

Epistemological/Ontological Interview: Magnitudes of Creativity: Clarifying Our Commitments to Solidarity in Educational Research and Practice: An Interview with Shirin Vossoughi and Jonathan Rosa

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The following interview took place on May 9, 2025, during the 5th Annual Speculative Education Colloquium online.

Since 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily shuttered in-person schooling and offered a glimpse at how educational systems might be reimagined, we (Nicole and Antero) have convened an annual Speculative Education Colloquium. In each of these events, we've invited friends, mentors, and scholars whom we've admired to help us reenvision the possibilities of schooling amidst the overlapping challenges of the present moment. These events are intentionally forward facing, seeking both playful and serious forays into the uncharted breaks of what learning *could be*. Our 2025 Speculative Education Colloquium, marking half a decade of shared dreaming, found us attuning ourselves to the ideas shared by dear friends, Shirin Vossoughi and Jonathan Rosa. Below, we offer an edited excerpt from the colloquium.

Nicole Mirra: I'm wondering, either in the academic space or in the community space, what are you finding useful in terms of your energy and resources at this moment? What are your spaces right now where you feel like you can tap in to act upon your critiques?

Shirin Vossoughi: It's a good question, thank you for that. I think I want to honor what a difficult and painful time this is. I think a lot of us are experiencing a lot emotionally and politically, and I just want to name that. And I think the extent of the material consequences of the decisions that are being made right now can feel overwhelming, and the strategy on the right to hit from all sides at the same time, it's difficult. So, I just want to honor that as a real feeling and grief. And at the same time, I've been thinking about what's being clarified in this moment.

A couple of the things I'm finding community with other people around are: For a long time in the United States, we've had certain progress narratives that I think are being really troubled in this moment, and I think there's a history that has come to a tipping point recently with Palestine around this compromise or bargain that we will strive for racial justice in the United States alongside being okay with imperialism and racial injustice globally. And I think many of us have been asked to play that game for a long time. The continuities between the Biden administration, the Harris campaign, and the Trump administration are instructive this way. And the hopeful part of me is seeing how those revelations are coming forward for people. One of my friends, Aria Fani, co-wrote a piece in *Truthout* (Fani & Berger, 2025) yesterday about this, and said essentially, "Maybe we're going to become better internationalists in this moment." I think that's happening. And I find hope in the idea that the extent of the current backlash is a reflection of our power and of the things that are changing and have been changing in pretty powerful ways, whether it's with the global resistance to Israel's genocide in Gaza or what's happening domestically in lots of ways. And definitely at the universities. I mean, for all their problems, which are many—I'm not one of those people that's going to stand up and defend universities as if they don't have their own violences in spades ongoingly—there's also change that has been happening. Many of us have developed different kinds of spaces and classrooms and have been building. And so there's a way in which the backlash is a reflection of real material changes that have been happening in the world. And so, I find hope in that because it means that this is a reflection of our strength and not of our weakness.

And I think that's actually really important psychologically, in moments of repression, to remember, because there's a collective power that can be exercised that is actually quite effective—that, unfortunately, I think many institutions are too cowardly to exercise in the ways that we need to now. And I've been finding community with other faculty and folks who are trying to fight that way. I will say, it's both beautiful and challenging, because I think a lot of people, at least on my campus, have found each other—whether it's Muslim, Arab, Middle Eastern faculty, finding each other in new and powerful ways through the struggle over the last year and a half or faculty who are deeply concerned about what's happening

right now with the Trump administration, which is a bigger group, finding each other.

And there's differences in those groups that can be challenging. When people say, "This is not who America is," I have to be able to say, "Actually, it's very much who America is, and also I want to fight alongside you." And I want to figure out how to do that because I don't think we can afford tiny groups of resistance fighters right now. So, I'm really wrestling with that myself and trying to figure that out.

I also think that there's some language emerging that I struggle with that I just want to name, which is, as people start to grapple with what is being called the rise of fascism in the United States, I find it really interesting that the examples that we reach for historically are in Europe, whether fascist states in Western Europe or Eastern Europe, as the context through which Americans are ready to understand parallels around fascism. I've had a couple moments where I'm like . . . I asked my partner recently, "Isn't fascism colonialism? Can we get some clarity on that?" And why is it that none of the places around the world that have had authoritarian regimes propped up by the United States are ever the example or the parallel, even though that is the reach of this same nation-state, now turning on its own people, particularly those who have not felt its precarity before. Because versions of fascism have been enacted domestically for a long time on Native and Black communities, on immigrants and other folks of color.

So, I just think it's important, and this is in the spirit of what this moment is teaching us, that we continue to grapple with that and work to develop the language we need. Otherwise, I think some of our responses risk doubling down on pretty troubling narratives in lots of ways.

And the second thing I guess I'll say in terms of where I'm finding community and hope is in teaching and in working with young people and in working in different programs and educational contexts. And I actually don't feel like that's present enough in the narrative. I think universities have taken a lot of the air space in some ways, and we're not talking enough about the attacks on K-12, but also about what children, including young children, and young people need for sense making in this moment and the resources that can support educators and families to continue to nurture and provide that space.

I have a nine-year-old who's thinking a lot about all of this and really grappling with what all of these changes mean in the world. We have conversations every day, and I feel like that's something we need to push into. So, I hope we can talk about that more. I'll pause there and just pass the mic back to Jonathan, but that's the other place where I'm finding community and meaningful hope.

Jonathan Rosa: I've also been thinking about how the magnitude of the critique always has to be exceeded by the vision of and commitment to what you want to build. And in some ways, this political moment, for all of the destructiveness we're faced with right now, there's a clarifying element. Some of the differences, our perceived differences, can be very distorting. We might need to reinterpret what we thought had separated us to create a different vision for how to work together in

different moments, in ways that in previous moments we might've thought, "You know what? I can't really build with that person. I can't work with that person. I need to draw a line somewhere." Well, those lines might not be workable in a moment like this. So, I think there's the potential for greater clarity or a reinterpretation of solidarity in this moment. And I don't want to say that from a place of denying what people are experiencing, denying the reality of how people have understood their differences and have felt the need to create affinity spaces in previous moments. Instead, I'm suggesting that we might need to have a different orientation to that work in this moment and in moving forward. I'm especially grateful for intergenerational wisdom in this moment.

It's been a fascinating moment when Stanford colleagues over the past year or so have come together to launch our Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine chapter. It's inspiring to witness people who you might not have anticipated coming together and being in community with one another. And that has been, really, an important space just to build together in different ways. And more recently, our chapter of the AAUP, the American Association of University Professors, was just relaunched. Of course, there are significant challenges associated with positioning an elite institutional context as a primary site of one's political engagement. I haven't always thought of Stanford as the place where I really wanted to root myself politically, but as a tenured faculty member, I feel a responsibility to engage meaningfully with this institutional context. I'm also reminded of the Audre Lorde (2017) quotation, "Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time, and the arena, and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle where we are standing" (p. 119).

It's really interesting to see that people are rediscovering themselves as labor in that context and thinking about what the implications of that are. And that's not just at Stanford. University faculty are thinking about themselves as educators in different ways, and that creates the possibility of developing forms of solidarity. And so that's been really striking. I agree with Shirin—part of the struggle involves working with people who have very different experiences and very different visions. And in some moments, you have a lot of people who are liberal MAGA. We might think of them as MACA: Make America Civil Again. From these perspectives, we just need to return to a few years ago, to the last liberal democratic administration that was exporting empire and exporting violence rather than doing it out in the open domestically. So, the question isn't about whether violence is okay; the question is the arrangement of violence and how we're displaying it and how we're organizing it, which is deeply troublesome.

And then the question that you're faced with is whether you need people to agree with you about everything in order to work with them, and build with them, and share space with them. And that's really challenging in some situations. And I think part of what we have to grapple with is how to work across some of these different experiences and perspectives in this political moment. With some of our colleagues, there are opportunities to struggle together. Because what I will say is that there are colleagues who might share a political analysis but aren't neces-

sarily willing to come together or build together and share space together. And so, what happens when the people who are most willing to share space also present significant challenges? What do you do with that? That's something to think about. When these unexpected collaborators and communities are what give you strength, there's something interesting to think about there. It's a different kind of community that comes out of that. It's an unanticipated community. For me, it's finding strength and community in unanticipated places.

My ongoing collaborations with K–12 teachers and community educators here in the Bay and in Chicago, with whom I've collaborated for many years, continue to be very important to me. It's just fascinating in California, where you have this statewide rollout of ethnic studies, which was itself once viewed as a pacifying compromise when the more radical demand was third world studies but is now framed as a controversial effort to radicalize students. A lot of the teachers I work with are ethnic studies teachers who are dealing with this really disorienting experience of this mandate to teach ethnic studies at the same time that they're facing the threat of punishment for teaching ethnic studies or certainly retribution for teaching ethnic studies in particular ways. They're really trying to navigate precarious circumstances there. But they're also emboldened in different ways because they recognize the impact of the work they're doing, the meaningfulness of their efforts with their students, and so they are compelled to continue. And in many cases, they are creating their curricula on the fly. That's the other piece that's so striking about the ethnic studies work. They are seeking resources, and seeking community, and seeking collaboration because there's a statewide mandate, but they don't necessarily have existing, ready-made curricula to work with. And so, we're in dialogue about ideas and resources; we're constantly sharing reading suggestions and ideas for different kinds of materials that they might work with. The final assignment for my Introduction to Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity course at Stanford is to design high school ethnic studies curricula so we can work with the teachers around some of those curriculum-building projects. The high school students and teachers then evaluate the curricula for adoption in their classes. Several of my students have worked with the high school teacher collaborators and their students over the summer to further develop their curriculum projects so that they can be implemented in subsequent school years with the university students' participation.

And then, yeah, finding solidarity and possibility in some unanticipated places. So, for me, again, this involves some compromise. Here in San Francisco, one of the things that I've done recently involves finding community in unanticipated places. In the past, I've been rooted in radical communities in places like Chicago, which profoundly shaped my political education and commitments. I might talk about this later, but the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago is a space that has this sort of radical, diasporic, maroon, anticolonial vision that has been very inspiring to me over the years and something that has informed my thinking and my work for some time. I haven't necessarily found a space like that since I've relocated to

California, one that is aligned with exactly those kinds of politics. And so, it's been challenging for me. I've participated in some different community spaces, but I've just sort of been seeking community in different ways.

In the last couple of years, I started singing with the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, which for me involves profound compromise. While it is certainly a multiracial organization, historically it has been a largely liberal white gay space.

But it is also a profound space in so many ways—an intergenerational space, a class diverse space, which is a very rare circumstance in San Francisco, where people are thinking about surviving all kinds of existential situations, again, intergenerationally and are compelled out of necessity to engage in acts of resistance and protest across different moments.

I've found it to be a really inspiring space that requires compromise that's challenging, that can be frustrating in some moments, but ultimately a space that is, for me, still important to build with, a space of beauty and possibility. I mean, come on, we get together every week with 250 people spanning seven or so decades in age to sing something serious, something light, to dance, to embrace, to laugh, to cry, to sustain, to restore. And so, yeah, I'm just thinking professionally and personally about some different contexts that are unanticipated or unexpected sites of solidarity and possibility.

Antero Garcia: Jonathan, you and I teach a class that's called Beyond Equity for preservice teachers in the Stanford Teacher Education Program—I think that class name feels particularly resonant given the current attacks on [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion]. And in our first week, the first lecture of that class, we usually ask the students to read all sorts of declarations—literally from the Declaration of Independence—to platforms or programs such as the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords, looking across historical ways where people have organized themselves and made explanations or created platforms prior to the bastardization of the word as it's tied to social media platforms. But platforms on which we might align ourselves and find ways to work across differences. And I guess I'm curious, and Shirin, I'm curious to hear from you in a moment, about what ways we might communicate those kinds of platforms and ways we might organize ourselves in terms of different kinds of outreach strategies.

But Jonathan, I guess I'm curious if you might be able to speak to how these kinds of platforms or programs historically have existed or been created, the ways they've worked in solidarity with one another, the kinds of tensions that have existed. This does not need to be a long answer, but also what such a platform might mean for us in this present moment of where we're standing right now.

Jonathan: Sure. I share these platforms with students in different courses, and we share a whole bunch of them. This includes the Black Panther Party, the Combahee River Collective Statement, the Young Lords, the Chicano movement, the I Wor Kuen Asian American platform. So, it's a whole bunch of them. And many of them draw inspiration from one another. So, you see the interplay among them.

For example, the Black Panther Party ends up becoming a template in many ways. And then we can think about what it means for many of the other kinds ethno-racially oriented platforms to derive their structure from the Black Panther Party. What are the politics of that, and what's that mean, and what are the possibilities and the limitations of that?

And so, part of what we think through is what's the unique moment in which what's the context, the political context, in which these visions are being articulated? What are they responding to? What are they trying to accomplish through the articulation of a vision?

One of the things that always comes up or that often will happen when we break the students up into small groups—and often we have to review a whole bunch of platforms, 10 or 12 of them, in a very short period of time—we'll ask a few students to review each platform and then to speak to what themes they found to be especially compelling or to draw our attention to different elements of it.

And what often will end up happening is the students will try to figure out which platform is the best. And there's an effort to suggest that "Oh, okay, the Combahee River Collective statement." And then you start to see, "Okay, the Black feminist statement is the best statement."

And then there's this sense that a particular kind of vision is the vision that has the answer. And there's the sense that this ends up being the best way of thinking about these kinds of situations. And on one level, I understand that people are trying to bring a critical lens to some of the limitations or some of the contradictions that they identify in these statements.

On the other hand, there ends up, in some cases, being a tendency to reproduce this dynamic where a particular kind of racialized and gendered labor, for example, is expected of particular populations to answer everyone's, to fix everyone's, to speak to everyone's challenges rather than honoring and taking seriously what was the unique set of issues that this particular kind of organization or this collective was responding to.

What was it trying to accomplish? What's it mean? Why did we expect it to respond to everything?

And what happens when we take it seriously on its own terms, and how do we make sense of those contradictions? What happens when our goal isn't to fix it, isn't to improve it, but to understand what shaped it, what informed it?

But also to take seriously that on the ground often, one of the things that's interesting, for example, when you study the Young Lords platform, is there are multiple versions. There are multiple versions of most of these platforms, but you can see explicitly multiple versions of the Young Lords platform.

And you can see feminist interventions with it where it was very clear that there were versions of it that were deeply machista and subsequent versions where part of the initial platform was saying that the goal of the organization is to protect Puerto Rican women and to ensure that Puerto Rican women are cared for in particular ways.

And subsequent versions are saying that is not the vision of this organization. The organization is redefining how gender has been organized and structured to maintain, to serve very particular interests. And our goal is to rethink the terms of that, to figure out what kind of a world we want to live in that will sustain our well-being or protect collective well-being in a fundamentally different way.

At any rate, what I wanted to surface for our discussion is to say, I think part of what's exciting and precarious about this is the work of crafting narrative and crafting language for something and not seeing that as an end in itself but understanding the narrative work as an enactment so that the platform isn't the answer.

The platform isn't an artifact that is the fix. So once you establish the five or six, or 10 or 12, sort of points, then you have your established ritual that you can pass on. And if you can maintain fidelity to those points or that ritual and then police one another's fidelity to those points, then speculative education is being maintained and reproduced across all times and places.

Don't get me wrong, there's something to be said for rituals. I'm an anthropologist, so I'm invested in ritual.

However, there's also something to be said for the work of coming together to think about this, to develop language, to debate it, to think it through, and to continually kind of rework all of that, and to even take it into consideration and take it up for reconsideration.

And so, it's as much about the process of thinking through a platform as it is whatever artifact emerges, might emerge out of it. But I think there's a reason why these kinds of platform statements are so resonant, even if all of them are deeply contradictory and have all kinds of limitations. But that's part of what makes them so compelling.

Antero: Shirin, I'm wondering if you might speak to, in reflecting on this, your work on *Blue Dandelion*—it feels particularly relevant, I think, to this. [*The Blue Dandelion* is a pedagogical zine and co-design project blending collaborative research and art (Vossoughi et al, 2023).] And I don't know if that's an obvious launching point for you?

Shirin: Yeah, I'm ready to launch off with my dear brother here. I feel like it's always fun to be in conversation with Jonathan because I learn a lot, and I also feel like we're moving in similar neighborhoods of thought, even if we don't always get to talk with each other.

So, I want to build on what you're sharing about the platforms, and I really appreciated what you said, and I want to offer some thoughts that may be helpful as people dig into writing. And I'll get to *Blue Dandelion* as part of that.

The first thought is that I think as much as the federal policies are clarifying right now, so are the responses. And I think that the range of responses to what's unfolding can help to sharpen and clarify the types of platforms that we need. And I'll give two examples of that.

One is within academia—there's currently a lot of grief and struggle about NSF canceling grants. And I don't know if people have had a chance to look at this Save NSF website. My understanding is that it's from internal folks within NSF.

At first when I saw it, I was like, "Oh, okay, cool." And then I started looking at the talking points, which you can download, and it just was horrifying. It was basically talking points designed for MAGA audiences around why NSF matters. And the reason I think that's important for this group to wrestle with is that there's a particular vision of the purposes of education being put out, not just by the right but by the people who are trying to convince the right to give the money back, that I think is maybe even more scary to me.

And so, I think that's really something to grapple with. And in creating a different kind of platform in this context, I think we have an opportunity to ask much deeper and imaginative questions around the purposes of education and what it is we want for our young people, our families and communities, and the world, that can be grown through these educational experiences.

And another example is the faith in the law and the faith in the courts to save us. Given the deeply troubled history of legally sanctioned violence in this country, that response also worries me. As much as I want those judges to stop them (which I do), I feel like if we put all of our faith there as the primary terrain of struggle, we're making a pretty deep mistake that I think is unfolding right now in lots of ways. And so, the responses I think can be as helpful to us as the policies that we're fighting and can help clarify both what we need educationally and what we need societally as radically alternate systems of social life, and practices of collective well-being, and ways of solving problems and relating with one another.

And then the second piece that kind of grows from that, for me, is about the ways that we are positioned to respond to the Trump administration by defending some things that are pretty flawed. And so, for example, to be positioned to defend DEI, like institutional neoliberal versions of DEI. And, in general, to be put in a defensive position, I think the impetus to build and dream and not just critique becomes harder in the face of this level of authoritarianism and violence.

So, I feel like it becomes all the more important to actually practice building and dreaming in this moment. And I think this speaks to Jonathan's points about the tendencies among the left. And what I heard, whether it's text or subtext, about who we're building with right now and the challenges at times of building on the left given some of our political cultures. And there's beautiful life and building that happens in radical spaces, and there's also some pretty patterned tendencies around hierarchies and policing and horizontal violence that somebody . . . I keep thinking like this is some COINTELPRO shit that's just still playing out because it's so effective and we don't actually need any federal agents to be on the payroll to let it function anymore. We're just doing it to ourselves. And I say that from a place of deep worry, but I also feel like it means that when that is ruptured, when relationality is sustained, when people are gentle and generous with each other within spaces of radical movement work, it becomes really significant and important.

And for me, one of the really interesting lessons of the encampment last year was witnessing students that I had worked with closely in a program that I co-direct show up differently at the encampment than some of their peers. And it was hugely revelational for me because I noticed that our students were working hard to enact restorative practices and to be the people that cared about that relationality. Not only them, but because I know them, I noticed that they were showing up that way. And it was both really beautiful to see, because I was like: Wow, these learning environments over here where we're practicing a political education that is gentle and generous, that wrestles with complexity, that recognizes the stakes of continuously being in an emotional place of knocking each other down so that nobody knocks us down... . Actually working on that with young people had this result that in this moment of intense political work, they were trying to engage differently. And I also learned that it was really hard for them to share some of those practices with their peers. So, it taught me, as an educator, it's not enough to know that we need that relational work within our social movements. We also have to know how to respond when someone else calls that soft or says that's not the party line.

One of the projects that I've been doing now that is another example of this for me is interviewing Iranian elders who were leftists in the sixties and seventies about how those political movements shaped their identities but also how it influenced their parenting, and then talking with their children about what these legacies have meant for their own upbringing and work in the world. And two of the things that I hear from a lot of our elders, given the ways that the Iranian revolution unfolded, is that "We knew what we were against, but we didn't know what we were building." And the second piece: "We didn't have very much space to practice what it meant to be leftist. We knew the ideologies we were supposed to have, we knew the books we were supposed to be reading and things like that, but we didn't know how to practice it with each other." And that's a kind of wisdom and reflection passed down from a lot of folks in that generation. Alongside the depth of the legacies they have left us, there's also these internal self-reflections that I hear from a lot of elders about this.

And so, I think that's helpful for thinking about the platform work that Jonathan was talking about because it raises the really important question of how do we live these values? And not live them in a rigid, policing each other kind of way, but in a kind of iterative way and in a way that is about practice and about growth and learning. This is part of why I care so much about learning. How do we learn to live these values over time?

So, I'm going to share with you a couple things that . . . I actually teach a class that is inspired by one of Jonathan's classes at Stanford where we have half Northwestern undergrads, half local high school students, and our teaching team includes high school teachers and community-based educators, and we have a document that has some key design principles. And I'm just going to share a few because I think there are examples from our space of trying to do this type of work in terms of naming these ways of being. So one of them is "Educationally just

learning environments are humanizing. They hold, honor, and engage the fullness and complexity of human experience.”

Here’s another one, which will probably resonate with this group: “Educationally just learning environments cultivate ethical relations between people, families, and places that propel imaginative world making.” There’s like 20 of these, so I’m just giving you a few, but here’s the last one I’ll share that I think is also helpful for thinking about the actual interactions. This is why I wanted to do this, because I feel like there’s a way to write these platform points that’s also about the type of interactions we want to see. And so this one says, “Educationally just learning environments enable analysis, reflection, listening, vulnerability, mistakes, and revisions as sources of generativity for ideas and relations.” One of the ways that I’ve seen that practiced by educators, myself included, and enacted by students over time is to model live revision.

So we had a class last fall where we were teaching Doug Medin and Megan Bang’s book, *Who’s Asking: Native Science, Western Science and Science Education*, and we started the lesson by asking students to work with us to define colonialism. And then it was a great class, but we had a debrief with our team and we were like . . . We didn’t really like that we started the story with colonialism. What does it mean that the starting point of this story was coloniality? And so, we decided that it would’ve been better to start with maps of Indigenous America, maps of Indigenous Africa, to consider the stories and the ways of living and being Indigenous peoples have practiced and continue to practice on these lands and to create a longer temporality that has a different kind of life to it than starting history from colonialism.

But the way we did it in the next class was to show up and say, “Hey, we made a mistake, and we want to tell you why we think it was a mistake, and we want to start again, and we want to start a different way.” And that move, actually—It would’ve been great if we did that from the beginning. But that move actually mattered so much for the rest of the quarter. Because it meant students could be like, “I didn’t like how I just framed that. I don’t quite have the language yet, but let me try again.”

So, what I mean by that is how can we create these principles around things like revision that are lived, and how can we actually imagine and practice what possible forms of learning look and feel like? And now I’ll get to Blue Dandelion, because maybe that’s where this lands, is because I’m an ethnographer and an interaction analyst; this is why I care about looking at micro moments. Because I care about understanding micro interactions that are attempting to reach for these values, again in an iterative way. So, I want to share some current ideas about the principles I put in the chat that we’ve been iterating. I don’t love “educationally just” as the only way to talk about this work. Justice is necessary but limiting to me as the only frame.

So, lately I’ve been thinking, is it educationally just, healthful, and beautiful learning environments? Is that a revision we want to make? And we start this class, we’ve done it four times now, by looking at these principles and editing them with the team every time. And so how to also continue to think about platforms and

principles as living artifacts that are relics of the learning that's happening when you try to implement them, and then you go back to them and you say, "We need this other word," right?

I feel like there's a spirit of revision that matters for this work that helps to counteract some of the more rigid legacies or pieces of the legacies that we've inherited. And the Blue Dandelion work is an attempt to partner with artists to figure out how to bring some of the interactions alive with the hope that if we can imagine and see the ways some of the relationality and the actual interactions that we're trying to build out of these kinds of platforms, how they look and feel, then maybe it nurtures our capacity to be able to live those stories in moment-to-moment interaction when we're doing this type of work in various spaces.

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b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation		
(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541. (<i>Include advertiser's proof and exchange copies</i>)	998	975
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17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner: Dyan Urquhart, Senior Director of Programs Date: September 30, 2025

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