

## **Praise for Discord: Collaborations in Talking Back**

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*“Whether the goal is harmony, antagonism, or any of the myriad of outcomes that fall outside of those two somewhat unrealistic poles, the labor of self-discovery is worthy of both our time and our brain power. This is work that asks us to interrogate who we are as an essential element of progress: intellectual, pragmatic, political, and aesthetic.”*

- Chloë Bass, *Where Who We Are Matters: Through Art to Our Social Selves*

*Black: So let's play. When I say “agonism,” you say—*

*Blue: —“an aesthetics of difference,” the delight in surprises, collisions, in-betweenness. You?*

*Black: I'd say, “mixie.” The acknowledgement that we are contingent beings, that identity is relational, and that one is incomplete without the other.*

- Marisa Jahn, *A Ballad of Black and Blue*

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Who's in the Room?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Statement of Intent</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Share My Lunch, No Really, I Brought Too Much</b>	<b>7</b>
Pedagogy and Socially Engaged Art	<b>11</b>
<b>Methods of Collaboration in Talking Back</b>	<b>14</b>
Collaboration and The Politics of Friendship	<b>16</b>
Group Making and Community Representation	<b>16</b>
<b>The Centre for Polite Dissent</b>	<b>18</b>
Zine Production, Publishing Spaces and Calling In Before Calling Out	<b>19</b>
Learning from the Processes of Refusal	<b>22</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>24</b>
Works Cited	25
Notes	26
<b>Reflection: The Aftermath of Making Public</b>	<b>28</b>
Appendix A. BACKTALK Exhibition Pamphlet	31
Appendix B1 and 2. Writing from The Centre of Polite Dissent	33
Appendix C. The Antiracist Classroom, Towards a Pedagogy of Consensual Learning Resource Packet Introduction	37
Appendix D. Get Down with Macadamia Nut, Funky Moves for Salty Mixed Nuts	<b>40</b>

## Acknowledgements

The work and life surrounding this document takes place on the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish Peoples, specifically that of the xʷməθ kwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

The following text is written in first person, the “I” mostly pertaining to my own voice, but with respect for an abounding influence from many members of my newly established community made in conjunction with the MFA program at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Nura Ali, Becky Bair, Aaniya Asrani, Reyhan Yazdani, Megan Jenson, Amanda Huynh, Justin Langlois, Diyan Achjadi, Jay White, Lucie Chan, Sue Shon are all artists and educators I’m particularly thankful for in this moment, as they modeled how higher education is an opportunity for a kind of growth that extends beyond references and into discovery about how we exist in the world.<sup>1</sup> Not listed by name are my peers in the MFA 2020 cohort, whose dedication to community has allowed me to understand the kind of everyday support needed for the existentially self-reflective processes that make up rigorous artistic inquiry.

For the sake of this degree requirement, I will adhere to the convention of single-authorship, though this text works through questions of holistic collaboration and what it means to write with a collective voice. Many of the ideas outlined here are not only in dialogue with the academic sources I list, but in flux based on hours of dedicated conversation with aforementioned peers and mentors, particularly artist, collaborator and friend, Nura Ali.

## Who’s in the Room?

The driving value of my art practice, equal to that of my teaching practice, is to exchange acknowledgments of who is in the room. I take up this question not in metaphorical circumstances that engage the viewer with an art object, but in a dialogical framework wherein I come into a room as host, instigator, or voice in a collective. In the first instance, the acknowledgement is nothing but hopeful, an attempt to experience presence with those in company, an act of empathetically situating myself and others. This starting point allows us to see one another before attempting any long or short term collaborations. The kind of first

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<sup>1</sup> In “Teaching as a Prophetic Vocation,” bell hooks recalls memories of the affirmation afforded by certain learning communities, “. . . the memories can be more profound. We may remember when we began learning critical consciousness for the first time. We may remember the moment when we first learned to be existentially self-reflective . . .” She continues in the chapter to show how teaching and learning are practices of critical thinking; a liberating strategy used to survive racist, sexist, class elitism and further to kindle ongoing self-actualization (183).

encounter I aspire to experience and/or facilitate draws from Adrian Piper's *Impartiality, Compassion, and Modal Imagination*. Modal imagination, which Piper defines as our ability to see not only what is actual, but what is *possible*, is key in determining our ability to act with compassion towards others (728). These possibilities apply not only to the complexity of the single individual's being, but to the potential to connect and create extending from the interaction.<sup>2</sup>

In order to acknowledge who's in the room, there is first commitment to modal imagination, the compassion that amounts from the inability to grasp another. This extensive imagination allows for a kind of compassion that can then be contextualized by the complex hierarchical systems in which we live. Acknowledgment begins with the personal but cannot stop at the individual. Like the empty chair that assumes attendance in different group conversations, there must be an acknowledgment of who's not in the room, what structures in place rule power dynamics, what limits one and privileges another. With this kind of situated acknowledgment as the baseline for working collaborations, it is possible to take up high-stakes practices like institutional critique, community organizing, and ethical representation of a collective voice.

In Audre Lorde's prominent, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," she teaches us that difference is the personal power that brings communities together, that strong communities are not built upon the shedding of our differences, but upon support through mutual non-dominance that gives us the security to imagine new futures (112):

Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters (Lorde 111).

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<sup>2</sup> Piper draws from Emmanuel Levinas' conception of the other to demonstrate the compassion necessary when depicting the other, infinite in their alterity. In her notes on her performance piece *Mythic Being* she writes, "... utterances of the Mythic Being ... regain their specificity, their significance [and] mystery for me: They are signs of someone else's experience, to which I have only partial access." While in this work she is the originator of the character, Mythic Being, she writes of her experience of separation and compassion that occurs when the character asserts more and more of his own difference. "The relation between him and me is not that of denotation to the object denoted; the Mythic Being does not "stand for" me. In some ways, he is me; but as an independent abstract object, he is only himself," (Piper 112, 123-25).

Lorde's essay was written in response to *The Personal and the Political Panel: Second Sex Conference* in 1979, where she discovered as an invited speaker that the majority of discussions about feminism still ignored the many differences between women at the intersections of age, race, class, and sexuality. She asks, "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable." Lorde's wisdom allows me to challenge my space in arts discourse as arbiter of the scholarship I align with. Further, her teachings set a foundation for principles that guide my decisions as an artist, both in upholding difference as a source of interdependent strength, and in being critical of the constraints within social systems that privilege some and delimit others.

In keeping with these values, it is imperative to acknowledge the grounds upon which I work, learn, and collaborate as the traditional and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples that is the xʷməθ kwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. A first step to situating a body of work is to understand its relationship to the histories of oppression that it is privileged by in order to inch towards deconstructing said histories. To do this, we must realize that trying to understand something only by engaging in Western theory is like insistently taking a cab during rush hour when the subway system is just beneath the surface (Tuck 14). I've come to understand territorial acknowledgement not as a strategy for imperial governments and settlers such as myself to make their claims in the work of reconciliation, but as a method of honoring the incredible, strenuous and ongoing work of Indigenous peoples as they fight for legal acknowledgement and systemic accountability for atrocities made against their lands and nations. I will not focus, in this text, on what decolonization means for the dominant cultures of the university, but rather, how can we honour the longstanding work of Black and Indigenous scholars and activists of colour who have asserted voice and rights in exclusionary spaces like the academy. While I learn to account for my relationship to these Coast Salish lands, I aim to critically situate my actions as an artist and educator by understanding the research I engage with as a political act. The art practice outlined in this text cannot account for the privilege I take up but can engage critical theory and long-term collaborations to guide my actions for equity in my community.

## Statement of Intent

As an artist, I interrupt spaces with installations that invite community members to make zines or letterpress print together, to act out dialogues or to eat hot pot. My commitment to building community comes from the desire to understand myself in relation to others, an experience of many like me who, as Sarah Ahmed puts it, have been made to feel questionable in the places we call home.<sup>3</sup> I can carve out spaces for solidarity where interracial knowledge creates belonging and difference is respected.

I could frame all the artworks of my period of study at Emily Carr as attempts to define this tendency: discovering self and agency by embedding myself holistically in my community. *Share My Lunch* is an example of a series of community events that cater to the interpersonal connection often taken for granted by social superstructures. *BACKTALK* is a curatorial project behind which hours of collaboration took place to thoughtfully represent the voices of individuals in a collective call out of institutional inequalities. *The Centre for Polite Dissent* is both a physical and imaginary space where those who do not inhabit a norm (or don't quite inhabit a norm) can be praised for their acts of denial as diversity work.

Creating these spaces means understanding their separation from the bureaucratic work of altering infrastructure. These projects can ignore institutional oversight and methods of sustainability while presenting physical and conceptual interruptions for deeper connection, community strength, and refusals of silence. But their realistic inefficacy doesn't belittle their power. I use theory-driven social frameworks to imagine new possible worlds free from restrictions, walls, and hierarchies that limit the creation of necessary support structures. I propose that an art practice can flourish in the middle ground between imagining new realities and instigating institutional change. Framed by the inner workings of personal relationships and social experiences, this thesis support document showcases different projects that attempt

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<sup>3</sup> In "Being in Question" from Sarah Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* she explains the political and embodied work of changing an institution with the metaphor of a room,

A norm is something that can be inhabited. I think of a norm as rather like a room or a dwelling . . . Not to inhabit a norm (or not quite to inhabit a norm) can be experienced as not dwelling so easily where you reside. You might be asked questions; you might be made to feel questionable, so that you come to feel that you do not belong in the places you live, the places you experience as home; you might turn up and not be allowed in or find it too uncomfortable to stay . . . Indeed, not to inhabit a norm (or not quite to inhabit a norm) is often an experience of being thrown . . . Diversity work is often the work we have to do because we are thrown (115).

to tread this middle ground by carving out community spaces that prioritize connection and solidarity.

### **I. Share My Lunch, No Really, I Brought Too Much**

Facilitating and attending community events plays an important role in my art practice. Community events act in multiple ways as opportunities to meet people while trying out different sets of artist-facilitated directives. Because the directives in these events are preconceived by the artist, and aimed to instigate intimate social experiences, I often refer to these events as “conceptual” or “social frameworks.” Participants enact social experiences like awkwardly sharing a fork or playing with food in order to encounter one another with vulnerability through humor, eating, and attentive conversation. Frameworks I’ve facilitated like *Share My Lunch* imagine new ways of being together that prioritize interpersonal connection. These projects imitate existing gathering spaces like the dinner party, the coffee date, or the community centre kitchen to imagine the potential of placing interpersonal connection at the centre of working communities.



*Share My Lunch, No Really I Brought Too Much 2018*





*Share My Lunch, No Really I Brought Too Much Det. 1 2018*

In a series of participatory installations titled *Share My Lunch, No Really I Brought Too Much*, I experimented with different sets of directives to meet strangers and build connections in my new community. In one iteration, I invited my newly acquainted MFA cohort as guests to an uncomfortable banquet. We sat together questioning the viscosity of a flan or the use of a shared spoon while reading printed scripts I had designed for the occasion. In pairs, the group read aloud catty dialogues between sisters, spats between partners, and confessions between close friends. The decisions behind the placement of each fork or the pairings of odd foods were made to instigate vulnerability through the humour of social discomfort. The social cues of our dinner party were off-kilter, giving us a common ground to laugh and fumble. Humour allowed us to move past the nerves of not understanding our roles in relation to each other. We created an atmosphere comfortable enough to allow us to eat food off shared plates and act out lines like, “I love you, please don’t leave me alone,” or “let me get the sleep goo from your eye.” *Share My Lunch* entailed a series of similarly awkward luncheons that allowed me to reflect on the experience of coming into a new community. I understood connection as the impetus for my

return to university and created socially engaged frameworks to imagine the long term relationships that form from those first encounters.

In a later iteration of *Share My Lunch*, I hosted one-on-one luncheons with passersby, again as a reaction to my role as a newcomer to Emily Carr. I carted around a dining set up, arranged the table and chairs in high-traffic areas and waited for strangers to inquire about my lunch plans. In this iteration, I pushed my willingness to connect to a new level in order to question what kinds of connections I was looking for. In the sixth of six shared meals with strangers, I happened to meet who would become my close friend, collaborator, and accomplice for the duration of the program, Nura Ali.



*Share My Lunch Series 6/6 Meeting Nura Ali 2018*

These kinds of artist-facilitated interactions sit within the contemporary art practices defined by Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and into the realm of socially engaged art or social practice. Bringing the social aspect of my art projects to the forefront of critical engagement with the work allows me to ask more topical questions about how to work with others as opposed to how I work with media like food or bookmaking. In his 1998 book

*Relational Aesthetics*, Bourriaud examines the art practices of Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, arguing for a transition in art making that focuses more on creating an arena of social exchange instead of a pre-established work for a viewer to interact with. Relational aesthetics depends on social interaction as the core of the work, creating a different set of questions when engaging with the artwork—but Bourriaud’s questioning process leaves little space for criticality. In Claire Bishop’s examination of Bourriaud’s text, *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, she criticizes relational aesthetics as a superficial imagining of new possible worlds when looking at socially engaged art projects that are not critical of their context or the artist’s intention. For example, Bourriaud places the value of the artwork in the viewer’s control when Tiravanija interrupts the gallery to serve free food in his work *Pad Thai*.<sup>4</sup> The art is only successful if people come to eat. Critical questions about the materiality of the work, the artist’s intention in creating the work, and the qualities of the social frameworks produced by the work are not taken up in Bourriaud’s depiction of this relational art form. Bishop asks:

How do we measure or compare these relationships? The quality of the relationships in “relational aesthetics” are never examined or called into question. When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good . . . If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why (65)?

To critically understand the motivations behind relationship building in my practice, I have approached Bishop’s critique in different ways. In many of my social frameworks, the success of the work has leaned on audience engagement, determining projects like *Share My Lunch* as spaces to connect encouraged by the loose sentiment that group fun equals community equals good. In a more literal attempt to answer Bishop’s question, I’ve posited that the kind of relations I’m producing are long-term collaborations that assert friendship and support as central to art practice.<sup>5</sup> But in a more thoughtful examination of my goals as a maker, I return to the values that drive my actions. If the conceptual frameworks I build are founded on acknowledgment of both the individual and the social context, then they must thoughtfully

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<sup>4</sup> Stokes, Rebecca. “MoMA | Rirkrit Tiravanija: Cooking Up an Art Experience.” InsideOut, 2012

<sup>5</sup> See section II.A. “Collaboration and the Politics of Friendship”

engage with a community's needs through modal imagination<sup>6</sup> and an understanding of the structures we inhabit. Hosting community-building events and attending pre-established community spaces like forums, socials or governance meetings is a part of my practice that lets me understand different desires and absences that motivate my community. Through these kinds of local gatherings, I am able to find my role in working towards the needs of my peers and how these needs often call for systemic changes within the institutions we inhabit.

Art criticism has attempted to define social art of the 1980s to the present with many disparate phrases. Dialogical art, new genre public art, service aesthetics, art and social practice, are strategic phrases that allow for new ways to understand the role of the artist in relation with their audience, and further, to establish the artist's gesture as extending beyond designated spaces for art and into active engagement with their communities. In the ongoing contextualization of my practice, I have come to identify with Pablo Helguera's "socially engaged art (SEA)" as it pertains particularly to collaborative methods that can be unpacked in learning communities like the classroom.<sup>7</sup>

#### **A. Pedagogy and Socially Engaged Art**

Pablo Helguera, known for his contributions to socially engaged arts as an artist, writer, and museum director attempts to consolidate a history of SEA in his book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. In a preamble about the interdisciplinarity of artists in his discourse, he writes:

Artists who wish to work with communities . . . can greatly benefit from the knowledge accumulated by various disciplines . . . This objective is not to turn us into amateur ethnographers, sociologists, or educators but to understand the complexities of the fields that have come before us, learn some of their tools, and employ them in the fertile territory of art (xiv).

Situating much of my artistic processes in the discourse of SEA allows me to understand how it lends to and defies the criticism of thinkers like Bourriaud or Bishop. It allows me to be critical of the collaborative methods that make up my art practice. Ultimately, I am intrigued by a particular stream of socially engaged artists who work within different disciplines like

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<sup>6</sup> See section "Who's in the Room" quote from Adrian Piper's *Impartiality, Compassion, and Modal Imagination*

<sup>7</sup> Helguera, Pablo *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (NewYork, 2011)

education to critically engage in community-based work. In my current work as an artist working in an arts and design university, I can align my practice within the trajectory of socially engaged artists who explore community work through the lens of transgressive pedagogy.

Connecting socially engaged artists with interdisciplinary practices in education gives insight into systems of power that govern the classroom, the academy, and the wider world. Encompassing the theory of educators like bell hooks, Eve Tuck, or Audre Lorde in community spaces like the classroom means not only critiquing hegemonic discourses in curriculum, but collaboratively restructuring educational spaces that marginalize or exclude people in the room. This work of experimenting with the collaborative methods of the classroom mirrors the expertise of socially engaged artists who create social frameworks for interaction through a critical lens. Conversely, socially engaged artists draw from the activist writings of transgressive scholars to understand the power dynamics in place in group work and methods for engaging with a diversity of lenses.

For example, in *Social Practice Studio*, a course at Maryland Institute College of Art, artist/educators Katie Bachler and Scott Berzofsky drew from bell hooks' *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, to develop topics and methods for their socially engaged art classroom. Over the course of their work with students, they collectively experimented with the space and function of the classroom in order to understand hooks' concept of home as a site of resistance (hooks 41-49). Drawing also from Audre Lorde's book of essays *A Burst of Light*, in which she depicts self-care/preservation as political warfare, the class focused on self-care as a political act in a semester-long assignment to "make something for yourself, to nourish yourself [in] the form of an object, ritual, or performance to share in class," (Bass, Sholette 38). Over the course of the semester, students and teachers discussed their domestic lives as a point of departure for community building and methods of resilience. They cooked weekly meals together, made sauerkraut, rearranged the space with pillows and sheets all the while discussing women of colour feminist theory, politics, resilience and mutual aid (Bass, Sholette 40).

These are the kinds of artist-led social spaces that inspire my practice. As hybrid artists/theorists/community organizers, the leaders in this classroom were able to facilitate a space of deep interpersonal connection alongside the work of contextualizing self and others not only in the designated space of the classroom, but as actors in the wider political and social climate. Socially engaged art combined with this kind of collaborative pedagogy can come together to imagine new ways to activate ourselves as engaged members of our communities.

While I hold fast to the words of hooks or the practices of teachers like Bachler and Berzofsky as a reason to situate my practice within education, I wonder if it's naive to have such faith in the post-secondary arts classroom as a site for community activism or social criticism. As a step toward contextualizing myself in the Emily Carr community, I attended curriculum meetings, faculty meetings, and student club gatherings as a way to understand my new environment. Over time, it became apparent that conversations about racial bias were missing and possibly avoided in group settings. This meant instances of microaggression or what many of us know as the “room of silence<sup>8</sup>,” had more potential to happen daily. I witnessed, heard of, and experienced instances of othering in presumably safe spaces like art critiques, class discussion, and general meetings. My friends and I became highly aware of a culture of unequal working conditions, silencing of diverse perspectives, and general distrust as we unpacked the bodily discomfort incurred in these academic spaces. Together with my collaborator and friend Nura Ali, we saw the need to shift our culture by developing and facilitating a teach-in called *The Antiracist Classroom: Towards a Pedagogy of Consensual Learning*.<sup>9</sup> We led our faculty, staff, administrators, and incoming grad students through a process of accounting for implicit biases first through the use of group agreements, then by discussing de-identified examples of students being racialized in critiques and class discussions.

We wanted to present a method of teaching where all members of a classroom, with such differing lenses, could decide the explicit social agreement that would help determine how the community would function. In a period where xenophobic ideologies permeate global politics, religious discrimination plays a role in majority legislature, and racial justice has to assert itself in climate change discourse, education—specifically art education as a learning of languages for self-reflection—should be the place to learn how to be active in our complex world. I bring up this workshop and its motivations as an example of an artist collaboration that pushes the boundaries of artistic practice through collaboration with other disciplines, in this case,

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<sup>8</sup> Student group at RISD, *Black Artists and Designers (BAAD)* in collaboration with student filmmaker Eloise Sherid created the video *The Room of Silence* in the early 2000s to address the experience of students of colour at predominantly white art schools.

The room of silence is when you make artwork regarding . . . race, identity, sexuality, etc. and everyone in the room is silent and has nothing to say about your work be it because they don't know how to talk about it or they don't want to talk about it. The crit is often offensive or doesn't address what the obvious emotional aspects or personal aspects of a piece [are].

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix C. “The Antiracist Classroom: Towards a Pedagogy of Consensual Learning Resource Packet Summaries”

education and antiracist work. While we don't care to declare the work as art or teaching—nor can we claim that the workshop was ultimately successful—we are artists who drew from transgressive pedagogy to facilitate a space for community growth, a practice taken up by both educators and socially engaged artists.

The methods and research taken up in the creation of *The Antiracist Classroom* are key to my continued artistic endeavors. The work of collaboration in the proposed outcome of the workshop is central to both my starting values and the culmination of any project. This type of collaboration means being present in order to understand the various issues a community is in need of addressing. It means acknowledging those who are in the room as well as the hierarchies that govern the room, and it means decision making and ideation is not dependent on the individual but always in conversation with others in a shared space.

## II. Methods of Collaboration in Talking Back



*BACKTALK*, title and accompanying distributables for exhibition, 2019

*BACKTALK* was the culmination of months of collective work. As a public exhibition, it engaged its audience through validation of experience and community awareness. The methods of collaboration behind the show provided insight into ways of working with others at different levels; from politically-aligned friendship to working with communities with thoughtful reciprocity. On all levels, the considerations taken into account when working with others relied on situated acknowledgment and trust earned with dedicated time and shared vulnerability.

Through a collection of text-based works, *BACKTALK* asserted a place for peer-to-peer solidarity within the exclusionary systems in place within arts institutions. As both co-curator and exhibiting artist, I was situated as organizer and co-editor of the collective voice. These combined roles required criticality and reflection on my part as I worked with others, in this case, publically portraying a multi-perspective lens. In the experience of the show, the viewer walked into the exhibition and was welcomed with a breadth of inviting colours and soft edge fonts. The title spread horizontally across the first wall and was accompanied by a series of zines, pamphlets, and the exhibition handout.<sup>10</sup> In these first interactions, the viewer could understand the exhibition's theme in multiple ways. Whether they related on a personal level with small-scale texts, engaged with the show catalogue that codified the space, or entered the room to be confronted with the highly personal reactions to institutional racism, the viewer was asked to confront their subjectivity. In the same way, collaborating on both the content and the exhibition strategies of this show meant months of unpacking subjective relationships through conversations about shared emotions, differences in positionality, and depth of friendship.

Coming up with the groundwork and collective voice of *BACKTALK* relied on a kind of collaboration only practiced through solidarity in friendship. Through this work, I could understand working together as much more than procedural. In a day, collaboration fluctuated between processing experiences through collective making, sharing interracial knowledge often unavailable in higher education models, and coming together in powerful public phrases. Methods of working together developed from dedicated time, but the content driving our collaboration in this instance came from the analysis of a shared experience in spaces that lacked capacity for complexities of ethnic identity, inherited culture, or interracial knowledge.

### **A. Collaboration and The Politics of Friendship**

Holistic collaboration means leaving space for another's needs while privileging the time and commitment it takes to know someone. To act publicly on another's behalf only seems

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A. "BACKTALK Exhibition Pamphlet"



ethical when the same kind of trust afforded to friendship is interwoven into the collaboration. In her book, *The Company She Keeps*<sup>11</sup> Celine Condorelli argues that alignment through friendship doubles as a political act. “Being a friend entails a commitment, a decision, and encompasses the implied positioning that cultural activity requires,”(7). Friendship enlists a kind of support founded upon shared experience, alignment of ideas, and dedication of time—qualities necessary for working community involvement and fulsome collaboration.

Condorelli’s writing complicates the altruistic notions of support as a political alignment not without its biases. When the interpersonal relationship is declared, the supportive action raises in stakes. The deciding moment of responsibility is crucial because it throws the relationship into the public realm, the space of “words and deeds.” Supporting is a political relationship, of approval and encouragement, not dissimilar to that of being a friend (16, 17). By hosting group-making workshops and designing hospitable spaces for conversations through text and food, my practice involves collective making and hosting in order to build the connections necessary for solidarity and support. But I question where my motivation to take part comes from. While providing support and working closely with others is built into the methodologies of my art practice, I question my impetus and what that means for working with others to strengthen community. How can a collective expression encompass all that we do and do not share?

## **B. Group Making and Community Representation**

Understanding the need for communal spaces of affirmation and comradeship, one of *BACKTALK*’s exhibition walls displays a constellation of collaboratively designed letterpress posters. In a letterpress workshop advertised to work through concepts of structural racism, Ali and I worked with different groups of students to poetically express experiences through text and printmaking. Motivated by the affirmation we were able to afford each other in our friendship, the facilitation of this poster workshop drew from women of colour feminist and antiracist writing to build community through conversation and group making. Exhibiting the work of a collective of voices meant consideration for the people represented by their works. To

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<sup>11</sup> *The Company She Keeps* accompanied Condorelli’s exhibition *How to Work Together* at Chisenhale Gallery in 2014. The show explored how human action takes place amidst countless structures of support. She draws attention to support structures as overlooked foundations for human action and experiments with naming friendship as the support between people, objects and social systems. Whether support is emotional, legal or physical, it is mostly taken for granted, and therefore often seeming to be invisible (“Celine Condorelli at Chisenhale” 3).

bring together individual expressions in a show bent on disruption is to risk misrepresentation of the many voices in the room. How can methods of collaboration prevent this kind of overshadowing or misalignment? Perhaps through the trust afforded to dedicated time, and through practices of reciprocity, group work can take on a curated collective voice.



*Antiracist Letterpress Workshop and Poster Constellation, 2019*

To understand how thoughtful collaboration is possible, I look to the work of Laura Gaaysiigad Cuthbert, an artist and anthropologist who archives the untold histories of rural

communities based on vested personal stakes and trust earned with hours of dedicated time and travel. In her ongoing project, *Populous Map*, Cuthbert and collaborators look for and archive what would otherwise be erased histories of different communities in British Columbia. She has travelled to over three hundred ghost towns over the last eight years, spending time with locals and land, always asking herself, who's missing? When did the inhabitants of Japantown leave Ocean Falls, or who frequented the Tong House in Quesnel Forks before the town's population dwindled to none (Cuthbert, "Shadow History")? In reflections on her work, Cuthbert sits with the need for reciprocity when working with the stories of real people:

Because only taking has created a disparity in our history that I see in every town I go. Historical erasure exists because history is disgustingly colonial and owned by its victors. Only taking erases living people and their experiences. (Cuthbert, "How We Got Here")

Cuthbert and her collaborators figure out different processes of reciprocity by commemorating stories not only in their own archival methods, but in different projects that adhere to the specific desires of the communities they work with. Similarly, as I work with individuals/communities involved in projects like *BACKTALK*, I aim to ensure affirmation and connection extending from the first encounter as a reciprocal gesture towards those I work with. In the work amounting to the show, we were motivated by the exchange of stories for affirmation and to build an archive of the difficult work we engage in day to day.

### III. The Centre for Polite Dissent

As an extension of the work done in *BACKTALK*, *The Centre for Polite Dissent (CPD)*<sup>12</sup> is a longer-term installation with the intention to strengthen the community affirmed by the exhibition. In this case, the project is not a public show, but a collaboratively-conceived space to imagine a different kind of communal learning environment. We can create alternative syllabi, gather for weekly potlucks, dedicate time for collaboration and contextualize our work in current politics. *The CPD* welcomes individuals who have enacted dissensus as diversity work in their learning communities. It is a physical space that pops up in the hallways and libraries of an institute to provide affirmation to BIPOC students through food, books, and collectivity. At the

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B2. Writing from the Centre of Polite Dissent

same time, it is an ideation space where members are given license to disagree with dominant superstructures and imagine new possible methods for community growth, education, and arts discourse drawing from a common experience of refusal. *The CPD* then acts as a self-publishing centre through which collaborative ideation is distributed in zines and pamphlets. The intentions and processes within this project bring together different ideas: collaboration seated in friendship, situated community work, and socially engaged art frameworks as the imagining of different realities. *The CPD* houses the material processes of zine making and self-publishing as methods for group ideation, and community call-in.

#### **A. Zine Production, Publishing Spaces and Calling In Before Calling Out**

Through reflective writing in the forms of collaborative zines, letters, directives, and recipes, *The CPD* is able to voice ongoing conversations through personal anecdotes and words of support. The voice within the publications prioritizes the support of its community, calling in before calling out. This kind of collaborative writing acts to siphon daily thoughts and experiences in forms that may then be reproduced quickly for distribution. Hours of conversations around social criticism are compressed into text-based collaborations that hope to reach an audience experiencing the same absences in diversity work that manifest in absurd experiences of othering within the institution. While the collective unwinding of the personal is slow, methodical, and emotive work, the residual material forms involve immediate printing processes. Collaborative unfolding of ideas takes time but the message is urgent. We find ourselves spending late nights compiling thoughts and sketches in front of xerox or Risograph machines in the hopes of communicating with students at an event the following day. The physical manifestation of collective call-ins is then distributable. They may be experienced as artworks in spaces chosen by viewers, giving them agency to experience the work at their leisure in spaces more comfortable than white cubes. We hope they'll be carried as anthems of collectivity within often unwelcoming spaces. They connect us, like an intimate conversation, through the sharing of like-hardships, acknowledgment, humour, and affection.



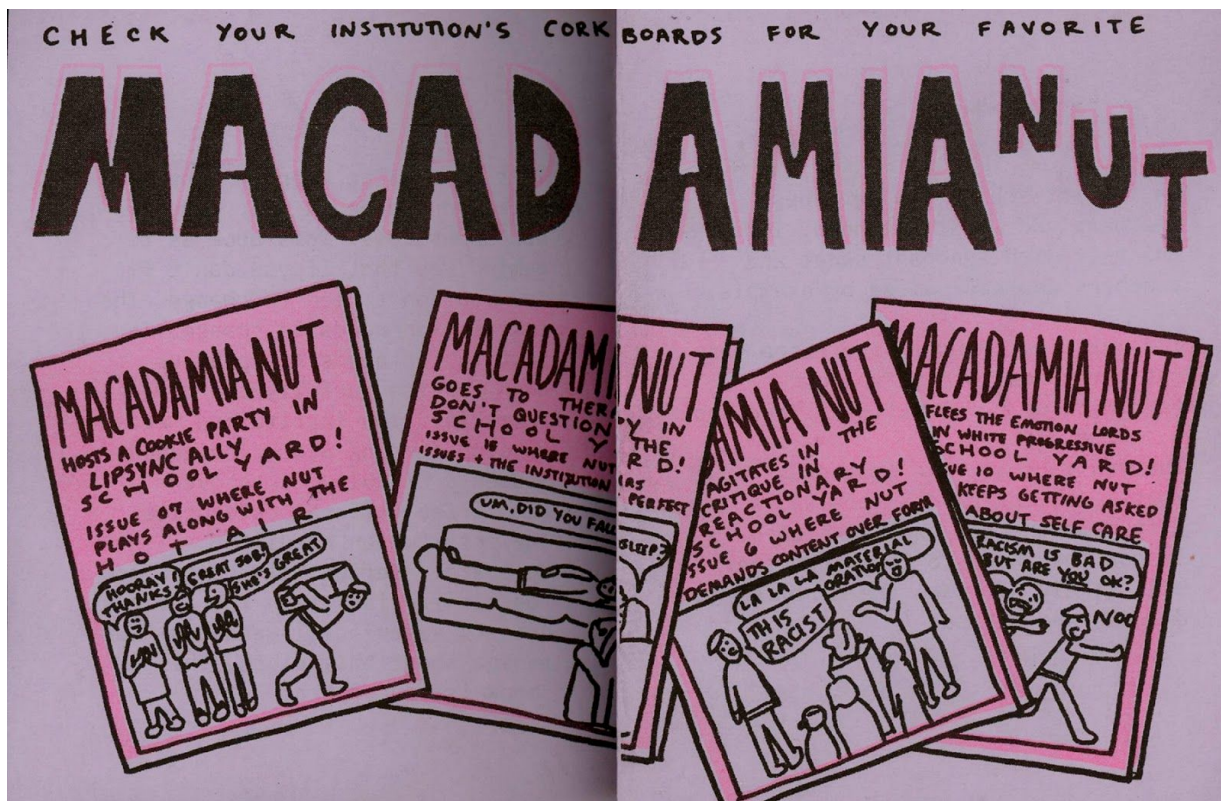
HANDBOOK Issues 1 & 2. Collaborative writing, Risograph prints

Zines and pamphlets out of the CPD distribute critical writing meant to call-out normative spaces that misinterpret race-based experience. At the same time, they are primarily distributed to the community for which they advocate, positioning them first as an invitation or call-in; a space for affirmation and solidarity. Self-publishing spaces offer a kind of working community that brings together a diversity of lenses under a common socio-political stance. For example, *Justseeds* is an artists' run and worker owned cooperative that produces prints and publications showcasing the transformative power of personal expression in concert with collective action ("Justseeds"). Through collaborative projects, *Justseeds* supports both its members and external grassroots operations with artists' prints and its publication network. With a different framework, *The Racial Imaginary Institute* is a publishing space collectively run by poets Claudia Rankine, LeRonn P. Brooks, Monica Youn and a group of collaborators that positions race as an enduring but invented concept, an imaginary force that limits movement and imagination (Rankine). *The CPD* as a location and publisher replicates aspects of these



models in its attempt to locate and support a community through artist publications, common agency, and community building.

Within the distributables proliferated by *The Centre* lie stories, directives and manifestos that aim to validate and draw-in readers through humour and like-experience. In one of the first zines to come out of *The CPD, Handbook: Surviving Institutional Racism in the Art School*, I introduce Macadamia Nut in an advertisement for her comic of the same name. The anecdotes Nut stumbles through are published as a strategy for calling-in, connecting viewers through inside jokes and acknowledgment through shared and exacting experiences. She connects viewers through humour and affection as she disturbs class critique in brash comments about racism or shimmies her way out of awkward conversations in disco maneuvers.



*Macadamia Nut* Ads risograph on newsprint, 2019

Macadamia Nut as a fictional character is able to make fun of the hypocrisy of the progressive arts school in her alternate reality. Sarcasm, hand lettering, and inviting colours welcome readers to take solace in knowing their experiences of microaggression are not only real, but ridiculous. Like the community she is meant to affirm, she is tired of a culture of hot

air. She rolls her eyes at a system that can talk and talk, removed from the work of making change due to bureaucracy and time management concerns. She pokes fun at nonsensical art vocabularies and white progressive lullabies that justify performative awareness as enough. After her introduction as an ad in *Handbook*, Macadamia Nut appeared in a poster series that acted as a large scale comic to portray how instances of exclusion or racialization are processed. Viewers were drawn in by a comic aesthetic to find all too real examples of how humour acts as resilience when moving through an institution can be propelled by rage.<sup>13</sup>

Creating this character and the publications where she resides came from a desire to call in with affection rather than call out with frustration. Facilitating *The Antiracist Classroom* catapulted Ali and I into the politics of our institution, giving us agency to inhabit different rooms as student representatives, resource people and willing collaborators, but our institutional call-outs were received with stagnant optimism. Changes in the wider culture became buried under institutional procedures and priorities that continued to belittle the inequality experienced by students of colour. Out of frustration, we realized that the meaningful impact of our collaboration was not based on the success of cultural changes within the stubborn university structure, but rather in the affirmation we were able to afford each other and our peers when acting in accordance with our common complaints. In the turn from speaking out to calling in, we refused the system of power that left us and our peers out, instead focusing on what we could do to support each other laterally. This act of dissent subverted our focus with the realization that systems of power cannot act towards equity when movements are instigated from the top down. In our case, supporting students with solidarity and community connectivity needed to be the focus rather than attempting to induce cultural changes from the level of faculty and administration.

## **B. Learning from the Processes of Refusal**

In her text, *On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s*, Chandra Mohanty calls for a public culture of dissent that upholds rather than suppresses conflict in order to make systems of dominance and privilege visible. In this process can an institution be transformed to better suit spaces for all of its constituents (30). In her contemporary critique, she shows how communities of difference within the institution are commodified by the still-dominant powers in accordance with the hierarchical structures of curriculum, governance, and unanalyzed pedagogy. *The Centre for Polite Dissent* produces publications and hosts events to

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix D. “Get Down With Macadamia Nut, Funky Moves for Salty Mixed Nuts”

support a collective stance that says we're onto it all, the institutional is personal, and our community has taken its first step towards refusal. *The Centre* makes public a student-led culture of dissent, formed in solidarity, in the face of persistent and oppressive cultural hegemony. It attempts to disrupt a pattern of diversity commodification by resisting assimilation through its roots in the imaginary. It is a space for solidarity, free from the barriers put in place by dominant superstructures by its mobility in both physical and conceptual spaces.

*The CPD* draws its theoretical backing from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. In Jack Halberstam's introduction to their text, he paraphrases the process of refusal that occurs as a precursor to imagining unprecedented realities:

The path to the wild beyond is paved with refusal. In *The Undercommons* if we begin anywhere, we begin with the right to refuse what has been refused to you. Citing Gayatri Spivak, Moten and Harney call this refusal the "first right" and it is a game-changing kind of refusal in that it signals the refusal of the choices offered (8).

*The Centre for Polite Dissent*, is a space for students to be praised for this first step of refusal. Members of the space come together through the act of disagreeing with a culture that acts in aggregate ways to push and shove. Students can deny the choices offered by the institution that claim to support the experiences of racialized students when it is evident that procedures ultimately adhere to the preservation of a hierarchy that doesn't serve its constituents. Through dissensus, *The CPD* transforms into physical space, where manifestations of a diverse and desired culture assert themselves in open spaces and pages; the library, the commons and publications as places of resilience. Drawing from antiracist and women of colour feminist theory, *The CPD* is a socially engaged artwork that finds footing in dialogue with other disciplines such as pedagogy, institutional critique, self-publishing and fugitive libraries. As a physical space, it borrows methods from community centred small publishers to circulate ideas from transgressive critical theory to support the experience of bodies of diversity that inhabit the institution.



**Conclusion**

As I reflect on my work within these two brief years at Emily Carr, I can begin to understand how my methods of collaboration and processes of ideation are not limited to my current academic context. Naming the ways in which support structures are key to my artistic inquiry gives insight into the kind of work I aim to conduct in future communities as a socially engaged artist. I am excited to see how my work will change based on the communities I work with and how my understanding of presence with others will develop as I learn more about the systems that govern our relationships. Humour, collective making, and community events will continue to define the ways I engage with social politics. Community building through interpersonal connection will change form but maintain its place as the central motivation of my work.

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## Reflection: The Aftermath of Making Public

It has been two weeks since my thesis defense where I shared an excited conversation with Justin Langlois, Diyan Achjadi, and Bopha Chhay that propelled the concepts and practices of this thesis forward while working through its significance. The room was full (virtually) of all of the supporters, mentors, and collaborators who had influenced the thoughts recorded in this document, much so that the three aforementioned panel members had to repeatedly ask people to leave the room as they showed up five or ten minutes early. I was looking forward to the defense's attendance, having sent personal invitations to everyone who had so influenced and supported me. Nonetheless, when I saw the list of names of the people in the room, I was overwhelmed. Their presence became a major theme in my presentation.

From the immense feeling of support that I experienced through collective presence, I want to expand on the ideas of accountability, reciprocity, and shared authorship which were complicated in different ways during my defense. I have been thinking about accountability in relation to time. What are processes of sustaining relationships and seeing projects through until a collectively decided end or until they transform into the next idea? Reciprocity comes through in different practices of collaboration, and I'm expanding my understanding by looking to mutual-aid structures that facilitate unilateral support. Shared authorship is taken up in this thesis through acknowledgements and gratitude, but I wonder how the process of making public or publishing can shift the conceptions of authorship through continued collaborative methodologies.

With the unforeseen halt in the semester due to safety procedures for COVID-19, projects like *The Centre for Polite Dissent* came to an abrupt end as physical gatherings became unsafe and Emily Carr facilities began to close. While I would like to claim that socially engaged projects such as these do not rely on the spaces that they are framed within, events within the Emily Carr library had been the primary activation of *The CPD*. We engaged the archive weekly and created a more inclusive space for public engagement. When the support systems provided by the institution fell away, *The CPD's* activities diminished and what remained was the baseline support it offered through newfound relationships. The team that created *The CPD* now have a sustained dedication to the support of each other's work. The students who came to the potlucks are now connected in this period of isolation. The faculty who supported the work have become such good friends that we have weekly video discussions where we continue to share stories of our lives and work. The books, films, and articles exist on our online platform as a

resource; an archive that continues to acknowledge undeniable BIPOC presence and resilience in the fields of art and design. When collaborative projects come to a pause or undefined end, what can be left is a lived accountability to the relationships they create. The support *The CPD* claimed to provide is still present in the relationships we made in the process. What fell away, in part, was the framework or name; the tools we used to make the work public. But we are excited to see the framework morph into the next collaboration, this time with a broader network of disciplines and expertise through the relationships we carry forward. I am curious now about how the concepts built into *The CPD* will turn up in later conversations as it exists in the institutional archive and in the headspaces of involved collaborators and participants.

As I move on with next projects, particularly in this period where our social circumstances create a range of precarious circumstances, I have come to understand reciprocity from a new and meaningful angle. In the chapter [\*Group Making and Community Representation\*](#), I write about reciprocity as a necessary addition to collaborations with different communities. With the example of Cuthbert's *Populous Map*, I wrote about the need to support the communities that public projects claim to represent. In the collaborative show, *BACKTALK*, artist Nura Ali and I determined that reciprocity meant giving voice to our community of students. We supported our peers by providing a safety net—a form of coalition that made our public expressions of institutional inequality easier to assert and address. This project's outcome focused mainly on the creation of a public exhibition that represented a collective of voices, but criticality for the processes of creation and curation creates space for more thoughtful forms of reciprocity. In recent projects I have been weaving in, more precisely, the lateral support collaborations can embody in every step of the process.

Understanding the major criticisms artists working with communities have incurred in public art initiatives, I am still reckoning with the politics of working within the structure of an arts institution. The politics incited by institutional spaces creates higher stakes for those involved due to the risk of replicating top down structures that misrepresent participating communities. This loops back to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's text, *On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s* where she depicts the commodification of minorities within arts institutions. Their work to critique different systems of oppression is weakened by the dominant hierarchical structures that direct curriculum, governance, and decision-making. As I step away from the university context, I am considering what kinds of organizations I'd like to work within. As I make plans for next steps, I am connecting with value-driven groups that think critically about their methods for working with others and working locally. As I research

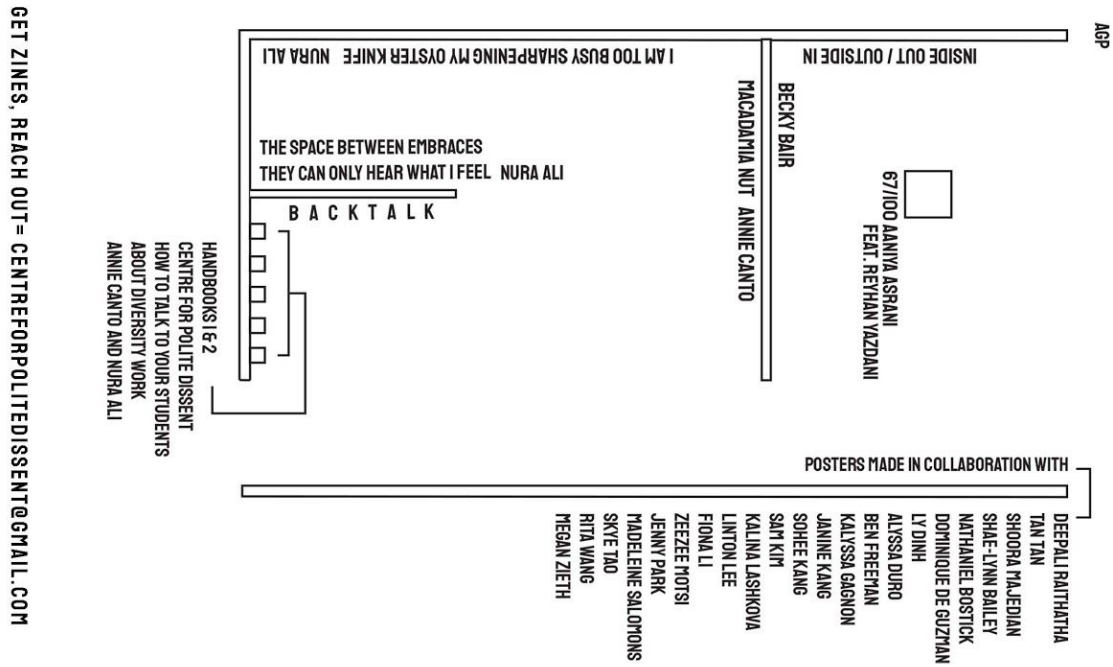
artist groups and community-centred organizations in Vancouver in search of a place to continue my work, I am interested in groups that build anti-oppressive policy into their organizational procedures and group initiatives. With this in mind, I'm excited to begin working and learning from local arts and culture cooperative, *Vancouver Artist Labour Union Cooperative (VALUCO-OP)* and grassroots support network, *COVID-19 Coming Together Vancouver*.

As I transition out of school and back into the working world, I have been studying the structure of cooperatives, labour movements, and arts and culture unions as I join the union board of *VALUCO-OP*. As my first lead role, I'm helping to coordinate a crowd-funding campaign that provides work for artists and funding to *Coming Together Vancouver's* survival fund/networking program. Artists and designers from *VALUCO-OP* are designing and producing goods to sell and raise money for *Coming Together's* initiatives. As an illustrator/producer and coordinator for this project, I am getting to see how the missions of two different groups can come together in a mutual aid structure and how creative work can connect resources, create relationships, and exemplify the cooperative values that drive community practices whether or not we are faced with global crises.

Finally, I will continue to explore collective authorship in upcoming projects and reflections of past work. I've begun to define my way of creating equitable systems of collaboration by creating group agreements, by building trust through dedication of time, and by creating titles and vision statements to name collective work. I am further processing the kind of work it takes to build the foundations of a working arrangement and understand how building social systems is a creative practice in and of itself. This concept has resonated in my work throughout, putting the practice in line with the artists and collectives of the late 80s to present who moved their work into community spaces questioning what public means for public art. But through continued collaboration with disciplines outside of art from education to labour organizing, I am excited to further develop the methods and processes outlined in this thesis in new collaborations with local groups.

As I wrap up this MFA program with a developed sense of what drives my actions as an artist and collaborator, I will continue to acknowledge the inner workings of my relationships as that which inspires and gives form to my work. The processes defined in this thesis project rose in an attempt to support and explore said relationships. And I take seriously this mutually shared support as the fundamental groundwork for my continued endeavors in social critique and collective action.

## Appendix A. BACKTALK Exhibition Pamphlet



# BACKTALK



WHAT DIFFERENTIATES BACKTALK FROM REGULAR CONVERSATION? IN ITS BROADEST MEANING BACKTALK REFERS TO A VERSION OF TALKING THAT IS RUDE, INSOLENT OR SHOWING A LACK OF RESPECT. IT IS SASS, MUMBLED BEHIND THE BACK OF POWER BY SOMEONE WHO IS LOWER IN RANK OR STATUS.

BACKTALK IS ALL ABOUT POWER. IT IS ABOUT THE ONES IN THE POSITION OF AUTHORITY NOT WANTING TO LISTEN TO WHAT THE LESS POWERFUL HAVE TO SAY. TAKING OFFENSE TO BACKTALK IS EQUATING DISAGREEMENT WITH DISRESPECT. BACKTALK IS FRAMED BY THOSE IN POWER, NOT AS A CRITIQUE OR CHALLENGE TO THEIR OWN ENTRENCHED VALUES, BUT AS IMPOLITE CONFRONTATION. IT IS TOO EMOTIONAL TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. WHAT IS BEING SAID BECOMES LESS IMPORTANT THAN HOW IT'S BEING SAID. THIS SHIFT FROM CONTENT TO FORM IS AN INTENTIONAL LINGUISTIC SIDE-STEPPING, A WAY TO AVOID THE ISSUES BY REDIRECTING FOCUS.

FOR THOSE IN THE LESS POWERFUL POSITION, THE WARNING TO WATCH THEIR TONE IS A SILENCING STRATEGY. INVARIABLY THEY ARE NOT THE ONES DECIDING WHEN THEIR WORDS HAVE SHIFTED FROM CONVERSATIONAL TO CONTEMPTUOUS.

THEY ARE TOLD WHEN THEY HAVE OVERSTEPPED, FORGOTTEN THEIR PLACE, OR BECOME INSOLENT. IN THIS WAY THE CALL FOR POLITENESS, MUTUAL RESPECT AND WAYS OF TALKING THAT ARE NOT "RUDE", "COARSE" OR "VULGAR" IS A WAY TO ENFORCE POWER DIFFERENCES AND ERASE DIFFERENCES ACROSS CLASS, GENDER, RACE AND GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE.

BACKTALK IS WHATEVER WHOEVER HOLDS THE POWER SAYS IT IS. BACKTALK IS ABOUT WHO GETS TO SCOLD WHOM, WHO GETS TO INTERRUPT, WHO SHOCKS, WHO GETS TO DISAGREE DEFIANTLY, FORCEFULLY, LOUDLY.

BACKTALK IS ABOUT BOUNDARIES. IT MAPS THE TERRAIN OF AUTHORITY AND GIVES SHAPE AND FORM TO POWER, TO ITS BORDERS AND LIMITS.

SOME TRUTHS ARE UPSETTING NOT BECAUSE THE TONE IS IMPOLITE BUT BECAUSE THE CONTENT THREATENS THE STATUS QUO AND THE LISTENERS SENSE OF SELF. SOME TRUTHS ARE HARD TO HEAR. #METOO  
#BLACKLIVESMATTER ARE INSTANCES OF BACKTALK. THEY ARE THE COLLECTIVE ACTION OF SPEAKING UP, OF ACTING OUT REFUSAL, OF TURNING INVISIBILITY INTO UNDENIABLE PRESENCE.

## Appendix B1 and 2. Writing from *The Centre of Polite Dissent*



*Talking to your Students About Diversity Work* and *The Centre for Polite Dissent* Risograph pamphlets on construction paper 2019

### **B1. How To's From the Centre of Polite Dissent: *Talking to Your Students of Colour About Diversity Work***

Diversity Work is a phrase borrowed from hero, Sarah Ahmed, “[Diversity work can be described] as a ‘banging your head against the brick wall job.’ Even if you are appointed by an institution to transform the institution, it does not mean the institution is willing to be transformed.” She calls diversity practitioners “*institutional plumbers*; they have to work out where the blockage is or what stops something (for example a new policy) from moving through the system.”

You may be witness to diversity work happening at your school. You may even have students rambunctious enough to take up some of the work themselves. You can surely imagine that this work is draining, impossibly time consuming, and scary (these feelings might be the things stopping you from taking up the work yourself.)

So how can you talk to your students about diversity work right now?

## **Inquire With Caution**

When you know that someone is going through a difficult time, it may be habit to ask them how they're doing. But asking your students how they're doing—showing emotional concern—can often be interpreted as a warning, an act to caution them out of their diversity work. Your student might be tired of people asking if they're okay because it diverts the conversation from antiracist institutional critique to methods of self care. Your students want social change, not advice on where to get bubble bath.

But if your student understands your intentions, asking basic questions like “How is your work going?” can allow your students to share as much as they feel comfortable. If your student says something like, “Great!” and leaves the conversation as quickly as possible, it's a sign that you are not in the inner circle. If your student says something like, “OMG I can't wait to graduate, this place's antiracist policies are archaic to me and I can't wait to never return to academia.” Then you're in. Silently hoorah, then put on your listening pants.

## **Are You Listening to Understand?**

Listening is step one of allyship (though we have much contention with this word). Listening means not interrupting. It means making eye contact, nodding your head, and saying things like, “You're so smart and capable.” and “I hear you and I'm sorry you students have to make up for such huge institutional absences that I personally refuse to contend with.” and “Wow, you're inspiring and I'm going to start a peer to peer teacher education working group.” (This last response would require you to step past allyship and into an active role. A role much preferred, a step towards working as an accomplice.)

## **Practice Introspection (Elsewhere)**

Many of you have likely sat idly by, saying nothing when faced with wacky racist shit. That is how implicit bias and cultural hegemony work. Sometimes you don't even know how racist shit is until your saintly racialized peer or student shocks you into recognition. There is much work to be done in untangling your racial biases through owning up to your transgressions. Do not do this work with your student. Best case scenario, they will roll their eyes at you and hand you a copy of *White Fragility*.

## **Do Not Make It All About You**

You must accept that your students of colour often know a garbage heap more than you about living in a superstructure devoid of tactical antiracist resources. Don't say things like, “yeah, I get it, it's rough in here.” This implies that you understand their experience, which—as empathetic as you may be—is untrue and more importantly comes across as condescending.

Worse, if you cannot sit with the idea that racism could be causing such an unbridled ruckus in your institution's halls, do not get defensive. While you or your peers have likely made mistakes (that your students *would love* to see you own up to) your guilt is getting in the way of real social change.

## **Don't Tell Them It's Gonna Be Okay**

Unless you have proved yourself to be an antiracist superworker, do not try to comfort your students by saying things like, “It's gonna be fine.” You don't get to be the one to make your students feel better if

you are sticking with level 1 listening status. They will enjoy this realization with their accomplices and collaborators. Their rage is not something you can diffuse through platitudes. Honour their rage.

### **Make Their Lives Easier (It's Possibly Your Job)**

The barriers faced by students of colour in your institution can be eradicated by you! Consult them often and take their complaints to work towards lasting institutional change. Connect them with other diversity workers, mentors who don't need this pamphlet because they've been doing and living this work for years.

### **Commit Yourself, They're Asking Nicely**

Step one of all this is listening well, but as good teachers you've been practicing this for years. The real work is to commit yourself to racial justice in your chosen field. You can make the world a more equitable place for everyone and you don't even have to leave your schoolhouse! Familiarize yourself with racialized peoples' issues and perspectives—that means reading books and articles and not relying on your students to explain everything to you or your class. Demand policy revision with your colleagues. Make a fuss in faculty meetings about upholding words like “intersectional” and “decolonization.” Make everyone actually read Crenshaw and Fanon. Create a network of peer to peer education to stop the aggregate microaggressions incurred by students of colour in your classrooms. Find resources (texts, opportunities, connections) for your students doing diversity work, because your job is to inspire, activate, and continuously learn. You have the power to help make a more equitable culture of education: work that will extend beyond your classrooms and into the world.

This pamphlet lovingly cites

Sarah Ahmed's *Complaint as Diversity Work*, Robin DiAngello's *White Fragility*, Marian Bull's *How to Talk to Women in Your Life Right Now*, Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Defining the Intersection*, Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, And Indigenous Action Media's *Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing The Ally Industrial Complex*

## **B2. THE CENTRE FOR POLITE DISSENT**

Where do we go when we are not learning enough? To self-directed study? To our communities? To our friends? What do we ask when we don't know what is missing? Our bodies, our frustrations, and our appetites shoved so we can enter the classroom.

In the Centre for Polite Dissent, we look to misbehaviour as flourishing scholarship. We disagree, we are mismanaged, we so frequently have to chip off bits of ourselves to fit into white spaces. As we move through the institution, to different degrees, we start to dissent. We edge by in hegemonic course structures, we smack gum during lectures about doric-ionic-pilar-trash. We snicker too loudly when the profs mix up our names. Sometimes we visibly disagree and in these moments we give our proposed leaders a chance to show themselves. For this, we can be praised. These forms of polite dissent excite the conversation and challenge our classmates and educators to rebut. Conversational classroom dissent is polite while heated, it is methodical and emotional, it unveils systemic flaws through the personal. In these moments, you scholars, overcome the fear of hostility in public, you overcome unsure looks towards defiance, you give our leaders a chance to re-evaluate dehumanizing behaviour, you demand a place in

conversations that have historically left us out. One could even say, these moments of disagreement, of resistance and rebellion, are acts of love.

Paradoxical though it may seem—precisely in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors that a gesture of love may be found. Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, or nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love. Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression (Friere 56).

In our case, we speak of our comfortable leaders, those acting without questioning the values of our oppressive superstructure, as oppressors (harsh, we know). When we disagree, digress, revolt against what is accepted as true by nature of our academic hierarchy, we give our oppressors a chance to unlearn or become. The kind of oppression we experience, privileged as we are as art students, is that of aggregate aggression. It is the accumulation of weird interactions that act to isolate us because of ignorance at difference. We experience barriers to the growth of our creative practices when our mentors and peers aren't able to talk about race or cultural knowledge. We start pointing to our teachers and peers to say, "Maybe no one has given you the tools that some of us have necessarily learned to wield in order to talk about race. Here, take a tool."

In the CPD (commonly mistaken for your Continuing Professional Development Office), we feed you because we know this work is exhausting. We spend time with our favourite dissenters, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Sarah Ahmed, Paulo Friere, Octavia Butler, Eve Tuck, James Baldwin. We elbow in to find space for the education we missed. We leave campus and go to the club or the park or the party, more classrooms mistaken for distractions. We have cushions and carpets and peer to peer counsel because our bodies are more than vessels for swallowing up white ideals.

You may ask, why the politeness? We are organizing for radical change. Well, we're polite because we're seasoned. We're jaded but know how to play. We know how to smile and nod, to fight the institution without burning bridges, to have our work validated by underqualified respect. We have little power but will continue nonetheless to deploy collective maneuvers to transgress. We want to end the day with a not-quite-threat/not-quite-invitation saying, "We dare you to hire us."

The Centre for Polite Dissent is soon to be situated in your public library. It exists to support you when fear of solitude creeps in. It is a place to complain (a hair louder than is respectable) about your teachers and admin with trusted accomplices. It is a place to turn your disquiet into public action, solidarity, and friendship. It is a place to study what you want in a community with no hierarchy, led by students for students misheard.

**Appendix C. *The Antiracist Classroom, Towards a Pedagogy of Consensual Learning Resource***  
**Packet Introduction**

# The Anti-Racist Classroom: Towards A Pedagogy Of Consensual Learning (Workshop)

August 28, 2019

## A big big thank you!

We would like to say a big thank you to everyone who attended today's workshop and hope that the conversations we have started today will go on to create meaningful and lasting changes to the spaces we share. Though by no means an exhaustive list, we have compiled some resources that deal with critical race theory, racism in education, and anti-racist pedagogy. We have created this resource for all those who believe that we can and should be doing better.

## Group Agreements

Group agreements are agreements that we enter into all the time. An implicit group agreement is one that you enter into without it being put into words. An explicit agreement is an agreement you enter into knowingly, whether verbally or in writing. When thinking about the classroom experience one of the fault lines seems to arise when two people believe they are operating from a similar understanding (or agreement) only to have experience show them that that was not the case.

Group agreements are not a magical cure all for all things but a way of having everyone be clear and on the same page for what we all agree to as the baseline for our interactions as a group. The beauty and the simplicity of group agreements is that it rests on two simple tenants;

### **Ownership (&) Accountability.**

Through group agreements we must take ownership of the impacts of our own actions and acknowledge our responsibility to others around us and to the principles that we decide together. Through group agreements we are stating our accountability to the space we are all inhabiting and stating that the group discussion, the critique, and indeed the classroom is not a neutral space.

An explicit group agreement can be constructed at the beginning of any new class and read aloud anytime there is a group discussion (i.e critiques, group presentations, etc.). Group agreements can be a powerful tool to make a disparate group of individuals into *active* participants in that space (consensual learning/participatory education) and set the tone for the subsequent discussions. They can also be a great teaching tool in helping the group **talk through next steps following** instances of bias, racism, and prejudice that will inevitably occur, creating spaces that welcome difficult uncomfortable conversations and work collaboratively to resolve them.

Similarly, implicit agreements have incredible potential to set the tone and baseline for interactions in a classroom setting. Teachers and students come into the classroom with a set of assumptions and expectations. Implicit agreements allow an avenue for both teachers and students to make those implicit assumptions explicit so that everyone begins from a place where the expectations of behaviour are clear, transparent, and easily referenceable.

## Explicit Group Agreements

### Example Agreements

We Agree,

- To conduct ourselves respectfully in this space knowing that our words and actions have impacts (sometimes wider than we expect).
- To be held accountable for our words and actions knowing that we have a responsibility to ourselves and to those who share this space with us.
- To acknowledge that the classroom is not a neutral space and that we are all entering this space with our own unique set of experiences, knowledge, values and biases.
- To acknowledge and understand that we are in an institution that is not divisible from the outside world and how we are in the classroom is how we are in the wider world.

### Agreements Made at the August 28th Workshop

We Agree,

- To acknowledge the differences in power held by the people at the table. To acknowledge the context in which we are meeting and understand our actions and motivations differ due to our subject positions.
- To acknowledge our separate and unique positionalities, subjectivities, responsibilities, so that we may better understand the perspectives we bring as individuals to the group.
- To give each other permission to fumble, to make mistakes in our use of language and ability to express difficult and sensitive thoughts.
- To realize and account for those who are *not* in the room and understand the privileges afforded to those invited to participate at the table.
- To give everyone enough space to share, whether that means pausing in dialogue for time to reflect, passing the conversation to one another in a guided manner, or simply being aware of how much space we each take up with our voices.
- To listen to hear, not to talk. To realize it takes time to formulate thoughts.
- To agree to disagree with respect in order to further difficult conversations. To disagree without disregarding another person's perspective.

- To try, to the best of our abilities, to sit with our unsureness and be brave with our vulnerabilities. To, further, understand that vulnerability looks different for different people, is accepted differently when shown by different people, and that trust takes time and presence.

## Implicit Group Agreements

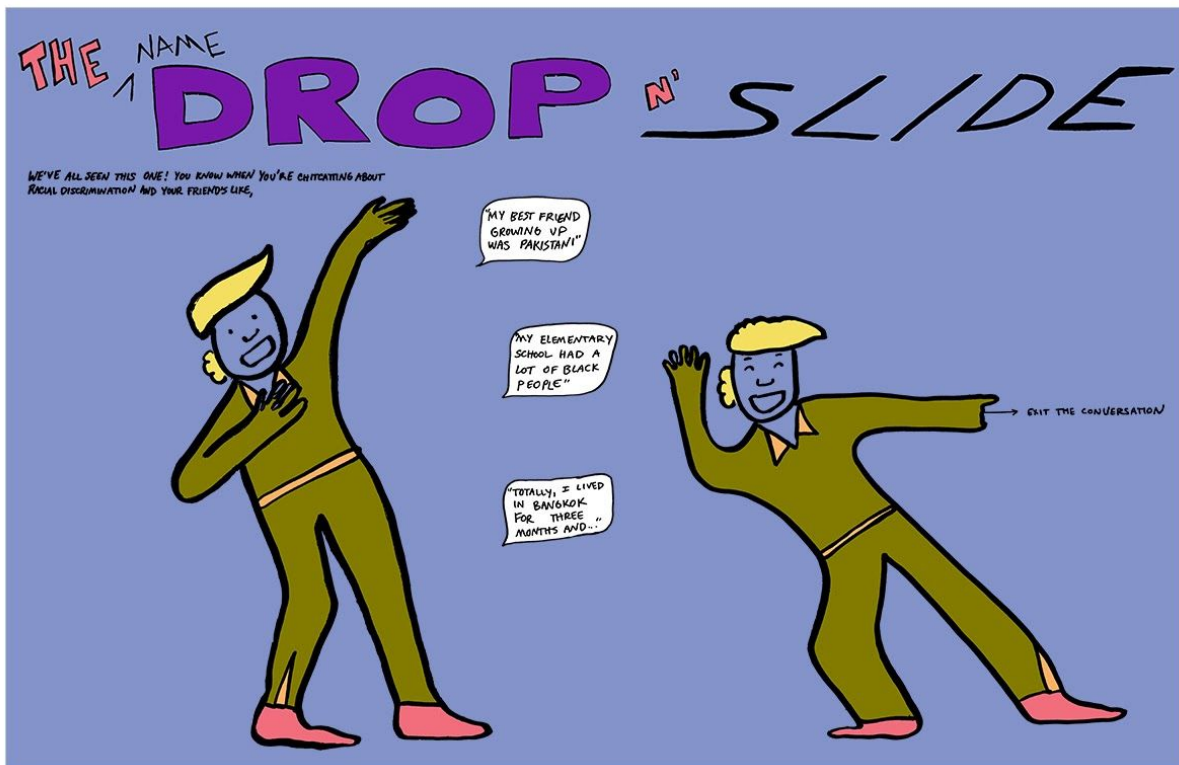
### **Example: The Implicit Agreement Made Explicit by the Skowhegan Administration for Incoming Students**

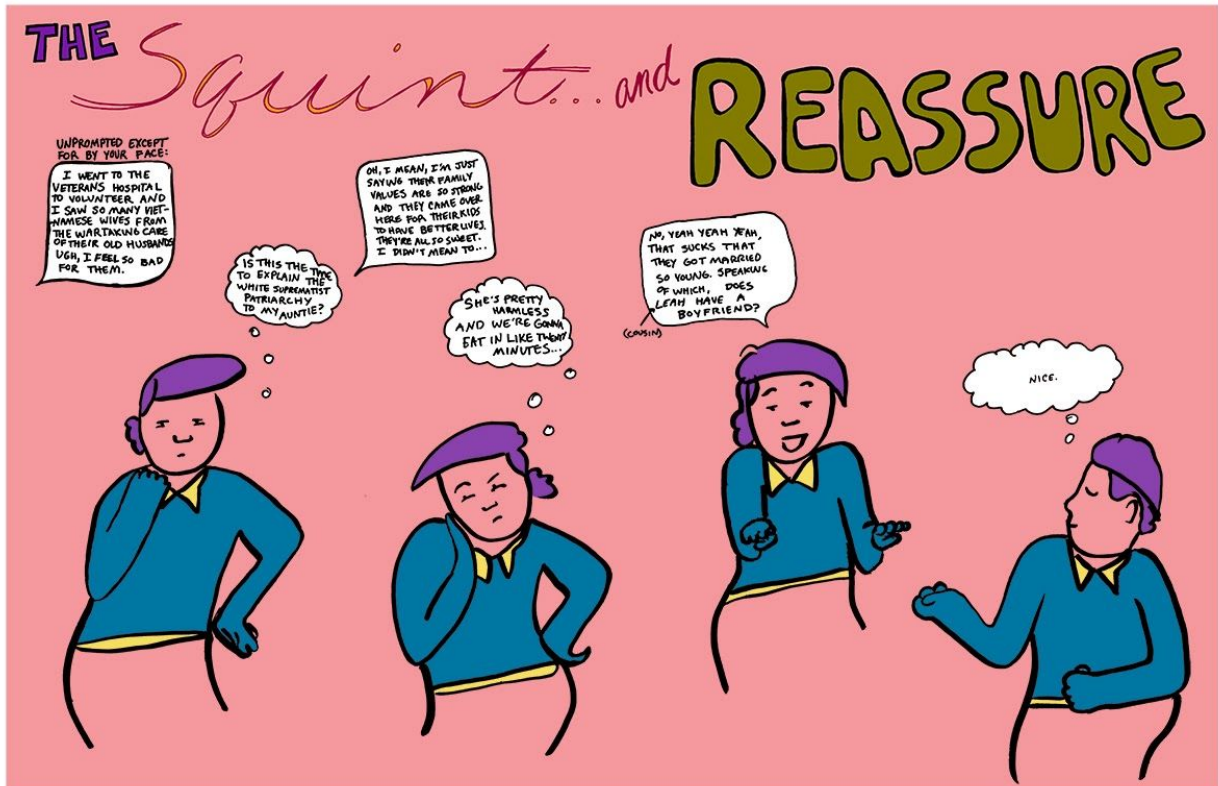
In accepting admission to skowhegan you are choosing to participate in a community that celebrates artistic voice and artistic freedom in every capacity. You are choosing to participate in a program that is a school and fundamental to our pedagogy is an understanding that diversity of voice, making, experience, ethnicity, gender, physicality, and class is critical in opening our eyes, vocabularies and practices to those outside of our own. We believe that through this exposure we become better artists. Inherent to being able to see and hear each other, respect, patience, non-judgement, education and understanding even in the most challenging of circumstances is our shared responsibility. While we don't all enter Skowhegan with the same experiences, interests and concerns we arrive with a shared interest in discourse, and in expanding our individual practices. No matter what we make we enter the space as artists in pursuit of freedom of voice, freedom to make mistakes and freedom to rebuild. Skowhegan will be one of the few places in your lives as artists and as citizens that will offer that freedom.

### **Implicit Agreements Made Explicit by the Emily Carr Student Body for Their Educators**

In accepting a position as a teacher at Emily Carr you are choosing to assume responsibility. You are choosing to enter into an agreement with your students, to be responsible to and for your students, to show up for them and be present, to be generous, patient, inquisitive and thoughtful. You are choosing to model behaviours that will teach your students how to cooperate, how to share, how to listen to each other and how to have patience in the face of difficulty. You are choosing to commit to being responsible for your own role as a person who comes into the classroom with your own set of unique experiences and biases and how you impact others and how they impact you. You choose to participate in an institution understanding that the institution is not divisible from the wider world, that the classroom is not merely a place to acquire skills or a stop gap to elsewhere but a place to model values, learn behaviours and methods of collaboration that allow us to become better artists, better students, better educators, better humans and better citizens.



Appendix D. *Get Down with Macadamia Nut, Funky Moves for Salty Mixed Nuts*





# BUT THAT DOESN'T SIT RIGHT



SO YOU CAN GO HOME AND EXPLAIN ORIENTALISM TO YOUR RACIST AUNTIE AND PRETEND, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, THAT WE LIVE IN A WORLD WHERE DIVERSITY IS A BEAUTIFUL TROPHY SUPPORTED BY RESOURCES FOR WHOMEVER IS SHOVED TO THE MARGINS OF THE ROOM