reclaim alternative ways of knowing, feeling, and acting—different ways of making sense of (ourselves in) a world that does not rely on punishment and control for justice. We don’t actually know what the necessary and sufficient conditions for such a world might be; maybe nothing is sufficient and lots of things are necessary. The challenge is to commit to remembering such a world in our bodies, in spite of not knowing what it will (have) look(ed) like.

Insofar as it issues an ethical and political imperative *never again* to let people die in the name of justice, this collective memory is broader than both the episodic memories of former prisoners and the semantic memory of what happened there; it includes also the collective procedural memory of a “we” beyond identity, a “we” that has not always relied on state violence for safety and justice. In effect, the memorial garden project reminds us not to tolerate life-destroying policies, practices, and institutions in the name of justice. I need not “identify” with survivors of P4W as women, as Canadian, or even as human in order to see how I (have always already) share(d) a world with them or to commit to building a differently structured world. The path to abolition is based not on a more inclusive sense of the “we” as a group identity but rather on an ethical commitment to *remember how another world is possible*. This commitment may be engendered by the expression of episodic memories shared by some and not others, but it also overflows the level of the episodic, experimenting with a collective procedural memory of how to share the world beyond identity, but not beyond politics.

---

**LISA GUENTHER** is Queen’s National Scholar in Political Philosophy and Critical Prison Studies at Queen’s University in Canada. She is the author of *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* and *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* and coeditor of *Death and Other Penalties: Philosophy in a Time of Mass Incarceration*. She is a member of the P4W Memorial Collective Advisory Board, and she is currently working on a critical phenomenology of prison abolition and decolonization on Turtle Island.

#### Notes

1. Archambault, *Report*, 314.
2. MacGuigan, *Report to Parliament*, 135.
3. Pollack, “Locked In, Locked Out,” 6.
4. Clancey and Arnone, “Queen’s Shackled.”
5. For an expanded version of this history of P4W, see Guenther, “Memory, Imagination, and Resistance.” For a broader analysis of the closure of P4W and the neoliberal system of federal prisons for women that replaced it, see Hannah-Moffatt, *Punishment in Disguise*.

6. For more on the P4W Memorial Collective, see the collective's website, <https://p4wmemorialcollective.com/> (accessed April 25, 2024).
7. For more on "The Art of Survival," see "The Art of Survival: A Prison for Women Memorial Collective Exhibition," P4W Memorial Collective, June 29, 2022, <https://p4wmemorialcollective.com/2022/06/29/the-art-of-survival/>.
8. For more on PJD, see "Prisoners' Justice Day," CPEP (Criminalization and Punishment Education Project), <https://cp-ep.org/prisoners-justice-day/> (accessed April 25, 2024).
9. For some highlights of PJD-TV 2022, hosted by prison activists El Jones and Desmond Cole, see Breach Video, "Prisoners Justice Day 2022."
10. See SMAAC, "Origins of the Native Brotherhood/Sisterhood Movement."
11. For more information and recommendations, see Native Women's Association of Canada, *Over-incarceration of Indigenous Women*.
12. Quoted in Nichols, "Colonialism of Incarceration," 453.
13. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 18.
14. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 150, 388, 461.
15. Sumell, *Growing Abolition*.
16. Gumbs, "Freedom Seeds," 145.
17. Union Park Kingston (website), <https://unionparkkingston.ca/> (accessed April 25, 2024).
18. Acosta López, "Gramáticas," 210.
19. Acosta López, "Gramáticas," 208.
20. Acosta López, "Gramáticas," 203.
21. Acosta López, "Gramáticas," 221–22.
22. Sumell, *Growing Abolition*.
23. For more on critical phenomenology, see Murphy, Salamon, and Weiss, *Fifty Concepts*.
24. Merleau-Ponty, *Institution in Personal and Public History*, 77.
25. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 16–20.
26. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 38.
27. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 68.
28. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 68.
29. The full quote reads: "How do our ancestors recognize us as Cherokee or Indigenous even when we're not living on our homelands? Ultimately it's about how we honor our place-based responsibilities and live our values and principles, as Tsalagi in everyday life, even when the land we're on does not recognize us" (Snelgrove, Dhamoon, and Corntassel, "Unsettling Settler Colonialism," 5).
30. Sartre makes a similar point in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*: "And let us not forget that the choice of social memories defines both the present *praxis* (in so far as it motivates this choice) and social memory in so far as it has produced our *praxis* along with its characteristic choice" (56).
31. Horii, "Disarm the Infamous Thing," 16.
32. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.
33. Lethabo King, Navarro, and Smith, *Otherwise Worlds*.
34. Michaelian and Sutton, "Collective Memory," 141.
35. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 165.
36. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 165.
37. Acosta López, "Gramáticas."
38. Gumbs, "Freedom Seeds," 147–48.
39. Gumbs, "Freedom Seeds," 149.

## Works Cited

- Acosta López, María del Rosario. "Gramáticas de lo inaudito as Decolonial Grammars: Notes for a Decolonization of Listening." *Research in Phenomenology* 52, no. 2 (2022): 203–22.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Archambault, J. *Report of the Royal Commission to Investigate the Penal System of Canada*. Ottawa: J. O. Patenaude, 1938. [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b47206](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b47206).
- Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. London: Verso Books, 2019.
- Breach Video. "Prisoners Justice Day 2022 — Highlights." *Breach*, August 12, 2022. <https://breachmedia.ca/prisoners-justice-day-2022-highlights/>.
- Clancey, Clare, and Terra-Ann Arnone. "Queen's Shackled by Small Budget." *Queen's Journal*, June 28, 2011. <https://www.queensjournal.ca/story/2011-06-28/features/queens-shackled-small-budget/>.
- Guenther, Lisa. "Memory, Imagination, and Resistance in Canada's Prison for Women." In "Critical Perspectives on Sites of Conscience," edited by Justine Lloyd and Linda Steele. Special issue, *Space and Culture* 25, no. 2 (2022): 255–65.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. "Freedom Seeds: Growing Abolition in Durham, North Carolina." In *Abolition Now! Ten Years of Strategy and Struggle against the Prison Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK, 2008.
- Halbwachs, Maurice. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Hannah-Moffatt, Kelly. *Punishment in Disguise: Penal Governance and Canadian Women's Imprisonment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Horii, Gayle. "Disarm the Infamous Thing." *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* 5, no. 2 (1994): 10–22. [https://journals.scholarsportal.info/details/0838164x/v05i0002/10\\_disarmtit.xml](https://journals.scholarsportal.info/details/0838164x/v05i0002/10_disarmtit.xml).
- Lethabo King, Tiffany, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith, eds. *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- MacGuigan, M. *Report to Parliament*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1977. <http://johnhoward.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/1977-HV-9507-C33-1977-MacGuigan.pdf>.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Institution in Personal and Public History and the Problem of Passivity: Sleep, the Unconscious, Memory; Course Notes at the College de France (1954–55)*. Translated by Leonard Lawler and Heath Massey. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Michaelian, Kourken, and John Sutton. "Collective Memory." In *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*, edited by Marija Jankovic and Kirk Ludwig, 140–51. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Murphy, Ann, Gayle Salamon, and Gail Weiss, eds. *Fifty Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2019.
- Native Women's Association of Canada. *Over-incarceration of Indigenous Women: Policy Brief*. [https://nwac.ca/assets-knowledge-centre/FNIHB\\_Over\\_Incarceration\\_of\\_Indigenous-Women-Policy-Brief.pdf](https://nwac.ca/assets-knowledge-centre/FNIHB_Over_Incarceration_of_Indigenous-Women-Policy-Brief.pdf) (accessed April 25, 2024).
- Nichols, Robert. "The Colonialism of Incarceration." *Radical Philosophy Review* 17, no. 2 (2014): 435–55.

- Pollack, Shoshana. "Locked In/Locked Out: Imprisoning Women in the Shrinking and Punitive Welfare State." PhD diss., Wilfrid Laurier University, 2008.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Translated by Allen Sheridan-Smith. London: Verso Books, 2004.
- SMAAC (Saskatchewan-Manitoba-Alberta Abolition Coalition). "Origins of the Native Brotherhood/Sisterhood Movement." August 7, 2020. <https://smaac.org/origins-of-the-native-brotherhood-sisterhood-movement/>.
- Snelgrove, Corey, Rita Dhamoon, and Jeff Corntassel. "Unsettling Settler Colonialism: The Discourse and Politics of Settlers, and Solidarity with Indigenous Nations." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society* 3, no. 2 (2014): 1–32.
- Sumell, Jackie. *Growing Abolition* (blog). <https://www.growingabolition.com> (accessed April 25, 2024).