



Possibilities of Care within Institutional Constraints: A Case Study in Black Creative Knowledge Production

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ABSTRACT Art school curriculums in institutional settings are often irrelevant to the lived experiences, pathways, and histories of Black students. In this context, in Summer 2021 and 2022, Artspace gallery manager Joshua Vettivelu stewarded a series of

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projects centring Black students, creating space for open exploration through residencies and research supported by peer mentorship. These projects mobilized a durational approach, pairing small groups of students with slightly more experienced peer mentors over an extended period, in an environment underscored with care and self-direction.

In 2021, the it's real because it happened residency and exhibit allowed participants to explore questions of self-portraiture and perception in collaboration. In 2022, The Black Creative Research Residency (BCRR) project paired a working artist, Shaya Ishaq, with three students to explore questions of optical allyship and Black resistance, culminating in the Knowable Archives, Unknowable Vessels exhibit. This exploration of optical allyship raised questions about allyship communicated through (sometimes shallow) visual signifiers, and in particular explored the works of David Drake – an enslaved potter working in the Antebellum South known for engraving his pots with poetry and his signature – and Josiah Wedgwood – a British potter who made abolitionist pendants for The Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slave Trade. This paper highlights the best practices that emerged from these residencies, such as providing both material resources and immaterial – that is to say, intellectual and relational – support through caring mentorship and relationship building. Furthermore, we explore the tension between both possibilities and limitations of radical care and Black creative practices within institutional constraints.

KEYWORDS Black feminism; peer-to-peer learning; care; pedagogy; arts-based methods

Introduction

This paper takes as its case study the work of artist and arts administrator Joshua Vettivelu in their position as manager of Artspace gallery at Toronto Metropolitan University (2020-2022) and the resistance from the institution towards their work, as well as the circumstances of their termination from the position. Serving in large part as documentation of the residency projects spearheaded by Joshua, residencies which specifically made spaces for Black creative practices and mentorship, in this article we highlight their best working practices while also registering the untenable institutional anti-Blackness and optical allyship that preceded, surrounded, and followed these exceptional projects.

To explore such possibilities of care within the constraints of the institution, we document institutional limitations to the radical programming implemented by Joshua, including their challenges in their position while reckoning with the institution, and we detail the circumstances and consequences of their termination. Next, we outline best practices of repair that emerged through the residencies, focusing on Joshua's insistence on providing participants with the time, space, and pay necessary for the work, as well as on the reworlding and relational aspects of the programming, which centred Black students and fostered conditions for mentorship and learning that participants had not experienced elsewhere in their education. Finally, we highlight the lasting

outcomes of the residencies, which go beyond typically siloed structures of institutional learning, and instead have extended into participants' creative, academic, and personal lives. Joshua and participants in the residencies all demonstrate that radical work *is* done within institutional frameworks, though their experiences illustrate that this work occurs *in spite of* institutional imperatives and is only sustained through the excessive care labour of those most precariously situated and under-supported. As such, these residencies offer exemplary practices that function against what Sara Ahmed (2012) discusses as the institutionalization of diversity or the rhetoric or appearance of engaging with diversity at a palatable surface level, without deeper engagement in anti-racist change.

As the authors, we are the participating artists and curators in these projects, as well as a professor and research assistant who supported the grant writing process to fund some summer research assistant positions. Our goal here is to centre the voices and experiences of participating artists and curators, highlighting reflections and comments on the experiences in these residencies, in some cases verbatim. After the conclusion of the residencies, Miranda conducted exit interviews with participants, and excerpts from these interviews appear in this article. Methodologically, we resist a particularly established disciplinarity and instead work to thematize and contextualize first-hand experiences. By centring Black experience especially as inseparable from a given "method" as such, we strive for what Katherine McKittrick (2021) calls "black methodology and method-making (which are academic and extra-academic)," in an attempt to "offer rebellious and disobedient and promising ways of undoing discipline" (p. 41); that is, disciplines and systems which have been and continue to be rampantly anti-Black. Additionally, our aim is to identify and document the value of the working practices and the work produced through these residencies, given their scarcity within institutional contexts. In dialogue with this special issue's focus on *reckoning*, *repairing*, and *reworlding*, we foreground care as intentionality towards *reckoning* with institutional contexts that can be limiting, isolating, and constraining; *repairing* through developing working conditions of improved time, space, and pay; and *reworlding* through relationality and ethos of friendship.

Framing Care

Our understanding of care acknowledges the theoretical and practical tensions of this type of work, which, when taken by demand, is representative of a violent extraction of unpaid (often racialized and gendered) labour – yet, when care is attentively and generously given, it becomes the basis for making worlds otherwise. Within widespread systems built upon, and productive of, white supremacy and violent anti-Blackness, the very concept of "care" is replete with contradictory effects and intentions. Care, in this context, can be extracted, divided, demanded, and devalued; it can be instrumentalized *or* vital

to survival, detrimentally depleting *or* necessarily hopeful, relational, and reciprocal. Disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepnza-Samarasinha (2018) identifies the invisible labour of care work and the systemic social divides in who is expected to perform this invisible care labour, writing that “the thing about being a working-class or poor and/or disabled and/or parenting and/or Black, Indigenous or brown femme is that people are going to ask you to do stuff for them. Oh, are they ever” (p. 136). While care work is often divided and asked of people from these communities, Lakshmi Piepnza-Samarasinha writes “I don’t think that only femme or feminine people offer care labor, or can. I know femmes who suck at this stuff. And I know many masculine and other-gendered people who do care labor, and I want all genders of people to be receiving and providing that labor in our communities” (p. 136). These comments highlight the constrained yet necessary and transformative potentials and impacts of care labour.

Black scholars who are working through the ongoing institutional and socio-cultural legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, such as Saidiya Hartman and Christina Sharpe, also speak to the possibility and limitation of something like care given these histories and formations. Hartman (2016) offers extensive insights into the labour of Black women, as she asserts that the care provided by Black women is both “coerced and freely given” and is “the black heart of our social poesis, of making and relation” (p. 171). Similarly, Sharpe (2023) asserts that care is “complicated, misused,” because “it is often mobilized to enact violence, not assuage it” (p. 333). However, she writes, “I cannot surrender it. I want acts and accounts of care as shared and distributed risk, as mass refusals of the unbearable life, as total rejections of the dead future” (p. 333). Though the depth and complexity of these scholars’ works warrant a deeper engagement, for the purposes of our work here, we are making reference to these brief points on care as a backdrop for better understanding how care, in all its multifaceted limitations and possibilities for making worlds otherwise, always carries with it these legacies of extractive anti-Black violence as well as an immense capacity for survival. While acknowledging the limitations of care, we also draw on Aisha Finch’s (2022) framework of care as relational and abolitionist, a “deliberate and purposeful creation of collective well-being” in opposition to an overarching climate of anti-Blackness (p. 2). Care, in this case, is a “Black feminist practice that seeks to live freer, feel deeper, and dream higher” (p. 2). For our purposes, such conceptions of care are central to the work done by Joshua and the residency participants – albeit with acknowledgement that this work is always at risk of being commandeered by the overarching system. In the Black Creative Research Residency (BCRR), participants explored Joy James’s concept of *captive maternals* (2016), a term which identifies “a function, not an identity,” of those upon whom the world’s order and function rely in their “service, caretaking, sacrifice, and resistance to dishonor and disposability” (James, 2023); Simone Leigh’s concept of the *loophole of retreat* (2022), which exposes the geo-spatial constraints characteristic of a world in the afterlife of

racial slavery; and Saidiya Hartman's concept of *critical fabulation* (2008), a method for imagining otherwise through the gaps left by the violence of archival practices.

Context of Residency Programming

Joshua Vettivelu was hired as manager of the Artspace gallery at Toronto Metropolitan University from 2020-2022. During their work, Joshua supported two residency programs for students, *it's real because it happened* and *The Black Creative Research Residency* (BCRR). Artspace is a gallery rented by TMU, located at 401 Richmond St. W. in Toronto, a building that contains hundreds of artist studios, galleries, and arts and culture office and meeting spaces. Supported in part by the Black and Indigenous Student fund at TMU under Joshua's stewardship, the programs provided Black students with unique opportunities within the university by focusing on peer-to-peer mentorship, rigorous research-based creation, technical support, funding, and an exhibition space. *it's real because it happened* was curated by Christina Oyawale and featured the work of student Deion Squires and recent alumni Ajeuro Abala (see Figures 1-3). The BCRR was led by artist Shaya Ishaq with students Daysha Loppie, Nala Haileselassie, and Carianne Shakes (see Figures 4-7). Both projects were initiated by Joshua with the goal of enriching Black academic life on campus and centring Black thought, which was reflected not only in content but in the practices implemented by Joshua. These residencies were carried through with an intentional ethic of care and transparency, running counter to the structures within which they were operating.

it's real because it happened was a year-long collaboration between curator/artist Christina Oyawale, visual artist Deion Squires, and photographer Ajeuro Abala. The residency was funded in part by the 2020 BIPOC Artist Fund Fundraiser, an initiative started in 2019 and continued by Joshua with the specific intention of supporting the project. The work itself was a site-specific installation, created in the space provided by Artspace and inspired by Frank Ocean's *Endless* and Irving Penn's portraits (*it's real because it happened*, 2021). For Christina, it was important to respond to "a serious lack of diversity" encountered within the institution, both in terms of mentorship opportunities and the curriculum itself. To have a showcase and exhibit specifically for Black students in the program that focused on topics relevant to them rather than an imposed narrative of diaspora, or Blackness being located elsewhere, was also important to the curatorial process. Reflecting on his experience in this residency, Ajeuro comments that a focus on process rather than outcome allowed participants to work through their ideas by "looking for answers to questions that we ourselves hadn't had answers for."

The BCRR was initiated by Joshua in collaboration with artist Shaya Ishaq. The concept for this creative research residency stemmed from Shaya's preliminary research on speculative links between David Drake, an enslaved

potter working in the Antebellum South known for engraving his pots with poetry and his signature “at a time when his literacy was illegal,” and Josiah Wedgwood, a British potter who made abolitionist pendants for The Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slave Trade (*Knowable Archives*, 2022). These abolitionist pendants are an early example of trendy items being worn by white people to visually signify (limited) commitments to anti-racist efforts – in other words, optical allyship, or allyship communicated through (sometimes shallow) visual signifiers, amounting to virtue signaling rather than sustained commitments to anti-racist work. A primary goal of the BCRR residency was to involve three Black TMU students in a research-creation opportunity to further explore these connections, along with material histories of Black knowledge and creation and concepts of optical allyship. Reflecting on the BCRR project, Shaya comments, “What would it mean for us to lead a project at this intellectual caliber at a time like this, where institutions are supposedly trying to make space and create opportunities for Black, Indigenous, radicalized students on campus?” Shaya speaks to continued institutional barriers for Black, Indigenous, and racialized students when opportunities that are presented can be shallow, not supported, or not sustained. It is worth noting that these residency positions were all paid opportunities – a vital piece to Joshua’s ethos of labour valuation.

BCRR participants Nala, Daysha, and Carianne expressed interest in the project not only because of the unique opportunity to work with other Black creatives within the university, but also because of the focus on meaningful engagement with Black knowledge creation in tension with the concept of optical allyship, as well as the opportunity to combine rigorous research with creative process supported by the mentorship offered by Shaya. In reflective interviews about their experiences, participants highlight the importance of working with Black feminist scholarship and artistic practice – an opportunity not encountered elsewhere in their coursework at the university. Both residencies work with notions of agency and self-determination, and the BCRR had a particular emphasis on the works of Saidiya Hartman, Simone Leigh, and Joy James. Both residency programs gave participants space to work through concepts with rigor and at their own pace, while having access to mentorship and financial support. In doing so, they demonstrate strategies for opening radical possibilities of relational care, self-determination, and self-development within universities, while at the same time confronting challenges that come with working within institutional constraints.

Working practices of both residencies centred the experience of participants: materially, in the form of providing adequate time, space, and compensation for their work without the traditional expectations of output imposed by institutional structures; relationally, by providing collaborative, caring, mentorship-based support systems that have continued beyond the timeframe of the projects; and intellectually, by centring Black radical thought and self-directed learning. These practices provided an expansive learning opportunity that went beyond typical university experiences.

Reckoning with the Institution

Artist and arts administrator Joshua was hired part-time as the gallery manager of TMU Artspace gallery after the height of the BLM protests in 2020 and was suddenly terminated from this position in 2022. Their hiring came after calls from marginalized students demanded structural changes to the university that would combat rampant anti-Blackness. This call, along with others, was highlighted in the *Anti-Black Racism Campus Climate Review Report* (2020), released by the university in July 2020. The report also highlighted Black students' experiences of "anti-Black racism on campus, in their classrooms and elsewhere. From lack of representation, to experiencing hostility, to a sense of not belonging to the larger [TMU] community, Black students articulated an experience that requires redress" (2020, p. 8). In their role as gallery manager, Joshua was expected to oversee the training and management of the five student roles at the space: the fundraising coordinator, exhibitions coordinator, video coordinator, communications coordinator, and installation coordinator. They were also expected to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the gallery. They comment, "what the expectations of my job were, told to me after I came in, was because the gallery was in a precarious position, I had to find a way to activate the physical space..." Using funding from TMU, they oversaw the creation of new video programming that supported the voices of BIPOC artists and arts workers, including *The Conversation Series*. Episodes discussed topics including "neoliberal representation politics, working within institutions, self-doubt, [and] censorship" (*The Conversation Series*, 2021). Joshua comments, "I got a lot of 'you are allowed to do whatever you want with the space' like constantly when I was asking for feedback and direction." Being left without feedback and direction created a dynamic where expectations from the institution were not communicated to Joshua and the gallery. What was not clear to Joshua upon being hired was that the gallery was in a precarious position, and that funding could be cut at any moment. Along with managing this constant threat, Joshua also took on the unpaid labour of caring for students, or, as they put it, "therapy for students" under the pressure of working within the institution, as Joshua was a supportive presence within this context. Joshua comments that if they knew that the gallery was in a state of being defunded at any moment, they would have thought twice about taking the position.

While leading *it's real because it happened* and the BCRR from 2020-2022, tensions between the university and the gallery began to arise. Joshua was prevented from submitting student work into the prestigious Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. While working with resident artist Shaya Ishaq and the three student research assistants in summer 2021, Joshua's position was terminated. Joshua comments, "[TMU] asked me to give a full update on the gallery, then at the end of that, [they] decided to let me know that my position itself was being terminated due to a lack of being able to rationalize it..." The sudden termination was a shock to participating artists,

who were in the middle of the production period, and indicated a lack of support for the Black artists at the gallery. To Joshua, this decision also reflected the intentions of the institution:

In a lot of ways, this position was set up to end in the way that it did, in the way that I feel they just planned to let someone diverse in to do some diverse programming, then they were going to make a fiscal decision... their tactic was to wait out the kind of racial pressure that was being applied to [TMU] at the time.

The research assistant (RA) sent an email to the university leadership expressing the issues with Joshua's termination. She wrote:

Joshua has nurtured and supported our ideas, allowing us to dream and imagine largely for this work. Since enrolling in [TMU] as a marginalized Black femme student, this has been the first time that I have felt supported in my creativity and art practice... This project, which follows abolition politics and the work of enslaved potter David Drake, requires care and dedication, and a thorough understanding of the politics and ethics around Black authorship, representation and the relationship of this work to the institution. It cannot simply "be taken" up by the next manager of the gallery space. The University often publishes statements reiterating its dedication to supporting its Black students. Deferring Joshua's termination date until at least the end of our Black creative research project is a tangible action that would demonstrate the University's commitment to actually supporting Black students. This is an important way to support the research and art practices of Black students, which I understand has become a priority post 2020 Black political uprisings.

After this student intervention, Joshua's position at Artspace was then extended until the end of the BCRR. Reflecting on Joshua's termination, participant Carianne comments:

It was reflective of a more extractive kind of process. In terms of Joshua's commitment and time to the project, I feel like it was almost invaluable, and what Joshua had brought to Artspace and to the institution and to the university was just awesome. I don't think that the treatment of Joshua was reflective of all the work that they had put in in terms of just advocating for us, and also advocating for a more inclusive and less rigid and easier process for creative output and research ... I think that when you're working on a project like this on something that is going to enhance, make the university look better, it's really important to treat the people who are laying the groundwork for this stuff with care and respect, and I don't feel like Joshua was treated in that way. At that time coming off of 2020, and all the Black Lives Matter protests, there was an effort on behalf of the school to prioritize kinds of projects that did that stuff. It looked really good for the university to be providing the space to do this project, but it wasn't in a way where it was sustainable, like letting Joshua go halfway through the project is kind of ridiculous to me. That had a strong hold for me, and just left a pretty bad taste in my mouth in terms of the institution.

Joshua's termination is a reminder that institutional decisions are rooted in optics rather than the desire to make tangible change. The BCRR centred a conceptual exploration of optical allyship, highlighting the 18th century example of Josiah Wedgwood's abolitionist pendants for white people, and these dynamics of optical allyship continue to play out in 21st century institutional contexts. Joshua's termination has implications for TMU and the position of Black students within it. Not only does it set the precedent that enriching Black studies and research is not an ongoing priority, it also furthers the dangerous paradigm that measures the value of Blackness on the socio-political climate of the moment. Joshua's termination by the university exemplifies the way in which the institution views staff who are marginalized. *Knowable Archives, Unknowable Vessels*, the culminating exhibition of the BCRR, was well received and highly visited by artists and students across the city. Toronto critic Huda Hassan (2022) reviewed the show in the Chinatown Issue of *C Magazine*, writing that the show "offers us a further reflection, not only on the politics of clay and ceramics, but also on the ongoing transgressions expressed through unthinkable forms of craft" (p. 75). This not only demonstrates the importance of Black knowledge production to these students but to those who engage with these works as well. As of now, Artspace TMU gallery will remain in its space at 401 Richmond St. W., as the university has renewed the lease. Leadership of the gallery was assumed by a TMU faculty member after Joshua's termination, which has shifted the output and structure of the gallery. The temporality of a progress narrative so often imposed in institutional communications, in this case, is undermined by the fraught short-term employment of Joshua, whose diversity and care work is at once undervalued and overly required and represented (on diversity work, see Ahmed, 2012).

Repairing: Working Practices

Time, Space, Pace, and Pay

Both Artspace residencies were organized to tend to supportive material conditions for meaningful artistic exploration, namely time, space, pace, and pay. Artists in these summer residencies appreciated the closed space and opportunities to work with other Black students, along with having Joshua in a supportive behind-the-scenes role, bringing ease to the artists to work on their projects through supportive administrative work. Both residencies used a durational approach, starting in the Winter semester, and culminating in a Fall exhibit of the art works produced. Many participants commented on the value of this extended work period, and contrasted the time and pace of the Artspace residencies with the demanding expectations of an undergraduate course in a semester, which does not leave time for reflection. This durational approach also meant there was extended time for artists and mentors to get to know one

another, and relationship building itself was prioritized over fixed or set goals of material output. For Nala, the project's lack of expectation “takes off a lot of the pressure,” in comparison to the fast-paced demands encountered in coursework and the expectations of a traditional academic calendar.

Winter 2021 and 2022 were disrupted periods due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and both residencies began with online video meetings and conversations, enabling participants to discuss goals and develop rapport. Participants commented on the value of relational work, which can be extended as a form of *care work* – that is, the work of creating community and supportive conditions for flourishing (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). For example, Christina comments, “in peer-to-peer collaboration, you get to know each other better.” Ajeuro also comments, “as much as we were getting together to work on our ideas, we were getting together to work on our relationships with each other.” In this set up, there was a focus on process and freedom to explore, and the longer duration of the residencies enabled this exploration. Christina states that there was “space to try, fail, and keep working at things we are interested in.”

This expansive space for artistic expression also meant not being boxed in or limited by preconceived notions of Black identity, as the residencies had an intentional focus on Black agency rather than reproducing and perpetuating notions of Black suffering or demanding particular labours of care often faced by Black students. This focus on agency formed a central node of the BCR in particular, with explorations of the work of David Drake, an enslaved potter who inscribed his name on his work, which would have been an illegal act. Care was taken to not reinscribe the material conditions of forced labour when examining Drake’s work, and to consider what it means to bring this work into a contemporary context. With their administrative work, Joshua aimed to foster a space of agency for Black students through a focus on countering their limited opportunities to connect and collaborate within university structures. Participating artists commented on appreciating the intentional spaces within the Artspace residencies to explore creative work and Black intellectual traditions alongside other Black students. Carianne comments:

It should just be kind of something that I could expect as a student in terms of just wanting to explore my interest as a Black student, and wanting to work with other Black students. But I don't think that that is something that exists within the university, or existed when I was doing my undergrad.

Extending the ongoing care required to counteract legacies of forced labour, Joshua comments on the importance of compensating artists for their work, which is lacking within the university context where there is often the expectation of labouring for free. They highlight the administrative decision, when faced with limited financial resources, to opt to use funds to hire fewer people to pay them better (rather than attempting to stretch scarce funds across larger numbers). Joshua’s stewardship set the tone for the work and was acknowledged by participating artists as impactful. Carianne notes Joshua’s

work “advocating on our behalf in terms of fair compensation, and ensuring that we weren’t having to pay for materials and stuff which I feel like is oftentimes overlooked when working on research projects, or the creative projects, especially in the capacity of the institution,” and in doing so Joshua “ensur[ed] that we had the full ability to just work on our project, and also just get to know each other and interact... Joshua’s contribution to the project was really important.”

Collaboration, Mentorship, and Learning

Attention to supportive material conditions set up the framework and support systems that enhanced opportunities to collaborate and develop lasting bonds and relationships. Deion comments that it was “significant” that he and Ajeuro hadn’t met prior to the Artspace residencies, as they were some of the only Black students in the same, small department, just a few years apart. At the same time, Deion comments: “Black people are not a monolith and I don’t want to be a pebble in that giant stone wall of Black art,” highlighting the contradictions faced by Black students within the institution, as they are navigating between being pigeonholed by their identity yet lacking adequate structures in which to explore interests pertaining to the particularity of Black subjectivity in its expanse. The residency provided the space to explore together beyond constraints imposed by institutional mandates and frameworks. Ajeuro comments on the “freedom” of the set-up of the Artspace residency, enabling “photographing moments of our lives as we are living through them as ways to understand what is going on,” allowing them to “create for the sake of creating” with the driving question of “where I am trying to go?” instead of “this is what I am trying to create” – demonstrating the centrality of agency at the core of the working process.

Daysha comments:

Working with other Black women in this capacity has been really affirming for me, whether we are just sitting and chit chatting about our day, some of the things we’ve gone through that are specific to our experience, that has been really healing and wholesome for me. Being able to bounce ideas back and forth with people working in similar ways with research and creativity.

She notes that she was motivated by, and in admiration of, the capacities of her fellow participants. Significantly, Daysha speaks to the kinship experienced with Black women in the residency, which “cuts back on some of the emotional labour that we might have to do in other contexts and in doing that, we are able to invest more energy into the actual work itself which is so beautiful.” Daysha’s comments highlight the affirmation of working alongside other Black students with similar interests and projects. This setting enabled the reduction of some of the constraints on care – the emotional labour required by Black students when dealing with contexts that centre and prioritize whiteness

– and contributed to the ease that working with other Black women brings to artistic and intellectual exploration. In her book *Yearnings: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990), bell hooks outlines the concept of homeplace as the “construction of a safe place where Black people could affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist domination” (p. 42). hooks invokes spaces of care and comfort that enable some relief from dominant, discriminatory norms. While the Arspace carved out this kind of space within the university, the broader dominant cultures of these institutions often do not enable these types of affirmation.

Carianne also comments on a feeling of comfort and ease from the inception of the working relationships in the BCRR project, stating:

It felt like a very safe space, definitely affirming, and also liberating to explore the topics we are exploring within the context of being Black women in the university. There wasn't really that time of building trust with each other. I went in feeling very comfortable and safe and asking questions, wanting to explore the areas of the project that I was interested in.

She notes that “in other contexts, you almost [have to] justify what you are doing before you go on to do it,” and that the “bond before we even began working on the project in depth” helped foster this sense of security. Shaya also speaks to the “affirming process” of the BCRR, as going through university,

You can feel like the only [Black person] or there's just a handful of you. For us to have a chance to work together in this way is a testament to how much nuance we can unearth when we have the space to vulnerably and trustfully and respectfully ask these questions. Empathic ways of doing research that can be heavy. Every meeting, there is also some kind of check in. We don't always dive right into, like ‘Saidiya Hartman said this’ [laughs]. No, [we start with] ‘how is everyone doing? What BS did the university do to you this week?’ Holding the fact that we are doing this in the context of the university, but how can we have some care practices around it, for ourselves, even if it's just how we approach the subject matter.

These residencies also developed opportunities for mentorship, feedback, and growth for the participating artists. For example, Carianne comments on receiving feedback on her work in progress from Joshua and Shaya, which encouraged her to develop a greater focus on the *captive maternals* part of text on the medallion art piece she developed (see Figure 7), which reads, “Black liberation necessitates the freedom of our captive maternals.” *Captive maternals* are, for James (2016), “those feminized into caretaking and consumption” (p. 255) and those who “provid[e] reproductive and productive labor to stabilize culture and wealth” (p. 256). Carianne was encouraged by Joshua and Shaya to centralize the term in her work calling for Black liberation. Within the context of an institution which has inevitably reproduced exploitative practices towards *captive maternals*, receiving support and validation from mentors empowers students to lean into complexity and

contradiction inherent in the pursuit of radical work within constraining institutions.

Furthermore, Shaya's focus on mindfully paced work has had an influence on participants. This emphasis on slowness can be seen as a mode of care and resistance in line with anti-racism efforts within academic institutions that prioritize rapid pace at the expense of care and process (Banda, 2022). Slowness here also functions in line with the anti-oppressive pedagogy proposed by Riyad A. Shahjahan – as a resistance against the “colonial nature of time” dominant in Western institutions (2015, p. 498). For Shahjahan, “slowing down is about focusing on building relationships, not about being fixed on products, but accepting and allowing for uncertainty and being at peace without knowing outcome” (2015, p. 497), which has played out in the work of the residencies. For example, Daysha comments on initially posting work-in-progress brainstorming notes about her work on the BCRR project on an Instagram account, and then having a conversation with Shaya, and learning to think “differently about the sense of urgency that I feel sometimes about getting things out to show what I'm doing. That was pivotal.” Subsequently working on a long-form piece of journalism, Daysha reflects, “that patience and dedication and discipline was influenced by my conversation with Shaya and seeing how she treats her work ... the way that she navigates social media as an artist and things like that.”

In addition to having the time and space to work through artistic concepts and build relationships, working practices were also reflexive, or as Carianne comments: “[we rooted] our work intentionally in thought and care.” According to Nala:

Filling in holes was really important with this research in particular because we were looking at archives and stories of Black potters, enslaved artisans and there was a lot missing because these are archives written by white people in power. I wanted to approach this work with care. I didn't want to approach the archive and take away from it in the same violent way. I wanted to interact with it in a way where I was attending to the stories of these people ... What does this image mean, and how can we work against it in a way that's going to be productive for the project, but also for the ideas we are thinking around abolition and liberation of Black people.

Daysha comments, in the context of gaps in historical records with regards to Black communities, “lived experience is valid. And sometimes you do need to think creatively, fill in the blanks yourself with your own knowledge, or your own intuition of things.” She comments that the project was important to get more practice doing this kind of research while “following my passion for Black culture and Black arts innovation. [It was a] validating and affirming experience because of realizing just because there is not ‘EVIDENCE’ doesn't mean it's not real and it didn't happen.”

In the BCRR, the approach to complex historical research was inspired in part by the work of Saidiya Hartman, particularly her methodology *critical*

fabulation, which Hartman (2008) describes as a way to work within and against the “limit[s] of what cannot be known” (p. 11), and as a way to “represent what we cannot” (p. 13). Especially when it comes to missing archives and histories of forced labour, Hartman emphasizes the importance of acknowledging “the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past,” while also leaning into the reality that these limitations also “animate our desire for a liberated future” (p. 13). The centrality of Black feminist radical thought to the residency works was made possible by the mentorship offered by Shaya, whose expertise provided Nala, Daysha, and Carianne with tools, frameworks, and role models that centred their own subjectivity as Black women, rather than the default, faulty standards of whiteness so often imposed upon all students within the university. With an organizing principle of care, the BCRR enacted critical fabulation within the university, creating a space of a liberated future with its affirming and enriching working practices.

These working practices of reflexivity and intentionality were further enabled by Joshua’s administrative and mentorship strategies, which set a tone of care and critical reflection. Working with care can also mean acknowledging the limits of care, foregrounding boundaries, and centring the self, especially in the context of limited institutional commitments to Black students and a lack of truly transformative change (hooks, 1994). Joshua comments on setting boundaries around accountability and availability; for example, telling artists that it is always acceptable to “tap out” if anyone is feeling over capacity, but not to “ghost” or disappear without communicating. Joshua notes the ways that participating artists took on these strategies and used them in their own working practices with others in their own projects. Joshua also comments on introducing conversations around the scope and scale of the work produced through the projects, discussing feasibility within timelines and material resources, which were limited. Overarching these conversations was the removal of the need for quantifiable output – the residencies did not mandate completion in the form of formal work or exhibit, though both residencies did produce final works on their own terms and of their own volition.

As such, part of Joshua’s administrative strategy was giving artists tools alongside modeling affirming behaviour as a mentorship and care strategy. Joshua comments, “I wanted to introduce them to the idea of mentorship-sustained conversation with each other, self-initiated research and also not needing something [to come] out of learning.” This includes conversations around how students’ labour is exploited in the university, and highlighting when something was outside of students’ job descriptions. Joshua brought an awareness that the university “will use output as a false metric to determine it is making the racial changes it needs to be making.” In other words, these limited projects that Joshua carved out within Artspace could be used as window dressing to give the appearance of anti-racist change or action, or “acting like the school solicits critique of themselves that is meaningful,” when in reality the work of anti-racism was done by Joshua in spite of, not because of, the institutional context.

Reworlding: Skill Development, Ethos, and Friendships

Both residencies enacted care materially and immaterially, reworlding the institution by fostering a radical pocket of affirmation and friendship. Though not designed to be outcome-oriented, the residencies did have lasting effects on participants' relationships and working practices, and did produce meaningful material exhibitions. On the whole, participating artists spoke to the affirming qualities of the reflexive working practices and the expansive space to explore on their own terms. Nala highlights the importance of having developed lasting friendships and ongoing collaborative relationships with her peers "even beyond the period of working" through the BCRR. Further, working with Shaya as an artist and research mentor, Nala discusses gaining caring working practices: "I learned a lot in terms of that in general, which I didn't really learn about in school. Understanding the way in which she sets boundaries, the way that she made sure we all felt comfortable, was really valuable." Nala further comments:

Working with Joshua was incredible. They were really understanding in terms of our position within the university. They made sure to protect us a lot. Uphold a sense of ethics throughout the project alongside Shaya. They really supported us in different ways and made sure that we were paid as much as they could find ways to pay us. They were really there to support the project and support the way that we wanted to do it. They didn't put hard expectations on us. They just really supported the learning space for all of us. Joshua is another lifelong connection I have from this project because they've supported me in so many ways beyond the research. They're such an incredible mentor for me.

Participating artists also describe the lasting impacts of taking these working practices forward with them. Ajeuro comments: "the freedom that it gave me, going forward I don't need to seek out the validation of the institution for my own success." Carianne highlights the importance of engaging in a creative approach to research, mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning:

Shaya and Joshua's work and working with Nala and Daysha as well, it showed me a definitely a different way of working that I'm super appreciative of, and a way of working that, I think, challenged me in a way that was really important.

The project helped Nala come to a decision:

An intentional choice now for me that the work I want to create, the audience is Black women. That that's an okay thing to have as an audience and it's really intentional and thoughtful to make that distinction and that choice. I learned that from a lot of the thinkers, but also Shaya, and Daysha, and Carianne – we realized that we all have this subjectivity and that's important to us.

Nala highlights having the time and space to develop intentionality to create for a Black women audience, but also having peer and mentor support in this

process – learning from Black women theorists, including her co-participants. The BCRR centred Black intellectual thought, which is missing within the university programs’ curriculums, while also centring learning from the intellectual engagement with one’s peers.

The residencies both culminated in final exhibitions held at Artspace: *it’s real because it happened* was shown from November 4th-December 4th, 2021, and *Knowable Archives, Unknowable Vessels* was on display September 6th - October 15, 2022. The presentation of these works demonstrates that the removal of outcome-oriented expectations does not result in reduced productivity. In fact, the high caliber of work produced by participants makes the case for a working approach that enables and empowers students to develop their own goals and desired presentation methods.

Christina, Deion, and Ajeuro explored the space itself as a site for their “iterative exhibition” which focused on “self portraiture, perception, and what counts as ‘real.’” Joshua created a physical structure, a wall, as a part of the installation, and participants used the wall both to photograph themselves within it and as a surface upon which to mount their images. The group displayed photographic works within the space alongside two photo-books which chronicle Deion and Ajeuro’s collaborative work, see Figures 1, 2, and 3 (*it’s real because it happened*, 2021).

Shaya, Nala, Carianne, and Daysha began with the exploration of David Drake and Josiah Wedgwood, in order to “think... through the material objects both left behind, the potency of them then and now and what they can teach us about our contemporary moment” (*Black Creative Research Residency*, 2022). Shaya describes the “generative potential in bringing their narratives together through a speculative lens,” echoing Daysha’s commentary regarding the care and attention required in exploring these histories via Hartman’s concept of critical fabulation. In Shaya’s words, focusing on “themes related to abolition, materiality, performative and optical allyship, ‘the algorithm of anti-racism’ as Dr. Joy James would say, and the memetic nature of Black suffering, were a starting point for us when it came to diving into this work” She emphasizes the importance of “great care for ourselves as researchers and reverence for the figures at the centre of our work,” which “takes great sensitivity and nuance,” both modeling and encouraging these methodologies central to their working practices as artists and mentors.

The importance of lasting relationships and new approaches to creative and intellectual work, as well as the exhibits themselves, are all vital outcomes to register from these residencies. Nala says that “this was something really radical that we were able to do within the university,” stating that “it was so life changing for me and I can imagine how life changing it could be for students after me.” That being said, she explains that this work “was not supported by the university and we had to fight to finish it,” emphasizing the difficult working conditions within the institution. “Working in the context of the university was really hard. It still is,” she says, noting that Black-centred

programming has not continued due to Joshua's termination from their position as Artspace manager.

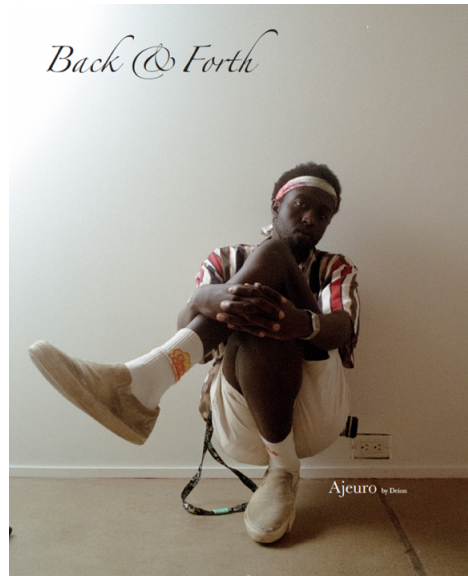


Figure 1. "Back & Forth Ajeuro" by Deion Squires.

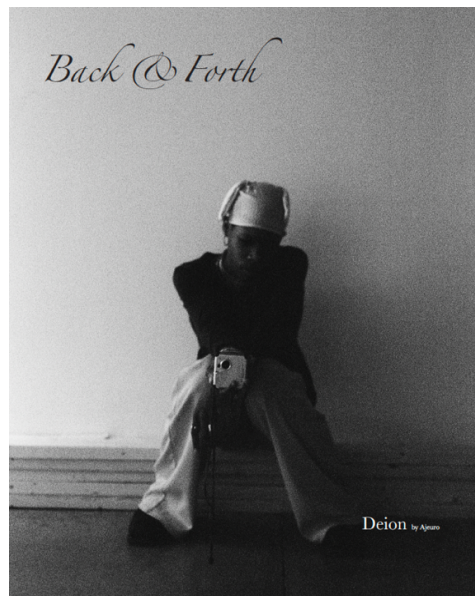


Figure 2. "Back & Forth Deion" by Ajeuro Abala.

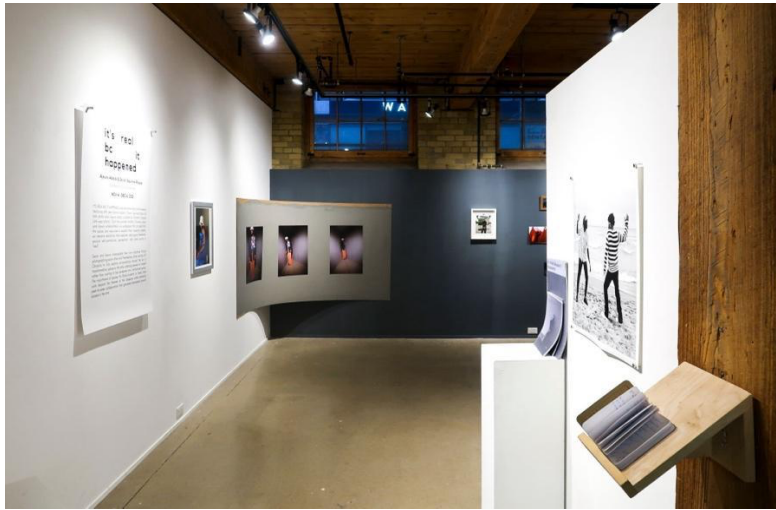


Figure 3. “it’s real because it happened” installed at Artspace Gallery at 401 Richmond W. (photo: Justyn Roque)



Figure 4. “Untitled Face Jug no. 1” by Shaya Ishaq. (photo: Justyn Roque)



Figure 5. “how does one give expression to black pain without presenting it as a spectacle” by Nala Haileselassie. (photo: Justyn Roque)



Figure 6. “a message, a tool” by Daysha Loppie. (photo: Justyn Roque)



Figure 7. Carianne Shakes, untitled. (photo: Justyn Roque)

Conclusion

These Artspace residencies illuminate ways of working with care within institutions to support and serve underrepresented students, while also exemplifying the limits and constraints therein. During the BCRR, participating artists discussed *the loophole of retreat* as a framework for radical action within a constraining environment. The term has been taken up by Simone Leigh in her work as both an art installation and conference, and is inspired by the first chapter title in Harriet Jacobs' (1861) autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. After escaping from enslavement, Jacobs lived for years inside a 9'x 7' garret in order to be near to her children yet remain hidden from capture. This insistence upon relational proximity and survival within brutal conditions informs the ongoing legacies of Black ontology. Leigh has interpreted the term as a "metaphorical refuge" that inspired her installation at the Guggenheim, which "explore[d] an ontology of Black women, centring radical agency and self-determination" (Simmons, 2019). Such an ontology is asserted in the type of work done through our residencies – one which functions as a refuge and loophole within untenable conditions of anti-Blackness.

In the Artspace residencies, the working practices, as well as the works produced by participants, make evident the significance of Black ontology, radical agency, and self-determination. The making of a space for relationship-building and rigorous creative work for Black artists within the limits of a racist institution is a loophole – of retreat, but also of resistance and self-

determination. These projects have expanded our understanding of radical learning and research, which continue to influence our practices and collaborative projects. The BCRR and *its real because it happened* have been starting points for participating artists to continue to enact radical and ethical reimaginings and reworldings of what it means to work as Black artists within institutional contexts.

In this article we have underscored the importance of providing time and material resources in the forms of space and pay, and enabling self-determination in pace as important components of fostering knowledge and skills development in artistic development. We have also highlighted the limitations and constraints of carving out these spaces within institutional contexts, and we insist upon the importance of ongoing commitments to Black students. We imagine the impact of these residencies will continue to be significant for participating artists and future collaborators. The residencies that took place at Artspace Gallery from 2020-2022 indicate that possibilities for Black creative knowledge production are limitless.

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