

CRITIQUE & COMMENTARY

A DISCIPLINE OF WONDER

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This is an edited version of a keynote speech I gave to the 2025 Statelessness and Citizenship Doctoral Workshop hosted by the Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness at Melbourne Law School. The prompt was to speak about the importance of interdisciplinarity for our research. In this piece, I take that in its broadest sense. That means that this commentary is less about the specific debates, nuances and critiques of statelessness and citizenship studies, and more about the myriad strands that flow from and through our lives that make us the (inevitably interdisciplinary) scholars that we are. While the world continues to be filled with endless suffering, this talk points our attention towards an equally boundless discipline of wonder that I believe can act as a wellspring for a revolutionary life.

I have been thinking a lot about wonder lately. Mainly whether wonder is enough to keep us going. Wonder as an antidote to the horrors we see daily on our feeds, screens and all around us, that is if we still tune in to those sorts of things. I don't. Whether wonder can inoculate us from hate speech, cancel culture, ridiculousness that is nevertheless deadly.¹ Whether wonder holds at bay a creeping idiocracy, or whether perhaps it is already here and wonder is the only thing that stands between me, you and madness.

I was asked to speak about the 'importance and challenges of interdisciplinary research on statelessness and citizenship, as well as my thoughts on the future directions of interdisciplinary research in these areas'. Interdisciplinarity is something that I guess I do in practice, but that I do not really think about much except when writing grant applications: 'this groundbreaking interdisciplinary project ... blah blah blah'. Funders and administrators seem to like that sort of thing.

So instead, I want to talk to you not about interdisciplinarity per se but instead about a discipline of wonder, and how I think — most likely — we all practise it already to varying extents, but also how I think a discipline of wonder is what will save us all. It will save us from the jaws of a neoliberal academy that is at times cutthroat;² that sometimes makes us cry; that exhausts all of us at different times and in different ways. It can save us from the academy, and perhaps this life, that can be suffocating and intense. That can be impersonal and cruel. A life and an

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¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Message* (Penguin Books 2024) 88.

² Sheila Slaughter and Larry L Leslie, *Academic Capitalism* (Johns Hopkins University Press 1997).

academy that can hurt us — sometimes a lot — and whether the scars are new or whether they are old, and whether life and the academy is only opening scars we already held anyway, and whether any of these scars will ever really heal, remains a mystery. Whether they need to be healed also remains an open question.

But, perhaps more importantly, a discipline of wonder will save us from ourselves, from the endless chatter, doubts, various imposter syndromes and incessant questions we as academics have going on in our minds — or at least, it will allow us to interact and be in the world as scholars, as academics, as people with morals who are committed to thinking deeply, critically and questioningly about citizenship and statelessness, in a world on the edge of madness and perhaps already slipped beyond.

I intuit that my endless curiosity at the world and its workings, my inherent interest in what you and the academy currently label ‘interdisciplinarity’ — and that I hope after this talk, you will call instead ‘a discipline of wonder’ — is no accident. That my personal constitution of wonder is a complicated ancestral legacy that means I am often in the isthmus, ‘the line that separates between the sun and its shadow’.³ There are many rivers that flow from the past into my life, into all our lives actually, in mysterious ways that we are not able to logically, scientifically, rationally, dare I say ‘academically’ fathom, but rather can fathom only through experience and wonder. Perhaps you think about questions like *why* do I research what I do? And perhaps, at least as importantly, *how* do I research what I do, as often as I do? Perhaps you don’t. Now is as good a time as any to start asking these central questions.

For me, one important result of practising a discipline of wonder, and part of the answer to why and how I do the research that I do on what citizenship, belonging and identity mean during wartime,⁴ is that I have found it necessary — an imperative even — ‘to walk the land’ as American author, journalist and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it:⁵ to speak with people, to listen and really hear their stories; breathe the same air filled with spices and exotic scents wafting from open windows; to see magnificent purple cloth as it blows in the wind hanging overhead in the narrow walkways of the old city; to smell and taste the meats and vegetables of barbecues cooking in the public square; to eat *ghazl al banat*, Arabic fairy floss, from a street vendor on a cold November night in an ancient city. I believe deeply that to adopt a discipline of wonder is a small revolutionary act, an antidote to intuition and hypothesising from the margins. A small inoculation from what former Trump advisor, Steve Bannon, has called ‘muzzle velocity’ or ‘flooding the zone with shit’.⁶

To ignore or relegate a discipline of wonder because the acts that it prescribes are small, somewhat banal and everyday, private or perhaps not grand or public enough, is simply to reinscribe the relations of power these acts oppose, pushing

³ Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (Syracuse University Press 2009) 8.

⁴ See, eg, Marika Sosnowski and Bart Klem, ‘Legal Identity in a Looking-Glass World: Documenting Citizens of Aspirant States’ (2023) 27(7) *Citizenship Studies* 761; Marika Sosnowski, *58 Facets: On Law, Violence and Revolution* (Melbourne University Press 2025).

⁵ Coates (n 1) 44.

⁶ Ezra Klein, ‘Don’t Believe Him’, *Inside Story* (online, 7 February 2025) <<https://insidestory.org.au/dont-believe-him/>>, archived at <perma.cc/8LR7-VWA3>; Sean Illing, ‘“Flood the Zone with Shit”: How Misinformation Overwhelmed Our Democracy’, *Vox* (online, 7 February 2025) <<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformationary> 2025>, archived at <perma.cc/E4XU-K2RZ>.

us back to the way things ought to be. And that way has simply gotten us here, to this world. As legal scholars Austin Sarat and Thomas Kearns have argued, quoting French philosopher Maurice Blanchot, ‘the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification.’⁷ Put simply, the everyday is all we have, it is the only thing that matters.

Just before I came up with the idea of doing a slow scholarship project on the theme of the legal afterlife of war and revolution, 7 October 2023 (‘October 7’) happened, and I lost my philosophical moorings and forgot how to be in the world. I remember a number of situations quite clearly gazing down at myself and friends from above, as they talked about something or other that my dissociated self couldn’t give a flying fuck about. My inner voice, floating about a metre above my body, couldn’t work out what the point was really. Until October 7, I had internalised that the great arc of history is long, and it bends towards justice. What happened on October 7, and what has happened since then, seems to me to prove that perhaps Dr King’s most famous statement is wrong.⁸ There is no justice here. A realist politics of ‘Might Makes Right’ seems to be the order of the day.

British-Palestinian author Isabella Hammad writes about Gaza, that ‘we who are not there, witnessing from afar, in what ways are we mutilating ourselves when we dissociate to cope? To remain human at this juncture is to remain in agony. Let us remain there’, she says, ‘it is the more honest place from which to speak’.⁹ October 7 made me recommit to a discipline of wonder. To find whatever small place I could from which to think and speak was, and still is, to practise a discipline of wonder. To put small everyday revolutionary acts out into the world with no expectation that they will come to anything. To look into the face of suffering, as much as I am able, in lots of different contexts, from Gaza, to Syria, to Ukraine, to our Indigenous peoples, and to wonder at it. To wonder at resilience. To wonder at survival. To practise wonder when I ‘walk the land’ and marvel about how it is a small world, really — stories might have different façades but they are, more often than not, foundationally the same. Potentially not as glamorous or adaptable to popular culture as the lone figure burning a flag or the charismatic militant, everyday acts of resistance — such as practising a discipline of wonder — also enable, constitute and continue revolutions, often long after they are deemed by the world to have ended.

Given that I am now old enough for at least some of the naïveté of youth to have fallen away, the belief I once held in my own abilities to bring about dramatic societal change no longer seems to hold the potential or promise it once did. October 7 made me feel that the world, and the systems that comprise it, are too complex and interlinked for any individual to have much hope of making major, ‘revolutionary’ change.

And yet, I do not believe that this reality should deter any of us from revolutionary acts.

⁷ Austin Sarat and Thomas R Kearns, ‘Editorial Introduction’ in Austin Sarat and Thomas R Kearns (eds), *Law in Everyday Life* (University of Michigan Press 1993) 6, quoting Maurice Blanchot and Susan Hanson, ‘Everyday Speech’ (1987) 73 *French Yale Studies* 14.

⁸ Martin Luther King Jr, ‘Out of the Long Night’, *The Gospel Messenger* (Elgin, 8 February 1958) 14, citing Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion* (Crosby, Nichols, and Company 1853) 84–5.

⁹ Isabella Hammad, *Recognising the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative* (Vintage 2024) 73.

In her book, *Afterlives of Revolution*, anthropologist Alice Wilson beautifully charts the legacy of the Dhufari revolution in Oman that supposedly ended in 1976. She does this through highlighting the kinship practices, everyday socialising, acts of unofficial commemoration, and occasional extraordinary acts that have outlasted it, ‘breaching official silencing’ imposed by the Omani regime.¹⁰ The selected writings of Egyptian political prisoner Alaa Abd el-Fattah, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*, tell a personal story about how the revolution — which, in official accounts at least, began in 2011 in Tahrir Square — is continued by him and others day by day, word by word, breath by breath.¹¹ Read together, these texts show that while the world may be ordered in a way that benefits the human inclination, bordering on fixation, to categorise events into distinct time periods, revolutions are much more than militancy and violence, or the years that regimes decree or history books put in place to supposedly bound them. Revolutions also have a rhythm of the everyday.

So as part of practising my own everyday revolution, in March 2024, I began a slow scholarship project with 10 interdisciplinary scholars on the theme of the legal afterlife of war and revolution.¹² Beginning in the late 1980s with the slow food movement — which focused on sustainability and the enjoyment of biodiversity and local food — the ‘slow’ ethos jumped the tracks over the following decades and began to be promoted in a range of other fields from artisan products to academia.¹³ Feminist scholar Vivienne Bozalek articulates that the modus operandi of the slow movement is based on a ‘resistance to neoliberal markets by invoking an anti-corporate agenda, emphasising qualities such as discernment, depth, pleasure and generosity’.¹⁴

For me, this slow scholarship project has opened me up further towards practising a discipline of wonder and a way of working that centres relationships and people rather than production. In the slow scholarship project, I work from a premise where I assume that the academic system is inequitable and corporatised but the individuals who make up academia are generally thoughtful, intelligent and talented. For this reason, this slow scholarship project turns on its head the major premise of the contemporary, neoliberal academy — to produce — to instead focus on the wellbeing and individual personalities of people, their relationships with each other and the generation of knowledge as a shared pursuit. This rationale confirms Bozalek’s suggestion that ‘[s]low scholarship does not necessarily mean operating at a more leisurely pace or doing substantially less, but engaging in educationally worthwhile activities, which are enriching and complex’.¹⁵

For example, in November 2024, participants went for a three-night residential retreat as part of the project at Yirik Wamoon, known today as Wilsons Promontory National Park, or heartbreakingly as ‘undetermined land’ because

¹⁰ Alice Wilson, *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman* (Stanford University Press 2023) 7, 143.

¹¹ Alaa Abd el-Fattah, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (Fitzcarraldo 2021).

¹² Marika Sosnowski, ‘Practicing Slow Scholarship in a Hard World’, *AllegraLab* (online, June 2025) <<https://allegralaboratory.net/practicing-slow-scholarship-in-a-hard-world/>>, archived at <perma.cc/NW5M-HTVV>.

¹³ Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (University of Toronto Press 2016) ix–x.

¹⁴ Vivienne Bozalek, ‘Slow Scholarship: Propositions for the Extended Curriculum Programme’ (2021) 25 *Education as Change* 9049:1–21, 2.

¹⁵ *ibid* 5.

colonialism did its job so well First Nations people no longer have memory of who first walked this place.¹⁶ On this residential retreat and a subsequent two-day workshop at Melbourne Law School, we laughed (a lot), we talked (possibly more), we hiked and became exhausted, we saw baby emus, wombats, wallabies, brush-tailed possums, and experienced wild ocean and rocky hills; all while we tried to better understand how people experience the law at an everyday level after world-shaping events in a range of contexts — including Myanmar, Colombia, Cyprus, North Korea, Pakistan, Syria, Jordan, Germany and Australia — and how these afterlives map onto firsthand encounters at checkpoints, with sexual and gender-based violence, with access to documents and citizenship rights, in frozen conflicts, with movements for peace, transitional, youth and criminal justice.¹⁷ If academia hired the United Colors of Benetton marketing company, it might look something like us. We are a bit of a cliché. It would make me sick if only I didn't like and admire everyone quite as much as I do.

While this was the first time we have all gathered in person, at that point we had been working together already for over a year now. During that time and in addition to the retreat, we have met in monthly online meetings from time zones spanning the globe, which meant late nights and early mornings for some; we have introduced ourselves and each other in numerous different, surprisingly enlightening ways; we took time to read each other's work and actually think about it; we sent WhatsApp voice notes about how we found work useful and generative.

This may all sound crazy and potentially unobtainable to you. But I would like to suggest that in-line with *Unanga* scholar Eve Tuck's directive to '[bite] the university that feeds' us, the impersonal nature of the modern academy provides all of us with the space, right now, to prioritise and hold dear relationships and the collective nature of knowledge generation in all that we do.¹⁸ Make no mistake, actually caring for each other, making and taking time, being what the Yanyuwa

¹⁶ Email from Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation to Marika Sosnowski, 19 August 2024. This email noted that Wilsons Promontory is 'outside of our determined Native Title and Registered Aboriginal Party area' (RAP) and therefore "undetermined land". See also 'Native Title', *Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation* (Web Page) <<https://gunaikurnai.org/our-community/know-your-rights/native-title/>>, archived at <perma.cc/YZ9Q-KCN3>; 'Registered Aboriginal Parties in Victoria', *Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council* (Map, November 2024) <https://www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-12/AVj2421_Statewide-Appointed-RAPs-RM-20241115.pdf>. More recently, however, the Kurnai Aboriginal Corporation have applied to be the Registered Aboriginal Party for this land: 'Registered Aboriginal Party Applications and Variations before Council', *Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council* (Web Page, 21 November 2025) <<https://www.aboriginalheritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/registered-aboriginal-party-applications-council>>, archived at <perma.cc/M7UQ-QXW9>. It remains unclear whether Bunurong or Gunaikurnai can make a native title claim to Yirik Wamoon.

¹⁷ 'The Legal Afterlife of War and Revolution', Melbourne Law School (Web Page) <<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/statelessness/research/research-projects/the-legal-afterlife>>, archived at <perma.cc/QK73-BK9W>. See also Marika Sosnowski, 'The Legal Afterlife of War and Revolution - Slow Scholarship Project (Living Document)' (Google Sheet, 2 December 2023) <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Q8dLKCxR794rQFyJkIUUy18XHEAc2IcKkPZU1F_411o/edit?usp=sharing>.

¹⁸ 'Episode 8: Education, Future Orientation, and Theories of Change with Professor Eve Tuck', White Noise (Indigenous Law and Justice Hub at Melbourne Law School, 3 September 2024) 00:08:33 <<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/iljh/resources/white-noise-of-settler-law-justice-talks/white-noise-podcast/white-noise-episode-8-building-treaty-relationships>>, archived at <perma.cc/8Q7D-Y9KW>.

of northern Australia call ‘*likili-nganji*’ or most trusted companions, rather than competitors or adversaries,¹⁹ is hard work — and it is a deeply political act.²⁰

Criminologist Maria Giannacopoulos says that we are living in an age of genocides.²¹ For us gathered here, on stolen Wurundjeri land, we live, work, play or just come for a few days in a place where the legal afterlife of different genocides continues to play out. Our praxis, our discipline of wonder, is to disrupt regimes of oppression in small but meaningful ways, in the ways available to us, which are more often than not, everyday. By engaging in collective work; by showing up having done the readings; by centring relationships and not accolades; through generosity and not critique, through amplifying the work of radical and emerging scholars in the teaching space; by choosing what words go best with which audiences and knowing that sometimes the best words are no words; being committed to the details while also having a vision that is expansive and global; being tactical and dexterous and not being overly concerned with disciplinary labels. Despite and because of the different disciplines we all come from to study citizenship and statelessness in a variety of contexts, because of the reality of interdisciplinarity, we are all part of one scholarly community — we are all already *likili-nganji* — whether we know, like it or not.

To conclude, I have shared the above stories and methods for a reason. These are firstly, to bring some level of honesty and vulnerability to academic discourse, in the hope that this will feed into the way you think about your relationship to this profession and to others who work in it. Secondly, I hope that explaining some of the methodological choices I have made during my slow scholarship project will enable you to implement some of these techniques or adapt them to use in your own ways. This is particularly relevant for statelessness and citizenship studies that, like modern academia, is inherently bound up with dynamics of inequality, injustice and power relations. Finally, over the last few years, I have been kindly and firmly dissuaded from my white, Western saviour complex by many scholars, activists and writers from the Middle East who I have engaged with. These creatives do not see revolutionary change as being something that will necessarily be seen in their lifetime, and yet they struggle on each day, in small ways, for revolutionary change.

Palestinian poet and performance artist Fargo Tbakhi writes very eloquently about how the long middle of revolution is not a condition of time but a geography, a place. We never know whether we are closer to the end or the beginning of revolution. Whether we are nearer liberation than defeat. We exist in the long middle because liberation of all beings is the ultimate goal of revolution.²² We constantly move towards it, we work every day for it: through large and small acts of revolution; through small cracks in precedent; through forms of care, of tenderness, perhaps sometimes of violence, of ingenuity, resourcefulness; through joy and survival; through practising a discipline of wonder.

¹⁹ See generally, Amanda Kearney et al, ‘Medical Pluralism and Kincentric Care in Indigenous Australia: Yanyuwa Experiences of Illness and the Importance of Keeping Company’ (2025) *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* e70046:1–19, 2 (forthcoming).

²⁰ Amanda Kearney, ‘Presentation’ (Speech, Yirik Wamoon/Wilsons Promontory National Park, 19 November 2024).

²¹ Maria Giannacopoulos, ‘Presentation’ (Speech, Prefigurative Practices Workshop, University of New South Wales, 3 February 2025).

²² Fargo Tbakhi, ‘Notes on Craft: Writing in the Hour of Genocide’, *Protean Magazine* (online, 8 December 2023) <<https://proteanmag.com/2023/12/08/notes-on-craft-writing-in-the-hour-of-genocide/>>, archived at <perma.cc/YTY7-D9Z6>.