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HYPHENATED: A COLLABORATIVE MEDITATION ON RESEARCH-CREATION

ANNA FORAN

AMI XHERRO

This article draws on a dialogic form to probe the hyphen at the heart of research-creation, a burgeoning episteme. We, both authors, contend that this hyphen is bound up with solidarity, in the sense of forging communal spirit in the often-depersonalized realm of the academy. We also contend that it's bound up with intimacy, in the sense of forging proximity between different media and disciplines and between the people practicing them, who are both separate and yet not so apart. In the end, we transcribe an impromptu dance party that took place in a seminar room in the winter of 2024, offering this up as a vision for the models of intimacy (you and me) and space-sharing (us) that research-creation might fruitfully imply.

Cet article a recours à une forme dialogique pour explorer le trait d'union placé littéralement au cœur de la recherche-création, un épistème en plein essor. En tant qu'auteurs, nous considérons que ce trait d'union est lié à la solidarité, dans le sens où il permet de forger un esprit communautaire dans le domaine souvent dépersonnalisé de l'académie. Nous soutenons également qu'il est lié à l'intimité, dans le sens d'une proximité entre les différents médias et les différentes disciplines et entre les personnes qui les pratiquent, qui sont à la fois séparées et pourtant pas si distinctes. Pour conclure, nous retraçons le déroulement d'une soirée dansante impromptue ayant eu lieu dans une salle de séminaire au cours de l'hiver 2024, offrant ainsi une vision des modèles d'intimité (vous et moi) et de partage de l'espace (nous) que la recherche-création pourrait impliquer de manière enrichissante.

This is a hyphenated meditation on research-creation. The desire to perform such a meditation sprung from our shared status as research-creation students at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. It also sprung from a year spent collaborating on two research-creation events that we hosted at the Centre in 2023-2024 called *Circumfluence*. We write it across various hyphens: disciplinary, psychical, physical. The exercise is a variation on the game of exquisite corpse, where one person adds to what the other has written (or drawn). We do it to engage in an intimacy via the hyphen, and to try and work out a set of conjectures around the possible relationship between research-creation and intimacy itself.

Anna Foran: I think this all started because you, Ami, identified a funding source and suggested we try to take advantage of it. This source was a possible grant (up to \$2000) through our department's "Ideas Program," designed to allow students to realize an event, a series, a workshop, through creative and collaborative means. You, we, saw this as an opportunity to give form and visibility to the newfound micro-community that we occupied within the Centre for Comparative Literature: research-creation. We talked about a natural way to lend this visibility, which was to invite artists and writers who worked across academic and creative lines to speak on their practices. But we also got to talking about *intimacy*, or our sense of its absence in our academic milieu: intimacy between people, but also expressions of intimacy between people and the work they were doing. What was the relationship between research-creation, or that notion of "working across" fields and media, and this question of intimacy?

Ami Xherro: Our original proposal sought to give room to new modes of making and thinking which ran parallel to academic work. Doing so would be a way to continue to hone the discussion around creative research, not so much in terms of institutional requirements but rather building community, and how students working in this capacity might find solidarity and a sense of community with those working in their disciplines and beyond. "Solidarity" seemed to be the first step of the "intimacy" which we sought. And as our first

event was set to occur a little over a month after the genocide in Gaza began, it was impossible not to address the complicity of large institutions and our positioning within it. How to foster intimacy within the walls of an institution—a university—that elsewhere in Gaza were being annihilated by Israeli forces? At the same time, and increasingly, we saw the power of these big Western universities seriously troubled by the voices of students, faculty, and staff alike who recognized the power of words at a moment like now. As people working inside the University of Toronto, we recognized our own roles in relation to language, and our agency in speaking out to call for a complete ceasefire and an end to apartheid and occupation in Palestine.

The aim of the events, which we called a “low prep/high presence scenario,” were to come together and talk in the hopes of forging an intimacy across disciplines and geographies. This intimacy was rooted in our position within the institution, and our orientation outward, in terms of what support we lacked within it and what was possible without it. It was rooted in a desire to be, in a sense, what philosophers Brian Massumi and Erin Manning would call both an institutional *parasite* (to benefit at the university’s expense by enacting its logic but not its methods) and a *para-site* (to maintain relations with the institution of the university but operate by a different logic): and for our own purposes as students and artists, to refuse the division between research/creation; reader/critic; reader/writer; to refuse the professionalization of affinities born in instinct, and instead to speak about this instinct that draws us near some texts/objects/ideas and away from others (Todoroff 2018).

AF: Yes. And after coming up against institutional barriers to try and secure a large enough space on campus, we settled on using the small seminar room in our own department for the events, which at the time felt like a surrender to bureaucratic forces but actually turned out to be a potent chance to activate a traditional learning environment in alternative ways. The name of the events, *Circumfluence*, emerged from our desire to position people in the round, as in a seminar room, but to reimagine and take apart that circle in various ways: “Circ-” and “influence,” were the categories we decided might

allow for this expression of intimacy between person and work, person and person. In the first iteration, on books of influence, six people (academics, artists, writers) sat in a semicircle, facing a semicircle of respondents. An audience radiated in semicircles behind them. In the dimmed light, each speaker shared about the intimacy between themselves and their chosen text: where they discovered it, and why they returned to it, and the respondents, tasked with listening, then offered a direct reply to what they had heard. We listened, for instance, to someone lovingly dissect a haiku by Matsuo Bashō. Another person read from their scrawled notes on the subject of literary tone as it figured in the collaboratively written 2023 book *Tone* by Kate Zambreno and Sofia Samatar. Someone else read a poem about flow and breath interwoven with a notion from Gilles Deleuze. The hope was for an hour or so of sharing: sharing space, sharing words, and sharing love insofar as the presenters were expressing a kind of love for, or attachment to, the books they were speaking on.

AX: This was also at a time when you, Anna, had just submitted your field paper and were preparing for your oral exam for PhD candidature, so I know we were talking a lot about the stream that we were pursuing, “research-creation”: a new initiative by the Centre for Comparative Literature to invite students with an artistic practice to use a creative methodology to replace one of the three mandatory languages. So a creative arts practice was set to replace or pose as a literary language, which is an interesting equivocation. We were talking a lot about what research-creation *is*, especially the hyphen which binds and separates them, and the kinds of people and thinkers who set the stage for its growing visibility inside the academy, like literary critic Rita Felski.

AF: As soon as we started talking about our desire for the events, which was *to have people bring things they love into the seminar room, and not be afraid to speak plainly on this love* I immediately started thinking of Felski, and her sense that scholars need not hide their love for, or attachment to, their objects of academic interest when performing criticism; rather, they need to boldly *attune* to them. I started to wonder whether Felski’s work (*The Limits of Critique*, 2015; *Hooked*, 2020) operates as a node on the continuum towards

THE CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE PRESENTS



CIRCUMFLUENCE: ON WRITING
(an event)

How are we influenced?

WHERE: the Centre
WHEN: Nov.27, 6-8pm
WHAT: Conversation,
camaraderie, food/drink

Figure 1: Our poster for the first Circumfluence event.

research-creation itself; because even if she wasn't writing about artists, she was calling for a visibility of the affective "hyphenation" between subject and object within the academy. This is what positions her inside the theoretical domain of New Materialism, which turns away from humanist dualisms and seeks a more embodied vi-

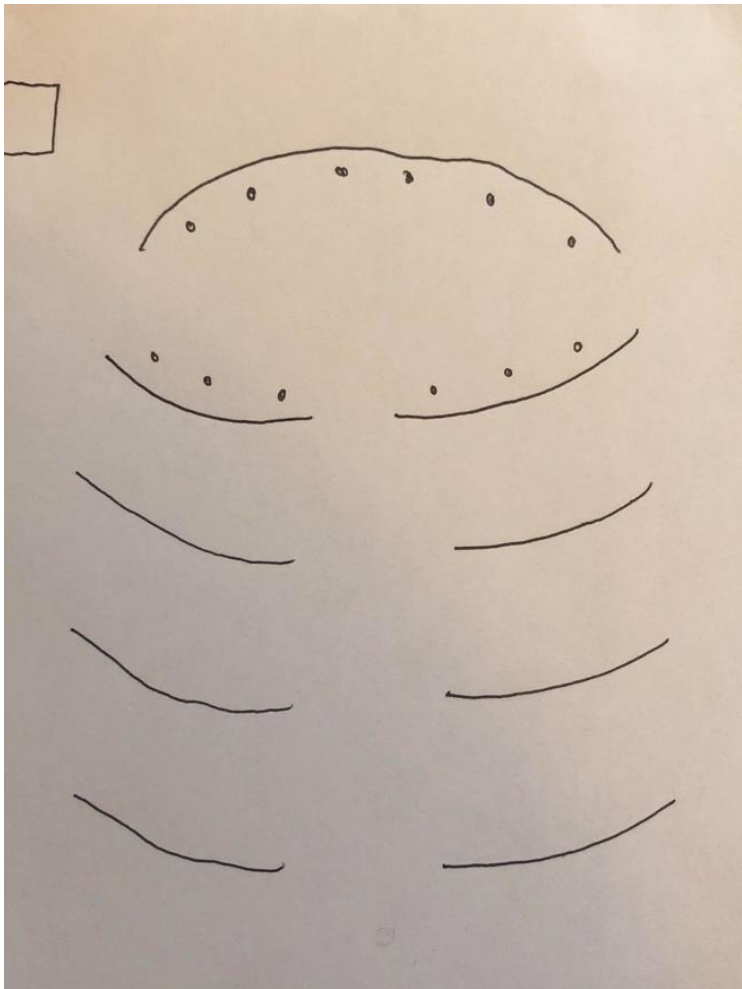


Figure 2: Hand-drawn room set-up for the first event.

sion of human and nonhuman entanglement. And indeed, scholars have called upon Felski and New Materialism to position research-creation as a part of this larger turn towards this entanglement of matter (in its case, of subject, research, creation, etc.) (Truman and Springgay 2015). But I don't think this is exactly what we had in



Figure 3: Cropped image of six presenters from the first event.

mind with the events: instead, we were interested in the physical quality of the hyphen itself, and this idea of connection, rather than the entanglement, that defines New Materialism.

AX: At our event, the hyphen became a bridge which not only connected and attached two realms of praxis but *attuned* the things it connected: more generally, research and creation, and more specific to the events, the books that were being brought in to be discussed and shared. The hyphen forged an intimacy which marked the space as a whole. Attunement, in this case, was less about attuning to the art or literary object in question (à la Felski), as a critic might; it was about attuning to all the material parts that made up the whole of the event itself, the distinct individuals and the objects they were speaking of, as well as the wider group of people in the room. People sat side by side, media and disciplines sat side by side, with the necessary gaps between them. This became, for us, a hopeful model of research-creation itself, a chance for this hyphenated coexistence of people and domains often kept apart. The impulse is to call this intimacy.

AF: And this is akin to the kind of intimacy imagined by literary scholar Julia C. Obert, who, in contrast to, say, critic Laurent Berlant's cultural configuration of the category, understands it in much more immediate terms. In her 2016 article "What we talk about when we talk about intimacy," Obert identifies four facets of intimacy, the final one being its "recognition of irreducibility, that is, a recognition that one cannot ever fully know the Other" (26). She develops this through a reading of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*,

calling on a line from protagonist Lily Briscoe that references language itself as both known and unknown, and which for Obert also summons Jacques Derrida's famous conviction in his text *Monolingualism of the Other* (1996) that, in doing translation, "one shall never inhabit the language of the other" (Obert 26; Derrida 57). In this text and others, Derrida makes an argument for this irreducibility as a core facet of intimacy, for the way we touch one another but never merge, a process that iterates like a trace. So is there a way to think about the hyphen of research-creation as such a trace, as such an opportunity to engage with difference without collapse? Might the processes of research-creation be imagined less as the entangled processes of New Materialism, and more as a chain of interactions between doing research and creating, one person and another? How can this notion of a chain—of continual exchange—resist the status of creative work as an "appendage" to a central research project?

AX: Derrida's configuration of the trace is especially conducive to our line of thinking here: the trace implies no central origin, no thing greater than another, and instead a chain of differences that each contain within them the unknowable other and achieve their meaning through both distance and proximity. In *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), Derrida writes, "I have tried to indicate a way out of the closure imposed by this system by means of the "trace"" (141). While for Derrida this context is the meaning of concepts and words wherein neither are more an effect than a cause, in the context of *Circumfluence*, this extends to mean the re-staging and re-presencing of these differences between academic disciplines on the surface, but on a deeper level, affinities which are not so much academic concepts as they are instincts towards what titillate us in the first place. Difference cannot be thought of without this trace: without the shared instinct towards reading in the shadows our favourite books.

AF: Just as we were interested in the physicality of the hyphen between research-creation, its true material reality, so did Derrida partially derive his own definition of the trace from a very material phenomenon: Sigmund Freud's "mystic writing pad," a 1920s invention which he [Freud] calls upon in his early writings as a metaphor for the human psyche. In his 1967 essay "Freud and the Scene of Writ-

ing,” Derrida turns to this analogy to think about writing as our most primal reality. External stimulus marks (writes) the psyche just as the stylus marks the surface of the mystic writing pad; even when the marks “disappear” by lifting the topmost celluloid sheet from the wax base, traces of these marks are inevitably retained. These traces invisibly inform new marks to come. As you say, it sets up the idea of an eternal chain of interactions between one sign and the next, one entity and the next: it makes it impossible that research should merely accompany creation, or vice versa: rather they are in intimate, but not necessarily entangled interplay, both living inside the other and also always remaining different. And so true with humans.

AX: In this model, research is not necessarily creating, and creating is not necessarily research, though each also always contains the other within itself. This oscillation between the two conjures up its irreducibility, like a breathy whisper where intimacy is forged both through touching the other and also recognizing the gap between you that will always exist. The hyphen becomes a material necessity, like the line that sits between two people on a bus or in an audience, forging a bond but also referencing a gap. In one sense, and historically, it was used to summon or to reference the origins of the grammatical sign, as a means to avoid ambiguity (Liddell and Scott), a sign written below letters—like a $_$ b—meant to bring two language systems together. But this ambiguity returns again and again as a physical necessity; and in research-creation, it enacts an intimacy between two entities. Yet both research and creation are ever-expanding universes. The hyphen is the state as well as the site of this intimacy replete with ambiguity and ambivalence, like a lovers’ hideaway or the corner in which they steal a kiss: something which springs from a body, confused but undistracted.

AF: This link between the hyphen and intimacy, the hyphen and love, actually showed up somewhat fortuitously in the material brought by one of the presenters in our first event, Ben de Boer, a writer, artist, and archivist. Ben shared on Friederike Mayrocker’s *The Communicating Vessels* (2003), a book of 140 entries Mayrocker wrote in the aftermath of the 1954 death of her partner and collaborator of almost 30 years, Ernst Jandl. Alongside text, the book al-

so features small drawings, some of which render two people sitting shoulder to shoulder, spectating at the cinema, or listening to a jazz concert (figs. 4-5). In many of these drawings, Mayrocker actually inserts a curving hyphen between the two people, the two heads, as if to signify a shared perception, or a shared feeling, or simply the fact of companionship. The figures are drawn in such a way that they almost appear to be moving, or making a form of brief contact. Below one of these drawings, Mayrocker writes: “how lovely it was, this mutual brushing of shoulders, it gave me such a great feeling of intimate connection” (2). The shoulders brush, but they do not merge; through this brushing a singular feeling of *intimate connection* is formed. And so it was, or hoped for, at the event, where people sat side by side, on different nodes along the continuum of research and creation, but still engaged in a shared perception, a shared feeling, one born of listening to people speak on what they are moved by.

AX: Reading Mayrocker’s poetry you get a sense of how these personal annotations make up a living archive. You get the sense of how

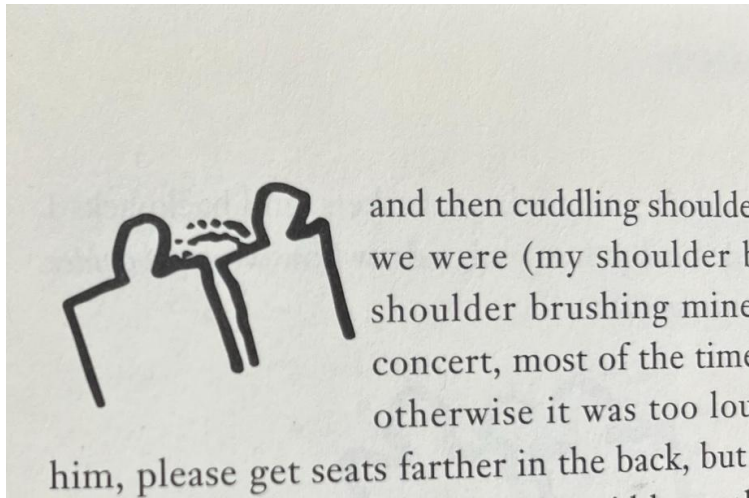


Figure 4: Illustration from Friederike Mayrocker's "The Communicating Vessels" (2003).

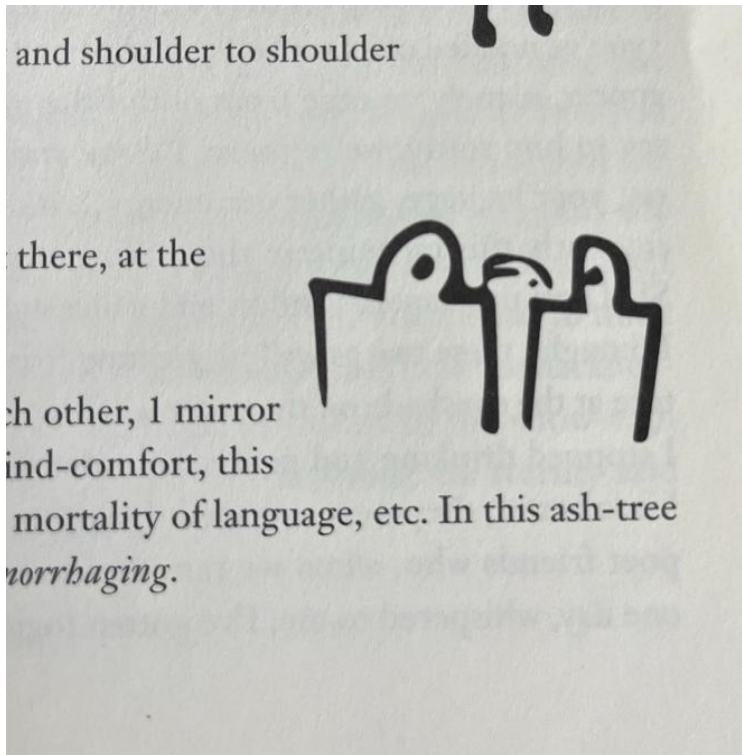


Figure 5: Illustration from Friederike Mayrocker's "The Communicating Vessels" (2003).

she lived among her material, how the contact she made with the world was archived and recorded in her private space. The frenzy of loose papers evokes an eternal labour of inscription, an obsession with the minutia in service of life, the creation of another life altogether. And indeed, if you think of the way she worked—keeping records and making them anew—you can get a taste of the inseparability of “research” and “creation,” and the very stakes of that hyphen.

What if, in or through creation, the differences of research and creation become obsolete? What collective outcomes are possible? And how to instigate them? The second iteration of the *Circumfluence*



Figure 6: Friederike Mayrocker in her studio in 2001 (Barbara Klemm).

events sought after these questions. For, as we learned from the first event, while research-creation at first appeared to simply designate a way of *doing* work, it also seemed an exciting possibility to think about *how* this new variety of work finds analogy or equivalency in models of being together, and models of being in the institutional space of the classroom.

With the second iteration, the event saw the more usual construction of an audience shift: rather than the semi-circled presenters and opposing spectators, the chairs were pushed to the edges of the room to form a full circle around the perimeter. Now everyone, presenter and audience, sat shoulder to shoulder, quite possibly brushing, focused on a shared experience: in this case, listening to the pieces of music or sonic compositions brought in by each presenter as particular sites of influence for their academic and creative life's work.

AF: As you were the one facilitating this event, Ami, it was an exciting chance for you to activate the space in a different way. Atmosphere was important to us all along, as a way to invite shared attunement amid the differences between people, disciplines, etc., but this time around we emphasized that atmospheric form of connection even more. This time, you turned off the lights and laid out 40 flameless candles, generating an ambience not often encountered in the artificially lit spaces of academia. You arranged four pillows on

THE CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE
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CIRCUMFLUENCE: ON MUSIC
(an event)

How are we influenced?

WHERE: the Centre
WHEN: Feb.27, 5-7pm
WHAT: Conversation,
camaraderie, food/drink

Figure 7: Our poster for the second Circumfluence event.

the floor, orange and neon pink, and laid out food on meat-wrapping paper. A playlist had been made called “Space is the Place,” a reference to the Sun Ra song and to a larger focus on space and place. Perhaps summoning echoes of the Fluxus events of the 1960s art-world, or, more aptly, the sit-in as a historic tool of institutional un-

settling, the event became a variety of performance that turned to elements such as layout and atmosphere to question some of the usual modes governing learning spaces. With the chairs freed from their usual rectangular formation, the aim was for a form of connection not necessarily enforced by shared scholarly or artistic material, as everyone was arriving with a different foundation, but one generated by a collective experience of *space*. Intimacy, in this configuration, was the intimacy of attuning to the space, no matter how unknown one person was from another. The hope was for something akin to Mayrocker’s “1 great feeling,” apart and also together.

AX: As we sat in the dark seminar room listening to the sounds vibrating from a Bluetooth speaker placed on a central table (see fig. 8), at first we were silent. It was like being in a cinema, except our eyes were closed. That evening, the last participant to share played a DJ mix of electronic music that they had danced to a few weekends prior. Slowly, fluidly, group listening of the mix transitioned into group dancing in the seminar room. We moved together through the space, bringing this notion of hyphenation into a final and distilled focus: while the group who was dancing was not necessarily carved from a

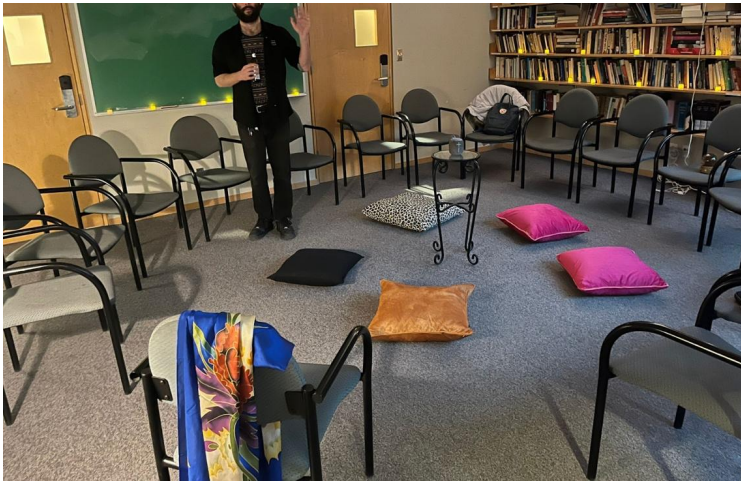


Figure 8: The room set-up for the second event.

specific segment of academia, they did represent a community, however fleetingly assembled, of people brought together by mutuality, by sociality, and shared engagement with a room as a living entity itself.

The act of dancing is a collective undertaking, but people also move separately, and this begins to render that model of a primal inter-connection. In the end, the implication was that such a gathering could transpire into infinity. Whether or not this will be the case, this sense of infinity, or an ongoing chain of responses to each other and to the world, seems to lie at the heart of research-creation and its possibilities.

PLAYLIST: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmkQQYjUpdzlNFU-jzavjcGTh1coKpwxhP&si=A8oeVL68ifo8tOaf>

AF: What seems crucial about what unfolded in the seminar room is the way it represented an immediate response, a response implying presence and perception more than premeditation. When the seminar room broke out in dance this was an act of spontaneity, a *response* to being in the space together and to listening to what had just played from the speaker. Movement became literal movement, but also the movement inherent in responding to the world and to each other, like the dancing was an extension of the earlier act of moving between speakers in the circle.

And if we return to New Materialist lines of thought, we see that movement as a category has been understood as “a primary ‘proposition’ of research-creation itself” (Truman and Springgay). In their 2015 article, the authors differentiate between *relative movement*, which they see as tied to a humanist framework whereby we move but space doesn’t, and *absolute movement*, which calls on New Materialisms to imagine all actors, human and otherwise, as created by and existing in movement (151). But while they imagine this latter variety of movement as “intensive” and “flowing,” and the hyphen of research-creation as gesturing towards various *unrealized potentialities*, it seems vital to also consider a more intimate kind of movement between one thing and the next: my shoulder to your shoulder, my work to your work. What might be gained from this less *inten-*

sive, more tangible (versus *unrealized*), orientation to the hyphen of research-creation? How might the quiet interplay identified by Julia C. Obert between proximity and distance as a hallmark of intimacy inform the act of working across media, across disciplines, across institutional people and spaces?

AX: Not exactly a heterotopia and not fully immersive, the seminar room and the university at large attach themselves to the logos of permanence. The abundance of the world is felt here, but only through its immediate absence: the locales and vicissitudes it augments and those it condenses. A few months after the last *Circumfluence* event took place, the People's Circle for Palestine was erected at King's College Circle. While the university had fenced this area off and put up a sign restricting assembly in anticipation of an encampment, we saw how collective singularities emerged to protest apartheid and genocide. Every day, students and non-students ate, read, and talked together without an expectation of permanence—indeed just the opposite.

I heard recently at a conference titled “The Anti-Zionist Idea” that things that reach for permanence are often destructive: that the condition of permanence itself is a practice of conquest. This is especially true in systems of knowledge-production that attempt to close the gap between the indeterminate and the definite. This breach, however, is where they cohere. Looking beyond the walls of the seminar room, the *Circumfluence* events offered a present in which one did not have to imagine the university being *different* or *elsewhere* or *otherwise*. It offered not an imagining but a tracing of practices to which we attribute less value, and it brought these to the pedagogical locale in which we were gathering.

AF: This question of tracing is where the hope lies: the idea of that endless iterating across disciplines, media, and spaces, not towards a place of permanence but rather of consistent movement and exchange. The task becomes not the temporary erection of a heterotopic or alternative space within the academy, with their risks of the elsewhere or the otherwise; instead, the task seems more to seize institutional space to model that variety of connection whereby the

permeability of the hyphen is that which connects: not solid and immovable walls. As I write this, in the wake of a widespread union movement, the University has announced plans to raise and equalize funding for more of their graduate students, this being a move towards that kind of will to connect more than separate, to generate hyphens, rather than division. Research-creation becomes a direct desire to *do* academic and disciplinary work differently, and it also becomes a broader gesture to a new way of existing in and among the academy: together and apart, but only apart by choice rather than institutional constraint. It's a gesture toward intimacy, in the sense of sharing something (sharing work, sharing space), and toward solidarity, in the sense of a *we* formed by exploring individual pathways into shared wisdom.

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IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Our poster for the first *Circumfluence* event.

Figure 2: Hand-drawn room set-up for first event.

Figure 3: Cropped image of six presenters from first event.

Figure 4: Illustration from Friederike Mayrocker's *The Communicating Vessels* (2003).

Figure 5: Illustration from Friederike Mayrocker's *The Communicating Vessels* (2003).

Figure 6: Friederike Mayrocker in her studio in 2001 (Barbara Klemm).

Figure 7: Our poster for the second *Circumfluence* event.

Figure 8: The room set-up for the second event.