

**I LEARNT  
WHAT CARE  
MEANS FROM  
A STRANGER**

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# I Learnt What Care Means From A Stranger

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To those that cared for me,  
those who care for others,  
and those in need of care.

### **Land / भूमि / Acknowledgement**

To begin with, I want to thank the reader for taking the time to read my thoughts. This document is written through an auto-ethnographic lens and framed by my personal experiences. I write from my racialized body and, in turn, this practice stems from a personal need — one of being seen, acknowledged and heard as a ‘person of colour’ in a Western context.

It is important for me to acknowledge that I am living as an uninvited guest<sup>1</sup> on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh first nations. I am humbled by the opportunity to pursue a graduate degree on the stolen lands of a community that values and protects its land, biodiversity, culture and relationships. I would also like to acknowledge my position of privilege as part of the Masters of Fine Arts program at Emily Carr, given that where I come from in India there are many people without access to a basic education.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to Reflection / भूतकाल on page 44

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And to my parents, without whose love, care and support I would not be writing this.

### **स्वागत हे / Welcome / Introduction**

I envision the world as an intricate labyrinth of stories, where with each encounter we have the opportunity to learn from the lived experiences of others. The perplexities of human existence and a curiosity for understanding and sharing perspective is what drives my artistic practice as a visual storyteller, multidisciplinary maker, and social practitioner. My practice looks at storytelling as a catalyst for changing the perspective of another through an exploration of the role of care in our everyday lives and the stories we carry with us. I work towards understanding gestures of care and their public, social, domestic, unseen, racialized and distributed forms as a core part of my artistic practice. I bear witness to personal anecdotes and the oral histories of others to acknowledge various articulations of care expressed through lived experience, which we manifest physically through the form of material exploration. I see this act as increasingly necessary in our current socio-political environment—one built on the foundations of ‘imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ (1) as Author Bell Hooks describes in *Understanding Patriarchy*. However, in this context, gestures of care, no matter how carefully studied or attended to, may not be enough, and so I have developed a practice of Radical Care.

In this document I define Radical Care as an embodied protest and methodology that aims to listen and be present with the unknowable other, in an embrace of vulnerability and discomfort to better understand difference. I

define this need as a brown body in a white context and hope to expand empathy into support for others as I attempt to build a space for care, comfort, community and ultimately a sense of belonging. This is done by hosting gatherings, through the form of a workshop, interactive installation or sculpture, within which others are able to self-identify as wanting to participate in this particular discourse. The work stems from conversations that unfold through a series of gestures such as storytelling, listening and making to form generative environments for dialogue and exchange. Across my work, I use clay as a co-facilitator to access the memories we store in relation to tangible objects, places or people, and to extend that dialogue through material exploration, which moves beyond the need for verbal communication or common language. Materially and metaphorically, clay embodies the underlying tendencies of radical care, offering a material record of conversations and vulnerabilities that are needed to better understand the people I work with in my projects.

This document works towards situating and contextualising this practice by tracing my two year journey and relocation to Vancouver, BC from Bangalore, India. It also dissects my relationship with social practice, workshops, sculpture and aesthetics in the contemporary art discourse. As I define decisions I make and reflect on how they function in the case of four specific works that resulted from the MFA program at Emily Carr; *Objects of Place*, *Where Are You From*, *What Do We Owe To Each Other* and *Listening Vessels*.

### **Orientation / मकान / Place / Objects / Bodies in Space / Discomfort**

Sarah Ahmed defines “point zero” in her essay, *Phenomenology of Whiteness*, as the point from which the world unfolds for an individual. This point zero is most often correlated with the dwelling place, or the home<sup>2</sup> which directs how we are oriented in the world (151). Ahmed makes the case that ‘history is what

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<sup>2</sup> My sense of place in the world has been stabilised by belonging to a home. For me, the home is a physical, emotional and cognitive reality that allows for an access point into an individual’s lived experiences. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Space and Place - The Perspective of Experience* defines “Place as security, space as freedom” stating that “We are attached to one and long for the other” (3). Moving away from my home led me to begin deconstructing my sense of belonging to a place, the conditioned facets of my identity, and how that relates to my interaction with others. Further unpacking for me, how identity and belonging are intricately linked to understandings of a home, and the things we accumulate over time.

we receive upon arrival' (154) and that when we inherit the world, we also inherit its colonial histories and find that 'the world is ready for certain bodies, and puts certain objects in their reach' (153), affording or absolving them of specific privileges. We inherit the reachability of these objects, which are not just physical things but 'styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques and habits' (154). I recognise that the aleatory nature of my birth afforded me a class privilege and gave me access to certain objects, such as education and an ability to communicate through multiple languages. Since moving to Canada for graduate school, I have become more aware of how much my brown body presents me with certain challenges, specifically in relation to comfort, care, community and belonging in this white world.

Ahmed discusses how whiteness is an ongoing and unfinished history, that decides how bodies are oriented, how they 'take up' space and what they 'can do' (150). By consciously identifying race through its physical markers such as skin colour, we 'interrupt the corporeal schema' (153) and the white gaze<sup>3</sup> changes the way certain bodies operate in space. Growing up in India, a perceived white superiority taught us to emulate, to imitate, and to grossly underestimate the power of our own realities. And so, my sense of third world identity was amplified in the first world context and manifests itself in the sense of inferiority that I carry with me in public space. This discomfort<sup>4</sup> takes the form of learned strategies of making myself small in public space, or maintaining eye contact with the ground, or constantly trying to not come in the way of anybody else.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity' (55) says Author Robin DeAngelo in her book *White Fragility*. As a result of the images perpetuated in the media and by our own conditioned hierarchical codification of race, white always comes up on top. In India for example we have countless companies like Fair&Lovely whose sole aim is to help make your skin lighter, to bring you closer to the image you look up to. I remember growing up on American television, moulding my behaviours and mannerisms around the white people I saw on the screen. Projecting utopia on to this world that they portrayed for us.

<sup>4</sup> 'Discomfort, allows things to move by bringing what is in the background, what gets over-looked as furniture, back to life. In a way, the experience of not being white in a white world not only gives us a different viewing point, but it disorients how things are arranged' (Ahmed, 163).

Professor Hamid Dabashi provides a foundational understanding of how this inferiority functions in his book *Brown Skin, White Mask*,<sup>5</sup> where he makes the argument for decolonizing our voices. ‘All colonised people - in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave - position themselves in relation to the civilising language, i.e the metropolitan culture’ (26). This statement further makes me aware of my own command over the ‘colonisers language’ and that even with an accent it affords me a social status, an ability to communicate and a permission to navigate this world with (relative) ease. I realise I am digestible partly because of my command over the English language, forgiven my difference because it is not too loud.<sup>6</sup> Ahmed suggests that ‘some bodies’ more than others are recognizable as strangers, as bodies that are ‘out of place’ (162) and so I say I am digestible because I align myself with the metropolitan culture. Even though the colour of my skin is brown - the way I dress, talk, act and carry myself present as belonging. I am approximating whiteness - by being like or assimilating to the dominant culture. I can protect my difference and conceal it from being revealed or questioned by others, probably as it makes my passage easier.<sup>7</sup>

### **Comfort / Care / Community / Language / Identity / विदेशी**

My art practice is a way by which I embrace my discomfort in order to challenge ideas of what it means to belong and who gets to seek comfort, as it is extended primarily to those that the space is built around. I ask hard questions I have no answers to, and plaster my vulnerability in the spaces I create, extending that gesture to others. I find that I must begin with the self by reflecting on my point of orientation - where I am from, my conditioning, identity, and privilege - questioning what factors for me constitute belonging.

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<sup>5</sup> The book aims to pick up where Frantz Fanon left off in *Black Skin, White Mask* in 1967 - arguing that contemporary forms of imperialist domination require a new ideological language.

<sup>6</sup> I am reminded of the work of Kameelah Janan Rasheed, who is a writer, educator and artist who amongst other things, makes large-scale public text installations. I remember finding great resonance in one of her pieces as I walked past it on the street, asking to “lower the pitch of (my) your suffering” on a yellow neon poster, that to me read as an instruction from the powers at play, but also as a nod to those who would disagree with that statement.

<sup>7</sup> I am unlearning these habitual patterns by cultivating a space with other cultural realities to embrace our difference through the lens of care.



Even though I am uncomfortable in this process, I find that channeling the tension into an art practice helps undo the apology in how I occupy space and the fear of displaying my difference. I choose to address this need through an art practice that creates space for conversation, connection and ultimately an understanding of care that allows for the growth of comfort.

These conversations unfold in English and thus are enabled and enclosed by the ontologies built into that language. English is my first language, even though I grew up speaking two other languages at home. This is the language I learn in, the language I think in, and it is also the language of my class position and privilege. I navigate this world with the use of this shared language, as a tool for communication that on the surface unifies us as thinking and feeling bodies. However, I find it crucial to contemplate the role of language as it is used, and the power or agency that it can either afford or absolve for those that employ it. In order to understand language as an emotional landscape with an impact beyond the self, and how the words we use are imbedded with a power that can affect our mental, physical and emotional well being.

For instance, the term 'person of colour' as I use it to identify myself in a Western context, is a term I find to be packed with a history and prejudice that may or may not be my own to claim. Even though it can be seen as a call for solidarity, I find that as only dominant groups are in the position to impose such terms, it lumps groups of marginalized, racialized and oppressed minorities into the same category 'of colour' and assumes our suffering to be the same while trusting us into the margins of society. As a label it is not our choice, but rather an imposition on who we are perceived to be. How then could we ever see the other as close to the self - in relation to, affected by and as a product of our relationship with - when the differences laid out by terminology and societal norms directs us to a different conclusion.

It is the very language we use that allows me to see myself as the other.<sup>8</sup> Moving from the 'us' to the 'them'<sup>9</sup>. Through my relocation I am beginning to realise that since I have no familial community here, I am fidgeting uncomfortably in my impacted sense of belonging. Not having a permanent place to call home, having moved house twice already with another impending renovation reminds me that this is not a place I can rest for long. I find that as suggested by Ahmed, comfort is a feeling extended only to members of the dominant culture:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surfaces of bodies disappears from view. White bodies are comfortable as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape (158).

So by creating spaces for different shapes, I am able to care for them in a way that I wish to be cared for. While I understand that it is practically impossible to extend our sense of empathy to every person we interact with and that proposing a new emphasis on care can be dismissed by some as naive.<sup>10</sup> I

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<sup>8</sup> Otherness is defined by how tightly we frame our own belonging in relation to the self and self-forming elements (such as the home) as well as what distinguishes this self from others. This difference can be understood via the shorthand of how it is practiced in North America, through the lens of Orientalism as defined by Professor Edward Said. Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the orient' and 'the occident' as constructed ideas of space. Their relationship towards one another is 'of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony' resulting in a 'positional superiority' favouring the West. (Said 2, 7) We understand the East through the gaze of the West, which inevitably results in the stereotyping, exoticisation and outright misunderstanding of an entire cultural reality.

<sup>9</sup> In a home there is imagined to be "concepts of stability and an apparently reassuring boundedness. Such underpinnings of the identity of places require them to be enclosures, to have boundaries and negative counterposition with the Other beyond the boundaries" (Massey 169) as scientist and geographer Doreen Massey outlines in her book *Space, Place and Gender*. This concept to me forms the basis of my understanding of my relationship with others, contingent on the proximity, language and relatability we have to a place or person. Which in turn, defines a tight sense of belonging and continues to evolve into a perceived sense of division between the self and others, resulting in an 'us' and a 'them'.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Avishai Margalit In his book *The Ethics of Memory* he asks "what does caring care about?" stating that "it cares about the well-being of meaningful others" and that "at its best, caring enhances a sense of belonging." He also states that care functions conditionally, making the argument that we are more likely to care about our thick relations, such as those defined by our bounded proximity to them, and are less

believe that being complicit within given systems isn't in our best interest either, and we must attempt to challenge institutions of power to create the world we want to inhabit. If we were to leave things as they are, we would miss countless opportunities to learn from each other. Unable to expand our understanding of different subjectivities we would continue to shy away from difference and help hegemony and homogeneity thrive.

### **Radical Care / Embodied Protest / Unlearning / ध्यान**

'Radical Care' is a need, an urge and a desperation for us to be present with one another — paying attention, listening, nurturing and growing our interpersonal connections. This practice is an embodied protest; it inhabits space from the position of belonging (even if it does not). It is radical as it aims to affect the fundamental nature of 'Care.'<sup>11</sup> This definition of care functions in the metaphorical realm, speaking of emotional care, rather than actual physical or medical care.<sup>12</sup> It is radical by virtue of extending that care reserved for intimate connections to strangers. In practice, radical care actively works against feelings of disassociation, marginalization and exclusion by building an inclusive and reflective space for conversation embracing difference to develop a new language of care. This new vocabulary better understands what we want and need from our interpersonal relationships, by placing emphasis on human relationships to understand care through performative gestures, rituals, language, feelings and objects. It asks specifically how communicating and acknowledging forms of care might bring us closer to each other, and how caring can become a rigorous form of social practice.

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likely to do the same for people we don't know. I find that this selective care is what is leading to feelings of disconnection or isolation in our interaction with others (34).

<sup>11</sup> Many factors affect our well-being, especially when that comes in relation to what we think we need. Our need exists in varying degrees, as defined by psychologist Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. According to the hierarchy, after our need for physiological and safety needs are fulfilled comes our need for feelings of belongingness and interpersonal connection ("Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs"). Here I feel is where care sits. Care on the social realm can exist in token exchanges through a capitalist system in the form of money, gifts or other physicalities, or it can be instrumentalized in the form of self-care products, wellness and health based services. The care I am looking to address is in its emotional form and responses to others.

<sup>12</sup> The work operates from a position of privilege, as it is located in the discourse of contemporary art in the service of activism. There is no tangible proof that the work is directly able to help better somebody's situation, especially in the case of those in need of economic or physical care.

Radical Care functions as a methodology that involves a range of approaches. In the book, *Choreo-graphic Figures, Deviations from the line*, artist Nikolaus Gansterer, choreographer Mariella Greil, and art-writer Emma Cocker outline certain practices of ‘deepening, widening or sharpening an aesthetic inquiry.’ Expressing an understanding of the term Wit(h)nessing, which includes processes of watching, listening and translating from a new perspective. Here the processes of listening are defined as being different from hearing, as it is defined by our subjectivities and therefore is different for everyone.<sup>13</sup> The act of translating that interpretation through different modalities is therefore generative to the process (164). When I reflect on my own processes, I see that the notion of Wit(h)nessing echoes the ways in which I am watching and listening, with the potential to translate based on my individual subjectivity. What I can offer is my translation, passed on through traces or archival of instances of being with each other. I am inhabiting the role of the medium for something to circulate in time and space, as I absorb the narratives of those around me, to act as a keeper of these shared moments of intimacy, and hold space for them in my practice.

Care is gestural, localised, action-oriented, and performed between people, while also often being a gendered notion, one seemingly assigned to women. Women perform tasks of care for their families, and especially where I am from, it is seen as a duty. It is either a given that is taken advantage of, or a neglected action that can change the mental construction of a person. We hardly assess the ways in which we would like to be cared for, how we care for others or how we could pass on gestures of care beyond ourselves. Artist Johanna Hedva looks at taking up the identity of a ‘woman’ which has been historically erased and excluded by many, to represent “the un-cared for, the secondary, the oppressed, the non-, the un-, the less-than” (“Sick Woman Theory”) through her Sick Woman Theory. Taking up this weight of care as a

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<sup>13</sup> The collective - Delhi Listening Group offers *mehfils* (gatherings) to members in marginal spaces in new Delhi. ‘Listening is the work we do to generate dialogue between diverse ways of sounding and hearing a given corner of the metropolis. Our practice engages with the diversity of embodied listening positions that the politics of life at the margins of the mega-city engenders.’ In this way giving voice to narratives of difference, providing a collective space for the contemplation of ideas and discussion of texts along with individual subjectivities that helps to develop a more flexible ear (“Project Anywhere”).

female body, Hedva dissects how this is no longer just a responsibility taken up by women by using and adapting the word 'woman' to embody anyone denied a privileged existence. The theory maintains that "the body and mind are sensitive and reactive to regimes of oppression" ("Sick Woman Theory") and that it is the world today that is making and keeping us sick. She encourages alternate forms of protest and suggests that care is an alternative to these systems of oppression.

The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other's vulnerability and fragility and precarity, and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community. A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care. (Hedva)

When investigated through artistic and social practices, this kind of work has the potential to produce transformations in the consciousness of their participants, and could act as a trigger in the mind of the participant or viewer to reassess how they extend their care to others. For example, the artist collective Aravani Art Project based in my hometown, uses their voice as artists and activists to reclaim public space. Poornima Sukumar and her collaborators form the Aravani Art Project redefine the relationship contemporary India has to the transgender community<sup>14</sup> through a mural making art practice. They work closely with members of the marginalized and often ostracised community to increase their visibility and celebrate their sense of expression by painting murals in an effort to reclaim the street as a safe space. 'Creating consciousness and well-being through art, these murals become remnants of conversations between cultures and help to build bonds and friendships across differences' ("Aravani Art Project"). Forming a community of support, while they shed light on social issues that (may or may not) affect them, expanding

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<sup>14</sup> 'Transgender community includes Hijras, Eunuchs, Kothis, Aravanis, Jogappas etc who have been a part of Indian society for centuries. Though most of the eunuchs seen today are begging at traffic signals or during weddings, they were a respected lot during the Mughal rule in the Medieval India. During the British rule, they were denied civil rights and were considered a separate caste or tribe who did kidnapping and castration of children and danced and dressed-like women.' (Sawant, 59) They have their own societal structures and form of community that upholds them, as they face abject poverty, as a result of being rejected by society, having to flee their families and resort to sex work for survival.

their sense of empathy in order to build temporary networks of care, solidarity and dignity through the platform of art.

In the context of communities of color enabling acts of care in the North American context, I am inspired by works of artist and activist Selina Thompson, as well as Syrus Marcus Ware, who each have a distinct approach to art making. In *Race Cards* Thompson uses the gesture of handwriting questions to direct the action of an audience in the gallery space. The viewer's interaction is seemingly fixed as you enter a room filled with overwhelming questions surrounding notions of race, and are instructed to respond to a question and leave with a question. There is no direct interaction with Thompson and instead the hand-written questions become both the site of engagement and an artefact in and of themselves. These questions then act as provocations for extended inquiry and function as prompts for the viewer to carry with them once they leave the gallery space. This kind of work allows a viewer to reflect on assumptions formed around identity, by asking questions with the intention of us becoming critical viewers of difference. This work to me speaks of care as it aims to represent racialized bodies to an expanded audience that isn't necessarily only made up of people of colour, and in this way, builds empathy and understanding across a range of cultural subjectivities.

By contrast, Syrus Marcus Ware's participatory performance, *Activist Love Letters* is a collaborative writing space involving spoken word poetry and discussions that 'encourage us to think about our role in sustaining a movement and supporting communities' ("Activist Love Letters") by acknowledging the impact of others in shaping our lives through the act of writing letters that would then be sent out by mail for the participant. Whereas Thompson's work negotiates a distance between the participant and the artist, in Ware's work, the artist is present directly alongside his participants and helps facilitate this moment of time dedicated to thinking about others, in a way that is tangible and real and in turn could have its own impact on the person receiving the letter. This ripple effect brought about through tangible expression is something I try to initiate in my workshops as well.

In other artists' projects, the installation itself becomes an important host for the participatory moment of a work. For example, the informal gathering or



discussion space facilitated by artist Pamila Matharu takes the form of a *baithak*, which translates to a place to sit and can function as a lounge, musical gathering or even act of protest. As described in the promotional material for the event by the Sister Co-Resister collective Matharu is part of , the *baithak* is described ‘as an intentional act of care, space-making and redistribution. Sister Co-Resister hosts artists, activists and thinkers to take up space in the Dear Amrita baithak, inviting them to meditate on coexistence and co-resistance with a weekly gathering space to connect, investigate, unlearn, and recharge through relational dialogue, conversations and tea’ (Akimbo). This particular baithak taking place in Toronto’s A Space asks ‘who’s home on native land?’ and aims to understand the role that ‘South Asians play as non-indigenous treaty partners by acknowledging the ways we are complicit in the colonisation of their lands, and how we can center our solidarity with Indigenous sovereignty through activism, art and everyday praxis’ (Akimbo).

In all of these examples, the artist is facilitating conversation to address an issue that resonates deeply with their own position in the world in order to expand their understanding of it in relation to others. In each instance, they are negotiating formal and social elements to catalyze and enact a particular gesture of care.

Through my art practice I am able to access new worlds through storytelling that allow for an access point into another's lived experience. Here, I am attempting to understand those around me, by paying closer attention to their journeys, that envelops us in a sense of belonging if only temporarily. Care remains as the spine of every interaction and extends itself through language, amplifying voices of difference and embracing cultural subjectivities. What this looks like in its physical form is therefore contingent on varying factors, and what it means to care is then specifically in relation to the people interacting within a specific context that catalogues, archives and instigates a new language of care.

### **Context / Institution / Gallery / दीवार**

The institution not only allows me to inherit a community, but also validates my position in it. As a masters student at the university, my voice carries with it a credibility, and on a hierarchical scale I am positioned close to the top. This

creates a power imbalance, that I may or may not ever be able to solve for in my art practice. It has become exceedingly important for me to acknowledge that any attempt at creating a community in this context will always live within those boundaries imposed by our position in relation to one another in this place. Within this program, the gallery space has been a boundary in and of itself, and I have struggled to situate my work in relation to its white walls. As a person from a third world country the gallery speaks to me of excess, privilege and inaccessibility. I have felt alienated by its languages and distrustful of the voice it affords to a niche section of society. An important argument that Sarah Ahmed makes in *Phenomenology of Whiteness* is her critique of Institutional spaces, as she claims 'organisations recruit in their own image' and that 'even bodies that might not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness if they are to get in' (158). In turn, I have to ask: Who has access to these spaces? What kind of privileges or hierarchies does the space help produce? What does it mean then to be a part of an institution as a brown body? And how is a sense of community established and maintained in these spaces?

In an attempt to disrupt some of these tensions I create space for a non-art audience, for people from different backgrounds to be able to access a provocation of thought in a language that they can understand. I have come to terms with the gallery a site to be leveraged for its ability to communicate my message to a different audience. I challenge the conventions around gallery practices, by instead choosing to activate the floor of the gallery as a site of collective making and by covering its white walls with brown paper. The brownness of my skin, now reflected by the brownness of the walls allows me to feel a sense of comfort in my constructed surroundings. These walls are warm and no longer intimidating. This is a process I follow in my studio as well, covering the walls in another skin, allowing my intimate and sometimes fragile thoughts to inhabit space outside my body.

### **Social Practice / Workshop / Audience / Participant / संबंध**

My practice is multifaceted, and encompasses a variety of art languages and platforms such as graphic design, sculpture and social practice. Social practice to me takes the form of hosting gatherings in these institutional or gallery spaces, with the intention to bring different voices together, and the aim to

provide space for conversation and contemplation. My practice is social in that it involves others, and values them as individuals with agency that activate the work. The sculptural and graphic design techniques I apply then are in service of that social engagement.

In her essay *Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents*, Art Historian Claire Bishop dissects how artists critically engage in dialogical or participatory practices. Suggesting that there has been a shift in intention from what Nicolas Bourriaud first described as 'Relational Aesthetics' in 1998, where he discussed the aesthetic relationships between people, space, temporality and design, instead now operates to build relationships between people, these kinds of practices are less concerned with the aesthetic and more interested in the creative rewards of collaborative activity (179). We contextualise these types of practices in the present day as they aim to "rehumanize - or at least de-alienate - a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production" (180). Situated in the context of contemporary art, this body of work is able to enter the discourse alongside established social practices built on dialogical aesthetics. However, it distinguishes itself based upon its material concerns, methodologies and socially-driven processes that act as an extension of my own sense of care. And as I look at the potential for art to shift perspective by addressing a dynamic public, I adopt the form of a workshop for its adaptability and ability to impact a vast audience.<sup>15</sup>

The workshop and the material choices used within it are then decisions made based on access. Workshops are a form that allow for the work to be made accessible to a larger audience, since in my practice there is no monetary

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<sup>15</sup> The format of the workshop is one employed by many social practice artists, For example Wochenklauser's boat colloquia unfolded on Lake Zurich as a conversation occurring between politicians, journalists, sex workers and activists from the city, whose intervention resulted in the creation of a boarding house where drug addicted sex workers could sleep (Kester, 3). As well as, Tania Brugera's Immigrant Movement International that is a flexible community space, and long-term art project in the form of an artist-initiated socio-political movement that engages various populations of society, examining concerns about the conditions facing immigrants ("Immigrant Movement International"). I find that as a gesture Brugera's movement or Wochenklauser's initiations are powerful methods for artists to use social practice as a tool to talk through some larger social, political or cultural issues.

exchange. My understanding of inclusion<sup>16</sup> also means that any space that I am working within will never discriminate based on gender, age, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other differentiating factors. Workshops are a way to build networks of people, that stay connected over time, so through a continued engagement we are able to build a meaningful relationship. Occasionally, this process formed lasting friendships between myself and participants that attended these gatherings, some of whom even help realise future iterations of the work.

In this document I use a variety of words to describe my relationship with others in the context of a workshop or artwork. To clarify these are all distinct and specific terms that I use intentionally. A participant refers to anyone interacting with the workshop space, while collaborators more specifically have contributed by leaving some physical evidence of their involvement. Audience for me, encompasses anyone that encounters the work in any format, while the viewer or spectator specifically engages with the traces or aftermath of a workshop. In that way there are two distinct audiences, one experiencing the work and the other only exposed to its traces or archival. Sometimes these distinctions collapse as the spectator is invited to become a participant by engaging with the environment or objects created in a gallery context, where the space has its own agency and functions without a facilitator, such as in *Listening Vessels*. However the presence of a facilitator in the workshop context creates two positions, that of **host and guest**.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Carmen Papalia and Whitney Mashburn, artist and curator writer duo, in a project initiated in 2016 called *Let's Keep In Touch* looked at this concept of 'meaningful inclusion' which they described as 'dedicating space, dialogue, care and attention to concepts that previously have not been seriously considered' (22) stating the importance of investing in long-term interpersonal relationships between artists and the surrounding community, allowing multiple access points for a complex public to interact with the work. They contacted sixteen artists in order to enter into a dialogue about tactile access to their work, where the resulting exhibition included excerpts from their conversation in both printed and audible forms, two interactive sculptural works with complete tactile access, and an opportunity for visitors to document their own descriptions of the works' tactile qualities via writing or voice recording. (22) Making the entire process more transparent to the viewer, at each level. The processes engaged in are then embedded in value, and redirects our attention to the thought process of the artists involved.

<sup>17</sup> **Go to Chapter on Host / Hospitality / Ethics / मेज़बान / Visitor /Guest / अतिथि**  
**Located at page 41**

When I consider the role of performance in these gatherings, I begin to understand the performative nature of our sense of self and how that extends in everyday interactions from the moment we leave the solitude of our homes.

The spaces I construct are also performative in that they encompass gestures of care that are enacted by visitors. Author Shannon Jackson in her book *Social Work* addresses the presence of performativity in social practice stating that ‘if public art’s audience gestures are choreographic then the gestural realm is not simply a contextual effect of the art piece, but integral to its interior operation. (28)’ The work is choreographed in the sense that the parameters of engagement are defined, and there is a set of actions to be performed within the space if a participant so desires. This practice enacts and imagines gestures that demonstrate or exceed an understanding of care we might normally find in our everyday lives. And yet, it is precisely those exaggerated gestures of care (for instance the act of listening enhanced by the art object) that make the participant more cognisant of the presence of care in everyday life. In my work, it is the way that the art objects are activated by participants that challenge ‘where an art object ends and the world begins’ (28). As it blurs the difference between art and life, I am never able to predict a single outcome for these interactions. It is this ephemeral and ever-changing nature of the interactions that makes photo and video recording such a crucial part of the documentation of an event.

In her book *Contract with the Skin*, Kathy O’Dell discusses the function of documentation in relation to performance. She speaks of the potential for actions to be transformed into objects or photographs that extend their life beyond the here and now, creating the possibility for the original action to find a new voice in new contexts. O’Dell writes, ‘A large part of the deconstructive capacity of the performance lay in its documentation’ (13) and I find that this capacity of documentation indeed allows for multiple and extended readings of the work. It provides the ability to revisit the work while limiting what a spectator has access to, ultimately framing a kind of third-party dynamic between the artist and viewer. This in turn reveals the limits of the larger impacts of the work, while also offering a sense protection to the intimacy that was produced in the original performative and participatory gesture of the work.

However, as much of my practice now exists as photographic evidence, I struggle to resolve what it means to record a body in action, and why leaving a physical trace, through objects or other tangibilities, remains important for the work.

As the documentation is able to exceed the present moment of our interactions, it continues to live and functions autonomously in telling the story of what transpired. This in some ways could betray my original intentions for the work, which were developed around producing a sense of intimacy. As records that are removed from the direct encounter of the work, they feel like a separate outcome in themselves. This is an aspect of my work I am yet to fully resolve, and will continue to explore its role and potential as this practice evolves.

### **Practice / अभ्यास**

#### **Objects of Place ( Recycled Clay, Recycled Paper, India Ink) 2018**

Over the last two years, I have conducted a series of workshops, that each followed their own line of inquiry. The first one, was conducted as part of a Social Practice Seminar with twenty five participants and took place in the gallery space at the university. Titled *Objects of Place* it looked at reappropriating the gallery into one of active making, to enquire the home and the physical objects we carry with us in order to share our sense of belonging with each other.



*Objects of place | 07/02/2018 | Paper and clay | Workshop*



This workshop functioned as an extension of the seminar, and had participants making everyday objects that reminded them of home.<sup>18</sup> They were provided with balls of **clay**<sup>19</sup> and asked to remove their shoes and sit down on the floor.<sup>20</sup> As the participants sculpted objects with the clay, they also began to share the stories that their objects contained—instances of people attaching memories to jewellery left behind by loved ones, in the gesture of kneading bread or the communal act of making dumplings sat next to airplanes representing placelessness and roads to nowhere.

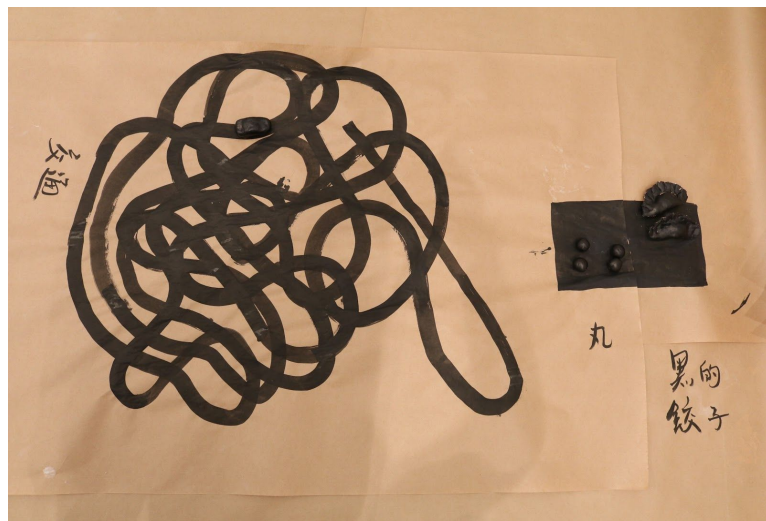
In the second half of the activity participants were asked to situate their object in their context, by questioning the borders they were positioned within. They questioned whether their borders were emotional or physical constructs, and considered the thickness, permeability and distance of the marks that they were producing. It was interesting to note how this allowed for people to claim ownership, or occupy space in relation to one another. As some people contained their movement to their immediate proximity, others spread out. For instance, one participant labelled other peoples objects in Japanese, as she expressed that the borders in her life took the form of language. Radical Care in this space functioned by allowing classmates an intimate window into each others lives, as they shared their experiences through the stories of these objects and their containers.

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<sup>18</sup> Professor Sherry Turkle in her book *Evocative Objects* makes the case for the power of objects to hold imprints of memory, and specificity of time and place by stating that “We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.” (5) *Souvenirs, tokens, talismans* - the things we carry with us through life and the things we leave behind and long for, act as a lens for us to start dissecting not only where we place value, but also the emotional ability for our objects to speak for us in our absence. When I moved to Canada I carried with me mostly things of practical value, but some things I brought with me for their emotional value. Photographs of my parents, jewellery both inherited and collected from my travels, postcards from friends, my mothers bathrobe and a container for salt, as in this box I house a tradition.

<sup>19</sup>For a closer discussion go to chapter **Clay / Co-facilitator / मिट्टी** located at page 38

<sup>20</sup> This action, one enacted as a mark of respect when entering a home in India, addressed an everyday action and allowed people to enter into my tradition.



*Objects of Place | Clay & Paper | 2018*

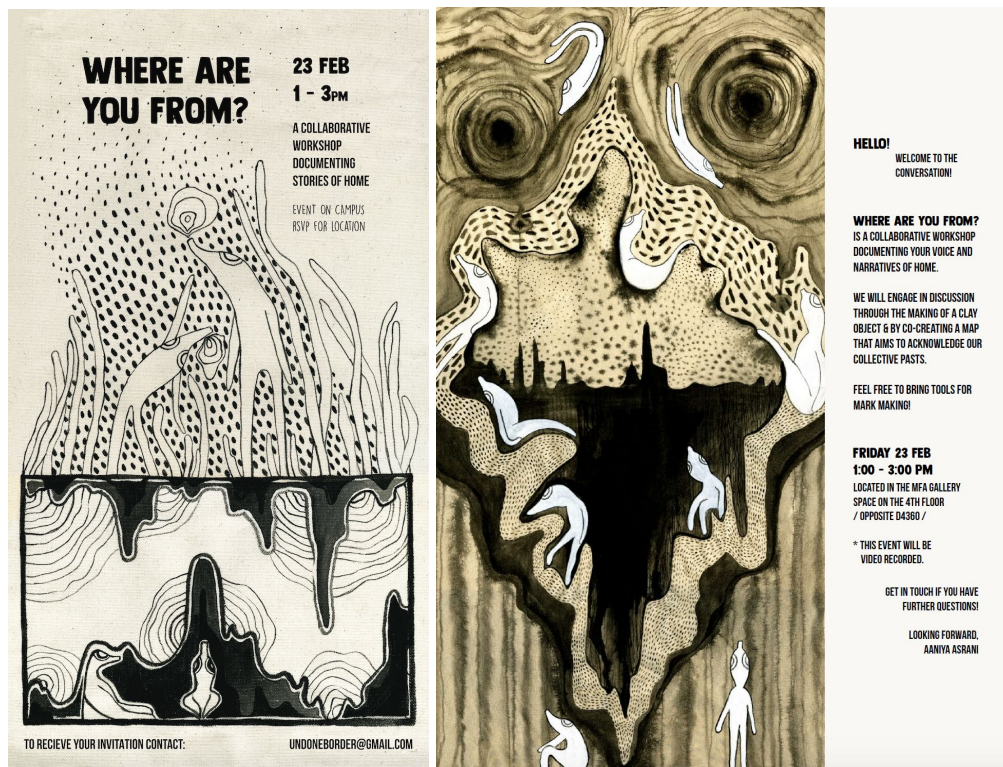
## **Where Are You From ( Recycled Clay, Thrifted Fabric, India Ink, Salt ) 2018**

In the next iteration of the workshop I wanted to ask a simple question that is often asked when meeting someone for the first time - Where are you from?<sup>21</sup> A question that allows for the connotations and nuances of root, identity and belonging to come into view. In this gathering too we were making objects associated with the home, cultural belongings or rituals, whose context was defined by a map drawn on the ground. Here, the map functioned metaphorically as the land, and helped situate the objects in their containers or borders. As one constructs an object that for them holds special meaning, one introduces that sense of place to the group. And by collectively building around these objects one is able to connect, intersect or overlap with another's metaphorical sense of place, to enable a curiosity around how we interact in space together. This workshop was conducted in the same place as the last one, but began with a call for participation, where people were invited to engage in the conversation through the circulation of a poster that prompted them to respond if they would like to take part. This allowed them to self identify as wanting to contribute to this particular discourse. They then received an invitation that described the activity that would take place and explained some of the tangible parameters of the event alongside a description of the activity.

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<sup>21</sup> In the context of North America this question is fraught with tension, as this is a question usually used to identify the origins of people of colour, or those otherwise marked by physical markers of difference. I reappropriate the term, to a question that can be asked of anyone with the intention of actually listening to what it is that defines where they are from. It is rephrased through the lens of care as an entry point into an individual's past so we can collectively acknowledge how where we are from shapes who we are.

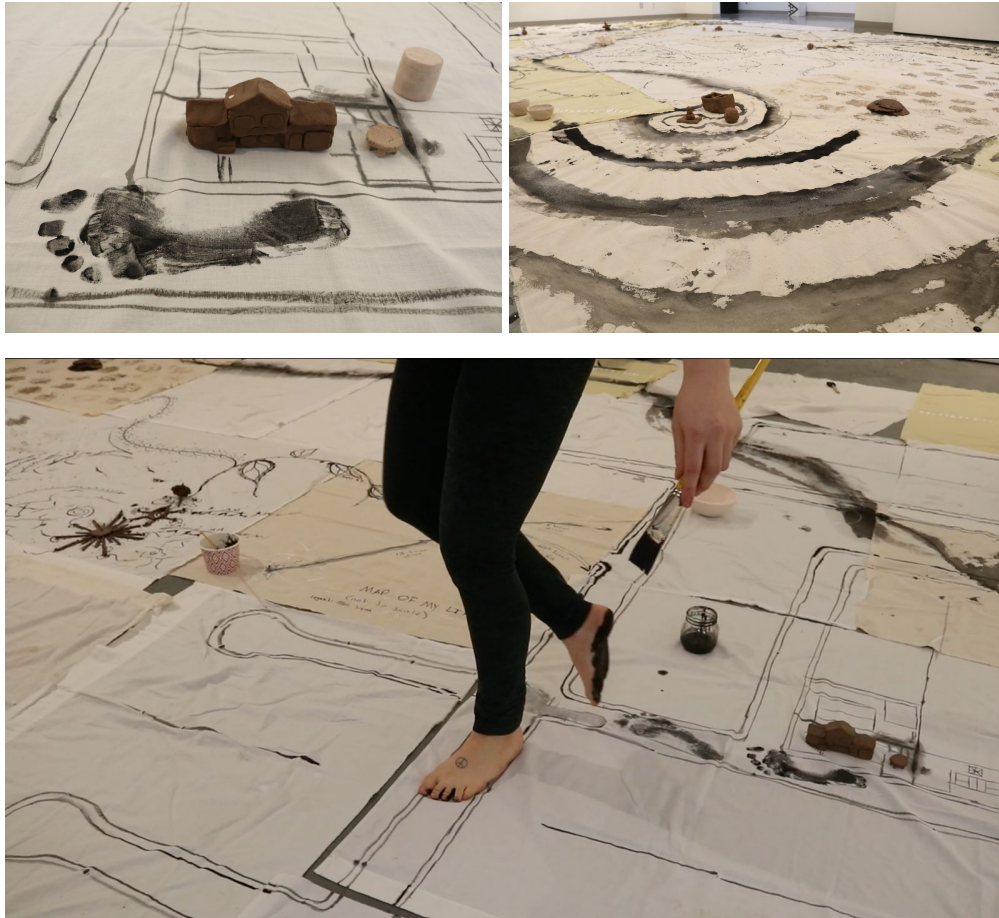




*Where Are You From? Poster | ink on canvas | 2018*



*Where Are You From? | Fabric, Ink, Salt | 2018*



*Where Are You From? | Fabric, Ink, Salt | 2018*

Here, I didn't direct the conversation or actions as much, inhabiting space alongside my participants as we learnt about each other. I began the activity through my own definition of the borders I perceived in my journey, and introduced salt as another material, as a way for the participants to be introduced into my personal ritual.<sup>22</sup> Being vulnerable alongside people was imperative and helped to lower the boundaries that we construct. I think that the space of comfort that was produced by sharing enabled a continued engagement with the same group of people in later stages of this project. I used the moment after the workshop to capture the essence of what had just occurred, as some participants stayed back to help me document and fold each piece of fabric laid out on the ground. The piece I displayed in the gallery was titled *Imbed*, and spoke to the care and domesticity in relation to the attentive

<sup>22</sup> If ever I was upset and couldn't point to a reason why, my father would take a palmful of salt and draw circles in the air around my head - seven times clockwise and then once counterclockwise. He would say he could feel the pulse of the negative energy contained in his palm, and then proceed to wash it away. I felt better every single time; not because there was a scientifically proven healing property of salt at play, but because in that simple act I could feel a sense of protection.



folding of the maps that were produced. Piled one on top of another, in a careful balance on top of a stool, the information on the maps was fragmented and intentionally couldn't be fully deciphered by an audience that was separated from the workshop. I use sculpture as a strategy for the work to reach an audience outside of the direct participants, for it to rest and hold space for these powerful interactions, which as a result creates two kinds of publics; one that is speaking and one that is listening.



*Imbed | Salt, Ink, Farbic, Wood | 2018*



*Interweave | Salt, Ink, fabric | 2018*



I found it was important to bring this back to the community that started it, and participants were invited back to alter the work in *Interweave*. My role in manipulating the material was more apparent in this stage of the work, as I divided, ripped and sewed the maps we produced together into long strips that I understood to represent borders. I was uncomfortable in this process, since these were not maps that I alone produced, and so I sought the permission of everyone and even received some of their help in ripping the maps, which also ended up being a cathartic process.



*Interweave | Fabric, Ink, thread | 2018*

This was followed by connecting seemingly unrelated narratives and wrapping them around an architectural support pillar on campus, that acknowledged the structure of the space it inhabited. This work was an effort to challenge some of the rigidity of the art institution, and the piece grew as its tentacles extended

in every direction, uncontained by its defined parameters within the space.<sup>23</sup> The process granted participants a freedom of expression in this new space, and people interacted as they pleased. Sewing together fragments, making knots and interweaving connections with other architectural support, expanding its reach beyond the defined parameters or as one participant did, by tethering themselves to the fabric creating tension between them and the support. I see parallels between this and the work of the Slow Art Collective<sup>24</sup> that works together with dynamic publics on large tapestries. Slow art as they define it, involves a long term investment in the work, and is geared towards generating a longer engagement or experience for the participant by creating temporary structures together to rest within.



*Interweave | Fabric, Ink, thread | 2018*

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<sup>23</sup> The new Emily Carr building has been treated as precious by the powers in charge, which extends to its inhabitants as we are always appointed a defined space within which to make work, which often needs to be contained and clean.

<sup>24</sup> I am inspired by the work of the Slow Art Collective that is currently helmed by Chaco Kato and Dylan Martorell where they describe “Slow art” as “the slow exchanges of value rather than the fast, monetary exchange of value. It is about the slow absorption of culture through community links by creating something together and blurring the boundary between the artists and viewer” (Kato and Martorell). In their latest Project, ‘Emerald Threads’ the artists seek participation and interventions from members of the South Melbourne community to build an evolving structure that will house a series of resting places for the public (Kato and Martorell).

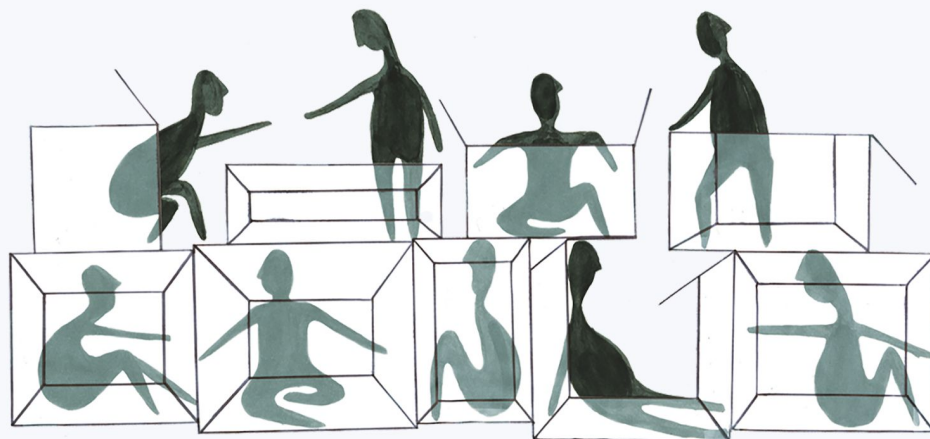
## **What Do We Owe To Each Other ( Recycled Clay, Recycled Paper, India Ink, Incense, Sound, Soup) 2018**

The next iteration of these workshops hoped for a dialogue with a non-art audience, which is why I chose to situate this work outside the university. In the case of *What Do We Owe To Each Other*, the workshop was situated in a student run studio space inside an abandoned mall in Chinatown called Ground Floor Art Centre.<sup>25</sup> This helped to reframe the practice in relation to its location in the heart of the city, which allowed for the work to be read through a host of connotations. Shifting contexts is generative as the spectrum of the conversation can range from care for the self to understanding more clearly the needs of another in the context of a specific place. In this work (whether I intended for this to be the case or not) the conversation was able to fluctuate between the self, others, capitalism, gentrification and the role of artists and activists in bridging the gap between those realities.

This time I asked the question ‘What do we owe to each other?’ through the circulation of a poster, this time distributed in public spaces as well as in the university and online. The process of putting up posters in public spaces made me uncomfortable, as an outsider it was a scary and daunting task occupying space I wasn’t directly entitled to. However that fear dissipated as I put up posters reclaiming that space as my own, growing as a result of the process. The design of the poster depicted indistinct human figures emerging from boxes as the iterations conveyed a sense of liberation from given labels imposed on our bodies, and I used the boxes as metaphors for the unpacking that would occur in the space. The poster too went through iterations, as I found the first version didn’t provide enough information about the space.

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<sup>25</sup> As an outsider to this city, I have found it extremely challenging to find sites outside of the institution, as that requires a risk and sense of trust from the inhabitants of any place. Having access to The Ground Floor Art Centre was only possible as I made my intention for the space very clear with the people that run it. As someone who had previously taken part in workshops conducted by me, this idea for a dedicated space for care was received very warmly, and I was supported by members of the community to make the following workshop possible. It felt welcoming to have people that supported and valued the work, as I began to ask another question, what do we owe to each other?



# FREE RADICAL CARE

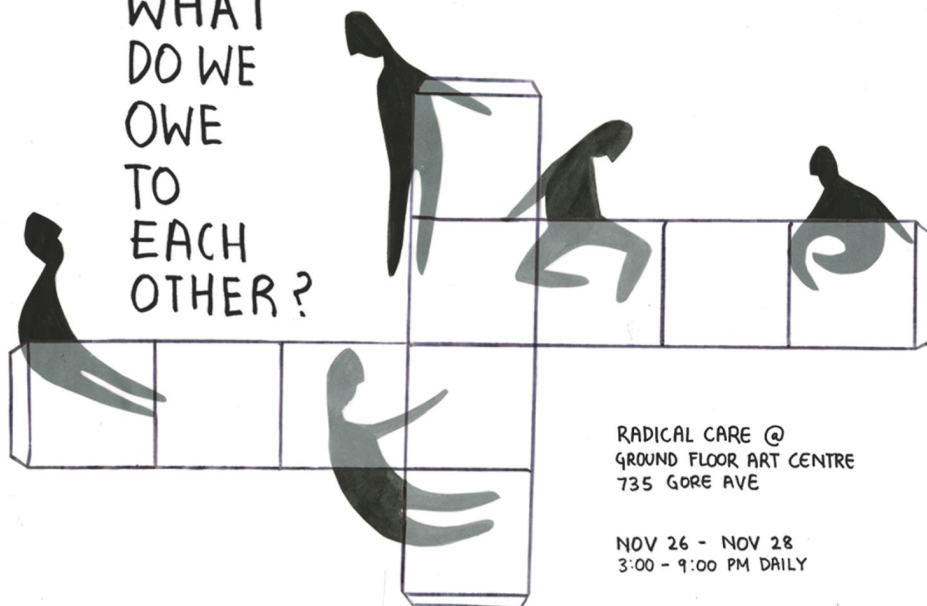
A SPACE FOR CONVERSATION & CONTEMPLATION

GROUND FLOOR ART CENTRE / 26TH - 28TH NOVEMBER  
UNIT 185, 735 GORE AVE / MON - WED 3:00 - 9:00 PM

AN EXPERIENTIAL SPACE CULTIVATED FOR DIALOGUE, EXCHANGE & REFLECTION. BY CONTEMPLATING

\* SPACE INCLUDES SOUND, SMELL, TASTE, TOUCH, SIGHT & POTENTIAL INSIGHT.

WHAT  
DO WE  
OWE  
TO  
EACH  
OTHER?



NOTIONS OF CARE, THE AIM OF THIS SPACE IS TO FORM A COLLECTIVE

UNDERSTANDING OF HOW CARE FUNCTIONS. INHABIT SPACE, COLLABORATE & FORM CONNECTIONS.

RADICAL CARE @  
GROUND FLOOR ART CENTRE  
735 GORE AVE

NOV 26 - NOV 28  
3:00 - 9:00 PM DAILY

What Do We Owe To Each Other | Vellum and Ink | 2018

I wanted for the space to activate the senses of the participants and so, I constructed this space from my own memory, amplifying certain senses to transport the viewer to a different reality. Here I allowed for various opportunities for others to express their understanding of care by being exposed to a constructed environment featuring sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. As I inhabited space for a period of three days (for six hours each day) with a sign out front to direct visitors that would be tended to and cared for irrespective of whether they were strangers or friends. People walked in to be greeted by me, the caretaker as defined by a poem on the wall, expressing my relationship to the storefront:

*I am the daughter of a shopkeeper  
The store came into his life  
the same time that I did  
All we had was a rack of clothes  
And an old radio for company*

*Yet,  
The shutters rumbled  
open every morning  
Subtle wafts of jasmine lingered  
from his morning prayers*

*And,  
After school on most days  
You could find me in his chair  
Tending to customers  
making big deals I could not honour*

*This was where  
I learnt to be a caretaker  
Here, I'll make another offer  
Where we are now  
Is from me for you*

*An exercise in turning  
to one another*



*Making visible our stories*  
*Enveloped in a warm embrace*



*What Do We Owe To Each Other | Workshop | 2018*

Participants were then asked to take off their shoes in order to enter the space that was deemed fragile by the brown paper that stretched from wall to wall. This served as an invitation to slow down and spend some of their time,

drinking soup while contemplating care. On day one we served a green lentil soup, day two a potato-leek and turnip soup and my personal favourite on day three, the pumpkin soup. Each soup was accompanied by an ingredient list for the visitor to recreate if they so wished. The soups were made collaboratively by Annie Canto and Molly Marneau, artists and friends, as I embraced my discomfort in asking for help. Enveloped in wafts of jasmine and faint old hindi music, visitors who were now warm and content from the soup were presented with another offering - clay wrapped in fabric in the form of a *potli*.

<sup>26</sup> This was for them to exercise an act of care for themselves or for someone in their lives, which could then be left in the space or taken with them, to keep or to further gift. What I asked in return was for them to share the story of what they made, in their own language on the wall using ink and a paintbrush.



*What Do We Owe To Each Other | Ink and Paper | 2018*

<sup>26</sup> Potli is a hindi word that loosely translates as a parcel that is sometimes meant to be received by a guest, usually derived from a fragment of a whole meant to be divided in portions or parts.





*What Do We Owe To Each Other | Clay, Fabric, Ink, Paper, Soup | 2018*

The aesthetic decisions involved producing a warm and welcoming space, that people could rest in. Decisions such as covering the walls and floor with brown paper, where I laid out the *potlis*, alongside deep glass bowls of nourishing soup in a glow of warm light helped set a tonal quality to the interactions. The material facilitators helped produce the possibility of tactile exchange while people spent as much time as they wanted to in the space. It sometimes piqued the interest of a passerby who would meditatively inhabit space alone or, sometimes addressed a collective of bodies who may or may not have known each other from before. As people inhabited space together it began to come alive with expression and conversation, as strangers shared their lived experiences with one another and formed new connections.



These conversations also called attention to my responsibility as a host, who also recognizes ‘the opportunities and limitations’ (Kakoliris, 153) of my position, specifically towards those in need of a different kind of care. I often questioned what my role would be if someone were to come to one of my spaces in search of a support I was not able to offer them. Apart from preparing myself with the tools to listen and be present, I wasn’t sure I knew how to handle an unexpected situation. This is where I faced my biggest challenge, which is not always being able to care for everyone. Having realised the limitations of the space and myself, I decided to keep a list of resources of mental and physical healthcare centres ready in case anybody was to visit with an urgent need for care that I could not provide.

**Listening Vessels ( Recycled, M370, Midnight Black II, Dark Chocolate, Navajo Clay Bodies, Burlap, Muslin Fabric) 2019**



*Listening Vessels | Mixed clay bodies, burlap, muslin | 2019*



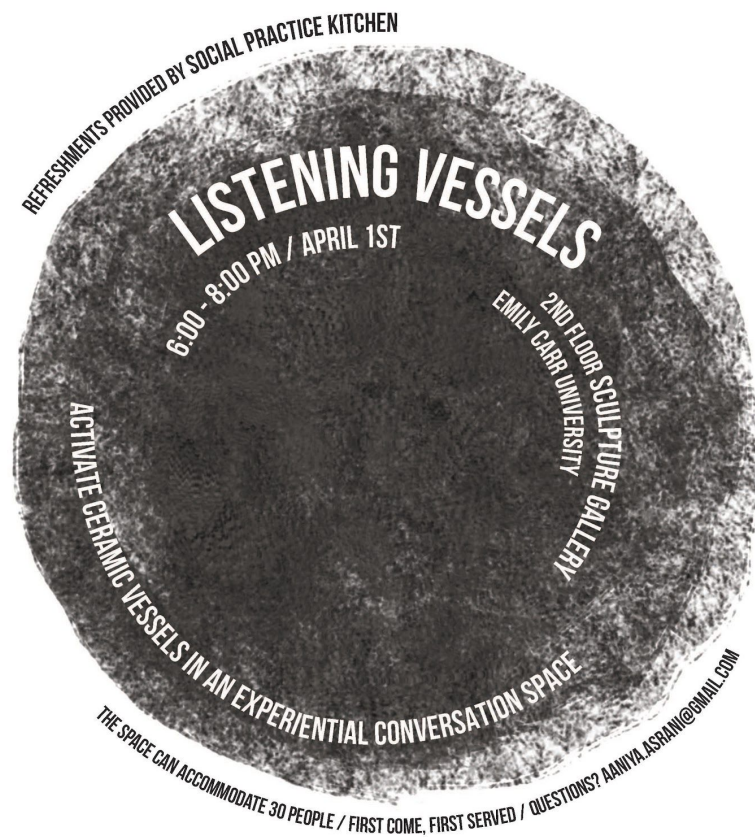
*Listening Vessels | Mixed clay bodies, burlap, muslin | 2019*

The trajectory of this work is positioned towards understanding what it would look like if I removed myself from the equation. Here the role of host is played by the material components of the practice. The aesthetic decisions become more apparent as I take this work forward, producing a resting space within the institution once again, meant to be activated by visitors to the space. Here I created a point of orientation or site of rest, that housed the listening vessels (A vessel for conversation and a vessel for contemplation) that for me embody care. These vessels act as the material collaborators to having a conversation as they amplify the sound of your voice, or your ability to hear another or even yourself. These vessels act as containers for our conversations and are functioning as companions to thought or feelings. In an experimental and experiential conversation, they are a personification of care as they want to listen, be present with or activated by others.

I see a parallel between this and the work of Lygia Clark's *Dialogue Goggles* made in 1968 as part of her *Nostalgia of the Body* series. The goggles themselves were made of industrial rubber, metal, glass and mirrors and restricted the visual field of two participants now locked in an eye to eye exchange, functioning as a sensory experience as well as an immersive sculpture. The glasses altered the vision of the participant with magnifying glasses, drawing attention to the act of wearing, looking and seeing (Evie).

Facilitating an intimacy, to focus our attention on being present with others, directing a new conversation experience. A recent work my vessels are in conversation with is that of Artist Babak Golkar's *Time to Let Go* where he positioned terracotta vessels on sandbags facing water bodies, 'designed to contain a scream' and let go of any excess feelings produced by contemporary society ("Babak Golkar"). These kind of works are inspirational to me as I attempt to produce objects that have their own agency in altering or reforming our consciousness.

As these artists allow their objects to convey a poetics that doesn't necessitate their presence, I see this as a generative next step in my research process, where I open it up to the possibility that participants are able to form connections themselves, and that they don't particularly have to be witnessed or documented for them to be valuable interactions. It leaves the space occupied by me, for others to fill as they form their own associations within how the work functions for them. In that way this strategy differs from my previous methodology, as it embraces its own undetermined outcomes.



*Listening Vessels | Poster | 2019*



As part of the thesis exhibition - *Introspection/Extrospection* I hosted a performative gathering in my project space, with an audience once again assembled through an invitational poster. This gathering comprised of members of the school and local community. People slowly trickled into the space and began their own experimentations with the objects, as I observed from the sidelines. This is where I see the biggest strength of this practice as it continues to surprise me in the ways that it functions. Unexpectedly, people began to collaboratively make sound together, sometimes listening closely to a lullaby, other times creating a cacophony of sounds that refused to go unnoticed in an institutional space, disrupting the borders produced by closed doors, inviting participants from different corners to engage. One participant shared her experience of the piece with me afterwards explaining how it had a profound effect on her as where she was from, in Iran, women are not allowed to sing in public and so this space allowed her the opportunity to hear her voice in the public domain for the first time, and she described it as a powerful and empowering experience. Every day for the duration of the piece, I would go back to tend to it each morning, in this process being able to document any changes that happened from people interacting in the space. This allowed me to foster a sense of care for the work, gauge if the work still functioned without my organised intervention, and allowed me to take on the role of outside spectator discovering new orientations and assemblages within my work.



*Listening Vessels | Mixed clay bodies, burlap, muslin | 2019*



*Listening Vessels | Mixed clay bodies, burlap, muslin | 2019*





*Listening Vessels | Mixed clay bodies, burlap, muslin | 2019*

### **Clay / Co-facilitator / मिट्टी**

My choice of material has been clay for a number of reasons. As a material it is used by people of varying skill levels, and can be accessed by a diversity of people. From the potters on the street back home in India, who sculpt beautiful idols during festivals or clay pots “off season” to earn a meagre living

to well established artists exhibiting work on pedestals in gallery spaces for modern audiences - this medium feels adaptive, even though the value of the clay, and the people who work with it changes depending on how they are seen in their context. Clay and its tangibility has the ability to access the functions of memory and embodies how we remember—we alter a memory every time we recall it, just as each gesture of the artist alters the course of the form that is produced. We can choose to forget what we made, rubbing away any obvious form or we could access stored information in our minds to recall what something looked like and construct it from memory, we could also just sit with the adaptability of clay and feel it move and morph organically between our fingers. Clay and it's malleability allows for it to be a shapeshifter depending on what we need from it.



*What Do We Owe To Each Other | 2018*

Meanwhile clay can also act as a co-facilitator of conversation, as it transcends the need for a common language. It serves to also ease potential tension between strangers, as they now have something to focus their attention

towards, for a conversation to develop around. Participants in *What Do We Owe To Each Other* encountered lumps of clay wrapped in fabric in the form of a *potli*. This was done with equally distributed balls of clay so that everybody starts this exercise from the same point, making something out of nothing. Equalising the space with a common material but also laying emphasis on the fragility of our existence by leaving them in their unfired raw state. The exercise asked people to make objects that they could keep or give away, which would hold their memory for the receiver, imbedding these lumps of clay with meaning and power.<sup>27</sup>

I use clay to enquire the role of objects, personal rituals and traditions in our construction of the home in some cases, such as with *Objects of Place* and *Where Are You From*. While other times I use it simply because it embodies the care I hope to start a dialogue around. In *What Do We Owe to Each Other* it acted as a material facilitator that slows you down, asking for an investment of time to spend tactically engaging while accessing a specific thought or contemplation. While fabricating *Listening Vessels* I realised just how much this material embodies care. It needs to be protected from reacting with the air by being wrapped in plastic, and anything made out of it needs to be held carefully and only after it has had enough time to rest and dry. It is vulnerable, able to collapse or crack if not tended to properly and its processes involve patience, as clay bodies that have not fully matured could explode under the pressure of the kiln.

While making *Listening Vessels* I was contemplating care, especially as different clay bodies feel distinct in your palms, need separate treatments and undergo distinct transformations when fired. The vessels I made took their own time, and resisted the possibility of being perfect as I made them all individually by hand. This imperfection speaks to the impossibility of the task at hand, which is caring for everyone equally and with the same focused attention. Time slowed down as I pounded, rolled, smoothed, moulded, erased

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Fischli & David Weiss are an artist duo from Switzerland collaborating since 1979. Their work involves the production of small, at times whimsical clay sculptures that ‘offer a casual meditation on how we perceive everyday life’ (“Peter Fischli David Weiss”). Imbedding our everyday actions, rituals, or instances with an importance that we don’t always afford them, never imposing meaning on to the viewer, the duo allow for these clay objects to communicate on their own based on others subjective interpretations.



and imposed form on the material, leaving an evidence of the time I spent trying to care for these objects so that they in turn could care for others.

### **Host / Hospitality / Ethics / मेज़बान / Visitor / Guest / अतिथि**

Philosopher Jacques Derrida on the *Ethics of Hospitality* proposes that hospitality within the Western tradition takes the form of a tension, a contradiction, an antinomy or a double imperative' (Kakoliris, 145). He defines unconditional hospitality as the pure, utopic 'provision of hospitality towards a stranger without conditions' (Kakoliris, 146) stating that this true hospitality 'should be open to indiscriminate otherness even if it risks always opening the door to its own undoing.' There is always a risk involved since 'we cannot determine who will be our guest or how he or she will behave as a guest (Kakoliris, 147).' This is opposed with conditional hospitality that has its limits defined by law, power, political, juridical or moral standards (Kakoliris, 149). Further, since there is a sense of invitation extended within conditional hospitality, it will always result in feeling of debt and expectations or time restrictions imposed on the other creating distance between the host and guest. Derrida suggests that that 'hospitality always brings within itself its opposite' in the form of hostility, that exists in every act of hospitality (Kakoliris, 149).

In Professor Gerasimos Kakoliris' critique of *Jacques Derrida on the Ethics of Hospitality* he expresses a fundamental miscalculation in terms of the paradox of conditional and unconditional hospitality. Stating that 'hospitality is impossible in a pure, absolute, unconditional form (151).' and that in order to avoid bias, or power imbalances 'the ethics of unconditional hospitality would preclude us from taking any decision - and thus taking responsibility for our decisions (154).' As human bodies inhabiting the world today we are constantly making decisions. The spaces I create have an underlying intention behind them, and I construct these spaces making moral, social, emotional, physical and aesthetic decisions which places responsibility on my shoulders. Kakoliris asks 'isn't it enough just to say that the fewer conditions we put on our hospitality the more hospitable we are?' and that all we can really do is control 'the violence stems from the host's exercise of power and sovereignty (154).' In the case of my art practice this power takes the form of the role I am playing as host.

The hospitality I engage in as host is definitely conditional as it is complicit within a capitalist system. By constructing a space, and its parameters of engagement for an audience to participate within, I am establishing my expectations from the interaction. These expectations take the form of an exchange, which in this case is not monetary but rather an exchange of time,<sup>28</sup> energy and a willingness to share one's story. By positioning myself as someone offering something - either balls of clay, bowls of soup or provocations of thought, I am able to validate the reciprocity. By offering in addition to those things, care through an attention to listening, I avoid producing 'violence' or in this case 'a feeling that we may be unjust to the other (154).' The ethics of my practice lay in a concern for others and how that manifests is through a notion of respecting boundaries. As I ask questions within the workshop context, the notion of boundaries takes the form of reading body language and comfort before moving forward with potentially triggering questions. Leaving questions open-ended so participants can reveal as much or as little as they would like. Most importantly making space for different kinds of engagement so that the conditions imposed aren't overbearing on a visitor. I also try to counter indifference by following up wherever possible, asking for feedback to see how the interaction trickled in the minds of visitors.

A challenge I have faced is concerned with authorship. Professor Grant Kester in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Conversation in Modern Art* asks 'Is it possible to develop a cross cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers?' (8) echoing the difficulty in the 'lack of resources in modern art theory for engaging with projects organised around a collaborative, rather than a specular, relationship with the viewer (11).' The challenge here is that of authorship, or who gets to claim a right over the work, since it is made collaboratively with a group of people. As I struggle with these questions, I find that in my art practice I am able to address this by giving credit to my collaborators wherever possible. This usually manifests itself on

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<sup>28</sup> In *What Do We Owe To Each Other* people had the flexibility to choose how much time they wanted to spend in the space, as I offered different entry points into the work. I provided soup, postcards and poems as extended engagements to people who do not want to participate in the ways I had set up. This meant that even if someone did not want to take part in the activity that they could engage by simply being in the space. As one participant chose to stay for the entire six hours the space was open for on one day.

the wall label describing the work in an exhibition context, or by seeking permission to document and photograph others as I record the spaces we inhabit together. I also ask individual collaborators how they would like to be identified, as some choose to not be photographer or want to be listed as anonymous collaborators.

In the case of an audience interacting with the traces of a workshop or sculptural work, Kester unpacks how ‘the viewers response has no immediate reciprocal effect on the construction of the work’ as opposed to dialogical projects that ‘unfold through a process of performative interaction (10).’ As is the case with *Listening Vessels*, I produce objects that are then offered to a viewer, that doesn’t afford them the same agency in determining the outcome of the work as is the case with the workshops I conducted previously. This is another strategy I explore to better understand the relationship of my work to participation, and how even as ‘the physical object remains essentially static’ (10) that the work can be activated and performed by others interacting within the space. Having said that, I am still learning and the methodologies listed above are yet to be perfected.

The people that have come to spaces initiated by me have been either close in proximity to the space, those that have encountered a poster, or who have been invited on a social media. The visitor, even though I don’t often know them, is usually a member of my extended community and are familiar with the art world or workshop environment. However since there is no defining factor for who the work wants a dialogue with, the space largely gathers its own participants. This is an uncertain process, and as I setup, there is not always a way to estimate the number of people that will arrive or if they even will. And each time they do, it reifies my belief in the importance of care, of creating space for dialogues with others. Further validating this process every time I have an unexpected conversation with a stranger.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> In *What Do We Owe To Each Other*, a security guard patrolling chinatown was curious as to what was happening, and him inquiring resulted in us engaging in a long conversation about homelessness in Vancouver. He described his job as that of relocating people who were causing trouble, stating that there wasn’t really a place to send them seeing as how the food banks, shelters and rehabilitation centres were all already overwhelmed. We then began to dissect what’s at stake with one of our most vulnerable communities in need of care, with Daniel basing his understanding in personal experience, suggesting that there is no sense of second chances in a largely addicted population essentially just left outside to die. We talked about the projected identities imposed on the these bodies, and what it means to assume that we all start

## Reflection / भूतकाल

When I think about belonging and home, I think of a set of guiding principles, a smell, a taste, a touch, a way of being in the world. But, practicing belonging and enacting a sense of home as an uninvited guest here on unceded territory is not so straightforward. When I moved here, I had no knowledge of indigenous cultures or that where I was moving was once known as turtle island and that I would be living in a settler society. All I saw, under a capitalist system, was opportunity. The potential for a better life, which as humans we should all be able to strive for. My aim in moving to turtle island wasn't to claim this territory as my new home but rather to expand and better understand my own sense of home and belonging. I have come to learn that the efforts and actions required to be a good guest and an ally to indigenous sovereignty are never complete and rather an ongoing part of an evolving practice. As my practice revolves around notions of understanding and caring for the needs of others, it is also in turn an active investigation of allyship and solidarity that continues to evolve. Going forward I would like to think even more critically and further trouble my own ideas of home to mean more than a physical space, instead allowing for it to function as an emotional and cognitive container for ways of being that are anchored in social structures, dynamics and gestures. In this way, I want my practice to occupy space in a metaphorical sense, creating new space built around notions of caring for one another.

In a conversation for the podcast *The Henceforward*, Eve Tuck and Rinaldo Walcott discuss belonging and ask the question: how does one become belonged to a place? They suggest that 'certain bodies are immediately in alienation to the land' and how some bodies more than others have 'no place in this world' and so can never belong, and further that there are some that used to belong but don't anymore. What role do I play then in this equation, as a

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from a point of equality. The fact that we were able to have that conversation, not accounting for our own differences was a monumental moment for me. He then gave me his number in case I was to encounter any trouble, and continued on his way. This interaction also reminded me of how this entire project will always in some sense be a failed effort since it doesn't account for those most vulnerable, and in need of basic human rights.

south asian woman who is in search of belonging? In what ways am I complicit in the colonisation of indigenous peoples and their lands? How does my presence and need to ‘occupy space’ and be seen, acknowledged and heard stand in the way of the future of reconciliation? These are the questions that will continue to drive my practice forward here on unceded Coast Salish territory.

I also need to acknowledge that our relationships to one another are shaped by capitalism, white-supremacy, anti-blackness and indigenous erasure. I acknowledge that what precedes my existence is a history of displaced belonging, and that by doing the work that I set myself up for in this context that I am accountable for acknowledging my position as a visitor to this land—that isn’t now and can never be mine to claim. Here, I draw another meaningful trajectory from Tuck and Rinaldo’s discussion, wherein they look to notions of the future, and in particular, what kind of future we are imagining. In addition to acknowledging our positions, we must also begin to think of each other as our audiences, for us to be generous with one another, to find new (or old) ways of being with each other and by operating on a different ethic of relation—being present with, recognising and looking out for each other’s well-being. This is at the centre of what I am trying to do with an art practice built on life practices of care, creating opportunities for expressing and enacting difference so that we can better see and hear one another.

### **Appendix / The Past / Witness / अपने कानों के साथ**

As a woman inhabiting space in the multicultural and diverse reality of India, I felt a strong comfort in difference. People cohabiting space, orbiting around one another in a chaotic, yet somehow functional, dance of cultures, identities and feelings. India to me feels raw and volatile, yet polyphonic in its acceptance of multiplicity.<sup>30</sup> This belief in the thriving of cultural difference is only complicated by India’s history with communal violence. Listening to

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<sup>30</sup> I spent twenty-five year of my life in Bangalore, India. A city that seems to be outgrowing its infrastructure in its embrace of the global market resulting in a rapid gentrification of public space. My city increasingly looks like any metropolitan city with coffee shops, co-working spaces and shopping malls at every turn - only to be juxtaposed by historic or cultural spaces, temples and ruins.

narratives of the Sikh Massacre of 1984<sup>31</sup> was formative in my understanding of the ramifications of a large scale socio-political movement, and allowed me to notice how people still live their trauma as the world moves on, giving a face to the numbers broadly categorised as genocide in our history textbooks. It was on a trip to Punjab with my classmates for an oral history project where I learned the true meaning of the word care, from the village postmaster of a town called Lopoke.

*It was a winter's day and we walked down a narrow cobblestone lane, lined with houses and rubble to get to his office, to be greeted by his wife and hot cups of chai. Keemti Lal sat at his desk, moving ever so slightly as he recounted for us his experience of a specific day, February 22nd 1984 when terrorists entered the village where he used to work as a travelling tailor. He recounted for us that evening in the doctors' clinic, and the banal act of sewing buttons on a coat, when two armed men walked in demanding for ammunition they believed the doctor would have. In his last minute attempt to escape, the doctor grabbed the coat from Keemti, tossed it at the men with guns only to run out the door of his own clinic. What he had forgotten though was his young son who was taking a nap in the back room. The two men saw this as their opportunity to get revenge and started a discussion about killing the young boy. Keemti seemingly frozen in the corner was shook by this thought. He says he believed that this young boy had no place in this senseless violence, and so instead challenged the men in front of him. As a result he was shot in the head, kicked and repeatedly stepped on only to be left for dead.*

*After the men had left, a passerby dragged Keemti's body into a rickshaw and took him to the hospital, here he was pronounced paralysed from the waist down. Eventually Keemti returned home to his family, but was faced with a new problem. How could he make a living to support them without the use of his feet? As a collective decision the whole village banded together to appoint*

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<sup>31</sup> '1984 remains one of the darkest years in modern Indian history. In June of that year, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered a military assault on the most significant religious center for the Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab (Simran Jeet Singh).' They did this in an effort to destroy the leader of the Khalistan movement, who wanted a separate Sikh state, and had taken occupation in the Temple. The attack killed thousands of civilians, as direct and collateral damage. Soon after Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. Her assassination triggered genocidal killings of Sikhs around the country, as homes burnt to the ground and mobs mutilated and murdered Sikhs, as the Congress government turned a blind eye to the fates of thousands.

*him the role of postmaster, as this would mean he could live in the post office with his family and that people would bring letters to him, to stamp and send. As he sat in his chair, he looked fragile and weak as he recounted this story. He said that he had no ill feelings towards the people that did this to him, because they were acting from their own convictions and personal trauma, and that he would do it all over again if it meant that the boy would get to live. He says he no longer remembers what it feels like to stand up, to walk, to feel his toes nestled in his socks, but that the boy visits him everyday telling stories of the world outside the post office.*

I carry this story with me as a reminder of how care can show us our humanity, how a community can band together in order to uphold the dignity of a man and the role he plays in his community. Care for me moved quickly from the realm of the physical, into that of our emotional responses to others, what we say to, about and around others, that grows our connectivity and support for those around us. Care is in unspoken silences, in not having to explain ourselves, in thinking about someone long after they are in front of you, in carrying the stories of others. It is in learning how lucky we are to inhabit this world together, and our potential to understand and relate to each other. I learnt what care means from a stranger, and I hope to take that back to strangers.

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