

# On Care-fulness: Critical Creative Expressions of Care in a Feminist Theatre Research Project

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## Biography

**Professor Stacy Holman Jones:** Over the course of a 20-year career, Professor Stacy Holman Jones has developed an international reputation for leading the development of innovative arts-based methodologies, performance, feminist and cultural studies research, and gender and sexualities studies. She's recognized for a collaborative and impact-focused research program that integrates theory and creative practice as a means of critique and transforming lives, relationships, ways of living, and communities.

**Professor Dan Harris** is a Vice Chancellor's Principal Research Fellow at RMIT University, an Australian Research Council Future Fellow, an Honorary Research Fellow at Nottingham University (UK), and Director of Creative Agency, a transdisciplinary research lab at RMIT University. Harris researches gender, creativity, and performance ethnography, is a native New Yorker and has worked professionally as a playwright, dramaturg, teaching artist and journalist in the USA and Australia.

**Professor Alyson Campbell's** work as a theatre director spans a broad range of companies and venues in Australia, the UK and the US over the last 30 years. She has collaborated closely with Sydney playwright Lachlan Philpott since our production of his play *Bison* in 2000, creating queer assemblage *wreckedAllprods* with him in 2001. Their works together include *The Trouble with Harry*, *Colder*, *Catapult*, *GL RY*, *Cake Daddy*. Many of these works have also been Practice as Research projects and Professor Campbell has an ongoing interest in artistic research methodologies.

**Dr Peta Murray's** work as an Early Career Researcher draws on her experience as a theatre-maker to apply arts-based methods as means of inquiry and activism across modalities including collaborative texts, sonic essays, live art, installations and creative-writing projects. Publications appear in *New Writing*; *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* and with key players in the Creative Practice discipline such as RUUKKU, and *Fourth Genre*. Performance projects have been delivered via Melbourne Writers Festival and Melbourne International Festival.

**Dr Misha Myers:** Through her career as a researcher and practitioner, Dr Myers has built an international reputation for developing arts-based and digital methods for understanding experiences of place and how it matters politically for isolated and marginalized groups including refugees and asylum seekers, women and rural communities in a global context. This impact-driven work has taken shape through different art forms and media in collaboration with NGO, community organisations, social service providers, theatre companies, and commercial partners to generate new strategies and knowledge.

**Mish Grigor** is situated in the performing arts as a maker, writer and performer. Working across a range of collaborative formats, she is co-director of *APHIDS* with Lara Thoms and Eugenia Lim, and one third of *POST* with Zoe Coombs Marr and Natalie Rose. With projects often departing from her own experiences, she enjoys connecting tangible everyday dilemmas with larger political and philosophical concepts. Using humour, facts and fiction, she is intent on examining, wasting and/or cherishing time spent with other people.

**Ripley Stevens** brings a love of Australian history, feminist research, autoethnography and visual art, to their role as a research officer for the *Staging Australian Women's Lives Project*. They are currently the director of the social enterprise *She Shapes History*. In 2016 they were awarded the ACT Young Woman of the Year Award for making an outstanding contribution to the lives of womxn and girls in the ACT. In 2017 they were a finalist for the Young Australian of the Year Award.

## **Abstract**

**In early 2020, as the first of many COVID lockdowns began across Australia, a collective of feminist and queer performance scholars and artists embarked on the research project *Staging Australian Women's Lives: Theatre, Feminism and Socially Engaged Art*. Our aim was to document contributions of womxn theatre makers, while conducting a feminist analysis of strategies used to deal with gender inequality and oppression, on stage and off. While pivoting to the digital and the virtual, we recognised a need to support womxn theatre makers whose lives and livelihoods are thrown into further precarity by the pandemic. This paper speaks to our commitment to bringing together critical theory, arts practices and everyday life in ethical forms and encounters that make visible, recognise and express care for one another and for the work.**

## **Keywords**

**Critical artistic research; feminist, queer and intersectional theory; theatre; care and activism**

### **Beginning by Feeling Backward (Stacy)**

Unnoticed. Undocumented. Unheard. Despite the indelible achievements and contributions of Australia's womxn theatre makers, the influence and impact of their work has not been comprehensively documented.

These are the words we use to introduce our collaborative research project, *Staging Australian Women's Lives: Theatre, Feminism and Socially Engaged Art*<sup>1</sup>. The project aims to

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document and analyse the social influence of works made by Australian womxn<sup>2</sup> theatre makers working from 1970 to the present. Our research focuses on both their contributions to Australian theatre history and their efforts to address gender-based inequality and oppression. When we began sketching the outlines of this project, we discovered that while the work of womxn artists and companies is often missing from ‘official’ histories of Australian theatre, what *is* well documented is the difficulty of registering the achievements and contributions of these makers in the ‘record’. Others, womxn, mostly, but also men, have tried to rectify this (Baxter, 1996; D’Cruz, 2007, 2012; Fensham & Varney, 2005; Pfisterer & Pickett, 1999; Tait, 1993, 1994, 1998; Tompkins, & Holledge, 1997). And now we, a research team of womxn, nonbinary and generally queer scholars and artists, are pitching in. Our work to add to this history immediately raises several questions that occupy us in this essay: who do we mean when we say womxn theatre makers? Who does ‘womxn’ include and who does that term leave out? What does it mean to write an account that doesn’t add to Western settler, capitalist, patriarchal and heteronormative understandings of history by ‘setting the record straight’, a homogenizing phrase that runs completely counter to our queer and feminist perspectives?

Our understanding of history—including theatre history—follows Elizabeth Freeman’s: history is a “chrononormative” discourse in which “historical regimes of asymmetrical power” are arranged in the ‘record’ as “seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines” (2010, p. 3, 5). Naturalizing and normalizing time as universal and objective, continuous and unmediated, and mutual and developmental institutionalises ‘history’ as legacy of colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative and state imperatives. These historical imperatives in turn determine human (not to mention non-human) values, inheritances, and rights. Here, we are in good company; queer, feminist and indigenous scholars have long questioned ‘natural’ and ‘straight’ time, arguing for other temporalities that have both “material existence and efficacy” that are not “reducible to a single, ostensibly neutral vision of time” or history (Rifkin, 2017, p. 19; see Ahmed,

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2006; Halberstam, 2005, Freeman, 2010; Love, 2007; Muñoz, 2009; Probyn, 2015; Puar, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2019). These alternative temporalities knit together affect, feeling, and memories into a cluster of relational practices that hold open possibilities for a “temporal sovereignty”; here, history occupies a space of both “potentiality and difficulty” (Rifkin, 2017, p. 179, 182).

For many of the Australian womxn theatre makers who we’ve spoken to<sup>3</sup>, claiming ‘temporal sovereignty’ over a history marked by absences and losses can feel simultaneously empowering and exhausting. Empowering as in the case of the interviewee who said, “I’ve spent a lifetime wanting to talk about this stuff”. Exhausting as for the focus group participant who shared that researchers “roll us out every 10 years or so and ask what we think and then forget about us”. Heather Love (2007) describes the potentiality and difficulty of telling history differently; we see how “negative or ambivalent identifications with the past can serve to disrupt the present”, whilst understanding that “[m]aking connections with historical losses . . . in the past can set into motion a gutting ‘play of recognitions’” (p. 45). Writing an affective<sup>4</sup> account of “feeling backward” asks us to home in on the desires, longings, disappointments and pleasures that constitute theatre history. It also helps address the idea that like queer and indigenous time, ‘womxn’s theatre time’ is what Dana Luciano (2007) describes as “permanently anterior”: always in the past, its liberating potential contained in the “reflective look backward” that enables us to “move forward” (p. 47, 82). Through a focus on queer and feminist theorizing around recognition, complaint and forgiveness, we explore how we and the womxn theatre makers we’re working with might make something reparative and powerful out of that often painful, sometimes angry looking backward in order to move forward.

Efforts to represent history are equally complex; they require a practice of reading and writing the past that hold the present and the future in complicated relation. We feel a responsibility—what we refer to in this essay as a care-fulness grounded in an ethics of care—that draws us to modes of representation that perform the fragmented, disjointed and often discor-

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dant telling of that history. Readers will hear from each of the members of the research team in various combinations as we speak to this ethics of care, along with the equally difficult and moving experiences we've had as we wade into the depths of a project focused on caring for a sometimes lost, sometimes silenced Australian womxn's theatre history. We draw inspiration in offering this uncertain and nervous text from scholars who write performatively about theatre and performance history (Blocker, 1999; Hamera, 2007; Phelan, 1993; Schneider, 2014), as well as from Sarah Clift, whose work on the intersecting relationship between the temporality of experience (memory) and our attempts to represent it in narrative (history) urges us to refuse "the settling of accounts" and to "reconsider the interrelations among ethics, memory" and anyone's individual interpretation of the past, "however allusive and non-normative the results may be" (2013, p. 7). This, Clift says, is the risk of every act of reading and writing a history, including ours.

The risks and responsibilities of writing a history of womxn's theatre in Australia are difficult to balance at any time; but given that we began work on the project in early 2020 just as COVID was shutting down borders, cities and lives, it became urgent. It was a time when relationships and questions of care—for self, for loved ones and for community—were at the centre of our lives. It was also a time when people working in the creative and performing arts saw most if not all of their booked work, along with their income, vanish overnight. In Australia, where a vast number of people were supported through this economic tsunami through government-funded wage support, artists were left high and dry (Croggan, 2020; Reich, 2020; Robertson, 2021). At its heart, this is a project that cares about recognising the people, practices, works and lives made invisible or untenable as important, valuable and meaningful. But doing the important work of care isn't straightforward. Or comfortable. It's messy and complex. Sometimes we find meaningful ways to tangle with and show this complexity. And sometimes, we fuck it up and must acknowledge those failures, ask for forgiveness and try again. In the

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sections that follow, we consider key moments in which critical and creative expressions of care require us to be care-ful with each other's memories, careers, identities, time and contributions.

### **Care-ful Curation (Peta)**

Between 2010 and 2016, Scottish artist Katie Paterson subscribed to a mailing list alerting astronomers and scientists around the world whenever the 'death' of a star was observed or recorded. Upon receipt of a notification, Paterson would write a letter announcing the death of that star and send it on to a nominated recipient. Paterson's collection of letters was subsequently published in *Performance Research* as durational work entitled *The Dying Star Letters* (see Cervera, 2017).

Paterson's small act of noticing, recording and honouring, exemplifies the possibilities in drawing together the words 'curation' and 'care' while reminding us, as Francesca Rendle-Short has elsewhere, that these ideas are already yoked together. Rendle-Short explains:

At its simplest, curation is the act of organising and maintaining a collection of works or artefacts. Etymologically, the word curation comes from the Latin *curatus* from *cura* 'spiritual charge of souls' or *cura* meaning to take care of, the act of healing. (2012, p. 2)

As COVID forced us to put plans for in-person focus groups and interviews on hold, we dove into the digital elements of the project, inviting theatre makers from around the world to create a three-minute 'legacy letter' video on their smartphones. The invitation was simple: If you could tell her how and why this work changed your own work and/or your life – what would you say to her? These letters enact a gesture akin to Paterson's care-filled curation, while also, in an almost uncanny way, growing a tiny pre-existing and all but invisible Australian archive consisting of a single letter, written by academic and archivist Glenn D'Cruz to the

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late playwright Vicki Reynolds. Reynolds was one of the founding members of the Melbourne Workers Theatre alongside the still thriving and ever-formidable playwright, Patricia Cornelius, to whom one of the first letters we received is dedicated. Learning of this, for me (Peta) gives the legacy letters extension of our project its own kind of spectral quality, a sense of the passing of an invisible cord of lineage from hand to hand.

The legacy letters are also by any other name, love letters. Drawing forth and exposing the deep feelings and reverence one has long carried for “thee” to whom the piece is dedicated, the dedicatee speaks from the heart. There is a kind of spillage of something held close, and in this, an act of healing purgation too, perhaps? Paradoxically, now entered into the world, each letter assumes a dual purpose through a dance of reciprocity. More than a simple honouring of its nominated ‘recipient’, each letter invites multiple readings as a missive to an unsung ‘Everywo/trans/man’, made legible to anyone who finds meaning in it, while at the same time holding intact a tribute to its intended. “To tell the story that every existence leaves behind itself is perhaps the oldest act of [such] care” writes Adriana Cavarero (2000, p. 53), who goes on: “There is the weeping in listening/reading the story, and there is the same emotion in the recognition of one’s own life story narrated by another” (p. 55).

The letters’ gesture enacts a networked community (that has little evidence and only scant awareness of its own existence) across Australia and out into the world, through a kind of virtual ethnography, in which “...a shared contextual and relational space is created by some womxn who exhibit who they are to one another” (Cavarero, 2000, p. 59). Not so much dedications as exchanges, legacy letters perform a reciprocity whereby each party is a transmitter and a receiver. Finally, and fittingly, they do what d’Cruz set out to do in his tribute to Reynolds, so that the calcified notion of archive as nostalgia-infused paean to what has passed, becomes, instead a lithe and living affirmation of a “future to come” (Derrida, 1982, p. 21)<sup>5</sup>.



### **Un-doing the Archive (Misha)**

As Joseph Roach argues, archives and other genealogies of performance resist erasure and affirm a future to come when transmissions of the past are delivered by ‘living messengers’ whose collective memories both restore and recreate (1995). We are particularly invested in those that have gone unnoticed by critics or history, those that haven’t been documented in image, film or word, and those unknown to new generations of theatre makers, along with those who have been removed from the record. We acknowledge the capacity to find or ask complex questions of their lives and work is lost in cataloguing systems and search terms that privilege and preserve canonical traditions and, as Jacqueline Wernimont (2013) suggests, it is not enough to add content to a system that is built upon a patriarchal methodology that determines what has value and how it is classified or accessed. Rather, we are gathering an archive to un-do and change that ‘diminishing story’<sup>6</sup> with new metadata, archival material and audio/visual resources and will co-design a digital exhibition with womxn theatre makers to include network visualisations and analyses, geographic and temporal mapping, and annotated performance videos that exemplify practitioners’ techniques.

In an interview, Darwin-based director, writer, actor, and producer Tania Lieman speaks about scenes in her new work about the prevalence of rape culture in schools that repeats phrases for calling out and pushing back. As she speaks, I (Misha) long for my younger self to have had that rehearsal, that data bank of words when they weren’t there at the right time or went unheard. Tania reminds me that this is the recovery work of data feminism (D’Ignazio & Klein, 2020), to make these complex ex-centric narratives not only visible, searchable and meaningful, but also available as strategies and techniques to galvanise action, in particular around gender-based inequalities inside the theatre and out.

### **Genderishness: Care and/as identity categories (Dan and Alyson)**

Our project blurb says, “Gender-based discrimination, harassment and violence against Australian womxn has risen dramatically in the last decade. Womxn theatre makers have played a key role in developing creative and effective actions to address gender-based inequality and oppression.”<sup>7</sup> There is, in one way, nothing to argue against these claims: they are persistently true, from both a data perspective as well as the compelling lived experience of ourselves and most of those we know. And yet, any project called *Staging Australian Women’s Lives* is, in a sense, asking for trouble. These days, it is hard – even from within marginalised communities like the category of ‘woman’ – to address identity categories in an increasingly fluid landscape. Second wave feminism taught us, if nothing else, that there is always going to be someone left out, even with the best of intentions, and even in ground-up movements. This project grapples with two kinds of gender-based complexity: that from funders who see ‘queer’ womxn (and all that might attend such descriptors) as too small and marginal a category to support and, conversely, from those more centrally inhabiting the ‘queer’ space that overlaps this project’s focus, namely those who identify as non-binary, as female-to-male transgender, and others along the rainbow spectrum.

Our team has invested considerable time and care in feeling into and reaching out regarding questions of gender fluidity and alterity as it intersects with, and influences and informs, the contemporary category of ‘woman’ in Australian theatre. After having to revise our initial funding application to remove the references to the additional/particular marginalisation of queer womxn’s theatre, once funded we returned to questions of the definition of ‘womxn’. Within the team, one of our members is in the process of transitioning from female-identifying to trans-masculine, another is transitioning from female-identifying to non-binary and another of us is parenting a teenager through the process of transition to trans-masculine. Project participants also include those from non-binary and trans identifications. Still, the presumed empowering

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‘womxn’s space’ of the research team as well as the broader group of participants did not always hold these changing or changed subjectivities of ‘queer’ ‘non-binary’ or ‘trans-masculine’. How might the political project and the project of caring for this feminist research project be able to hold these diverse identifications, histories, practices, and alliances, both publicly and privately?

As a gender- and sexually-diverse research team, we are painfully aware that we do not hold the same diversity in terms of ethnicity; in short, we are very white. Further, four of us did not grow up or start our careers in Australia, so that particular experience, and how that interweaves with a shared and lived knowledge of performance histories, adds to the mess. Are we the right people to do this work? We believe it is an act of allyship to document, analyse and celebrate, but also know that we cannot speak in place of others, and that any erasures we make inadvertently have an added layer of complication. It remains that we have the power to include or exclude, and in a project like this one we must continually challenge ourselves: when we say we care, who is it that we are caring for? How do we do it?

### **Care and/as recognition, risk, and forgiveness (Stacy, Misha, Mish and Alyson)**

Judith Butler has written urgently and beautifully about how structures and institutions of power create and wield inequality through a politics of recognition, where being ‘recognized’ under the ‘eyes of the law’ or country or history—including theatre history—becomes a problem for “those who have been excluded from the structures and vocabularies of political representation” (qtd in Willing 2012, p. 140). This is compounded by heterosexism, racism, classism and other isms which insist that in order to achieve recognition in such structures and vocabularies, we must efface or reject our cultural and social histories.

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Butler posits that this ‘differential distribution of recognizability’ produces “schemes of recognition that determine in a relative sense who will be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition” (p. 140). In her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler uses situations in which we are called on to tell the story of our lives and ourselves as an example of how we “seek recourse to those cultural conventions that will make us recognizable to another” (p. 140). And whilst we enter into those conventions, effacements and rejections without a “strong sense of choice,” we can and do marshal words, movements and structures to tell other stories and to tell stories otherwise. We do so with an other in mind, and, as Butler and a host of other feminist theorists have reminded us (over and over)<sup>8</sup> recognition and recognisability happens in relation with others. Telling the stories of our lives insists we engage with one another in an ethical relationship that:

requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. . . . If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven. (Butler, 2005, p. 136)

Each time we do an interview we are asking our interviewees to tell the stories of their professional lives as artists and to make themselves recognisable and vulnerable. This is both a ‘chance’ to speak/to ‘have one’s voice heard’ but also to risk being undone. We turn to Stacy Clifford to address how we might manage this relational exchange care-fully. Clifford links Butler’s works on recognition to Joan Tronto’s four phases of feminist care (1995): “caring about, attentiveness; taking care of, responsibility; care-giving, competence; and care-receiving, responsiveness” (1995, p. 142). Clifford argues that recognition, or attentiveness, whilst affirming and important, ought not be the end-goal of an ethics of care. She says that because care

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theorists' emphasis on practice "exposes a fuller range of risk. . . we cannot simply acknowledge our limits, but rather. . . we sometimes need to act even amid these limitations" (2012, p. 12). These risks and limitations include moments when we misinterpret or misrepresent the lives and needs of others (2012). They also include moments when we fail to recognise each other at all.

I (Stacy) was invited to give a presentation about the project to members of the Australian Women's Director's Alliance (AWDA). After the presentation, there were lots of questions: How were we making sure to include theatre makers who live in country communities and not the larger metropolitan areas of Melbourne, Sydney, Darwin and Adelaide? What efforts were we making to ensure that Disabled creatives could participate in the project? How many First Nations, womxn of color, gender diverse and trans participants had we included in the project? What about creatives who work in community and youth theatre, circus, cabaret, and comedy?

There were also pointed questions about whose work and histories were not only left out, but also dismissed or ignored. Alison Richards, a long-time member of the group and an important voice in Australian womxn's theatre making, communicated this frustration clearly and eloquently, saying:

I am acutely aware of the 'black hole' caused by technological and other shifts in modes of documentation and networks of support, that threatens to devour the memory of works other than text-based plays (and even some of those) presented by women theatre practitioners in Australia between the 1970s and the 1990s. This only adds to the forces of erasure already ranged against performance work by women, especially works made for and with women, youth, disability and other community participants and audiences.

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She also shares the personal toll such erasures exact:

These forces of erasure have affected me personally throughout my career; a large part of that career has been devoted to trying to establish beachheads, where my work and that of women practitioners coming after me, might have a better chance of being heard, seen and acknowledged...But even though I have learnt to expect it, it still hurts to be ignored. (Richards, personal communication, May 4, 2021)

Richards and other members of the AWDA adopt Peta Tait's (1994) 'theatre as piracy' metaphor, understanding their and other feminist theatre makers' work as having "shared, divided up and rearranged the loot" (p. 14) of not only male-defined theatrical forms, but also the more recognised work of womxn theatre makers. As Richards notes, "we survivors of the long battle to get women's voices heard in Australian theatre culture and its public discourse in general, carry many wounds. Us pirates haven't come out unscathed . . .".

Richards' account of the hurt she and other theatre makers feel in an industry that silences and ignores them is compounded by feelings of being ignored by a publicly funded project aimed at naming, honouring and entering into the archive the works of womxn makers. We have a networked way of making our lists of artists to interview—we brainstorm, invite experts in various communities of practice, and ask them who we're missing. Philosophically we believe that such emergent and fluid processes work. But, somewhere along the knitting circle, we dropped a stitch and forgot someone.

We acknowledge as a collective that it is important to apologise and ask for forgiveness. This decision echoes Clifford's proposed fifth phase of care. Drawing on Butler's consideration of the relational movements of forgiveness, in which we "will need to be forgiven" for what we do not "fully know" and must also offer forgiveness to others for the same (2005, p. 42), Clifford outlines how forgiveness figures in practices of care:

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We offer forgiveness to those who have cared for us—even as we know that this care misinterprets and limits who we are—as well as forgiveness to ourselves as we recognize that the care we offer is similarly incomplete and misguided. Forgiveness allows us to reenter the process of care, as we allow ourselves to make mistakes and carry on. As such, care is never only about maintenance; care can also disrupt, deny and, at its worst, dehumanize. Retheorized, care is risky. (2012, pp. 12-13)

We wonder, too, if there is a sixth phase of feminist care to add to Tronto and Clifford's: that of caring with and sharing. This phase of care extends that risky endeavor into collaborative/collective risks. Can the collective practices of care that embolden and challenge also create a safety net, ensuring that individual womxn's contributions do not fall through the gaps of memory, opportunity and record?

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“There is a lot of forgiveness in this group” said Alyson in our team meeting yesterday. “There is a lot of observing and understanding that we are all human.” I (Mish) am reminded of the violence of exclusion. Of the things that drew me to this project. As a baby researcher, a young artist just hitting ‘mid career,’ finally considered ‘emerged,’ I have encountered generations of powerful feminist womxn and their practice. I have laughed at pictures of my mentors as their younger selves: in overalls, rolling on the ground in improvisations, or handing out cheap wine in consciousness-raising splendour. I’ve gasped as I see what they did, the space they carved out for themselves, for me, for the future. And yet change moves slowly, and so many of their practices—feminist, experimental, marginalised while they existed—are the first to be forgotten.

Rebecca Schneider (2017) speaks about the wave, or the hail, as a gesture that proves the coexistence of multiplicities of time. Two people are engaged in one relation as one waves in one moment, and their acquaintance waves back in another moment in time, yet the same

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moment of action. I consider the reflective, feeling backward gesture of our shared research waving to the past, ‘Hey, I see you!’ and to the future, ‘Look here! See what has happened!’ I wonder then what happens if an artist waves, and nobody is there in any other time knot to receive them. Is there no memory? No history? No future?

Will I be forgotten? Before I am even dead? Before I am even old? Will it be next week? Next year? Should I have tried harder to enter *The Annals*? Should I have done some Shakespeare?

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I (Alyson), who have had a long relationship with Alison, wanted to be part of the process of interviewing and spending time with her—being in the room when an interview happens and party to that weirdly alchemical process that happens sometimes, when thoughts get put together, or at least publicly/semi-publicly articulated, for the first time. In other words, I did not want to watch the video: I wanted to go and drink a cup of tea and be in the same space. There was a moment in the interview that came up about the lack of mentors for womxn in theatre, Alison noting she had never had one. I was behind the camera nodding and agreeing from my own perspective when Alison pointed out, quite rightly, that she had ‘tried to be one’ for me. Of course, this is absolutely true, and so, I struggled on silently behind the camera with the realisation that I had just made things worse rather than better, in hoping to care for Alison. This led to the desire to make up for this in situ, not to let it go, and so at the end I suggested that I make my legacy letter to Alison there and then. The place where I met Alison was in academia, near the start of my PhD. Something emerged during the interview with Alison that opened up for me the intersections between academia, precisely theatre scholarship in Australia, and the theatre-making we are more ostensibly focused on. It became clear that the mentorship and care Alison had shown me as a baby scholar was all part of the same thing: theatre scholarship, documentation, archiving, critical analysis is also an act of care.



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This is also related to the emergence of the validation of artistic research within the academy. Suddenly the legitimising of creative research—practice as research (PaR), research-creation, practice-led or practice-based research as methodology—opened up ways to critique and interrogate our own work as ‘makerthinkers,’ however marginalised and ignored by others, as a means of charting “an old/new way forward” (Loveless 2019, p. 13). Artistic research insists that we put ourselves into the frame—but we can’t do that without both the philosophical and practical support of the mentors, allies and pirates who’ve paved the way for us. The work of situating ourselves in relation to others is connected to the wider project of critical autoethnography and the time it has taken for work that includes a focus on selves-in-relation to be taken seriously within the academy. So, where artistic research (like autoethnography) might be criticised as ‘me-search’—a lonely (however reflexive) process of focusing on individual acts of making, we approach critical artistic research as ‘we-search’ (Holman Jones & Harris, 2019, p. 7): a process of “assembling a we,” a community of makerthinkers who speak and act together whilst holding on to difference and disagreement.

Alison’s care for others and efforts to “act even amid the limitations” (Clifford, 2012, p. 12) is encompassed more widely by the urge towards reparative scholarship, as set out and enacted in queer feminist work (e.g., Sedgwick, 1990, 1997; Cvetkovich, 2003; Freeman, 2010; Wiegman, 2014). In contrast to ‘paranoid’ approaches to scholarship, in which ‘critical thinking’ and ‘strong theory’ become weapons taken up against pleasure and being surprised or worse, *wrong* (Sedgwick, 2002), reparative processes are invested in nurturing those who are left out or disavowed by histories and cultures. Reparative practices engage in storytelling as an ameliorative and “critical mode of affirmation” (Stewart, 2017, p. 143) in which “selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (Sedgwick, 2002, pp. 150-151). Our project sits within this reparative vein. This is not to say there is no place for rage and anger: indeed, the

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reparative mode engages with feelings of all sorts, and sees them not only as valid but useful, even vital (Ahmed, 2017).

### **Anger and/as Care (Ripley)**

What stuck out for me (Ripley) in our first focus group was rage. Masked, nervous, and fresh out of lockdown we shared our names, our aims and our games with one another in a moving circle of introductions. One theatre maker introduced herself to me stating, “I’m here because of *rage*. That’s my aim, that’s my game.” When we asked the group how feminist works changed the conversation around womxn in theatre, the words “full of rage” were penned onto a poster.

I realised we were not simply recording and collecting data and archival material; we were opening a space for complaint—words, gestures, images and movements that “name and identify abuses of power, that confront hierarchies and inequalities” (Ahmed, 2021, p. xii). And by opening a space of complaint, we were making room for enacting a “rage not only toward something or somebody in the present, but toward the past, all those past experiences of putting up with it” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 202).

Many of the theatre makers who attended the focus group had previously contributed to Playworks’ surveys in the mid 1990s (Chesterman & Baxter, 1995). “I hope something comes of this project” someone said quietly to me during our first focus group in Melbourne “. . . because this isn’t the first time I’ve told this story.” It struck me that these womxn had been sharing their experiences of inequity, harassment and having their work being perceived as “lesser” for more than twenty years.

We wondered if our invitation to tell histories and stories that have been “buried, denied, [and] unpublished” (Chesterman & Baxter, 1995, p. 25) over and over again could reveal a more nuanced telling—one in which rage and care intersect. Speaking of the womxn characters

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in her play *Shit*, playwright Patricia Cornelius describes her strategies for representing the hurt of being left out and rendered unintelligible by showing how the young womxn in the play take power through language and a refusal to care:

I felt I found a way to creatively get there, that they had been discussing the way they use language. And also, I've seen it on my 86 tram, which is famous for going down to get your methadone and can be pretty wild sometimes, or used to be. The language used is so powerful. Nobody's going to look at those women. Nobody's going to contest where they're sitting, how they're not giving somebody a seat. When you've got no power, and all you've got is language, then there's something extraordinary about that. I think the stuff about changing the discourse was about. . . don't pity us, don't write works that look at us as abject and as victim. But we are that, too. We are miserable and [we] have been hurt horribly. (Cornelius, unpublished interview, March 19, 2021)

Other theatre makers reflect on theatre's refusal to care about the safety of those assembled in rehearsal rooms, as well as audiences. Director Emma Valente speaks about a culture of aggression and lack of care that permeated her training as a theatre maker; a way of working that she had to actively unlearn:

. . .the people that I was learning from were men who had a certain way of directing and they had a certain way of treating the audience as well. I thought that that was a requirement, I guess, of being aggressive in some way, towards an audience, or at the very least, nonchalant. *Story of O* really taught me that that was untrue and that the deepest care should be going into the audience experience. Particularly if you are presenting them with a position that they might not have thought of or they might disagree with, that you need to take care of them in that space. Whereas a

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lot of the work leading up to 2015 [and through the] early 2000s was so aggressive towards the audience, was so like, “Fuck you. We don’t care if you don’t understand, we don’t care if we’re smarter than you, we don’t care if you’re watching a rape scene on repeat. We don’t care.” Really having to physically unlearn a lot of those ideas and tactics. (Valente, unpublished interview, March 30, 2021)

This ‘unlearning’ is part of recognising how aggression, anger, omission and hurt are “so embedded in the institution that we learn not to notice them,” as well as how we – theatre makers *and* our team – need to “unlearn that embeddedness” (Ahmed, qtd. in Sian, 2014, p. 16). That unlearning is both a challenge and an act of care.

### **An Unfinished Ending**

This project’s legacy letters, interviews and the one focus group we’ve managed to hold provide form and a forum for curating as acts of unlearning and of healing. By employing methodologies centred on co-creation and eliciting collective memory and lived experience, we’ve made space for anger and hurt. We’ve asked people to risk themselves, trust us with their stories, and forgive us when we’ve failed to live up to the promises and risks of feminist care. Decentring, queering and disrupting traditional methodological and discursive conventions have been vital in this collective and critical creative practice of care. Finding ways to coexist in multiplicities of time have helped us move out of the pain and toward the reparative in our efforts to share the histories of womxn theatre makers in a way that emphasises their temporal sovereignty and represents their work and lives as active, inventive, engaged, and enraged.

To care while undertaking critical artistic research is to be care-ful about the methods we use to construct those whose histories we seek to restore and re-story in living archives. Together, we are engaged in what Schneider (1997) calls the work of counter-memory: an “action

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that defines itself, that recognizes itself in words—in the multiplication of meaning through the practice of vigilant repetitions” (p. 168).

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>We use the intersectional feminist term womxn to signal the work the project and project team are doing to address sexism, include trans, non-binary genderqueer and other people who identify as womxn and the messy and important work we're doing to grapple with such neat and tidy language 'solutions' to complex and fluid considerations.

<sup>3</sup>To date, this numbers nearly 100 womxn via interviews, focus groups, advisory groups, presentations and via inquiries sent through to our website. We have a growing (350+) list of womxn's to contact and include in the project. We are currently exploring ways to share this work to ensure the project lives on after it's 'official' timeline.

<sup>4</sup>Love (2007) contrasts such affective histories with effective histories; where effective histories take an epistemological approach to the queer past, asking for example "were there gay people in the past?", affective histories

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take a relational approach, asking, “Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past” and “What relation to these figures do we hope to cultivate?” (p. 31). Our project joins the epistemological “Who were the womxn theatre makers in the past” and the relational: “Why do we care so much and what relation to these womxn do we hope to cultivate?”

<sup>5</sup>You can see a sample of these letters at <https://stagingwomenslives.com.au/legacy-letters/>

<sup>6</sup>This is the story summarised by Virginia Woolf as ‘Women can’t write. Women can’t paint’ that galvanised the Orlando Project to create a database of 1300 and counting British women writers.

See <http://orlando.cambridge.org/public/svDocumentation?d;d = ABOUTTHEPROJEC>

<sup>7</sup>See <https://stagingwomenslives.com.au>

<sup>8</sup>See, for example Ahmed (2017), Haraway (2016), Barad (2003), Braidotti & Ragan (2017) and many, many others.