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## ARTFUL DIFFRACTIONS: (EN)TANGLING WITH REFLEXIVITY AND NEW MATERIALIST PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract:** In this article, we explore the potential of artmaking as a reflexive practice, grounded in the work of feminist new materialist philosophers Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. Barad and Haraway's philosophies emphasize our entanglement with more-than-human materialities and forces and consider our ethical responsibility to the world. We explore our own artful practices such as collaging, drawing, mapping, and creative writing as

reflexive practices that help us consider who we are in relation to our research. These examples provide a grounded description for novice and veteran researchers alike who might be interested in using artful reflexive practices in their own work.

**Keywords:** collage; mapping; visual memos; audio compilations; new materialism; belonging

In qualitative research, reflexivity has been widely defined as considering who a researcher is in relation to their participants, research site, and research questions. Practicing reflexivity has been emphasized as an important component of conducting strong qualitative research (Peshkin, 1988; Pillow, 2003; Shelton, 2024; Tracy, 2010). In recent years, qualitative scholars have argued that arts-based methods offer new, profound ways of engaging reflexively, contending with the self, others, and the ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape research processes and representations (Skukauskaite et al., 2022).

In traditional qualitative methodology, reflexivity is defined as a researcher's "continuous examination and explanation of how they have influenced a research project" (Dowling, 2008, p. 747). Pillow (2003) describes this more succinctly as "what I know" and "how I know it," going on to note that reflexivity "aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research" (p. 178). As Dowling (2008) notes, we might imagine reflexivity as falling on a paradigmatic continuum. At one end, reflexivity is a process of setting aside one's biases in order to produce a more accurate or valid research product, and at the other end, reflexivity challenges the very notion of objectivity through an ongoing diffractive consideration of how researchers are entangled with the process of doing research and producing knowledge. In this article, we examine how artmaking makes possible a diffractive orientation to reflexivity through examination of our own work and feminist new materialist theory.

"We" in this article are two qualitative researchers in the field of education. Maureen is a White woman who was born in the United States, and who, at the time of the writing of the article, was a faculty member in qualitative research methodologies on the tenure track. Yixuan is a Chinese international doctoral student, who, at the time of writing the article, was a student in Maureen's qualitative research methodology courses. Maureen and Yixuan first met while Yixuan was enrolled in a qualitative methods course taught by Maureen; through subsequent courses they found intersections in their areas of interest in feminist new materialist theory, artful methods, and questions of ethics, voice, and knowledge in qualitative research. We offer these introductions here as an entry point for our engagements with reflexivity and diffraction, together and apart, later in the article.

In what follows, we provide a brief overview of the literature on artmaking as a reflexive practice in qualitative research; before turning to reflexivity from a feminist new materialist perspective. This literature inspires and grounds us, providing something for us to speak back/in relation to as we move into our own examples. Then, drawing on the theoretical grounding of new materialism, we explore our artful practices of collaging, drawing, mapping, and creative writing as reflexivity throughout data analysis and display to understand the entanglement of arts, art tools, research site, participants, and our roles as researchers in our research projects.

## Artmaking and Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

The relationship between artmaking—and more specifically, artful qualitative research—and reflexivity is deeply embedded in the literature. Artful practices are explored in relation to how they foster reflexivity as part of the research process, as well as how they might interact with the consumer of research to facilitate reflection. Leavy (2017) for example, wrote that “the beauty elicited by arts-based research (ABR) is explicitly linked to how it fosters reflexivity and empathy in the consumer” (p. 5). Conversely, Sullivan (2009) focused on the researcher, describing four kinds of reflexive practices facilitated by art making: (a) self-reflexive; (b) meta-analytic; (c) information dialogue; (d) content questioning. In this article, we focus primarily on the first kind of reflexivity offered by Sullivan, self-reflexivity, while also noting that these practices are intertwined and connected.

Some examples of how arts-based scholars have written about reflexive practices from the viewpoint of the researcher include Stokrocki (2012), who, drawing on the work of John Dewey, argued that “a drawing is not complete, until it is reflected on” (p. 136). This process of reflection is a practice of reflexivity that is not just about an emotional response, but also includes social and cross-cultural dimensions. Intrinsic to this epistemological positioning is the assumption that reflection is separate from the act of drawing. This is echoed by Crowley (2022), who incorporated painting and self-reflection as a form of autoethnography.

Others have explored how artmaking as a reflexive practice gives rise to new ideas in the research process. For example, Triggs and colleagues (2014) described how walking as an art practice facilitates awareness of how perceptions are made and how we become conscious of the world around us. As an artistic practice, walking fosters awareness, perceptions, and sensations. Likewise, Wienk (2016) described this feeling of “being in touch with art” as “linked to an interrelated awareness that materializes feeling, thinking, observation, and intuition inseparably” (p. 100).

Wilson’s (2018) aesthetic interludes were included in her article to provoke consideration of remembrance practices and our relationship to the past. Wilson’s creation of her doctoral gown was an autoethnographic project that visualized and embodied her identity and its development in academia during the transition from being a doctoral student to a tenure-track Black woman faculty member. The garment-making captured the nuances of Wilson’s identity development in the social, historical, cultural, and situational context of academia. Another example using visual art is Ward’s (2016) reflections on an exhibition where she visually explored women’s feelings about sexual intimacy through an exhibition titled *Panty Pennants*. Throughout, she played with different visual representations of her

data, employing color blocking, white-out poetry, and the rotation function in word, to remember and (re)present stories from her recent and “not-so-recent past” (p. 213).

Poetry is another artful practice that researchers have engaged with reflexively. Bhattacharya (2008) used found poetry to consider the complicated position as “a transnational academic in a higher education institution in the U.S. trying to depict experiences of other transnationals” (p. 85). While composing the poem, Bhattacharya became aware of her complicated positioning, and the poem was a space for her to consider multiple loyalties between academic expectations, personal experience of being a transnational scholar in U.S. higher education, and honoring participants’ way of knowing and understanding their experiences. Similarly, Delgado’s (2018) article featured a poem written in an autoethnographic epistolary style to showcase the poet-researcher’s personal life and intersecting identities (e.g., queer, Latinx, and gender non-confirming). While the main text of this article is the poem, it provides a great example of how the poet-researcher explores the relations between identity, culture, existence in the world, and research.

Throughout these examples, we notice how the subject and object stay distinct and separate from one another—for example, the painting acts on the viewer, the researcher manipulates materials to make a drawing or create a collage. These activities then produce some kind of insight or reflection, which might produce a change or shift in the artmaker, or viewer of the art. The consideration of how reflexivity has been taken up in relation to artmaking, then, is as an ongoing process of reflection between *self-other* where the self and other are distinct and separate.

In what follows, we explore how thinking reflexivity with critical feminist philosophers shifts how we think about the self-other continuum. Specifically, in thinking reflexively with feminist new materialism, reflexivity becomes an ongoing acknowledgement of the reciprocal and response-able relationship between researcher/researched. More specifically, we think guided by critical feminist philosophers Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. Barad, who writes from the field of quantum physics, and Haraway, who writes from a critical ecological perspective, both explicitly discuss (and expand) reflexivity in their writings. To think with these philosophers, we follow their trail of citations and references to reflexivity before turning to examples from our own work.

## **The (En)Tangled Tales of Reflexivity**

We began our exploration of reflexivity in the feminist new materialisms with Barad (2007), who wrote in their text *Meeting the Universe Halfway* that traditionally, reflexivity is considered in relation to reflection. When considering a reflection, such as in a mirror, there is always a distance between the reflection and the self. The self in the mirror is always

distant, outside. In turn, Barad argues that practicing reflexivity (the consideration of the self and how it is reflected) is a practice that maintains distance and reinforces static boundaries between the self and the other. Further, through the process of reflection, reflexivity can only reproduce the same (i.e., can only reflect back what is known/what is seen). As Barad describes, “Haraway notes that [reflexivity or reflection] invites the illusion of essential, fixed position” (Haraway, 1992, as cited in Barad, 2007, p. 29; insertion by Barad). For Haraway (1997), diffraction is a metaphor and methodology that breaks away from the reductionist self-reflection that reproduces the boundaries between nature and culture at a distance from the materiality. The wide practice of reflexivity in qualitative studies, therefore, has evolved from critiques regarding the representation of research, objectivity, and trustworthiness, and researchers’ critical examination of the relationship with the research (Gullion, 2018). Outlining the genealogy of reflexivity, Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) summarize that reflexivity, often self-referential, is a practice of identifying and interrogating how a researcher’s standpoint and positionality have an impact on the relationships and process of the research (Davies, 2014; Shelton, 2024). While reflection/reflexivity might document and produce differences, akin to mirroring, for both Haraway (1997) and Barad (2007), diffraction is the process and result “whereby differences are made and made to matter” (Davies, 2014, p. 734).

Rather than reflecting the static other, diffraction is a process of being attentive to the entanglement of material-discursive phenomena in which matter and meaning are co-constructed. More specifically, Haraway (1992) describes diffraction as “processing small but consequential differences” (p. 318) in science methodology, incorporating the researcher-self and knowing as a means of becoming-together with the social, material, and cultural matters in studies. In their writing, Barad (2007) draws from Haraway’s work and from quantum physics to offer a “diffractive methodology” (Barad, 2007, p. 29) that is “respectful of the entanglement of ideas and other materials in ways that reflexive methodologies are not . . . [through] attunement to apparatuses of production, one that enables genealogical analyses of how boundaries are produced rather than presuming sets of well-worn binaries in advance” (p. 30). In this vein, “diffraction is thus seen as both a process and as a result—ontologically a being and becoming” (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017, p. 116).

## **Diffraction ⇔ Reflexivity**

A simple reading of Barad and Haraway might offer a doing away with reflexivity in favor of diffractive thinking. Following the footnotes and citations between Barad and Haraway, however, we offer a more subtle reading of the relationship between diffraction and reflexivity. Rather than reading diffraction as a critique of reflexivity, we understand it as an expansion, a complication. We are grounded here in Barad and Haraway’s writing. For example, in Haraway’s (1992) text, which Barad draws on to make the distinction between

reflexivity and diffraction, we find that Haraway (1992) does not make the jump to link reflection and reflexivity, writing:

Diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear but rather maps where the effects of difference appear. (p. 300)

In other words, what Haraway is critiquing in this quote is not reflexivity, but reflection–replication of the same. Haraway (1992) further offers that a “indeed, a reflexive artificialism [artifactual: an object made by a human being] offers serious political and analytical hope” (p. 299). Likewise, Barad (2015) offers in a footnote a synonymous relationship between reflexivity and diffraction placing the two parenthetically next to one another (p. 426). Following these (en)tangled tales of reflexivity and diffraction, Geerts and van der Tuin (2016) argue that Haraway does not want to “get rid of reflexivity” (para. xx). Rather, they offer that reflexivity, thought diffractively, offers a starting point to “work through and beyond the reflective paradigms of science, social movements, and policy-making” (para. xx). A diffractive approach to reflexivity opens up onto-epistemological possibilities and spaces for an immanent encounter. The researcher does not know in advance what ethico-onto-epistemological knowledge will emerge from such intra-action with meaning and matters. This diffractive reflexivity requires the researcher to be present, attentive, and open throughout the diffractive analysis, “seeing how something different comes to matter” (Davies, 2014, p. 734). This approach is interested in material-discursive interference and becoming-together. The research is both an encounter and experiment (Davies, 2014) as it does not set out to represent what already existed prior to the research (Mazzei, 2014).

Thus, rather than rejecting reflexivity in favor of diffraction, we follow Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) to consider both terms as opportunities to think with/in the other without prioritizing one over the other. To think diffraction reflexively, to think reflexive diffraction is an opportunity to think beyond human boundaries categorizing the self and other, and to consider our critical, responsible, and entangled engagement with the world. In what follows, we briefly overview some examples of researchers who have drawn on Barad and Haraway’s conceptualization of diffractive reflexivity before turning to examples from our own work.

## **Diffraction & Reflexivity with Feminist New Materialisms**

Others in qualitative research have created artful strategies with Barad and Haraway as part of a diffractive methodology. For example, Bozalek and colleagues (2016) explored the process of making stained glass to explore “alterity in self and other” (p. 210). Coleman and Osgood (2019), meanwhile, invited participants in a workshop to play with glitter and account for “what glitter does—or, more specifically, what it did to us in the context of the

workshop and the reverberations that are felt months later” (p. 63). Hultman and Lenz Taguchi (2010) think with visual materials and wonder “What happens if we look at the image thinking that not only humans can be thought upon as active and agentic, but also non-human and matter can be granted ‘agency?’” (p. 527). Thorpe and Newman (2023), thinking with creativity, diffraction, and collaboration when editing a special issue, asked “How do our affective, aesthetic, and creative responding to academic products . . . prompt new politics, ethics, pedagogies, and response-abilities in our everyday lives?” (p. 109). Each of these researchers explored the possibilities of artmaking or artful materials for thinking beyond self-other binaries, considering our entangled responsibilities and relationships with one another, thought with and through new materialist philosophies. In each of these studies, a specific artmaking practice or material served as a portal or threshold in relation to a larger research study, creating an entry point for troubling boundaries between the self/other, and making visible entangled and responsible/response-able relationships (Gullion, 2018).

## **Diffraction Reflexivity/Reflexively Diffracting Through Our Examples of Artmaking**

In this section, we explore a variety of artful examples from our work<sup>1</sup> to think with and through the differences that different artmaking practices produce. Through this close examination of a variety of artmaking practices, we not only add to the literature on how artmaking might function as a portal or threshold toward reflexive research, but we also consider the ethico-onto-epistemological (Barad, 2007) differences that different materials, practices, and research questions produce. Specifically, we do this through considering examples from each of us in turn. Through turning to each of our projects, we think across/between/within the differences each project produced in conversation with our subjectivities, positions, and research sites. Both of our projects consider questions of place, belonging, and identity. This framing, considering each of our projects in turn, is similar to how we two came together, sharing and engaging with the similarities and differences between our projects to consider “not a static relationality but a doing—the enactment of boundaries—that always entails constructive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability” (Barad, 2003, p. 122). Following engagement with each of our projects, we turn to a discussion of implications for diffractive reflexivity in artful research broadly.

### **Yixuan’s Examples**

In summer 2021, I was taking a course on visual inquiry with Maureen. As a Chinese international student living in the Southeastern United States, I wondered about how anti-Asian and xenophobic discourse mattered in the local community of the college town. I noticed the three local Asian grocery stores became the spatial embodiment of my sense of

belongingness when researching this topic. The three stores, Fook's Food, Orient Mart, and Achachi International Market, carry products from East Asia, Southeastern Asia, and South Asia. I decided to explore customers' experiences at these three stores during the pandemic. Due to the ongoing social distance restrictions at the time, I approached data collection in both online and off-line ways. My project examined user-uploaded pictures and reviews on Google Maps. I first included a traditional process of coding in the beginning of data analysis (e.g., In-Vivo coding), but, learning different approaches to data analysis and representation from Maureen's course, I was intrigued to explore arts-based approaches in the analysis process, as artmaking is less of "an endeavor of memory, skill, and/or representation and more one of immediacy and experimentation" (Richardson, 2017, p. 85). In each example below, I explore how different artmaking practices helped me think about not only the relationship between users and spaces but also engage diffractively with reflexivity, considering my own relationship to the study, food, and both Asian and Southern American cultures across the physical and virtual spaces.

## **Collages**

Asian food and ways of cooking became a sensitive topic to me during the pandemic, as the culinary practices were once again perceived as "dirty" and "unsanitary" due to the media's overemphasis on the association between bat, food, and the spread of coronavirus. When gathering and analyzing the reviews from Google Map, it saddened me to see the stores being depicted in such negative ways. For example, the text in Figure 1 captures a user's written review of the store:

Went with a friend but all the food looked terrible but only because I hate Asian food. My buddy's wife is Asian and he likes some of the food. Wouldnt [sic] be fair for me to give 1 star so i [sic] will say it is small, location is bad but it was clean and the cashier was friendly.

When coding and analyzing this review, the In-Vivo coding repetitively encapsulated the negative views on Asian food/products and the store's location and size, iterating the anti-Asian sentiment that harmed Asian/Asian American communities in the United States. Reading the reviews over and over again, I found these reviews to be deeply hurtful, contradicting my experiences at the stores as an insider of the local Asian communities. The stores, regardless of the size and locations, were my home away from home, nurturing my body and soul at a time when safety and resources were scarce. Going to the stores weekly was one of the only cheerful events to me to connect with the culture, food, and community. To integrate reflexivity, in the process of analyzing and representing data in relation to my connection with these stores as a researcher and insider of the local Asian community, I included collage and creative writing to not only reflect my sense of belongingness but to "talk back" to the exclusion and xenophobia enacted in the reviews. Specifically, after

collecting images and reviews from Google Maps, I used collage and mapping to (re)consider the many possible stories the analysis might tell.

**Figure 1**  
*I Hate Asian Food*

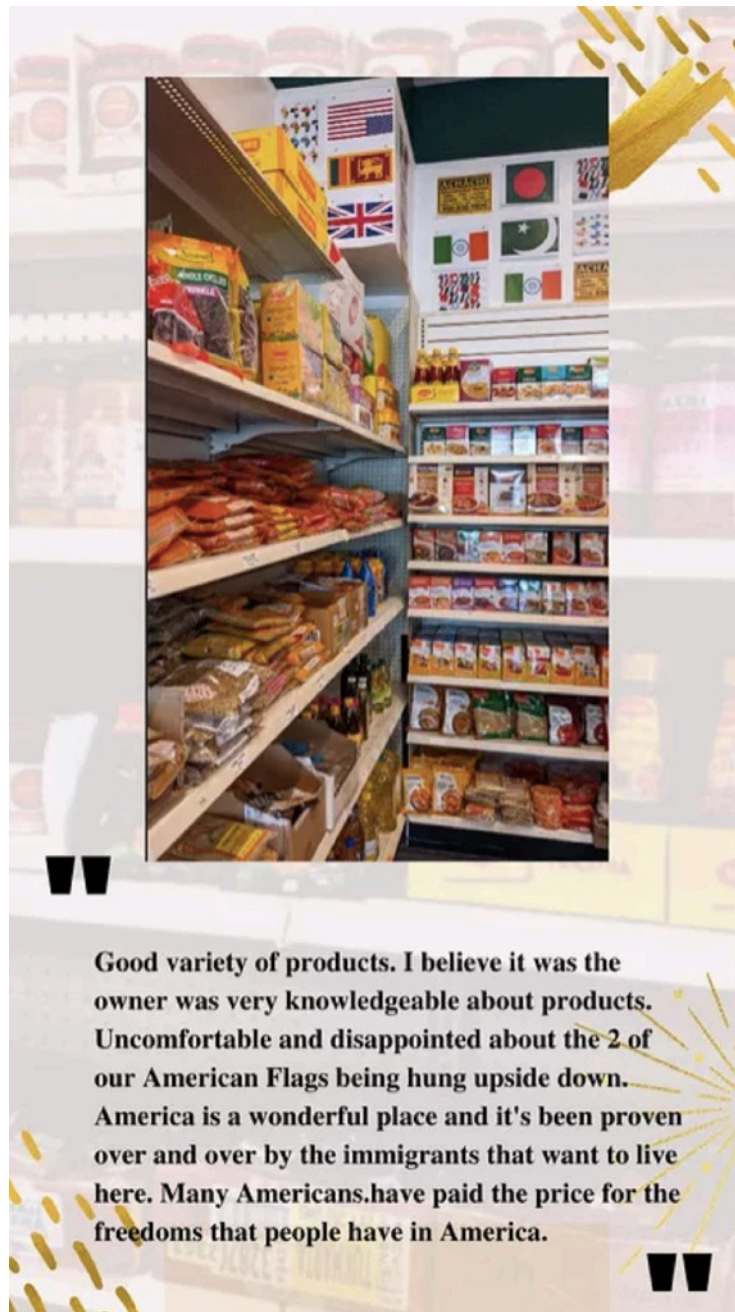


Went with a friend but all the food looked terrible but only because i hate Asian food. My buddy's wife is Asian and he likes some of the food. Wouldnt be fair for me to give 1 star so i will say it is small, location is bad but it was clean and the cashier was friendly

To analyze this specific review diffractively, I paired it with a picture from a five-star review to present a visual counter-story, while sarcastically naming the collage “I hate Asian food” from an In-Vivo code. When analyzing the written reviews and user-uploaded pictures of Achachi International Market, I noticed another review that posed a binary that signified a self-other alienation that ostracized immigrants from American society and culture.

## Figure 2

### *Uncomfortable and Disappointed*



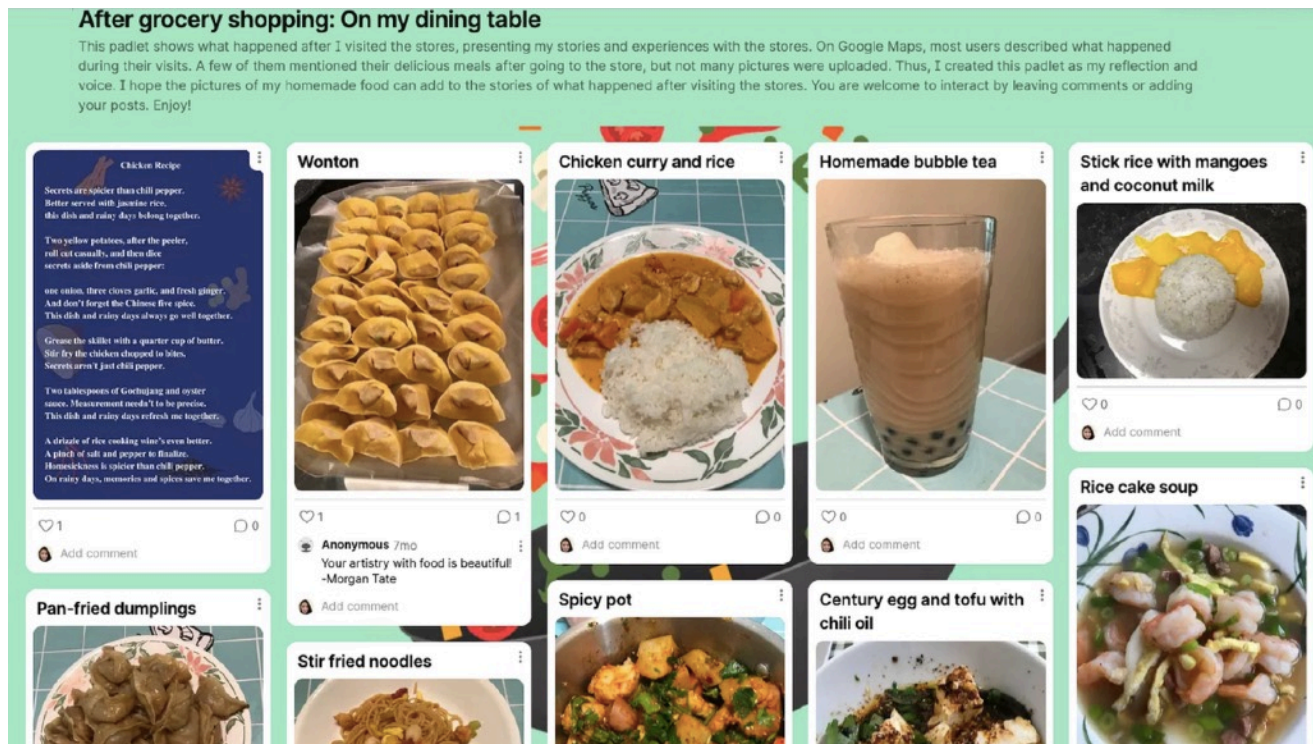
In the review, the customer condemned the two American flags that were hung upside down on the wall among other flags, and deemed this as disrespecting American values. The efforts of diversity seemed to be overlooked as the reviewer hyper-focused on the dyad between Americanness and otherness that the store embodied. When thinking about how Asian/Asian Americans were fraught with the *model minority* and *forever foreigner* tension, I paired the review and another picture of the store's interior, to show that the store had flags from different countries as decorations, demonstrating the store's, or the owner's, appreciation of diversity.

Through making collages, I constantly traveled between the views as an insider of the local Asian community, specifically the Chinese community, and an outsider of the local community; however, these insider-outsider positions developed in simultaneous and contradicting ways. For example, the reviews discussed above constantly reminded me of my outsider identity as an international student—an immigrant, whose racial, cultural, linguistic, and culinary identity was marginalized in this Deep South, White-dominant college town. These differences also made me a bilingual and bicultural researcher, however, a member of the university community who had the academic training and power to disrupt the problematic hegemonies that kept imposing binaries and boundaries. Thinking diffractively through collages allowed me to understand differences that exist in the physical and virtual spaces where the study took place, and how what the differences could do (Haraway, 1997). The linguistic, cultural, and racial differences are “a dynamism integral to spacetime-mattering” (Barad, 2014, p. 169). The communities and boundaries/dichotomies are not absolute separations, but rather together-apart (one move) in an ongoing (re)configuration to mutually (re)negotiate boundaries, inclusion, and community membership.

### ***Cooking and Creative Writing***

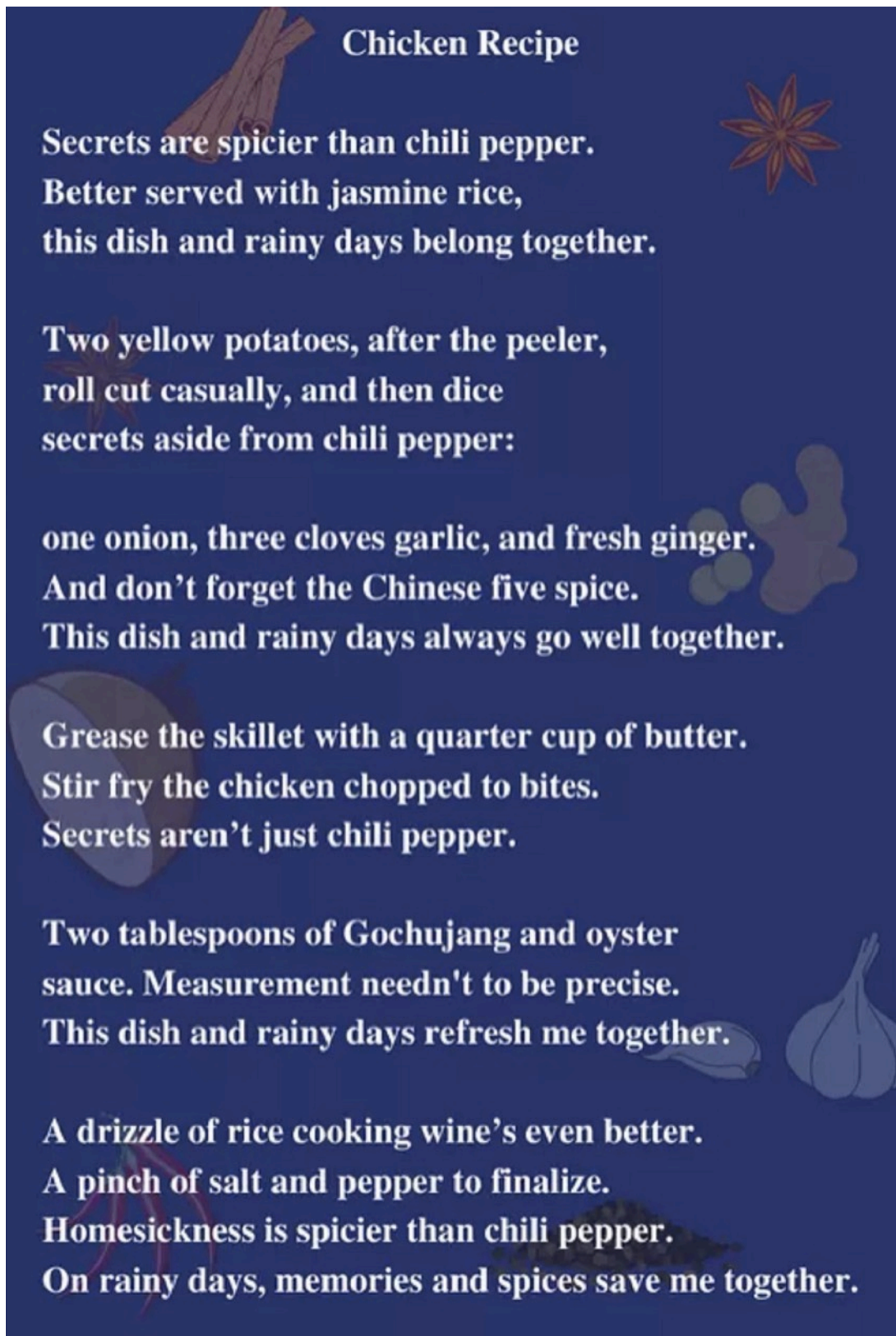
During the project, I also visited the stores more frequently, not only for analysis but also for my survival as the project made me crave food more than usual—an entanglement of human and nonhuman materiality in a researcher's daily life. I noticed that the reviews and pictures rarely shared what the products could be(come) as a material-discursive mutual re-turning, survival, and entanglement (Barad, 2017). Therefore, I started compiling pictures of my homemade Asian dishes cooked from ingredients that were purchased from the stores. To the local Asian/Asian American communities, these stores are the pivotal connections between our home countries and cultures, especially on ethnic holidays and when homesickness hits.

**Figure 3**  
*After Grocery Shopping: On My Dining Table*



One day, after I visited Orient Mart and cooked a dish following my family’s recipe, I wrote the recipe in a *villanelle poem* (see Figure 4), a highly structured poem format. In a villanelle, “the first and third lines of the opening tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the succeeding stanzas; then in the final stanza, the refrain serves as the poem’s two concluding lines” (Academy of American Poets, n.d.). In the first five tercets, I recorded the ingredients used for this chicken recipe and steps to cook this dish. In the last quatrain, I reflected upon the profound cultural and personal meaning this dish brought to me. Writing in this poetic structure enables poetic and onto-epistemological re-turning to diffractively think about the ways that the nonhuman ingredients (materiality) and the human I (subjectivity) intra-act and entangle in the daily transnational home-making (being/doing) and researching (knowing). In the diffractively reflexive processes of shopping, cooking, and writing, I bridged my bicultural and bilingual backgrounds and the sensory intra-action of being. This process further connected me with culture and food, as well as my roles as a researcher, community member, and artist. The complexity of the roles is deeply embedded in my daily entanglement with different locations and spaces. New materialist thought makes a fresh argument for the co-implication of humans with non-human matter and further challenges “the apparent indifference of qualitative research to the ways human thinking-doing affects what will matter in the world” (Davies, 2018, p. 114).

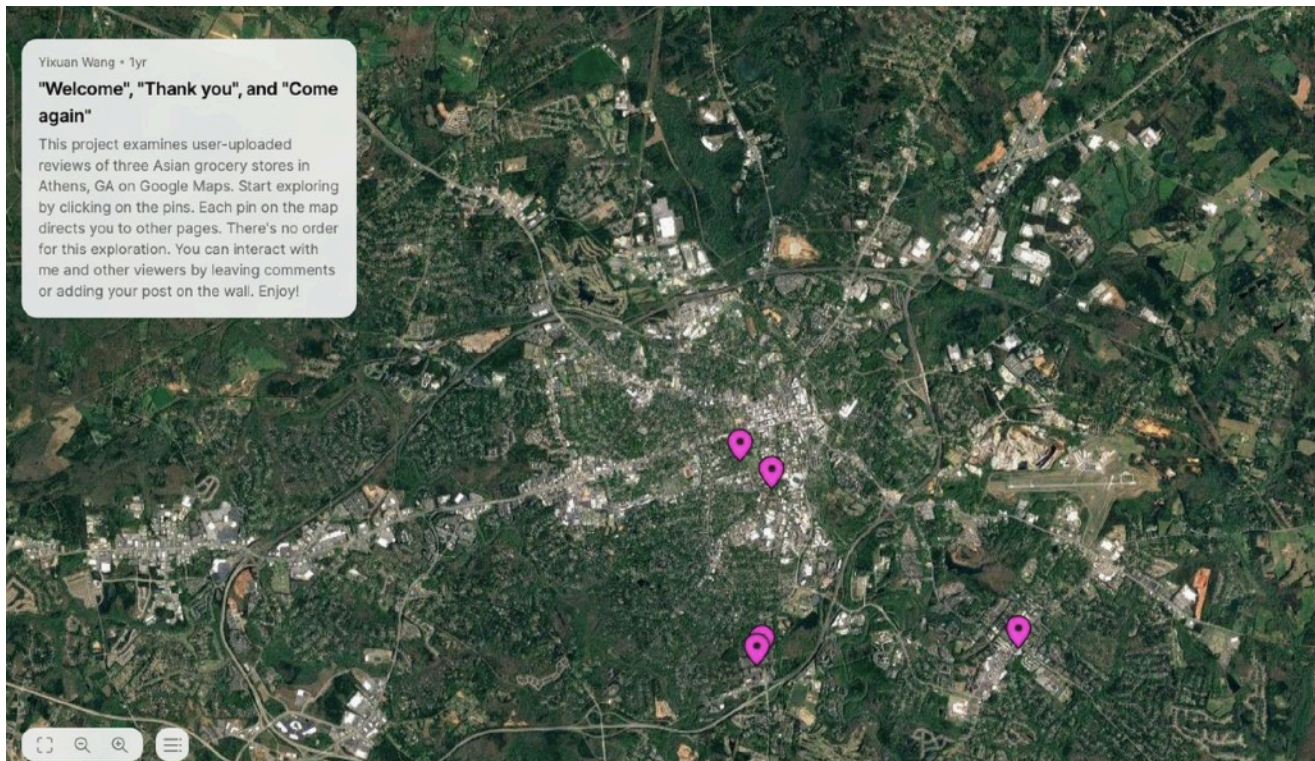
**Figure 4**  
*Chicken Recipe*



## Mapping

When preparing to present this project at the end of the course, I aimed to (re-)present the project in a diffractive manner as diffraction and reflexivity foregrounded the analysis. This goal indicated that the (re)-presentation should move away from replicating sameness, and instead, facilitate “a way of knowing the world, *a world that does not exist yet*” (Richardson, 2017, p. 95). To accomplish this goal, I used the digital tool, padlet, which allows users to upload, organize, and share multimodal content to virtual bulletin boards. The analysis and artifacts of each store were organized under separate padlet pages. Then, I created a page that links all stores’ padlets on a satellite map of the city, Athens, Georgia, as a starting page with pins linked to stores/findings. Viewers can click on any pin to start viewing the project and to continue by self-guided exploration. Each viewer will have a different experience with the project since there is no specific order to the presentation. (Re)presenting analysis in this way follows Barad’s (2007) conceptualization of diffraction, which is making difference and making difference in intra-actions to matter in an onto-epistemological be(com)ing-together.

**Figure 5**  
*The Project*



This map visualizes a geographical entanglement of the three stores, the university, and my apartment. Meanwhile, the map also displays how my experiences, roles, and identity might fluidly shift and (re)shape when I go to different spaces in the city, or when other individuals go to different spaces in town. Creating this map is conducting and inviting reflexivity diffractively, focusing on how the entanglement of my roles, research sites, and daily life come together with viewers' explorations. Reflexive diffraction emphasizes that "we are not mere observers of a fixed world (including ourselves), but that our practices of knowing are part of the world's becoming" (Undurraga, 2021, p. 2).

## Maureen's Examples

Similar to Yixuan, in the examples that follow from my (Maureen's) work, I use artmaking practices in addition to more traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis. Each of the two examples are derived from my dissertation research, which explored how college students navigate the space/place of campus, and the role that the sociohistorical context of race has in student navigations of place (Flint, 2019). As a White woman from the North, researching and studying at an institution in the Southern United States, I continually thought about the ways that my identities intersected and entangled with those of my research participants and how they came to matter in my research. In my work, artful methods became a way for me to think within these tensions and contradictions, to engage diffractively with my identity and the layered discourses of place and space. Two of the artful methods I highlight here are the creation of visual memos during data generation and the composition of audio compositions during data analysis. As I will explore in the following sections, each of these artmaking practices made possible different considerations of my relationship to my research, and different dissolvings of the boundaries between self/other; researcher/researched.

Visual journals build from artistic practices of sketching and journaling, and reflexive qualitative research methods of memoing and field notes (Clark/Keefe, 2014; Guyotte et al., 2015). In my study, following each focus group or interview, I would sit down and listen to the audio of the encounter again, pulling out art supplies, colored pencils, and a small travel watercolor set, along with my jottings or notes. I would listen and pay attention to words and stuck moments, using visual memos as a way to think through patterns and areas of stuckness after each interaction. I continued this practice as I began transcribing, and later again, in moments where I found myself stuck in the analysis. One example of this is the memo below (Figure 6), completed after an interview with a student, Leo (all student names are pseudonyms). Leo was at the time a senior in a physical science program, preparing to apply for medical school. Throughout his interview, he questioned his relationship with the university, and the role of the institution in remembering, memorializing, and forgetting histories of racism, White supremacy, and chattel slavery. The visual memo made while re-

listening to the audio of this interview maps back to some of his questions: who do we memorialize? What is the lingering impact? I also thought about my own co-implication in this as a White woman. In the visual memo, the imagery, columns, and pediments echo the architecture of the campus, edifices which perpetuates the discourses and histories of the antebellum period, of White supremacy (Flint, 2021a). Collaging with them, I consider my own co-implication in the questions Leo asks, what do we memorialize? At the same time, they are fractured and off balance, tipping off the page. Cutting and pasting these as I listened to Leo's narratives, I too am fractured and off-balance, questioning what I know, what my role is, how I know. In the image, a mass at the center of the image overlaps and envelopes the columns, visually echoing these questions.

**Figure 6**

*Visual Memo created after Leo's interview*



Throughout my inquiry, making these visual memos, alongside jottings and journal entries, offered an experimental space to play in the differences and nuances of campus narratives. Barad (2003) writes that diffractive reading produces and enacts boundaries which, “always entails constructive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability” (p. 122). Simultaneously, as I cut and pasted and drew and listened, these visual memos became a space to think about my accountability to my participants. My thoughts zigzagged between time and space, memories of being a campus housing administrator, serving as a hearing officer for student conduct infractions, one on one meetings and staff meetings with student staff. Complicated moments, of subversion, disruption, and co-implication in the histories of the institution in my enactment of campus policies. These memories continued to circulate in other memos. For example, the memo below (Figure 7) was completed after a focus group conducted with four students: Annaliese, a Black woman in her senior year, Annie, a Hispanic woman in her first year, and Vivian and Mary, both White women in their first year of college.

The memo depicts a fragmented elephant (the mascot for the university) superimposed over a window on the left-hand side of the page where the landscape is turned upside down. The elephant disappears off the page, and chain-like tendrils wrap around its body parts, anchoring it, floating. In the memo following this focus group, I had written about a moment where Mary had said “I don’t see color,” shortly after Annaliese had shared a story of a time when she had experienced racism on campus. At that moment, following Mary’s sharing, the embodied reactions of other group members were visceral—Vivian, snapping her head up to look at me, Annaliese leaning heavily back in her chair.

### Figure 7

*Visual Memo created after focus group with Annaliese, Annie, Vivian, and Mary*



Making the visual memo, I again reflected on the relationship between the institution and memory, and, listening back to the audio, on my own co-implication with that moment. At the time, I was going through an extensive training program to become a facilitator of intergroup dialogue. In this role, I was learning how to name and lean into complicated moments, moments of tension. And yet, in this moment, in this focus group, I stayed silent. Barad (2009) wrote about responsibility that it is “a matter of the ability to respond . . . an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self” (p. 69). In another research memo, I had written, “*Why didn’t you say something? You should have said something. You could have said something.*” As I doodled chains around the legs of the elephant, I wondered about the institution, locked in the status quo, but also myself, as a researcher, as a White person not intervening at that moment. Through visual memos and collage, both methods which facilitate sensemaking and bring ideas into conversation with one another, I considered the complications and contradictions in my research and the ways in which my identities mattered in multiple ways (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; de Rijke, 2024; Freeman, 2020; Lahman et al., 2020).

Through their multimodal capacity, the visual memos began to intersect and connect different parts of the data and questions I was asking for my project—and importantly, brought to light the entangled and reciprocal relationship with research. Artful methods allowed me a space to think in these contradictions, not to solve them, but to linger in their ethico-onto-epistemological matterings. In the following section, I explore the process of creating audio compositions as engaging with a similar process of layering and juxtaposition.

### ***Audio Compositions***

As I started to write through the findings for my dissertation, I began to feel a tension between the messiness and complicatedness of my data, and the desire to tell a neat and linear story. I felt the pull to categorize bodies, moments, and encounters into a representational regime, prioritizing analysis and interpretation. I printed out full transcripts, color coding and highlighting and scribbling notes on the side “finding/remembering,” or “contradictions.” I pulled out narratives and segments from those scribbled notes, titling them in a bold font, such as, “LIKE EVERYBODY KNOWS” and “DOES SHE THINK I’M A RACIST?” These titles began to fall under broad categories, and I cut them out, making piles of paper strips across the floor. I tried to write through these categories, but I was unsatisfied with the result, a flat telling of place and space. My data squirmed on the page, narrative segments saying multiple things, contradicting one another, jumping and sparking between categories. I wondered if there might be another way through analysis, a different entry point that aligned theoretically and conceptually, that embraced the messiness and contradictions and simultaneity rather than trying to smooth it over. I was particularly struck with the

resonances of the audio—how the sound capture of the narratives conveyed the pauses, hesitations, sarcasm, excitement, and wonder from the student voices. Sound methodologies have been used as a way to disrupt the linearity of text or visual-based mediums of representation by artists and researchers (Gershon, 2013).

Inspired by these artists and researchers, I first turned to the paper strips of narratives and themes that I had been attempting to write through. I brought these strips of paper to a research team meeting with a group of undergraduate students who had been working with me on the project, and invited them to compose and order the narratives<sup>2</sup>. In doing this, we thought less about how the narratives segments were similar or different than the other, and instead tuned into how they were in conversation, how they layered and complicated one another. After this meeting, I then used an open-source audio editing software, Audacity, to create audio clips with the same titles. Then, I turned to another open-source software, Reaper, to bring the audio clips together<sup>3</sup>. Guided by the conversation with my research team, I layered and overlapped narratives, playing with duotone, volume, and silence: moving voices from one ear to another, from louder to quieter. Throughout this process, considering how I edited, made cuts, and placed stories next to one another, I considered questions of truth and my role as a researcher. I again contemplated the moment with Annaliese in the focus group, this time through leaving in the long moment of silence that came after Vivan's comment. Barad (2017) writes that "diffraction as methodology is a matter of reading insights through rather than against each other to make evident the always-already entanglement of specific ideas in their materiality" (p. 64). In leaving in this silence, the sound continues to entangle me as a researcher and my co-implication in the research process at the same time as it snakes a tendril of responsibility to the listener. In that silence, the listener of the audio is also invited to consider their role in that moment, sitting uncomfortably in the silence, considering whether to intervene, to stay silent, to respond.

## Discussion

Throughout this project, we have used our separate artful engagements to engage in a diffractive reflexivity about questions of power and agency in our work. We have considered how we are becoming qualitative researchers together, but also apart through this dialogue about our separate and shared artful work. As Barad (2013) writes, entanglements with matter make possible "a felt sense of difference, of intra-activity, of agential separability—differentiations that cut together/apart" (p. 19). These cuttings together/apart invoke and provoke considerations of ethics, of power and knowledge.

In what follows, we braid our examples together to offer a discussion of what artmaking offers in consideration of reflexivity. From our examples above, we contend that

artmaking makes possible thinking about the process of doing research as material-discursive and response-able together-apart, an integrated practice rather than separate components. We learned from one another through the process of sharing and discussing our work, “thinking together anew across differences of historical position and of kinds of knowledge and expertise” (Haraway, 2016, p. 7). We emphasize here that the point of thinking reflexivity diffractively with artmaking is not the product of the art but the process. Taking up artmaking as a practice of diffractive reflexivity, knowledge production is not about the output but about the process and experimentation, the play, what becomes possible. How we have presented our work in this article echoes how we engaged in the process of thinking about diffraction and reflexivity. We met and shared about our individual research projects, our artmaking practices, and wondered together what these practices did differently. Through this process, we found several threads that we continually returned to throughout our discussions across our individual projects. These included (a) an extension of the body of literature on diffractive analysis to include artful diffractive thinking and analyses; (b) how artmaking attunes us to the ongoing relations of power in research; and (c) how artmaking moves our consideration of reflexivity from reflection to diffraction.

Academic knowledge production oftentimes prioritizes writing. The process of making and entangling with art can express what is not able to be expressed in words, making possible layered diffractive knowings that exceed the written word (Hickey-Moody, 2017, p. 1092). Each time we re-turn to these visual and sonic compilations, we find other ways of turning them over, and/or intra-act differently. We have different responses, and thus become response-able differently. Artmaking creates a bridge, a thread that invites ongoing reflexivity/diffraction, meaning, or possibilities that orient toward openness and response-ability rather than closure. When making art as part of our research, both of us found that we began to think more expansively about our inquiries instead of thinking about data analysis, representation, and analysis as separate steps. These steps can be done at different times, locations, and spaces, and are all one process in research. Barad (2014) emphasizes the concept of *spacetime mattering*, indicating that there is no absolute cut of separate time/space/matter, but rather, each of these components move together and apart simultaneously. Actions such as shopping, cooking, and collaging are examples of doing research differently and intra-actively. This concept's implication for qualitative research is that even though researchers might go through different stages of research (e.g., data collection, analysis, representation, and reflexivity), these stages are not separate from each other with artmaking threaded throughout. To call something “analysis” is to make a cut. To think analysis reflexively, analysis and research are always together/apart from togetherness throughout the whole research. For example, the Google reviews in Yixuan's analysis are not only located in-a-time-since-past but are also present as the researcher makes connections with her experience when she shops at these stores and when potential customers consult these reviews. Reflexivity and artmaking in the together/apart togetherness are the tie that binds, the thread that weaves through the research to orient

researchers to possibilities and connections made possible by entangling with the material diversity and immanent encounters.

A second consideration of thinking artmaking and the process of reflexivity with Barad (2007) and Haraway (1997) is how it attunes us as researchers to the ongoing relations of power. As Indigenous and feminist scholars have noted, all research is fraught with relations of power (e.g. Childers et al., 2013; Cisneros, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2014). More specifically, formal research has a long history of extraction, exploitation, and violence that tracks back to the very roots of traditional qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017). Considering one's reflexivity is often offered as a marker of trustworthiness or goodness in qualitative research because the process of considering the self in relation to others necessarily takes up questions of power (Shelton 2024). We offer that artmaking practices, through new materialist theories, attunes us to the relations of power, not as a static force that exists "out there" to be managed, but instead as an ongoing and dynamic flow moves in multiple directions throughout the research process. These power dynamics intra-act within and from the entanglement and immanent encounters. Who is privileged or marginalized in research is not a static mode of being but is multidirectional and ongoing. The creative and experimental forms of artmaking create space to take up the multiple possibilities of power to move beyond the anthropocentric "self-as-entity, of self as existing separate from other selves" (Davies, 2014, p. 739). In her writing, Barad (2007) draws on Niels Bohr's two-slit experiment. A simple read of the waves moving through the openings might view them as distinct and separate, but a close observation begins to draw out how the waves are entangled and constantly intra-acting. For example, in Yixuan's research, making art creates a space to talk back to and create a conversation with the Google reviews, centering the food and products found in the stores and their profound power in human survival. Yet this talking back is not unidirectional, it zigzags in multiple directions and invites consideration of power at multiple spacetime scales. Likewise, Maureen's audio compilation was a space for her to explore the multiple power relations zigzagging through the narratives of students' encounters with race on campus and, at the same time, it invites the listener to consider their own co-implication in those processes of racialization. This is particularly notable in the instance of silence in the audio compilation. In the moment of silence, there are multiple and simultaneous flows of power—from Maureen, the researcher, from the student who made the comment that caused the silence, to the students who do not respond, as well as to the listener. Through artmaking, the multiplicitous flows of power become tangible and visceral in new ways.

A third consideration is that artmaking moves our reflexive practices beyond simply a process of reflection since reflection can only reproduce what is, or what was, as Barad (2007) and Haraway note. Reflection is only sufficient for recreating the image that, already located in a mirror, is from a time since past (Barad, 2007). Thinking reflexivity diffractively attunes us to differences within and from differences, moving toward an ongoing consideration of how we are entangled with/in our research processes. Along this line of

thinking, reflexive diffraction implies that there is no clear cut between the not-reflected past and the reflected-present or future (Barad, 2014). There is no clear cut between past/present/future—they are already all at once. For instance, Yixuan’s homesickness, transnational experiences and practices, and analysis happen simultaneously, in the processes of analyzing Google reviews, writing poems, and mapping. Similarly, the revealing of White supremacy and its silences are also unveiled at the same time in Maureen’s visual memos and audio compositions. Artmaking connects the personal, local, and historical, past, present, and future together, blurring any boundaries and boundary-making that might seem to take place (Gullion, 2018). Artmaking asks qualitative researchers to consider the self within the study, not from a view above or outside, but to become-with the matters in studies.

As we have explored, making art as a part of research is not simply about the result or aesthetics of the product, it is also about what these different forms of thinking/making/doing make possible. Thus, one does not have to be an expert in drawing or painting to explore the possibilities of art in research. Diffractive reflexivity through artmaking encourages researchers to “pay greater attention to research as an emergent enactment of materially embodied socio-political practices, and to the cuts, boundaries, and differences we co-constitutively produce through knowledge enactment” (Taylor, 2016, p. 203). We urge readers to play, create, experiment, and see what artmaking might make possible in their own thinking and work toward intra-actions with the world.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. A note on institutional ethics: Maureen's work, which drew on interviews and focus groups with human participants, was approved through an institutional ethics board (IRB) (#17-OR-281). Yixuan's project relies on publicly available data and thus was not required to go through IRB approval. We note that to think-with ethics as defined through IRB protocols is just a starting place, one entry point to doing ethical research. To think with feminist critical materialist philosophers is to necessarily take up an ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007) which considers how ethical questions are entangled with how we are and come to know in the world.
2. For more about this research team and their role in this process, see Flint, Shiver, & Whyte, 2022.
3. This audio can be listened to at the following link <https://www.maureenflint.com/race-place>. Additional theoretical engagements with this work and a more sustained discussion of its creation can be found in Flint (2021b).