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Activist projects and the negotiation of thrownogetherness within the hostile environment of Hungarian politics

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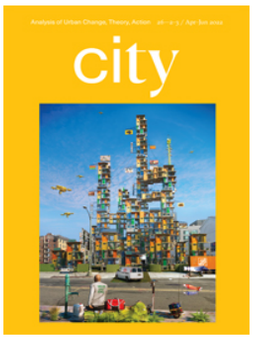

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Shawn Bodden

For Doreen Massey, space is a challenge of multiplicity, encounter and relation: a 'thrownogetherness' that demands ongoing negotiation. Space, Massey argues, is open—it is capable of being made otherwise. Drawing on Massey's ideas, this essay reflects on the everyday political work of community projects to open up space for new possibilities of living with difference within hostile political environments. Through a combination of ethnographic storytelling, photography and diagrammatic sketches, I follow 'stories-so-far' from the Auróra community centre in Budapest, Hungary and its members' project to build a community garden. Rather than focus on prevailing discourses which frame Hungarian politics as a battle between an illiberal government and a liberal opposition, I shift attention to everyday experiences of this hostile political environment by examining projects

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as mundane and local techniques through which community groups describe, assemble, and work on their own better possible futures. In so doing, I also argue for a praxeological, rather than ontological reading of Massey's work: rather than presuming a priori that all space is open, we should follow Massey in analysing the situated and ongoing 'terms of engagement' through which people open up—and close down—better possible spaces and better ways of living with difference.

The work of keeping open

Levi leans heavily to shove open the garden door. It grumbles aside, revealing a small gravel lot packed full of stuff. A disused bar is crowded with boxes, crates and run-down refrigerators. The countertop brims with tangles of wire and heaps of less easily identifiable rods, sacks, planks, blocks, lumps, lengths, widths, bars, bits and many odds and many ends. Corners of worn furniture peak out of a closed toilet stall nearby, and someone—somehow—has managed to park a car in the scant open space between the buildings. When I first visited in 2016, this lot was the Auróra community centre's trendy new beer garden: inside, groups of friends chatted on DIY pallet furniture beneath strings of yellow fairy-lights. But just two years later, the beer garden's optimistic atmosphere has been replaced with weeds and junk. The local government had intervened, rejecting Auróra's appeal for a license to sell food and drink outdoors: the beer garden was closed, and the lot became a storage shed.

Keeping Auróra open involves constantly working to reinvent how it works, and this can make it hard to summarise what kind of place Auróra is: a community centre in Budapest's 8th District; a café; a bar; a concert venue (see Figure 1). It's also home to a Jewish cultural organisation, a number of NGOs and independent media outlets—part of the reason Auróra's members call it

Figure 1: The Auróra community centre has to look for new ways to stay open. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

an activist base; a social enterprise; a 'free space'. From the start, Auróra's aim has been to provide space and cheap rent—subsidized by the bar's profits—to civil society groups. This was the hope for the beer garden too: a way to bring more people into the communities that frequent Auróra and more funding for the community projects they support. Yet, these projects are also the reason Auróra has come to be a 'George Soros-funded nest of duplicitous civil-society dissidents' (Ferenc 2019, online) in the eyes of Hungary's Fidesz-led government. Auróra has maintained steady opposition to the Hungarian government's hostile treatment of refugees and the homeless community; its closure of the Central European University; its dismantlement of Hungary's independent media. The response: a barrage of citations, police visits, far-right graffiti, homophobic flash-mobs and even an arson attack.

After rejecting Auróra's appeal for a beer-garden license, the government went further and revoked the community centre's permit to sell alcohol after 10.00pm, radically jeopardising the sustainability of their work. The members of Auróra have had to get creative to keep open, trying out new techniques like renting out the side-lot as parking space; giving out 'free' drinks for donations in an honesty box; and launching a support network with similar spaces throughout Hungary. When government-affiliated media began posting stories claiming that Auróra had been closed, its organisers took to social-media to assert that Auróra was open—they'd just had to re-invent what 'being open' looks like.

Our visit to Auróra's neglected lot today is part of another project to keep Auróra open differently: a group of volunteers want to convert the lot into a community garden (see Figure 2). Surveying the lot's dirty gravel, the broken wooden walkway and the slumping bar from the open gate, the question on our minds is where to start—how to make new possibilities for keeping Auróra open out of all this clutter. Time and again, Auróra's community come together to respond to messy, confused, problematic situations: to keep their space open, they face what Doreen Massey (2005, 140) calls 'the unavoidable

Figure 2: Facing the challenge of making the lot into a community garden. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

challenge of negotiating a here-and-now'—the thrownTogetherness of their place-in-the-making.

Making space within a hostile environment

Thrown Togetherness, Massey's evocative phrase for the 'event of place', aims to convey an open-ended and multiplicitous understanding of space (2005, 181), one that contests ethno-nationalist accounts of space as clearly demarcated and 'closed'. Following Massey, places are not containers in which 'different social processes are gathered up into an intelligible whole', but rather each 'a locus of the generation of new trajectories and new configurations' (2005, 141). Thrown Togetherness references the 'chance', 'surprise', and 'challenge' of space—and the political implications of the realisation that 'in its temporary constellations we (must) make something of it' (Massey 2005, 111–116, 141).

Although Massey finds hope in the 'openness of space', she insists that thrown togetherness is a *challenge*, not a debate on 'whether demarcation (boundary building) is simply good or bad'; it involves ongoing negotiation of 'the terms on which … openness/closure is established' (Massey 2005, 165, 179). Thrown Togetherness invites political questions about the criteria, terms, resources and practices through which a place is made—and made to be welcoming, tolerant, good or otherwise. Taking space as a *question* (Massey 2005, 13) directs attention to the ways communities formulate situated and provisional answers as they attune and respond to encounters with difference (Wilson 2017; Swanton 2016), issue and evaluate claims about the world (Barnett 2017), and negotiate grammars of 'principled action' in everyday life (Raffel 2013; Blum and McHugh 1984). In this sense, to approach politics as 'the (ever-contested) question of our being together' is to take interest in the ways that people and groups negotiate their place in a wider world of projects, agendas and 'stories-so-far' to which their own projects are made responsible (Massey 2005, 9–12, 142; Massey 2004).

The project of Auróra's community garden is a response to a hostile political environment, and one that emerges day-to-day through conversations, encounters with government policies and the ongoing search for resources among Auróra's spaces and material things—for ways to stay open as an alternative to the government's vision of an 'illiberal' Hungary. Auróra's work may not stop the government's project to create an environment hostile to those outside its vision of an 'homogenous' ethno-nationalist state (Kolozsi 2017), but the community centre's projects make room for other possibilities. When the government stranded asylum-seekers in a Budapest train station in 2015, members of Auróra opened up their courtyard and showers for families and helped deliver food to the station. When the government banned Gender Studies from universities and LGBTQ+ representation in public media, Auróra hosted activist events and student groups—with a rainbow flag posted staunchly above their front entrance.

Such projects assemble alternatives to the government's vision from mundane resources like a shower, a spare room or an empty lot. Even a community garden can thus become a resource for new political alternatives—put to work in the

Figure 3: 'Join us!' Scrap paper, sharpies and recycled wood put to use to re-negotiate the terms of Auróra's community. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

negotiation of 'as well as possible' ways of living through a 'hands-on, ongoing process of recreation' of Auróra's possibilities within a hostile environment (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6). For Massey (2005, 141–142), the analytic value of 'throwntogetherness' turns on an attention to the *work* done to negotiate multiplicity and conjuncture, a realisation that the 'terms of engagement' for getting on and sharing space with others are implicated and formulated in the ways we respond to a shared world. 'Reconceptualising place in this way', she argues, 'puts on the agenda a different set of political questions' without presumption of 'pre-given coherence, or of community or collective identity' (Massey 2005, 141) (see Figure 3).

Within Hungary's hostile political environment, this move helps to escape reductive, yet pervasive discourses about an 'illiberal government' challenged by a 'liberal opposition'. Claims of 'democratic backsliding' in Hungary and Central Europe trade on—and performatively constitute—understandings of a tolerant, progressive, liberal West in contrast to a purportedly 'under-developed' or 'regressed' Central European other (Kulpa 2014, 439–442). Essentialist definitions of 'healthy' democracy in terms of select legal forms enable a vitalist critique of illiberalism as an 'infection' endangering vigorous legal systems in the West (see Mazmanyan 2020, 241; Hendrikse 2018, 170). Such discourses mask ways in which the economic and political interests of Western actors are implicated in Hungarian illiberalism, and they distract from a critical study of the ways legal devices are used and misused.

Although these interpretations usefully express the vulnerability of seemingly bedrock political norms, their diagnosis of an ailing 'body-politic' glosses over the intentionality and situated uses behind experiments in illiberal governance (Pirro and Stanley 2021). They do not acknowledge that illiberalism—like liberalism—is a situated and emergent *project*, 'not a description of the world as it is so much as an image in which the world is being made' (Massey 2005, 5). Recognising this fact leads to the 'different set of political questions' of throwntogetherness: Massey's focus on the *negotiation* of multiplicity originated in response to Thatcherite claims that 'there is no alternative' to neoliberal

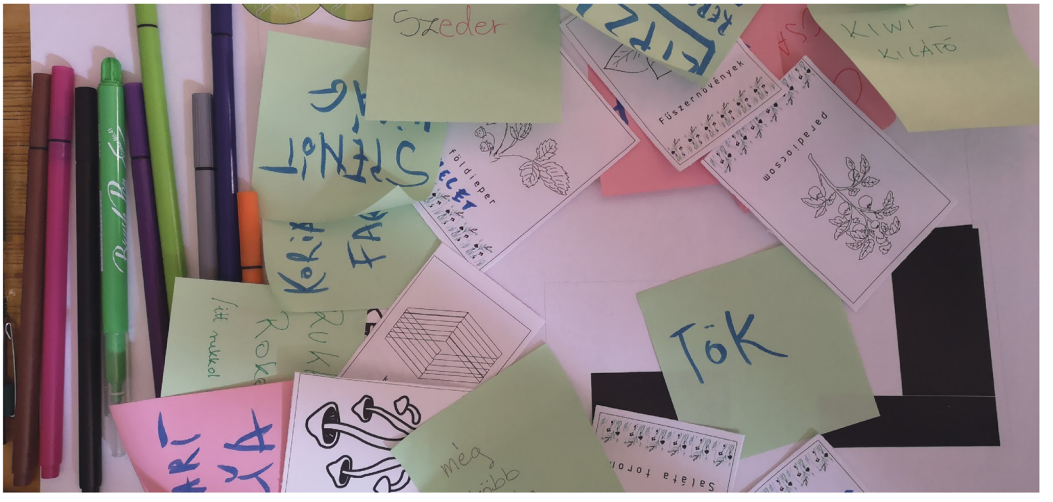

Figure 4: Thrown*together*ness calls attention to the techniques used to assemble possibilities here-and-now—and to dismiss others. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

globalisation, a 'discourse of inevitability … to render unthinkable the possibility of any alternatives' (1997, 9; 2005, 4–5; 1992, online). Recognition of neoliberal globalisation, liberalism and illiberalism as projects trains focus on the practices that constitute them—as well as the situated and experimental work done to enact alternatives (Featherstone and Painter 2012, 6). As an analytic approach, thinking with thrown*together*ness opens political projects to scrutiny and 'claims *for justification* of social relations' (Barnett 2017, 266–268): it calls for a critical, provisional and pluralistic accountability (see Figure 4).

Massey's ideas re-orient critique of projects like illiberalism or neoliberalism away from their 'form' alone, toward the techniques through which their supporters disavow accountability to others' interests, claims and projects. Making this distinction is particularly important for bringing Massey's ideas to bear on the hostile political environment in Hungary due to a broad tendency to link thrown*together*ness with cosmopolitan multiculturalism, demographic diversity and open borders (as discussed by Gawlewicz & Yiftachel in this Special Feature). Massey directly rejects the idea that certain places—the city, public space, the West—are essentially 'more' thrown-together than others (2005, 155). Likewise, she insists that, within certain unequal 'power geometries', actions like the closure of borders can be justified (Massey 2005, 164–166).

A critique of the Hungarian government's closure of borders in the face of asylum-seekers, closure of the Central European University and (attempted) closure of Auróra risk falling prey to conspiracy theory and double-talk crafted by Fidesz politicians (see Magyar 2018) to belittle dissent as an 'attack against Hungary'—behind which demands for conformity to Western liberal models of multiculturalism are the purportedly 'real' agenda. A critique of these closures could, instead, focus on the terms through which they are enacted—the techniques of violence, deception, censorship, bad faith negotiations and antagonism routinely identified by those affected, yet just as routinely dismissed by those in power. Studying the hostile environments created in Hungary or other contexts (such as Italy or Israel, see Carta; Abuzaid & Yiftachel in this

Special Feature) in terms of thrown*together*ness can draw attention to their constitution as projects, to the work involved in implementing them.

At the same time, thinking with thrown*together*ness can provide insight into the political work of projects like Auróra's by focusing on the ways members formulate and enact what their community space can and should *do* (Lussault and Stock 2010). Such projects are ways of working out 'particular answers, to (particular) questions of space and place' (Massey 2005, 166). By working together on a shared project, the community members of Auróra work out what 'difference' their space can make in Hungary today (Gawlewicz in this Special Feature gives similar examples from the UK). In so doing, they assemble work-in-progress geographies of political action through situated and embodied grammars of decision-making, deliberation and evaluation. They tell their own stories of Hungarian politics.

Politics as a work-in-progress

'There's gonna be a planter here', Dani tells us, kicking at a soggy sheet of plywood, 'and somewhere over there'. We've been sorting junk for weeks—sagging chairs, rags, broken bottles into the rubbish pile; pallets, bricks, tarpaulin set aside to repurpose later. Some things are less obvious: when I ask Levi how we'll remove the toilet bowls from the former WC—torn down by order of the local government—he shakes his head with a grin, 'They'll be perfect for flowers. And Bárbara thinks we should build a rainbow between them!'. We sort, chat and debate; we piece together a shared sense of how this space might work (see Figure 5).

Our planning meetings go a similar way: one week, Pisti and Alíz get into an argument about whether the allotments should be free and communal or rented out for a fee. There's no final consensus, but we pose questions about how the garden should fit in among Auróra's other interests and projects. Meetings and gardening sessions become spaces to test ideas together: suggestions of a 'community rules' board; plans for eco-friendly composting workshops; Pisti's

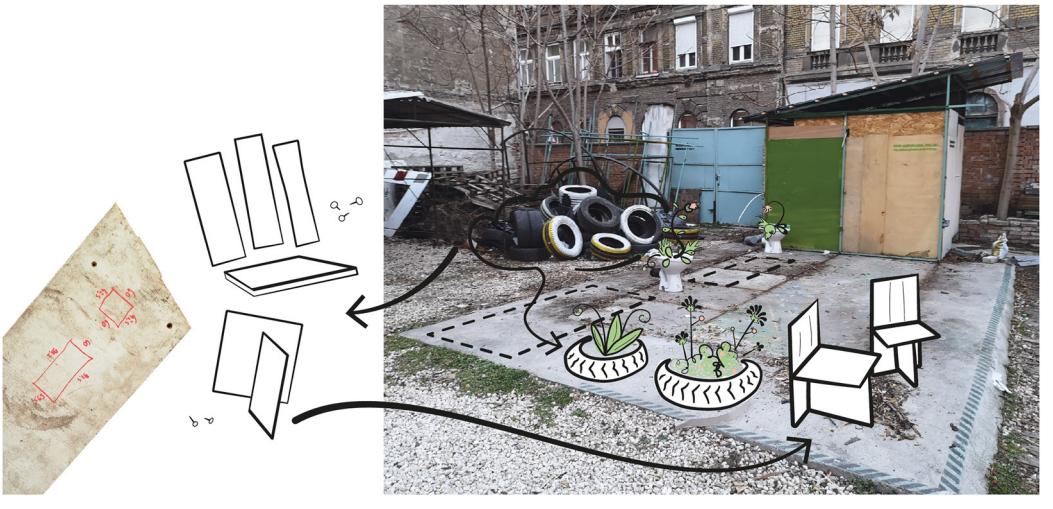

Figure 5: We work with what we find. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

Figure 6: Volunteers discuss playful and practical possibilities while they work. A street-food sign becomes something to keep—a way to make the garden their own. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

adamant appeal that 'we need to include grannies!' if we want to be a part of the neighbourhood. Week-to-week, meeting-to-meeting, we negotiate the 'terms of engagement' (Massey 2005) of our garden and our community, a provisional, practical and shared sense of its possibilities and goals, rules and problems (see Figure 6).

One day, I arrive to find our new sign missing from the garden's low brick wall. The sign had been a big, gaudy, borderline garish collaboration—and another moment of 'making something of' the lot's debris: a door from the former WC painted in splotches, streaks, drawings of lizards and stylised flowers by a crowd of volunteers, adults and children alike. The sign was another space where all sorts of ideas mingled and merged, and we'd hoped it would bring still more people and ideas to the garden.

I shout *sziasztok!* to the others already pruning, shovelling and chatting away inside, then ask Levi what happened. *Megvan*, he reassures me, 'we still have it', but there's been more trouble with the local government. Auróra's been accused of advertising a 'business' in public space without a permit: the sign had to come down or we'd face a fine. It's not a major setback, but minor citations and disruptions like this make the hostile environment felt in Auróra's everyday life—and they're part of the reason our work on the garden is always provisional, always speculative. We work together to open up new possibilities for the garden, but those possibilities are subject to outside opinion and intervention too. 'We'll just have to hang the sign up again inside the garden, and we'll make it four times bigger—so they get the message', jokes Levi.

Here-and-now possible futures

Auróra's community members discover the value and political meaning of their community garden emergently (Hughes 2020), together and along the way

Figure 7: The first small blooms, returning volunteers and ideas for new projects each become signs the garden is working. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

as they work on their shared project: they learn—from one another, from the material things they put to work, from the government's pressures—what the community garden and Auróra can become (see Figure 7). In gardening sessions and meetings, members experiment with the garden's possibilities by adjusting, imagining and responding to each next challenge that arises—and each time we must learn 'how to care' for our project together, how to 'maintain, repair and continue "our world" so we can live in it as best as possible' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 3). Work on the garden opens up Auróra's community in new ways—and keeps open the possibility of a different, more tolerant space within the hostile environment fostered by Fidesz.

A shared project is a way for a community to negotiate the multiplicity of shared space. This is, however, an ongoing and worked at process; it is not defined in advance. This is important to recognise in light of forceful critiques of project-based work as a precarious mode of living. The philosopher Bojana Kunst (2015, 164; Bayly 2013) argues that projects are 'a promise of the future and the possibility of what is still to come'. In her analysis of the ecology of project-based funding in the arts, Kunst warns that powerholders and funding-bodies can use the 'contradictory temporal constellation' of the project to constrain and dictate the possibilities of the future. Here, the project's 'terms of engagement' are defined within existing 'power geometries' (Massey 2005; 1999), projecting these relationships onto the future.

The precarities and limitations of project-based funding are a pressing reality for Auróra and other civil-society organisations, making their work accountable to and contingent on the interests of (predominantly Western) funders. Auróra's

Figure 8: Other groups use the garden for workshops and meetings; the community centre's possibilities continue to grow. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

project work, however, is not as strictly defined as Kunst would suggest: although funders' terms may work to foreclose the future, Auróra's community members *negotiate* those terms along the way. Auróra's politics of place, then, involves keeping open the possibility of under-valued ways of living together by creatively adapting techniques—like community gardens—that *are* valued by others. To work on a community project in a hostile environment is to engage in the political work of creating new capacities to act together with others (Massey 2005, 141). Members develop shared grammars of political action (Barnett 2014) and a shared sense of worthwhile possible futures. By working on the community garden together, Auróra's community opens up space for better possible futures here-and-now (see Figure 8).

As the ongoing negotiation of a community, the project of Auróra's community garden offers a better sense of the *challenge* of multiplicity than perspectives that assume 'living with difference' takes the form of different cultures living side-by-side, 'a world where many worlds fit' (Escobar 2018). Arguing for a 'problematic' understanding of pluralism, Martin Savransky (2021a, 2021b, 145) argues that 'rather than a philosophical exposition on multiple worlds and ontologies, or a theory of the organisation of a diverse polis, pluralism is first and foremost a *pragmatics of the pluriverse* – a political, experimental and pragmatic *response*'. The mundane practical and ongoing techniques people develop to respond to difference—in values, in beliefs, in ways of life—negotiate the terms of engagement for their shared spaces- and communities-in-the-making. Although Massey's depiction of space as 'open-ended' has frequently been treated as a given, *ontological* claim about 'relational' space (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos 2021; Rustin 2012), a 'problematic' understanding of plurality follows Massey's attention to the situated and provisional negotiation of multiplicity to examine the shared and contingent work done to open up space for new possibilities in everyday life.

By working on their community garden, Auróra's members undertake the collaborative and conflictive work of caring for a community in a coeval world by making something of the thrown*together*ness of a vacant lot, material debris,

Figure 9: Staying open takes work—situated and provisional responses to questions about how, for whom and by what terms a space is made. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

government interventions, personal convictions, neighbours' interests and each next day-to-day challenge. Taking seriously the practices, conversations, and material things people use to work on community projects within a hostile environment can show how space becomes open as a practical—and challenging—local accomplishment. Even in the uncertain placement of a sign or the playful imagination of new uses for rubbish, we can learn about the live struggle to re-negotiate the terms of living together here-and-now. They weave together a shared 'here and now' as an ongoing story, 'as unfinished business' (Massey 2005, 129–130): as techniques for negotiating a shared place in the world, such everyday projects assemble work-in-progress geographies of political action. It is thus pertinent that we not understand Massey's injunction that we 'must make something of' space as mere ontological abstraction, but rather as a political directive to keep our own research practices close to the ground, to consider how our own storytelling takes part in the shared, practical, everyday politics of opening space (see Figure 9).

Conclusion

In a move consonant with Massey's interest in the politics of 'stories-so-far' (2005, 130), Anna Tsing argues that ethnography can serve as a practice of generative storytelling to 'pick up diverse things of meaning and value and gather them together' (2015, 287–288). Sharing stories-so-far from Auróra and other community projects (see Gawlewicz in this Special Feature) might inspire

Figure 10: How, for instance, elder flowers can be used to make cordials, but also to do the work of gathering people together. Photo: Shawn Bodden.

like-minded stories elsewhere—opening up still more possible futures. A work-in-progress view of politics can draw attention to the situated work through which people formulate—tentatively, experimentally, always subject to revision—responses to the questions of space they encounter. This is the work of keeping space open, of finding 'loose ends and missing links' to open new possibilities together and to negotiate a shared here-and-now (Massey 2005, 12).

In this text, the use of diagrammatic sketches aims to draw attention to the shared senses of possibility developed by Auróra's members in and as their work on their community garden. Drawing can be used to 'edit out, or … open up space for, the messiness and conflict of lived encounter in the field' (Brice 2018, 151). As Tim Ingold (2011, 309–310) argues, drawing is a kind of 'gesture that follows what is going on': it can 'draw the eye' to particular details, but also feelings, hopes and possibilities (Taussig 2011, 123–125; Bullen, Fox, and Lyon 2017). If drawing—like writing and photography—as a skilled craft is 'about responding to things and being responded to' (Ingold 2018, 162), then its skilful use is bound up in and negotiated through the everyday practices, projects and values of a community (Goodwin 2017, Ch. 19). My own use of diagrammatic sketching to annotate text and photos recalls the practices of Auróra's members to point out and work on the possibility of a good community garden with one another. By sketching atop ethnographic and photographic descriptions of Auróra's work in the community garden, I aim to point readers to the work of Auróra's community to develop shared and situated senses of possibility and to bring their stories-so-far into conversations with others' (see Figure 10).

These sketches reiterate Massey's (2005, 130) repeated point about the multiplicity of trajectories that pass through and compose a place. They present a montage of many possibilities, hopes, interests, values and projects that Auróra's various members find in the community garden—without claiming that they must all 'add up' or 'reduce down' to a single, common aim. Instead, Auróra's community garden is a way of finding common ground for many interests and ideas, of keeping space open for shared alternatives and possible

futures unwelcome in hostile political environments. It is thus important to convey not only descriptions of the events that have already happened, but also their community's ongoing, worked-at sense of here-and-now possible futures: it's a way of keeping the ending open, and inviting others to connect their own projects with theirs.

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