

# A Place to Meet: Living with Critical Theory as a Mode of Care in Everyday Artistic Practice

Myriam D. Diatta, Stacy Holman Jones, Kate McEntee\*

Monash University

\*Author names in alphabetical order

## Biography

**Myriam D. Diatta** is a Black, Asian, American creative practitioner and researcher. In academic contexts, she takes a particular interest in developing reflexive methods for investigating how critical theory and everyday creative practice come together. Myriam is a PhD candidate at Monash University.

**Stacy Holman Jones** is a writer, director, researcher and educator in the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music and Performance at Monash University, Australia. Her research focuses on performance as socially, culturally, and politically resistive and transformative activity.

**Kate McEntee** is a social design researcher. Her practice is focused on decolonising and collaborative social practice. She is currently a PhD candidate in WonderLab, a co-design research lab at Monash University. She receives the Raydon Graduate Research Scholarship and the Monash Graduate Scholarship to support her PhD studies.

## Abstract

**This essay is a place where the everyday meets critical artistic practice meets theory. Within a critical artistic researcher's everyday practice, critical theory is lived and practiced in modes that are material and felt. Building on the work**

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**of critical theorists who write explicitly about their relationships with theory, three researchers write vignettes detailing small moments in their practice. The vignettes make visible the ways the everyday and critical theory interlock and show how critical artistic research asks us to consider ways of caring, being accountable, attending to, and growing sensibilities for living with critical theories.**

### **Keywords**

**Critical artistic research, the everyday, practice, critical theory, care**

Creative practitioner-researchers bring together personal knowledge, materials, multiple relationalities, and social structures in their work (Vega et al., 2021). They use artistic forms and methods to render their research within scholarly contexts (Loveless, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Our critical artistic research is informed by our respective practice and research histories—feminist and queer theatre and performance and critical autoethnography (Stacy); engaging design’s creative and affective practices and histories to work across social collaborative contexts (Kate); and a non-disciplinary creative practice that explores how practitioners do expressly critical and creative work (Myriam). In a practice that is both creative and engages with critical theory, theory is not a static piece of text whose ideas are then applied to practice (Holman Jones, 2016). Taking cues from cultural studies and performance studies, we understand theory and practice—knowing and making; the abstract and concrete—as mutually influential and in an ongoing relationship with one another (Hall, 2003; Pollock, 2005). However, there remains a tension in creative research in separating the personal and the theoretical and approaching research-based inquiry and practice-based inquiry as different forms of knowledge-production. Humanist social sci-

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ence uses a problem-based approach, in which a series of questions are asked and answered through the application of qualitative methodologies designed to separate the subjective and the objective.

Post-qualitative approaches challenge research processes designed to enable researchers to “slot” their explorations into “well-identified categories” that make their research projects “recognizable, clear and accessible” (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 603; see also Jackson, 2017; Mazzei, 2017). Instead, post-qualitative inquiry focuses on what is often unintelligible or unspeakable within existing practices. It calls on ontologies of worlds in the making, including feminist new materialist, intersectional decolonial, or Black critical thought, to help render these worlds in word, image and movement. Such work advocates a relational approach that considers experience, theory and practice as entangled and emergent.

In particular, we use this essay as a space to meet and materialize relationships, partner with theory as a facilitator, and recognize how critical theory and care are nestled within the everyday. We approach the everyday as a critical orientation—the words we speak in an interview, the proximity of someone’s shoulder to yours in a workshop, the gaze someone casts on you in a meeting are part of the dynamic, complex, intersubjective, and mundane relationships of the everyday. The act of reading a critical theoretical text urges us to look again and re-understand a moment shared with others in practice. When we’re filled with uncertainty in practice, a confronting or capacious statement in critical theory keeps us moving.

Here, we attend to, unsettle and re-form everyday moments through a lens of care. We do this attending, unsettling and re-forming through praxis narratives in which practice is a mode of thinking and theorizing, theory is a practice of acting in the everyday, and narrative is a mode for reflecting on both as entangled and mutually influencing (Grocott et al., 2021; Korsmeyer et al., 2021; see also Holman Jones, 2016). We carry this out through stories that intertwine the work of thinking and theorizing in everyday moments of each of our creative practices. In

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this essay, you will find three first-person narratives from a moment in creative practice, each written by one of the authors. The stories are fragmented and interwoven throughout this essay. Between the stories, you will find brief interludes, noted in italics, that turn to you, the reader, to pose questions of practice and research and serve as invitations for you to be reflexive with us. These questions also point to how we might bring together our distinct creative practices for the purpose of examining multiple ways of living with critical theory as a mode of care.

Throughout the stories, we use endnotes to explore, question and challenge our relationships with others in the narrative, with critical theory, the materials of our research, and you, the reader. The endnotes allow us to exercise privacy and publicness, shed light on power dynamics, open up opportunities to set things in motion, connect story and theory, and urge the reader to read with care. Leaning into this quality of the essay, we conclude with a dialogue between the authors that works to expose and affirm the messy ongoingness that surfaced in the process of writing together. We treat the project of co-writing this essay as an ongoing site of critical artistic practice.

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*What is the significance in recounting a moment?*

*What is it that moves you to revisit it?*

*Does the moment begin at the beginning, when it ends, or right in the thick of it?*

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2016. I'm heading into a meeting that I've been hyping myself up to go to, building myself up to show up to. I feel totally tiny but dense and heavy as I walk up the street off of Union Square in Manhattan. I see the building where we've had our meetings for almost a year now, and head in. I'm nearly my original size by the time we all arrive and are sitting at the table, but I'm still a little crooked and bent. I put my things down and catch up with one of my colleagues

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who is already there. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom because I feel a pounding in my head and pressure behind my eyes. I throw up in the toilet. I feel better and back to full size, but with lots of aches from being tiny and crooked. I rinse my mouth and I head back to the table where my things are. She's there.<sup>2</sup> It felt as though thick oil was surrounding me back then, but I didn't know it. We start the meeting.

This was an everyday scene—going to work meetings and figuring out how to be with people. I used to revisit and revisit tense incidents like this because they were acutely out of alignment with what I value or know now that I could have done. We can “let these things go,” but I was convinced there was something important for me to learn from it. I'm only able to dig into this further by gripping onto what someone I deeply respect once shared in a panel discussion, “We are so unaccountable to ourselves ...it lays the groundwork for an abusive world” (Perez Darby et al., 2019, 44:00). In other words, I work with the understanding that the ongoing work I do to be accountable to my own values is not primarily for me, but for others I interact with day to day. This year (2021), I pulled out some writing I did in 2019 about that moment. When I reread it, I struggled to defer hesitation or judgement or self-hate about revisiting it. Again. I manage to revisit it here because I want to explore how it feels to acknowledge that it happened in the first place rather than what was said and who was there at that meeting like I had carefully done again and again. I instead made the thick oil, the pounding, and the pressure the context. This time, I attend to the goings-on of that meeting at this quiet volume.<sup>3</sup>

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Early 2021, Melbourne, Australia. We are in the closing minutes of a workshop. For the last two hours we have been facilitating a group of social service providers exploring the integration of lived experience into the design and delivery of services for people seeking asylum in this country. Participants are gathered into breakout rooms. One of the organisers who invited us to

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facilitate this workshop<sup>4</sup> is positively discussing the session and energised by their appreciation, I am coasting toward final reflections and a checkout. This is when she makes a small request: can we close the session out highlighting self-care as part of this work? She knows it's not what we are discussing directly, but it's an important theme for the day. Immediately I respond, "Of course!" The pressure to perform is not consciously registered, but innate; automatic.

I lean over and scribble some notes in my notebook as people begin to return to the main session. I am overwhelmed by the impossibility of communicating "the importance of self-care."

In the final reflection participants share the challenges they are up against. I recognise the earnestness with which they are seeking to improve services to the communities with which they work. I appreciate the openness with which they share their fears and expectations around transitioning to new ways of working. I want to communicate this recognition, so participants leave feeling seen, and supported for these future challenges. In seeking to reward their honesty and acknowledge their participation as they navigate sensitive topics, I am attentive to the collective well-being of the room. People have been vulnerable and need support and space to process this. I also want folks to leave with a sense of the challenges of working in these new ways<sup>5</sup>. This balance, providing a supportive environment without overly mitigating the necessary discomforts, feels delicately held. And in this moment, care feels in conflict with accountability.

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July 2021, Melbourne Australia. We are in the first in a series of arts-based workshops<sup>6</sup> for people who are living with mental health diagnoses. Several people in the room speak about how the year of COVID-19 restrictions and isolation have exacerbated feelings of anxiety, depression and emotional distress. Many say they're carrying a twin burden of experiencing

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outsized emotions and struggling with how to manage both the emotions and their physical and relational effects.

We—my life partner and collaborator and I—are responsible for leading the workshop. It's work we are experienced in and love doing. But this workshop feels different. It is different—both in how the work is tied to our everyday experience of mental health challenges, and also in how our relationship to the institution, to “research” and “data,” are practiced.<sup>7</sup> It's the story of how the “institutional as usual” sees arts-based work as collecting data for research, rather than data collection as arts-based research (Ahmed, 2017).

The arts-based workshops are part of a funded research project aimed at reducing stigma and improving care and treatment for people living with a diagnosis. The project includes social science, medical, education and arts researchers, service providers and support organizations. And while the arts-based elements of the project are central to the research, they seem both mysterious and obvious to most members of the team. *Mysterious* in how they might be integrated into other elements of data gathering, analysis and development of findings and *obvious* in the strategies and techniques we might use in working collaboratively with volunteering participants. In other words, the arts-based workshops are both *hard to imagine* and *something anyone can do*.

My partner and I have experience with mental health challenges—my partner in their diagnosis and me as someone who lives with and cares about someone living with mental illness. For the research team, this experience is both something to be *avoided* (i.e., it's not part of the research) and *embraced* (i.e., relying on my partner's contacts with others living with diagnoses to recruit participants). This tension reminds us that research teams and ways of practicing research are “container technologies”: They reproduce ways of practicing research by containing and constraining what or who is included and what or who is excluded (Ahmed, 2017).

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So, we are in the first in a series of arts-based workshops for people who are living with mental health diagnoses. There are six researchers present and five participants in the room. As we gather and begin the workshop, I feel the push-pull of researchers and participants in my body, my heart and my head. My partner and I are literally between the research team and the people who've volunteered their Saturdays to make art with us and others living with a diagnosis.

A number of things pass around and through me and my partner in these opening moments. They are moments in which I feel in between; moments in which care is my “urgent practical task” (Ahmed, 2020a, para. 1). Care for whom? The participants. My partner. Myself. And also, the research—most importantly caring for the critical, artistic practice within it—and my professional relationships with the members of the research team. These are moments where I feel the balance in the room—the between research and data on the one hand and the creative work and practices of care on the other—is off. In this in-between space, I do what I can to pay attention and do things differently. If not to restore balance, then to make space for doing research differently by doing theory and artistic research differently. By doing what I can to stay in touch with theory while being in the thick of it<sup>8</sup>.

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*And now we are in it, and it is in us. Where do we go from here?*

*What are the tools, the materials that help us navigate through the thick of our  
everyday?*

*What histories gathered these materials together to be available, to be within  
reach in the moment?*

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Figure 1. Materials gathered.



Figure 2. Sitting down to reflect on a past moment before materializing in paper form.

2021. I rummaged in closets and boxes and found paper scraps, glue, a cutting knife, a cutting mat, and unwrapped a fresh stack of black paper (Figure 1). I sat down in front of the materials I gathered to work out how it feels to acknowledge my response to the meeting years ago (Figure 2).

As I sat there, I took a heap of deep breaths to get in touch with the aches and throbs in my body left over years later from that incident; I got in touch with how my body felt out of alignment. I continued by sitting with the sensations. The effort to put that moment to words felt like a fine point melting, thick and slow. The melting was a kind that was not in disarray or ruined, but the kind that settles in and spreads out into its foundation. I sat down with the materials in front of me intent on making visible *how it feels to acknowledge that it happened in the first place.*



Self-care can be a radical, political act in the face of working environments with continuing demands for one's time, attention and energy. When engaged in social services and activism work, it can often seem that the needs of others eclipse the needs of caring for oneself, rather than being interrelated. Radical self-care is not separate from services provided to others, but part of a necessary, holistic framework.<sup>9</sup>

Behind my knee-jerk, performance-seeking response, “radical self-care” is not simple or straightforward. Mainstream discourses of self-care are largely co-opted by neoliberal trends which promote individual happiness at the ignorance of collective responsibility and well-being (Michaeli, 2017) and the self-management of work-life balance in the face of increasing demands as a means of upward mobility (Ahmed, 2014). This places the work of self-care, and the benefits, on an individuated self. It does not question the system or organisation that is denying an environment of support. These trends and dominant discourses take the politicized teeth out of feminist, sustainable and transformative models of care. In contrast, radical and collective self-care is a collective process that is alert to context, relationships and structures that surround and support individuals.

The majority of the group of people with which we are working, and how I also identify, are cisgendered women, and to a smaller though still significant degree are white, settler descendants. This context, my context, is one in which many systems and structures are set up to promote our well-being.<sup>10</sup> Though the diversity of participants in the room requires understanding that politicized, collective well-being attends to how and why the world provides or denies care for certain individuals through “particular political histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability” (Michaeli, 2017, p. 53). How does encouraging self-care differ for the majority, white-cis folks, and the non-white or gender diverse folks?<sup>11</sup> From the work of Audre Lorde, to Sara Ahmed, to Angela Davis, the call for a feminist, politicized collective

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well-being speaks directly to and from the lived experiences of the outnumbered participants. I speak as an outsider. A researcher-outsider. A professional, white, cis-woman. From this mouth, is self-care a political act? A neoliberal trend? Another exhausting exhortation from management? An out of touch, privileged cliché?

The participants' final share-out has come to an end. From my jumble of notes, strong emotions and inadequate time and language, I decide to close with a message about self-care being a political act. I say, "Taking care of yourself is an act of resistance against white supremacy and capitalism!" There is no time to unpack what this means, to consider the responsibility of the organisation in relation to the individual, to understand the politics of this statement in relation to your own politicized self. Through this action I have universalised the room and erased the recognition of diverse lived experiences—the very topic of the workshop. Instead of taking the time, planning, and space to slow down, to make complex, and to give myself permission to not have a clean and tight response, I speak. My statement avoids accountability, while still 'talking the talk,' a move I am able to make because of my position as a speaker to the room. My closing comment leaves a hot pressure smoldering uncomfortably inside me.

We schedule a time to debrief the arts-based workshop. The project lead cannot attend at the scheduled time, and so debriefing happens in another meeting. It happens without the workshop facilitators—my partner and me. After the meeting that happens without us, we receive an email saying the project research assistant will share the group's feedback. The move from debrief to feedback is jarring. I could let this shift go, but I don't.<sup>12</sup> Instead, I ask to move the meeting to a time when we can all attend. My request is accommodated, and I prepare by writing some notes about what it means, for me, to be in a space of rehearsal.

The night before the newly scheduled meeting, I dream I am rehearsing these notes out loud while doing a number of physical activities—walking, climbing the stairs leading to my work office, doing a Viewpoints warm-up activity in my usual drama theatre teaching space. I wake

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up, walk the dogs, shower and get dressed. I remind myself that rehearsal is how we look back at previous actions even as we “look forward to something that does not yet exist. We recollect forwards whilst remembering backwards. We rehearse the future into being.”<sup>13</sup> I procrastinate for an hour over email and then log on to Zoom. I breathe in and wait. When I see everyone’s faces on camera, I breathe out.

I think the me making the list was me rehearsing the future into being. But now here I am, in the Zoom room, and before we can begin collectively, the project lead says she wants to start. This start isn’t the debrief, but rather the feedback.

The workshop was, in the team’s estimation, too much and not enough: too much time spent on introductions, warm up activities, breaks, and chatting. Not enough time spent on art-making, talking about mental health, and generating data. I feel the collision of the instrumental and the felt-sense of being there (in the workshop) and here (in the Zoom) in my body. My hands and feet start to tingle. My heart pounds. I feel the push-pull of the tacit—the emotions, sensations, and being-with of the workshop and the sayable—the desire to evaluate and improve the process, the push to generate meaningful and “usable” creative research outputs.

I breathe in. I hold up my hand, trying to interrupt; to stop the forward flow of the conversation. I want to go back so that we can move forward.

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*What settles through these moments?*

*What materials take care of these moments?*

*What forms does care take?*

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Critically re-examining the moment raises questions I cannot answer on my own. They are a reminder of openings for practice, in that they require a critical, collective and situated

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response. Why does “self-care” feel like an additional burden? Am I supposed to be grateful to an employer, or my employer’s proxy, reminding me of its importance? What remains unseen, or glossed over, by a series of workshops and tools? What does collective care mean in a room of different politicized selves?<sup>14</sup> What is the role of the community I work with and for in our collective well-being? What do we need from one another in this space?

Building off the work led by Black feminists, collective wellbeing requires a conversation about the kinds of care that are provided by intersecting identity characteristics, as well as social and political affiliations. Through these mechanisms, individuals come to spaces, including the workplace, with different experiences of privilege and support.

Facilitated by the slow, careful work of critical theory, the idealised self-care workshop becomes a space that thoughtfully cares for the room, while maintaining a critical and politicized positioning of the work. On both sides of the harmful relationship between exhausting, dehumanising workplaces and seeking self-care as a means of recovery from those experiences we are forced to ignore the collective as a means of survival. Operating outside of collective systems, acts of self-care likely engender individualism. Self-care that is not individualistic advocates for mutual support and shared responsibility, whether that is within a family, workplace or community. Inna Michaeli (2017) highlights the marketization of self-care in the workplace that hinders actual acts of care, like political organising. Mainstream self-care discourse invites us in response to breathe, “meditate, and—if we can afford it—enjoy a day at the spa” (p. 53). And whilst we must be cautious of such neoliberal efforts to monetize and individualize self-care, collective forms of self-care are not as easily co-opted, “just like breathing in itself isn’t neoliberal...Breathing is life, and few practices are as powerful in creating intimacy and solidarity between individuals and groups as the act of breathing together” (Michaeli, 2017, p. 53). Self-care which attends to the collective seeks to create solidarity rather than separation. It does not encourage “checking-out,” with escapism and luxury, but “checking-in,” with ground-

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ing and presence. It enables strength and empowerment, rather than passivity and extravagance. Considering self-care through grounding and empowerment, also highlights the importance of the structures that enable or hinder that positioning.

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I breathe out and “stop how things usually flow” by saying I am uncomfortable with how the meeting is going (Ahmed, 2017, para. 54). By saying I would like to talk about process and participation and rehearsal and what that means for me and for both the research team and the participants. But my interruption and words about process and participation are “deemed disruptive” and hurtful (Ahmed, 2017, para. 54). I am deemed disruptive and hurtful. I breathe in. The meeting spirals into an argument about what people should do and feel, where they agree and disagree, what they intend and don’t intend, whether people feel safe or trusted. There are raised voices and tears. My partner, feeling angry and disrespected, leaves the meeting to stabilize.

I breathe out and try to repair. To recover. “It is time to take care of each other” (Ahmed, 2020a, para. 1). It is “always that time,” but here, now, in this meeting, “we know it, the truth of it” (Ahmed, 2020a, para. 1). And we know that however “compelling this truth is, that that is not always what happens, that that is not always how decisions are made” (Ahmed, 2020a, para. 1). We know that “care is an urgent practical task,” even when we don’t take care of each other (Ahmed, 2020a, para. 1).

I’d like to think we also know that we can rehearse that care, “recollecting forwards whilst remembering backwards” by paying careful attention to what and who needs support and how (Schmidt, 2015, p. 5). I’d like to think that if we do the sometimes painstaking work necessary to look after each other (Ahmed, 2014), we can make time and space for care.

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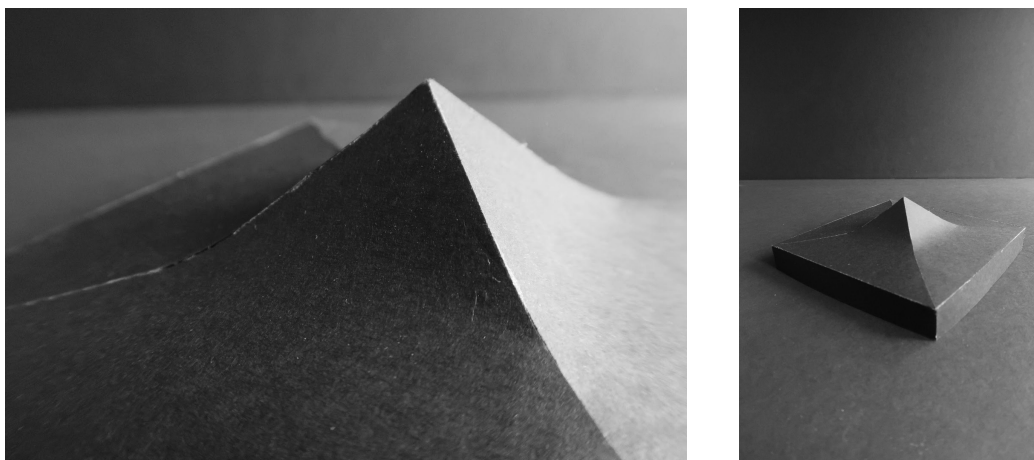


Figure 3. A close-up and long view of the paper model.

I was seeing the paper model come together in front of me as I worked. The form suggested to me how the point at its tip was the impossibly tight space I was giving myself to process the density, pressure and aching I often felt leading up to loaded encounters—like that meeting that day (Figure 3).

It was loaded with dozens of tense moments and the weight of so many things unsaid. Seeing that sharp tip made visible how I internalize the narrative around the “narrow, concrete driveway where I am unwelcome . . . a bleached-white, stiff-straight master plan” (Bruce, 2019, p. 352). I reproduced it in the fixed, tight space I often give myself to process all that there is to process. In the context of this work meeting, for instance, the gaze on me<sup>15</sup> flared up my self-awareness<sup>16</sup>, a hyper-awareness of how I appear in the meetings as un-present or tensely aimless.

I studied the shapes in the model in front of me. The space, mass, shadows, edges and gestures of the form suggested multiple understandings of the initial past experience. The shapes I recut or creases I pressed presented a different framing. In the process of making, the models and pieces of writing “suggested”, indicated, presented, and told me things. The act of reflect-

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ing and negotiating in the making became new framings and reframings of the situation, letting me care for my misalignments in material, felt ways.

How did this fine, fixed point come to melt? Naming the aching and pressure reminded me of my habit to suppress or push past the gaze rather than open up what I dreaded would be a draining, endless conversation. It was a necessary and welcome re-familiarizing myself with my habit. Putting the model together let me see what it feels like when I do linger and stay in the aches and quietude. While I would otherwise suppress the residual aches from the meeting that day, I was able to make visible how it felt to name the details of this event in the first place and it grounded me in what I already know: “the appearance of aimlessness might conceal a truth of deliberation, strategy, and care” (Bruce, 2019, p. 352). Making the empty spaces, surfaces, and edges in the model itself was how I externalized and made visible my past experience. The model was not a replica of a physical room or objects. Nor was it an interpretation of previously written theory. The process did let me tangibly trace critical theories in the contours of the quiet context of the situation.

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*And in this space, where do we meet?*

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**Kate:** Myriam, when you write about the tight space you give yourself in the model making process, what role does theory play in the translational process? Or your understanding of what it is that you were doing in giving yourself that tight space?

**Myriam:** I think in that materializing bit I brought a kind of being-knowing. Like an epistemology or way of knowing. I put faith in that and know that theory is in what I make. When I look to a past event, I’ll be able to find theory because I’m investigating the pressure on Black life. That kind of material, immaterial, spatial orientation is supported by written critical



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theory. And Kate, for you, how does theory come out when you revisit a past event? How does that work?

**Kate:** I often take copious notes in the moment. Detailed accounts of what is going on around and inside me. In this instance, that was like four lines, but in themselves are really an outpouring. They are searching beyond the material facts, to make sense and take care in this moment and are things I'm unsure about. I still need to go and take time with that uncertainty.

**Myriam:** Is there a relationship with that stack of books by your desk that you reference or while scrolling through PDF documents, or does the theory come in other ways?

**Kate:** Taking time with that uncertainty could be very textual. Scrolling a PDF, picking up a book. Or it might be sitting down and having a conversation or sending an email. It's a way of taking more time and also working with resources outside of myself. But those four lines are also how theory comes in. What is happening right now? Explicitly? Implicitly? What is uncomfortable? What needs attention here? These notes are not data in the conventional sense. For example, they do not serve to "evidence" an account of what occurred. Rather, they are a way of calibrating to the moment. They might express illegibility or intensity, reveal anxieties, or a state of total distraction. In the moment, it might not be possible to hold all of that, but then sometimes, like here, there is the opportunity to revisit.

**Myriam:** It's also fitting having Stacy talk about this, because you're the one who first posed questions about theory and practice to us through [the research lab we are involved in].

**Stacy:** With regard to living with theory, I'm really interested in the way that backwards-forwards movement of revisiting comes together in the practice and in the writing process. If care, as Ahmed puts it, is about looking after, then theory asks to look again. Our writing also looks after things that stick or come along with us. We look after the effects of those encounters, in our bodies, in ourselves. It is, as Ahmed says, the painstaking work of looking after how we might do things differently.

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**Kate:** In asking us to look again, to look after, or even to ‘rehearse the future’, it also becomes an invitation to critically understand how we are working with people.

**Stacy:** And I wondered how the work that we’ve done helps us think about working with other people— participants and friends—as well as the work that we three are doing here, on the page, and in conversation.

**Myriam:** It’s interesting how those things come together. They bump up against each other or highlight things in each other’s personal accounts. Like specifically, the way that we may be positioned “between” work or individuals. And sometimes we’re in a meeting or workshop as someone is directly impacted or caring for others who are directly impacted. We saw, for instance, one of us were part of the majority of the participants who are cisgendered women and white. And our link with others can be tucked away and aching. Like, the way “she’s there”, and has “tucked her confessions down my throat” is found in the endnotes. We haven’t explicitly compared or drawn lines between our relationships to those we write about. But I think the way that they sit next to each other does some good work across the intervals of the essay.

**Kate:** Relationships and how we work with people play a central role in each of these stories, but it’s not doing the same work. An experience I have been frustrated with is when theory is defined in a specific role in creative work. It comes after the fact as a justification or validation for the work being “critical”. Being in the space of this essay, and being able to write alongside different stories, practices and writing styles really helps me appreciate all the different ways theory supports ways of being, with our work and with people.

**Stacy:** That’s also what theory is for—a space to enter the work, though not to validate or debate. I was struck by the moment early in the essay when Myriam says the writing is about how it feels to acknowledge what happened in the first place, rather than what was said and who

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was there. It made me think of Judith Butler's giving an account of oneself as an ethical relation (Butler, 2005). You can't give an account of yourself without doing that work with other people. In this essay, we are giving an account of practice as it's happening and unfolding, and we are making ourselves and others vulnerable and accountable in a purposeful way.

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**Myriam:** Maybe it's a nice place to then think about how that matters specifically in creative artistic work in particular.

**Kate:** How does being a practitioner of critical theory mean I come into a space? When I come into creative practice with other people? The ways theory allows us, or asks us, to acknowledge, account for, and create relations is both a practice and a way of being in the world. This makes it entangled with all the other ways we are in the world. It is not separate from how we make our coffee in the morning, sit on a meditation cushion or watch a movie.

**Myriam:** There's something about how theory and practice are in relation or mutually influence each other. And then there's a bit about critical theory itself. It always reminds me of what Black American artist Sam Gilliam (2020) was asked in an interview: "How is abstract art political?" And he says, "It messes with you." I always feel like critical theory sweeps me up, flips my world upside down and makes the conditions where I have to settle back in. But, of course, that settling is temporary.

**Stacy:** And so, if I think about this special issue and the pulling together of the words critical, artistic, and practice, I think about practice not instrumentally, but instead as using theory as a call to action. And I quite like that tangle of thinking about what the "thinking part" is and what the "feeling part" is. The closer we can get to showing how those things are entangled and emergent, the better we can take care of them. And the better we can look after them, ourselves and each other.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Loveless (2019) uses the terms artistic research and research creation, in conversation with other related terms used for critical artistic research across geographies, including practice-based and practice-led research (Dean & Smith, 2009), practice as research (Barrett & Bolt, 2019; Nelson, 2013) and arts-based research (Leavy, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>As I see her there, I feel tenseness in my body. The relationship between us was always at a distance, maintained by the confessions she tucked down in my throat (Zhang, 2017), maintained by her intimacy as a soft-spoken, white damsel in distress (Accapadi, 2007, Holland 2012). I, Myriam, use endnotes to intentionally take up the offering, “I [pay] attention to the footnotes because I believe that Indigenous Women and Women of Color are always writing to each other in our footnotes” (Tuck, 2013, 88:09). My politics in this essay is in the invisible—in what is left unsaid. I use the body text that is exposed and above ground for content to be consumed. I use the endnotes as a slightly safer ground, intended for the reader to come to terms with everything they expect to consume of folks like myself. What appear to be discrepancies and gaps in my writing for some act as an affirming beacon for those

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of us who see ourselves in bits and pieces of the scene described above.

<sup>3</sup>Quiet can be synonymous with being motionless, complicit, silent. However, it should not be mistaken with silence (Quashie, 2012). In *Black life*, it instead describes “a stay against the dominance of the social world” (2012, p. 6). I argue that quiet is the volume at which our dreams, devastations, fights, fears, and vulnerabilities, make themselves lived and felt. Quashie offers that, “The idea of quiet, then, can shift attention to what is interior. . . . It has its own sovereignty. . . . Anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life” (2012, p. 6).

<sup>4</sup>This work is part of a multi-year engagement with co-design researchers and practitioners to support a transitioning the organisation from a needs-based to rights-based approach of service delivery. The collaborative workshops include visual mapping, storytelling, self-reflection, equity training and embodied exercises as part of the scaffolding of individual and organisational change.

<sup>5</sup>In transitioning to a collaborative service model led by lived experience, we ask participants to engage in an ongoing process of personal examination and accountability for one’s politicized self in relation to the environment, service recipients, and work. This includes understanding how identity and power operate through you and your work and having a willingness to be with the discomfort that may arise. These are concepts that can feel concrete when learned or acknowledged, but experientially difficult to embrace.

In my (Kate) own practice, knowledge of theories, concepts, and histories inform my work. However, it is not static, unassailable or how-to knowledge. It is entangled in relation with real-world contexts, shaped, performed, embraced and eluded. I use the endnotes to call attention to how this knowledge is enacted, contradicted or extended in practice context. These endnotes connect the story to theory in a dynamic relationship of alignment, imperfections and gaps.

<sup>6</sup>The workshops include writing, filmmaking, visual arts and performance-based activities.

<sup>7</sup>The relationship among our everyday experience, research, and data is, for us, a matter of doing scholarship that brings together the concrete detail of the personal and the potential of conceptual frameworks that help us understand how experiences are “enlarged and/or constrained by relations of power,” alongside how “stories animate and become the change we seek in the world.” I, Stacy, use endnotes to point to how certain feminist new materialist, affect, and other critical theories throw light on the power dynamics at work in the stories of practice I share, while leaving open what these stories might (or might not) set in motion or shift for me and for you, the reader. I see the endnotes as a kind of breadcrumb trail that strings together how critical reflection on everyday moments of practice becomes theory (i.e., a framework for experiencing and analyzing those moments) as well as how theory becomes the practice of critically reflecting the everyday moments of doing research.

<sup>8</sup>In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2016) writes, “theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin” (p. 10). When theory stays in touch with our experiences in the world, it helps us get closer to enacting care and “minding the gaps” between research and data and artistic practice, the institution and everyday experience, and the complexities of the personal and the professional in ways that promote our collective “health and safety” (Ahmed, 2020b, para. 29).

<sup>9</sup>This requires both individuals and organisations to be attuned to balancing these interrelated needs. Angela Davis shares from her experience that care is a skill one “also has to learn, how to take care of herself, himself, themselves” (Davis, 2018, 0:07). How are environments and relationships set up to attend to care on multiple levels? What training is provided to know how to care, and how to ask for care is provided?

<sup>10</sup>Ahmed (2014) describes, “When a whole world is organised to promote your survival, from health to education, from the walls designed to keep your residence safe, from the paths that ease your travel, you do not have

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become so inventive to survive. You do not have to be seen as the recipient of welfare because the world has promoted your welfare. The benefits you receive are given as entitlements, perhaps even as birth rights. Racial capitalism is a health system: a drastically unequal distribution of bodily vulnerabilities” (para. 6). This does not mean that people who are the beneficiaries of invisible structures are not in need of care, and are not also recipients in models of radical self-care. However the reality of these structures requires a perspective on the ethics of care and allocation of resources in relation to larger contexts.

<sup>11</sup>And how do the professional job titles and small squares of faces belie the actual diversity of participants in the room?

<sup>12</sup>Ahmed (2016) writes that people doing ‘diversity work’—the work of addressing everyday injustices and inadequacies—are often told to “get over it” (p. 156) and “let it go” (p. 141). Ahmed encourages us to not get over it when it’s not over (p. 262). Care work is diversity work in this sense—a recognition of and commitment to the idea that some things can and should be changed and opened up. There are tools and materials we can use to open up spaces for dialogue and for bodies and histories that are often left out or “registered as impositions on [others] who were here first” (p. 113). Diversity and care workers “end up challenging what gives security, warmth, place and position” (p. 113) so that they might create spaces of security, warmth, place and position for others, and for themselves.

<sup>13</sup>Schmidt (2015) connects affect theory and devised performance practice to ask, “what is it that moves us to act” (p. 5), particularly in moments when we are faced with representations of suffering. The space of rehearsal is a space in which we become aware of our own awareness through the act of discovery. For Schmidt and for us, rehearsal is a space in which critical theory and care are lived and enacted in modes that are material and felt.

<sup>14</sup>“We are not talking about a generic ‘self’ here, an abstract individual, but about a self which is grounded in particular political histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability. Self-care in a world that denies you care means revolting against the unequal distribution of life and death, health and illness, well-being and suffering, of care-giving and receiving roles, as fixed by patriarchy, white supremacy, global capitalism, and other systems of domination and exploitation” (Michaeli, 2017, p. 53).

<sup>15</sup>Unnamed.

<sup>16</sup>Alice Walker writes, “For not only is he in a position to see his own world and its close community . . . , but also he is capable of knowing with remarkably silent accuracy the people who make up the larger world that surrounds and suppresses his own” (1983, p. 19).