

Experiments in Art Research

How Do We Live Questions Through Art?

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Chapter 1

An Invitation to Compost

Writing Forms for What I Can't Write

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AN INVITATION TO COMPOST

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Not an Abstract

What's one thing you want to paint, but couldn't put in oils or acrylics, on canvas or wood? This chapter takes up writer's block, not as a problem to be avoided, but as an invitation to turn aside and write/make in other ways. In an attempt to embody some of its suggestions, this chapter's form brings together academic article, auto-ethnographic narrative inquiry, art research invitations, and conversations with friends. It draws on recent scholarship in art education and queer methodologies in writing studies to ask, "What am I making? Why make it that way? What other ways might I stumble, fall, or dance into?"

I still wonder where to start. Perhaps with a story about when I failed to write a different article, and found myself making a card game...

"Do the Thing Another Way"

Chatting at Cafe & Co in Urbana, Illinois, I showed one of my recent projects to a new friend, Ishita Dharap. Ishita was excited with the cards I'd made—as excited as I'd hoped as I sat there unsure and delighted. The cards started as an attempted "academic article" (separate from what you're reading) on the various ways writing in academia *hurt*. The central idea of this never-written article was that some of the hurts of academic writing are tied in different complex ways to identity: mine as a genderqueer person (who feels pressured to pass and promote myself as "cis" while performing research), my friend's as a Black woman (who feels pressured to "be white" in her writing), a friend's as a person with a disability, a friend's as a first-generation scholar carrying generational trauma. This never-written article didn't start as academic research: it

started as crying and being held by my partner; as long talks with friends, all of whom were considering leaving their PhD programs. As I tried to put my feelings together into the clear sentences and compelling paragraphs of a linear article, I ran headlong into stomachache and writer's block.

A mentor, Jenny Davis, had reminded me it's possible to respect and embrace writer's block. She lives this, and also gave me a wonderful piece about writer's block as something to be attended to (Chew and Lokosh, 2021). Instead of trying to drive forward, I tried to listen to why I was struggling to write. I heard lots of things. I'll share two. One, I didn't believe in linearity as a thought-form appropriate to what I was describing: These experiences were many things, all at once, and taking them apart made them collapse, like pulling a bit of algae from the water—in the water, it's voluminous, itself. In my hand above the water, it's a bedraggled scrap, flat, torn (Glasby, 2019; Smith, 2021). Two, I wasn't willing to write "about" my friends, but I couldn't explore my experience without grounding into interactions I have with people I love. So much of what I think—of what I am—exists in loving, embodied relationships. Instead of a researcher looking at my subjects, or even an autoethnographer learning beside them, I want to be a friend living with friends. If I was going to write about these hurts, I wanted to write more *with* them.

So I had something I wanted to paint, something that emphasized relationships, but the paints were getting in the way. I had heard friends talk about the ways they tried, compromised, or refused to ventriloquize/sanitize their voices and experiences into an academically "acceptable" voice and experience. What could I make?

Without quite meaning to, I turned toward games. I like board games. Or at least, I really like people, and games are a good way to hangout while friendships grow. Maybe it's easier to become friends while playing because games create little alternate worlds where rolling *this* dice means doing *that*, and

"The Fuck Is She"

My friend Jackie Abing, queer Salvadoran-Filipino American playful magic, tells me, "I try to separate myself from my writing [in anthropology]. I cannot be the same person or I would be miserable all the time. The person I am when I write, the person writing all these things, she's different and who the fuck is she. She's not me." Later we talk: Sometimes we attend to the hurt, we realize we are fighting real institutions. Sometimes we try to shove it down to *get the shit done*.

within the arbitrary imagined (artful) world of those actions and goals, it's easier to try on surprising behaviors (Nguyen, 2020). It's easier to recompose answers to the question, "What are we to each other?"

One card I made with Jackie Abing, my friend and collaborator, went like this:

Sitting in my bed, the fragments of my intended article scattered like algae scraps in the Google doc in front of me, I opened a new window and started to make cards. Each card was an interaction I'd had with a friend: quotes about the hurt of writing in academia, lessons for how to survive, possibilities these systems told us weren't there. Some of the "friends" were scholars, the ones I'm supposed to cite in articles. When I showed these cards to Ishita Dharap in Cafe & Co, she said:

"I love these. The way you work feels so familiar to me." She paused, and added: "I think, when the thing isn't working, you have to do the thing another way."

For me, that invitation—to do the thing another way, which changes the thing we're doing, which calls into flexibility what *working* and *way* might mean—found nutritive soil in overlapping practices and communities of art research. Nutritive soil is itself an invitation to grow: to ground into how and why this writing hurts (as I try to "pass" as the kind of scholar I'm "supposed" to be; authoritative, cis, polished, hireable), and into the communities and lived experiences that give me life inside those hurts. These invitations suggest ways forward.

Following Jack Halberstam, failure becomes the chance to be something beyond the narrow confines created by how I've been taught to police myself. When my paints get in the way, what other materials might I create with? When I don't want to be *this*, what else are we? Where do our writers' blocks guide us?

Composting Methodologies

Part of me wants to be a clever clock. Clean gears and bright brass, each piece exactly where it should be, each tick careful and measured and complete. The bright/clear window of my prose would let you see the workings. (This dream is tied to productivity, capitalism, masculinist competition). But my friend Dusty Bacon and I have been composting together. We add scraps. Onion skins. Eggshells. The touches and trimmings of every day, of lives that wave through our own. In my life/research, in my reading, I'm starting to fall in love with myself as a compost heap. As a place where what is and what was decays slowly: nutrients for what will be.

Read one way, a lot of this section is me composting myself and the scholars I draw from.

I want my life/research to return to my body. It's funny to say "return," as body and I are literally inseparable. Still, Robert McRuer suggests we can "reconceive" something "paradoxically, as what it is" (McRuer, 2006). We might have to, if we've been taught conceptualizations that flow from systems of oppression.

The daily life of sweeping, cooking, walking, watching trees; of toilets, buses, phone games, libraries, post offices, pulled muscles, grocery stores; of friends and family and chattering birds, of ants and a friendly cat and bees and a neighbor's muffled music—all this is often strangely, surprisingly, enforcedly, horribly absent from what I'm doing as a PhD candidate, a teacher, an artist. Also "absent" is my body: genderqueer, uncomfortable as I sit here typing, happy when I stand up and type with my computer on the kitchen counter. In this way, my engagement with art research (and the communities in this book) follows Alberto Aguilar's suggestion, "Consider household chores as art compositions or performance" (quoted in Lucero, 2013). Bring it all back in. What if everything listed, everything I am—everything I always am, even though I'm often told (verbally or by the "quiet" workings of systemic power) to cover up, to "pass," to be respectable, to accept *this is how it is*—is involved in my art and my research?

Michael Faris theorizes the reality of a body as disproving the abstract "identity" that a certain kind of worldview assumes: rational, intentional, coherent, decisive, anointed by agency as it rises above the flesh toward a kind of godly (white, male) me-ness (Faris, 2019). ("At 21," John Updike quips, "I was elected Zeus"). bell hooks shows us education's dualism: intellect deified, body abhorrent. With these scholars as inspiration, I read Aguilar as offering one practical way to make art against (or beyond?) the restrictive systems that exclude my body from the classroom. That insist my "self" should be rational, internally consistent, and up for a raise next year. By returning to what Jorge Lucero calls the artful "materiality" of everyday dishes, sheets, street corners, and relationships, I can make art with the pigment of what (historically) is excluded from my art history textbook and my PhD. Make with everything here. Perhaps all of my recent work (including the invitations at the end of this chapter) are meant to open moments for us to do that.

If Faris, hooks, and Aguilar help me think about "my own" identity and the classroom, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook's reading of education and family (following William Pinar) helps me think about cultural narratives of connection inside the classroom (Ng-A-Fook, 2012). Ng-A-Fook sees an education system interested in emphasizing separation, individuality, shame, blame, competition, and related narratives. This abandons (or refuses to read) the real interdependence I experience when I cry, and my friend holds me; when I don't see the point and a loved one's memory comes back to me; when I feel lost and a mentor sees me. When I (not an art education grad) snuck across campus into art education seminars, I became part of a community actively engaged in being-together as a cultural narrative and a way of making art (and possibility, and lives). I think that nutritive soil led to the cards I wrote several years later. In the face of the linear competition of education, degree seeking, and academic writing, cards are social, shared, unordered. They're shuffled, dealt, recollected, passed from hand to hand. Games end and begin again. They're invitations to friends. "Same time next week?" Working

through the medium of playing cards invites a kind of education/research that is always provisional, not linear, and thumbs its nose at anointed Competition Between Individuals. Do you want to play?

My art research practice draws on my writing practice. I was overjoyed when I started reading Hillery Glasby's article, and found her giving words to what I and many of my friends had felt:

As a queer rhetor, I often feel as though my identity is limited on the academic page [...] Similarly, my thinking is somewhat restricted when I am asked to take a firm stance; I prefer to take my time, write through thorny issues and play around in the messy stuff.

(Glasby, 2019)

Stacey Waite (2019) opens more space for this kind of writing (and art/research) with a series of contradictory, playful, brilliant rules for writing queer, including:

Undermine your own authority, be certain in your uncertainty, develop a voice that can be trusted even as it is subjective, unreliable...

and

In fact, you might consider *not* making arguments and thinking of a writing context that is less like a courtroom (evidence, argument, opening statements, etc.) and more like a carnival, or a nightclub, or a swinger's convention.

I hear these voices intertwined with my friend Ishita's. What other ways could we take up when we mean to make community, make connection, make research, make questions that live through art and art that helps us live?

I'm supported by John Duffy's reminder that to write (make art/research) is to propose a relationship between two people: an Authority and a Reader, a Celebrity and a Fan, an Applicant and a Hiring Manager, and so on (Duffy, 2015). I'm supported by Paré's insistence that writing contains ideologies (in my experience of education: competition, and a self-worth that's supposed to be proven through a meritocracy that doesn't exist), and the subject positions—the kinds of being—that are (im)possible within those ideologies (Paré, 2002). I'm undercut and pained by the systems Duffy and Paré diagnose, but the awareness invites me to behave otherwise, and to engage with communities interested in building cultural power inside other forms. In 1983, Le Guin asks, "What if I talk like a woman right here in public?" Echoing Le Guin, Glasby, Waite, and so many of my friends, we can create moments that ask, "What if we interact as our embodied selves, our gendered (misgendered, and refusing gender) selves, our erotic selves, our racialized (racially othered,

and confronting racializing systems) selves, our moving selves, our sensorily entangled selves—right here in our classroom? Right here in our reading? Right here in our writing?”

These aren't new questions. Resisting or living crosswise to systems of power is as old as systems of power. Wherever I look, I see that forms of resistance are many, “exuberant,” “mercurial,” and building on what generations have done (Russell, 2021). Supported within art ed communities, I am finding many different ways to live into places “of uncertainty that [are] orientated by un/articulated questions” (Castro, 2007). I am learning to “dress it up, try it on, take it off,” as Waite writes—where “it” might be language, but it might also be research, methodology, conceptual frame, or the expectation of being a well-maintained ‘productive’ brass clock. In arts-based research, I am finding ways to understand, acknowledge, refuse, reweave, and rewrite-as-beautiful-shared-silence (Rule, 2019) the narratives of competition, research, writing and art that were written into me. Art research (and community) is nutritive ground for “us”—my lived communities—to do that finding. Composting—the methodology of caring for myself, my friends, and my research as a messy, organic process, warm in its decay—invites us to help care for nutritive ground. And of course there are countless other ways. What a delight to be asking, with my friends, with my communities, with you (if you'd like), “What will we make?”

Invitations

In a research seminar with Sarah Travis and graduate friends (many of whom are in this book), I started writing invitations. Each invitation tried to make space for a way of doing, responding, sharing, celebrating, getting unstuck. These shared experiences grounded into a kind of lived reality that I do not (usually) find in words.¹ When I wanted to ground into a rich messiness—a compost pile of being—that would not exist as linear intellectual argument, an invitation and how we took up/refused it as a group held some of the “muchness” I couldn't say.

I don't share these as lesson plans someone should use. They can't be recreated. As artistic gestures—a kind of group performance art—what we did lived inside our moment, responding to our contexts and hopes. There's a deep note of sadness as I sit with never again having this community together in a room—and an even fuller joy, as I live this community in memory and ongoing relationships. In a sense, I share these as records of my experiments to do a thing another way, to create scholarly, human, interwoven inquiry-space filled with body. Space that does not manufacture the linear, that embraces failure, that paints with other paints. In another sense, I share them as descriptions of an art exhibit that you can't visit. The exhibit doesn't exist anymore. But that's okay, you and I and my friends are engaged in more kinds of making. This piece might be an invitation to compost what we have done

to make nutritive soil for what we do next. And unlike directions, invitations are something to be accepted, refused, modified.

Invitation: Whispering Into

What's one thing you need to say in this moment? Think about it, but don't write it down. When you have it, whisper the words into your hands. Carry them outside and do something that feels right with the words you're holding—throw them into the sky, or tuck them like seeds into the ground, or eat them, or anything else. Don't plan what you're going to do: go outside and notice it. Then come back inside to the group.

Those words are still here. What if instead of speaking them, we let them live where they are?

We did this soon after COVID restrictions allowed us to meet in person again. There is so much that I don't acknowledge, so many things that parts of me and my world shout that I pretend not to hear. There was something ceremonial in dipping our masks down to whisper into our hands, and then pulling our masks back up. In the walkways where my friends planted, released, and wove together the words they carried, I feel a presence, a silence that is to be cared for. A silence isn't a rock to put on my windowsill, it's harder to point to, but I might lose a rock. The cared-for silence spreads all through the walkways' dust and the grass around them.

Invitation: Playing With Weight

Begin standing, or sitting. Invitations are meant as a kind of *would you like to join me*, and the "you" and the "like to" are important. Please modify them to fit your own experience, your body, your comfort.

Let your head sway gently to the right, leading your shoulders. Perhaps your hip (or your arm) moves left to balance the weight. Perhaps it doesn't, and you step to find a new center. Keep swaying, maybe on one foot as you play with weight and balance.

My muscles spend so much of the day "holding" me "upright." Can this "holding," this "upright," become games we play together?

Writing this, I've just paused and done this invitation. Alone in my apartment. I would've rather done it with friends. That way it's often a bit embarrassing, and then funny, and then something we share. Alone it still helped me—loosen?

I often tell myself to sit and work even when that position is physically uncomfortable. Having swayed, playful and silly, I'm now typing at my standing desk. My body feels more involved in typing. Where is my body in my research?

Invitation: Boundary and Balance

I feel like I need to rebalance. Do you feel that way, too? Let's pause, acknowledge that, and then I invite you all to spend 15 minutes doing whatever might be grounding for you. Walk. Draw. Sit in a corner. Then we'll come back together.

In a trusted group, we can build on this invitation to repeat something similar. This time instead of each person doing their own separate practice, I invite you to move into small groups of about three. The group invites one person to do something that helps them ground. Without instructions, their companions follow along, respectfully mimicking their actions.

I've said (and heard people say) "I don't know what I need." What do we learn by sharing, supporting, mirroring, and embodying one another's habits of care? What do we share by living these balancing practices together?

This invitation arose on the fly, as we transitioned to my workshop from a powerful and tense workshop on the imagery of political hate. My workshop was supposed to involve emotional vulnerability. Honestly, when it came time to start, I just couldn't go there. So I wondered, What do I need? And I wondered, What do we need?

Someone carefully cleaned their phone. Someone went for a walk. Someone crawled under a table. As we shared space, we separately but communally lived small responses to the overwhelm of where we were.

Not a Conclusion

The invitations themselves are not what I mean to share. The invitations hope for moments of shared being—discussing, gift giving, art making, thought weaving, belly laughing, game playing, composting, embodied researching, alive, together. When I say, "Would you like to go for a walk?" the invitation is not those eight words. The invitation is a hope toward the trees we might walk beneath, the connected ground that might support each step, the conversation or silence we might mutually weave, the bits of each other's breath and tree's breath that might get into (is already inside) our lungs.

Would you like to go for a walk?

Note

- 1 Or any kind of symbolism smaller than life itself. As René Magritte says, "This is not a pipe." And this is not even the paint in Magritte's letters.

Bibliography

I mentioned these people.

(so here they are, in case you'd like to read them)

(though there are so many more people I could have mentioned)

(and even more I should have mentioned because of their wonderful, troubling, related work, but I haven't read them. Not yet, I hope, for some of them. But there are always more: out beyond where I've been, and submerged inside where I am)

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