Prefigurative Design as a Method for Research Justice

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While there is growing concern around justice and equity, they mean different things in different socio-political and cultural contexts. Additionally, it can be difficult to make sense of how to incorporate the more abstract concept of justice into our research practices. This paper discusses *prefigurative design* as a framework for more just research practices to challenge inequity, particularly in community-based collaborations. I draw from past fieldwork with activist organizations and radical organizing literature to explore opportunities for how to engage with justice as academics, identifying three main opportunities for intervention through research: *social relationships*, *resource distribution*, and *counter-institutions*. I offer these contributions in the spirit of generative critique, in hopes that other researchers with similar concerns will iterate on these practices to commit to more just and equitable scholarly impacts.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Collaborative and social computing** → **Collaborative and social computing design and evaluation methods** → Ethnographic studies

KEYWORDS

Research justice; transformative justice; civic engagement; anarchism; equity.

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1 INTRODUCTION

There is growing scholarship in the CSCW community addressing various concerns around justice and equity. These concerns are so imbued into our professional responsibilities that they have recently been more strongly incorporated into the Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics [1]. Because of the breadth and richness of community-based computing research, we have unique opportunities to incorporate justice and equity into our work and are able to do so from a variety of perspectives. For example, existing research has examined concerns around justice as they take place across different levels of scale, from interpersonal relationships and smaller scale interactions [3, 65] to larger and more historical issues taken up by broader community efforts or legal institutions [76, 82]. In addition to different levels of scale, justice and equity mean different things in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts. When looking at equity concerns in industry, for example, concerns may look at access to opportunity in professional development

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[23, 60] or transphobic system design [19, 43, 57]. There are calls for us to be reflective about the impact of our work, both as they actively exclude and oppress our more vulnerable communities, but also—and perhaps more insidiously—how we might unwittingly perpetuate existing forms of systemic violence by ignoring oppressive histories and sustained impacts in contemporary work practices, culture, and norms [19, 51, 84, 53, 33, 78]. These concerns and conversations all make extremely valuable contributions to our research and scholarly communities.

This paper humbly builds on these ongoing efforts by offering some structure for how we might better engage in justice-based collaborative research. This work draws from years of fieldwork with activist and advocacy communities and radical organizing literature, both of which are interested in how to incorporate justice into our work, both as a more abstract value and as material practice. This work asks the research question: *how might academics engage with justice through community-based research and intervention across multiple issues?* I anchor this work in justice and equity because they are concepts that are at the heart of many of the discourses and frameworks across HCI, from historically disenfranchised research sites [35, 23, 83] to oppressive biases in algorithms [19, 42] to communities and practices around sustainability [27, 56]. Moreover, they are at the core of many of our professional concerns, such as the historical concern with service and equity in participatory research methods [17, 63, 73, 74] and just representation in industry and knowledge production [32, 60]. Within CSCW, much of this work takes place through community collaborations, like co-designing and producing digital artifacts [14, 35] or more accountable organizational and civic processes [6, 30, 80].

I explore this question by focusing on three concepts: research justice, prefigurative politics, and transformative justice. Each of these spaces offer more nuanced understandings of what justice looks like in practice. Together, they form the foundation for *prefigurative design*, which is a framework for more just approaches to community-based research and collaborations across different issues and concerns. Prefigurative design is meant to frame conversations and negotiate boundaries around what kind of work needs to be done and to set goals and expectations across researchers and partners for the outcomes and impact of the collaborative work. The goal is to create counter-structures to uplift and sustainably support the justice work of community partners while minimizing harm. While I focus here on digital interventions, prefigurative design also acknowledges the potential for technology to impose harm, so it is important to consider non-digital approaches, as well [10]. Ultimately, prefigurative design tries to articulate opportunities for researchers to engage with and support justice work in three ways: through *social relationships*, *distribution of resources*, and by *building counter-structures*.

Prefigurative design is also a way to acknowledge both the pluralities and the difficulties of incorporating justice into scholarship, particularly through the lens of computing. There are a variety of ways that already do address justice through our work, such as service, narrative, or pedagogy [19, 45, 56]; prefigurative design explores how to do this work through research, specifically by building on more interventionist methods like community-based research, design research, and/or ethnography. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the difficulty of engaging with justice in the academy: it imposes additional levels of labor, from operational to administrative to emotional [46]. There are challenges to understanding the impact of this work, particularly when the stakes are often experienced by our community partners and do not (typically) directly impact us as researchers. This paper does not assume to have adequate solutions to these complex and longstanding concerns, though the hope is that prefigurative design can offer some pragmatic and accessible starting points.

This work makes three contributions: the first is to make more concrete what the abstract value of justice might look like through different kinds of practices; the second is prefigurative design, a framework for more just community-based research, which I explore through a survey of existing research projects; and finally, I conclude with opportunities and challenges that emerge when we more closely interrogate our roles in enacting justice as academics. I acknowledge the various approaches to justice in the computing community more broadly, and within the discipline of human-computer interaction (HCI), as well as the various impacts and outcomes that each initiative strives for. Thus, I offer these contributions in the spirit of generative critique, in hopes that other researchers with similar concerns will iterate on these practices to commit to more just and equitable scholarly impacts.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This work first aims to offer some clarity around how justice might be put into practice. What is notable is the emphasis of justice as it is practiced outside of institutions (e.g. criminal justice) and instead practiced in smaller scale or more local settings. This orientation largely draws from the researchers' roots in community-based research, particularly with activist and advocacy communities. However, I also wish to emphasis more community-centric practices of justice given that this is the scale at which much of the interventionist research is done in the discipline of HCI [e.g. 4, 36]. I briefly discuss three concepts of community-based justice below: research justice, prefigurative politics, and transformative justice. I identify how each of these engages with justice, both as a set of values and how they are put into practice. These practices are then discussed as opportunities for us to learn from and build on existing CSCW work concerned with justice, community collaboration, and interventionist research.

2.1 Research Justice and CSCW

I align this work with *research justice*, acknowledging the long legacy of scholarship by underrepresented academics, many of whom are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), Queer*[1], and/or undocumented, and thus have not had the option to ignore concerns of justice through their experiences both inside and outside the academy [8, 54]. Research justice is a theory and method developed by DataCenter: Research for Justice, a research organization in Oakland, California. It emphasizes interventionist strategies for policy reform and embraces underrepresented forms of knowledge (e.g. experiential, cultural, spiritual) and focuses on centering community partners as experts in research projects [54]. One of the ways that research justice conceptualizes justice is through the creation and maintenance of equitable power relationships across researcher and non-researcher. Another considers justice as access, specifically academics having more access to influence policy through knowledge production than those directly impacted by it through lived experience. One of the main goals of research justice is to move away from hegemonic and oppressive power dynamics reproduced by educational institutions—particularly within the context of neoliberalism—and to encourage critical pedagogies and emancipatory ethics [8, 19, 33, 53].

Putting these values into practice, research justice focuses on more just collaborative relationships and distribution of resources. The former acknowledges that the community-based research relationships are fundamentally imbalanced, with researchers in a more dominant

[1] I use "Queer" here as a shorthand for the full and evolving spectrum of gender identities.

position, extracting knowledge and experiences from community collaborators. Instead, research justice pushes to acknowledge community partners as experts in their own right, making space in the relationship to include and build on non-academic forms of knowledge, including local histories, non-Western epistemologies, and/or the preservation of underrepresented narratives [2, 63, 70]. Additionally, research is reframed to center the various needs of the community as articulated by members of that community; research becomes a way to respond to and serve community concerns, positioning academics as mutual participants in research practices alongside their community collaborators. Here, research questions and outcomes are determined by members of the research community, determining what social, legal, economic, cultural, and/or political policies are needed [8, 53].

The concerns articulated by the Research Justice community are oriented towards the social sciences, but also echo many of the concerns expressed through community-based research work in the CSCW community and in the field of HCI, more broadly. Certainly, concerns around power imbalances in research are not new and have been incorporated into community-based research methods such as participatory design [28, 31] and action research [45], both of which center the needs and contributions of participants. However, there is a growing body of work that also calls for these more inclusive modes of knowledge production specifically to challenge structures of injustice and oppression. For example, recent community-based research with activists reveals how their grassroots information practices are a way to make visible systemic violations of human and civil rights [4, 38]. Similarly, other CSCW projects have incorporated the lived experiences from their research community as a way to highlight forms of violence against underrepresented populations [25, 63]. In these instances, digital interventions were used to amplify underrepresented experiences and challenge narratives that normalize forms of injustice and inequity.

2.2 Prefigurative Politics and Design Research

Much of the literature concerned with justice addresses it through the lens of design: many forms of justice share in common with design a focus on *process*. Here, I owe much to the work of Sasha Costanza-Chock and the Design Justice Network, who both focus on the role of design in matters of injustice. Specifically, design justice refers to the way that "design reproduces, is reproduced by, and/or challenges the matrix of domination (white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism)" [19]. Design justice echoes many of the same values around justice, as well, specifically the goal for more equitable distribution of access to design, both as an artifact, but more important as a process. Costanza-Chock argues for better recognition of community contributions to design practices, as well as more participation in design decisions, drawing particular attention to whose labor is valued in design, both historically and in contemporary design settings [19, 51]. Like research justice, design justice is explicit about the exclusion and erasure of women, BIPOC, LGBTQ folks, folks with different abilities and socioeconomic status [19]. Design justice emphasizes more just inclusion and representation throughout design processes to lead to more equitable and diverse design outcomes.

HCI literature offers a wealth of approaches through which justice and design are discussed: Joanna Boehnert describes these as *symbolic violence*—originally theorized by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—wherein the exploitation of different groups of people is naturalized and obfuscated through ideas and practices, e.g. patriarchy, racism [13]. Boehnert discusses design specifically as a powerful tool to reinforce these oppressions through cultural practice, such as software design for certain cameras that often mischaracterize Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI) users as

"blinking" or photo algorithms that confuse people with darker skin pigmentation as apes [13]. In addition to the broader category of symbolic violence, work has been done to identify specific structures of oppression or forms of violence against particular identities. Postcolonial HCI, for example, focuses specifically on the legacy of colonialism to analyze structurally unjust power relationships in technology and development [52, 84]. Here, design labor and practice is considered on racial, cultural, and economic grounds to challenge norms on what counts as design, who gets to design, and where design is produced globally [2]. There are also strong traditions of feminist HCI, which entails a variety of perspectives, including but not limited to reproductive justice, sex work, and sexuality [56, 77].

These critical lenses are invaluable for researchers to be critical of assumptions and hierarchies that are entrenched in various design practices, and their focus on particular identities and frameworks are rich and generative, rightfully advocating for the specific and unique challenges faced by different identities and communities. This work is indebted to these discussions, and humbly hopes to build on them by addressing the broader underlying concerns of power and autonomy. For this, I turn to more recent literature design research that focuses specifically on anarchism as an approach that—like design justice—challenges *all* forms of violence, oppression, and injustice.

Anarchism has a fraught history, which is beyond the scope of this paper (but is elegantly discussed in [57]), but is underpinned by concerns of justice that extend beyond any single system of oppression. One of the main goals of anarchism is autonomy, which emphasizes smaller scale models of governance where all participants actively negotiate and decide on outcomes that best represent their needs [20]. Cindy Milstein describes anarchism as an alternative to the violent and oppressive structures of contemporary Western democracy, including white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and—more broadly—"coercive, hierarchical social relations" [67]. While anarchism is a rich site to conceptualize justice, recent work points to the value of anarchism as a mode to practice justice, as well. Os Keyes, Josephine Hoy, and Margaret Drouhard outline a potential framework for practicing anarchist HCI, which makes explicit its political agenda to eliminate oppression in order to better hold ourselves accountable to the impact of our work [57]. Specifically, this work identifies core anarchist principles—such as anti-oppression, liberation, and dignity—which would reshape our relationships to our world, our research communities and collaborators, and with other researchers [57].

Anarchist HCI is among many other anarchist resources that identify prefigurative politics as one of the main implementations of anarchist ideals. Here, I also focus on *prefigurative politics*, which refers to work that expresses the 'ends' of its politics through its 'means' [20, 41]. As a practice, it both envisions a more just and equitable future, and simultaneously puts into action practices in the present to more actively move towards that future. Anarchist literature discusses prefigurative politics as an approach that emphasizes process [41, 75]: by practicing more just social relationships and organizational models now, we actually enact those envisioned, liberatory ideals [16, 20, 67]. Ultimately, prefigurative politics aims to produce counter-power, or counter-structures [16, 20], where smaller scale interactions and relationships scale up to eventually replace oppressive systems and institutions and realize the visions of liberation and solidarity.

It is this dual emphasis on envisioning and process that scholars are beginning to identify as rich sources for design work. For example, prefigurative politics would be well positioned alongside many speculative design projects, which also orient their design processes towards radically different futures [74]. There are also parallels to participatory design as prefigurative politics similarly focuses its outcomes on the underrepresented and often vulnerable stakeholders

that are most affected by current practices and processes [28]. Carl DiSalvo identifies two opportunities for incorporating prefigurative politics into design work: the first is to leverage design skills "in direct material support of a prefigurative political endeavor" [26]. Through this approach, prefigurative politics become a way for design to produce or support the production of these alternate conditions or values. The second is to leverage prefigurative politics as a mode of inquiry "experimenting with new forms and configurations of artifacts, systems, and environments in order to discover, if only in abbreviated ways, the desired conditions of a prefigurative politics" [26]. Additionally, some of my earlier work (with Le Dantec, Nielsen, and Diedrick in [6]) can be seen as early experiments with prefigurative politics and design: through their workshops, participants articulated what they envisioned to be 'good' community engagement—like ownership, accountability, and transparency, not unlike other articulations of justice mentioned above. Our research team then explicitly incorporated these value into their design processes and practices [6]. This work hopes to build on these early experiments with prefigurative politics and design by formalizing approaches to collaborative research practices that are better oriented towards justice and equity.

2.3 Transformative Justice and Intervention

Like research justice, prefigurative politics seeks to directly address the needs of people directly affected by injustice; counter-institutions are meant to create more sustainable structures for the community to be autonomous and have more control over issues that impact them. Here, I focus on transformative justice as one kind of counter-institution specifically for concerns around justice. Transformative justice is a diverse framework, but broadly encompasses modes of community intervention to repair harm. It is meant to be an alternative to the punitive and carceral measures on which the contemporary Western criminal justice system is based, and which disproportionately harm certain communities, [15, 22, 39]. Like research justice and prefigurative politics, it is based on community-level practices, sometimes used interchangeably with the concept of community accountability [40, 44, 58].

Transformative justice enacts—or prefigures—more equitable social relationships by imagining and practicing care and healing as alternatives to incarceration and prosecution. Participants first identify what harm has been done; who is involved and impacted; what their resulting needs are; and what future actions are needed to heal the traumas resulting from an act of harm and address the needs of those affected [40, 81]. Transformative justice focuses on harm to recontextualize crime not as an individual transgression or inherent deficiency, but rather as the product of other forms of oppression and existing systems of violence [40, 44]. As such, an offender is understood to also be a victim, who may be perpetuating harm as a result of past trauma from harm done to them [40]. Transformative justice focuses its practices more locally on the victim, the offender, and other impacted individuals within a community, rather than larger legal or criminal justice institutions, such as police, courts, and prisons, which can reproduce similar or other forms of harm to an individual and related communities, e.g. the prison industrial complex [39, 47]. Ultimately, the goal is to transform the underlying conditions and structures that made harm possible to begin with, from misogyny and transphobia to state-sanctioned violence like colonialism and the prison industrial complex [11, 47].

There are a variety of models for practicing transformative justice, which vary depending on the setting, the impacted community, and the kind of harm that needs healing. In instances of juvenile offenses, for example, family group conferences are led by a facilitator who mediates dialogue across the offender, the victim, and members of impacted communities, such as family

members, fellow students, or school administrators [69]. In other instances, for example where a victim may be too traumatized to encounter their offender, the encounter may instead take place between the offender and other impacted members of the community. This encounter focuses on the actions needed in the short term to repair the harm done to the broader group, while the victim may confront the offender at a later time to address the needs resulting from the interpersonal harm.

I wish to acknowledge that transformative justice is sometimes conflated with restorative justice. Figure 1 compares the differences between retributive justice, the current model for the Western criminal justice system, and restorative justice. While there is literature that delineates key differences between restorative and transformative justice in practice, for the purposes of this paper, I refer to them interchangeably, referring to them as two frameworks that share the same broader goal of social transformation through healing, reconciliation, and reparation [86].

I am interested in transformative justice more specifically as it has been taken up by grassroots organizations to repair harm being done to their communities, particularly harm caused by the criminal justice system that disproportionately affects BIPOC, Queer, immigrant, and/or undocumented communities [11, 40]. Transformative justice is strongly advocated by many radical communities—some of whom are explicitly anarchist—particularly around the issue of prison abolition. The Transformative Justice Law Project of Illinois (TJLP) advocates for transformative justice models to "ultimately replace State systems of control with community empowerment in matters of conflict resolution" [79]. Through this lens, transformative justice identifies the source of harm—and thus, injustice—with the State; there is overwhelming evidence of identifies existing criminal justice practices that cause harm, including but not limited to racial profiling, broken windows policing, and the prison industrial complex [47, 79]. Transformative justice thus functions as a counter-structure for communities to maintain autonomy from existing harmful institutions.

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Across the three concepts above—research justice, prefigurative politics, and transformative justice—we can draw parallels across how justice is conceptualized as a set of values (e.g. autonomy, anti-oppressive, inclusive) and implemented as practices across different issues and levels of scale (e.g. prison abolition, colonialism, labor). Below, I synthesize these concepts and practices to describe *prefigurative design,* a framework for negotiating and articulating more just collaborations between researchers and community collaborators.

Retributive lens	Restorative lens
Crime defined by violation of rules (i.e. broken rules)	Crime defined by harm to people and relationships (i.e. broken relationships)
Harms defined abstractly	Harms defined concretely
Crime seen as categorically different harms from other	Crimes recognized as related to other harms and conflicts
State as victim	People and relationships as victims
State and offender seen as primary parties	Victim and offender seen as primary parties
Victims' needs and rights ignored	Victims' needs and rights central
Interpersonal dimensions irrelevant	Interpersonal dimensions central
Conflictual nature of crime obscured	Conflictual nature of crime recognized
Wounds of offender peripheral	Wounds of offender important
Offence defined in technical, legal terms	Offence understood in full context: moral, social, economic, political

Fig. 1. The differences between retributive and transformative/restorative justice.

3 PREFIGURATIVE DESIGN

I build on my earlier work on prefigurative design, which my co-authors and I described as "design work that is explicitly oriented in service of political or civic goals" to both "articulate these goals as design objects" and "structure design processes to actualize them" [6]. We reflect on a specific research project to identify accountability, sustainability, and ownership as qualities that were articulated to them as important by their community collaborators that they then actualized and incorporated into their design work. Through this early work, we see the relevance of prefigurative design to other design-based methodologies: for example, it borrows from speculative design an emphasis on visioning as a mode of inquiry and critical reflection. Prefigurative design can also be seen as a response to value-sensitive design as it makes explicit a set of values to incorporate and negotiate throughout the research process, while additionally creating space for other, more specific concerns to emerge through collaboration.

I extend this work to be more generalizable beyond this specific research project, and to better incorporate principles of research justice and transformative justice. Additionally, I hope that the more applied framework described below becomes a way for prefigurative design to more explicitly build on and extend the contributions and impact of other design-based methodologies. In [6], we introduced prefigurative design as a more theoretical approach to work; I hope here to make those arguments more material by grounding them in research practices common to interventionist and/or design-based methodologies, such as participatory design, co-design, or action research. Additionally, this work adds to prefigurative design a specific focus on *healing* via transformative justice. This framing more explicitly moves away from more product- or consumer-based concerns in HCI to better understand collective practices and sociopolitical concerns within broader communities, specifically concerns around injustice, oppression, and

trauma [15, 40]. I first describe the prefigurative design framework, then discuss some anticipated opportunities through these categories of justice work.

3.1 Prefigurative Design in Practice

Prefigurative design is not meant to be a totalizing framework, but rather a tool to articulate a vision with community partners to better identify opportunities to leverage existing justice work through research intervention. Here, I wish to acknowledge the potential for prefigurative design to *stifle* healing, rather than enable it. Drawing back to its political roots, it is important to note that prefigurative work emerges from anarchism, which is at its core against all forms of oppression, and thus centers in its practices equity and collective liberation [67]. Given these goals, prefigurative design asks:

1. Who is being harmed and by whom?
2. What does healing look like?
3. Which needs should be addressed first?
4. Where can resources be marshalled to support the healing?
5. How can interventions support healing while minimizing harm?

When asking *who is being harmed and by whom*, this first and foremost provokes a discussion of what the harm *is*—or the multiple kinds of harm—which is vital for communities to articulate what their needs are and for researchers to begin negotiating what their contributions might be. This also begins a conversation to identify the communities, individuals, and/or entities affected by the harm. Together, these set the foundation to envision more just, alternative futures that the community wants to work towards and that the researcher(s) can help support.

The community partners then take the lead with the envisioning step by imagining *what healing looks like* for them. This step focuses the work on healing, rather than the harm, which emphasizes generative alternatives, which is especially important if the harm is not something accessible. Here, I draw from the work of transformative justice as focusing on undoing harm might lead to even more difficult challenges: what happens to a community if you are unable to change—or heal—the police? Thus I focus on healing for the envisioning step to focus on possibilities and emphasize the autonomy of the community by identifying what they *can* or *might* be able to do. Relatedly, this step is important to consider the sustainability of the project. While communities may envision a wide variety of healing practices, naming them all is a way to identify with the researcher what *scope* or *scale* of intervention might be appropriate for the partnership. It may be that the researcher supports the community to achieve a very small piece of their envisioned healing work, but it ensures the community has ownership over the process—especially after the researcher leaves—as it will have been guided by their visions.

The next question is meant to address the scope of the shared work as well by asking *which needs should be addressed first.* This is important to prioritize the tasks and actions necessary to move towards the community's vision, which can guide the researcher in making responsible and reasonable commitments for the partnership. This step is also crucial for researchers to articulate to their community partners the role of research, more broadly, especially if the community is unfamiliar with academic practices or scholarship. This step can be a source of friction, as well: it may be that the most immediate needs of the community cannot be addressed through a research collaboration, or that there is any place for a research intervention of any kind. In this case, it would be pragmatic to have a discussion about this to avoid wasting resources and efforts.

Echoing Baumer and Silberman, technologies are not always appropriate for various contexts or practices, in which case the researcher should look to non-technical artifacts, practices, or processes [10]. If it is the case that the community and/or the researcher decides that it would not be appropriate to continue the partnership, ideally the community would be left with the outcomes of the first two steps, which can guide their work independent of a research intervention. The researcher will also have benefitted by identifying the limitations or boundaries of their current approach to their research, which they might adapt for later collaborations, grants, etc.

If the partnership continues, the next step will be to identify *where resources can be marshalled* to support the collaboration. The first two steps outline the various roles and commitments of researchers and community, while the third prioritizes and structures the shared work. This step is meant to build accountability into the partnership as the actors involved and invested in this work identify what resources are needed to *do* the work. I use "resources" in a broader sense here, identifying the myriad ways in which different kinds of capital and materials can leverage different outcomes. This is a particularly important step for the researcher to reflect on their position and how they can leverage that in serve of justice and local impact. For example, many researchers—particularly in computational disciplines, like HCI—might carry with them a degree of legitimacy, which might be valuable to build or amplify public support for the community's cause, e.g. with local press, policymakers, elected officials.

The final step of prefigurative design asks *how interventions might support healing while minimizing harm.* I refer to "interventions" to refer to a variety of things, including digital artifacts and systems, but also to processes, organizational models, and non-digital artifacts. This step reiterates the importance of centering community needs and autonomy, which may ultimately call for non-digital interventions as a way to support their work. These interventions are also an avenue to build counter-structures: if the intervention is not a counter-structure itself (as was the case with our earlier work in [6]), the intervention could build towards a counter-structure. This ensures that the partnership with the community results in something that contributes to their work, be it a deliverable like a digital tool or documentation, or something that otherwise builds their capacity to continue doing the work after the researcher has left. This negotiation process is also a way to better incorporate community concerns into the research project as the shared work becomes a way to uplift and work alongside the community as an accomplice [7, 49], rather than the intervention as a mode of extraction that only benefits the researcher.

It will be key to document the discussion produced by the above questions, which will serve an artifact for all parties to commit to being accountable through their respective work, not unlike practices already used in community-based research, such as memoranda of understanding (known as MOUs). This artifact will guide researchers as they acclimate to the practices and norms of their community collaborators and reflect on their progress, adjusting and iterating on their research practices as necessary to better align with the work articulated through the prefigurative design framework. Co-creating this artifact with the community is crucial to minimize further harm on the part of the researcher, especially as they necessarily bring with them the politics, agendas, and power of their academic institution [52].

3.2 Opportunities for CSCW

The prefigurative design process described above is far from complete, but the hope is that it is a concrete and practical tool through which community-based researchers can forge just and equitable relationships with their collaborators. Given the growing concern within our academic

communities around justice and equity, it behooves us to better understand justice as it is practiced by folks who do the work full-time [49], as well as the broader impacts of the interventions we deploy on those who already experience precarity and vulnerability [52]. This framing is especially important for us as HCI scholars and practitioners, given that we are in unique positions to work with and within the systems, infrastructures, and artifacts that very materially impact exploitative and extractive structures of access and power [32]. If we are concerned with justice and equity but do not explicitly address them through our research, we must attend to the very real possibility that our work will in fact further entrench and reproduce the very injustices and inequities we claim to critique [33, 50].

Through the lens of prefigurative design, I discuss three opportunities to leverage community-based research practices to better support justice work. These opportunities speak to ongoing concerns within the CSCW community, especially as we draw from design-based or interventionist research methods to better embed ourselves within our research communities. As described above, in addition to common concepts of justice, I also highlight three categories of practices common to research justice, transformative justice, and prefigurative politics, which directly inform our prefigurative design framework. These are: transforming social relationships, redistribution of resources, and building counter-structures. Below, I briefly describe these practices within the context of technology design, infrastructure, and professional commitments in hopes of provoking more reflexive and reflective interrogations of our research practices and their impacts on our partners and collaborators.

3.2.1 Transforming Social Relationships. Through prefigurative design, we see the opportunity to challenge norms and assumptions around different kinds of social relationships in research. Here, I return to Anarchist HCI to focus on two relationships in particular, inter-community relations and intra-community relations. The former refers to connections across communities; here, I focus on researchers and community partners, but we might imagine how prefigurative design might prompt reflections on other relationships across different levels of scale, such as industry and academia, advisor and advisee, or reviewer and author. With the focus on practicing justice and reducing harm, I anticipate the more engaged role of community partners to lead to richer research projects and insights as we stand to learn from other sources of knowledge, experiences, and insights not typically prioritized in scholarship.

From the perspective of CSCW researchers and the role of computing, this alone introduces new avenues for the design and implementation of digital systems. There are already examples of the kind of innovative research we anticipate from more just research partnerships: one is called *Contratados*, a "Yelp for migrant workers" [21] to share information about potential employers, exploitative practices, and migrant worker rights. Here, the 'healing' is in the form of autonomy and self-education as the tool prefigures more just relationships between workers and employers as an alternative to the wage theft and violence that is so prevalent in these structures today. Rather than revisit the "Yelp" model (i.e. peer reviews) solely for consumer and retail interactions, *Contratados* leverages the digital tool as an intervention for fairer working conditions, to make transparent the economic exploitation of migrant communities, and to leverage the autonomy and agency of workers to better advocate for themselves through legal policies and local legislation. In reimagining these social relationships, however, we also come up against the complexities that underlie them: in the case of *Contratados*, as a counter-structure, it is an intervention around worker/employer relationships that relies on other, potentially unjust institutions, such as the criminal justice system. Revisiting the project through prefigurative design could reveal other

opportunities for justice, however, for example by discussing what other, non-legal resources might be available to support the same issue (e.g. unions, solidarity networks).

3.2.2 Redistribution of Resources. The redistribution of resources is an opportunity to further examine intra-community relations as we reflect on ourselves, as academics, researchers, and practitioners and the potential roles that we might play in imparting harm. Through prefigurative design, we might instead focus on the roles that we might play to heal: what are opportunities and resources we have access to that can support the justice work of our community collaborators? This spans the spectrum of material resources (e.g. digital devices, software licenses, grant money) to professional training (e.g. as educators, as designers, as facilitators, as administrators) to our networks (e.g. developers, legislators, politicians). While this work focuses prefigurative design on research practices, there are opportunities to explore other academic spaces, like classrooms, where we have the unique opportunity to teach future designers and developers about other potential uses for their training.

Above, I discuss the role of the researcher to contribute to the community in more comprehensive ways, but that might not be the most impactful or supportive decision for either the researcher or the community, especially given how taxing and laborious interventionist modes of research can be. Here, I refer to the work of Max Liboiron, who calls for care and intervention as necessary for the *researcher* [64]. I wish to revisit and emphasize something from the introduction of this work, which is the very real difficulty and exhaustion that comes from doing interventionist research, especially since it often requires additional work on top of the demands of an academic. Liboiron rightly argues for the need for greater infrastructures to support interventionist researchers across the various kinds of labor put into their community-based work, from the emotional to the administrative and bureaucratic to the ethical. I enthusiastically endorse these asks, and hope that prefigurative design can also be a way to mitigate these efforts by articulating what additional efforts we put in and by attending to healing and harm within our own work and practices, as well.

3.2.2 Building Counter-structures. As stated above, I envision the ultimate goal of prefigurative design to be the co-creation of counter-structures that replace the harmful institutions, policies, and practices that impact our community collaborators and the broader social structures in which we live. I do not wish to suggest that prefigurative design is a solution to large, complex issues like racism, colonialism, or capitalism. Rather, I find it valuable as a way to articulate, both to ourselves and with our collaborators, what the goals are of our work and to draw attention to the larger structures and institutions of violence and oppression in which our digital designs and systems might be complicit. By doing this, we can better commit to modes of intervention or research to resist or challenge these impacts. In the same way that we aspire to support our collaborators as they work towards their envisioned ideals, we hope to provoke the envisioning of more ideal structures and institutions within academic research, starting with smaller scale goals—like offering dinner or childcare for our design workshops—to larger, more ambitious and imaginative ones to build towards the more inclusive, compassionate, and liberatory worlds that our ancestors always dreamed of and fought for.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The framework described above is meant to scaffold research collaborations between academics and community partners; it is far from complete, but instead offers a framework to structure iteration and adjustments, creating guidelines for the "constant mapping" [57] necessary to align present practices with future visions to ultimately building the counter-structures to enact more

just and equitable conditions. I hope researchers will use prefigurative design to initiate more nuanced discussions with partners: the questions are meant to be generative, creating space to identify mutual boundaries, commitments, goals, and expectations, both from the research community and the researcher(s). Prefigurative design works to center the needs of the research partners and set up the scaffolding for them to take ownership of the work, both as it is conducted and after the researcher has left. It is also a means to help responsibly scope the commitments to the collaboration, particularly for the researcher, by identifying needs and resources early on, which will inform what interventions are feasible and reasonable. By starting a project with transparency, honesty, and generosity, the hope is to create better circumstances for both the researcher and their community partner, affording both the autonomy and agency to set reasonable expectations around what work can be done and how each can contribute to the shared project to build more impactful research to benefit the communities directly involved, and hopefully also other communities beyond.

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