Highly Aspirational Political Movements

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Abstract: Many of today's movements seek extensive restructuring of society. Some such examples include "Land Back," indigenous peoples' movements to reclaim sovereignty over unceded territories, or "No Borders," the movement to abolish state boundaries. These movements are recognizably characterized as radical, revolutionary, or utopian; however, this existing vocabulary obscures the structures and practices that organize the pursuit of far-reaching aims under constraint and over time. In this paper, I develop a theory of movements that seek to *change everything*, and call them Highly Aspirational Political Movements (HAPMs). At the level of movement participants, HAPMs share three common features that emerge from the political thought of their movements. One, movement members are dependent on the very institutions and ideology they criticize. Their dependence keeps them in a bind in which their attempts for structural transformation are hindered by continuous use of systems they criticize. Two, they rely on imaginative practice like prefigurative experiments and narrative frames to overcome structural dependencies and to convert critiques into actionable strategies for social transformation. Three, movement members have a sense that their movement is operating on a generations-long or even indefinite timeline; they acknowledge the possibility their movement may never succeed, yet they persist. To illustrate the HAPMs theory, I conduct a comparative study of three contemporary North American movements: prison-industrial complex abolition, Hawaiian sovereignty, and Christian nationalism.

'Utopian' nowadays refers to any criticism or proposal that transcends the up-close milieu of a scatter of individuals: the milieu which men and women can understand directly and which they can reasonably hope to change. In this exact sense, our theoretical work is indeed utopian. In my own case at least, deliberately so. What needs to be understood, and what needs to be changed, is not merely first this and then that detail of some institution or policy. If there is to be a politics of a New Left, what needs to be analyzed is the *structure* of institutions, the *foundation* of policies. In this sense, both in its criticism and in its proposals, our work is necessarily structural—and so, *for us*, just now—utopian.

— C. W. Mills, 1960

In 1999, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and five of her friends came together to fight the construction of a new mega prison in Delano, California, a small pre-dominantly Spanish-speaking town in California's central valley. At the time, Delano had one small prison of 500 people; the new prison, if built, would incarcerate 5,000 people. The group built solidarity with farm workers, environmentalists, families, and some prison employees. Members regularly communicated with people in towns threatened by new prisons, talking to them on the phone, driving around the state to assist in organizing local opposition, and giving talks at local service worker and teacher union meetings.[2] In forging ties across groups and interests, the community recognized that building a mega-prison in Delano would harm the community's health, environment, education, and family life.

The problem wasn't just the possibility of *another* state prison in California's central valley, already host to twenty-four mega-prisons in 1999. Gilmore and her friends had been organizing a movement to eliminate the entire system of policing and prisons. As they organized, they

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[2] In an original interview with Craig Gilmore, one of the six people involved in this early organizing, he describes how the group made connections with Delano's Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment, and worked directly with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), California Federation of Teachers (CFT), and the California Teachers Association.

started fielding questions about what would replace those prisons, and in effect they began to envision what community safety without prisons might look like. In a more recent recounting of her activism and thinking into the future, Gilmore spoke of her vision for prison abolitionists:

> "Abolition requires that we change one thing, which is everything. Contemporary prison abolitionists have made this argument for more than two decades. Abolition is not *absence*, it is *presence*. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities. So those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can." (Leopold and Gilmore 2018)

At once, Gilmore believes everything must change, and changing everything is a process of building today's abolitionist politics, housed in fragments and experiments, into tomorrow's everything. If this sounds like an approach that is deeply undetermined and highly aspirational, it is. And, this style of movement politics is not unique to prison abolitionists. Many of today's leftist movements and some right movements seek extensive restructuring of society. One such example is "Land Back," the effort by indigenous people in the United States and Canada to reclaim political and economic sovereignty over their unceded territories. Another example is the movement for "No Borders" (Walia 2022). The movement decries the existence of national borders and imagines a new political project in which the omnipresent and oppressive border regime is replaced by alternative ways to negotiate resources and mobility.

In this essay, I introduce a theory of Highly Aspirational Political Movements (HAPMs) and show its value for understanding certain forms of political struggle. Drawing on the writings and original interviews of elites from three different North American movements — Prison Industrial complex Abolition, Hawaiian Sovereignty, and Christian Nationalism — I show how a similar pattern of movement politics emerges in movements with very different projects and across ideological spectrums. This paper focuses on identifying how thinkers within highly aspirational political movements understand their projects and the kinds of challenges they must address. Other work discusses how my account of the challenges of HAPM politics elucidates an-

other common aspect of highly aspirational political movements that might seem counterintuitive; namely, that these movements pair widespread critiques of society and calls for institutional and ideological restructuring with a highly localized politics of personal transformation.

Each movement asks people to take on practices and mindset transformation in their own lives to best live in accordance with the vision of the world the movement aims to realize. Movement adherents attempt to internalize their movement's ethics, going so far as to transform their personal judgments, practices and passions to match the politics of their movement. Their dedication to self-transformation runs against normative social theories that structural change occurs through common struggle as opposed to internal personal development. While some may think of collective action as the summation of individual-practices, collective actions do not of necessity require members to engage in deep transformational work in order to participate.

Highly aspirational political movements are most recognizably characterized as radical, idealistic, utopian, or, perhaps, revolutionary. While the movements I study may be both radical and utopian, these characterizations do not offer a specificity that might help us analyze such movements.[3] Furthermore, in the social scientific study of social movements, these labels can be used to dismiss close study of movement critiques, their practices and organizing, and their members' close study and thinking to envision a better world (Wright 2020, 4-6).[4] While some philosophers describe the pursuit of ideals under non-ideal circumstances, they tend to ground their theory in discussions of political agency broadly defined, rather than in the specific narratives and collective activities of movements (Ward 2024; Khader 2019, 3-10). Finally, if we define revolutionary movements as movements that seek to make such profound social and political transformations of society that the outcome can be considered a new social and political order, then HAPMs fall under that category. Still, the modern concept of revolutions engages notions of historical progress or shifting structural conditions in which members seize an opening and use violent or nonviolent coercion to achieve radical change (Alberoni 1982, 8-14). For the movements I call highly aspirational, members describe the conditions in which they organize as

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[3] Angela Davis writes, "radical means grasping things at the root" (Davis 1990, 14). In discussing movement activities, radical has been applied in a wide variety of contexts and has not been developed to describe the pattern of movement challenges explained in this chapter.

[4] Beyond the connotations of the term utopian, members of the case movements debate the usefulness of the concept to their movement. For example, PIC abolitionists discuss how the abstract ideal of utopia might be reinterpreted for fascistic ends. Robin D. G. Kelley has repeatedly made this argument in panels and interviews on the topic of abolitionism (Kelley 2024, 10)

hostile to structural transformation; so, they are forced to rely on prefigurative politics rather than insurrection and to cultivate a long time horizon for success. While concepts like radical, utopian, and revolutionary provide meaningful analyses of political activity, the theory of highly aspirational political movements offers new language to describe how movement members structure their critique, tactics, and endurance in order to pursue far-reaching aims under severe constraints and over time.

Highly aspirational political movements are those movements which forward a *restructuring politics* while also asking their members to engage in a *politics of personal transformation*. "Restructuring politics" is a term I use to describe politics that aims for deep ideological and institutional change, and can helpfully be understood as a contrast to reformist politics. I use the language of *restructuring* instead of 'revolutionary' or 'radical' to be more precise about the intended function of such movements. Such restructuring politics hold space for high levels of uncertainty about the movements' eventual outcomes and when those outcomes might be realized. Because of the uncertainties and constraints generated by the features of these movements, adherents find themselves particularly challenged to live according to the principles of the movement in their daily lives. Interpreting movements through the following three characteristics offers a specialized understanding of political struggle that is distinct from the outstanding literature on social movements.

First, movement members are materially and ideologically dependent on the very institutions they criticize; moreover, this dependence keeps them in a bind in which their attempts for structural transformation are hindered by their continuous use of the systems they criticize. They may be materially dependent, relying on the provisions of unjust institutions. If these *criticized* institutions were to disappear, movement members would have no organized or obvious way of meeting their needs. They are psychologically dependent on the patterns of thought generated in the context of existing structural forces. So, the movement demands a rejection not only of the existing material institutions but also the ideological influence of these institutions. While every effort for change faces a status quo bias, HAPMs face this challenge in a specialized way because they share little in common with the status quo, and because their views on just ideological and institutional arrangements shift as they engage in deliberate imaginative practices.

Second, movement members rely on deliberate imaginative practice to overcome material and ideological dependence and to generate political strategies for a pathway forward.[5] Because highly aspirational movements pair a wide-reaching social critique with a motivation for whole-sale restructuring, the movements tend to be open to many possibilities of what the more just world will look like. They do not have a collective crystallized image of what they are working to realize. As a result, imaginative practice is essential to generate visions of what the more just future could look like and to practice prefigurative efforts in localized experiments.

Third, movement members have a sense that their movement is operating on a genera-tions-long or even indefinite timeline; they acknowledge the possibility that their movement may never be successful, yet they persist. These movements' politics cannot be fulfilled by existing concrete political processes, actions or transformations understood as having a duration (Cohen 2018, 64-65). Much of how we understand social movements rests on movement members mak-ing claims on political processes to achieve their clearly defined interest (Tilly and Wood 2019, 6; Moody-Adams 2022, 24-25). As described in the imagination section, the movement's aims cannot be described as a set of interests; as a result, the realization of the movement cannot be captured by time-bound political processes. While many normative procedures over political pro-cesses form temporal boundaries that are not straightforwardly estimated, the procedures embed an expectation that there will be an end to the process (Cohen, 29-53).[6] The indefinite time hori-zon HAPMs face is different in kind. In summary, three characteristics shape these movements operation on inestimable timelines: 1) they have a wide-reaching interest in restructuring as op-posed to a set of concrete interests; 2) they are uncertain about the procedures and processes re-quired to realize their just world; 3) they are undecided about what a just world looks like.

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[5] In *Making Space for Justice,* Michele Moody-Adams describes how imagination might address certain forms of ideological dependence. She explains that existing cultural concepts provide limited resources to understand problems faced by individuals, and theorizes how imagination can allow constructive progres-sive movement members to overcome the challenges of their dependent relationships on dominant pro-cesses. Specifically, she names *epistemic imagination* and *sympathetic imagination* as productive for em-pathetic understanding that is largely inaccessible due to its structural marginalization (Moody-Adams 2022, 134). Her theorization helps explain how activists use imagination to aid in naming and identifying processes that harm and exclude oppressed groups in order to bring those groups into democratic life. Later in the paper, I argue that imaginative practice can assist in overcoming other aspects of structural forces, not only the effect of excluding groups of people.

[6] For example, the process for permit applications and approvals may not be precisely estimated. Still, it is assumed that these processes will eventually end in a recognizable way, and that we can perhaps set bounds on how long they will take (<10 years, say).

In the remainder of the chapter, I distinguish highly aspirational politics from other sorts of movements in the social theoretic and scientific literature. Then, I use the case of prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition to illustrate in more detail each element of highly aspirational political movements. I demonstrate the concept's scope by offering a description of two more North American contemporary 'highly aspirational' movements, Hawaiian Sovereignty and Christian Nationalism. Prison industrial complex abolition seeks to remove prisons, police and extensive surveillance systems and to generate a new system of response to wrongdoing (Davis and Rodriguez 2000). The Hawaiian sovereignty movement seeks to overthrow the colonial and corporate entities that govern Hawaiian land and people. They seek a new relationship with the United States, the tourist economy, and corporations—a relationship that fulfills their needs and allows for a Hawaiian way of life (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, Ikaika and Kahunawaikaʻala Wright 2014). Christian Nationalism seeks to move to a post-constitutional society in which Christian dominion organizes culture, education, and social institutions (Wolfe 2022 and Stewart 2020, 3-5).

The Distinctiveness of Highly Aspirational Political Movements

While many political scientists and theorists have studied social movement politics, they have yet to offer an adequate account of the form of politics I call highly aspirational political movements. Theorists and social scientists alike demonstrate an interest in how movements transform political life. The kinds of questions that have driven research on the topic so far offer insights into their structural causes, recurrent mechanisms, and their democratic functions (Skocpol 1979, McAdam 1999; Tilly and Tarrow 2015; Woodly 2022; Young 1990; Moody-Adams 2022). To illustrate the distinctiveness of HAPMs, I surface the central questions social scientists and political theorists have asked about social movements. Then, I describe how the questions, methods, and contributions of existing scholarship on social movements differ from the theory I introduce in this paper.

Social science scholars have been interested by questions about the emergence of social movements, the process and forms of social movements, and movement outcomes (McAdam, Skocpol 1979, Tilly and Tarrow 2015). They focus on causal explanations and strategies. For example, McAdam and Tilly and Tarrow develop a concept about political opportunity and the conditions under which forms of politics arise. While Tilly and Tarrow build a theory of the pat-

terns of contentious politics by looking at a wide array of activities like protests, marches, movements, and revolutions, Skocpol's and McAdam's seminal works narrowly focus on large-scale transformative events. These events, including the Civil Rights Movement and the Russian revolution, represent a distinctive type of movement that on the face of it looks similar to HAPMs; however, the kind of questions they are asking exclude HAPMs by definition because their studies examine rare events in constrained time scales.

Normative theorists of social movements have focused their questions on what moral insights we gain from the content of social movement narratives, how movements might advance democratic values like justice and inclusion, and the distinctive democratic functions social movements perform that other political institutions cannot perform. In answering these questions, normative theorists have examined movements' theories, their discursive articulations, as well as their activities. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990)*,* Iris Marion Young asks what role social movements based in group identities play in advancing justice when injustice is rooted in cultural imperialism and group-based oppression? In *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (2022), Deva Woodly examines why movements are necessary for democracy and how they reshape discourse, agendas, and participation. In *Seeing Like an Activist,* Erin Pineda (2021) examines how our understanding of civil disobedience changes when we examine it through the lens of activists. By doing so, she reframes the activist practice of civil disobedience from an act of law-correcting protest to one of constitutive world-making. Practical normative thinkers have focused on describing how ordinary people can organize and build power to create social change (Alinsky 1971; Piven 2006). While Saul Alinsky's (1971) *Rules for Radicals* is not an academic monograph, normative theorists have explored the limitations of his emphasis on tactical, practical action to theorize how the activities and discourses of grassroots organizers advance democratization (Phulwani 2016; Inouye 2022; Woodly 2022).

While there are differences in our approaches, my work shares an interest in the epistemic resources made available by social movement actors, and in the interplay between structure and agency. Movements are not purely about structural conditions nor are they solely about acts of vision or will. By examining movement materials, I am able to describe how movements understand structures, and how they think structures constrain what is possible. At the same time,

I am able to explain how movement elites and members understand individual or relational-dynamic agency. By looking at the structural and agential aspects of highly aspirational movements, I can describe the pattern or form of the of the politics of changing everything.

The theory of highly aspirational political movements contributes to social movement theory in three ways. Conceptually, it replaces the labels of "radical" or "utopian" with an account that specifies the internal logic of movements that aim to change everything, clarifying how ideals function as organizing principles. Normatively, this theory can help reorient debates about feasibility and ideal theory by showing how aspirational visions are operationalized through concrete practices that refine judgment, reshape motivations, and generate institutional prototypes. Methodologically, it bridges interpretive political theory and comparative social movements analysis, taking movement texts and practices as sources for theorizing the critical, visionary, and temporal elements of politics. In the case studies below, I examine in detail how agency, expressed as a politics of personal transformation, interacts with and transmutes structures.

Highly Aspirational Movements Illustrated in Three Cases

In the remainder of the chapter, I will present the model of highly aspirational politics through three case studies of such politics, PIC abolition, Hawaiian sovereignty, and Christian Nationalism. I begin each section with a description of the central ideas of each movement and then describe how the movement follows the three elements of HAPMs, 1) institutional and ideological dependence, 2) deliberate imaginative practice, and 3) a long time horizon.

I. Prison Industrial Complex Abolition

Prison industrial complex abolition, or PIC abolition, encompasses the anti-prison and anti-police movements, and calls for the end of the prison industrial complex. The term "prison-industrial complex" (PIC) was popularized by a group of anti-carceral activists, Critical Resistance, which formed in the 1990s.[7] Movement founders include scholars like Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who brought the term into academic discourse via their writings,

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[7] Today, Critical Resistance includes chapters in Los Angeles, Oakland, Portland, Central Appalachia, and New York (Critical Resistance 2025).

which include *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (Davis 2003) and *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Gilmore 2007).

PIC mimics the structure of a more well-known concept, military-industrial complex. Davis explains in a 1998 *Colorlines* article, "Taking into account the structural similarities and profitability of business–government linkages in the realms of military production and public punishment, the expanding penal system can now be characterized as a 'prison industrial complex.'" For many abolitionists today, PIC helps describe how schools, universities, hospitals, and social programs collaborate with police and prisons in order to surveil, control and disappear some groups of people (Gilmore and Gilmore 2025). In addition to active and passive collaborations with police and detention facilities, these social institutions implement critical penal functions like surveillance, punishment, and control.

In response to the overwhelming force and power of the PIC, abolitionists urge for a social reorganization of resources to support freedom for all people (Gilmore 2022, 474-475). Abolitionists repeatedly frame their fight in shared language like a fight for freedom, healing, and a complete transformation of material conditions. Mumia Abu-Jamal, a currently incarcerated former Black Panther, writes, "Prison abolitionists are today's freedom fighters who seek to expand the experience of liberty for all" (Abu-Jamal 2021, 195). Marlon Peterson frames abolition as "the everyday questions and creation of solutions to the underlying reasons why people cause harm and are harmed" (Peterson, 210). Mariame Kaba describes abolition as an imaginative practice to envision the way forward into new systems, practices, resource distributions that "creatively consider how we can grow build and try other avenues to reduce harm" (Kaba 2021, 2-3). In Derecka Purnell's book, *Becoming Abolitionists,* she argues abolitionist policy aims and community based practices aspire to "create and support a range of answers to the problem of harm in society" and to "reduce and eliminate harm in the first place" (Purnell 2021, 8).[8]

Now that I have provided some background on the idea of PIC abolition, I will explain how the movement exhibits the three characteristic features of HAPMs I have identified: their

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[8] I specifically use the phrasing 'aspire to' because the diction and sentence structure of Purnell's statements employ terms that do not foreclose possibilities or dictate particular outcomes. She uses phrases like "abolition is an invitation to create and support" or "an opportunity to reduce and eliminate." The use of a generative and welcoming tone is not only reflective of a tactic of Black feminist abolitionist organizing, but also a foundational principle for their organizing.

awareness of ongoing dependence on carceral institutions and ideology, their engagement of imagination as a tool for addressing structural dependence, and their considerations of time and transition that animate their work.

a) Dependence

First, PIC abolitionists face a dependency problem. Individuals are dependent on institutions and ideologies that are misaligned with or oppositional to their political movement. Individuals do not currently have many alternatives that cover the scope of activities unjust institutions are responsible for in our current society. Some argue that this lack of alternatives is by design. Geo Maher argues that "policing is built right into the structure of everyday life" (Maher 2021, 10-11). To his point, much of the movement's educational work has been to describe police and prison presence running through welfare agencies, healthcare systems, and schools.[9]

Movement members regularly discuss the problem of institutional dependence in the context of survival and basic needs (Gilmore 1999, 174). In the last two years, a new branch of Critical Resistance has emerged in Central Appalachia as communities in eastern Kentucky battle the growing number of prisons in the region. Advocates for and against the building of additional prisons acknowledge that introduction of a new prison in rural communities is bundled with waste treatment systems, a small number of employment opportunities for locals, and the possibility of new customers. Furthermore, in Central Appalachia, where sixteen federal and state prisons now pepper the region, some basic provisions like clean water are only introduced because prisons are also introduced (Schept 2023). While community organizations argue that resources could be diverted to create educational opportunities, sanitation facilities, and jobs programs without building a new prison, these efforts receive rare support from state officials.

When the "defund the police" proposal became popularized in 2020, many existing abolitionists and those new to abolition questioned whether it was ever appropriate to call the police or engage in protocols that feed into the police state, like engaging emergency call takers (911) or Child Protective Services. Abolitionist health care workers, teachers, and social workers have extensively discussed how they can provide care, keep their jobs, and resist mandatory police en-

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[9] SNAP distributions Operation Talon, resisting carceral sanism (Liat Ben Moshe), police in emergency rooms, school to prison pipeline/nexus

gagement that are built into professional practices (Kaba and Ritchie, 140-142). Similarly, abolitionists who are not required by law to engage PIC institutions, may still need to call the police because of limited options to address their specific needs. As a mundane example, the abolitionist is required to report a theft to the police in order for her insurance policy to provide for replacing a stolen laptop that she needs to keep her job. There is no workaround as the insurance company requires proof of a police report. As a difficult and less prevalent example, an abolitionist, isolated from their community and facing regular violence from a domestic partner, may call on police to intervene in a life-threatening altercation. In this instance, the best the abolitionist can do to act responsibly is to coach the emergency phone line responder, indicating that they do not want the partner to be killed or harmed, and the abolitionist can provide information to reduce the likelihood the police will be unnecessarily threatened by aspects of the partner's presentation and behavioral tendencies.

Moreover, dominant narrative framings that run through media, culture, and politics — that carceral punishment is necessary, that certain groups of people need to be disciplined in particular ways — are deeply embedded in individuals' psyches. Angela Davis describes the ideological problem, "The site of the jail or prison is not only material and objective, but it's ideological and psychic as well. We internalize this notion of a place to put bad people. That's precisely one of the reasons why we have to imagine the abolitionist movement as addressing those ideological and psychic issues as well" (Davis 2016, 22). Because carceral biases occupy abolitionists' minds, resistance includes creating new systems of meaning, cultural expressions, and intentionally undoing conscious and unconscious biases as a part of resistance. Prison industrial complex abolitionists respond to the problems of institutional and ideological dependence by placing imagination at the center of their political practice.

b) Imagination

Highly aspirational politics pays close attention to the realities of injustice in everyday life, and requires aspirants to imagine how needs could otherwise be filled. Imagination is a practice of thinking against and outside of unjust systems in order to generate alternative procedures, programs, and environments to meet people's needs. In *No More Police,* Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie summarize the role of imagination in escaping ideological and institutional dependence:

We need to break the equation of policing with public safety in our imaginations. We must collectively divest not only financially, but ideologically and emotionally, from all forms of policing in order to build genuinely safer futures for all of us. It may seem easier to follow the lure of reform—to continue tinkering with the existing system or replicate policing in our community-based responses—than to build a radically different world. Fear of the unknown keeps many of us frozen in some version of the status quo. But if we are committed to true safety for our communities—the kind of safety that comes from everyone having what they need to live into their fullest human potential—nothing short of wholesale structural social and economic change will lead us there (Kaba and Ritchie 2022, 179).

Imagining is consistently offered as the activity that could enable abolitionists to live beyond the carceral social, political and economic institutions that pervade everyday life. Kaba describes the ethos as "committing to a spirit of experimentation" or building collective capacity to "try things, embrace failure, and commit to multiple cycles of practice, fail, learn, repeat" (Kaba and Ritchie, 17). While imagination is the way to break institutional and ideological dependence, the political practice at the heart of PIC abolitionism also faces enormous challenges of ideological and institutional dependence.

The task of imagination is burdened by epistemic constraints of experience-based information and memory (Moore and Milkoreit 2020, 2-3). Movement aspirants are asked to conceive of material and ideological arrangements they have never experienced. Moreover, they are asked to imagine behaviors and practices that can generate non-carceral communities.

Social psychologists and political scientists have begun to examine how an imaginative practice might overcome epistemic constraints and support transformation. Such imaginative efforts operate on two dimensions: 1) the cognitive-emotional processes that work in individuals' minds and 2) the social and political processes that work at the level of the group (Milkoreit 2017, 4-7). At the cognitive-level, norms constrain what behaviors come to mind as options even when the counter-normative behavior would satisfy a motivation drive or need (Kalkstein and Hook 2023, 1203-1204). In daily action, non-normative or uncommon behaviors are infrequently thought of and are perceived as impossible (1204). Because individual future thinking is contex-

tual –- meaning social, political, environmental contexts impose ideas about reality and possibility— individual and collective future possibility thinking requires deliberate practices to overcome these constraints (Milkoreit 5; Greene 1995).

Abolitionists recognize these localized cognitive and social constraints; thus, they advocate for collective or and individual practices of intentionally bringing one's self to question norms in order to overcome cognitive and social constraints. In this spirit, Black feminist abolitionists, including every day organizers against the prison industrial complex, have taken up writing visionary fiction and working through thought experiments in order to interrupt normalized carceral impulses.[10]

On the social and political level, abolitionists recognize that imaginative practices can quickly be reshaped into a feature of oppressive structures. Cooptation is a strategy of the dominant system to integrate efforts for change into its existing process (Mills 1956, 234, 571; Selznick 1949, 261). Once cooptation occurs, the imaginative practice or creation no longer serves its aspiration; the efforts that were supposed to work against the oppressive institutions and ideologies end up working for those critiqued ideologies. Mon Mohapatra, a coauthor of the #8toAbolition resource, a widely circulated resource during the 2020 George Flloyd uprising, and organizer with the No New Jails Network and Community Justice Exchange has detailed how legislators, policy makers, and program managers within the carceral infrastructure coopt abolitionist efforts to create alternative, non-punitive systems of care.[11] The policy makers, program managers, and bureaucratic agents carry out the cooptation by providing 'care services' within the

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[10] In 2021, prison abolitionists came together to practice imagining possibilities where harm could be adjudicated without criminal courts. The materials from this workshop were published and abolitionists in groups all over the country have engaged in this material on numerous instances as a way to practice the creative impulse of abolition. As an example, Andrea Ritchie structured one activity with the following prompt, "Imagine you are developing a new legal system for the liberated Black nation of Wakanda (as seen in the film Black Panther). That legal system must reflect abolitionist principles and reject any form of surveillance, policing, imprisonment, punishment, or exile. Assume that everyone's basic needs for housing, food, health care (including mental health care) and liberatory education are being met, and that, for the time being at least, there are no external threats to Wakanda's sovereignty or long term sustainability. What kinds of harms do you envision happening under these conditions? How would you define harm? What kinds of conflicts do you envision happening under these conditions? What kinds of fact finding do you envision when harm occurs?" (Ritchie 2021). https://beyondcourts.org/en/imagine/imagine-dealing-harm-outside-courts-workshop-session

[11] Mohapatra recently published, "If They Build It: Organizing Lessons and Strategies Against Carceral Infrastructure," a resource that examines lessons learned from a variety of efforts to close jails and other segments of carceral infrastructure. In this resource, he examines how carceral infrastructure coopts abolitionist organizing, writing: "Attempts to promote jails as capable of providing care or services or of being responsive to trauma, are clear attempts to pacify anger against the violence of jailing. The jail has been, and will always be, a technology of anti-black and eugenicist violence, whether it looks like a penitentiary, an asylum, or a court holding cell" (Mohapatra 2025, 13-14).

scope of the carceral infrastructure, entwining support with systems of monitoring and control. Within the movement for prison industrial complex abolition, this particular form of cooptation is referred to as 'carceral humanism' or 'soft police.' Many non-incarcerated abolitionists have noticed that their efforts to support incarcerated comrades via mutual aid and advocacy can be coopted to provide more humane or "kinder cages." While abolitionists recognize the need for more humanity in the here and now, they generally oppose such reforms since jails and prisons use these reforms to justify increasing their budget and expanding the size and capacity of their facilities in lieu of freeing people and reducing or ending incarceration.[12]

c) Time Horizon

The Black feminist prison abolitionist organizing of today roots the present project in centuries-old organizing against the conditions of chattel slavery, plantation life, and Jim Crow. In addition to understanding contemporary abolitionism's historical roots, members of this highly aspirational movement see this past as always in the present. Plantation order continues into the ordering of Black people in today's free schools, hospitals, streets, and homes. In "The Kids in the Hall: Space and Governance in Frisco's Plantation Futures," Savannah Shange provides a detailed description of the extension of plantation logics in schools and their classrooms via systematic punishment regimes for Black students, including expulsion, suspension, comportment regulation, dress regulation, and discourses about the cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical development of Black children (Shange 2019, 19). Shange's explanation of plantation logics in today's educational institutions is a continuation of the Black feminist concepts like "plantation futures," including plantation time, space, and contexts (McKittrick 2013, 2-3 and 10-11), and the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2008, 6 and 10-14). These theoretical concepts, while academic, emerge from the lived experiences of Black peoples and flow seamlessly into many branches of today's abolitionist organizing. This thick description of experiences of racialized, punitive violence through time and space strengthens both the critique of the prison industrial complex and the political imperatives that emerge from this critique (Rodriguez 2018, 1575-1580).

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[12] Amongst PIC abolitionists, the work of organizers with Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) is widely recognized for their documenting of the procedures and processes by which carceral humanism operates to justify the prison state's budget and infrastructure expansion. https://curbprisonspending.org/the-latest/is-this-the-california-model

A movement politics that proposes complete restructuring against the grain and resists the forms of order and social organization readily available does not follow a plan, or in effect, a timetable. PIC abolitionists regularly struggle with the unplannable nature of their movement. After a recent discussion amongst movement elites, a young North Carolina based abolitionist inquired, "When I organize in my community, I can think about a three-year plan, and even a ten-year plan, but a thirty-year plan? Or even further along? How do we plan for an abolitionist future?" The question garnered a familiar response: "You can't plan for an abolitionist future." Because these movements are actively imagining what the future might look like but do not have a complete vision of that future, the movements' collective vision poses a challenge for making sense of today's goals and actions. The movement's ethos demands a commitment to constant struggle.

The temporal challenge of highly aspirational politics is characterized by a wide-reaching interest in restructuring as opposed to accomplishing a set of concrete interests, uncertainty about the procedures and processes required to realize justice, and a guarded open-mindedness about how social justice might be arranged. For abolitionists, their critique creates openings for striving for justice and freedom, but these spaces of striving are highly undetermined, and are best understood by what they are resisting as opposed to some crystallized image of an ideal that they are instituting. So, even while abolitionists insist their aspirational politics is about creating as much as it is about dismantling, the creative energy is best understood in terms of their political imperative of their critique.

Now that I have described how PIC abolition exhibits the three characteristics of highly aspirational political movements, I move to a very different sort of movement, an anti-colonial movement.

II. The Hawaiian Sovereignty Movement

"If you are thinking of visiting my homeland, please do not. We do not want or need any more tourists, and we certainly do not like them. If you want to help our cause, pass this message on to your friends." — Huanani Kay Trask, 1999, p 146

"What's at stake here is 1.75 million acres of land—close to half of the lands of the archipel-ago—and the right of the Hawaiian people to their own government. But the sovereignty move-ment is not one monolithic thing. We do not agree among ourselves about what form that sover-eignty should take." — Jon Osorio, 2021[13]

In *A Nation Rising: Hawaiian Movements for Life, Land, and Sovereignty,* the political movement by Kanaka Maoli, indigenous peoples of Hawaiʻi, is recognized under two names: the Hawaiian sovereignty movement and the Hawaiian movement (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, Hussey, and Wright 2014). The second name helps us see the movement as not about legal sovereignty, but as an effort to generate a Hawaiian way of life, a way of relationship to the land, and a way of self-ownership. The Hawaiian movement is part of a larger set of sovereignty movements happening in North America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and other locations where indigenous com-munities mobilize to reclaim ancestral lands and elevate a kinship relationship to their land to bring about safe housing, food sovereignty, and healing for the environment.[14] Since 2010, many of these such movements have claimed the label "Land Back" — Hawaiian sovereignty activists have also emblazoned their own flags with this moniker. While there are strong similarities in some values across these diverse and often geographically distant movements, each movement emphasizes its own history, language, and concerns in its effort for sovereignty.[15]

As an elaboration of the distinction between the Hawaiian movement and the western eu-ropean conceptions of sovereignty, theorists can turn to the political and ethical concept, ea. Lei-lani Basham, political scientist in the Kamakuokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies, has published foundational interpretive work about ea. This work is written entirely in ʻolelo, the Hawaiian language (Basham 2007). Due to my limited language skills, I take up Noelani Goodyear-

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[13] "What is the Hawaiʻi Sovereignty Movement?" September 2, 2021, https://www.afar.com/magazine/understanding-the-hawaii-sovereignty-movement

[14] In the United States, some such movements include the Sioux nation's effort to reclaim He Sapa, also known as the Black Hills, which were forcibly expropriated for the construction of Mount Rushmore and mining. The NDN collective has been a central organizing body for Land Back efforts in the region. The collective describes Land Back as "the meta political, organizing, and narrative framework for which we work toward collective liberation."

[15] In her essay, "Hybrid Democracy*,*" Iris Marion Young (2000) writes, "Indigenous peoples remain colo-nized people. Despite the locality of their claims, they have forged a global social movement which has achieved significant success in the past two decades in gaining recognition for the legitimacy of their claims."

Ka'ōpua's explication of this political philosophical concept: "Ea refers to political independence and is often translated as sovereignty." In its various meanings, as is common with terms in 'olelo, I note two significant features of ea. First, ea is ethical in so far as it refers to an active state of being. Ea carries the meanings of "life" and "breath;" in turn, political activists interpret sovereignty as demanding constant, daily action. Second, the Hawai'ian concept of sovereignty refuses to be understood in terms of property relations or ownership (Kauanui 2018, 28).[16] Unlike Euro-American philosophical notions of sovereignty which center around legalistic property relationships, ea is based on "relationships forged through the process of remembering and caring for pana, storied places" (Goodyear-Ka'ōpua 2014, 4).

The Hawaiian sovereignty movement should be held apart from the state-based conceptions of sovereignty not only because they are substantively about different concerns, but also because they are incompatible. In her essay considering the justice concerns of colonized people, Iris Marion Young highlights that state-based sovereignty which promotes separation and independence is in conflict with the relational emphasis in indigenous movements for justice (Young 2006, 31-33). Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, Kauanui, Osorio, Basham and other leading feminist activists and scholars understand sovereignty as a demand to change all of our relationships with one another, living and non-living beings, ancestors and progeny. The Hawaiian sovereignty movement like the prison industrial complex abolition movement seeks to change everything, including the dominant cultural conceptions of sovereignty.

In the following sections, I describe the Hawaiian sovereignty movement's "dependence" problem along institutional and ideological axes. Then, I show how "imagination" or imaginative practices — the proposal for getting out of the deep, complex, structural dependencies— remain ambiguous and materially and epistemically constrained. Finally, I describe how the sovereignty activists understand their movement to be on a long "time horizon" that is consistent with their conceptions of dependence and imagination.

a) Dependence

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[16] In her work *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty,* Kauanui argues ea conflicts with the concept of sovereignty described in international law. At the same time, she acknowledges that the embrace of ea is complicated by the often conflicting varieties of sovereignty.

Sovereignty activists find themselves multiply bound by economic, religious, and state institutions. These three sets of institutions govern a wide range of Kānaka life and the life of settlers on the lands. They are also mutually reinforcing. Before explaining how Kānaka are dependent on these institutions, I briefly draw out threads of connection between these institutions to demonstrate their interconnectedness. For example, US military sites like Pearl Harbor serve as major tourism sites and contribute to the degradation of the environment. To this day, you can see oil bubbling up to the top of the ocean at this 1941 site of war.[17] The state government prioritizes its tourism industry so much that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hawaii continued to promote tourism to the detriment of Kānaka.[18] The Hawaiian kingdom, which often gets referenced — arguable falsely so — as the model of Hawaiian sovereignty is a composition of all three of these sorts of institutions. It consisted of an oligarchy of corporate plantation economy leaders, Christian missionary leadership, and chiefs and chieftesses who had been converted to Christianity (Osorio 2002). Sovereignty activists are aware of the interconnectedness of these institutions, how these institutions undermine Kānaka sovereignty, and consequently that the success of sovereignty demands structural change.

Hawai'i has been forcibly established as an important naval and air base as well as a strong source of military recruits. Make'e Pono, a Honolulu-based youth group for sovereignty, says, "when we rule our own land, there will not be over 50,000 military personnel and 76 military installations (on O'ahu alone) forcibly occupying our home! The military does not belong here." Young people are actively recruited for an alternative nation's project (a non-Hawaiian nation) and many Kānaka are financially dependent on the military.[19] Furthermore, the military

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[17] https://pearl-harbor.info/arizonas-black-tears/

[18] During the delta surge in Hawai'i, the Kānaka 'ōiwi were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and their vaccination rates stagnated. In comparison, an increasing proportion of the rest of the state population became vaccinated, and COVID-19 restrictions gradually were lifted. This created an increased risk for the unvaccinated population. Collectively, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders were the least vaccinated racial group, accounting for 13% of vaccine recipients and 21% of Hawai'i's population (Office of Hawaiian Affairs, 2021).

[19] Jamaica Osorio says, "Any call to reduce military impact or footprint in Hawai'i is met with, we can't survive without the military, not just because ""they're here to protect us," but because what will we do without their money? And the same thing is met when you talk about imagining a different world in Hawai'i than one that is run by tourism."

continues to do extensive damage to the land and cordons off land and sea from Hawaiians.[20] A Hawaiian way of life in relation to the land is greatly limited by the militaristic domination of life in Hawaiian society.

Christian institutions have forcibly displaced Kānaka cultural practices. Trask writes "the missionaries had insinuated themselves everywhere" (Trask 1999, 116) into Kānaka relations. Their insinuations include prioritizing heterosexual marriage, denying ʻolelo in educational and social spaces, and removing spiritual traditions and respect for non-humans. Furthermore, missionaries' values prohibited that which they understood to be erotic, including banning hula and punishing widely-prevalent non-monogamous sexual and relational practices. Today, the form of monogamy and the prevalence of strict heterosexual practices can be attributed to and are maintained by churches, reinforced by federal and state policies (Osorio 2021). Kānaka are dependent on the English language for communication. Moreover, the relationships and forms of social support they have are organized by the church (Chang 2016, 79-100).

Kānaka have come to depend on these dominating institutions for the organization of their family, relational structures, and livelihoods. The federal and state governments, the military, and tourist industries are the only options available for how Kānaka can provide for their immediate welfare. Additionally, in a less directly material way, Kānaka are dependent on the dominant structure of relationships according to Christianity. The structure of the family and monogamous heterosexual relations dominates provisions of care and resources. Furthermore, the faith has evangelized the role of property and profit for supplying people's needs, which results in a capitalist system that usurps the possibility of strong systemic alternatives. In many ways, the institutional and ideological dependencies are linked. Kanaka Maoli largely depend on the tourism industry to provide jobs and meet their material needs. At the same time, many Kānaka have internalized ideas about their pre-colonial society as backwards and modernity afforded to them by industries like tourism as both desirable and good for them.

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[20] "The military controls about 231,000 acres, or 5.6 percent of total land area in the state, occupying a staggering 24.6 percent of Oʻahu. Military personnel, retirees, and their dependents constitute roughly 17 percent of the population, and the military is one of our largest industries, second only to tourism. Talking about the military in Hawaiʻi means talking about our economy, our patriotism, and often, our friends and family. But it also means talking about dependence, violence, imperialism, and occupation." Article interviewing Terri Kekoʻolani about her detour.

On the ideological front, sovereignty requires confronting how settler historiographies and the tourist economy have shaped Hawaiians' self-understanding. The American historiography of Hawaii has socialized Hawaiians to believe their way of life pre-colonization was barbaric and primitive, characterized by feudalism, infanticide, and overrun with disease. This narrative offers justifications for colonialism and implies that colonialism was in fact good for Hawaiians (Silva 1998, 43-70). Furthermore, the historical narrative passed down by Christian colonists disparages and discounts knowledge that might be gained from learning Hawaiian histories, moʻolelo. Noenoe Silva argues that the academic discipline of history negates the reality of Hawaiian myths to the people's self-understanding and as legitimate stories of their past (Silva 2008, 123). Goodyear-Kaʻōpua writes, "psychologically, our young people have begun to think of tourism as the only employment opportunity, trapped as they are by the lack of alternatives." (Goodyear-Kaʻōpua 145; Teaiwa 2001). Huanani Kay Trask identifies Hawaiians' openness to tourism as "a measure of the depth of [our] mental oppression." For her and many other activists, the tourism industry poses a situation in which Kanaka Maoli actively live out their own degradation. Hawaiian women are sold to attract visitors and Hawaiian culture is constructed as "naturally one of giving and entertaining" (Trask 1993, 137). She explains how this ideological problem directly impacts Hawaiians' ability to engage in their own freedom struggle.

b) Imagination

Movement activists have articulated competing and multiple visions of the sovereignty they want, and the very real challenges they face in their day-to-day efforts to strive for the Hawaiian way of life. An accounting of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement in the 1990s in *Christian Science Monitor* confirmed at least 300 factions of sovereignty activists who held differing views on the path to sovereignty and what sovereignty might look like (Wood 1994). Imaginative strategies are believed to be a way out of the extensive institutional and ideological forces that stand in their way. At the same time, engaging in imaginative practice and its promise is fraught.

Hawaiians struggle to imagine outside of the institutional structure imposed by the U.S. federal government and the state of Hawaiʻi. While they are indigenous, they do not desire to be legible to the government the way native Americans on Turtle Island have been counted and categorized. Still, the language of sovereignty politics, in many moments, struggles to think beyond

what the federal government has offered native peoples, i.e., tribal status that is accompanied by welfare provisions and land allotments. Additionally imaginative strategies generated by the collective Land Back do not always apply or strategically suffice for Hawaiians' unique and different history.

Moments of prefiguration are also expressions of imagination to help Hawaiians move beyond the structural dependencies that bind them. They inspire people to know they can create the just vision of the world they aspire to. The imaginative practices that go into creating prefigurative moments like Standing Rock and Mauna Kea, are limited by those moments. They create for a moment a glimpse into what might be possible, but do not last. Additionally, prefigurative projects are incredibly demanding on individuals' resources and time — most movement believers are not able to spend the full time at the location/in the space. Activist and writer, Adrienne Keene of the Cherokee nation describes her experience at Standing Rock and Mauna Kea as moments that allowed her to get past the idea that Hawaiians need to wait for Congress to "save them." Seeing the lāhui, gathering, allowed her to understand that Hawaiians can provide for themselves without the state. Alongside this optimistic outlook, she expresses this is possible if people are able to come together and have the means to do so.

c) Time Horizon

"This is a generational journey; not a one and done. E nānā i ka ʻōpua o ka ʻĀina. Observing the horizon clouds of the land." — Norma Ryūkō Kawelokū Wong Roshi, June 22, 2022, presentation to the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Sovereignty activists describe their movement as an intergenerational effort. Drawing upon Iroquois philosophy about past and future generations, many activists including Norma Wong, Jamaica Osorio, and Noe Noe Wong-Wilson describe developing a sustained relationship with ancestors and progeny. Movement activists discuss the time horizon in relation to the emotional burden of movement work, relationship to ancestors and progeny, as well as movement planning.

Hoʻopoe Peace Project, a non-violent movement for sovereignty, actively works to organize their members around the practical implications of a political movement on a long time

horizon. In a pamphlet on activist burnout, they ground movement members in the length of the journey through a poem.

> This fight is so long
>
> Still we're here, standing strong
>
> Through the fires, through the tears
>
> Children of a thousand years.
>
> …
>
> You and I, we'll carry on
>
> For those to come, and those who've gone
>
> And through the laughter and the tears
>
> I'm so glad that you are here.
>
> —Hoʻopoe Peace Project 2013

The poem reads as a salve to movement participants who feel the emotional burden of the fight for sovereignty. Part of the approach to healing and wellness for members is in developing a mindset about sovereignty as a generations-long fight. In a section on the causes of activist burnout, they write, "There are often far too few people fighting really big battles against really powerful foes. And the battles can go on for a LONG time (sometimes generations in the case of native activists), which can be very draining" (Hoʻopoe Peace Project 2013, 2). Movement activists are not only thinking about the emotional burden of participating in a generations-long movement, but also on how such a time horizon should impact strategic decisions and planning.

Jamaica Heoli Osorio, Associate Professor of Indigenous and Native Hawaiian Politics at the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, elaborates on strategies for movement longevity. She emphasizes,

> "[W]e're certainly not too late to live in dignity with our ʻāina, and to offer ea, … what it tells me is that we have to be courageous to step into decisions that are intergenerational, right, that are looking not just what I'm going to see in my lifetime, not just what I'm going to see in this fiscal year, but what is the world that I'm going to create for my children and my grandchildren? And right, what does it mean to plan for seven generations out something that, you know, that language I learned from other Indigenous scholars, right? What does it mean to project seven generations into the future?" (Osorio 2021)

The seven generations discussion does not imply that there is a step-by-step plan over the next 100-150 years to achieve sovereignty. Instead, it is the emphasis on thinking seven generations into the future in considering actions today. In a discussion about extractivism with Naomi Klein, indigenous scholar, Leanne Betasmoke Simpson, a Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer, describes historical efforts of such long-term thinking that takes into account future indigenous generations.

> "My ancestors tended to look very far into the future in terms of planning, look at that seven generations forward. So I think they foresaw that there were going to be some big problems. I think through those original treaties and our diplomatic traditions, that's really what they were trying to reconcile. They were trying to protect large tracts of land where indigenous peoples could continue their way of life and continue our own economies and continue our own political systems, I think with the hope that the settler society would sort of modify their way into something that was more parallel or more congruent to indigenous societies." (Simpson 2013)

For members of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement and some other movements of native peoples, the long time horizon of the movement is an ever-present part of how they understand the politics of structural change they are after. While it is deeply considered and understood as the nature of the movement, it also brings about crises of movement activism by asking people to be ready to give to the movement over long and often sustained periods of time. In the Ho'opoe Peace Project pamphlet, they outline the harms that can arise in such instances of over-exertion as harms not only to people and their relationships, but also to the overall movement goals.

The Hawaiian movement aspires for an extensive transformation of the primary political, social and economic institutions that currently shape their lives. Movement activists don't all agree on what the restructuring process should look like and what the ideal world looks like. The pattern of this movement — its dependence characteristics, engagement of imagination, and long time horizon — presents a general political problem. How might the movement can carry out their highly aspirational political commitments under deeply non-ideal conditions? The desire to

displace the dominant culture and create space for the Hawaiian way of life has pushed the movement aspirants to explore how they might live out a politics of restructuring.

III. Christian Nationalism

> "[T]he central problem that haunted the missionary's [R.J. Rushdoony] early ministry; namely, how might he help cultivate the "freedom and justice" necessary for a Christian man to thrive, especially when America's constitutional system no longer seemed to provide for either?" (McVicar, 19).

The pattern of a movement that is highly aspirational is not limited to movements opposed to systems like structural racism, colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. The wide-reaching critique of social and political institutions and ideologies appears prominently in my final case example, a contemporary Christian Nationalist movement. In the following, I begin by offering a description of the movement I take an interest in and how to understand the set of specific political activities engaged in as part of a broader shared theocratic political effort to reshape American society.

Moreso than the prior two cases, PIC abolition and Hawaiian sovereignty, Christian Nationalism has received attention from a wide swathe of academics, including sociologists, political scientists, and religion scholars. Because these characterizations of the movement come from actors on the outside, granted with some first-hand interview material of those who are believers, there is not a coherent movement story. For example, Smith and Adler argue that the movement has been described as "a pervasive ideology, cultural framework (Whitehead and Perry 2020), convergent social identity (Whitehead and Perry 2015), constellation of beliefs (Gorski and Perry 2022), malleable set of symbols (Whitehead, Schnabel, et al. 2018), myth, discourse (Perry, Whitehead, and Davis 2019), movement (Davis 2019), political theology (Perry et al. 2022), and politicized religion (Baker et al. 2020)" (Smith and Adler 2022, 3). In the fashion of my previous two cases, I seek to use movement literature and media to reconstruct what the movement is without dismissing the vast efforts that have gone into understanding the nature of the movement.

While Christian Nationalism (CN) is a label commonly used by media and academics who are not party to the political movement, it has recently been appropriated or 'reclaimed' by

some on the inside of the movement. There are two contemporary figures who have appropriated the term for the cause of advancing Christian dominion over all aspects of society: Stephen Wolfe and Douglas Wilson.

The publication of the book, *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* by Stephen Wolfe marked an important shift by some movement members who are starting to take the term and make use of it. Wolfe presents his book as a text of Christian political theory and defines CN: "Christian Nationalism is a totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs, conducted by a Christian nation as a Christian nation, in order to procure for itself both earthly and heavenly good in Christ" (Wolfe 2022, 9).

The second figure, Douglas Wilson, is the founder of the press that published Wolfe's book and has more recently taken the term seriously in his own writing — of which he has quite a bit. He has been a prolific author on the topic both in extensive blog posts since 2004 and as the author of 100+ books. In his blog post, "FAQs on Christian Nationalism", Wilson defines CN as "the view that secularism is a hollow construct, now plainly revealed to be bankrupt. Additionally, CN is the belief that human societies require a transcendent anchor to hold everything together, and that this transcendent anchor should be the true and living God, and not a placeholder idol" (Wilson 2024). While both of these figures disagree on theological grounds, they find common ground in their political endeavors. Wilson describes the disagreement and convergence as follows,

> "We do have some divergent assumptions at the tectonic plate levels, differences which result in some variations on the surface—Stephen is a Thomist and I am not, he is operating directly out of a tradition of political theology and I am more of a biblicist, and so on. Canon Press practices an evangelical ecumenicism on such issues. But it is worth pointing out that my general equity theonomy and the Reformed common law tradition have much in common, and differ largely in time and stage of development. The Reformed common law tradition is general equity theonomy after six centuries of maturation. So if I sat in the back row with all my convictions, and watched Stephen and his minions take over and obtain all that they wanted, from my perspective, this would be *way better* than what we are dealing with now. And I also think Stephen would feel the same if those positions were reversed."

I point to these two definitions, their divergences, and agreement in order to show that the political movement may be peppered with distinctions on the grounds of some beliefs, but within the movement people find themselves allied despite those differences.

While I will draw examples from the political efforts of activists and those who share movement values in the Christ Church and its broader community in Moscow, Idaho, the pattern of dependence, imagination and organizing on a long time-horizon is not unique to this specified group. The effort to reorganize the United States as a kingdom of God interacts with and is mutually reinforced by other similar political movements around the country and the world. Some such examples that have captured public attention recently include Scott Lively's anti-LGBT evangelical campaign in Uganda (Okereke 2023) and the recent scrutiny of current speaker of the house Mike Johnson's ties to dominion theology and faith in the Seven Mountains Mandate (Davis 2023).

Up front, I want to address the concerns that such movements should be thought of as primarily religious as opposed to political; or that such movements espouse such obscene, dehumanizing politics that they should be treated differently; or that such movements stand outside of the realm of normative democratic politics so much so that they are better understood as conspiracy rather than politics; or even further that they are pathologies, sicknesses that should be treated as such. Each of these attitudes is found prominently in the academic and journalistic writings about the politics that is now popularly dubbed as Christian Nationalism. At the same time, some researchers have watered down the term to include relatively innocuous beliefs like the United States was founded as a Christian nation and Christian values should be represented in government (Perry and Whitehead 2020). In my research, I prioritize primary source materials to construct the movement pattern, and hold these prevailing attitudes at bay in order to offer a description that takes seriously the organizing and movement building that has gone into achieving something as aspirational as "exercising dominion over every aspect of society by taking control of political and cultural institutions" (Clarkson 2023).

a) Dependence

A defining characteristic of highly aspirational movements is that members of the movement are structurally dependent on the very institutions they criticize in such a way that makes their aspiration seem deeply unrealistic and out of reach. I divided the dependence characteristic

into dependence on prevailing ideologies and dependence on dominant institutions. Members of the movement do not have many alternatives that cover the scope of responsibilities the unjust or immoral institutions are responsible for. Moreover, it is often not possible to completely opt out of these institutions. The movement deeply cares not just about what the institutions are but the values and ideas that are held by people in society.

Toby Sumpter, a Christ Church pastor, describes the institutional problem:

"The greatest lie of modern, government education is that there is such a thing as "religion-free" zones, which is what the First Amendment has been twisted to mean. But it never meant that; it always meant that the government could not run churches or be partial to a particular denomination. But our founding documents universally acknowledge the Christian God and Creator, and our constitution recognizes Sunday as the Lord's Day… In the absence of Christ, other gods and values always fill the vacuum. The other side of this lie is the claim that you can have math or language or history work apart from Christ. But all things hold together in Christ (Col. 1:17). Remove Christ and you remove reason." (Sumpter 2021).

Here, Sumpter outlines an institutional dependence on schools with a secular agenda. He argues that we face a need for the development of 'new' and 'moral' life, but constitutional mandates like the separation of church and state restrict the primary centralized and low-cost institution for such moral development.

Movement activists argue that a successful Christian nationalist movement needs to be able to move beyond the ideas given to us and undo our acceptance of the values of liberalism. Within the context of Christian Nationalism, the social critique emphasizes liberalism and secularism as the dominant ideologies (Russell 1976, 213). The Christian nationalist asks, "How can the Christian man live with justice and freedom when the constitution no longer protects him?" (McVicar, 19).

Furthermore, Christian nationalists tend to criticize the constitution and call for a new state order. At the same time, without critical protections of the US Constitution, like freedom of speech and freedom of religion, they would not be able to carry out their activism. For example, the First Amendment protects their freedom of speech to advocate for violence against LGBTQ people. Furthermore, the particular distribution of liberties available in the American context has

made space for a decentralized model of grassroots political movements pushing for God's dominion over all parts of life, political, social and personal.

b) Imagination

In the grip of overwhelmingly secular, demonic, and ungodly institutions and ideology, Christian nationalist leaders encourage the practice of "faith-fueled imagination" in order to "reimagine the entire world." In a 2021 lecture to the Association of Classical Christian Schools conference attendees, Douglas Wilson helped his community of Christian Nationalist educators understand what this imagination in the context of their classrooms might look like. Imaginative practices are intended to extend beyond concrete educational tasks like teaching students in the way of the western tradition under the guidance of books by C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, or G.K. Chesterton. It is not about children and families learning to perform certain activities that have been labeled as 'Christian.' Rather, faith-fueled imagination demands a larger vision of carrying out action with joy and love.

Wilson identifies how exercising a faith-fueled imagination can be challenged by social and political circumstances. First, he argues that there are many misunderstandings of faith that are in wide circulation. Some see faith as 'wishing' or a sort of 'dreaming' that is not tied to objectives outside of the self. As a result, people feel they are practicing faith by having these internal expressions that are not tied to the real world. As an extension of this atomization of faithfulness, he argues that people may have a tendency to understand faithful practice as a way to cultivate their own piety. Christians too commonly understand faithfulness as something that flourishes in the self. However, this sort of faith is not sufficient for and distracts from the faith-fueled imagination necessary to reimagine the world and build out the infrastructure of God's kingdom.

Christian nationalists try to reimagine the world and access a larger vision, one which has blueprints set by God. These blueprints are only accessible by faith, requiring the right sort of faith-fueled imaginative practice to act such that God's kingdom is built in the here and now. The eschatological belief that the movement will achieve success can be understood as a form of imaginative practice. As I will discuss further in the time horizon section, an important aspect of the Christian Nationalist's belief is that victory will come eventually. Doug Wilson argues, "…we believe that a time is coming when the earth actually will be as full of the knowledge of

the Lord as the waters cover the sea... So such an eschatological hope should serve as a great encouragement to those magistrates who are gearing up to do the right thing. This eschatological hope provides this duty with a reinforced teleology" (Wilson 2024). Movement activists regularly attempt to offer visions of the future in which victory will come; however, how soon or how far away into the future the victory will arrive is embedded into a blueprint they cannot know. Furthermore, this exercise in imagined victory challenges how Christian nationalists understand their faithful duties in the present.

c) Time Horizon

The belief that there will be victory interacts with the fact that CN believers commit to a system in which they may not know when this victory will come. While some denominations have theorized when the end times might come, they have been wrong many times in the past. Others, like Wilson, are more ambivalent about predicting when the victory might happen, but they are committed to fostering generations of Christian leaders so that eventually the United States can become the Christian Nation it was meant to be.

One of Douglas Wilson's influences is the theologian R.J. Rushdoony, whom I quote at the top of this section. R.J. Rushdoony dedicated his life to the project of Christian Reconstruction. On his deathbed, Rushdoony wrote on the topic of 'The Necessary Future,' and he preached his last sermon to his family, "The victory is ours and so we must fight. May He give you all strength to fight the battle. We have a battle to fight and an obligation to win. We have a certain victory. We are ordained to victory" (McVicar, 220). As in Rushdoony's last words, and the words of other dominionists and reconstructionists, there is a pattern that the movement will succeed. There is an assumption of victory. However, the timing of that success is largely undetermined. In the case I selected, Douglas Wilson's Christ Church ministry, the church repeats this certainty of success, writing, "We are postmillennial, which means that we believe that the world will be successfully evangelized before the Lord comes again" (Christ Church accessed 2024).

The world Christian Nationalists want to realize is not clear. There is no one idea of what to do with people who maintain non-Christian faiths or what institutions would persist, what to do with economic policies, and how to organize the parts of life that have not been thoroughly evaluated within their belief systems, like marriage, child-rearing, education, abortion, and gender roles. There are competing views on whether the Constitution should remain or be scrapped

altogether. While there is uncertainty about what a world that follows their values will look like, the members of the movement have a sense that the just world is one in which critiqued institutions are removed, and society is organized according to a guiding set of values such that critiqued power structures would no longer dominate or reemerge.

Conclusion

In this essay, I forward a theory of HAPMs to analyze movements that seek extensive social, political, and economic transformation while demanding practices of personal transformation. To illustrate this framework, I offered a study of three contemporary North American movements: prison-industrial complex abolition, Hawaiian sovereignty, and Christian nationalism. Across cases that otherwise disagree about the scope and inclusivity of social justice, I find recurring themes: dependence on contested institutions, imaginative practices for inventing non-dominant arrangements, and temporal orientations that anticipate transformation through uncertain pathways and long horizons.

In attempting to change everything, members of political movements theorize the challenges they face in practical and strategic action; moreover, they confront these challenges head-on. Even when their social critiques emphasize systemic and structural forces, prolific actors within each movement emphasize concerns that play out at the personal and interpersonal level. There is vast heterogeneity within each of these movements, and this research does not explore the whole terrain within each movement. There are actors within each movement who are skeptical of a politics of personal transformation. Though I do not engage them here, these moments of disagreement amongst movement members about approach can be a fruitful area to theorize the normative stakes of practicing personal transformation when engaging in a politics of changing everything.

The interpretive work in this chapter offers social theorists language for understanding the dimensions of restructuring politics that forward a politics of personal transformation. Political theorists strive to reconstruct arguments people make in different forums. In reconstructing the political thought of those actively engaged in today's political movements, we not only expand the kinds of thinkers we can learn from, but also expand the kinds of political activity we can consider and study.

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