

eISSN: 2254-1179

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14201/candb.v13i121-140>

# Mundane Joy as Emergent Strategy: Community Storytellers on “Happiness,” “Resilience,” and the “Good Life”

**Kathryn Waring, Lorraine York, Daniel Coleman**

[warink1@mcmaster.ca](mailto:warink1@mcmaster.ca) // [yorkl@mcmaster.ca](mailto:yorkl@mcmaster.ca) // [dcoleman@mcmaster.ca](mailto:dcoleman@mcmaster.ca)

Waring ORCID: 0000-0002-1227-2738

Coleman ORCID: 0000-0001-6973-9872

*McMaster University, Canada / CCENA (Centre for Community Engaged Narrative Arts)*

**Submitted:** 05/04/2023

**Accepted:** 04/09/2023

## ABSTRACT

This essay traces how community-based activist storytellers make room for emergent strategies in perilous times. It was sparked by the authors' experience of working between two distinct communities that are both deeply invested in understanding the function of story-and-art-making in troubled and troubling times. For brevity's sake, we will refer to the first community as the collective of “arts-based community-making” groups with whom we work under the auspices of the Centre for Community-Engaged Narrative Arts in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Our second community is the Spain-based RESHAP international group of literary and cultural studies scholars who are studying the theme of “Narrativas de la felicidad y la resiliencia / Narratives of Happiness and Resilience.” In the context of “risk society”—the widespread perception of life on earth as dangerous, vulnerable, and fraught with complex hazards—popular media, governments, and corporations, in addition to school systems, public think tanks, and the self-help industry often urge people to generate what Sara Ahmed has called “happiness scripts,” to keep positive and be resilient. These “scripts” become directive, insofar as stories of happiness, the good life, or resilience become mechanisms of discipline or coercive governance that can elicit what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.” Our essay teases out the emergent possibilities, the creative potential, that we see arising from community-based story-makers' navigation of the tension between these

(required) stories of the “good life” and the everyday, emergent strategies they invent in the midst of challenging times.

**Keywords**

Community-based Storytelling; Resilience; Emergent Strategies; Mundane Joy

## 1. Introduction

This essay examines the narrative expectations that often go unstated in widespread exhortations to achieve the “good life”—that is, to understand your experience as a story of finding *happiness* or *resilience*, especially in precarious times such as the period of the COVID pandemic. Our premise is that *the good life, resilience, or happiness*, among many other affective states, are essentially stories—scripts or narrative sequences that order events and experiences into stories of “bouncing-back” from trauma, conflict, or adversity (in stories of resilience) or navigating the “hap” of happenstance (in stories of happiness) in such a way as to feel one is living a good life. Another premise is that these kinds of stories or narrative sequences when collectively shared, have remarkable binding power to shape communities. Indeed, communities and subcommunities come into being by means of the stories they collectively share.<sup>1</sup> What we have learned by interviewing community-based storytellers in our city is that their communities tend to avoid predetermined story forms that would add up to *happiness* or *resilience* and espouse instead less-determinable narratives along the lines of what adrienne maree brown has called “emergent strategies”—strategies that she says involve “adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, fractal awareness, resilience and transformative justice, non-linear and iterative change, creating more possibilities” (16-17).

These distinctions were recently highlighted for us through our experience of participating in two communities that share common interests in storytelling

---

1. We are influenced here by Benedict Anderson’s argument forty years ago in *Imagined Communities* that dispersed people imagine themselves as part of a community when they can share the same stories. His argument was specific to the way in which the popular spread of print media (from newspapers and novels to maps) after the invention of the printing press made possible the emergence of the modern nation. The shaping power of stories to generate communities and belonging are not strategies deployed exclusively by official nation-states. As Korean-American writer Mathew Salesses points out, stories shape how people of various social and cultural positions find “meaning in our everyday lives” (15); speaking of the importance of storytelling to the formation and survivance of Indigenous communities, Cherokee writer Daniel Heath Justice writes that stories “connect us to the world, one another, and even ourselves” (4).

Mundane Joy as Emergent Strategy: Community Storytellers on “Happiness,”  
“Resilience,” and the “Good Life”

but are quite different from each other: in the first, we have worked in partnership with community-based artists and writers in the City of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where we three authors work, and in the second, we are participants in a team of international scholars studying “Cultural Narratives of Happiness and Resilience.” You could call the first a community that practices storytelling in the everyday world, while you could call the second a community that theorizes the methods and effects of storytelling in the worlds of literary and cultural studies. We will say more about each of these groups momentarily, but for now we will note that both are interested in how shared stories create communities and how communities create shared stories (one way of understanding what “cultural narratives” do). As scholars trained in the disciplines of literary and cultural studies who draw on the insights of affect theory, disability studies and theories of care, we see our straddling these two communities as necessary to our investigation of a widespread public’s relation to our disciplines and of our disciplines’ relevance to a larger public.

The gaps between these two communities have been instructive to us because, when we asked our community-based artist and writer partners in a series of interviews conducted in the early half of 2022 how they would describe the benefits of their story-making and story-gathering activities, especially during the pandemic, we were struck by their avoidance of summative concepts like *resilience* or *happiness* that are key reference points for our scholarly community of theory, and how they instead preferred open-ended, improvisational concepts that emphasize unfolding processes, such as *surprise*, *creativity*, *community*, *care*, *spontaneity*, or *mundane joy*. Reflecting on our interviewees’ statements, we have come to believe that their discomfort with terms like *resilience* and *happiness* stems from their resistance to the normative narrative sequences conveyed in these terms, sequences that present hard-pressed individuals or communities “bouncing back” from adversity or “overcoming” trauma to achieve a kind of solid state, affective denouement, such as *happiness* or the *good life*. Not only do these narrative sequences occlude the social, contextual determinants that generate trauma or precarity in the first place, they also fail to appreciate the creative energy or vitality that our interviewees valued most about the *process* of generating narrative artworks, producing collaborative stories, or participating in creative communities. In this sense, then, our essay discerns in our interviewees’ responses a strategic, improvisational ontology that seeks to elude the preset narrative forms assumed by cultural scripts for *happiness* and *resilience*, for what constitutes the good life, by espousing mobile, processual ways of conveying their experiences that give them room to manoeuvre.

## 2. Context: Our Two Communities

All of the people we interviewed for this article are partners of CCENA, the Centre for Community-Engaged Narrative Arts, based at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (see <https://ccena.humanities.mcmaster.ca/>) founded and co-directed by Daniel and Lorraine, white, settler-Canadian faculty members in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton. Since 2016, CCENA has partnered with over forty storytelling projects generated by equity-seeking communities in the Hamilton area. CCENA's mantra is that we partner with groups who are engaged in "telling their stories their way." This means that we work with a very broad understanding of "narrative" or "story," and we have partnered on projects that use music, visual arts, poetry, stories of various people's food traditions, theatre, interactive mapping, and other methods of narration to tell community stories. Whatever genres or methods partners prefer to use, CCENA tries to provide moral, infrastructural, and financial support as well as consultation to help our partners facilitate focus groups or storytelling groups; edit their own forms of publication from websites to podcasts to zines; produce digital stories or music recordings; generate newsletters, interactive maps, community archives; or produce community plays, concerts, or exhibitions. Each year, we welcome a graduate student to work with us as a research assistant and manager, working with our Advisory Committee to decide on how to partner with the community proposals that come our way. Our RA manager facilitates CCENA's partnerships by communicating with our partners and arranging with them to feature their storytelling projects at our yearly series of Long Table gatherings, where community partners describe their projects, mainly to other community-based narrative-making groups in our city, but also to academics, and interested people from the general public. Kathryn, a white, chronically ill, settler PhD student came to McMaster in 2021, and we were fortunate to recruit her as CCENA's RA and manager.

All of CCENA's partner projects have been developed by already-existing community groups whose priorities range from racial or sex-gender equity, poverty and housing, to environmental concerns or disability justice. For the purposes of this article, we interviewed eleven community partners, asking them questions such as how they understood the role of creativity and narrative-making in facing adversity, what emotions or affects they associated with their project's activities, how individual or collective they understood their creative work to be, and what they thought of terms like "resilience" or

“arts-based community-making” for the work they did.<sup>2</sup> Here, we will offer a little background about these partners to provide a sense of the range and focus of CCENA’s activities, to give readers an idea of what kind of narrative projects our partners have produced, and to set a context for what they had to say in response to our questions.<sup>3</sup>

- **Aaron** worked with the Hamilton Black History Council to research and assemble a “one-stop online shop” for locating multi-generational stories of Black history in Hamilton. A key site in the Underground Railroad, Hamilton has an over 250-year history of Black presence. Many historical sources are scattered around the city, so this project created a portal that would enable community people, who may not have inside access to various archives at McMaster University, Hamilton Public Library, Stewart Memorial Church, or private collections to find relevant materials on Black life in Hamilton.
- **Paul** and **Fiona**, who edit *Hamilton Arts & Letters (HAL)*, a social justice-centred literary journal, have published several special issues of this remarkable online magazine in partnership with CCENA, featuring art, photography, and writing on topics such as climate action, disability poetics, activist photography in the city, living through the COVID pandemic, and Indigenous writing in our region. You could say that *HAL* is a serial producer and distributor of Hamilton storytelling.
- **Leo** is a disabled poet, songwriter, and spoken-word artist who worked with *HAL* to produce “poem films,” recording the vocal track for another poet’s lyrics intercut with a commissioned blues music soundtrack accompanied by visual art. This collaboration was produced during the COVID lockdown, so although the artists—painter, poets, musicians, and film editor—involved in this project were local, they were forced to assemble the poem film virtually and never met in person.
- **Melissa** led another CCENA project in partnership with *HAL* in which she solicited and edited six essays for a special dossier in the journal on the topic of narrative-making and community engagement. You could say that Melissa’s project constituted meta-storytelling: a collection of pieces telling stories about the importance of community-led storytelling.
- **Kelsey** contributed poetry that was featured in the “Ode to my Postal Code” CCENA-sponsored poetry-writing series of online workshops (again, during the lockdown), facilitated by the extraordinary

---

2. For the list of questions we asked our partners, please see our Appendix.

3. More information and links for the projects below can be found under our “Projects” tab at <https://ccena.humanities.mcmaster.ca/>

Hamilton-based spoken word artist and dubpoet, Klyde Broox. Each participant in the workshop series wrote and performed a set of poems in, about, and for their “postal code”—their neighbourhood of the city where they live.

- **Simon, Matt**, and **Nancy** constructed an interactive map and website based on oral history interviews and focus groups conducted with senior citizens who grew up in Brightside, a Hamilton neighbourhood that had been bulldozed to make room for Hamilton’s once-powerful, now-waning steel industry. This work generated an exhibition at the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre; a broadside paper including maps, photos, and narrative. Their telling of the former neighbourhood’s stories has had such prominence that City Council has named a new park in Hamilton “Brightside Park.”
- **Ashley** conducted psycho-geographical auto-ethnographic exploratory walks in downtown Hamilton where she had lived as a young Black woman. She employed the Situationist *dérive* theory of urban “drifting” to record her experiences of “walking-while-Black-and-female” on camera and in poetic form. She published the resulting work in *Pitch: Black Magazine* (Feb. 2020).
- **Rick** is Tuscarora of the Six Nations, an artist, art historian, and curator who had partnered with CCENA to produce *Creation Story in Haudenosaunee Narrative Arts*, a book derived from interviews with a wide range of contemporary Haudenosaunee artists about their renderings of the Haudenosaunee “Sky Woman” creation narrative, with particular emphasis on how the artists, who were often not raised in traditional families, discovered or reconnected with narrative tradition.

We hope that this brief overview of the partners we interviewed for this article and the projects in which they were involved demonstrates that, although telling stories that aim at equity and justice are common concerns across these groups, their approaches and spheres of activity are distinct from one another.

During the years when CCENA was involved in the above partnerships, Daniel had also been involved, alongside a McMaster colleague, Dr. Susie O’Brien, with the international RESHAP project investigating “cultural narratives of happiness and resilience.” Composed of leading scholars of Spanish, Canadian, and other national literatures and cultural studies, the RESHAP group had received funding from the Spanish government to investigate “critical and theoretical scholarship on the notions of happiness and resilience and... to address the relative scarcity of research on both notions in the specific field of literary and cultural criticism” (Darias-Beautell and Fraile-Marcos). When RESHAP invited its members to contribute papers to one of their series of workshops on

Mundane Joy as Emergent Strategy: Community Storytellers on “Happiness,”  
“Resilience,” and the “Good Life”

the topic, Daniel asked Lorraine and Kathryn if they would like to pursue this line of inquiry by asking CCENA partners how they understood concepts like happiness, the good life, and particularly resilience in the community-based storytelling work they were conducting. This essay is the result of our reflections upon those interviews.

Led by Dr. Eva Darias-Beutell (University of La Laguna, Spain) and Dr. Ana María Fraile-Marcos (University of Salamanca, Spain), who had each conducted collaborative research projects previously on happiness (Darias-Beutell) and resilience (Fraile-Marcos), the RESHAP group seemed like kindred spirits to us three at CCENA because they approach the concepts of happiness, the good life, and resilience critically, aware of how what the cultural theorist Sara Ahmed calls “happiness scripts” and what RESHAP member Michael Basseler has called “resilience narratives” have risen to prominence in the context of what Ulrich Beck has called “risk society”—the widespread and increasing perception of life on earth as dangerous, vulnerable, and fraught with complex hazards. In such a context, when popular media, governments, and corporations—let alone school systems, public think tanks, religious institutions, or the self-help industry—urge people to “keep positive” or “bounce back,” these “scripts” become directive, insofar as the objectives or goals of happiness, the good life, or resilience become mechanisms of discipline or coercive governance that can elicit what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.”<sup>4</sup> “The production of happy subjects,” Fraile-Marcos and Darias-Beutell write in their RESHAP Project Description, is

inversely proportional to the awareness of vulnerability and the body’s material conditions of physical and psychological health, economic and ecological precarity, social isolation and so forth. Moreover, the success of the happiness industry, Ahmed argues, depends on the erasure of those conditions and the protection of hegemonic modes of heteronormative citizenship. (3)

This is the harm “happiness scripts” can cause; they readily become coercive tools in the neoliberal effort to convince everyday people that their capacity for the good life depends on their individual ability to make positive stories

---

4. “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant 1). “[O]ptimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming” (2).

from their experiences, leaving the structural and material conditions of their suffering and precarity (strategically) unaddressed.

Likewise, in their contributions to a volume of essays edited by Fraile-Marcos during the buildup to the RESHAP group's formation, *Glocal Narratives of Resilience*, Darias-Beautell and O'Brien, along with other scholars in that volume, linked the rise of interest in resilience to the upsurge in neoliberal thinking during a period of increasing globalization. For them and many other critics of resilience, the creative potential of resilience story-making can be recuperated under neoliberalism's dogma of constrained individualism in such a way that the oppressed are expected and even required consistently and repeatedly to adapt to their subjection. In a vein parallel to Ahmed's critique of "happiness scripts" and the "happiness industry," Basseler has written that "resilience is essentially a narrative concept. After all, the very notion of resilience, as the capacity to 'bounce back' from stress and pain, rests intrinsically upon the narrative sequencing of events, responses, and adaptive processes" (26). Consequently, Basseler suggests, stories of resilience constitute a kind of genre built upon what Marxist critic Frederic Jameson would call an "ideology of form" (29-30). Basseler goes on to sketch out some common properties of resilience narratives: 1) they often revolve around a disruptive or even traumatic event or situation of perceived risk, 2) they often feature narrators who work hard to restore coherence and continuity, meaning and normalcy, 3) they often emphasize social and cultural resources or elements (such as music, artforms, or traditional ceremonies) which serve to increase the resilience of individuals, groups, communities, and even societies (27-29). Considered as a narrative form or genre, then, resilience pre-shapes the story it tells. It brings with it certain expectations of sequence and plot, metaphor and resolution, to the experience for which it ostensibly accounts.

### 3. Terminology and Narrative Expectations

Our experience of interviewing community-activist story-makers about their experiences during the COVID pandemic drew the problem of these narrative expectations into sharp relief: it is not that the stories they were telling and collecting in their neighbourhoods were dismissive of the *affect* of happiness or the quality of resilience. Our interviewees seemed more concerned about how these affects and qualities get mobilized. That is, as soon as we turned to our RESHAP community's vocabulary about how our partners' work as community-based storytellers related to happiness or resilience, we could see how these terms' narrative expectations and timelines did not adequately reflect their experiences. "Why are creative activities so important in these times?" we



asked Paul and Fiona. “Let’s turn that question on its head!” they replied. “Are there *any* times when creative activities are not important?” Simon put it this way: “Creative stories are important *all* the time.” These story-makers disputed our time signature; they didn’t want to credit the pandemic as a necessary, painful stimulus to the story of creativity. When we asked, “Is *resilience* a word you would use to describe your experience with your project?”, Melissa admitted, “I wasn’t... sure how I felt about that word because it’s become the sort of badge of honor that I think can mask... a kind of tolerance for harm,” while Aaron remarked, “I’m upset that [we in the Black community] have had to be resilient... What should we be doing so we *don’t* have to be resilient?” It didn’t take long for us to realize that people who create stories in and for our city’s communities found the terms we brought to our inquiry overly restrictive.

If, as Basseler has suggested, “the very notion of resilience... rests intrinsically upon the narrative sequencing of events” (26), then we think our community partners were drawing attention to our terminology’s tendency to sequence—and, in the hindsight of evaluation, to make meaning of—their events, responses, and adaptive processes. We understand their responses as showing us that *happiness* and *resilience* imposed narrative expectations on them, similar to literary genres such as romance, tragedy, epic, or autobiography, with their narrative teleologies, and these limited our community narrative-makers’ freedom to find sequences that did not marshal their experiences to fit a pre-set structure. In listening to our community partners’ querying of these terms, then, we wondered who exactly the terms *resilience* or *happiness* are for. In our conversations, our partners rarely, if ever, brought these words up on their own when describing their storytelling activities. Rather, it was only when we introduced them as a possible descriptor that participants tried to fit their experiences into these narratives, or else suggested alternate terms altogether. Melissa suggested that resilience is “a very traditional idea, this idea that persevering through difficult times is how you show your worth, or your good character.” We understand the insufficiency of our key terms, then, as arising from community partners’ effort, maybe even their need, to maintain a non-predetermined freedom when it came to assessing the value and effects of their efforts to generate community stories and creative forms of self-expression.

Our community partners did, however, curate their own language for describing their experiences. Ashley summed up her reaction to *resilience* as a way of describing her experience when she said, “I want to emphasize that we [Black Canadians] need radical love, and I would replace resilience with that for us, and let the [political] right keep resilience.” “Our [story-gathering] research did not make [community participants] *happy*,” added Nancy. Rather, “our research provided them many moments of *joy*.” Joy was a term that recurred in many of our partners’ responses: “Joy exalts,” Nancy went on to say.

"It's big... Joy elevates completely in a way that happiness does not." Along the same lines, Kelsey said artistic creation is joyful, precisely because it's "not expected... You could have an idea, but a lot of times you have this energy to do something and then you're surprised by the end result, as much as anybody else. And then it's like these layers of, oh *this* [poem]—*this* came from me, *this* came from my experience! That's the magical part of creating; that is the unexpected reflections." Our partners' chosen terminology highlighted for us a questioning of the structures imposed by resilience: by redirecting the conversation away from the conflict and trauma inherent to resilience and instead towards the spontaneity of unexpected joy, our interviewees communicated a desire for remaking expectations of arts-based community work. As Ashley went on to say, "A lot of people that do this kind of ... social justice work think that [it's] also joy... I don't want our passion to be struggle, constantly. I want our passions to also be... Prosecco!"

#### 4. Centring Trauma: Do Stories, Like Resilience, Always Have to Be Structured Around Conflict?

Listening to our partners' preferences for joy, spontaneity, and love over resilience, we noticed that many of them expressed frustration over public perceptions of resilience as a *product* needing to be achieved rather than a *process* which can be messy, ongoing, and incomplete. Kelsey pointed us in this direction when she told us, "Moving towards resiliency is not necessarily a capacity or something that you *have*, or that you definitely *possess*, but it is a kind of horizon you're moving towards," while Melissa addressed the issue even more directly: "If we actually want change, we'll focus on *process*. If we just want the semblance of change, we'll focus on *product*." Their statements accord with Simon's warning that the temptation to instrumentalize art-making and creativity "reduces its free play; loses what's resilient about it—its 'playful indeterminacy.'" Our community-based partners consistently avoided summative, conclusive terms and preferred open-ended ones that emphasized ongoing process.

If we understand resilience to be a narrative structure, then we wondered: what does a public fixation on *product* over *process* mean for storytelling? These conversations with our partners reminded us of the disabled activist Harriet McBryde Johnson, who wrote in her 2006 memoir *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life* that "Storytelling itself is an activity, not an object" (4). From this, we understand the *process* of storytelling and what it represents for the storyteller—an opportunity to be heard or witnessed—to mean more for the community it involves than the *product* itself. Thus, by expressing their preference for process over product, our community partners redirected

expectations for community arts-making away from what an audience may take from a story and towards what the storyteller (and their audience) gains—joy, surprise—from the telling.

While our community partners aim for joy in their everyday practice, discussions of narrative in Canada as both a craft and a field of analysis often conform to a Western perception of storytelling. Whereas Western storytelling positions crisis or trauma as a crucial point around which a narrative unfolds—with the character persevering through conflict until a resolution is achieved—storytellers in many African and Asian cultures do not consider conflict as the driving force in a story. In *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, for example, Korean-American novelist Matthew Salesses writes that “In East Asian fiction the twist... is not confrontation but surprise, something that reconfigures what its audience thinks the story is ‘about’” (54). If we take resilience to be a narrative structure that privileges a conflict-centred Western understanding of storytelling, then we can understand Salesses’s account of East Asian fiction as bypassing resilience and instead prioritizing the unexpected, which many of our partners spoke about valuing within community narrative-making projects.

One of CCENA’s partner projects during the COVID pandemic highlights this assumption about the purpose and structure of narrative. Leo Nupolu Johnson, the Liberia-born Hamilton community activist, proposed and organized the Ubuntu Gospel Music partner project with CCENA in 2020-2021. In his project description, Leo noted that throughout his leadership in the Black Lives Matter protests on Hamilton’s streets in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, he was troubled by the way public narratives of Black life in Hamilton centred on trauma, grief, conflict, and anger. These portrayals were absolutely justified, he noted, but he felt they limited public understandings of why Black lives in our city matter to Hamiltonians. By contrast, Johnson noted that “the history, beliefs and folklore of African communities have been kept alive through the tradition of music and oral storytelling. Stories have been passed through the ages by musicians, poets and artists... African [stories] are often created to be verbally and communally performed as an integral part of dance and music” (1). Given this story-in-music-and-dance tradition, Johnson observed that Hamilton’s Black communities had narratives of joy, creativity, and embodied pleasure to share with the city, especially in times of struggle and adversity, and he arranged for CCENA to provide support for a group of twenty-some young African musicians to present a concert on the forecourt of City Hall in a public expression of *Ubuntu*, “I am because you are” (Johnson 1). The concert and subsequent recordings and YouTube video, he said, were meant to convey African values of celebration, resurgence, gratitude, and regeneration.

The assumption of crisis and conflict as central to Western understandings of story, by contrast, places resilience as central to the way Western narratives seek to resolve conflict. Basseler cites Luckhurst to suggest that resilience might, then, be understood as the “narrative possibility, the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative” (17). Thinking of this linkage between trauma and resilience, then, we wondered what effect focusing our inquiries on resilience may have had on the partners we interviewed. Aaron, for example, said that “I feel like sometimes we focus a little too much on celebrating the people who have the resilience to actually do these things and sometimes we forget about the people [for] whom [resilience] is not as easy—whether it’s just based on who you are as a person, the amount of obstacles you have, or even based on disability—the fact that sometimes you might not be able to be as resilient as everybody else.” Which raises the question: who are we excluding when we focus on resilience? And how might asking *already* marginalized individuals to conform to such narratives, regardless of their desires or capacity to do so, harm their communities?

In “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” Unanga̓ scholar Eve Tuck addresses the larger harms of “damage-centered research,” proclaiming “the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community” (413). We take Tuck to mean that researchers who focus exclusively on trauma risk portraying communities solely through the lens of oppression. While resilience narratives ask a community to continually return to the trauma of the past, the terminology our partners suggested—like joy and desire—look instead to a collective future, reminding us of Raymond Williams’ proclamation that “To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing” (118). As researchers and community members ourselves, then, it is our responsibility to reflect the community’s chosen terminology and the complexity of their pasts while also maintaining an eye towards the future. Tuck wrote, “It is our work as educational researchers and practitioners, and especially as community members, to envision alternative theories of change, especially those that rely on desire and complexity rather than damage” (422). Alternative narratives about how change works were on Rick’s mind when he suggested, “Let’s not script what the community narrative *should be*, but let’s listen to what the community narratives *are*—that’s what the arts can provide.” Throughout these conversations, our partners advocated against using resilience as the standard way to assess community narratives, and instead upended common perceptions of arts-driven community work as displaying perseverance in the face of oppression—thereby resisting the kind of damage-centred research Tuck describes. Indeed, Ashley summed up several of our partners’ reactions to resilience when she pointed to how many “... see resilience as this thing we need to achieve and be good

at and I reject that.” Rather, Ashley went on to say, “I refuse the term resilience and instead call it *community*.”

## 5. Care Work as Alternate Narrative Structure: Finding Joy in Community

In her introduction to *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, disabled activist Alice Wong proclaims, “Community is political. Community is magic. Community is power. Community is resistance” (xviii-xix). We would add that people can feel part of community as they envision themselves sharing the stories of politics, magic, power, or resistance together with others around them. Throughout our conversations with our partners, we often found ourselves returning to the expansive possibilities of community. To circle back to Ashley’s observation, “I want to emphasize that we [Black Canadians] need radical love, and I would replace resilience with that for us, and let the [political] right keep resilience.” Or, as Kelsey echoed: “That is community, you know: love.” From our discussions, we understand that our partners view community—like joy, desire, and some of the other terms our partners offered in place of resilience—as an inclusive space: anyone who subscribes to the stories that define that space can belong to a community. In contrast, not everyone has the desire or ability to be resilient. Aaron, like several of our partners, questioned the need for resilience during our conversations, asking “Why do we *have* to be resilient?” while Melissa touched upon a similar idea when she told us that resilience, “especially in the conversation that we’re having today around mental health, in the kind of people who can’t persevere, [is] actually a demeaning idea, in some way.” If we understand resilience as a narrative often imposed on marginalized communities, we wondered: can there be community-making agency in refusing resilience as an organizing principle for telling community stories? And, if so, what organizing principle might we use to replace resilience? This line of thinking brings up, for us, the question: what value is there in *resisting* resilience as a narrative structure?

In their interviews, Melissa and Ashley both pointed to rest as a radical response to the exertion demanded by resilience. On the topic of resilience excluding people with disabilities and mental illness, Melissa said, “that’s actually very counter-challenging to our modes of work and... capitalistic imperatives to say in fact that if we hit the pause button and say ‘I can’t right now’—what value does that have instead of resilience?” Pursuing a similar line of thinking, Ashley pointed to how “capitalist time tells you to hurry up and that being busy and overworked and under-rested is a positive thing” and how, in contrast, “I embrace the mundane and I want us to find ways, even after this pandemic, to be more mundane—to have more time at home.” This focus on mundanity as

a radical act—on everyday care over a narrative structured around trauma and resilience—reminded us of the many cultural forms of storytelling that focus on building joy rather than conflict.

In listening to our partners find alternatives to resilience as a narrative structure, we wondered if “care work” might better describe the complex arts-driven community work in which our partners are engaged. Disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, in her 2018 book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, proclaimed, “we have the opportunity to dream and keep dreaming ways to build emergent, resilient care webs” (23), which reminded us of brown’s description of emergent strategies as, “Not one perfect path forward, but an abundance of futures, of ways to manage resources together, to be brilliant together” (14-16). Piepzna-Samarasinha goes on to ask, “What does it mean to shift our ideas of access and care (whether it’s disability, childcare, economic access, or many more)... to a collective responsibility that’s maybe even deeply joyful?” (21). Posing care work as an opportunity to forge “a collective joy and offering we can give to each other” (12), Piepzna-Samarasinha suggests a connection between the kinds of radical love and joy our partners described and community-driven care work. We wondered, then, what might happen if we stopped imposing summative narratives such as resilience or happiness upon the communities we work with and instead prioritized care? Would we avoid structuring narratives around damage, like Tuck suggests, and instead redirect ourselves towards a more collective future? As the disabled activist Sami Schalk writes, “Our knowledge,” built by community stories, “is part of how we [Black disabled people] as a collective not only make it to the other side but also build a new world that is more capable of responding with care for all of us, not just some of us” (160). Or, to quote the disability justice performance group Sins Invalid, “To exist is to resist.”

## 6. Radical, Mundane Joy

Radical mundanity, and the embrace of everyday pleasures that it entails, offers another alternative to trauma-based narrative frameworks and terminology. It opens the way for joy as a correspondingly radical affect that suffuses the kinds of arts-based community-making that CCENA supports. And there is reason to believe that the joy that emerges from the radically mundane is closely tied to the idea of *process* that our community partners value so highly. When Brian Massumi theorizes joy, he connects it to his more general notion of affect as an embodied becoming. “Affect,” he declares, “is thinking, bodily... a movement of thought or a thinking movement... accompanied by a sense of vitality or

vivacity, a sense of being more alive” (10). When Massumi points out that this conception of affect is “more compelling than coming to ‘correct’ conclusions or assessing outcomes” (4), his thinking correlates powerfully with our partners’ preference for a processual language of doing and becoming rather than one of tabulating final results. In fact, one reason for the insufficiency of the terminology we proposed to our partners is its lack of what Massumi perceives as valuable about affect: its mobility. Affect as embodied becoming allows for “a margin of manoeuvrability” that people can focus on “rather than on projecting success or failure” (4): a liberatory incrementalism considered as affective-political “wriggle-room” (6). In essence, this mobile manoeuvrability is what we understand Simon to mean when he highlights creativity’s anti-instrumentalist “playful indeterminacy.”

Mundane occupations and situations give rise to this joy; intensity need not only attend culminating moments. Ashley connects the reclaiming of pleasure in Black communities with anti-capitalist, leisurely temporality, even though such pleasures are often thought to be counter-revolutionary: “I can live here [in a nice apartment] and... do my nails and it doesn’t make me a bad revolutionary.”<sup>5</sup> This embrace of mundane, radical joy is not a bourgeois seeking of refuge from ideological critique in an apolitical aesthetics, for pleasure becomes radical when it thrives in the face of an ongoing history that has sought to eradicate it wherever possible. As Ashley pointedly remarked of Black pleasure, “I understand what this leisure time means and... what it was borne from... what it came out of.”

This joy—“what it was borne from” and “what it came out of”—is powerful but it is also fragile, precious, fleeting, and frequently under attack. We might distinguish it from its liberal humanist cousin as everyday, “*resistant* joy.” And its temporality, in turn, distinguishes it from what we might call, borrowing from physicists and chemists, “steady state” conditions of happiness, the good life, or resilience. (A “steady state” is one in which stability and predictable equilibrium can withstand countervailing challenges or changes. The most common illustration of this state is the water contained in a bathtub while the faucet is on and the drain is unplugged). Joy, on the other hand, is more commonly associated with surprise, eruption, a bursting forth, a volatile substance that is anything but steady. Water circling noisily down the drain! Water overflowing the bathtub!

---

5. See Rebecca Solnit’s *Orwell’s Roses*, in which she argues that Orwell’s attention to natural beauty (as captured in his act of planting roses at this cottage in Hertfordshire) is not opposed to his political writings and advocacy but is, instead, intimately intertwined with them.

This sense of joy as burgeoning movement is linked to the empirical or experimental method that many of our partners have espoused; as Massumi explains, joy is:

an empirical kind of belief. Ethical, empirical—and creative, because your participation in this world is part of a global becoming. So it's about taking joy in that process, wherever it leads... having a kind of faith in the world which is simply the hope that it continue... not a hope that has a particular content or end point—it's a desire for more life, or for more to life. (48)

Our community partner, the poet Leo, takes joy in collaborative film-making in precisely this empirical, experimental way: “there’s a lot to be said for just getting it [one’s creative contribution] out there, you know, and just trusting that it’s going to be what it is... and really going with the flow.” Out of that flow, for Leo comes “generosity”: “when you give something and you don’t care about what happens or who notices or who says what, when you just say okay I have this to give. Here it is.” We discerned a similar preference for empirical experiment over deliverables in Kelsey’s answer to our question about why she associates creative work and joy. Noting that she had recently finished writing a poem whose final word was “joy,” she replied, “I think because it’s not expected... [A] lot of times you have this energy to do something and then you’re surprised by the end result.” Several of our interlocutors emphasized the serendipity of the creative joy that they had experienced—its isolated temporal bursts. This is the improvisatory faith that Massumi calls “joy,” bubbling up and overflowing the conventional “tubs” of artistic and social practice.

The staccato temporality of joyful creation appears to have been all the more striking to our partners during the pandemic. Just because everyday, resistant joy manifests itself in vibrant bursts does not mean that it is untethered to difficult experiences like the pandemic (Ashley’s “what it was borne from” and “what it came out of”) whose temporalities remain expansive, systemic, and persistent. Melissa connects the momentary “wow, something happened” of creative collaborations with relationality in all its difficult, protracted phases: “when we’re exposed to the story of another person” “... that moment where you should have to confront the fact of another person’s existence in reality through a narrative art project... [T]he most transformative moments in my work have come in those moments of critical reflection, as opposed to [seeing] other people’s reaction to an end product.”

For Rick, the quality of the creative moment that he would identify as resilient is a *replicability* that stitches together discrete joyous moments in a temporal extension that constitutes hope: “The resilience comes in when you want to do



it again. Let’s go back and do it again. Let’s sing that song one more time. Let’s have that ceremony one more time. Let’s show that we care about this so much that we hope it continues.” Leo’s definition of resilience as “continuation... the ability to continue,” which he sees personified in the Ukrainian people who are robustly resisting the 2022 Russian invasion, channels this same recognition of the value of replicability. Creative joy contains within its short burst of temporality the promise of a replicability and continuity that, in their expansion of joy’s temporality, become, in essence, care.

Radical joy extends care in many ways, not least because it has the capacity to materially affect and rebuild social relations in a way that promotes social generosity. carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, who, like Massumi, take Spinoza’s theory of affect as a starting-point for their thinking, agree with Massumi that joy is distinct from happiness, for “Whereas happiness is used as a numbing aesthetic that induces dependence, joy is the growth of people’s capacity to do and feel new things, in ways that can break this dependence” on capitalism’s recipes for commodified happiness (n.p.). And when that dependence on externally validated versions of the good life is lifted, networks of care sprout and thrive in its place: “When people find themselves genuinely supported and cared for, they are able to extend this [care] to others in ways that seemed impossible or terrifying before” (bergman and Montgomery). Ahmed, also building on Massumi’s theories, similarly cautions that “We need to take care not to collapse joy with happiness... Joy is a less weighty word; it is often used to signify an intensity of feeling that is transitory” (214). And yet if the “intensity” that both Ahmed and Massumi identify is let loose in the kinds of creative practices that our partners have devised, we can witness a realignment of ways of being social that is “weighty” enough! While joy, according to bergman and Montgomery, “rarely feels comfortable or easy,” provoking the sort of unease that attends the revolutionary rebuilding of social relations, it is still capable of nourishing “the growth of people’s capacity to do and feel new things... because it transforms and reorients people and relationships... it is resonant with emergent and collective capacities to do things, make things, undo painful habits, and nurture enabling ways of being together” (n.p.). The language of movement and development that is fundamental to Massumi’s affect theory resurfaces here (“do and feel new things”; “transforms and reorients”). And if social creativity is approached in the spirit of patient, inductive experiment that many of our partners have articulated to us, it can be more effective than broadly utopian thinking. As Massumi argues, “focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture isn’t really settling for less. It’s not exactly going for more either. It’s more like being right where you are—more intensely” (3).

## 7. Conclusion: “Emergent Strategies”

In closing, we emphasize that mundane joy is not “settling for less” either; it is not a politely quietist alternative to radical social change. As we noted earlier, brown’s concept of emergent strategy captures the vision of serendipitous experiment that CCENA’s partners have devised precisely because those strategies are “ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions” (brown 14). Taking inspiration from Octavia Butler’s fiction, brown deeply believes that “radical ideas speak through conversation, questions, one to one interactions” (14), CCENA will continue, in this spirit, to facilitate the kinds of “conversations, questions, and one to one interactions” that communities already practice, in the belief that those strategies can scale up to be shared more broadly as means of sweeping social change. As brown explains,

emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (16)

### Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Basseler, Michael. “Stories of Dangerous Life in the Post-Trauma Age: Toward a Cultural Narratology of Resilience.” *Narrative in Culture*, edited by Astrid Erll and Roy Sommer, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2019, pp. 15-35.
- Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage, 2005.
- bergman, carla, and Nick Montgomery. *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*. AK P, The Anarchist Library, 2017, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/joyful-militancy-bergman-montgomery>.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
- brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK P, 2017.
- Darias-Beautell, Eva, and Ana María Fraile-Marcos. “Narrativas de la felicidad y la resiliencia / Narratives of Happiness and Resilience.” *Memoria Científico-Técnica de Proyectos Coordinados*, Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades, 2020.
- Fraile-Marcos, Ana María, editor. *Glocal Narratives of Resilience*. Routledge, 2020.
- Johnson, Leo Nupolu. *Ubuntu Gospel Music Project Proposal*. 13 May 2019 and 19 Oct. 2020.
- Justice, Daniel Heath. *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2018.

Mundane Joy as Emergent Strategy: Community Storytellers on “Happiness,”  
“Resilience,” and the “Good Life”

- Lipsitz, George. “Arts-Based Community Making in Black and Chicano Communities.” International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (University of Guelph), <http://improvisationinstitute.ca/research-project/arts-based-community-making-in-black-and-chicano-communities/>. Accessed 24 Nov. 2023.
- Massumi, Brian. “Navigating Movements: An Interview with Brian Massumi.” *YUMPU*, 11 July 2014. <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/29174507/navigating-movementspdf-brian-massumi>.
- McBryde Johnson, Harriet. *Too Late to Die Young: Nearly True Tales from a Life*. Picador, 2006.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp P, 2018.
- Salesses, Matthew. *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshoping*. Catapult, 2021.
- Schalk, Sami. *Black Disability Politics*. Duke UP, 2022.
- Tuck, Eve. “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities.” *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2009, pp. 409-28.
- Williams, Raymond. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. Verso, 1989.
- Wong, Alice. “Introduction.” *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong, Vintage, 2020, pp. xv-xxii.

## Appendix

### CCENA Happiness and Resilience Project Interview Questions

- Why are creative activities so important in these times?
- George Lipsitz speaks of “arts-based community making”—a phrase that reverses the more expected “community-based art-making.” Would that describe the method and aim of your project? Is community important as a goal for your project? What is it about arts (story- or narrative-making) that builds community?
- How individual or collective is your project? Does your project encourage individual or collaborative creativity? How would you describe your participants’ experience of community over the course of your project?
- Resilience is a much-used term these days to describe how people adapt to adversities and even find new energies. Is this a word you would use to describe your hopes for the participants in your project? If so, what does it help identify? If not, what term or terms would you prefer?
- What do you feel are the limits of your project and what it can achieve? Why?
- What does your project bring to participants? What do participants bring to your project? How do you feel about the relationship between these two acts of contribution?

Kathryn Waring, Lorraine York, Daniel Coleman

- What feelings do you associate with the carrying out of your project?
- What qualities or habits of mind does your project introduce and/or reinforce in community participants?
- What difference does your project potentially make in the world?