1. Methods as Feminist Practices of Care

> Feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite. I think of feminism as a building project: if our texts are worlds, they need to be made out of feminist materials. Feminist theory is world making. [...] It should not be possible to do feminist theory without being a feminist, which requires an active and ongoing commitment to live one's life in a feminist way. [...] To be a feminist at work is or should be about how we challenge ordinary and everyday sexism, including academic sexism. This is not optional: it is what makes feminism feminist. A feminist project is to find ways in which women can exist in relation to women; how women can be in relation to each other. It is a project because we are not there yet.
>
> *Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life*[1]

Despite the space for criticality that it provides, academia is a normative space that prescribes disciplinary boundaries, upholds mechanisms of exclusion due to racial and social origins, and imposes heteronormative codes of conduct.[2] It is thus with great intention that I begin this methods chapter with a quotation by the queer-feminist theorist Sara Ahmed. The methods I employ undergird an attempt to not only theorise according to feminist thought but also to construct both the research and the curatorial practice element of my doctoral undertaking in alignment with feminist principles. Rather than writing *about* feminist theory, I seek to produce work that *practices* feminist care as a methodological framework. The overall intention of the following sections is to put feminist thought into practice in all the different methodological layers of my research and practice-based undertaking. In this regard, the "what" of feminist research finds its validation, its credibility, in the "how." Central to this methodological framework is the relationship between my experience as a researcher, a single parent, and a curator and the ways in which feminist methodologies challenge the supposed split between these positions. In this context, I borrow the term "research-creation" from Natalie Loveless to describe artistic

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1   Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 14.
2   For a dismantling of the (American) university, see Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2013).

research at a doctoral level and to make transparent the inherent theory-practice nexus.

Thus, in the first part of this chapter I provide a range of feminist scholarly positions and methodological approaches that allow me to frame, analyse, position, and trouble my own experiences as a caregiver as a possible "productive encounter"[3] in relation to my doctoral research framework.[4] The four sections of this chapter go from the narrow to the broad. I first address note-taking and auto-theory in order to move through the ways in which the personal relates to wider social issues, and how this tension – this split between the self and the academic – can be challenged and integrated according to feminist methodological approaches, such as "situated knowledges" by Donna Haraway. In the second part, I home in on the relationship between lived experience, theoretical research, and curatorial practice. Following Loveless's proposition of "makingthinking," I argue that these fields became inseparable processes of knowledge production in completing this practice-based study. Thirdly, I turn to the importance of affective ecologies of research and curatorial processes. That is to say, that it matters with whose thoughts we – as feminist researchers – build our own thoughts, that it matters how we cite and whom we cite. By exploring Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's notion of "writing-with care" and Ahmed's politics of citation, I propose a specific method of citation that aims to turn feminist theory into a relational practice of care. In a fourth step, I broaden the scope and turn to the relationships among the disciplines from which I draw by introducing Loveless's concept of "polydisciplinamory." I then move to the ways in which foci and interests (within this set of disciplines) were established, drawing from feminist activist Audre Lorde's concept of the "erotic."

1.1   Taking Notes: On Inscribing the Self within the Academic

Over the past month, my son and I have both been experiencing a lot of illness; either I myself was sick or my son (twice, with a short interval of recovery), or other people whom we were supposed to work with (e.g., the jury members for the artist prize). This made the care situation much more dire, and my regular work structures collapsed. I am lucky to not have a boss I must justify my hours to, but still the amount of work doesn't go away. I try to work whenever he sleeps; having other people take care of him while he is sick is difficult. I try to, paradoxically, split the little time that I do have between caring for my son and doing curatorial and scholarly

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3   Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 75.

4   This chapter focuses specifically on the methods used in this research project, and I elaborate on the influences and conceptual frameworks for the methodology of my participatory curatorial project on care in chapter 4 – "Curating with Care: Contemporary Approaches and Challenges."

work on topics of care. The stress that emerges out of this simultaneity is both what limits, and yet drives, my work. The constant impossibility to reconcile these two is what makes me mad – mad in the sense that it keeps me restless, anxious, and upset. "There has to be a way!" I keep thinking to myself. "This unsolvable riddle needs to be solved! Yes, single mothering while writing a PhD and directing an art institution is absurdity – but it has to be possible." Or at least I want to believe so.

I trick myself into believing that organisation is the solution. My mind constantly generates organisational structures, timelines, dates, planning every detail of my upcoming months – while knowing that life can't be planned. So, I try to plan for the unplannable surprises of life, too. I come up with eventualities: Plan A – D or maybe F. And my mind never rests. It is very, very exhausting. The amount of effort that goes into creating a structure that allows me to produce professional work in a flexible, neoliberal world is quite unimaginable. And its unpaid and invisible. It is the infrastructure of care that will eventually enable me to produce other outcomes. But the existing (uncaring) infrastructure remains unquestioned. It is a given in a world that functions under a patriarchal order. It is what nuclear families have figured out, by assigning housework to one parent and income-generating tasks to the other, or by taking turns in paid labour in the workforce and unpaid labour in the home. Single parents do not have anyone to share the tasks with. The split of reproduction and production collapses in the figure of the single parent. They therefore depend on state-subsidised childcare – which is a somewhat functional system for traditional jobs with very traditional hours (at least in Germany). For everyone outside the "norm," it becomes an existential question: What infrastructure allows my family to live? Something that I might want to call "caring infrastructures," as they help us to receive support, give care, and produce professionally, if desired. It is a network of survival and well-being.[5]

In my excessive overthinking, I thought an au pair would be a good solution for me – providing me with a 24/7 backup system, in case something went wrong. Just to know that someone was in the house, if I had to rush to a meeting or if one of us fell sick. But it took me two months of interviewing different candidates across continents, many, many WhatsApp messages, emails, and exchanges of draft contracts to realise that this would not work for me. Not at this point in time. The extra energy needed to be a welcoming host, to introduce the au pair to our family routine and values, would consume a lot of time and energy, which I currently do not have. Not to mention that at this time of transition, I simply could not offer a family routine. We have none. Everything is up in the air. Moving from one part of Germany to another, transitioning into a new job, introducing my child to a new town and a new daycare – and, after a few months, reversing the process: moving back, finding a new daycare … etc. When you think about it

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5   As this field note shows, the notion of "caring infrastructures" has surged up in different facets of my thinking, writing, and curatorial practice. This notion has evolved over time through conversation with my peers, particularly Rosario Talevi and Gilly Karjevsky. The way I used the term in 2019 follows the same trajectory, but was not as defined as presented in this research project in 2023–24.

from a conventional perspective – it really doesn't make sense. What drives this situation is the heavily idealistic quest to produce a cultural project that alters the ways in which people relate to one another, trust one another, and care for one another – one that will provoke new forms of caring infrastructures through artistic interventions, which can eventually sustain themselves long after the project is over. But this vision is based on many, many variables. And the outcome is absolutely unforeseeable.[6]

Throughout the research process and the practice-based parts of my study, I took reflective notes. They speak to the internal tensions that arise from my professional and academic engagement with care as a curator while single parenting a small child. They bring forth the invisible elements that sustain or disrupt and complicate the executing of a public programme on care in parallel to the writing of a research project such as this. Despite the crucial influence of these private circumstance to research-creation, such reports are commonly regarded as irrelevant to the final published research narration. Feminist researchers from the late 1960s onwards have criticised this supposed split between personal and academic realities. Literary scholar Jane Tompkins, for example, contests that in reality there is no such split:

> It's the same person who feels and who discourses about epistemology. The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) transcends the merely personal.[7]

Tompkins describes this dichotomy as a "public-private hierarchy," which she recognises as the central condition of female oppression.[8] Tired of sticking to these conventions, she concludes: "I say to hell with it."[9] In solidarity with Tompkins, I dedicate this section to key feminist figures who have proposed methods of integrating their personal experience into their writings.

Before I turn to a brief theoretical overview of the field, I want to provide closer insight into the triangle of tensions around care and how it influences the ways in which I carried out my research. It spans, firstly, my experiences and positioning as a single mother; secondly, my academic engagement with social reproduction theory and care ethics; and, finally, my professional practice as a curator with a focus on matters of care. Each element of this aforementioned triangle affects the other, as often times these different aspects were carried out simultaneously: I would be

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6   Field note, February 11, 2019.
7   Jane Tompkins, "Me and My Shadow," *New Literary History* 19 (1987): 169.
8   Ibid.
9   Ibid.

mothering while hosting a public event; the conversations around the public event would influence my perspective and possibly open up new thoughts for my research; and my readings and engagement with different theoretical positions for my research project altered my perspective in regard to both my parenthood and my professional self. Due to my child's presence on my research trips, at professional engagements, and during exhibition and conference visits, many times these overlaps took the shape of disruption, of interjection, of seeming unproductivity. A semi-structured interview with the curator of a community-engaged project in Mexico City was interrupted several times by the crying of my child, his upset state making a focused conversation almost impossible. Many times, I had to rush through relevant exhibitions because he was exhausted and wanted to leave urgently. This lived reality resonates with the writings of psychosocial scholar Lisa Baraitser, in which she argues that "interruption forms the ground of maternal experience against which all other experiences are understood."[10] However, Baraitser continues by framing interruption as an *elusive* moment, in which "something happens to unbalance us and open up a new set of possibilities."[11]

With this intention to create a fracture, a crack, to make way for unforeseen possibilities, I turn to Haraway's much-cited article "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" from 1988.[12] Haraway proposes to embrace the "split and contradictory self" as a way of engaging with diverse positionings and accountability.[13] For her, "[s]plitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge."[14] She thus famously – and fiercely – argues for situated knowledges, as

> politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity.[15]

This view from the body – the contradictions inherent to the embodied experience of care – surfaced during the first month of my appointment as artistic director

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10   Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 74.

11   Ibid., 69.

12   For a historical contextualisation of this work, see Angela Dimitrakaki, "From Space to Time: 'Situated Knowledges,' Critical Curating, and Social Truth," *OnCurating*, no. 53 (June 2022).

13   Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988), 586–87.

14   Ibid., 586.

15   Ibid., 589.

2019–20 of M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung. On January 30, 2019, after the jury session for the Artist Advancement Award 2019–20 – which focused on artistic works at the intersection of social reproduction and social justice – I noted down the following thoughts:

Speaking of care – the paradox that happened in parallel is that my almost three-year-old son was sick with fever on the day of the jury session. He was very attached to his mom, crying a lot and generally very much unhappy with life. It was very difficult for my grandfather to take care of him for so many hours. Occasionally, my son was in the jury room, or I would spend some time in the apartment with them. It added an extra layer of stress – and made the stretch quite visible between a professional practice and the responsibilities of motherhood – even though the content of my profession is care work, it doesn't eliminate or smoothen the stretch. At around 11 p.m. I went to our apartment, expecting a sleeping child. And there he was, still awake. Both my grandfather and my son looked very exhausted from a very long day together. He luckily fell right asleep next to me once I was in bed too. We took the next morning together to recover from the day before, especially because I could barely sleep that night. All the applications went through my head, unsure whether we had made the right choice, feeling bad about eliminating all those other positions.[16]

This note speaks to the situated knowledge and the mundane experience and tensions of caregiving that are not merely add-ons to this theory-driven academic endeavour but rather form its basis and cannot be disentangled for antiquated reasons of objectivity.[17] Part of the critique of writing and research methods that depart from the self is that they emerge from "navel-gazers [...], self-absorbed narcissists

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16   Field notes, January 30, 2019.

17   Concepts of objectivity have been contested by feminist positions, such as that of Haraway: "Academic and activist feminist inquiry has repeatedly tried to come to terms with the question of what we might mean by the curious and inescapable term 'objectivity.' We have used a lot of toxic ink and trees processed into paper decrying what they have meant and how it hurts us. The imagined 'they' constitute a kind of invisible conspiracy of masculinist scientists and philosophers replete with grants and laboratories. The imagined 'we' are the embodied others, who are not allowed not to have a body, a finite point of view, and so an inevitably disqualifying and polluting bias in any discussion of consequence outside our own little circles, where a 'mass'-subscription journal might reach a few thousand readers composed mostly of science haters. At least, I confess to these paranoid fantasies and academic resentments lurking underneath some convoluted reflections in print under my name in the feminist literature in the history and philosophy of science. We, the feminists in the debates about science and technology, are the Reagan era's 'special-interest groups' in the rarified realm of epistemology, where traditionally what can count as knowledge is policed by philosophers codifying cognitive canon law. Of course, a special-interest group is, by Reaganoid definition, any collective historical subject that dares to resist the stripped-down atomism of Star Wars, hypermarket, postmodern, media-simulated citizenship." Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 575.

who don't fulfil scholarly obligations of hypothesizing, analyzing, and theorizing."[18] Communications scholar Della Pollock asserts:

> We don't have sufficient protocols for reading or writing the first person in scholarly discourse and are all too often left regarding it as incontestably determined or merely arbitrary, absolute or relative, esoterically remote or toxically close, and, either way: untouchable. This then radically delimits possibilities for practicing new subjectivities, for beginning to do in and through writing what theories of hybrid, multivoiced, engaged, and embodied social subjectivities have encouraged us to imagine.[19]

The insertion of the auto, the self, into a research context is thus a counterstrategy that destabilises established codes of conduct within academia while producing a rich, nuanced, and situated dimension within scholarly work. Auto-ethnography, for example, "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)."[20] It is this intricate linking of "auto" and "ethno" which is crucial to a methodology that goes beyond navel-gazing and thereby serves as a methodological framework to challenge "canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act."[21] Further, such a method "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist."[22]

From the cited perspectives, the potentials of a more enriching scholarly practice already unfold, a practice which seeks to do justice to feminist attempts to overcome the supposed split between the personal and the academic, and which challenges existing hierarchies and norms. In auto-theory, similar as to in auto-ethnography, "one's embodied experiences become the material through which one theorises, and, in a similar way, theory becomes the discourse through which one's lived experience is refracted," as feminist writer Lauren Fournier argues.[23] The personal is therefore set in a knowledge-producing relation to wider societal aspects.

This knowledge-producing capacity is asserted in anecdotes offered by feminist literary scholar Jane Gallop in her writings on anecdotal theory. Gallop's approach

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18 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," Historical Social Research 36 (2015): 283.

19 Della Pollock, "The Performative 'I,'" *Cultural Studies—Critical Methodologies* 7 (2007): 242.

20 Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," 273.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 274.

23 Lauren Fournier, "Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory: Autotheory as Contemporary Feminist Practice," a/b: Auto/Biography Studies 33 (2018): 658.

shifts focus to the uncanny details of everyday life, to trivial, quotidian narratives. She argues for the entangled roles that such details play in the production of theory: "Beyond theorizing anecdote, I would hope to anecdotalize theory – to make theorizing more aware of its moment, more responsible to its erotics, and at the same time, if paradoxically, both more literary and more real."[24] Natalie Loveless, whose feminist scholarly work on research-creation builds on Gallop, describes this approach as "a practice, [that] is not a simple call for overtly personal over impersonally abstract theory."[25] She rather argues for a critical reflection, a responsive movement between what appears as a particular account and what appears as "seductively generalizeable."[26]

To further expand on this notion, I want to quote at length the feminist scholar Stacy Young, as her position opens up the complexities, relationalities, and importance that fuse within feminist auto-theoretical writings:

> The power of autotheoretical texts lies, in part, in their insistence on situatedness and embodiedness. The writings' autobiographical nature clarifies the origins of their insights, and thus underscores the contingency of their claims. […] It also works as an invitation to the reader to examine her own multiple positions – in relation to the author/narrator (the relationship is always one of identification) and, by extension, to other readers and authors, and in relation to various aspects of the social structure. These texts combine autobiography with theoretical reflection and with the authors' insistence on situating themselves within histories of oppression and resistance. […] [T]hey present the lives they chronicle as deeply enmeshed in other lives, and in history, in power relations that operate on multiple levels simultaneously.[27]

This passage beautifully captures the complex relational webs that unfold from situated experience and how this form of writing is much more encompassing, and relevant, than is acknowledged by the voices that dismiss the practice as self-centred. Rather than navel-gazing, I see this approach as a strongly relational, collectivising moment that builds on shared experiences and the production of situated knowledges while challenging the supposed split between the personal and the academic. It therefore also holds importance for collective, participatory interaction within research and the arts, as curator and writer Gilly Karjevsky articulates: "In particular, it [autotheory] has potential for the negation of the plural self, for addressing the

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24   Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 11.

25   Natalie Loveless, "Reading with Knots: On Jane Gallop's Anecdotal Theory," Journal of the Jan van Eyck Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique 4 (2011): 27.

26   Ibid.

27   Stacy Young, *Changing the Wor(l)d. Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement* (London: Routledge, 1997), 69.

tensions of collective work by asserting the embodied reality of each member of the collective."[28]

In the context of my own research-creation and participatory curatorial processes, note-taking – as first-person writing within an academic scenario – became a central strategy for me to observe, document, and make transparent the tensions that arose between my personal implications, field of study, and curatorial practice on care. While only a small selection of these personal notes has made it into the final document – as vignettes throughout this study – the notes manage to reflect not only my conviviality with my curatorial formats but also the tensions that derive from them. At times they fall into the flow of the written text, at others they interject, interrupt, and thereby speak to my lived reality as a single caregiver that, in itself, is shaped by constant interruption, a lack of consistent focus, and ongoing financial and time precarity.

My situatedness in the precarity and contradictions of care allows me to formulate critical questions, thinking, and practices that are rooted within a lived experience – an experience that is not so much singular but collective, as the societal structures mirror. This methodological approach encouraged me to critically analyse and reflect on my own conditions, in relation to social matters of gender, care work, and the wider economy, and to continuously challenge my own curatorial concepts, formats, and conversations "on the ground." Thereby, my personal experience as a caregiver entered into relation, into dialogue, with social reproduction theory, with empirical data on women's role within the wider economy, and with artistic and curatorial projects that address the representation of women, queer people, and motherhood within the arts.[29] This interconnectedness alludes to the tensions that exist between one's *particular* experience and the larger societal, political, and economic mechanisms – by which the first always needs to be consciously understood *in relation to* the wider social group of which it forms a part. In my case, the personal experiences shared in this chapter are contrasted and contextualised with empirical data as well as a cultural, social, and political analysis of women and single mothers, in and outside of the arts, from medieval times up until today – thereby performing the shift from *auto* via *graphy* to *ethno*, or from *auto* to *theory*.

1.2   makingthinking: On the Inseparability of Life, Theory, and Practice

The methodological frameworks outlined in the previous section hold tremendous potential not only for the ways in which life and theory intersect but also for the ways

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28   Gilly Karjevsky, "Collective Autotheory: Contextualize, Embody, Resist," *Lerchenfeld* 66 (May 2023): 5.

29   See chapter 2 – "Uncaring Conditions: Care Work Under Capitalism."

in which practice and theory (and life) relate to one another, allowing for "theory in the flesh of practice" to emerge.[30] This process can be regarded as an active engagement, "a working-through of a series of life events that are intimately entwined with a theory-making practice in which neither has priority or can be disentangled from the other."[31] Loveless proposes the notion of "makingthinking" for projects of "research-creation" – a sister term she establishes for artistic research, which I, too, will use to address this practice-based research account – thereby rendering the distinctions between sets of daily practices irrelevant:[32]

> Working and weaving together the lines between not only disciplinary factions and political ideologies, but also between thinking and making, art and life, the personal and the political, the Fine Arts PhD, rather than crossing putative practice/theory lines, fundamentally reconfigures them in a profoundly feminist way, challenging the myth that the daily practices called "research," "theory," "academic," and "intellectual" labour are the reified other to the "embedded," "instinctive," "messy," "creative" labour of the artist.[33]

The notion of "makingthinking" resonates with how my own theoretical research and curatorial practice relate to one another: my writing process is fuelled by an oscillation between dedicated time for reading and extensive periods of curatorial practice on the one hand, and engagement with inspirational colleagues on the other.[34]

Before my artistic directorship at M.1 began in January 2019, I had already spent four months enrolled in my PhD programme. This allowed me to get started on readings and more conceptual concerns, which were inevitably tested and challenged once I transitioned into an extensive phase of practice, lasting twenty months. Although the focus was on curatorial practice, I retained one day per week to dedicate to reading, writing, and reflecting. My curatorial practice would push me towards pressing theoretical concepts, while my readings would inform my curatorial decisions in moving forward with the public programming. Once my position at M.1 ended, my professional practice transitioned into that of a curatorial freelancer (or "interdependent curator," as I will introduce later in this book).[35] This position high-

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30   Jane Gallop, quoted in Loveless, "Reading with Knots," 27. Loveless built on this notion of Gallop's and developed the idea of "practising in the flesh of theory." See Natalie Loveless, "Practice in the Flesh of Theory: Art, Research, and the Fine Arts PhD," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37 (2012): 93–108.

31   Loveless, "Reading with Knots," 27.

32   For her articulation of "research-creation," see Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

33   Loveless, "Practice in the Flesh of Theory," 103.

34   Ibid., 100.

35   See section 3.2 – "Unsettling Curatorial Care: Histories, Theories, and Practices."

lights the complex dimensions around curatorial subjectivities, precarities, vulnerabilities as well as the lack of caring infrastructures. In this period, the tension between theory and practice took shape in the form of "time vs. money." Taking on more so-called opportunities in the neoliberal gig economy took away precious time from my research and writing; however, rejecting offers was not something I could afford then, neither financially nor strategically. It was only when I switched my doctoral status from part-time to full-time that I was able to dedicate more time to writing, as my stipend increased respectively. Yet, even in that last phase, workshops, teaching, and lectures formed part of my professional life and created valuable feedback and food for thought. This was particularly so because these formats usually departed from my own practice, and thus opened up the ideas, concepts, and themes that I was working with to the public and an engaged discourse.

In line with Loveless's notion of "makingthinking," I strongly regard my practice and approach to theorising as insuperably intertwined. It is precisely this interplay of making and thinking that comes to fruition within the previously described "triangle of care" (caregiving while researching care and curating with care) as a methodological framework for this research-creation. The implications of my role as a single caregiver formed the embodied experiences that I abstracted to construct curatorial formats and to contribute to the discursive fields of art, curating, and gender theory, while, simultaneously, I continued to immerse myself in research, reading and writing.

Thus in this practice-based research project, both theory and practice, as a form of makingthinking, were mutually beneficial to one another without either turning into the mere illustration of the other. This approach both requires and produces vulnerability, not only for the researcher but also for the practitioner – for the human behind the written pages. As a consequence, received feedback and critique then is not limited to the written pages, to their content, style, and grammar, but rather encompasses the life choices, the methods, the ethics, the experiences, and the practices of the author. By incorporating personal elements into the process of research-creation, I open up not only my curatorial programming and my research to critique but also the ways in which I relate to my child and how I lead my life. Thereby, life and research intrinsically overlap and produce vulnerability on various levels.

1.3   Writing-with-Care: On the Relational Politics of Citation

> It matters what thoughts think thoughts.
> It matters what knowledges know
> knowledges. It matters what relations
> relate relations. It matters what worlds
> world worlds. It matters what stories tell
> stories.
> *Donna Haraway, Staying with the Trouble*[36]

While inserting the self into research-creation processes is highly important, it is equally necessary to highlight the relational, collaborative elements that sustain writing and practice in a feminist approach. Whereas the previous section aimed to challenge the ways in which academic methods relate to lived experience, this section seeks to resist the reproduction of the solitary writer in the ivory tower as the ideal of academic research. Feminist approaches to research and activism in particular have foregrounded the importance of working with others in thought and practice, on the bumpy road to an otherwise.

In this line of thought, Donna Haraway – in the context of this section a central figure of alternative, feminist methods – cites the ethnographer Marilyn Strathern, who has done lifelong work in Papua New Guinea, and her definition of anthropology as "studying relations with relations."[37] For Haraway, this approach allows for "[e]mbodying the practice of feminist speculative fabulation in the scholarly mode," continuing: "Strathern taught me – taught us – a simple but game-changing thing: 'It matters what ideas we use to think other ideas.'"[38]

Following this idea, citation becomes a relational practice, which Lauren Fournier considers to be "a mode of intertextual intimacy and identification" that makes way for the formation of community and communion within feminist contexts.[39] It thus matters who we cite: whose ideas we depart from, build from, and think-with, as this act co-constitutes collectivities and renders legible interdependencies and contingencies. This is mirrored in Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's understanding of "thinking-with," a concept developed by Haraway, upon which she builds her argument for "writing-with." For her,

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36   Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 35.

37   Marilyn Strathern, quoted in ibid., 34.

38   Ibid.

39   Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2021), 134.

writing-with, is not who or what it aims to include and *represent* in a text, but what it generates: it actually *creates* collective, it *populates* a world. Instead of reinforcing the figure of a lone thinker, the voice in such a text seems to keep saying: *I am not the only one*. Thinking-with makes the work of thought stronger, it supports its singularity and contagious potential. [...] It builds relation and community, that is: possibility.[40]

However, writing-with also demands an ethics of care and the cultivation of re-sponse-ability to a "collective thinking and doing"[41] – an accountable knowledge construction that is nonetheless open to dissent ("dissenting-with").[42] This kind of knowledge creation is situated within a "multitude of relations that also make possible the worlds we think with. [...] [R]elations of thinking and knowing require care."[43] Puig de la Bellacasa, in a next step, asks in which ways this form of care can be translated into a doing. How can care as a methodological principle be practised? She turns to Haraway's politics of quotation, as a style of writing that gives credit to a multitude of ideas and affects that sustain one's writing, including in Puig de la Bellacasa's case the works of fellow researchers, students, activist groups, and human and non-human friends. Quotation politics also trouble the norms of academic isolation that tend not to valorise these enmeshed webs of thinking-with – from within and outside academia.[44]

Sara Ahmed, in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, has likewise put forth a politics of citation that echoes these principles of "doing feminism," of writing feminism into the fabric of text. Ahmed articulates how she only cites "feminists of colour who have contributed to the project of naming and dismantling the institutions of patriarchal whiteness."[45] Inspired by her approach, I have also chosen to focus on citing fem-inist scholars – primarily women writers, queer writers, Black writers, writers of colour, artists who are mothers, and single-parent arts practitioners. In the frame-work of this research project, I have withstood the comfort of citing what is easily available: the ideas of White cis men. As Ahmed argues: "We cannot conflate the his-tory of ideas with White men, though if doing one leads to the other then we are be-ing taught where ideas are assumed to originate. Seminal: how ideas are assumed to originate from male bodies."[46]

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40 María Puig de la Bellacasa, "'Nothing Comes without Its World': Thinking with Care," *Socio-logical Review* 60 (2012): 205. Emphasis in the original.

41 Haraway, Staying with the Trouble.

42 Puig de la Bellacasa, "Nothing Comes without Its World," 205.

43 Ibid., 198.

44 Ibid., 202.

45 Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 15–16.

46 Ibid., 16; Katy Hessel, *The Story of Art without Men* (Portsmouth, NH: Hutchinson Heinemann, 2022).

Some of the theoretical positions and concepts I cite may have been put forth by White men originally, but I reference these ideas through the perspectives of feminists who have adapted, reworked, challenged, and added to the initial ideas (e.g., in the case of Marxist theory: (queer) feminist Marxism). I also write about and refer to White male subjectivities, not affirmatively but as a background against which I contrast my argument, which challenges these positionings. I use this approach, for example, in the section where I briefly outline the issues around the curatorial figures of Harald Szeemann and Hans Ulrich Obrist. I thus do not rely on their work as a foundation of knowledge creation but rather use it as a contrasting element to discuss questions of gender and power relations. This approach is therefore not rooted in the illusory fantasy that knowledge which "originated from male bodes" does not exist nor dominate nor matter.[47] I rather regard my approach as a practice of *foregrounding* the voices of feminists, people of colour, queer people, and mothers within a system that is built to exclude them, where they might otherwise remain in the background and, due to their marginalisation within the dominant academic canons, be perceived as less valid academic positions.

It is, however, utterly important to not conflate this approach of foregrounding with an essentialist mission or a pursuit to establish a rigid diversity quota for one's citational practice. Rather, it departs from the urgency to uncover and uplift voices that have been systematically silenced. This position aligns with that of the Black scholar, writer, and cultural practitioner Natasha A. Kelly, who argues: "Only by creating a culture of knowledge that counters white Eurocentrism can anti-Black racism in particular and discrimination in general be sustainably abolished."[48] While the cited voices share experiences of marginalisation due to their race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disabilities, or other forms of systemic exclusions, they are not understood as representing monolithic groups, whereby each position would carry the burden of representing the wider socially constructed category, such as, for example, "women."[49]

Yet, as one moves away from the core of the approach of foregrounding "othered" voices, one increasingly encounters conceptual and political tensions at the fringes.

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47   Exceptions to the postulated norm are made either when White male scholars form part of a collaborative authorship, when their position is used to exemplify the patriarchal narrative that this research project aims to dismantle (in the case of, e.g., Adam Smith, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Harald Szeemann), or when they are authors of empirical studies, journalistic essays, or interviews. Further, I cite queer and non-binary scholars and activists, independent from their gender assigned at birth.

48   Natasha A. Kelly, *Rassismus. Strukturelle Probleme brauchen strukturelle Lösungen!* (Hamburg: Atrium Verlag, 2021), ePUB. My translation.

49   Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 271–313.

Authors of such feminist politics of citation can find themselves confronted with complex questions of identity politics: Where does a White male subject begin and end? How to deal with a White male author who specifically writes about feminism? An Asian or Black author who is male yet not explicitly feminist? We thus quickly arrive at the dangerous equation where a person's perceived skin colour or gender identity would come to serve as a fixed indicator of a critical political positioning. I, therefore, *explicitly* do not want to venture into the outer fringes of this approach, as it runs the danger of turning into an overtly dogmatic undertaking fuelled by an assumption of fixed gendered and racialised identities. Such an end, I hope to make very clear, is not the aim of this approach. As a writer, editor, and curator, through this practice of foregrounding I aim to actively make visible what others might write off as too tiresome to seek out, simultaneously contributing to making "othered" voices readily available, too. This resonates with Ahmed, who argues: "Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings. My citation policy has affected the kind of house I have built."[50]

In this regard, I do not wish to shy away from the ambiguities and tensions that arise from such a method. Rather, I specifically want to refrain from the modus operandi of perpetuating the "monologue of sameness"[51] of curatorial and academic knowledge production. To cite Haraway, I wish to "stay with the trouble," to actively *work through* the set of tensions.[52] The aim is not to propose a bulletproof, fixed, and non-negotiable method but instead to open up a space of discourse around these citation practices by proposing one possible path forward. If desired, one could regard this methodological proposition an *anti-hegemonic provocation*, in a spirit similar to the one evoked by Katy Hessel's book title *The Story of Art Without Men*.[53]

Further, in the context of practice-based curatorial research, citations are to research what artists are to exhibitions: they are the "bricks" from which curators build their frameworks. As feminist curatorial activism centres on anti-hegemonic practices that address the "moral emergency" within the arts, it aims to produce exhibitions and public programming that represent a diverse range of artistic practitioners and speakers, as put forth by the curator and arts writer Maura Reilly.[54] I apply the same critical lens to this text. From a curatorial perspective, matters of inclusion are intricately tied to matters of representation. As a curator, whose practice relies on discursive and editorial strategies, I understand this research undertaking as an

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50   Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 16.
51   Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 15.
52   Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.
53   Hessel, *The Story of Art without Men*.
54   Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*.

expansion of such a representational curatorial space that aims to establish anti-hegemonic encounters of knowledges.

In reference to Haraway's notion of "companion species," Ahmed suggests the concept of the "companion text": "a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden."[55] This notion beautifully creates an image of intergenerational, affective, and relational support networks between the researcher and the thinking and writing of others – a metaphorical image that also speaks to feminist curatorial relations. Ultimately, citation is the space of agency for each scholar and curator to shift the discourse, to carve out hidden voices and arguments, and to centre attention on negated issues, practices, and approaches, while recognising that academia and the arts as institutions uphold patriarchal, elitist, ableist, colonising world views and within which one must struggle to define new practices to counteract their dominating narratives.

1.4   Un/disciplined: On the Erotic beyond Disciplinary Boundaries

In the same spirit of challenging the dominant modus operandi of academic writing, I want to turn to the hegemony of disciplinary boundaries. Well-established, and rather rigid, conceptions of disciplinary boundaries need challenging, as they are geared towards academic work which is traditionally based within one or two disciplines. Natalie Loveless's book *How to Make Art at the End of the World* can be read as a plea to rethink research-creation and the ways in which it relates to scholarly disciplines, academic institutions, neoliberal logics, and personal interests. Loveless proposes to queer the ways in which research-creation is conducted – "queer" understood as being "at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant."[56] For her concept of "polydisciplinamory," she draws parallels between academic disciplines and romantic and sexual relationships, as both are metaphorical spaces that carry the potential to be sites of entanglement or exclusion: "While queer theory commonly asserts that it is the queering, the undoing of (sexual/disciplinary) norms, that is at stake, the theoretically polyamorous steps in, in its wake, to invite us to develop and nurture attachment across multiple (sexual/social/disciplinary) sites."[57]

Loveless regards "monogamous disciplinarity" as a method of exclusion, whereas polydisciplinamory still allows for disciplinary acts yet counters the logic

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55   Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 16.

56   David Halperin, quoted in Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 61.

57   Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 62.

that a monogamous engagement with one discipline is the "only site of rigorous legitimacy."[58] She explains:

> I argue for the importance of learning to navigate the attachments that guide a "multiple" approach to research-creation (multiple in terms of discipline, method, and form) by drawing on the affective literacies of theoretical polyamory. Grounded in this literature, I propose the neologism polydisciplinamory as a way to differently structure our negotiations of the affective attachments needed for a robust practice and theory of research-creation.[59]

While university departments, or individual supervisors, might be open to more experimental approaches to research-creation, most funding bodies available for doctoral research still follow rather traditional disciplinary conceptions and aim to measure the success of their funded students according to rigid metrics and contested categories such as "originality" and "academic rigour."[60] While my practice-based curatorial PhD – from which this book emerged – was funded by the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council under the category "Art History," it was housed in the Department of Art at the University of Reading and the Department of Cultural Analysis at Zurich University of the Arts, and, within that, the Postgraduate Programme in Curating. This complex departmental-bureaucratic research setup comes with potentially conflicting interests as far as disciplinary requirements and standards, despite the different entities' declared openness to interdisciplinarity. While transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to research have been popular for several years, Loveless's polydisciplinamory suggests a crucial distinction:

> Traditional interdisciplinarity, with its intertheory thrust, could be said to be about who (which disciplines) one commits to, while research-creation, as a polydisciplinamorous orientation, becomes about how one commits to producing new kinship ties not only in terms of content (the "who") but in terms of form (the "how").[61]

In the context of this doctoral research-creation, the "who" is the discourses around curatorial theory and practices, (queer) feminist art history and contemporary art practices, social reproduction theory and care ethics, and sociological, political, and philosophical thought. The "how" links me back to Ahmed's quote at the start of this

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58   Ibid., 64.

59   Ibid., 14–15.

60   This doctoral research was funded by the UK-based Arts and Humanities Research Council's South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership in the category "Art History."

61   Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 63.

chapter, with its emphasis on the importance of how research is created, how it relates to feminist struggles, and whether this theorising is rooted within feminist living versus feminist theorising only. Yet the "how" is also about how to navigate the maze of theories, interests, disciplines, debates, and tensions, and how to formulate a position within these tensions. For Loveless,

> polydisciplinamory, as a kind of eros-driven-curiosity, becomes an organizational principle for research-creation, one that helps tutor us in managing the frictions, dissonances, and different demands required by not only more than one discipline but more than one form, and to recognize these negotiations as always already imbricated in structures of power.[62]

This idea is that the subversion – the queering – of academic disciplines, which serves as a set of tools or principles to navigate these tensions, is rooted in a sincere dedication to how attachments within academia are formed and accepted. As the above quote already suggests, Loveless's concept builds on the work of Audre Lorde and her notion of the "erotic." In Lorde's understanding, the erotic is not to be conflated with the pornographic or the sexual;[63] rather, it is "an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."[64] In her foundational 1978 text "The Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," she speaks of the erotic as a source of female power and information:

> Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. [...] The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.[65]

Both in my research process and in the conceptualisation of my curatorial practice, I have had to push myself to allow this quiet intuition of "what feels right to me" to become a valid methodology for the how's and what's of my research-creation. It indeed takes tremendous effort to allow for the erotic – this sensation of "feeling right" – to become a sound decision-making tool within research-creation, to let the erotic be the central guide in lieu of the metrics of academic rigour, established canons,

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62   Ibid., 70.

63   Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Feminist Series (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.

64   Ibid., 55.

65   Ibid., 56.

and disciplinary boundaries. This sensation resonates with Loveless's definition of "the drive I have been naming curiosity, a drive that erupts and takes us over."[66]

The interdisciplinary character of curatorial studies – with its wide range of influences, spanning disciplines such as philosophy, art history, psychoanalysis, critical theory, arts administration, political theory, ethics, and many more – means that there are no clear-cut, predefined demarcations to guide the disciplinary and methodological frameworks of a practice-based curatorial research project. Thus, the importance of "eros" as a guiding principle became crucial, for me, as far as how to make decisions and form attachments to themes, authors, perspectives, and artists.

For example, in the conceptual and initial phase of my curatorial programming at M.1 Arthur Boskamp-Stiftung, I needed to carve out space for the erotic as a way to make place for the unknown and the unexpected in the unfolding process. While I had applied to the artistic director 2019–20 position with a clear conceptual framework of the topics and issues around care that I wanted to address during the curatorial cycle, I, however, had not yet defined the specific formats, dates, exhibitions, or artists I wanted to invite. Even before my official start date, the institution had enquired about the dates of openings of the exhibitions so that staff could plan their vacations. Instead of setting fixed dates and curatorial formats prior to my curatorial cycle, I negotiated a three-month research phase at the beginning of my position. In this phase, no public programming would be held, so that I could acquaint myself with the institution, the village and its inhabitants, potential artists and curatorial formats, and socially engaged processes.

In retrospect, I regard this process as one driven by Lorde's notion of the erotic as a way to provide space for "what feels right to me," despite having caused a feeling of vulnerability as I was deviating from the trodden paths of institutional curating – building a less robust shelter with lighter materials, to go back to Ahmed's imagery.[67] I am here stressing this element of my research-curatorial process because, in addition to countering institutional logics, it also felt "unproductive" at first and it required stamina to build a curatorial programme from a gut feeling, from the erotic as a driving force. Within the framework of curatorial activism, under which I situate this research project, it is the erotic that connects the seemingly personal patterns of attachment with wider social issues that are in urgent need of address.[68]

To summarise, the various above-outlined methodological lines, when taken together, are fused by the erotic, affect, situated experience, collectivity, vulnerability,

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66   Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 70.

67   Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 16.

68   In section 3.2 – "Curating with Care: Histories, Theories, and Practices," I explore Reilly's concept of curatorial activism in more depth.

and care in order to challenge dominant modes of research-creation and to propose a *feminist otherwise*. Similar to the ways in which auto-ethnography regards itself as a method that "attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art,"[69] in this book I aim to disrupt the entanglements and contradictions between the capitalist framework, my role as a single parent, and my institutional and non-institutional activities as a curator and researcher – by making them transparent. While this research-creation is not a result of auto-ethnography or anecdotal theory in a narrow sense, I nevertheless aim to inscribe my lived experience into the research narration around care, curating, and feminist research-creation, as an act of micro-politics in reso-nance with the feminist slogan of "the personal is political."[70] The overall argument of this chapter is that in the method – in the way in which research is conducted – lies the opportunity, or rather the impetus, to counter the logics of heteronorma-tivity, of neoliberal productivity, and of compulsory monodisciplinarity, as well as traditional understandings of objectivity. In my research-creation, I combine these methodological principles in order to explore how feminist theory might be put into academic practice – as a method of care.[71]

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69   Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," 283.

70   The slogan "the personal is political" has been a core phrase of the feminist movement since the 1960s. Its original authorship is unclear, as several feminists decline having coined the phrase and rather attribute it to the collective social movements.

71   In chapter 4 – "Care for Caregivers: A Case Study of a Participatory Curatorial Programme on Care," I return to some of the methodological considerations of chapter 1. Situating myself in relation to my research process is furthermore relevant due to the ephemeral nature of my curatorial practice. Therefore, I describe my curatorial programming and analyse it through my own experience, lens of focus, and fragmented memory, which allows me to return to the ideas of Jane Gallop and Natalie Loveless. I make explicit the necessity for retrospective reflection and the assembly of the various methods, strategies, formats, and experiences created during the process of research-creation – as a way to honour the research and cu-ratorial process as an end in itself. With this, I joined prominent contemporary curatorial platforms such as the 11th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art and documenta fifteen in Kassel – projects that dedicated themselves to sociopolitical, community-based processes that frame exhibitions as a means to produce encounters rather than abstracted products. These practices resonate with the central feminist research approach of auto-ethnography, which is both process and product.