On Gathering

Collecting, sharing, and creating the
Cyberfeminism Index

Mindy Seu

I have long been a gatherer. Though we rarely hear this word used literally anymore, we do hear its sister *gathering*, as in gathering people, gathering information, gathering pace. Occasionally—increasingly, through a year of pandemic—we hear of gathering mushrooms and wild-foraged bouquets,[1] hobbies for the otherwise domesticated. But the term *gatherer* we more immediately associate with our origins as hunter-gatherers, nomads foraging food and moving with the seasons for subsistence. We went, we gathered goods, and then we returned home to our kin, *sharing as survival*.

In Ursula K. Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* [2] (1986), Le Guin posits the first human tool as the basket, not the spear, thereby recasting the first protagonist as a gatherer, not a hunter. Not only did this address the deeply gendered roles of these two parts, it also changed the singular hero to the plural collective, from *he* to *we*. "Before the tool that forces energy outward," she writes, "we made the tool that brings energy home." Gathering, for Le Guin, is not a masculine, techno-utopian process of disruption or of moving fast and breaking things, but the methodical, deep labor that comes from "looking around, rather than looking ahead," from gathering rather than hunting. [3]

When I call myself a gatherer, I mean that, even without my hands in dirt, I aggregate, together with collaborators, disparate pieces from an ecosystem, and develop the appropriate container for each collection. It was only when Laura Coombs pointed out the byline for the book *Pleasure Activism* (2019), "gathered and edited by adrienne maree brown," [4] that I began to see myself in the term and its use. *Pleasure Activism* is a gathering of ideas, stories, interviews, held together in the shape of a book. As a container, it is more than just the sum of its parts; the book is the site around which its public forms, and a place in which to gather that public. [5]

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Gathering is, in this way, not the act of aggregation alone. It is not an automated

1. Floral arrangements by Wretched Flowers graced the tables of Forlini's in Manhattan for the 2020 Rhizome Benefit honoring Devin Kenny and Seth Price. Created to "raise questions about ethnobotany and interspecies collaboration," the arrangements were foraged from Wretched Flowers's property in Connecticut. As the year went on and we all began to navigate life in a time of heightened precarity, Anna Tsing's 2015 *The Mushroom at the End of the World* grew increasingly relevant. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, rev. ed. (London: Ignota Press, 2019).

3. The positioning of Le Guin's basket and Tsing's feral infrastructure is foundational to *The Scalability Project*, which also uses this line in its curatorial statement. See Roxana Fabius, Patricia M. Hernandez, and Mindy Seu, *The Scalability Project: Cacophony of Troubled Stories*, A.I.R. Gallery, https://scalabilityproject.org.

4. adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019).

5. Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 49–90, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-49.

Shift Space

6. Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie, "Behind the Making of the 'Feminist Whole Earth Catalog,'" interview by Meg Miller, *AIGA Eye on Design*, 16 Aug 2018, https://eyeondesign.aiga.org/behind-the-making-of-the-feminist-whole-earth-catalog.

7. While second-wave feminism focused on employment and education, it primarily centered cis white women and upheld "white feminism," leading to the emergence of intersectionality at the heart of third-wave feminism. For more on intersectional feminism, please see Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299.

8. The *Cyberfeminism Index* was commissioned by Rhizome and co-presented with the New Museum for its First Look. See the index's current container at https://cyberfeminismindex.com; and, for the New Museum's feature, "First Look: Cyberfeminist Index," New Museum, 2020, https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/first-look-cyberfeminism-index. The website was designed in collaboration with and developed by Angeline Meitzler, with frontend support from Janine Rosen and PDF support from Charles Broskoski. The typeface is Arial by Patricia Saunders and Robin Nicholas. Laura Coombs designed the encircled cross-reference numbers to make a complementary pairing with Arial.

9. The Internet Archive has archived billions of webpages since 1997 with their Wayback Machine. Rhizome's Conifer, previously called Webrecorder, is a web archiving service that creates an interactive copy of any web page.

10. For more on the making of the Cyberfeminism Index, see Mindy Seu, "Sharing as Survival: Mindy Seu on the Cyberfeminist Index," interview by Marie Hoejlund, The Gradient, 9 Nov 2020, https://walkerart.org/magazine/sharing-as-survival-mindy-seu-cyberfeminism-index.

11. The in-progress index was, for a time, an open-access Google Sheets document: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1JAn h_WAcniKzzlIicRUQmJLO-X3HdVr4v38ZQHE8tvA/edit?usp=sharing. Corey Tegler has collected other examples of bibliographies, resources, and tools that use Google Docs in an Are.na channel. Corey Tegler, "Radical Google Docs," Are.na, 2017, https://www.are.na/corey-tegeler/radical-google-docs.

collection or the formal acquisition of works for an institution, nor is it the plundering or extraction of resources from a neighboring region. It is the tender and thoughtful collection of goods for your kin, and a moment for reunion, for celebration, and for introspection around those goods. Now, as I reflect on some of the many remote conversations I've had in the past year, I see a throughline of gathering in its many forms: the material gathering of crowd-sourced ephemera; the social gathering of sharing these findings in online conversations; and the collective building of digital tools to contain them. Gathered here, in this text, these expansions and explorations of what gathering is and what it can be might help us return to the original meaning of the word, sharing as survival, as we move from physical to virtual contexts.

The *New Woman's Survival Catalog* (*NWSC*), a survey of alternative, second-wave feminism, was co-created by Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie in 1973 with just that explicit goal in mind, its ambition baked into its title. The bookstores, rape crisis centers, and financial resources it documents, along with the consciousness-raising it forwards, Kirsten and Susan write, "express a rejection of the values of existing institutional structures, and, unlike the hip male counterculture, represent an active attempt to reshape culture." (6) Compiled during a five-month road trip across the United States, the *NWSC* makes transparent the process of its own gathering in a situated, subjective way. The catalog openly rallies together a community—all who see themselves in the phrase *new woman* (7) —for which the sharing of its ideas is no less than a means of survival.

The *NWSC* was also an early inspiration for my ongoing work, the *Cyberfeminism Index*, (8) which I have been gathering and facilitating in conversation with net artists, historians, activists, named in a growing list on the "about" page of the site. The index holds examples of hackerspaces, digital-rights activist groups, DIWO (Do-It-With-Others) organizations, DIY (Do-It-Yourself) teledildonics manuals, bio-hacktivists, data dominatrixes, and open-source estrogen pioneers. Like the *NWSC*, the *Cyberfeminism Index* too began as a bibliography—inspired, secondhand, by a claim Kirsten's advisor at Barnard made that revolution cannot not happen within an institution; Kirsten and Susan, the advisor said, needed to go grassroots. While I myself didn't leave on a road trip, I logged hundreds of hours of phone calls and emails, which led to web rings, hypertext trails, and screenshots of the Wayback Machine and Rhizome's Webrecorder. (9)

The current container of the *Cyberfeminism Index* is a bespoke website, developed by Angeline Meitzler with frontend support from Janine Rosen, that highlights a multiplicity of voices, visualization of citations, and the site's aging. You might feel, upon arrival, that the site comes across like any other data table, but as you begin to move, the site responds: colors appear, form elements glow, and each click is added to a side panel "trail" that can be downloaded, printed, and disseminated. (10) Formerly, the index lived in an open-access, crowd-sourced spreadsheet. Soon it will be a book. (11)

Among the resources catalogued within the *Cyberfeminism Index*, you see various forms of Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism*—first a manifesto (2012), then an essay (2013), and now an anthology (2020). (12) In a public conversation, Legacy and I discussed the idea that an essay anthology or digital index, in their presentations of new histories, might serve as maps. (13) By aggregating nodes and markers, hard research and scattered facts, these containers might surface suppressed voices among the connections they draw, as introduced by Saidiya Hartman's notion of "critical fabulation." History written by the victors offers glimpses of marginalized figures, for whom we need to "fabulate" stories to "strain against the limits of the archive" and "represent lives… through the process of narration." (14) Building relationships between things is a form of

12. The manifesto was first published as Legacy Russell, "Digital Dualism And The Glitch Feminism Manifesto," *The Society Pages*, 2012. It was then commissioned by Rhizome, retitled "Elsewhere, After the Flood: Glitch Feminism and the Genesis of Glitch Body Politic," Rhizome, 12 Mar 2013, https://rhizome.org/editorial/2013/mar/12/glitch-body-politic. In 2020, the manifesto was expanded into an essay anthology called *Glitch*

Feminism: A Manifesto, (New York and London: Verso, 2020).

13. This conversation was organized by Kelsa Trom and Emma Osore. "Cyberfeminism as Glitch & Archive: A Conversation with Legacy Russell & Mindy Seu," New Inc, 24 Feb 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6ccyXBYjhk.

14. See Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14, https://doi.org/10.2979/sax.2008.-.26.1.

15. adrienne maree brown, "Conversation Is Not a Master's Tool," interview by Roxana Fabius, Patricia M. Hernandez, and Mindy Seu, *The Scalability Project: Cacophony of Troubled Stories*, A.I.R. Gallery, 2020,https://scalabilityproject.org/inteviews/conversation-is-not-a-masters-tool.

authorship too.

Gathering is the tender and thoughtful collection of goods for your kin, and a moment for reunion, for celebration, and for introspection around those goods.

In an interview with Roxana Fabius, Patricia M. Hernandez, and me for *The Scalability Project* (2020), adrienne maree brown described relationships like a spiderweb—diaphanous yet strong, thick yet porous. "A web allows things to fall through, like a sieve," she said. "Some things are not meant to be caught." I like to think of these webs as citational networks; who you read allows you to catch similar sentiments. brown also built upon Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984), declaring, "I believe conversation is not a master's tool. I believe being in a circle, in a community, is not a master's tool." Here, she describes gathering people to share stories as a web, a network, as a finding aid for like-minded voices. [15]

Amelia Winger-Bearskin makes a similar claim: "If history is written by the victors, then the future will be written by the vectors," she says. A technologist, artist, and host of *Wampum Codes*, Amelia interviews Indigenous people who work with new technologies in what she labels "co-creation through a podcast." As a member of the Seneca-Cayuga Nation of Oklahoma in the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy), Amelia told me in a conversation for *DataBrowser* that she was taught to think about storytelling from a decentralized perspective. Stories are entrusted to storytellers by the elders. But these storytellers are not meant to repeat the narrative verbatim; they are expected to understand these stories and, through them, reflect on what the community needs to hear at any given moment. This temporal gathering, both in and around a story, acknowledges the personal subjectivities always inherent in retelling. Only multi-authorship truly exists.

Memory work of this sort is also a form of activism. Whose memories are saved and retold to future generations? Hailey Loman, the co-creator, along with her interviewers and storytellers, of the Autonomous Oral History Group (AOHG), spoke with me about the collective gathering of stories. "You're taking a lived experience and making a record of it together," Loman said. There is a "sweet duty" to shaping someone's personal memories. Oral histories, like publications, bind people. After a conversation, all parties maintain ownership of what transpired, and they continue to hold ties to one another. This form of storytelling is not predetermined, but develops through its unfolding. Perhaps gathering stories is radical because it refuses to give the gatherer all of the credit. The collector-collection dynamic is deliberately broken. The person who puts it together is only one of many parts.

Though seemingly intimate, these aforementioned conversations were held remotely through a myriad of video-conferencing tools that have become so familiar in pandemic times. And while the frequency of online correspondence has increased, the platforms of these new social gatherings have affordances, affecting behaviors of those who use them. Since the start of the pandemic, Prem Krishnamurthy has led *Present!* an experimental Zoom talk show and performance series that tries to activate all of the different modes of dialogue that might exist on one given digital platform. [16] In early February 2021, I attended Prem's latest workshop and conversation, co-led by Kalaija Mallery,

16. Present! is an experimental Zoom talk show and performance series that Prem Krishnamurthy began in March 2020. For documentation of the first three seasons, see Prem Krishnamurthy, "Present!," 2020, https://bit.ly/PresentExclamation.

called "A Gathering of Gatherings," around new formats of online convening. We discussed sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of the "third place," the space between home and work, and whether this place could exist online. The event began with rules for conduct and an "incomplete list of suggestions for organizing communities online." *Present!* feels like a feedback loop, adapting suggestions from the audience into the live event and then commenting on its output. After Kalaija pointed out the lack of white noise that often creates the ambience for most online events, everyone unmuted. When we keep our microphones off and stage our conversations as a singular broadcast between hosts and viewers, we lose moments for participation. Consider the eeriness of seeing everyone laugh but hearing silence. Once everyone unmuted, we shed

our formality and the casual conversation returned, with the many moments of interruption that permeate in-person gatherings.

As we complicate the definition of gathering, this blurring of container and content diminishes any lingering idea of fixed, solitary authorship.

These rules of engagement, for conduct and for play, created what Priya Parker calls "temporary alternative worlds," in *The Art of Gathering* (2018), which was recommended to me by Laurel Schwulst. The primary goal of meaningful social gatherings, or, as Priya writes, "the conscious bringing together of people for a reason," is to create a "sense of belonging." [17] On remote conferencing platforms, we're limited to very particular frames and senses, so if we want to connect with people, we actually have to learn new skills. In the process, we might embrace "bumpiness," Prem's term for "pleasure in the irregular, in what's not already expected and familiar." In the end, as Prem's longtime colleague Chris Wu stated, "It's not about perfection. It's all about the gesture."

17. During the Spring 2021 semester, Laurel Schwulst taught the Princeton course Graphic Design: Link while I led the Yale MFA course On Gathering. We co-developed the virtual gathering prompt that takes place in the second of half of each class, for which Laurel recommended Priya Parker, The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018). For our online class syllabi, see Laurel Schwulst, Graphic Design: Link, Princeton University, 2021, https://veryinteractive.net/link/ and Mindy Seu, On Gathering, Yale University, 2021, http://on-gathering.com/.

Gathered here, we weave from cyberfeminist indexes to citational networks and from oral histories to conversational, online events. As we continue to learn our way with these digital tools and online events, we might shift our energy from trying to prevent inevitable technical difficulties to cultivating a sense of belonging. Tools break and containers change, but the urge to tell stories remains. Containers and content can be used to mutually inform the shape of their counterparts, expressing a tender, anti-heroic, communal, and present side of storytelling in place of our received understanding of historical material as heroic, individual, disconnected, and past. As we complicate the definition of gathering, this blurring of container and content diminishes any lingering idea of fixed, solitary authorship. After all, societal movements come not from singular authors but emerge as dissolved collections, making it impossible to know where one thing begins or ends. To survive, we gather not only from what's around us, but from among us.

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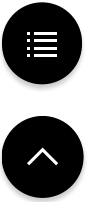
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