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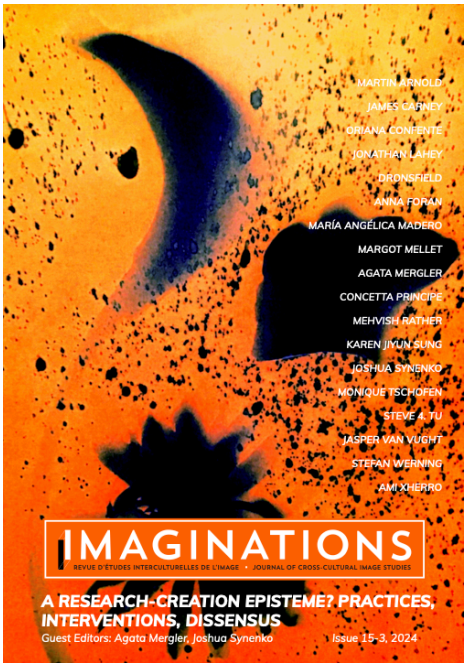

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A Research-Creation Episteme? Practices, Interventions, Dissensus
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IN (A) CRITICAL CONDITION: RECONSIDERATIONS OF KRISIS, CRITIQUE, AND THEORIA THROUGH RESEARCH CO-CREATION

MONIQUE TSCHOFEN

This paper explores the transformative potential of feminist research-creation through the lens of krisis and collaborative world-building, positioning research-creation as both a method and an ethic of care. Revisiting the ancient Greek concept of krisis—a moment of judgment and discernment—as a framework for inquiry, the author contrasts her prior scholarly work embedded in traditional frameworks of critique, often rooted in metaphors of violence, with the reparative methodologies developed through her work with the Decameron Collective. Over four years of iterative collaboration, the Collective produced award-winning multimodal digital projects Decameron 2.0 and Memory Eternal, which use storytelling,

Cet article explore le potentiel transformateur de la recherche-création féministe à travers le prisme de la krisis et de la construction collaborative de mondes, en positionnant la recherche-création comme à la fois une méthode et une éthique du care. En revisitant le concept grec antique de krisis—un moment de jugement et de discernement—comme cadre d'investigation, l'autrice met en contraste ses travaux académiques antérieurs, ancrés dans des cadres traditionnels de critique souvent associés à des métaphores de violence, avec les méthodologies réparatrices développées dans le cadre de son travail avec le Decameron Collective. Au cours de quatre années de collaboration itérative, le collectif a produit les projets numériques multimodaux primés Decameron 2.0 et Memory Eternal, qui utilisent la narration, la co-création et la cu-

co-creation, and curation to respond creatively to crises from the pandemic to climate change. This paper argues that research co-creation can redefine krisis as a site of generative potential, where making and theorizing intertwine to produce new forms of knowledge and connection. By centering relationality, materiality, and feminist ethics, the Collective's work moves beyond solitary modes of inquiry to establish a collaborative, care-driven practice. Situating research-creation within philosophical traditions of theoria and contemporary feminist thought, the paper highlights a number of ways such collaborative creation and curation can sustain communities, foster epistemological innovation, and offer reparative responses to crises. The paper ultimately positions research co-creation and co-authorship integrating storytelling, digital design, and collective reflection in slow scholarship as a vital methodology for navigating complex global challenges and reimagining the role of scholarship in a world facing ongoing crises.

ration pour répondre de manière créative à des crises allant de la pandémie au changement climatique. Cet article soutient que la co-création en recherche peut redéfinir la krisis comme un espace de potentiel génératif, où fabrication et théorisation s'entrelacent pour produire de nouvelles formes de savoir et de connexion. En centrant la relationalité, la matérialité et les éthiques féministes, le travail du collectif dépasse les modes d'enquête solitaires pour établir une pratique collaborative et orientée vers le care. En situant la recherche-création dans les traditions philosophiques de la theoria et la pensée féministe contemporaine, l'article met en lumière plusieurs manières dont cette création et curation collaborative peuvent soutenir les communautés, encourager l'innovation épistémologique et proposer des réponses réparatrices aux crises. L'article positionne finalement la co-création et la co-écriture en recherche, intégrant narration, design numérique et réflexion collective dans une érudition lente, comme une méthodologie essentielle pour naviguer à travers les défis globaux complexes et réimaginer le rôle de la recherche dans un monde confronté à des crises continues.

> "But sometimes we need to forget and unlearn what we think matters. We need to rearrange our sensorium and sensemaking practices and disrupt disciplinary thought styles and ways of seeing so that other worlds within this world can come into view. Art making helps me break the frame so that new phe-

> nomena come to matter" (Natasha Meyers in Truman, "Intimacies" 232-233)

This paper explores research-creation from two positions in time. I re-consider my own earlier theoretical writing about research-creation methods in light of my more recent experience working in research-co-creation modes with the Decameron Collective, a group of nine scholar-creators who have engaged in digital worldbuilding since the start of the SARS 2 pandemic (Jolene Armstrong, Kelly Egan, Lai-Tze Fan, Caitlin Fisher, Angela Joosse, Kari Maaren, Siobhan O'Flynn, and Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof). From an institutional research standpoint, the work has been highly productive. Over a four-year period, we have produced two digital storyworlds (*Decameron 2.0*, 2022, WebGL, and *Memory Eternal*, 2023, Oculus Quest 2) and an exhibition (*Deformances as Unlinking*, 2024, Web) selected for juried exhibition in Italy, Portugal, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom; three refereed articles; fifteen presentations and workshops given to international audiences; and have been awarded a SSHRC IDG grant, including shortlists, and honourable mentions and awards for electronic literature and digital humanities prizes. What I ask here are more modest questions about the value of this work, designed to uncover the dissensus in my own corpus: What did my early scholarly work sifting through the history of thinking about doing and making miss? What was I blind to because my knowledge was purely theoretical? What has been surprising in the work we are now doing? Four years of weekly dialogue and co-writing with my collaborators have left indelible marks on my thinking. This paper reflects theirs.

ACT I: THE BEFORE TIMES

My career falls into the before times and the after times. In the before times, I was a theorist of theory and a critic of critique, and theorized critical making in solo and co-authored publications. I came of intellectual age in the discipline of Comparative Literature in the 1990s, after the "theory wars," at a time when ideological critique was understood as the very necessary goal

of scholarship. However, despite finding in the language of pure theory (Theoria) a form of complete happiness (Aristotle would call it "teleian eudaimonia" (Ward 242)), I developed a deep suspicion of what Rita Felski described as the "combative idiom" (21) in the language of theory, that is, its casual masculinism and militarism, particularly in relation to its conception of epistemological change.[2] It wasn't only the casual praise of Sadism by postmodern theorists that perturbed.[3] Rather, it was the uncritical deployment of metaphors of violence in relation to ideals of truth. Rodolphe Gasché, in *The Honor of Thinking*, noted that truth must be "violently shaken" by the theorist, and "torn from one's everyday setting" (267). Slavoj Žižek, in a 2014 essay called "The Poetic Torture-House of Language: How Poetry Relates to Ethnic Cleansing," wrote:

> "...in order to get the truth to speak, it is not enough to suspend the subject's active intervention and let language itself speak — as Elfriede Jelinek put it with extraordinary clarity: 'Language should be tortured to tell the truth.' It should be twisted, denaturalized, extended, condensed, cut, and reunited, made to work against itself. Language as the 'big Other' is not an agent of wisdom to whose message we should attune ourselves, but a place of cruel indifference and stupidity. The most elementary form of torturing one's language is called poetry." (566)

This language of force goes unremarked because of the origins of the term critique (*krinein*—taking apart, separating, severing, and judging) in crisis (*krisis*). As Wendy Brown explains, in ancient Athens, *krisis* was originally a "jurisprudential term identified with the art of making distinctions, an art considered essential to judging and rectifying an alleged disorder in or of the democracy" (Brown 5). This process of sifting and judging was linked to a conception of critical inquiry and truth that scholars such as Idelbar Avelar, Edward Peters, and Page DuBois note has its origins in practices of torture of slaves. The Greek ideal of truth (*aletheia*) conceived of as a "dragging, and bringing into light something hidden" (Avelar 29) at the basis of our sense of critical inquiry as a practice of interrogation, leads, accord-

ing to DuBois, "almost inevitably to conceiving of the body of the other as the site from which truth can be produced, and to using violence if necessary to extract that truth" (DuBois 6).[4]

How, in times of crisis, I wondered, might a practice of theoretical critique avoid this violence and "affirm life, affirm value, and above all affirm possibilities in the present and future" (Brown 15)? In my scholarly writing, I turned to centre the artwork's modes of knowing. My driving research question became how an artwork could be understood as an *act* of theory.[5] I sought to reconceptualize the relationship between theorist and theory in material, epistemological, and relational terms by returning to the pre-Socratic idea of *theoria*, which yoked two practices—wandering and wondering—to understand the relationship between the thinker and the objects of contemplation as a kind of kinship.[6] The touchstones of my analyses were a series of questions, all measured against the backdrop of a range of critiques of modernity: How can art's shaping of concepts un-think and reform the epistemological frameworks around which instrumental modes of knowing and thinking are constructed? How can art reflect and prompt reflection on the circumstances that limit action and transformation, or, alternately, establish the foundations for a mode of action in the real world? How can art develop a concrete language, anchored in the everyday, that restores "dwelling" in an age of displacements, bringing embodied and affective experience back to what we call thinking? How can art find what is redemptive in philosophy's conceptual homelessness through the articulation of new vernaculars? By studying art's ways of thinking, I thought, one could find one's way to an understanding of what it means to ponder, perceive, and act in a world in which we live together.

Seeking to critique the practice of critique, I had read and taught Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique,* Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam," as well as Patai and Corral's *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent,* and Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*. Inspired, I organized a panel at a conference with Nataleah Hunter-Young, Daniel Browne, and Lai-Tze Fan, scholars with robust critical art practices, to talk about the issues raised by their works. We then

co-wrote an article where I posited that critical *making* such as theirs had a capacity to reform critique:

> "We consider critical making as a way of reforming the scholarly tradition of critique that runs from Kant through Marx, the Frankfurt School, the poststructuralists, feminists, postcolonialists, queer theorists, and so on. Critical makers' work retains critique's emancipatory aims, while challenging what Adorno identifies as traditional scholarly critique's arrogant 'claim to a more profound knowledge of the object' achieved through distance (Butler). Judith Butler writes about how critique needs to refuse to be separated from 'the social world at hand" because not doing so would be "a move which deratifies the results of its own operation' (Butler). By forging intimate forms of exchange with their interlocutors (readers/viewers/audiences), based on closeness rather than (purportedly objective) critical distance, critical makers leave their readers/audience free to have responses that are powerfully ambiguous." (Tschofen et al., "Reforming Critique" 135)

My three co-authors described the relationship between their own art practice and crisis. Hunter-Young discussed her work *OverSight*, which responded to the crisis of Black death, responding to the phenomenon she calls "e-Lynching"—the "digital recording, circulation, and consumption of police brutality videos on social media" (142). Browne discussed his film *Memento Mori* in the context of the climate crisis. And Fan discussed many works including a collaborative locative media project set in Montreal's Champ des Possibles that addresses "the city's issues of sustainability, including toxicity, settler culture, and the death of indigenous plants and animals because of climate change" (152).

What I tried to argue was that works like these centred the relationships between theoretical thinking, the thinker, and what Hannah Arendt calls, in *The Human Condition*, the "world-in-common" (139) through a practice rooted in *care*. Like critique, critical making, as I then understood it, emerged from and evidenced concern with justice, but unlike "pure theory," its address was intimate and actions

material and concrete. My proposal in this paper on critical making was a corrective to Latour's and Felski's respective critiques of critiques, which involved

> "reconsidering the terms of the dyadic relationship [of theorist and theory] and replacing it with a tetrad: a) the theorist-maker; b) their made (rather than merely contemplated) object; c) their reader/audience/ spectator, who meets them in an encounter over an object with its own facticity and materiality; and d) the world-in-common, that is, the social and material space in which these theorists, viewers, and made objects are embedded. Under this alternative model, the theorist seeking to generate new modes of critique is the artist. Their artwork in turn is at once the theory itself, the object of theory's scrutiny, and its salvo from obfuscation and irrelevance. The reader/spectator—the person to whom the theory is addressed and whom the theorist intends to care with and care for—produces from the made-theoretically-rich object 'arenas in which to gather'." (139)

Looking at this now, I see myself reaching for what new materialism would call "mattering" (Cheah; Jones; Palmer) as a way to connect the materiality of form to relationality. However, inasmuch as I was not writing this as a theorist-maker but rather as an outsider, I had not appreciated the transformative power when the theorist-maker is not a monad but rather a feminist Collective and the world-in-which-to-gather is a prolonged and critical crisis.

ACT II: THE AFTER TIMES

Since March of 2020, I have met with some or all of nine other scholar-creators almost every week in a practice of slow scholarship anchored in storytelling and thought experimentation. What I have found as a scholar who is a middle-aged human whose time and attention is shaped by caregiving relationships with elders and a child through this co-creative work is what Nicholas Bourriaud calls "a way of living and mode of action in the existing real" that both expands and undermines my prior ways of thinking (13). My

new guiding research question is: In "complex environments" (Chapman and Sawchuk) can our work (of art and theory) be an act of caring and giving? This in turn builds into a series of other questions: How can the collaborative co-production of artworks generate a way of knowing (an epistemology), a way of building communities and connectedness (an ethics), a way of reorganizing work (a praxis), and yield a rich "living archive" (Sabiescu 2020)? What follows is an attempt to distill some wisdom from this work.

1. Co-creation and Curation

According to The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), for a work to be considered research-creation, the creation process must be situated in the research activity, but this is not how many practitioners understand the far more fluid and mutually inter-informing relationship between thinking and making. The work of the Decameron Collective began at a moment of global crisis: the first pandemic lockdown in March of 2020 when the world felt extracted from time. It continued through Black Lives Matter protests, the start of the war against Ukraine, and through fire seasons so severe the smoke from Alberta muddied European skies. Initially, the group's intention was to reread Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1349-51) and recreate it in the present day. In Boccaccio's work, seven women and three men removed themselves from a Florentine cityscape full of the horrors of the Black Plague, where bodies are rotting in the street, to a *locus amoenus*—a beautiful walled garden—where they told each other stories to while away the time. This space could hold feasts and laughter. It was a space to breathe and create.

From our own backyards and dining room tables over Zoom calls every Friday, we emulated Boccaccio's narrators and began to use storytelling as a means of survival (see fig. 2).[7] Simply making time for a Zoom call each week felt like a commitment to keeping life moving forward. We chattered about our worries, and then took some quiet time to create something. We wrote poems, drew pictures, pressed flowers, cultured sourdough, and showed what we made to each other, each sharing an opening of worlds. These activ-

Figure 1: Manuscript pages from the Decameron in the Decameron 2.0 (2022) by the Decameron Collective.

ities existed outside of the demands of our work and family spaces, and so while the work we did was inflected by our scholarly and teaching as well as our personal lives, we experienced this time as a radical reprieve from being pulled under by them.[8]

The idea of disseminating the fruits of our Friday creative time came as an afterthought. We had amassed a large body of works and sensed that there was something important to share. When we first began thinking about the value of the work we had done together, it was from within literary and artistic rather than research frameworks.[9] We contemplated producing an anthology, collections of chapbooks, and one-of-a-kind fluxus boxes featuring tiny music boxes and perfumes. It now seems clear that this impulse to frame the work as creative rather than scholarly reflects less on our conception of the intellectual value of the work we produced than on the difference between the affective registers of storytelling, which is intimate and reciprocal, and research, which is generally neither.

We decided to create a digital world to hold the works we had been creating because digital spaces could best accommodate multimodal

Figure 2: The Decameron Collective (from left to right: Caitlin Fisher, Monique Tschofen, Kari Maaren; Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Jolene Armstrong, Angela Joosse; Lai-Tze Fan, Siobhan O'Flynn, Kelly Egan).

forms, and it was with this next step that our practice evolved into something richer and more connected to research-creation. Practically, we needed to adapt oral and written works for digital presentation, and we needed to design a space to hold them. We divided our body of work into thematically-linked collections, and then asked for volunteers to serve as curators to oversee their adaptation into digital spaces. Four Decameron Collective members (Jolene Armstrong, Caitlin Fisher, Angela Joosse, and myself) collaborated with our designer/developers Angela Joosse and Hendrick de Haan to design the aesthetic feel and layout for individual galleries radiating from a central courtyard that we had envisioned in dialogue with the illuminated manuscript tradition of Boccaccio's *Decameron.* To accelerate the timeline, as curators, we took upon ourselves to adapt some of the group's works on our own, and then collaborated with Collective members in the adaptation of other works.

Without exactly intending to, the collective had made the economy of the gift into a cornerstone of a methodology that drew together and enriched the emotional and intellectual work we were doing.

Our practice, which hung on listening and being-with, meant that we made things with but also for each other. Jolene Armstrong and I, with support from the entire Collective, later summarized this method thus:

> "The methodology is strongly feminist and can be summarized as a series of steps create - collaborate - curate - convey to communities. Creation begins with a method that Lauren Fournier (2021) calls 'autotheory', which 'integrate[s] the personal and the conceptual, the theoretical and the autobiographical, the creative and the critical, in ways attuned to interdisciplinary, feminist histories' (7). Works then pass through a collaborative process modeled on quilting bees or Renaissance workshops that reactivates a spirit present in medieval cultures prior to the notions of authorship and fixed creations conserved in a physical medium or archives that restrain us today. Following collaboration, the curation stage begins, as works are brought into the digital storyworld through a process that involves dialogue about how to activate themes, forms, contexts, and meaningfully construct users' experience. Finally, we convey the results of our inquiry to communities of researchers and arts practitioners, articulating the research creation illuminates." (Armstrong and Tschofen, "DIDS")[10]

I had previously discussed Anne Carson's theory of the gift from her book *Economy of the Unlost* in relation to her poem about Betty Goodwin in my 2013 essay "Drawing out a New Image of Thought" (223), and rediscovered this discussion when I was attempting to theorize our work with the Collective. Writing about ancient poetry, Carson draws from the work of Marcel Mauss to compare two modes of exchange: commodification and gift giving (12). Commodity form, Carson says, "fragments and dehumanizes human being" (19). A gift, in contrast, is an act of communication that offers "an extension of the interior of the giver, both in space and in time, into the interior of the receiver" (18). A gift, she expands, "has both economic and spiritual content, is personal and reciprocal, and depends on a relationship that endures over time" (12). I had seen Carson activating an understanding of language as an intimate force, but also issuing a chal-

lenge to patterns of thinking that dehumanize the other. In performing and then adapting works with and for each other, the Decameron Collective was doing the same.

2. Crisis and Critique: Care is Repair

> "The iris opens and it is a Zoom call, and all of you are there. Each week this happens, and all of you are arranged on the screen's grid. Sometimes your order changes. Sometimes some of you are missing. The weeks proceed. The poetry, stories, photographs and films, the accumulated wisdom of these meetings are hard to capture in a 20 second scene, so there needs to be music perhaps, or scented oil. It is clear that there is so much to save that we try to put it into a box. When you open the lid, the light shines out." (Monique Tschofen, "Bright Spots," *Decameron 2.0*)

If a problem of critique is that it embeds a language of violence, Wendy Brown notes that in its ancient and medieval contexts, there is a connection between *krisis,* critique, and repair. She recalls the

> "sustained linking of the objective and subjective dimensions of critique, the ways in which a worldly event or phenomenon, whether a collapsed empire or a diseased body, connects a specific condition with an immediate need to comprehend by sifting, sorting, or separating its elements, to judge, and to respond to it." (7)

Brown explains: "critique as political *krisis* promises to restore continuity by repairing or renewing the justice that gives an order the prospect of continuity, that indeed makes it continuous" (7).

The Decameron Collective's generation of a digital storyworld engaged with *krisis* through *kritik* in this spirit of restoring continuity at a moment of truncated time. Exploratory and aleatory, our work became emergent, auto-reflective, speculative, and always prospective.[11] We sifted, sorted, and judged our experiences, and responded aesthetically and interpersonally in dialogue with each other, and in dialogue with other pandemic texts. Justice is often considered to be

public while care is considered private (Van Stichel). And so, with Manuela Puig de la Bellacasa, I turned to Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher's definition of care as including

> "everything that we do to maintain, *continue and repair* 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web." (Tronto 1993, 103, emphasis added, in Puig de la Bellacasa, 4)

Our creations, collaborations, and curation, rooted in the economy of the gift and engaged through a spirit of care, consistently turned to this ancient idea that storying was life-sustaining.

Angela Joosse's Gallery of Spells offered phenomenological thought-experiments that conjured the possibilities of the poetic "as if" (Skibsrud). Caitlin Fisher's Gallery of Portals envisioned rich epistemologies of hope in the form of passageways connecting what was known to what was not-yet-known. And Jolene Armstrong's Gallery of Curiosities envisioned a home for things and feelings and experiences that didn't fit anywhere else, legitimizing the unexpected and inexplicable. Like Natasha Meyers, my collaborators worked "to call other worlds into being, to conjure other worlds within this world" offering "art, experiment and radical disruption to learn other ways to see, feel and know" (Meyers, "How to Grow").

The theme of the gallery I curated for the Decameron 2.0 was women's friendships, motherhood, and sisterhood. I took an epigraph from the opening of Boccaccio's *Decameron*:

> "The pleasant conversation and invaluable consolation certain friends provided me gave me such relief that I am absolutely convinced they are the reason I did not die." (Boccaccio, *The Decameron*)

Boccaccio underlined in his preface that the storytellers' stories will "teach them how to recognize what they should avoid, and likewise what they should pursue."

What did our stories teach me?

A practice of love.

Vulnerability.

Reciprocity.

Joyfulness.

3. In "complex environments," only ever start with love

> "The question is no longer of submitting, or not, art to philosophy but of understanding that in order to reach another philosophy, a philosophy appropriate to humanity as formed by beings-in-relation, we must begin by transforming our energy through a continuous artistic process. [...] Art is more critical than morality for entering into a culture of human as a being-in-relation." (Irigaray, "Ecstasy" 55).

Natalie Loveless and Carrie Smith have written about how "feminist collaboration can work to resculpt academic political spaces" and "argue for the value of insurgent, modest, local modes of collaborative resistance that operate in the cracks of the neoliberal university," "responsive in its capacity to nurture generosity, care, and creativity" (272). Together they invite readers to be attentive to the conditions necessary for any true critical collaboration, listening for and attuning to what Sarah Sharma has called "brokenness" (Loveless and Smith 272).

The importance of love and its cognates to a well-lived life is well known to artists, and love continually appears in the writing about co-creation and research creation. Creating together is vivifying; it resurrects love of ideas, of materials, of feelings and sensations, love of experiments, of being vulnerable and sharing, of learning and growing, and it cultivates love for others. I considered many kinds of love: *philosophia* (love of wisdom); "polydisciplinamory" (Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art*); "attunement" (Natalie Loveless and Carrie Smith, "Attunement in the Cracks" 272); "a politics of relation rather than negation" (Rita Felski, *Limits of Critique* 147); and "care ethics" (Manuela Puig de la Belacasa, *Matters of Care*). Hannah

Arendt, in *The Human Condition,* centred the *homo faber* who creates a lasting human world with durable objects. Engaged in *making* with the Collective, I brought Arendt's *homo faber* into dialogue with relational anthropology's idea of *homo amans* (see Van Ness et al.).

However, I observed that there isn't really an academic language to describe the condition of simultaneously being strangers and sisters, having incommensurable experiences, frameworks, and perspectives, but being nevertheless, at least along some axes, of one mind, building out one place from many spaces. Siobhan O'Flynn and Jolene Armstrong turned to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of polyvocality. My previous discussion of Martin Buber became pertinent to my own understanding of the Collective's "method" (create – collaborate – curate – convey to communities):

> "Buber describes in I and Thou the transformation from a relationship of 'I—It' which reduces the other to an object and subjects it to the blind will of the 'I,' towards mutual, reciprocal relationships Buber terms 'I—You' (*Ich—Du*) that are grounded in dialogue and based on the recognition of the other. As Buber posits: 'I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You'." (Tschofen, "Drawing Out" 238)

For me, the experience of curating and co-creating *felt* different from the initial experience of creating. It was expansive, not discrete, led by heart not mind. Curating, from the Latin "cura": "to be an object of care or attention; to have a care for, take care of, attend to, to be anxious about, bestow pains upon," involves making space/s for others (Lewis). In designing digital gallery spaces to hold the mutuality of "I—Thou" relationships, I realized that my past scholarly inquiries into epistemology and co-organizing work of the Media and Materialities Working Group of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association were really about ways of *making room* for new ways of *thinking, together* (what we described as "le penser ensemble"). The difference between the mutuality, reciprocity, and expansiveness of our ensemble practices and the "forcework" (Ziarek) embedded in the tradition of critique could not have been more stark, or, I felt, important. Erin Manning writes "If 'art' is understood as a 'way' it is not

yet about an object, a form, or content" (Manning 53). We found our art's "ways" to hang in the prepositional. Our work became a feeling *about*, *for*, or *with*; a reaching *to*, a drawing *in*; making space and holding time *for*.

I treated my task of curating and co-creating like a sacred trust, thinking about the ways I could safely hold and expand the experiences my collaborators had shared with me. Every aesthetic and practical decision I made was designed to honour the intricate webs of relationships and experience that our weekly conversations had brought about. As I designed my galleries, poring over the medieval tradition of illuminated manuscripts for inspiration, I continually found myself dwelling upon works that centered reverence, ritual, and gathering. I sought to understand the sacred in the architecture of cathedrals so I could work its principles into the space that held my collaborator's works as well as my digital adaptation of the works themselves.

In adapting Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof's intimate story about emergency hospital visits during the pandemic in the form of an electronic book, I reached for visual metaphors for connectivity, and she gifted them to me in EEGs and photographs of the branches and roots of trees. I wondered, what happens if we situate her story in an arched room with a stained-glass window made to feel like a medieval church? What if we bring the rose window motif onto the page so the insides reflect the outsides? What happens if the coloured glass of the windows was made of histological stains showing the neurodegeneration of epilepsy? Would such a design open new ways of considering the overlays between the sacred and scientific—two models for thinking about healing? Could it support new ways of thinking about mind?

From my own *krisis*, I yearned for the kind of clarity achieved not by erasure but rather by depth and connectiveness. While *kritik* means sift and separate, I found that digital tools were inviting me to work palimpsestically in a logic of inclusion, of both/and rather than either/or. My short films and photographs layered still photos, video, and sound from multiple group members over top of manuscript

Figure 3: Left three images, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Covid Stories, Maternal Worries. Book design Monique Tschofen. Right, the Rose Window alcove where the book was installed. Decameron 2.0 Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

Figure 4: Left, Monique Tschofen, Being is Said in Many Ways. Middle and right, compositions with Kari Maaren's wildlife photographs layered onto medieval manuscripts. Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

pages so that they bled into one another, each layer retaining some distinctiveness but becoming a compound part of a whole that inscribed its genealogy.

This aesthetic of the palimpsest, drawn from my reading of the medieval tradition, I later reflected,

> "is part of an ethical praxis that mirrors our vision of feminist ethics and communities of care. Each layer, a moment of a pandemic world seen through our eyes and articulated through language, is a gift from one of us to another, and as they are stacked over each other, no one obstructing another, they materialize the kinds of intimacies that traditional, sedi-

> mented epistemology has been unable to imagine or engage. Articulations of experience and thoughts in times of crisis can never be fully scraped away, nor should they. Instead, as the *Decameron 2.0* shows, they can conjoin such that new modes of knowing can shine through." (Tschofen et al., "Speculative Archives and World Building")

4. Philosophia: For the Love of Wisdom

> "The wisdom of love is perhaps the first meaning of the word 'philosophy.'" (Irigaray, *The Way of Love* 1)

One of the most important and generative insights from the field of research creation is that exploratory and creative work can precede and lead theorization and reflection. As Erin Manning explains, constricting the terms of a research-creation experimentation in advance "results in stultifying its potential and relegating it to that which already fits within pre-existing schemata of knowledge" (Manning, "Against Method" 54). This notwithstanding, at the same time that I wanted to be responsive and attuned to my collaborators in my curation and co-creations, I wanted to be deeply and intentionally philosophical. I turned from my own *krisis* to Aristotle, whom Boccaccio also read and to whom he responded, for his theory of crisis (Κρίσις) as judgement, his delineation of *theoria* as happiness, and his centring of friendship and care.[12]

In my own poetic works that treated themes of motherhood, sisterhood, and friendship, I engaged with Aristotle's metaphors of building, generation, and change, as well as his theories of the body and love from *Rhetoric*, *Physics*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I not only cited him, but integrated his ancient manuscripts into my digital palimpsests. In *A Form, a Privation, and an Underlying Thing (Eidos, Sterēsis, Hupokeimenon)*, an essay-film I created integrating photographs and video footage from Kari Maaren, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Angela Joosse, as well as lines from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, I drew the many generative things that Aristotle studies—the lives of plants and animals and the generation of beings as well as building (Aristotle links the building of ideas to the building of

Figure 5: Monique Tschofen, A Form, a Privation, and an Underlying Thing (Eidos, Sterēsis, Hupokeimenon), with photography and video by Angela Joosse, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Kari Maaren. The Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

homes)—together with one of the things that Aristotle omits: motherhood.

I wrote an Aristotle poem for Izabella that drew from Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Physics* that treated love as a form of cyclical and circular movement, *Upon a Particular Relation*, and she made a film for it that manifested these movements in a camera language of tilts and pans. And I followed this with another Aristotle poem and film, *Being is Said in Many Ways*, that mashed up thoughts about movement from Aristotle's *Physics* with a story about sisterhood as the world threatened to break in two and sweep under. I organized the works in my gallery according to the four Aristotelian elements: water, earth, fire, and air. With this intertextual palimpsestic poetico-philosophical practice, I aimed to join other women philosophers whose forms, as Catherine Villanueva Gardner argues in her study on women philosophers subtitled *Genre and the Boundaries of Philosophy*, "specifically show other possibilities for the philosophical

genre, as well as the way that these possibilities can form a critique of the dominant model" of philosophy (Gardner 10). Through the materials, processes of making, form, and content of the Aristotle Suite of film-poems and through the Aristotelian themes of my gallery, I experimented with ways of critiquing the foundations of the Western epistemological tradition while issuing correctives—something my academic writing could not do.

5. Matter Matters: The World-in-Common

> "MEYERS: Concepts like Donna Haraway's material semiosis and situated knowledge motivate me, grounding me in research methodologies that propel me to the arts to expand and disrupt all-too-disciplined modes of inquiry. Material semiosis helps me see the creative and ethical work involved in making matter come to matter, and also helps me see that there is no necessary divide between art and science, or between scholarly research and artistic practice. Making matter come to matter differently through art practices helps me activate new research questions." (Natasha Meyers in Truman, "Intimacies" 227)

In *The Human Condition,* Hannah Arendt suggests that community requires a meaningful engagement with the "common world of things" that gathers us together, as a table gathers those who sit around it, because the very public sphere is constituted by "the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together" (52). She describes artworks as the most "intensely worldly of all material things" (167). Co-created artworks are even more so.

Our practice of co-creation not only expanded relationality, turning *homo faber* into *homo amor*, but also its capacities for ideological critique because materials and techniques carry and thus betray their own histories. In my adaptation of Lai-Tze Fan's short story "The Dressmakers' Daughter," set in British colonial Shanghai, I combined an audio recording of her reading her story, historical advertisements of Pears Soaps featuring Chinoiserie that she had shared with me, together with cell phone footage by Jolene Armstrong, Angela

Figure 6: Lai-Tze Fan, The Dressmaker's Daughter. Film by Monique Tschofen, with footage by Jolene Armstrong, Angela Joosse, Lai-Tze Fan, and Monique Tschofen. Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

Joosse, and myself of silk scarves and Cheongsam dresses. I digitally processed the footage to render it as an animation.

Textuality, digitality, and research creation/critical making have long been understood through metaphors of textiles. Tim Ingold, for example, describes "making [as] a practice of weaving, in which practitioners bind their own pathways or lines of becoming into the texture of material flows comprising the lifeworld" (91), while Stephanie Springgay describes research-creation through the metaphor of "feltness" as a practice of intimacy:

> "feltness is m/othering—a violent, sticky, erotic, swollen temporality that is always a tiny ripple at the edge of the sand and simultaneously an enormous wave (Springgay & Freedman, 2010, 2012); Hand felting, affect, and m/othering swirl with intensities, transcorporeal touching encounters, and practices of intimacies committed to reciprocity, relationality, stewardship, and an ethics of care." ("Feltness" 212)

This is because, as Ganaele Langlois argues in her brilliant book *How Textile Communicates,* textiles can be

> "one of the most profound types of communication: one that makes both collective and individual existence possible by tying us, binding us, wrapping us to others and to the world, both physically and imaginatively; one that gives us pasts to bring to our presents and presents to project into futures." (3)

The shared footage of cheongsam silk dresses not only bound us to each other. Integrating this gifted footage extended the reach of Lai-Tze's potent critique of colonialism and commentary on women's lives in garment manufacturing by bringing before the eyes material evidence that the complex historical processes that Lai-Tze was writing about have not ended.

What, indeed, are the overlapping and historical *krises* behind the global flows that have moved silks from China into the houses of Chinese and White women living in Canada? (A complex weave of colonialism, capitalism, globalization; work, travel, migration, and blending of families.) The gifted footage of the silks makes visible a chain of custody of women's (art)work/s, with all their historical and ongoing planetary inequities. Who manufactures and sews, who

purchases, who wears, who preserves and documents, who critiques silks from China? What is needed to remember the women whose hands made these things or understood what they endured? Our methods of research-co-creation offered a way to orient to, and "Orientate" around (Sarah Ahmed in Behar 12), Orientalism, to keep these matters in memory, showing *and* telling about privilege and inequality, beauty and labour extraction, and East-West relations.

6. Hives Hold the Sweet Wisdoms

> "So if that is what is at stake in art, that raising of forms that give a possibility of world, where the world in an ordinary, everyday way, is either limited to ready-made and indefinitely repeated significations, like elementary significations (living, surviving, earning a living, also slowly losing your life by leading life towards death, making or producing this or that, making objects, making exchanges, making children, learning something, forgetting, etc.), or else, on the contrary, to an absence of significations, in which case, onto what does it open, the world? Onto other possibilities of worlds. I would say that art is there every time to open the world, to open the world to itself, to its possibility of world, to its possibility thus to open meaning, while the meaning that has already been given is closed." (Nancy, "Art Today" 93)

Chronologically, at least, theory followed practice. We did not leave the artworks we co-created as self-evident. In keeping with professional expectations of research-creation, we critically reflected upon our co-created work, co-authoring grants, and co-presenting and co-authoring papers about it. One advantage of theorizing in large teams is that nine brains are better than one brain. We made observations of each other's work that we ourselves could not see, and continually pointed each other to new critical literatures that greatly expanded our vocabularies, approaches, and insights. Co-authoring in digital spaces let us build our thoughts in and around each other's, so they became more deep, layered, and nuanced.[13]

Co-authored works in the academy typically are achieved through a division of labour; each author tackles a section based on their exper-

tise. Our practice co-writing in Google docs was communal[14]; guided by the unspoken principle "come as you are and for as long as you have time," during long co-writing sessions, members joined and left the Google doc in the middle of sentences and paragraphs, writing and rewriting with few traces of who did what. It remains immensely frustrating that all humanities and social sciences citation styles flatten these contributions to first author et al.

My previous tetradic schema situating the maker-theorist in the world had not accounted for how hard it is to think and theorize when one's capacity for attention is under constant interruption. We had palliated a broken world in crisis by tending to and becoming custodians of each others' experiences and ideas. We were all caretakers—middle-aged women whose responsibilities included students passing through a challenging time in their career, as well as caretaking for elders, siblings, and children. We found that another advantage of the feminist Collective is that if someone had an emergency, or dropped out, another seamlessly pulled to the front and the theorizing work kept going. We had built-in redundancies to become resistant against the recurring crises that punctuated our daily experience: critical exhaustion, health emergencies, deaths. Hive mind is revelatory as a radical way of doing academic work.

Hive mind has wider ramifications though. It completely undermines the philosophical conception of the theorist as someone special, solitary, objective, and disengaged, and restores the ancient Greek understanding of *theoria* as "a cultural practice that brought Greeks from different cities and ideologies into contact with one another in shared religious sanctuaries" (Nightingale, "On Wondering" 30) and the *theoros* as one who beholds not with suspicion but with "wonder" (*thauma*) (24). Hive mind, like ancient *theoria,* is co-invested and unboundaried; its knowledge is based on "kinship" with, not distance from, its object (Nightingale *Spectacles* 10). As Hans-Georg Gadamer described ancient *theoria,* hive mind generates "a true participation, not something active but something passive (*pathos*), namely being totally involved in and carried away by what one sees" (in Nightingale, *Spectacles* 13): "In this activity (which was itself driven by a 'de-

Figure 7: Monique Tschofen, A Form, a Privation, and an Underlying Thing (Eidos, Sterēsis, Hupokeimenon), with photography and video by Angela Joosse, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Kari Maaren. Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

sire to know') the theorist experienced a powerful *pathos*: a transformation of self and soul." (Gadamer in Nightingale, *Spectacles* 10)

As I write this, Jasper, Alberta is on fire, and the world has (again) recorded its hottest day. Crisis demands nothing less than manners of thinking that put aside ego and are moved to join together to prioritize collective care and repair.

ACT III: DISSENSUS AS GIFT

This article contrasts the "before times" and the "after times" that have characterized my career and work, outlining the contours of my troubled relationship with critique and theory and early efforts to (albeit theoretically) gesture towards critical making/research creation for solutions, in relation to the transformations brought about by working with the Decameron Collective. I was not wrong, but underestimated the power of what I call feminist collective research-co-creation's re-formwork, in opposition to theo-

ry's "forcework" (Ziarek). In each of my advocations, I have tried to uncover cornerstones to my work within the Collective, showing how centring making, co-creating, and curating greatly expands the possibilities embedded in theoretical critique. It turns out it is not necessary to interrogate or torture to attain truths. Responding to the world creatively through storying; becoming custodians of and caring for the matters of the world and others in it; "penser ensemble": these are ways of responding to our collective critical condition that are self- and world-repairing, generative, and non-violent. Rosi Braidotti wrote about sustainable subjectivity, arguing for experiencing "bond[s] of empathy or affinity with [our] fellow 'others'" (16). Entering into relations, experiencing joyful encounters, she wrote, "express one's *potentia* and increase[s] the subject's capacity to enter into further relations, to grow and expand" (17). "This," Braidotti stressed, "makes possible future perspectives [...] it writes the prehistory of a future. Entering into relations, or virtual nomadic becomings engenders the world by making possible a web of sustainable inter-connections" (17).

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Manuscript pages from the Decameron in the Decameron 2.0 (2022) by the Decameron Collective.

Figure 2: The Decameron Collective (from left to right: Caitlin Fisher, Monique Tschofen, Kari Maaren; Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Jolene Armstrong, Angela Joosse; Lai-Tze Fan, Siobhan O'Flynn, Kelly Egan).

Figure 3: Left three images, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, Covid Stories, Maternal Worries. Book design Monique Tschofen. Right, the Rose Window alcove where the book was installed. Decameron 2.0 Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

Figure 4: Left, Monique Tschofen, Being is Said in Many Ways. Middle and right, compositions with Kari Maaren's wildlife photographs layered onto medieval manuscripts. Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

Figure 5: Monique Tschofen, A Form, a Privation, and an Underlying Thing (Eidos, Sterēsis, Hupokeimenon), with photography and video by Angela Joosse, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Kari Maaren. The Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

Figure 6: Lai-Tze Fan, The Dressmaker's Daughter. Film by Monique Tschofen, with footage by Jolene Armstrong, Angela Joosse, Lai-Tze Fan, and Monique Tschofen. Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

Figure 7: Monique Tschofen, A Form, a Privation, and an Underlying Thing (Eidos, Sterēsis, Hupokeimenon), with photography and video by Angela Joosse, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Kari Maaren. Decameron Collective, Decameron 2.0 (2022).

NOTES

1. This paper has greatly benefited from Griffen Horsley, Jolene Armstrong, James Carney, María Angélica Madero and Agata Mer's critiques and insights and, of course, is completely bound with the think-

ing of my collaborators Jolene Armstrong, Kelly Egan, Lai-Tze Fan, Caitlin Fisher, Angela Joosse, Kari Maaren, Siobhan O'Flynn, Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof, and Hendrick de Haan.↩

2. Patai and Corral, in *Theory's Empire*, describe postmodernism's "aggressive vocabulary of subversion, demystification, transgression, violence, fissures, decentered subjects, fragmentation, dismantling master narratives, and so on" (12).↩

3. Sade was ubiquitous in post-structuralist theory via Adorno and Horkheimer, Barthes, and Lacan. For a contemporary summary see Tyrus Miller.↩

4. "That truth is unitary, that truth may finally be extracted by torture, is part of our legacy from the Greeks and, therefore, part of our idea of "truth" (DuBois 4). See also my discussion in Tschofen, "Drawing Out" (235).↩

5. Jacques Aumont asked the question "can a film be an act of theory"? and answered no. I was seeking to argue that it could, in studies of works that ranged from Kristjana Gunnars' lyric essay/novels and poems (*Kristjana Gunnars*); to Anne Carson's ekphrasis of Betty Goodwin's rendering of torture ("Drawing Out"); to Caitlin Fisher's augmented reality storyworld about generations of women's lives ("The Digital Denkbild"); to Gertrude Stein's philosophico-poetic portraits of Matisse, Picasso, and Isadora Duncan.↩

6. See Andrea Wilson Nightingale. "On Wandering and Wondering:"Theôria" in Greek Philosophy and Culture." *Arion*, Third Series, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall, 2001), pp. 23-58. Andrea Nightingale writes that "[t]his encounter [of the theoros] with the unfamiliar invites the traveler to look at the customs and practices of his own city from a new vantage point. The journey abroad may end up confirming the theorist in his own perspectives and prejudices, but it may also function to unsettle him and even to transform his basic worldview" (33). The work of the *theoros* was thus social and political, directed to the affairs of the world. It was dialogical. And of particular importance, the work of the *theoros* was borne in relation to a way of seeing that was shaped by a practice of actual spectatorship. It was as spectator and then as the storyteller who returned with the account of the spectacle that the *theoros* was able to draw the thinker/citizen into ever wider perspectives.↩

7. I am acutely aware of the immense privilege we had working from the safety of our own homes while other labourers were not being protected from a fatal and disabling airborne virus.↩

8. In this sense, our collaborative practice, which began as a refusal of the demands placed on academic women and ended with modes of productivity acknowledged by the academy, echoed Natalie Loveless' experience of feminist collaboration with Carrie Smith; she observed that their "year of collaboration might be a way to render my daily experience of academic life more robust, communal, and affectively resilient" (Loveless and Smith 273).↩

9. Other pandemic projects had similar ambitions. See Hollington's *The Decameron Project: 29 New Stories from the Pandemic;* Kubovy et al's *Decameron Row* https://decameronrow.com/; and *Corona Haikus: Visual Poetry in Times of Isolation* https://coronahaikus.com.↩

10. We have since implemented this methodology in workshops with broader publics delivered including the Electronic Literature Organization's Unconference (London) in 2023 and the PhiloSOPHIA conference (Calgary, AB) in 2024.↩

11. See Matina for an account of krisis.↩

12. For an effort to connect Aristotle to feminist care ethics, see Groenhout, "The Virtue of Care."↩

13. Our article in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, "A Research-co-Creation of Care: Feminist Speculation, Collaboration, and Curation in the Decameron 2.0 Virtual Gallery" (2024), demonstrates the documentation of this work that Siobhan O'Flynn describes as digital kintsugi.↩

14. This co-writing practice was feminist, but also informed by workshop practices of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association's Media and Materiality Working Group with myself, Marcello Vitali-Rosati, Margot Mellet, Lai-Tze Fan, and Antoine Fauchié, demoed at the Annual Canadian Comparative Literature Association Conference.↩