

I Hate Creativity

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We love creativity. Everybody loves creativity and everybody wants a “*Culture of Creativity*.” However, there is strong evidence that we do not even *like* creativity, especially under stressful conditions. Creativity thrives in conditions of uncertainty, vagueness of purpose and psychological discomfort — conditions that can be unbearable when added to the current anxieties of a shrinking academic landscape, the pandemic, let alone wicked problems like the climate crisis.

We are terrified in these traumatic circumstances, so we shrink away from creativity toward the safety of what is known, understood and proven. As a result, *Proxy Creativity* emerges — one that is tidy, easily processed and consumed. “Creative” educational tools like Design Sprints, Pithy-Themed Courses, Compelling Branding Platforms and Curated Campuses emerge because they feel safer. These tools “sell” *Proxy Creativity* to potential students, current students, faculty, as well as to those outside of art and design institutions. This is a raw deal. Creativity in its most primal, unwieldy and disruptive form is a valuable tool used in interdisciplinary teams that are addressing wicked problems. *Proxy Creativity* may be more comfortable right now, but it is a poor substitute. Are we biased against creativity?

Key Words: Creativity, Cognitive Load, Wicked Problems, Bias

1. Art and Design Colleges are Implicitly Biased against their own Institutions, People and Core Principles

In “The Bias Against Creativity”: *Why People Desire but Reject Creative Ideas*, researchers Jennifer Mueller, Jack Goncalo and Shimul Melwani used the *IAT Implicit Bias Test* to measure creative bias. If you have taken any of these bias tests, you have experienced the rapid-fire binary choices that appear on the screen, and the staccato typing of either the “E” or “I” key on the keyboard, as a response.

Instructions read, “Go as fast as you can”. The combination of the speed and binary responses encourages gut reaction and places users in a less conscious state -- a liminal state where bias lives.

2. Vomit, Spiders and Poison

In Mueller, Goncalo and Melwan’s research, participants rated their positive and negative reactions to creativity using both words for practicality (practical, functional, constructive, useful), words related to creativity (novel, creative, inventive, original), words related to good (rainbow, cake, sunshine, laughter, peace, heaven) and words related to bad (vomit, spiders, poison, rotten, agony, hell). Results showed that creative ideas and objects were most often associated with “bad” words and feelings. This issue was even more pronounced in situations where participants were exposed to emotional states with high levels of uncertainty.

As a culture, we’re deeply biased against creativity.

Considering how our brains operate, this makes sense. Humans have very limited cognitive space and bandwidth, to begin with. In order to prioritize, make decisions, and stay safe, we generalize and reduce information to fundamentals. Bias is one of the ways we do this, as it enables us to make decisions, quickly and manage our bandwidth. We are a highly risk-averse species. When we become exposed to creative people, environments or institutions, our bias is activated. When there is an opportunity to reduce it, we take it.

“The world in general disapproves of creativity.” It’s usually only after an idea has gained acceptance and recognition that we applaud the idea and its creator. - Isaac Asimov



Figure 1 Spider, Wikipedia



Figure 2 Vomiting, JE Theriot

3. Fear and Scarcity = Less Bandwidth = More Bias

- Higher Education Enrolment has been dropping every year since 2011 and it is down from 20 million in 2011 to less than 17.5 million in spring of 2021. A small increase this fall, was reported by *Forbes*, but by 2025, the pool of college applicants is predicted to decrease by between 11-15 %, leaving fewer and fewer seats filled.
- In July of 2020, global surface temperatures were the highest for that month, since global records began in 1880. As of this writing, 2,391,354,467 people are living in water scarce areas (Water Scarcity Clock <https://worldwater.>)
- 4,814,980 people have died from Corona Virus. (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>)
- A *Scarcity Mind-set* decreases bandwidth and increases attention on scarce resources. We shift to “*Going as fast as we can*” mode (as one does in the IAT Implicit Bias Test) and rely on “gut reactions.” Bias kicks in.



Figure 3 Empty Shelves During the 2020 pandemic, Ingrid Cold

Figure 4 Dry Cracked Earth, Ken Kistler

Figure 5 Empty, Deserted Classroom, PXhere

Figure 6 Lowering Birthrates, The Noun Project

4. Concealed Barriers. A New Protected Class Emerges

Surprisingly, educators prefer less creative students. While they explicitly state that they value creativity, and include it in their course goals and objectives, their “favorite” students are not creative. In fact, when Mueller, Goncalo and Melwan listed words related to creativity, educators said that they “disliked these kinds of students.” Concealed barriers like these discourage creative discussions, explorations, and place extra strain on students to put creative ideas forward. Publically, our educational institutions celebrate a creative climate on our outward facing websites, mission statements and recruitment materials, but concealed barriers are firmly in place in our teaching environments.

Closer scrutiny of grading practices, risk encouragement, cultural gatekeepers, and assessment suggest deep contradiction. Is there a new invisible “protected” class on campus that we are so close to but cannot see? Art and Design Institutions embrace the DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion) initiative. We agree that we may have age, race and gender related biases, but we can hold unconscious bias against creativity and creative individuals as well. Are we implicitly biased against our principles, our colleagues, our students and ourselves?

Creative Educators need to bear witness to this tangled and messy dynamic and become change makers, mediating between college survival, administration, and students and learning environments. In spite of the bias against creativity, or because of it, we need to use the messy, primal, unwieldy and disruptive tools of creativity to reimagine and remake art and design education into an effective and transformative tool for a world running out of time.



Figure 1 Road Closed, No Attribution

Figure 2 Ingrid Cold

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About the Author

Patricia Kovic is a Professor at Otis College of Art and Design, where she focuses on a successful interdisciplinary teaching practice through the Product Design, Artist Community and Teaching and Creative Action programs. She is lead faculty for the Creative Action course NEIGHBOR GAP BRIDGE, which embraces inclusive, community based, radical pedagogy. Ms. Kovic was awarded a Teaching Artist Residency at the Skirball Cultural Center, in conjunction with the Library of Congress exhibition "Creating the United States." She is the recipient of an Otis Curricular Innovation Grant for Blended Learning, in support of her dedication to digitally focused, future learning models.

Patricia enjoys writing about Experimental, Educational Innovation and has published and presented her ideas in a variety of venues, including AICAD (The Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design) and IDSA (Industrial Design Society of America), THE 2019 PARIS DESIGN SUMMIT and 2020 TATE TALKS at the Tate Gallery in London. Ms. Kovic lives in Los Angeles, California and is a designer at facilitybrand.com.

An Abundance of Tools: Attention and care with theory

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This paper argues for the value of sustained exploration of theoretical work and practices from diverse perspectives on the margins of dominant systems, such as radical Black and feminist thought; Indigenous research scholars; queer theorists; modernity/coloniality scholars from the Global South; and critical design practitioners speaking from situated place. Reading, engaging, and extending this work assists with recognising common ways in which we and those around us think, work, and relate to others which accommodate dominant, oppressive systems. This includes recognising ingrained white saviorism, compulsion for efficiency, linear and task-oriented collaboration and deep-seated regard for institutional recognition. Beyond recognition, there are important lessons with immediate and everyday applications in direct relationship with practice. In this paper I will briefly address the idea of theory as an active and liberatory practice and share an example from my practice of noticing theory integrated into everyday design practices. There is a need for ongoing work to address the persistent challenges of working with and embracing theory in design. Recognising one's positionality to this work reveals and mitigates hubristic biases of how 'design' might dismantle and create alternatives. This paper describes the wealth offered by critical theory from the margins, as seen from a dominant positionality, and ways of engaging critical knowledges to support and challenge design research and practice.

Theory, positioning, social practice

1. Positioning

Positioning myself in this work is an act of acknowledging the world comes to and through me in specific ways. This essay discusses the role of theory generated by the lived experiences on the margins of

dominant systems in social practice¹. How I encounter, understand and engage this theory is predicated on my relationship to systems of domination and marginalisation. I am positioned, in many ways, at the center of dominant, European culture. Theory developed through the lived experiences of those marginalised by domination does not reflect my own lived experience, but it does speak directly to and characterise the world I inhabit. Born and raised in homogeneously white, small-town America, my worldview is deeply shaped by being white and nurtured within a culture, education and politics structured around Eurocentric education, democratic ideals, Christian values, individualism and American exceptionalism. While I am a queer woman and can recognise and in some ways contest these structural norms, I have an established ease and fluency which privileges how a I move and receive recognition within dominant systems of whiteness, capitalism and coloniality/modernity. Positioning myself makes clear from where this knowledge and practice is generated. This positioning underlies the ways my worldview has been shaped, and how today I act and navigate within this research (Martin, K. and MirraBoopa 2003; Martin, B. 2017; Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-Schollum, 2019). This position is one of many which present particular approaches around what is required of decolonising through a design practice, and is part of a larger, continuous project of dedicating time to understand personal and civilizational histories, trace learning lineages, understand power and reflect on personal subjectivities and political commitments. The premise of this paper is predicated on the exploration, reflection and responding to this positionality.

2. Theory as an Active Tool

In response to Pivot's call asking what are the tools needed to create alternative, liberatory futures in design, this paper explores how theory can offer an abundance of 'tools' for situated, reflexive and sustainable practice. The Oxford English Dictionary defines theory primarily as "the conceptual basis of a subject or area of study" and further details it as something that is, "contrasted with practice" (2021, n.p.). In practice, theory is a way of giving an account. It accounts for situations, actions, relationships and ideas. It "asks about and explains the nuances of an experience and the happenings of a culture" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 229). These accounts, and the work of accounting for, "link the concrete and abstract, thinking and acting" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 229) and help to understand and support our ways of being and acting in the world. This makes theory an integral part of what it means to make sense of how we can be and act in the world. This is not in contrast to practice, but rather, is integral to how one makes sense of and supports a continuing practice. Engaged in social practices, it offers a way into working, a tool or method, that resists instrumentalization and contests cleanly packaged, neoliberal problem-solving approaches. There is an abundance of wisdoms and practices from people and communities long engaged in radical liberation projects contained in the theory their practices have produced. Theory is a tool that helps to translate and share these wisdoms and practices.

¹ Barbara Ransby, Black feminist activist and academic, in promoting the work of the Combahee River Collective speaks to the importance of, "...always ally[ing] yourself with those on the bottom, on the margins, and at the periphery of the centers of power. And in doing so, you will land yourself at the very center of some of the most important struggles of our society and our history." (Taylor, 2017, p. 183). She highlights how radical movements must work across systems of domination. Doubling down on intersectionality and highlighting our differences threatens neoliberalism. This further emphasises the role of positionality in this paper. As someone who generally exists in the center of dominant systems, the importance of recognising this, and spending *more* time and *more* resources and *more* energy listening and learning from the margins is essential. This is not done to create the 'false unity' across differences, but to work towards the extraordinary power created by solidarity.

Within creative research practices, particularly in the history of design academia, theory can feel ‘other’ to practice. In practice-led research it can be considered the opposite of design work, making ideas more abstract, rather than “making real” or “making tangible”. There is an historical lack of engagement with theory and problematic divide between theory and practice in design. As Marjanne van Helvert recently describes,

Design theory and design history are relatively young fields of research. They have only recently started to become recognized as serious academic disciplines, and there is still a large gap between the worlds of design practitioners and design theorists.... Design does not yet fully profit from theoretical foundations and critical, historical analysis. (van Helvert, 2019, p. 27).

When it comes to design operating as a social practice, it becomes more problematic to consider design as not a practice engaged in theory and history. van Halvert continues, “Because of its urgent nature, the field of socially committed design would benefit considerably from a more widespread historical awareness and more developed critical theory” (2019, p. 27). When it comes to the work of social practice and design, theory can be used as a critical and supportive tool for exploring more robust and complex practice.

There is some history of practice-based design research in which theory is something that comes in after ‘the work’ is finished, in order to validate creative work in an academic setting. This is distinct from theory being used in *relationship with*, or developed *alongside* practice. In my own practice, spending time and making space for theory has been a force of slowing down and an agent of provocation. One of the gifts I have found in theory is that it is hard. It requires time and effort to take in someone else’s account of the world, contemplate, discuss, write and make as ways of working with the material. Concepts are not clear, and often require questioning my previously held views or frames of reference. As a provocateur, it makes simple moments more complex, opening up a depth of experience. It can offer an alternative perspective on a situation, provide a place for grounding or unsettling, make legible a process or feeling that has struggled to be seen. Theory helps to notice the invisible things happening in a room and gives ‘language’ (visual, material, written, verbal) to a moment, gesture, or look. It offers guidance for how to be with others. It provides encouragement to take the time to investigate a feeling, an affinity, an affect. It discloses larger structures and systems sitting invisibly behind an idea, and how that idea came to be shared. Critically, it reveals things I cannot see on my own.

Just like any tool, theory can be wielded in myriad ways. It is not a magic cure-all which only promotes careful, thoughtful practice and reveals hidden truths. In her essay, “Theory as Liberatory Practice” bell hooks tells us, “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end....” (1991, p. 2-3). Theory can also be used in ways that entrench conventional power dynamics and exert control over others. Discussing the struggle for black liberation hooks describes,

...[S]ome elite academics...construct theories of “blackness” in ways that make it a critical terrain which only the chosen few can enter, using theoretical work on race to assert their authority over black experience, denying democratic access to the process of theory making, threaten collective black liberation struggle (hooks, 1991, p. 7).

She explains that institutional environments construct theory to keep people out—sometimes out of their very own lived experience. It creates barriers to stop people from coming together to do the work of accounting or engage on critical questions about our worlds. But she counters, to respond to this exclusivity with an anti-intellectual stance and reject theory with a position that “praises the concrete over the abstract” is just as damaging to the radical liberation project as the elitism, “[T]hose among us who react to this by promoting anti-intellectualism by declaring all theory as worthless [also] threaten

collectivite black liberation struggle” (hooks, 1991, p. 7). We need to both recognise the value and power of theory, of the work of accounting for and valuing, listening and discussing that accounting for, as part of a holistic, sustainable social practice.

Often theory is encountered through oral and written work, but it is also an active, engaged part of how one can live and practice. These accounts do not live statically in books and discussion, but as integral and necessary parts of collective action, and as part of a larger, liberatory framework, “...we must continually claim theory as necessary practice within a holistic framework of liberatory activism. ... I find [theory] to be most meaningful that which invites readers to engage in critical reflection and to engage in the practice of feminism” (hooks, 1991, p. 8). Embracing theory as a necessary and active part of social practice in design contests the neoliberal agenda behind design ‘for social innovation’ which turns social practice into another facet of capitalism. When directed towards ‘liberatory ends’ theory requires critical and slow work. Through this, it resists practice becoming instrumentalized. When concepts such as ‘decolonising’ or ‘anti-racism’ or ‘black liberation’ are wielded as practices without theory, they lose their radical and politicized teeth. They are diluted into mainstream trends and social media rhetoric. Removing theory from social practice devises ‘tools’ that people can pick up and ‘use’ constructs linear, progressive narratives. It encourages the idea that people can act as individuals rather than collectives, promoting ideas of how one can ‘get better’, and ignores the relationships and structures necessary for collective action and radical change (Michaeli, 2017).

3. Ontological Differences

To discuss the role theory plays in everyday practices, I want to highlight the work of some influential Indigenous scholars, Linda Tuhawli Smith, Karen Martin, and Aileen Morten Robertson. In their work, these scholars explain how Indigenous research paradigms and knowledge systems are ontologically and epistemologically different from the Western dominant frames of learning and research (Smith 2012, Martin and Mirraboopa 2003, Moreton-Robinson 2020). These differences are described as ‘other’, ‘unique’ and ‘alongside’ as opposed to thinking about them through ideas of connection, similarities or overlaps. This work, “eliminates the need to seek knowledge of the quality of cultural universality” (Martin and Mirraboopa 2003, p. 206) and encourages Indigenous scholarly work to seek knowledge particular to their own onto-epistemologies. In my work, I have been considering the role of Indigenous scholarship and knowledges in my own learning and practice experiences. Through the discussions on ontology and creative arts practice, I have come to understand that the conditioning I have received through Western systems of education and culture of how to learn, relate to and make sense of the world does not share a foundational medium or standard with different ontologies, or worldviews. The ways in which I make sense of the world relies on frameworks, languages and values developed and conditioned by my positioning in the world. There are certain ways of knowing and being in relation with the world that are not translatable².

² This creates conflict in multicultural idealism and notions of convergence promoted in conventional design practice, which promote the ability to come to consensus and operate in harmonious agreement. Respecting pluriversal worldviews, as increasingly promoted in design, requires letting go of an ideal that through innovative tools, empathy, or even story sharing we can create spaces in which we all can come to understandings with one another. Rather, it proposes recognising and encouraging a notion of incommensurable ways of knowing and being in the world.

In late 2020 I attended a small community of practice conversation led by Māori codesign practitioners from New Zealand. The intention of this conversation was to listen to and learn from perspectives of Māori peers through a professional learning community. In the sharing of their practice experiences these peers used language, dialog, stories and ways of relating distinctly different from my own practice. While listening, I noticed a conditioned pattern to understand this work by connecting it back to my own identity and practices. The ingrained habit uses the lens of my own background, experience and frameworks to help me make sense of new information. Even when this information is being shared as explicitly distinct from white, settler-colonial

ways of being and working. One of the ways I seek to make sense is to find similarities and create connections. As I watched the desire to translate the stories through and into my experience, I was aware of how this translation erases the clear and important differences between our contexts. The content of our life and work experiences may share similarities on a content level—building relationships, fostering belonging, maintaining work-life balance, challenging authority. However, when this content is experienced by different people or identities, and processed through a fundamentally different worldview it is not the same. Not only does it obscure and mutate the knowledge being shared, it undermines a practice of listening and learning in a diverse community.

Holding space to listen and refrain from sensemaking is uncomfortable. It is an easier path to translate, to understand, to connect and try to ‘know’. Upholding the possibility of incommensurable knowing and practice requires a paradigm shift in my own practice. In this paradigm shift, there is an allowance for the places that didn’t ‘make sense’ to become deeper and wider, rather than glossed over and dismissed. In this kind of listening the words hold more. They hold stories beyond my own horizons.

This small act of honouring a pluriverse prioritises the lived experience, words and truths of others without translation into a Western (or any other) worldview. It does not lead to outcomes or outputs. It does not become research data to analyse. It does not seek gain or profit from the practice of listening. It runs counter to the neoliberal academic inclination to extract and simplify knowledge, make it distributable, and thus productive. Here, theory, and the wisdom shared by theory, helps me to shape my engagement with others. It also serves to keep me accountable to my social and political commitments of my practice in deeper and more meaningful ways.

This is work to shift my own paradigms of how I see and create in the world. It is not to propose tools for others. Part of working to shift the paradigm has included not ‘owning’ the stories shared by others in presumption of being able to share or use as research, not prioritising my own clarity when facilitating or listening in a group, allowing for stories to be open and not translatable. It has been to not claim ‘knowing’ when I learn an unfamiliar cultural nuance, and working to keep respectful distances from intruding on others stories and languages to satisfy my own curiosity. This practice developed in a contextual and situated space and was informed and shaped by listening to the work and positioning of Indigenous scholars. It avoids creating a tool or maxim to put on a card that instructs people how to listen, and to whom, but instead asks people to recognise different ontological positions to your own, how they manifest in your life and practice, and how that affects your relationships when working with others.

4. Conclusion

Taking time to learn and understand the depth of knowledge and practice from the perspectives of those long engaged in work and theory from the peripheries is a critical part of acting. Positioning oneself in relation to theory is important to understand the value and relationship of theory to your practice. Theory is not something that must be relegated only to theorists or historians, or something

that comes after the design work. Rather it can be embraced and integrated as an active element of practice. From this, I hope people take away a commitment to actively seek out and attend to critical knowledges and practices from the periphery, and take time with theory which helps us take account of our worlds.

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Kate McEntee is a PhD candidate in WonderLab, a co-design research lab at Monash University on the traditional lands of the Bunurong people in Melbourne, Australia. My research explores how to create shifts in our relationship to larger systems of oppression, within social collaborative practice. I work with communities in industry, non-profit and academic settings. Originally I am from northern Utah, the native land of the Eastern Shoshone and Goshute peoples. Raised in a Catholic home, in homogeneously white, small-town America, my worldview is deeply shaped by being white, Christian values, a bootstrap work ethic and individualism, and American exceptionalism. Through studying Religious Studies (BA) and working in interfaith dialog, then studying Transdisciplinary Design (MFA) and working on research around race and white privilege, and nearly 20 years as a Zen Awareness practitioner, I have been increasingly exposed to the limitations and biases embedded in and through my identity and worldview. Previous to this PhD, I also worked in corporate creative consulting in San Francisco and New York, and in academic research and teaching in Australia.