Three Card Spread: Theorizing Queer and Trans Futurity for Tenure-Track Faculty Through Divination Dialogues

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Three Card Spread: Theorizing Queer and Trans Futurity for Tenure-Track Faculty Through Divination Dialogues
Justin A. Gutzwa, Sergio A. Gonzalez

Abstract: This article lies betwixt methodological, conceptual, and empirical scholarship, queering traditional presentations of qualitative research to imagine what a future in the academy could look like for queer and trans faculty if the academy instead prioritized queer and trans joy, thriving, and life. The authors, two queer and trans early-career tenure-track faculty, utilize divination dialogues, or conversations that take place during and following a divinatory practice such as tarot reading, as a liberatory politic of community building and co-theorization on how to actualize our own futures in a colonial, neoliberal academy. In presenting excerpts from the conversation that took place during our divination dialogue, we reflect on their time as former graduate students and current faculty, through which we highlight four ways that queer and trans academics can infuse our queerness into the academy as a reclamation of our space.

Keywords: Queer & Trans Faculty, Tarot Reading, Divination Dialogue, Queer Futurity, Higher Education

A Letter on Queer Futurity

Dear reader (whoever you may be, whenever you might be reading this):

When we were invited to contribute to the inaugural issue of the Journal of Queer and Trans Studies in Education (JQTSIE) to discuss queer futurity, we each were in a transitional period in our lives. Both of us were about to move across the country to begin our first tenure-track faculty appointments. Our institutions were - and in many ways, still are - new to us. Neither of us had fully established communities where we were moving. Our respective futures in the academy at once felt more tangible than they had before, and yet somehow were veiled even darker in mystery, apprehension, and uncertainty. After all, the academy does not exactly feel safe for us no matter how we look at it: as multiply minoritized queer and trans faculty, as scholars who center multiply minoritized queer and trans communities in our research and praxis, as people trying to exist (let alone thrive) in a climate where national sociopolitical discourse would rather render us invisible than work to celebrate our vitality. Yet still, the academy, in many ways, has grounded and uplifted us - or, at least, it has brought members of our chosen family who ground and uplift us into our individual gravitational orbits. Our kinship, built through kiki-ing at conferences, staying friends on the faculty job market (Wicker & Washington, 2023), and many memories between and beyond, is in some ways indebted to the academy. Similarly, our individual futures in the academy are inextricable from one another. Part of how this communal future has looked for us has been in holding each other down as we wrestle with the beasts of our new circumstances. We share this context to illuminate how, right now, theorizing on what queer futures can, should, and/or might be like in postsecondary education feels daunting to accomplish without first answering thousands of questions about our own futures that we have no clue where to start answering.

In an attempt to find answers, we got together at Justin’s apartment, ordered take-out pizza, and gave each other tarot readings. What transpired was a three and a half-hour conversation full of laughs, healing, and love for one another in which we wrestled with (some of) these questions and uncertainties (and more). This manuscript, in turn, is an abridged retelling of what we call the divination dialogue, or the conversations that take place during and following a divinatory practice (such as tarot reading), that we engaged in on that October afternoon. It is a co-construction of what love, reciprocity, solidarity building, and collectivism mean for two early-career faculty members, and an imagination on how each of these ideals is the foundation for how we can build a future for the academy that sustains and empowers queer and trans joy. We offer divination dialogues as ways for faculty to come together and build communities that nurture hope and resistance in light of the minutiae of violence we encounter daily in a colonial, white supremacist academic system. While sacred for us, sharing this conversation is, in part, a love letter to our community/comunidad. We also hope that our vulnerability sees you, reader, in the ways you may need to be seen right now, or that it gives voice to the words you might not yet have (as phrased by Lorde, 1984) in the way that our divination dialogue gave us voice.

Keywords: Queer & Trans Faculty, Tarot Reading, Divination Dialogue, Queer Futurity, Higher Education
The Landscape of Queer and Trans Exclusion From the Professoriate

It is important to contextualize our narratives amongst the constellation of literature exploring queer and trans faculty experiences in higher education. We honor that we are far from the first voices to name the academy as a site that perpetuates epistemic and structural violence against queer and trans faculty. Scholars exploring the lived realities of queer and trans faculty have emphasized that in both the macrocosm of the university writ-large and the microcosms of individual academic departments, queer and trans faculty (and particularly those who are also Faculty of Color) experience exclusionary behavior both at alarmingly high rates and in a myriad of modalities (Barnett et al., 2013; Eliason, 2023; Jourian et al., 2015; Nadal, 2019; Patridge et al., 2014; Pitcher, 2017; Pitcher, 2020). Of note is that this already young body of scholarship overwhelmingly centers the experiences of white, cisgender queer faculty, echoing the ways that discourses on gender equity, queer liberation, and institutional inclusion often render trans lives and needs invisible (Pitcher, 2020).

Increasingly, faculty have used the peer-review publication process to subvert the modes of domination foisted upon them by society, the academy, and the university. Trans and nonbinary faculty and postdoctoral scholars (e.g., Caraves, 2020; McLewis et al., 2023; Nicolazzo, 2021; B. Robinson, 2022; S. Robinson, 2022; Salas-SantaCruz, 2023), queer Faculty of Color (e.g., Hutchings, 2023b; Orozco et al., 2023), and Black, Indigenous, and other Women of Color faculty (e.g., Baldwin, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2015; Wicker & Washington, 2023; Williams & McCloud, 2023) have long reflected on the ways white supremacy, settler colonialism, and cis/heterogenderism permeate their engagement with research, teaching, service, and other modes of labor (both formal and informal) in the academy through autoethnography, duoethnography, poetics, and other self-authored epistemologies. These personally-driven testimonies of identity operate as powerful reclamations of voice in a neoliberal, settler colonial academy that all too often relegates such epistemes to metaphorical elsewhere that are geographically spatialized anywhere but the university (Baldwin, 2022). Some of this work, such as Harris and Nicolazzo’s (2020) co-theorization on liminality at the borderlands of the academy through autoethnographic letter writing, has operated as a form of coalition building across minoritized identities.

The musings we ideate in this paper join these intersecting pantheons of scholarship: ones that are rooted in refusal, ones that are steeped in an ethic of solidarity and communal healing, ones that join Salas-SantaCruz’s (2023) imaginations towards “concentrating on tangible practices that defy settler logic and elevate sovereignty” (p. 84). Doing so follows many scholars’ calls to center the self in resistance to coloniality, including Bhattacharya’s (2016):

> our well-being and our ability to neutralize oppressive attacks are critical not only to carving out spaces to legitimize our work, but also to making our experiences matter and having enough sustainable energy to address de/colonizing injustices on the personal, national, and global levels. (p. 318)

In community, we embarked on a mutual, vulnerable journey turning towards our pasts and sitting with our presents to imagine a future where the academy no longer at best tolerates queer and trans existence and instead amplifies queer and trans joy and aliveness as a needed part of its own survival. This journey, which we refer to as a divination dialogue, was mobilized through tarot reading as a means of reclaiming divinatory practices “as a way to practice communities of care and caring for ourselves. Particularly, caring for those who are deemed illegitimate under the hegemonic gaze, whichever that deviance may be” (Lustig & Wu, 2022, p. 26).

Defining the Divination Dialogue

Cultures have long turned to practices of divination and spirituality as modes of “negotiating the unforeseen, uncovering hidden transformation, and increasing awareness to inform decision-making and implement change” (Greenberg, 2023, p. 1). While the reading of tarot cards has long been one such method of metaphysical engagement, Greenberg (2023) argues that tarot has not been “culturally consecrated as a legitimate way of knowing” in part due to the colonial forces that shape contemporary understandings of what constitute as “valid,” “correct,” or “ideal” modes of knowledge production (p. 1). Similarly, exploring the decolonial potential of tarot, Wu (2020) offers, “Tarot as a technology, particularly of care, for art educators to begin an exploration of justice, where the decks serve as tools and the reading strategies serve as techniques that constitute a practice of justice-oriented worldmaking” (p. 204). Our decision to implement tarot as a technology reflects our positions as scholars whose identities - Justin as a nonbinary, trans person, Sergio as a Latinx joto1, both of us as disabled and neurodivergent - have been directly shaped and subsequently subjugated by settler colonialism (Blackwell, 2017; Grech & Soldatic, 2015; Smith, 2015). Combining an ethic of jotería intuition (Gonzalez, 2023; Pulido et al., in press) with the technology of tarot reading enables us to collaboratively dream and imagine possible futures of the academy where queer and trans perspectives and epistemologies of Color are not just accepted, but are given the space to thrive and disrupt (khúc, 2021; 2024).

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1 Derived from the pejorative terms “Joto” and “Jota,” Jotería has been historically used to label individuals of Mexican and Latinx heritage who do not conform to heteronormative norms. Within the queer and trans Latinx community, Jotería began to be reclaimed as a source of empowerment and resistance (Alvarez & Estrada, 2019; Gonzalez, 2022).
This imagined ethic of disruption has a complicated history with qualitative research traditions. For all of the ways qualitative inquiry has opened the possibility of disrupting colonial modes of knowledge production, the very roots of qualitative research are steeped in white, Eurocentric colonial logics of expansion (Erickson, 2011) and have historically constructed Indigenous, non-white, queer, trans, and other systemically minoritized communities as deviant others (Smith, 2012). In light of these tensions, Bhattacharya (2019) reminds us that “qualitative research is mostly celebrated through a form of whiteness, which (even if it is self-aware) cannot generate any knowledge that is completely devoid of whiteness” (p. 113). Rather than rooting the present inquiry in an existing methodological tradition, we purposefully turned to tarot as a technology and jotería intuition to guide our imagination of a method that we refer to as “divination dialogues.” We intentionally utilize the language of “divination” to prioritize the connection between the spiritual, psychic, and imaginative:

The play of multi-modal analytical, imaginal, metaphoric, and analogical thinking required in divination develops and expands the capacity to weave ever more complex and abductive webs of interdependence. We are able to both use our imagination abductively and perceive “reality” at the same time, without confusing the two. (Greenberg, 2023, p. 18)

Said differently, the space created through the divination dialogue enabled us to co-imagine, co-conspire, and co-construct an understanding of what the future can and should hold for us as multiply minoritized queer and trans academics. The actualization of justice-oriented worldmaking through engaging with tarot extends not just to how tarot cards are read, but also how the art of tarot has been reclaimed by minoritized communities impacted by colonialism who “shape future possibilities by making and publishing decks with explicit anti-oppression politics,” despite the art of tarot having largely white, European histories and traditions (Wu, 2020, p. 206). The deck we used in our divination dialogue, Justin Henry and Kendrick Daye’s Black Queer Tarot, is one such deck. Created through the intentionality of an unabashedly queer and Afrofuturist politic of resistance, namely by “challenging outdated, non-inclusive decks of the past,” the Black Queer Tarot “imagines worlds where liberation and freedom are alive and well-connected bedfellows. Worlds where Black queer people are not just living – we’re thriving” (Henry & Daye, 2021, p. 8). As queer and trans scholars who are not ourselves Black yet whose work and praxis are often shaped by Black feminist, Black trans feminist, and Afrolatinx epistemologies, utilizing this deck was itself a manifestation of our own queer imaginations for the future both in and out of the academy: one that prioritizes Black, Indigenous, and other modalities of knowledge production central to queer and trans Communities of Color, disrupts anti-Black racism and settler colonialism (especially within queer and trans spaces), and advances radical freedom as a tangible disruption of colonialism (Salaña Santa-Cruz, 2023).

Inspired by Greenberg’s (2023) postulation of reading tarot as a method, we each took turns offering a reading to the other, beginning with the readee (the recipient of the reading) asking a broad question to the cards, which are then interpreted by the reader (the one leading the reading). We used a three-card spread reading method (sometimes referred to as a past-present-future spread) wherein the readee selects three face-down cards from the deck as guided by their intuition, with each card representing a moment in the readee’s life: the first card drawn signifies the “past,” or what emotions, struggles, triumphs, and histories the readee brings with them to the reading; the second signifies the “present,” or the manifestation of the emotions and feelings that the readee is currently sitting with (both consciously and subconsciously); the third signifies the “future,” or the place of actualization and realization the readee will reach over an indeterminate time following the reading. As we flipped each card face-up to reveal the card’s title and depicted artwork, the reader explained the meanings and significance of the card before using this significance to guide the questions they asked the readee. While some qualitative scholars might refer to such an interview strategy as one that is loosely structured, this approach was, in fact, closer to a semi-structured interview, guided by divination and introspection as opposed to a formal interview protocol.

Following the 3.5-hour dialogue, we individually open-coded (Saldaña, 2021) a transcript of the conversation to intuit emergent themes from both our individual narratives and across the collective of our experiences. Manually going line by line, we paid close attention to long pauses, non-verbal cues, and other observations that allowed us to critically reflect on the contents and nuances of our dialogue (Saldaña, 2021). Further, open coding allowed for a foundational fluid starting point to break down intuitions and reflections into definable parts to reveal findings and themes. We subsequently compared our own intuitions in multiple dialogues throughout the drafting of this manuscript. In the following section, we present the “findings” from our divination dialogue as reflections on our manifestations of futurity in the academy as emerging tenure-track faculty. While it is impossible to fully do so, we hope this framing recreates for you, reader, some of the magic we felt when creating this sacred, ritualistic space for divination, kinship, and reflection.

The Pasts and Presents That Inform our Academic Futures

Throughout the divination dialogue, we critically reflected on our past (graduate education), made meaning of their present (as emerging tenure track faculty), and imagined a future grounded in love, spirituality, and queer and trans liberation within the academy. The following selections from our divination dialogue are presented largely dialogically, in a similar format to Hutchings’ (2023a) podcast script format, to preserve the integrity of our conversation and to provide as rich a description of the setting for, tone of, and emotions shared through our divination dialogue. As Hutchings (2023a) models, we italicize contextual and narrative descriptors of the environment and our conversations to “create a rich descriptive
We present this dialogue in three parts. First, we share some of the dialogue from before the tarot readings that set up the tenor of our conversations. While space does not allow us to explicate the discourse each card from our readings elicited, we follow this framing discussion by sharing an abridged excerpt from the conversations following one of the three cards drawn during each of our readings. Each card highlights one theme of how we communally envision a collective futurity of joy, thriving, and resistance in the academy. We conclude each of the three parts with a synthesis of how we began to make meaning of the excerpts shared during our analysis. In the section that follows all three presentations of excerpts, we place our dialogue in conversation with the literature and with the four themes we open-coded the transcribed dialogue for (community; abundance; becoming; reclaiming) to illustrate how our stories and experiences shape the way we envision futurity in our work.

Setting the Scene: Spirituality and Ancestry

We start in a dining room on a gloomy Friday afternoon. The high-rise windows of Justin’s apartment welcome the little bit of light that manages to seep through the dense grey clouds. As we sit across from each other at the table, Justin shuffles the deck of tarot cards and explains the process of tarot reading to Sergio, who admits to never having done one before. At this revelation, Justin’s face lights up with excitement as they exclaim, “Oh my god! Well, welcome, I’m excited to pop your tarot cherry in terms of leading”. The sound of the cards being shuffled echoes in the room as Justin poses a question to Sergio, “Tell me before we get into the cards, what does spirituality mean to you? Tell me how it connects with your joto work, with your joto identity?”. Our divination dialogue begins:

Sergio: Oh, that’s a really good question. So I think for me, spirituality, so growing up as a Mexican Catholic in a lot of weird ways, it’s like we were Catholic, but we weren’t. And then my mom went through this whole thing where she became Mormon.

Justin: Oh, what?

Sergio: Yeah, she became Mormon when I started high school, and I remember this specifically, because my mom was like, “Well, if you’re going to...” What did she say? You need to have some kind of faith and you need to follow something. So if you’re not going to be Mormon, convert to Mormonism and start going to Mormon Church with us or with me, then you need to be more involved with your faith.

Justin: Interesting.

Sergio: I was 13. Yeah. I was going on 14, because it was the first year of high school. So I said, “Say less.” I come home the week after and I was like, “Oh, I signed up for catechism and I’m going with my best friend Jaime.” And his parents agreed to be my godparents for my confirmation, because that’s what I’m going to do, because we’re Catholic. And she was fucking livid, because she was expecting me to, [be like] okay [I’ll join the Mormon church].

Justin: Yeah.

Sergio: And I was like, “I’m not going to become Mormon. I don’t want to be Mormon.” And I didn’t care to go through the Catholic way or whatever. But to me it was like, this is my resistance. You’re not going to force me into a faith that I’m like, I don’t-

Justin: That you have no connection with, yeah.

Sergio: Connection with. So I think that’s where I really started to question what is believing in God? What is faith? What is spirituality? Why do people always interconnect spirituality with faith? And I think there is a connection, but I also think that spirituality is tied to our ancestors. And so for me, it was like our ancestors, how they brought us here, things like intuition. And I’ve always been big since I was a kid on my intuition. My intuition guides me in ways that I’m like, there’s no logic, but I know that this is like this and it comes out. Or if I warn you about somebody, it pops up months later. And I was like, I told you, because it pops up. And so with time, I started processing that my cukis [grandma] passed away, and then I think it was after she died that I was like, my spirituality is my connection to my ancestors. And since then, I put a candle-vela for her. I put her picture up. I talk to her all the time. I actually carry, well now my people, which is my grandpa, I carry both of them with me everywhere. And I always tell people I bust this out at work when I’m working.

Justin: I love that.

Sergio: I carry them with me. And so I’m always like, oh, what’s that? This is my spirituality. I talk to them and I asked them for guidance, for help. I was like, I’m at a Catholic school and they’re Catholic. Well, they were Catholic.

Justin: I carry my grandparents with me everywhere too. My mom used to ride horses and my grandparents got her this key ring that’s two horseshoes, kind of like stirrups. And then she gave it to me when I got my first apartment to put my keys on. And this is kind of my connection of having my grandparents with me.

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always. I remember one time I lost my keys, because they fell into a couch cushion and I was freaking out, because I didn't want to lose this. I mean, it could be replaced with the sentimentality and the spirituality of it can't be replaced. And then I found my keys. They just fell into a couch in my apartment. But yeah, I think for me, before I have you pick cards, I grew up in a really secular home, because my mom is Jewish, but my dad is Roman Catholic, and neither of them are particularly practicing. Neither of them are particularly, my mom would go at the time, at least when I was growing up on the high holy days to temple. But she never had a bar mitzvah. I never had a bar mitzvah. My dad, I never had a confirmation or communion or anything like that. And we celebrate Hanukkah and we celebrate Christmas. But beyond that, my parents were like, if you want either of these, we can help you connect with them or find them. And I was kind of like, well, if neither of you want these things, then why do I need to have these things either? And they were like that. But I have always, I think in Jewish faith in particular, fortune-telling or cards or looking to the future spirituality wise is not really kosher for lack of better words, but talking to the past and talking to ancestors is right. So on Yom Kippur, you always candles for those who have passed and you let them burn all night. And my mom lights them every year. I got a really funny text from my mom on Yom Kippur, because she sent a picture of the kitchen, and on the left side of the picture were all the candles. And on the right was pork loin, because that was what she was making for dinner. And she forgot it was Yom Kippur. And she's like, "I probably shouldn't be eating pork." But no one in my family keeps kosher.

**Justin:** Right. But yeah, I just am very, that's kind of my connection to, but my mom has also always been one of those people that's kind into astrology and into all of that kind of intuition stuff. And we've always, not from necessarily a spiritual perspective, but just from a maybe it is an intuition basis of things that are meant to happen are supposed to happen. And particularly about my education and my professional journey, my mom has always been this very big believer in everything that everything happened for the right reason and at the right time, even if it was something that wasn't good or if it was something that wasn't what we want, if it didn't look like it was the right path at the time, it was in the long run and it got you to where you are now. And that's kind of what I've always approached things as, but me kind of just being drawn to tarot or to card reading has always been less about let's predict the future and more. How do we utilize this kind of spirituality, this connection with our past and with our future to center us and ground us in the moment. And that's kind of why I was kind of drawn to doing this, because I feel like with your joto work, with your joto identity, with the intuitive stuff that you bring to your research, but also just to your life, it's not dissimilar from other forms of kind of spirituality and connection. And I think that we're told that we can't bring these into education spaces or to research period, or to just research in general. But that's kind of where I ground this or how I have this.

Before we began the tarot reading, we took a moment to reflect on our past and consider how spirituality has manifested in our lives. We acknowledged that spirituality is not limited to any one tradition or belief system, but rather encompasses a diverse range of practices and perspectives. For both of us, spirituality was closely tied to our connection with our ancestors, particularly our grandparents. We each carry physical artifacts, such as photos and a key chain, as a way of staying linked to our roots. Moreover, we grapple with how we have been socialized to exist in higher education spaces as tenure-track faculty and, more specifically, how our intuition and spirituality are directly connected to who we are and how we show up authentically. These themes continued into Sergio’s reading.

**Five of Sticks: In Community and Abundance**

The tarot cards have been meticulously shuffled, eagerly awaiting our reading. Justin explains, “So what I’m going to have you do [is] whatever you want to touch the cards, run your hands over the cards, the first one that pops out to you, pull it out, don’t flip it over, and then pull three cards that way. Just do what you want. You can mess them up on the table. You can get your hands on all of them. You can just feel the energy as it kind of comes to you. But this is your reading, and these are your cards baby”. With a slight gesture, Sergio selects three cards that call out to him and sets them aside on the table. The tarot cards selected are now at the center of the table, they are, 1) Ten of Swords, 2) Five of Sticks, and 3) Eight of Sticks. After discussing the Ten of Swords as it relates to Sergio’s past, Justin and Sergio then turn their attention to the Five of Sticks.

Like the other cards in the deck, the artwork is presented in a mixed media collage format. The five sticks referred to in the card’s title are represented as a tree with five leafless branches, underneath which two Black queer people, who the deck’s accompanying guidebook names as Neikea and Logoi (Henry & Daye, 2021, p. 82), are seen engaging one another in a playful conversation; their bodies, represented in grayscale, contrast with the color images of the rest of the collage, including the brown bark of the tree, the green foliage at its base, the red rocky mountains superimposed on the foreground of the collage, and the reddish-pink tinged galaxy image that serves as the image’s backdrop.

**Justin:** Okay, let's do card number two. This is where we're at now, five of sticks. Ooh, that's a fun one. I haven't seen this one yet… tell me, what do you think when you see this?

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Sergio: It’s two QT of Color folks, Black QT people, and they are playing around. I feel like this is the collect and share the abundance because the image that came to my mind, and this is me leaning into my intuition, is that [of] sharing resources and abundance and having a good time. We’re on the path of things [that] are beautiful, and this is the era of gold.

Justin: Yeah. Interesting. I’ll read you what they have written to describe the card: "Playfully competing amongst the trees, Neikea and Logoi argue about the origin of the universe. Although such a philosophical question could never be answered with certainty, each individual shares their theory with confidence. Rather than arguing in attempts to “win” the conversation, each challenges the other’s claims calmly and respectfully. As a result, their cordial debate allows for each contributor to leave with a new perspective" (Henry & Daye, 2021, p. 82).

Justin: That sense of even though your interpretation was maybe a little bit different, I think there’s a lot of similarities between the author of the deck, just of people coming together and that sharing of knowledge and expanding of world boundaries being a source of inspiration. And I guess let’s talk, I guess since you brought it up, this space feels not like that, I don’t think we’re debating, I think it’s more just that we’re sharing our experiences. But whether it’s this conversation or the plática work that you did with your dissertation participants or the plática work that you do with [your people], or any of the other spaces that you’re in, how you are such a community-minded and collaboratively minded person. And I guess how does that fit into your imagination of yourself as a faculty member? What does that collaborative spirit mean for you?

Sergio: Yes, I think for me, it grounds me. It reminds me when the individualism, when the horrible side of academia surfaces and says you have to fight and compete and you got to do shady shit to people in order to come up, I think that nature, that collaborative spirit, that nurturing comes out of me and reminds me to stay humble, own it. Own when you do things, celebrate yourself, but stay humble. And how are we uplifting, as, and it’s cheesy, uplifting as we climb, but how are we uplifting? And so if I am coming up, how am I also supporting people that I care about and giving folks their moment? Co-creating in a way so that they [other people] have their moment and folks can shine the way they need to. And so I feel like I do that and it shows up in social media, it shows up in when I’m doing, like you said, work. And for me, it makes me feel so much joy and all these fuzzy warm feelings inside when I see the people that I love and care about getting things, grants, awards, publishing. Not because they’re publishing to be like, “Great, you’re going to get tenure,” but because this [work] is magic, what you’re saying, what you’re sharing, how you’re showing it. And so I love that, and I think that comes out of me whenever I'm in academic situations where it’s like, “Okay, but you have to do this.” I’m like, “Yeah, and we can also love and support and come from love and not-”

Justin: Mm-hmm, and lead with love.

Sergio: And lead with love.

Sergio critically reflects on the questions posed by Justin in connection to being a community and collaboratively-minded person. Sergio shares that this means prioritizing a collective well-being and working together with others towards common goals. Further, it means valuing collaboration, co-creation, and mutual support over individualism and competition. Being community-minded means recognizing and valuing the perspectives, experiences, and contributions of others within community rooted in radical queer and trans love (Tijerina Revilla & Santillana, 2014). Moreover, it means recognizing that we are stronger together as queer and trans faculty in higher education and that our collective success and progress depend on collaboration, inclusivity, and a shared commitment to a queer and trans futurity.

Ace of Cups: Becoming and Reclaiming Ourselves

Justin captures a photograph of Sergio’s cards to ensure that the moment is documented. Following this, Justin inquires with a smile, "How did this feel for you?" Sergio responds with equal enthusiasm, “Good, I was like, WOW”. With this positive exchange, they move on to the next reading, and Justin gives the deck one final shuffle before handing it over to Sergio to lead the card reading. Our divination dialogue continues with Justin asking their question of the cards, before drawing their “past” card: the Ace of Cups.

The collage featured on the Ace of Cups is bold, full of color, life, and many depictions of water, the element that governs the minor arcana, or suit, of Cups in most tarot decks. The “cup” in question is depicted as an amphora adorned with Egyptian hieroglyphics. The amphora is filled past the brim with crystal blue water, some of which cascades like a waterfall onto the rocky cliff that the amphora sits on before ultimately merging with the shoreline below it. Both the ocean and the full moon overlooking it are heavily saturated, appearing in the collage in technicolor shades of blue, orange, and red. In front of the full moon is a Black queer man, who the deck’s guidebook names as Tyler Johnson (Henry & Daye, 2021, p. 94); Tyler’s hands are entwined and raised over his head, stretching and reaching towards the parting skies above him. A swarm of brilliantly colored butterflies—some orange, some blue, some red, some yellow—are in flight next to him, almost as if they are flying from Tyler’s shirtless torso, leaving his body to join the supernatural landscape surrounding him.

Justin: The question that I’m going to ask that we can both reflect on is what does a future of the academy look like?
like for... How do I, as a trans, disabled person, and how do we, as multiply minoritized people, work within this system that was made to not support us, to not respect us, to not value us, and transform it into one that prioritizes our livelihoods? That prioritizes our well-being, our voice, our spirit? How do we work in that direction? And what is my role in working towards that?

Sergio: Yes. I also think with that question, I think we are doing. I want to also honor that we are doing that. We do do that, day in and day out. When we show up, it's like it's... Dr. G, shout to you, boo, told me one time, our existence is a site of resistance in these spaces. You showing up to the college of ed here the days out of the week that you show up on campus is a fucking site of resistance, just period.

Justin: Yeah. And same to you.

Sergio: Okay. So the first card is the Ace of Cups. So as I look this up, what comes to mind for the Ace of Cups?

Justin: So the butterflies are really standing out to me. I think it's some type of metamorphosis. And I think they're all flying in one direction. They're all moving forward from this person's core, from this person's heart and soul. And that stands out to me. I think cups is the suit that's connected to water. It's the water sign of the cards, so I think of abundance. The cup is literally overflowing. But yeah, those are the things that come to mind. I think evolution, movement, moving forward, those types of things. Yeah, I wonder what they say.

Sergio: Okay. So Ace of Cups. [The book says]: "Tyler stretches his hands toward the heavens to absorb insight from his higher self and his surroundings. In doing so, he establishes a strong connection to his natural senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, as well as the sixth intuitive sense. As such, these powers impart him with the ability to see all things as they are, as they have been, and as they might be. Divine information streams through him like the water that encircles him, making him aware of the fact that the potential for new relationships of all sorts has once again reached its peak"(Henry & Daye, 2021, p. 94).  

... Oh my god, hella similar. Yes, you definitely were hitting on all these major points. And the question that came to mind, all these processes, how if so, was your decision to come to [your institution] connected to what you're seeing in the Ace of Cups?

Justin: Yeah. I think it connects a little bit to what we were talking about earlier. I've had this conversation with so many different people throughout the process, that there are just so many signs that... Not that it was going to work out, but that this was the right decision to make. I don't think there was a point in the process where I felt like I had this job. 'Cause you can't ever be sure of shit like that. But I was very confident that I was being able to be myself and being understood for who I am as a person throughout this, and it felt like I was really able to... I think for a lot of jobs that I've applied to over my life, I think for a lot of decisions that I made in grad school, or things that I did in the academy, I have always tried to force myself to fit into something else. Not necessarily any other person's expectations of me, but what I expect their expectations are. And I think in this job search, I was really like, "I'm going to approach this with leading with exactly who I am and who I want to be." And I think some of it boiled down to [who the search committee chair was]. I told my mom. I remember I said, "I have to apply for this position, not just because Michigan State's some great program, not because..." Yes, and that was obviously part of it too -

Sergio: We love you, MSU. [both laugh]

Justin: But I saw that the search committee chair was this person who I cited in my first paper in grad school. And I was like, "I don't see very frequently a search committee chair where I know that I will be respected as a scholar and as a person for what I do." Now that I'm here, my official mentor and I were having lunch the other day. I don't really remember how it came up, but he was like, "You're here because we love your work and we think you're a great scholar, but you're also here because we wanted you to be our colleague. We wanted you to be here as a scholar but as a person too." And I think that hearing that, it wasn't something that I needed to hear in that moment because I think I know that and I don't really have imposter syndrome being here. Because [this university] and my community in [my department] has been so strong at making me feel welcomed and making me feel supported, but it was validating to hear that I was reading the room correctly. I was getting this strong sense people are invested in me as a person. Not just a new person who can bring grant money or a new person who can bring publications in or a new person who is taking up leadership, but they want me to be here as Justin and bring Justin to this space. And I think that that's been really important to me.

Sergio: I think, you know, all of that and I think that these butterflies also, the things that you felt that you were losing or that were slipping from you, they returned to you when you presented your job talk here because all those elements came back. Maybe you were evoking them through your research talk. Whether or not you got the job which you did, but whether or not, it was like that had to happen, it had to happen in that way, for you to be like, "It's me. I'm bringing myself back and centering me and I'm putting out the bullshit. I'm not

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going to this, that, and the third," and look at where it got you.

**Justin:** And I think so often we think of when... I don't know, I feel like a lot of times people use butterflies as a metaphor for transness. "Oh, you're coming out of your cocoon and evolving" but what you said made me think is about butterflies in the literal, actual how butterflies work, is they migrate. They leave places and they go places and they go to different sides of ourselves and then they travel to different places, they make journeys. And I think that all of the various things that navigated in my life brought me to this place. And that's what it feels like and I think I left [grad school] simultaneously really proud of myself and really moving forward with a certain direction but I also think I might've felt a little loss. I simultaneously felt like I was the most actual version of myself and then a shell of myself at the same time. And it was this really weird duality of... I think of Britney Spears in the Lucky music video where she's like, she has everything, but why is she still feeling empty? What is she missing? I felt very like that where I was like, "I have publications, I have this postdoc, I am a doctor, I'm a whole ass doctor. I finished the damn thing. I did the thing but it still feels like I'm missing parts of myself." And I think I was still holding on to a lot of those things that had given me doubt. And I think I spent so much time... I'm not saying that I ever embodied criticality not genuinely because I've always been critical and I've always been somebody that wants to deconstruct this system. And again, as a white person, I'm always navigating and grappling with white supremacy in terms of how I benefit from it and how I resist it and those and that duality. But I think I spent so much time trying to perform a certain type of person because so many people told me that I didn't know who I was and maybe not so many people, but it was...

**Sergio:** It was the constant messaging.

**Justin:** It was constant messaging and there were a lot of different ways that I had that messaging. Sometimes it was very explicit, sometimes it was, I would present on my work and then it would just be silence in the room ... And then as I started to come out, the people who misgendered me are the people I worked with that never got on board or never really understood. There were just so many different ways that I was getting this message of “it doesn't matter who you are, we have made up our mind about who you are”. And I think I felt so much time trying to change other people's perception of [me] instead of finding confidence and trust in myself that I've always known who I am.

For Justin, an understanding of their future in the academy is reliant upon feeling empowered to embody themselves fully in the spaces they enter. As much as elements of the academy have stripped parts of Justin from themselves, their work and the communities they have built and sustained were in many ways liberatory for them as a trans scholar (Gutzwa, 2024; McLewis al., 2023). Even in writing this piece, it is oftentimes difficult to sit with that duality. How can something that has provided me (Justin) with the language to create a home so often feel as a place that also locks the doors of that home, throws away its keys, and prevents me from entering it? To say that the first necessitates the second is to accept the academy’s colonial forces, to be complicit in its dehumanizing and oppressive technologies–realities we are not prepared to be either accepting of or complicit in. For all of the ways that the academy can be liberatory for queer and trans people, those ephemeral euphorias should never come at the cost of losing or silencing ourselves.

The symbolism of the butterflies in the artwork for Henry and Daye’s (2021) iteration of the Ace of Cups reminds one not only of the process of chrysalis and metamorphosis, but also of mobility and migration across time and space. At its best (which, again, it seldom is), the academy offers the ability not just for us to become but to reclaim space and build community on those reclaimed foundations. Like butterflies, we have undergone our own processes of becoming and reclamation, and we will continue to do so across space and time. In some essence, our chrysalis is our future in the academy, and that future can only be cultivated through radical kinship, love, solidarity building, and the refusal to accept anything less than our thriving.

**Our Manifesto on a Queer Future for the Academy**

The communal nature of the divination dialogue is particularly salient as it allowed us, two friends and chosen family who have developed kinship between one another long before the context of this dialogue, to learn more about each other’s families, histories, fears, anxieties, and hopes in a healing space. As we briefly introduced in the opening paragraphs of the previous section, our analysis of the above retelling of the divination dialogue we engaged in illuminated four key ways that we, as queer and trans people, can transform the academy into a space that relies upon our thriving for its own survival. We present these four ideals for queer futurity in the academy as a manifesto of sorts, and hope that these tenets of our experience inspire you, reader, to imagine how your queer futurity can take shape in a space that desperately tries to endanger it:

**Community**

A future in the academy that prioritizes queer and trans thriving can only be actualized when we are able to come together in community. Holding each other down through the divination dialogue helped us strengthen our bonds with one another by providing one another the space to grieve, heal, and conspire together. When reflecting on the transcription of the dialogue, for example, we discussed how the following soundbite of Justin sharing their fears for a future in the academy that drains their spirit felt like a level of candidness
and clarity that Justin had not reached with themself before, let alone in conversation with Sergio:

**Justin:** I don’t want to put words into your mouth, but I know a lot of that stemmed from my coming to terms with being in this space, having ADHD, being disabled and being queer. As multiply minoritized people, for you as a queer, disabled Scholar of Color and for me as a disabled, trans scholar, we’re under a microscope where we have to overachieve. … On one hand we’re told that we need to do this. But then on the other hand, it feels like if we’re not doing that, then that makes anxiety for me too. It makes it worse if I’m not propelling myself forward, right?

Sergio replies to Justin’s vulnerability as he states:

**Sergio:** You bring up a good point. I think there’s also this factor of we’ve come to understand, or [have] been socialized [to believe] that we have to work harder than the average cis hetero white guy. Because we’re going to get overlooked. Because we don’t talk about football… our 2.5 kids and our white picket fence, a house and whatever bullshit. We don’t talk about it, ‘cause we don’t have those experiences. That’s not the realities that we exist in… We publish, we got to present. We got to… We know that these things are part of the currency that currently exist in the systems [higher education] that we’re in. And so playing the game and understanding that we can’t be consumed by it where it takes away from our soul. But understanding that we know that these [publishings] are [our] receipts, or these are the coins that [we] need to collect.

Soundbites like these reflect the ways that coming together through the divination dialogue allowed us to be there for one another in ways that, even as friends who speak regularly, we had not fully been able to before. This bolstering of our community and kinship reflects the ways scholars before us have engaged in a queering of methodological praxis to further enrich lines of solidarity between themselves and their communities, such as Harris and Nicolazzo’s (2020) modeled through writing letters to one another and the podcast approach Hutchings (2023a) took in presenting the communal dialogue they shared on Black queerness with Jamal, Jay, Shawn, Kai, Gabriel, Tre, and Isaiah as a podcast. The spatial limitations of this manuscript did not allow us to share the full range of topics we discussed, including our own experiences of loss and many of the traumas we endured, or the ways we were able to show up for and support one another in the space. Still, what we have shared here demonstrates that the academy must support us in building community if there is hope for our future within it.

**Abundance**

Community is essential to our future, which is why the academy so often tries to prevent community from being formed. One way this manifests is through the neoliberal logics of resource scarcity, competition, and siloing that are often reified through academic practices (e.g., grant writing, awards, the job market, the mentality of publishing or perishing). Wicker & Washington (2023) reflect viscerally on the ways that issues ranging from the often vocalized concerns resource scarcity of the academic job market to direct messages of anti-Blackness as it related to their faculty searches as Black women sometimes endangered their sense of community, friendship, and sisterhood with one another while they were both applying for faculty positions. Wishing for one another’s abundance on the market - and celebrating the eventual successes that came both of their ways - played a large part in how Paris and LaShawn were able to, as the title of their piece suggests, stay friends while on the job market. Like Paris and LaShawn, we, too, were friends who saw each other through the 2022-2023 faculty job market. In reflecting on these experiences during our divination dialogue, the emergent theme of abundance reminds us that to truly be in community means to celebrate the abundances our communities experience as though they are our own, even when such abundance might also come at the hands of hearing another “no” in our immediate realities. Part of celebrating abundance also means utilizing our power, when we have it, to create space for others to find abundance of their own. Raising a middle finger to the neoliberal realities of the academy in part means divorcing ourselves from the mindset that another person’s success is a hindrance to our own. It is through abundance where community thrives and where the future begins.

**Becoming**

It is difficult to build community or to celebrate abundance when the academy forces each of us to question who we are, what our voices should be, and how we “should be” contributing to its neoliberal machination. Becoming ourselves means more than just finding the language we use to categorize our identities. It also entails liberating our bodies and minds from the understanding that, as faculty, we need to act, think, walk, talk, and be in certain (white cis-heteropatriarchal) ways. As Brandon Andrew Robinson (2022) shares in their theorization on non-binary embodiment, “queer, non-binary, and trans researchers and bodies can disrupt, challenge, and subvert the cisnormativity of methods and knowledge production” (p. 438). For us, divination dialogues as method offered not just a space for us to think queerly as queer and trans people (therein disrupting much of the white cis-heteropatriarchal ways we were socialized to engage in scholarship, reflections we muse on later in this article), but also a place for us to see, feel, and embrace one another as the queer, trans, joto, nonbinary, disabled, and otherwise minoritized scholars, thinkers, and people we are, a type of embrace that neither of us find normatively within the academy as it is currently structured. As such, our future in the academy necessitates carving space for ourselves to breathe, to think, to feel, and to be in whatever ways we want, as well as to support others in breathing, thinking, feeling, and being how they want to.

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Through building community, celebrating abundance, and leaning into the forever process of becoming, it becomes possible to reclaim the university and the academy as spaces that need us, rather than the other way around. In a critical race feminist pláticas between herself and Daniel Solórzano, Dolores del Río Bernal asserts the dire need to create methodological and theoretical ruptures: “So, I would say an essential consideration is to remember that intellectual work, especially when we are pushing methodological and theoretical boundaries, is best done in collaboration, not in isolation” (Solórzano et al., 2024, p. 8). She reminds us that in order to reclaim time and space, especially in the academy, we must come together in comunidad/community to nurture and expand our vision of queer and trans liberation. In line with Delgado Bernal’s assertions, the excerpts we shared above from our divination dialogue emphasize the ways that queer and trans futurity cannot exist without us reclaiming the spaces that seek to subjugate and eradicate our existence. We should not have to give of ourselves until we waste away just to possibly have a seat at the table. Rather, our power, our beauty, and our light can and should be harnessed to reshape, retool, and ultimately reclaim the academy as a radical space of queer and trans liberation. This means reckoning with the mindsets the academy forces us to adopt in our teaching, research, service, and praxis.

What This Means: Implications for Research & Aliveness

In the realm of higher education, there is an urgent need for liberatory politics that center and empower marginalized communities. We offer tarot as one such liberatory politic that prioritizes collective healing, self-reflection, and empowerment for queer and trans faculty specifically. Tarot cards have a long history as tools of divination and self-discovery (Greenberg, 2023). They offer a unique and powerful way for individuals to tap into their intuition, explore their identities, and challenge oppressive systems and beliefs - particularly doing so to usher in collective healing when in community with others (Wu, 2020). Queer and trans faculty in higher education often face multiple forms of oppression, including heterosexism, cissexism, and transphobia. Embracing tarot as a liberatory politic and poetic can provide a space for queer and trans faculty to reclaim our power, validate our experiences, and envision a more just and inclusive future within academia. Tarot readings can serve as a form of self-care and empowerment, allowing queer and trans faculty to gain insights into their own journeys, navigate challenges and make informed decisions. Furthermore, tarot readings can be used as a collective practice within the academic community. By engaging in tarot readings together, queer and trans faculty can create spaces of solidarity, support, and affirmation. These spaces can foster deep connections and understanding among faculty members, while also challenging the dominant narratives and structures within higher education.

Our dialogue together presented an opportunity for us to challenge dominant narratives and create space for our voices as queer and trans faculty to tell their own stories. By centering queer and trans voices through divination dialogues, faculty members can reclaim agency over our own narratives and challenge the lethal intersections of oppressive matrices of domination (Collins, 2023) that are present in (and beyond) academia. Tarot readings can provide a transformative and liberatory politic for social justice, specifically centering queer and trans faculty in higher education. Through tarot readings, queer and trans faculty can tap into their intuition and inner wisdom to navigate the challenges and obstacles they face in academia (Salas-SantaCruz, 2023; Lustig & Wu, 2022). They can gain insight, clarity, and guidance through the symbolism and messages of the tarot cards, allowing them to make informed decisions and take empowered actions. Additionally, tarot readings can help queer and trans faculty in higher education cultivate a sense of community and belonging. By using tarot as a tool for self-reflection and transformation, queer and trans faculty can connect with others who have similar experiences and struggles. Tarot readings can create a sense of solidarity and support among queer and trans faculty, fostering a community that understands and validates their unique journeys (Sérrano & Gonzalez, 2022). Furthermore, tarot readings can serve as a catalyst for self-empowerment and liberation. By utilizing tarot readings as a liberatory politic and poetic for social justice, queer and trans faculty in higher education can reclaim their agency and challenge the heteronormative and cisnormative structures that perpetuate erasure.

We also feel divination dialogues can follow in line with how Hutchings (2023b), Karunaratne (2023a; 2023b), Gutierrez and colleagues (2023), Gonzalez and friends (2023), and many others have envisioned approaches to qualitative research methods that can be used to disrupt colonial understandings of knowledge production. While this discussion necessitates the space of a separate piece to fully explicate, we initially offer divination dialogues here as a possibility for a queered, decolonial approach to engaging with queer and trans communities in qualitative education research. The introspective nature of the divination dialogue not only allowed us to tap into our embodied epistemologies - funds of our identity (as Justin has discussed elsewhere; see Gutzw, 2021) - and our ancestrally-entwined ways of knowing, but the space also offered a way for collaborative knowledge production to take center stage in the scholarship process.

Karunaratne (2023b) describes a similar process in her implementation of thé talks as a method for data collection used in her work with South Asian student survivors of dating violence. Named after the Sinhala word for tea, Karunaratne’s thé talks combined her own position and cultural background as a South Asian scholar with semi-structured interviewing to “allow for natural ways of being and relating to one another as South Asians in the diaspora” through creating a research environment that “uplift[ed] the influence of place, feeling, and cultural being” by engaging in a collaborative dialogue with the co-creators of knowledge in her research that featured tea, South Asian snacks, and comfortable, ultimately healing conversations (p. 44). Similar to Karunaratne’s thé talks, our
employing of tarot reading and ancestral connectivity through our divination dialogue put our epistemologies as queer, trans, nonbinary, and disabled people front and center in ways that often are not prioritized in a colonial understanding of the academy. The present article is a reflection of this rejection of colonial norms of knowledge production, and the methods that informed its creation can be adapted and evolved in other scholarly settings co-created in community with queer and trans scholars, participants, co-conspirators, thinkers, and knowers. Said differently: divination dialogues can be more than just tools for community and solidarity building amongst queer and trans faculty, but can also be employed methodologically in queered research settings where queer and trans spiritualities might shape the trajectory of how queer and trans people share our stories in research contexts when given the chance to emerge organically.

A Concluding Call to Action

We close our writing with this a call to action to you, reader - whoever you may be, whenever you may read this, and whatever identities you may hold. Sharing this work through JQTSIE, a space designed by and for queer and trans (QT) academics, is our invitation to you: an invitation to join our community, to allow us to celebrate in your abundance, to uplift you in your chrysalistic process of becoming, and to work together in reclaiming the space that the academy has long stripped away from QT people. Be queerer, dream queerer, think more queerly, and embody all of the special elements of yourself in all that you do. Because THAT, reader, is our future.

With love,

Justin & Sergio

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