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Responding with and for Joy

Kelly Dombroski and J. K. Gibson-Graham

The coeditors of The Handbook of Diverse Economies revisit their work and respond to essays reviewing it, with curiosity amid bizarre and dark times in the global political economy: billionaires co-opt working-class politics in the United States, colonial ambitions in Aotearoa New Zealand undermine Indigenous gains, and environmental devastation deepens despair. The Handbook and review essays together remind us that both old and new thinking tools can offer sustenance. As the reviewers note, wallowing in despair and reifying the bizarre elements of political economy reflects a privileged stance. The fleeting pleasure of being the all-knowing analytical subject—akin to the paranoid subject—offers control over horrors, but at a cost. Inspired by their reviewers, the Handbook coeditors shift from despair and control to the sustained joy of learning from multiplicity and difference, advocating for joy and speculation while inventorying diverse economies to nurture the flourishing Community Economies Collective.

Key Words: Affect, Alternative Economics, Diverse Economies, Political Economy, Possibility

The Handbook of Diverse Economies was published in 2020 just as COVID-19 was connecting people and places in unexpected and unwelcome ways. As the frightening impacts of the pandemic were only just being discerned, the *Handbook* was finally ready to be launched after years of intensive and stimulating work by authors and members of the Community Economies Research Network. It would have been wonderful to have had some kind of celebratory event to mark the milestone of a volume signaling the existence of a new “subfield” of study. For a milestone it certainly is. When J. K. Gibson-Graham wrote in 1996 about the possibility of embarking on a project to produce economic knowledge by developing a discourse of economic difference, we had no idea how this project might eventuate. In our wildest dreams we could not have predicted that, some quarter of a century after the publication of *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, the diverse-economies research project would be such a lively, prolific, and valued focus for activist scholarship. So, in the absence of an immediate celebration upon publication in 2020, it is very gratifying to see this symposium around the *Handbook* come together in the journal *Rethinking Marxism*. Our heartfelt thanks go to Chizu Sato and Esra Erdem for orchestrating this collection of

review essays and to Kathrin Böhm and Kuba Szreder for their art-essay contribution.

We are impressed and gratified by how the four review essays shed light on the *Handbook*, each in their own appreciative way. Thank you to George DeMartino, Ilene Grabel, Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, Bengi Akbulut, Matt Scobie, and Lila Laird for their insights, reflections, elaborations, and questions. We are struck by the intergenerational call-and-response aspect of their essays. Our “early career” colleagues write with passion about what they learned from the *Handbook* and about questions they are struggling with in their own scholarship-activism, questions that they turn back to us. Our “later career” colleagues, veterans of academia and movement politics, pick up on aspects of our approach, producing amplifying reveries that foreground the affective realm. We wish that we could all be in one room to share our thoughts, embrace our differences, and dance, actually and metaphorically, together. In the absence of such a possibility, we offer the following thoughts and stories as our response—sometimes in the voice of us/we, sometimes as our separate selves.

The Pleasures and Privileges of Knowing Despair

In recent years, Kelly has been involved in a range of conferences about alternative economic politics in Aotearoa New Zealand. At one conference the panelists were tasked with discussing international degrowth thinking and strategy and to reflect on what those of us in Aotearoa New Zealand, might learn from that. As Bengi Akbulut (2025, 298) notes in her review essay, degrowth thinking and the diverse-economies approach share many alignments, such as an interest in supporting diverse economic practices that are “intentionally different from mainstream (capitalist).” There are also divergences, such as degrowth’s attachment to the certainties of capitalism’s structural imperatives and absolute ecological limits. This attachment was evident in the event Kelly attended: after some prerecorded and live talks, discussion for those in person on stage got down to the details of how and whether a transition to degrowth might occur and the mathematics of emissions. The facilitator asked the panelists directly: do you think we can make the transition before society collapses? One by one, the live panelists admitted that, no, they didn’t think we could.

It’s hard to describe how the affect in the room shifted. A whisper of disbelief went out among the audience. I (Kelly) was seated in a full lecture theater of 250 seats or more, with Indigenous leaders, community members, local and regional government actors, and public servants from the central government, as well as researchers and academics such as myself. If we couldn’t do it, why were we even there? But the panelists on stage did not seem to be upset by admitting to their belief that degrowth could not be achieved before widespread collapse. Indeed, they seemed somehow *pleased*—perhaps not pleased with the outcome

but pleased with themselves for not being taken in by false hope. Or were they pleased that society would collapse and perhaps something better would emerge? Or pleased that, given that they had prepared themselves for such an eventuality, they and their families would be OK? I'm not sure. And I'm not sure if I read them correctly. I felt a bit sick. I felt angry with the organizers for their lack of attention to the effect of such a public statement. I didn't want to hang on to a Pollyanna view that everything was going to be alright, because we cannot really know. But I also felt that the moment called for some attention to affect, to the loss of a shared sense of possibility, and to grief at the messiness of collective action and reflection, not for self-satisfied pleasure at being the ones who know what will happen.

This experience raised the question: Can we let go of the desire to know and control everything? And following that, can we navigate through despair into a space where joy and possibility might emerge alongside community? Both of us have found some answers to these questions—and more questions in need of answers—in the four review essays at hand. George DeMartino and Ilene Grabel (2025), for example, introduce us to Albert O. Hirschman's notion of possibilism as an ethical imperative. They make a strong case for foregrounding uncertainty and engaging with the productivity that incoherence fosters. Their elaboration of the epistemic foundations of the diverse-economies project is a lesson in clarity and an exhortation to adopt an ethic of risk because there is “no option but to carry on” (269).

Certainly, in the context of these times it is quite easy to find ourselves in a pit of despair. And as DeMartino and Grabel (2025) point out, the pit does not seem to be neoliberal anymore but has other faces: the bizarre billionaire's oligopolism (Kath's new neologism), the ongoing burdens of colonialism and colonial states, and the depths of concern and despair that many of us feel when thinking about the environmental losses we face globally. Sometimes the pit of despair is a necessary place in which to begin, to be, and to sit. As Dougald Hine (2025, 2023) writes about his book *At Work in the Ruins*, “The world is deep in trouble, deeper than we know how to talk about.” Yet for Hines the way forward in times of such trouble is not to make “our living planet and its inhabitants into an object of technological management and control” but “to find other ways of talking and other paths worth taking.” Indeed, in a recent podcast, Bayo Akomolafe (2023) proposes that how we talk about and address an end-of-world crisis is the crisis. These authors and others reject the techno-managerialism that accompanies desperate cries to manage and control our economies and the world in order to save the world. Instead, like Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), they invite us to hospice modernity, to put aside the desire to keep the world as it is, and to look around us to see what might be.

If I (Kelly) look back on that moment in the degrowth conference, perhaps I can now read the affect differently. I can work through my resistance to the message of imminent societal collapse and think: Well, what about our society do we want to

preserve through dark times? In our inventory of diverse economies—which includes good, bad, complicated, and messy—what might we take forward, past the pit of despair, and what might we leave behind to just compost? In *The Handbook of Diverse Economies* we tried not to offer a one-size-fits-all technocratic solution: “This is how you should do economy.” Instead, we offered a smorgasbord of already existing economic difference from which different places and communities might select unique combinations. But often, as Matt Scobie and Lila Laird (2025) point out, when people read diverse-economies literature, they limit themselves to a select few pieces by J. K. Gibson-Graham and somehow read the project to be about the benefits of diversity rather than the affective potential of moving past capitalocentrism. More than once we have been asked, “How do we enact and scale up diverse economies?” Also, “Aren’t some things in diverse economies actually bad and/or supporting capitalism?” These questions miss the point, as we say in the *Handbook*. The diverse-economies project is not about what *should* be but what *already* is. Diverse economies—and inventorying diverse economies—is a project of seeing what is already out there for different places, communities, states, and regions to draw on—or not draw on—as appropriate.

In teaching diverse economies at the undergraduate level, we have learned the value of acknowledging despair. If we jump in and present a range of diverse-economies examples and case studies—particularly ones that we think are interesting and exciting—our students tend to staple those ideas on top of their already existing ideas of “good,” “bad,” “alternative,” “ethical.” It doesn’t challenge their thinking, and it doesn’t invite them to let go of the modernist project of fixing everything, saving the world, finding the one true solution. Bengi Akbulut (2025) suggests that, if we want to kindle *postcapitalist* desire, it is useful to spend time in the pit of despair, critically engaging with the horrors of our time: with environmental destruction, the capture of politics by elites, the global economic order as governed by the WTO, incomprehensible levels of inequality and varying financial power between people, and more. Confronting capitalism as a “mammoth force” has the potential, she proposes, to promote an understanding that “motivates and moves political subjects” (303). Indeed, we agree, a strong theory of capitalism can definitely motivate activism and draw people to the fight, but can it help with theorizing and building beyond capitalism? We have found that along with acknowledgement of the superior force of capital often comes the presumption that co-option is inevitable, with a resultant undermining of the desire for something different. The fear of co-option stands in the way of actually doing the empirical work of observing and analyzing how various diverse economic activities might feed into capitalist accumulation—how prison labor is used, for example, or how women’s social-reproductive work around the globe supports others’ capital accumulation, or how state power can limit the viability of community-led action, and so on. We do not deny the pit of despair, but we also do not get any pleasure from it, nor do we presume we must stay there.

As DeMartino and Grabel (2025, 268) note, drawing on Sharon Welch, “Despair is the response of the privileged who have lived with the illusion of control over the world.” We see this sentiment reflected in Jessica Gordon-Nembhard’s (2025) wonderful review essay, which focuses on the joy of Black women’s cooperation; she reflects that, for many people, business as usual has never worked, so experimentation and improvisation have been necessary to survival. Out of the struggle to thrive has come a kind of affirmation and support in which learning together and working together is joyous and where the process is the focus rather than mastery or control. Perhaps it is the joy that allows hope to be risked. For, as Rebecca Solnit (2024) notes, hope involves recognizing that we are vulnerable and cannot have certainty as to how our efforts will turn out, but we act anyway. It is about recognizing despair as an emotion but not an analysis. It is about feeling the uncertainty, acknowledging the grief, but acting without truly knowing the outcome. Returning to DeMartino and Grabel, who reflect on the *Handbook*’s underpinning stance, there is an ethical imperative to embrace uncertainty and risk, for it is this, paradoxically, that unleashes emancipatory power. Taking an adventurous step further, Gordon-Nembhard alerts us to the joy that accompanies such a release.

The Joy of Being Together, Not-Knowing

When we let go of the desire to know/control, when we come through the pit of despair and start to turn toward the kinds of joy that Gordon-Nembhard describes, what is enabled? Absent from *The Handbook of Diverse Economies* is an in-depth discussion of what follows inventorying economic diversity, although we do lightly outline such a discussion (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020, 19ff.). The diverse-economies project is one of deconstruction and close observation, of widening out and opening up the representation of the economy for the purposes of decentering the economy and rejecting capitalism as somehow inately normal and inevitable. But what comes after this theoretical intervention? How are various kinds of economies put together in place from the diverse elements identified? To answer this question, we can look at economies built on values other than capitalist accumulation. Matt Scobie and Anna Sturman’s (2024) book *The Economic Possibilities of Decolonisation* outlines the Ngāi Tahu tribal economy as an example of what economies have looked like in the not-so-ancient history of Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Here, an example of an economy built on values other than capitalist growth is evident. Likewise, Maria Bargh’s (2012) work on Māori economies highlights a set of ethical coordinates or central values around which a Māori economy might be enacted and is often enacted in part in contemporary times. In the same way, diverse-economies scholars move from inventorying diverse economies to enacting and uncovering community economies. The concept of community

economies invites economic collectives to think about what ethical coordinates or key concerns their place-based economies might (or already do) organize themselves around (Gibson-Graham 2006b; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy 2013). In community-economies literature, key concerns are framed in an open-ended way that recognizes how different places and groups might have geographically and culturally specific answers to these questions.

Broadly, such questions invite us to consider (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020, 19):

1. How can surplus be produced, appropriated, and distributed for human and planetary well-being?
2. How can different forms of work and remuneration be combined so that humans and Earth Others can survive well?
3. How can human-human and human-Earth Other encounter each other (through transactions and relationships) in ways that enhance well-being for all?
4. How can communities make, access, and share commons?
5. How can investments provide returns and protect against risk, both now and well into the future?

Gordon-Nembhard's (2025) response invites us to add to the above by thinking about how joy is threaded through the potential answers to these questions. We both remain convinced that working with others toward a meaningful goal brings joy, even in and through the tensions of working things out (Dombroski 2024). And we are not alone, as Jess Rimington and Joanna Cea (2022) note in their book *Beloved Economies*, which is based on in-depth research into "breakout" workplaces that go beyond business-as-usual work practices. They argue that the process of doing work differently will bring new economies into being and that breakout workplaces courageously emphasize well-being, meaning, connection, and resilience.

In the years since the *Handbook* was published, we have found joy in forms of enterprise that prioritize various kinds of growth, such as purpose-driven businesses prioritizing reuse and repair and Indigenous-led projects that invite different kinds of urban planners to emerge. In a project on just and sustainable manufacturing in Australia, Kath Gibson, Jenny Cameron, Stephen Healy, and Joanne McNeill brought together a diverse group of company managers and employees to share their experiences of enacting economic justice and environmental sustainability in their respective enterprises (Gibson et al. 2019). In the room were people from multinational capitalist firms, social enterprises, cooperatives, and family businesses. As the researchers reflected to the group how each enterprise was practicing a commitment to good jobs, long-term survival, people, place, and environment before profit, there was shared amazement, appreciation, and

learning. For example, those companies with an explicit commitment to reducing their ecological footprint shed light on how surplus distributions to environmental repair were being made internally both through site-specific changes in operations and also sector wide via voluntary stewardship agreements backed up by state and local government regulations. Participants reflected on the difficult and uncertain process of negotiating change and garnering support for new commitments. As noted by Bengi Akbulut (2025), attending to decision making and negotiation is a crucial aspect of the transitions we are being called to make. In the project, the dual recognition that making things does matter and that seemingly quite different enterprises and organizations had much in common has produced a kind of joy out of which sharing stories about such challenging negotiations has become possible.

This project has led to several engagements with local, state, and federal politicians and national-policy agendas where we have presented the case for a strong and forward-looking manufacturing sector in Australia in which diversity in the assemblage of enterprise actors can be a real strength. Rather than shying away from involvement with “the state,” community-economy researchers have a wealth of experience working with government agencies and analyzing techniques of governmentality (e.g., Gibson 2001). But as Scobie and Laird (2025) point out, there has been little direct engagement, theoretically or politically, with the “colonial state”: that is, with the intersection of governing and colonialism. How colonial power is exercised in practice is an important and overdetermined contributor to the conditions of possibility, and this theme is gaining more attention within the diverse-economies research project, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand, as we discuss below.

Since the *Handbook*'s publication, Kelly has moved to a new job that involves teaching in the planning program at Massey University in New Zealand. She teaches a course, designed with Dr. April Bennett (Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Raukawa), that involves partnerships with both Indigenous organizations and non-Indigenous community organizations that prioritize Indigenous partnership. Here, the process of working together with others has demanded an openness to learning differently. In the first iteration of the course, codesigned with the Te Rūnanga o Tupoho subtribe, we were challenged to design coursework that enabled the students to “know themselves.” Tupoho members told us that it was in “knowing themselves” that *mauri ora* (vitality and well-being, connected to the landscape) would emerge, and this was what they wanted future planners to be skilled in. The joy of working together in a partnership led by the values implicit in Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) emerged from first guiding our students into listening to the *mamae*, or the hurt, shame, and perhaps despair of the *hapū*, in their ongoing interactions with local governments still steeped in colonial views. The students reflected on their positionality: Māori students on their role as people of the land; other students as descendants of immigrants or new immigrants. They learned how to hold hurt and to listen and were tasked

with producing artworks that reflected on their journey toward knowing themselves, their place in the land, and their role as emerging planners for local government. In the final class, tears were shed as students presented their art pieces and reflected on their state of *mauri*, the state of *mauri* of the land, and their place in the land.

What emerged was, yes, the limiting factors of the colonial state, as Scobie and Laird (2025) reflect, but also a different possible future: here, future local-government employees and leaders produced art and shed tears together in a journey toward doing planning—and, thus, “governing”—differently. In many ways, this joy in the process of learning together, through discomfort and hurt and on into something else, was the joy produced through not having (or not giving in to) the privilege of despair. Can we know where this will go? Will powerful interests co-opt it? We do not know, and we cannot know, but we engage in the process of learning with vulnerable hope.

Where to Next? Forgoing the Pleasures of Knowing for the Joys of Experimentation

If we refuse to know how our interventions will end, if we refuse the pleasure of teleology and turn toward the discomforts of not-knowing, what is there next for those seeking postcapitalist forms of economy? The *Handbook* finishes with a chapter by artists Kathrin Bohm and Kuba Szreder, who use their example of Company Drinks to explain “how to reclaim the economy using artistic means.” They recognize yet go beyond an analysis of art as underpaid exploitation, intervening with an art project that is also a company that produces both drinks and also company with others. They reclaim the word company, in its multiple meanings, to bring joy to an endeavor that is also about livelihoods and creating beauty in an aesthetic sense. What would it mean for us to reclaim the lasting, meaningful joy of working with others while forgoing the fleeting pleasure of being the know-it-all? We wonder what this reclamation might mean in the area of policy, often thought of as a dry and pedantic mode of engaging with speculation.

In many countries where the financialization of everyday life has become the norm, housing affordability is in crisis. Shelter as a human right has no air space in debates that center instead on housing as an investment instrument. The policy discussion, at least in Australia, is tinged with despair at the shortfall of housing completions, the lack of social housing, and the inferior quality of buildings, especially slapped-together high-rise apartments. At the same time, the policy discussion is peppered with blame, all focused on immigrants putting pressure on supply, on overseas investors driving prices way beyond local affordability, and on baby boomers whose multiple properties are locking young people out of the housing market. Taking a speculative approach (of the imaginative

kind), we might ask what it would look like to intervene with joy in housing policy and why we assume that living together will be awful.

Social researchers such as Hugh Mackay (2024) point to the rise of loneliness, disconnection, and living alone in Australia as social trends that are having adverse health effects both in individual bodies and in the body politic. So how could the housing crisis rekindle interest in more collective approaches to surviving well together in, for example, cooperative housing, cohousing, community land trusts, group housing? And in design innovation that breaks from the dominance of single dwellings where growing isolation is locked behind double garages with remote-controlled doors? Kath—having just participated, as part of the Climate-Ready in Social Housing project (2023–6),¹ in a monthly barbecue run by social-housing residents in a shaded common area abutting their apartment complex—can vouch for the joy of connecting across difference in regular rituals outside the front door. With my recent move to Canberra upon retirement, I (Kath) am experiencing the joy that housing design focused on collective sociality can bring in a fifty-year-old housing complex developed by a cooperative society. Here, small joined-up houses are built around a commons that includes recovering bushland and shared assets (a tennis court, allotment gardens, children's playgrounds, a pizza oven, an open field, and car parks at some distance from the houses). As I bump into residents walking from their cars to their houses, the latest sightings of endangered native species are exchanged while plans are hatched for social get-togethers and shared recycling bins. These incidental and unexpected moments bring a joy into living that should not be underestimated.

What would it look like to intervene in the local state with joy in local-level relationship building? In planning policy this might look like building relationships that foster postcapitalist desire: working with student planners, community planners, local *iwi*, and local planners to reimagine places for those that live there. Currently, people in the city of Porirua (in the Greater Wellington region) are participating in a citizens-assembly process that involves a partnership between a citizens' assembly and the local *iwi* (tribe) Ngāti Toa Rangatira. The assembly involves speculation: What can we do together in the face of climate change? What would that look like in our city? What resources do we have to draw on? The organizers are distributing a book that emerged from a *mauri ora* and a Community Economies project, *Transitions in Action* (Yates et al. 2024), which drew on Community Economies thinking. The organizers invite people to speculate what kinds of policies could support the kinds of innovations and transitions featured in the book.² The decisions will be handed to local authorities and the community-

1. See the Climate-Ready in Social Housing project, accessed 9 May 2025, https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/ics/projects/living_with_urban_heat_becoming_climate_ready_in_social_housing.

2. See an outline of the process at the Porirua Assembly home page, accessed 9 May 2025, <https://www.ngatittoa.iwi.nz/poriruaassembly>.

leaders forum for action. Are the decisions likely to be limited by existing laws, regulations, and government procedures? In some ways, this is not the concern of the group; instead, it is about taking action, promoting leadership, and engaging with the decision-making process, policy design, and local decision makers in advance of knowing the outcomes. The knock-on effects of the citizens assembly may be government action, but, equally, it could also spark widespread collaboration among nongovernment actors such as Ngāti Toa Rangatira and the many Porirua-based organizations that seek to care for the community. In the end, the line between state and nonstate formal governance and informal governance is not fixed: people come in and out of the entity known as the state, and local government employees are also active in their own communities in other ways. In Community Economies terms, the hope of the citizen's assembly is to shift subjectivities, shift the language, and build capacity for collective action together (Gibson-Graham 2006a).

The responses to the *Handbook* highlight for us that much of the work we do as academics is the same: whether reflecting on degrowth, the state, Indigenous economies, Black women's collectives, or our own research, there is work to be done on affect; whether we are cultivating joy, working through grief and despair, researching enterprises, or helping students to "know themselves," we are working in the space of affect. Transforming the economy is a project of shifting subjectivities, of our sense of selves as agents and actors. It is a project of shifting language, moving toward languages of possibility and care. It is a project of developing capacity for collective action through multiple means. And it is a project of finding the joy in collective action, wherein we act because acting is the next right thing to do and not because we necessarily know how it will turn out. As Solnit (2024) points out, "Joy can appear in the midst of crisis, and ... a crisis is a crossroads."

The year after the degrowth conference, Kelly attended the Wellbeing Economy Alliance conference (Economy for the Public Good).³ This conference had many of the same people in the room as the conference mentioned earlier, but the community actors had center stage. Here, people were grappling with grief rather than despair, engaging with the joy of collective action rather than the fleeting pleasure of knowing certain outcomes. Even influential speaker Tina Ngata, who joked that she is not renowned for being a positive thinker, spoke of the journey through Te Po (the night) into Te Ao Marama (the daylight) as symbolizing the clarity of knowledge. She spoke of how we could not shortcut our way to Te Ao Marama, that sitting with problems and very slowly taking a way out into the light was both *tika* and *pono*, right and true, a working toward correct action aligned with values rather than taking a position of all-knowing rational planning.

3. See a conference summary and video at the Economy for Public Good Conference 2024 website, accessed 9 May 2025, <https://www.weall.org.nz/economyforpublicgood>.

This is where the *Handbook* and its reviews have left us: sitting with the inventory, sitting with the pit of despair, sitting with the *mamae* and hurt and then carefully making our way out and through with a focus on the process, on the joy and pain of working and being together.

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