

Theory-Practicing in Critical Times: Viv Bozalek in Conversation With Kathrin Thiele, Deirdre M. Donoghue, and Pinar Türer

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Kathrin Thiele¹ , Deirdre M. Donoghue¹, and Pinar Türer²

Abstract

This article is derived from a webinar series conversation titled, “Post Philosophies and the Doing of Inquiry,” co-hosted by Candace R. Kuby and Viv Bozalek. The webinar sessions ran from August 2020 to September 2021. This webinar series was made possible by a research collaborative partnership between the University of Missouri System in the United States and the University of the Western Cape (or UWC) in Cape Town, South Africa. The session with Kathrin Thiele took place in April 2021 and the following article is the transcribed conversation with Kathrin Thiele, also including contributions by Deirdre Donoghue and Pinar Türer.

Keywords

feminist studies, gender and sexuality, new methods & methodologies, methodologies, rethinking critical theory, methods of inquiry, decolonizing the academy, pedagogy

A Note From Special Issue Guest Co-Editors

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1. How does your philosophical approach influence your ways of doing inquiry?
2. What does this philosophical approach make thinkable or possible for inquiry? (so how does your approach relate to more traditional practices such as literature reviews, data collection, analysis, and so forth)
3. What are your perspectives on methodology(ies) and/or methods? How do you envision that in your approaches to doing inquiry?
4. What mechanisms could be put in place at universities to help supervisors and/or committees support students doing post-philosophy inspired ways of inquiring?

We are grateful for James Salvo’s invitation to publish the webinar in a special issue and to Erin Price who assisted with technology, logistics, and the art for the series. To learn more information about the webinar series, please locate the guest editors’ (Kuby & Bozalek) introduction to the special issue on the website for *Qualitative Inquiry*.

Each panelist in the webinar series suggested several readings to accompany their talk. To access the recorded webinars and suggested readings, please visit: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4P_GUK6QV2Wp_OAWEpw87Q. For more information about the webinar series, visit: <https://education.missouri.edu/learning-teaching-curriculum/webinars/>.

Viv Bozalek: So, Kathrin, our first question that we’ve been posing to everyone is, ‘How does your philosophical approach influence your ways of doing inquiry?’

¹Utrecht University, The Netherlands

²University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:

Kathrin Thiele, Graduate Gender Programme, Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Muntstraat 2a, 3512 EV Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Email: k.thiele@uu.nl

Kathrin Thiele: Let me start by thanking everybody here who made this webinar possible. It is really great that you are doing this in these difficult times. It is one of those rare, nice occurrences during the current Covid-19 pandemic. So, thank you for having me and I am happy to be in conversation with you again today, Viv.

Like a few others from this webinar series with whom you have spoken before, I would like to approach this first question from a biographical angle. I want to do it this way because linking philosophy to life, a way of living, is really how I see myself doing philosophy.

Philosophy is for me the matter of thinking. Thinking/philosophizing—and here I learn a lot from bell hooks’s approach to critical thinking—is a “laboratory” in which we develop a way to live our lives; “understanding how life works,” as hooks (2009) writes (p. 8). When I listened into a few of the sessions before this one, I felt resonance with Erin Manning’s answer to this first question (which is also so close to hooks): children are versatile critical thinkers, Manning says. So, trying to understand the world, which to me is philosophizing, is actually in our lives from the start; and in hooks’s (2009) words it is a deep concern that “sadly, children’s passion for thinking often ends when they encounter a world that seeks to educate them for conformity and obedience only” (p. 8). I find this extremely impactful for my own way of doing inquiry, but also for how I teach in the university, or how I translate such an approach to life and thought into a pedagogy.

This, I would say, is the guiding motto for how I see myself as someone doing philosophy. But I want to also continue from here to say that I do not actually say “I *am* a philosopher,” though my research is clearly philosophical, and also my everyday practice—my practicing (of) the world—is often best described as “philosophical.” But philosophy is for me not interesting in a propriety-sense; it is not even so interesting as a scientific discipline. Instead, what is inspiring to me about philosophy is a potential to live the world otherwise. It is “a line of flight” for my becoming, and here one sees to a certain extent my Deleuzian shaping qua “philosophizing.” Philosophy and thinking are specific tools to work through problems and to un-work naturalized and normalized habits.

I have a problem-oriented approach to the question of philosophy, or the question of thinking. And while there is some Cartesianism in what I say here because indeed thinking and being are linked up also in my account of what it means to do philosophy, this “thinking” is not the volatile *I think, therefore I am* which in my eyes is too much after categorizing and defining the world. Rather, I understand thinking as a movement of becoming, that is, an onto-epistemological endeavor. One is forced to think by what is happening around and with/in oneself. It is not the sitting down and starting to think approach to philosophizing, and that is

most important to me in this question what it means to do philosophical inquiry and what it means to say that philosophy for me is the matter of thinking.

Yet, another angle for approaching this first question is also to mention that I come to philosophy from a specific geopolitical situation. I am German, born in the 1970s. And to learn about the history of the collective inhuman(e) indifference and/as a nonthinking approach—here Hannah Arendt’s (1963) insights into what she has called the “banality of evil” were very influential to me—was extremely shocking as a young person. But it also taught me a lot from that early age on about the importance of what it means to think. A collective unwillingness and/as incapacity to think as one condition that made possible the Holocaust gave me a way to fathom why or how what happened during Nazism in Germany could happen. “Not to think,” that is, to remain indifferent to the other or what is happening around oneself, is for me at the bottom of so much violence and worldly disasters. However, “not to think” does not mean here that one does not use concepts or understandings correctly. This happens a lot, I would say, that concepts and understanding are used correctly but indeed in a rather nonthinking manner. The approach to thinking laden with heavy-weighting dimensions is maybe something to discuss later on still in more detail, but to think in the sense I use it here also as a link to how I relate to philosophy, means for me to open up and become someone else in the process of doing “it.” It means to learn to see, feel, hear differently, to sense otherwise; to open up to more than what one saw or heard at first. Thinking is not about being confirmed in oneself but rather to be transposed and transformed in a significant way.

To speak this way about philosophy as the matter of thinking is therefore a matter that comprehends thinking as a practice or an act. It is not a matter of intelligence in the quantifiable or standardized sense. It is something that rather always/already happens within us, if you will. It is a maneuvering of the world itself. And it is not even something that is reserved to humans alone. While it is certainly *specific* how humans engage in the matter of thinking (e.g., by philosophizing), a human-exceptionalist view on the matters of thinking I do not share. Thinking for me is a practicing (of) the world; it is wor(l)ding, and that is not reserved for humans alone.

In that sense also the common theory/practice split is a mystery to me, why it holds for so long. I cannot understand why one believes that theory and practice have to be approached in a separated manner; why practice is supposed to come “after” theorizing, or why theory should come “before” it is put “into practice.” Of course, I do not want to say here that both are the same. No. While thinking and theorizing to me is a practice, practice or practicing can take many different forms, so thinking is just one of them. But what I want to stress is that a practice without thought

is no practice either—here we turn to the ethicopolitical dimensions of the matter of thinking. So, there are of course differences between theory and practice, but we never get outside of their entanglement in my eyes. It is theory-practice, or think-practicing as I call it in some of my work.

By having said all of this now about the matters of thinking, I want to emphasize last that thinking is then a practice that everybody can do. It is—as I said with hooks at the beginning—engaging with life. It is also a creative practice, and to specify a bit more what I mean by this, I can link again to my personal history here. I do this also because I am often asked why I am so much into theory; it looks like as if I am very fond of abstraction, engaging with the world beyond or above the happenings of empirical reality. But actually, think-practicing as wor(l)ding comes for me very much from lived experience. For example, in my youth I was not a very good student and I also didn't fit so very well the (gendered) expectations of how to behave in school. So, in some ways it could be said that I failed the established formats which at that age assess intelligence and potential for future horizons. Yet, what saved me through this time, what kept me confident that I can do what I want to do in life, are two kinds of convictions that I experienced back then and that I still carry with me today: On one hand, this is the experience that when I grew up my mom often told us that she was not allowed to go to higher educational schooling herself when she was young, and I could see how much it hurt her as someone who would have had all the potentials to excel in education; and she always educated us with the conviction that learning and knowledge is what helps us open up the world to ourselves, what creates pleasures and possibilities to become a response-able human being. And this affirmative but mattering approach toward what it means to think-practice the world was, on the other hand, also combined with something else. I come also from a quite musical family, and when it came to music—something that is so often linked to “being gifted,” something one has or does not have “the talent for”—it indeed was very natural to me to just be good at it. Playing instruments, singing, doing this kind of creative practice as if it is the most natural thing while for others it is something “one cannot do,” counterbalanced in that time the way how I underwent school disciplinarization. During that time, I had a very good friend who different from me was a brilliant student in school, excellent in all different disciplines. But all he wished for at this age was to sing and play guitar. So far, he just could not sing or play any instrument; he had never used his voice in that way. But we started helping each other practicing together; I “trained” him in singing and he practiced with me different disciplines for schoolwork. This experience gave me an insight into how it is not really a matter of what you have or do not have, but what you practice and how you do it, that is, under what condition. As I already said, it helped me to stay confident also when I failed in terms of being a so-called “intelligent student.”

Why I bring all of this together is that to me it is important that instead of believing in thinking as a matter of “gift,” “talent” or “intelligence,” it is a practice that is to be enacted. My friend became a very good musician actually—still playing and singing—and I know for myself that our think-practicing together, a very earthly doing in and of different practices, contributed to both our choices of who we became in later life. I could recognize with him that also “knowledge” is about practice and practicing. It is a practice that has often a much more zig-zagging nature, and it requires an earthly approach to what we call thinking. This relational practice helped me, I would say, that after the disciplinarizing school experience which was not a very flourishing experience for myself, I still believed that if I wanted to engage in this world via “knowledge,” I have a capacity of practicing otherwise, with which standardized models would not help. My mom never educated us according to the grades we got. Rather, with her own experience of not being allowed to go to higher education, she emphasized how important it is to stay open, to keep the pleasure going, keep practicing the joy of gaining knowledge, and via that to become sensitive human beings with/in the worlds we inhabit. This kept growing in us also as siblings. And I believe it lives on in how I see my task as a teacher today, and how I work on the question of critical thinking (as in the prepared reading for this webinar conversation). The capacity to think critically is an opening up—a praxis of opening up rather than a mastering of something (see Thiele, 2022).

Two final things I wish to conclude the response to this question with: Why I find all of these angles important to mention for my “doing of inquiry” is about problematizing philosophy understood as a discipline. For a long time, the canon of philosophy in the disciplinary sense already stagnates, and thus, I'm very happy to be here in a conversation about post-philosophy. That framework is what matters most in what I am doing and indeed gives me a way of doing philosophical inquiry as a *material* engagement, a *transformative* process, and a *practicing* of wor(l)ding. It is important for me to help create a different image of philosophy, so that we who want to think as engaging with/in the world, can do philosophy differently.

The second issue with which I want to conclude with is on a more pedagogical level. When I speak of the matters of thinking as “doing inquiry,” it initiates a more pedagogical access to philosophy as active engagement with the world via an approach to thinking as *performative*. A think-practicing in an ethico-onto-epistemological sense, in which how we think matters always/already in how we enact the world politically, aesthetically, socially: thinking/thought matters.

I hope I am a (feminist) theory teacher who shows commitment to creating an atmosphere in the classroom in which the hurdle to engage with theories is lowered by practicing theory and thinking otherwise, where we allow ourselves to join in intimate conversations. Thinking is, as I

said before, an e/affective material engagement for me; it matters (in Haraway's sense) how we politically, aesthetically, and socially do it. It is a question of "how." Are we "doing it" in a way that reestablishes the coloniality of Being (Wynter)? Or does it strengthen decolonization? Thinking can be an inherent part of reinstitutionalizing established frameworks of racism and sexism, or it can work for opening up imaginaries and furthering social justice as a radical critical project.

Viv Bozalek: Thanks Kathrin. I just wanted to ask a couple of follow-up questions, and I hope I'm not preempting what you're going to say later. In reading your pieces, I was intrigued by your notion of transformation, so I'd like you to elaborate a little on that. And then how does thinking relate to critical thinking, and how does that relate to critique? As you know, I am very interested in critiques of critique, and I wondered how you relate to Karen Barad's critique of critique with diffraction as an alternative to critique. Erin Manning and Brian Massumi are also critical of the notion of critique.

Kathrin Thiele: Yes, maybe I start from the last point you make. I see a lot of resonances between Erin Manning's and in some sense also Brian Massumi's ways in how to understand the matter of thinking. But I also see that they are going more in the direction of affect or the more affective register: the SenseLab approach. Yet, I would say that we all share a kind of understanding of thinking that could also be named "feel-thinking," a terminology we all might link to Bracha Ettinger who uses it a lot. Feel-thinking rather than the conceptual crystal-clear definitory thinking. But, then, yes, I do connect more to the critical line than either of these two scholars in their works, and so it's very nice that you are asking about how I place myself then in those important critiques of critique.

We speak about methodology later, and then I think we can come back to this question again because it is indeed a question of methodology that is important here in my eyes. But just to say now: I am institutionally trained as a critical thinker, I even have a PhD degree in critical thinking (which is a rare thing I believe ☺). But the reasons why I am drawn to the question of critique may also have something to do with the importance of the critical theory tradition in Germany that helped to bring to the fore the foundational problems—with positivist scientism. So, I believe my connection to critique comes from the fact that I am first of all just very much brought up in that line of thinking as a thought of *resistance*, even though I also join the critiques of critique that you mention. I distinguish myself rather clearly from the traditions of ideology critique. I am here not only agreeing with Erin Manning and Brian Massumi

but in as much with Donna Haraway who is very influential to me for what I connote as critical thinking. And then also, of course, Karen Barad's transformation of critique via diffraction, as you already mentioned, Viv. Critique not as judgment or opposition, not as framed by a subject that distinguishes itself from an object, being elevated and then rejecting, but critical encounters as diffractive endeavors—the creation of interference patterns—which carry an intensity of engagement with a specific question. It is about the intensity or intimacy that I have with the subject matters I am engaged with. That is the potential of criticality, or even stronger: this is what I call criticality itself. And it is this specific potential which I still want to keep in my engaging post-philosophically with/in this world. Criticality is related to an analytical sharpness and an exposing—not exposing as in correcting mistakes, but instead exposing myself to the multilayered problematics in my doing of thinking. And here, indeed, diffraction characterizes a different form of critical engagement respectively how "we" intra-act—entangled and/as differentiated. Diffraction seems to me a much more productive and helpful way forward, diverging significantly from the traditional ping-pong of right/wrong, good/bad, high/low... All of these keep oppositions in place and you are either in this camp or in that one. I am very much convinced that whatever I engage with, I am always implicated; and implicatedness for me—and again I think this also biographically as I see myself still very much implicated also in the past that I inherit—is a dimension that I *cannot not* have. It is a political impetus or an ethical urge that also characterizes my "doing inquiry." I am therefore still convinced that we need critical thinking and that we need critique as a form also for democratic processes. It is important. But it is also important not to put myself on the outside as a critic, simply criticizing something else—over there. Rather, to implicate myself in an activating sense, that is what critical thinking is all about for me. And that is also what I connect to Barad's intra-activity and/as diffraction, as models for envisioning a different criticality: There is no outside to which I can retreat as a critical thinker. I am never outside but always/already implicated in the very doing of what I present as critical knowledges. This can lead to another version of critique, a more accountable and response-able one.

Here, I am also very much indebted to the critical thinking traditions of feminist and queer studies in which criticality is the modus of transformation, a matter of ethics and politics, to help contribute to a different vision of or to instigate some transformational steps toward a different future. But, as my chapter "After Humanism" also shows, I have to be careful as critical thinker with this constant push for transformation which cannot but also continue the underlying structure of *progress* that critical thought traditions also aim to un-work. The progressive logic has to be disrupted, and that is what I think I'll try in this new piece on "After

Humanism”—to figure out how we can think transformation but not as progress narrative because the latter is closely related to the Eurocentric (colonial and scientist) legacy of critique.

Viv Bozalek: You had a quote [in one of your suggested readings for the webinar] by Margaret Atwood where she talks about “a sequential way.” Can you explain how critique can be what you call a linear progress narrative and sequentiality, which is obviously what you’re trying to move away from?

Kathrin Thiele: Yes, I think this issue fits very much to what I also thought we would talk about in relation to the second question on “What does this philosophical approach make thinkable or possible for inquiry?” Indeed, my way of doing philosophy—engaging with thinking as a matter of wor(l)ding, and to me that also means critical thinking—is to argue that by conceiving thinking as an action, it is a reality with which we shape (our) lives. Margaret Atwood’s text is a shorter text which I found in a little book in which Atwood next to other artists wrote short speeches for the 21st century (Atwood, 2019). And this quote that I use in my chapter just stuck with me because yes—I learned this also from Octavia Butler, the Afrofuturist writer—it is very hard to make an argument or to distinguish something from something else or to develop on the level of concepts without repeating *sequentiality*, that is, the (human-centered) sequential logic which I want to argue is a limiting understanding of how the world wor(l)ds itself.

So, when we speak of transformation, as I also already said before, most of the time it is thought about in the way that there is a before and after. Transformation implies that we leave behind and we also critique what was before, plus we are now in the position to make things better. But of course, we know by now that next time it will be someone else who will argue that what we have now is not good enough and we will go on and on in sequentiality as the model for transformation.

This underlying progress narrative or sequentiality, and I am learning a lot here from especially radical Black studies, Black feminist thinking, and literary and utopian thinking, is conditioning the violence of modernity and therefore it is one of the foundations of the colonial order of being or the colonality of Being, as Sylvia Wynter would say. Sequentiality as a conditioning *temporal* register of “the World as we know it” (to also bring in Ferreira da Silva, 2016) is really one of the deepest levels on which I would like to make a contribution to how we can reshape or rewire ourselves to tell stories otherwise.

Viv Bozalek: It sounds similar to Walter Benjamin’s objection to progress narratives?

Kathrin Thiele: Yes, maybe this is also a good way to think about it. I always liked his reference to the backward looking angel (*Angelus Novus*) that also problematizes modern sequentiality according to which we believe that the past lies behind us. And, of course, also agential realism can be named here. I often try to mix or bring into conversation agential realist or critical posthuman(ist) perspectives with a decolonial thought horizon because I believe that while they are different in terms of wherefrom they speak, these lines of thinking have a resonating insight at the very heart: time—past, present and future—is precisely not sequential; past, present, and future do not follow after each other, and most of all the past remains haunting and the future is not “new,” in the sense of “innocent.” Hauntology, also as your own work shows, Viv, is a different ethico-onto-epistemological register. In Western thought traditions, we learn about this hauntedness of our here and now in theoretical approaches such as Barad’s, but then also already with Jacques Derrida. Yet, of course, other intellectual traditions, non-Western thinking from the start does not necessarily base everything on that sequential ordering of past, present, and future.

So, making transformation disruptive of the sequential order as a critical goal is what I hope to make available in my work. And while we might worry now that without sequential reasoning we won’t move much anymore with/in critical thinking—by not being after the new proposition respectively how things can be corrected—I choose to read authors that have an affective impact on me, and see how instead of trusting only the message I literally shift with them; how I turn and how I learn via them to rewire myself. And that is a learning or transformational process that criticality as practice allows, I believe. I am fond of it as an often-overlooked moment of change that I affirm.

What I also still wanted to say in view of the second question: on the more philosophical level I was always interested in ontologies, fascinated by the register of ontology, this classically conceived metaphysical foundation of philosophizing. But in this interest, I was inspired by post-structuralist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and the feminist thought traditions of Elizabeth Grosz or Rosi Braidotti and others. And before I even knew about Barad’s work, when I did my PhD I explained the problem I have with the classical understanding of ontology to me with what I now see as a transformational equation: “ontology = ethics” (Thiele, 2008). In bringing ontology and ethics in close proximity in my argument, I try to think “world” not as a given but as a question of “how it is done”—wor(l)ding—and I emphasize that it matters *how* “we” do it. To me, Deleuzian becoming in this sense is always linked to questions of responsibility and coexistence, and thinking with and alongside becoming was already back then a way for

me to disrupt the classical disciplinary ordering in philosophy. Namely that ontology, epistemology, and ethics cannot be severed from each other (to now say it in a more Baradian way), even if of course one can focus on specific dimensions in one's philosophical (and otherwise) projects. But, ultimately, they always come together. It is this knotted and knotting approach, the knotting of which Haraway (2016) also speaks when she writes that "it matters which knots knot knots" (p. 12), which I consider important when asking what is possible in or with such a philosophical approach that understands itself as a more active or praxiological approach to thinking. Keeping the critical in it, yes; that is, standing up for that wager of trying to make a difference. But then it is up to the readers or my conversation partners to see how it affects or infects them.

Viv Bozalek: And I would add that you always do bring the political into it, on top of those other three things.

Kathrin Thiele: Yes, for me ethics is not the question of morality. I'm also not a real ethics scholar in the disciplinary philosophical sense as I already said. To me, ethics is important as an attitude—again practice and praxis—in the sense of *ethos*. Such approach sees ethics always/already connected to the political. I hope I have shown this in my words up to here as well. But this also transforms then how we conceive of ontology. In my view it matters that ontologies are not just about "what we are," it's not the definition of B/being outside of "how we live," to say it broadly. Every ontology is always already "historical" in this sense. The "I" lives intra-actively, and that means also that the "logic" with which we try to understand—ontology—is not beyond history or the social. Fanon's (2008) "alongside phylogeny and ontogeny, there is also sociogeny" (and Wynter's reading of it) are enlightening in this regard (p. xiv). Very important for the demand to decolonize, ontology is not beyond (or outside) the violence that created "the World, as we know it." Rather, it is foundational to it.

Viv Bozalek: Can we move on to the methodologies and how the philosophies influence how you make sense of methodologies?

Kathrin Thiele: Great, yes. The reason why I turn to diffraction is for me the diffractive approach to critique or criticality. And I start here with Haraway's notion of diffraction, which works in view of "another kind of critical consciousness," as she said already in 1997 when she coined diffraction as a more appropriate optical thinking tool (Haraway, 1997, p. 273). From there, Barad takes up diffraction as well, and in their quantum scholarship I also always read diffraction as a lens or tool that still keeps the critical potential, this transformative potential I would argue. Barad's deep engagement with diffraction, according to my reading, is not just about

telling us in the Humanities now something about quantum physics. It is really about how we actually can learn to understand a little more. How we can become more attuned... And thus, what these approaches tell me very much is that it is not only a question about *what* we think, but again *how* we do it, the how to and from where is central.

Of course, in this regard I have also learned a lot from other feminists or critical traditions and in terms of the critical knowledge production I am attached to, it is also the reason why or how we came up with this network called *Terra Critica* (TC). TC is not so much a network that merely tries to keep critique alive. Rather, it is about how to transform and reconfigure critique for the 21st century within a planetary (non-innocent) condition where we know that we are always/already implicated and entangled; and how does that affect also what we mean by critical knowledges and their methodological frameworks. So, it is all about the "how to": how do we envision this reconfiguration, which practices to choose, which texts to read, and whom do we try to bring in conversation with each other? Do we disrupt canonical knowledge with/in our practices? All of that signals a methodological understanding of critique, and, therefore, while I am very much a Humanities-trained scholar and thus for a longer time might have been a bit more hesitant to talk about methodologies so decisively, by now it is rather clear to me that my approach both to what I call philosophizing and critical thinking is interested *methodologically*. It is the question of how that gives meaning to why I am doing critique or critical thinking. It is not about that I am right about something, or that I could find the mistake in someone else's argument. So, the "how to" is important and that is also what I hope for—maybe Deirdre and Pinar later on can speak a bit about that—in my teaching and in my collaborations with students in the university: to create a place in which we can learn to have such conversations; to become surprised by each other and to take the time to be in touch with each other. We also wrote an article together on this—Pinar and I, together with Magda Górska, a colleague in the Graduate Gender Programme here at UU (the second preparatory reading for today's webinar)—on "Relation(al) Matters," in which we inquire into this question of "slowing down" and the need of "careful(l)-ness" which a methodological approach to think-practices and theorizing requires (see Thiele et al., 2020). You cannot just jump ahead in such intimate classroom discussions. You need to take the time so that things flourish on a different, a more intimate but also more vulnerable level. But also, as a researcher, I think, I am kind of drawn to material in which I lose myself; when I am not fully in charge of what I know and I have to learn to find ways to get through that experience. So, very often, as you know, I am drawn to what could be called "difficult" texts or authors. Authors who have created a lot of

conceptual in(ter)ventions. Take for example Bracha Ettinger's theoretical work.

Bracha Ettinger, together with Karen Barad and also Sylvia Wynter are central authors for me in my work on relationality, and certainly all of them have a lot of their own vocabulary which they introduce to their readers. But precisely the density and specificity of their manners of thinking gives me the opportunity to slow down and to practice their thought rather than merely understand it. So, it is again the question how to approach their works, only then it does something, then they affect me. And this methodological focus leads me to a pedagogy that aims in today's neoliberalized universities to still ensure the time that it takes to learn. Thinking as a practice needs to be practiced and trained so that one learns to find out what kind of questions one really wants to ask—questions of a transformative kind at best—instead of merely using concepts to repeat the established sameness.

Viv Bozalek: I did have some questions about that, but I'm going to keep them because I'm very conscious of Deirdre and Pinar and I would really like to involve them at this point with it before I ask you the final question because I see time is ticking by. So, I'd like to now invite the three of you into conversation about the last question, which is about your relationships and experiences in pedagogy, in higher education, and postgraduate studies. It would seem that you were doing quite different sorts of studies with art and dance—how was that for you? Please feel free to come in with anything at this stage, we'd love to hear your voices.

Deirdre Donoghue: Thank you. So much to respond to. It is difficult to decide where to jump in! Maybe first I will just give a little bit of context to my practice and to how I came to be in the university in the first place, doing a PhD. A lot of it is thanks to Kathrin, as well as of course many other people in my life. Similarly, to Kathrin, I am a child of the Seventies. Although, I was not born in Germany but in Finland to a Finnish mother who was a teacher and who ran Second Wave Feminist awareness groups from our living room, and an Irish, linguist father from whom I learned at a very early age that to speak is not the same as to communicate. This early experience has something to do with the ways that I have come to thinking as a practice. As well as the fact that children in Finland don't start school until 7 years of age and that effectively Finland is like one big forest, so for the first 7 years of my life I was just playing in the woods, doing sort of self-directed inquiry.

I think it is also important to acknowledge how the order in which we encounter things affects how we learn and process things. For example, although I work as a visual and

performance artist my first training was in theater, and I think this is really crucial for the way that I think about *relationality* and *thinking* and *being* and *doing with*. I did theater, performing and directing, and lots and lots of improvisation, which really teaches one to pay attention to the others who play with you, including the space around you, and also the audience. This then teaches creative collaboration and improvisation, activities which are really based on listening, on responding to the others and contributing. Saying "Yes, and..." instead of "No, but." Something similar came up in one of the conversations before with Aaron Kuntz as well... In theater you are always serving your partner. You always say "Yes, and..." You make your contribution in order for all of you to move "forward." Plus it is not only about this interrelational, human-to-human play; it also includes the environment, the space around you, the audience. In theater, you learn to pay attention to all of those things, and I think this experience and training has been crucial for me as a starting point going into visual arts, which has a completely different background. Theater is very much an affirmative approach to creating and generating research, and to playing and inquiring. From here, I was more formally introduced to critical thinking and cultural studies when studying photography and visual studies. Coincidentally, at the same time I was also a young single mother, so my days were filled with my undergraduate studies and caring for and observing this little child unfolding in front of me. And at this point the texts, the Western canon that I was being introduced to... I would be sort of reading it over here (gesturing with hands on one side of body), and then over here (gesturing with hands on the other side of body), would be my child unfolding and living and changing together with me. This is when I realized that there is a discrepancy between how the human, maternal experience is being described, theorized, and reproduced by the texts that I was given to read, and my own experience as a mother and a human being moving in and with the world. This was another formative moment in my development as a thinker I would say because I really began understanding the importance of having a practice alongside one's purely theoretical thinking. Of course, thinking is also a practice. I understand thinking very much in the way Kathrin spoke about thinking as a practice earlier on. However, there is a difference between having a separate or, rather, an accompanying material practice alongside one's theoretical thinking practice. There is a difference, yet they always go hand-in-hand and inform each other. From here, I did my master's degree in Fine Art, art making now becoming another way to practice thinking with, and from here I entered into my PhD trajectory. I very much want to acknowledge Kathrin at this point because with a background like mine, which is not a classical academic education, I have been very lucky to work with Kathrin who has recognized that "hmmh ... there still might be something there to work with."

One of the many points where our thinking with Kathrin and Pinar converges is the notion of care as practice. And I would also say relationality as practice. And now to bring all of this back to my experience as a PhD student, what I want to emphasize in this context is that care takes time. Practices take time. So, and this is a question to Kathrin, as well as for all the others who have been in the academy for longer than my five seconds, “How can we practice care, or inquiry, or *care-full* inquiry, if we don’t have the resource of time?” If we don’t have time to really live and breathe with our questions as situated and embodied beings. And I mean this in a really mundane way, like sleeping with our questions—napping was mentioned a few episodes ago—gardening with our questions, having a walk with our questions. Really giving our questions time to marinate in the world together with us. How could we give more time to *care-fulness* within the academy? What kind of interventions can you imagine, or have you employed? How do you do it?

Finally, I also want to somehow come back to the issue of environment because for me often what is most interesting when people do inquiry is not so much what they are interested in, but how they ask the question, and how they go about answering the question. Here care for the space in which the inquiry takes place is important because relations exist in space, and the spaces and environments in which we do inquiry affect the kinds of relations that we then make within our practice/s. It is like a feedback loop. In my different practices as an artist, mother, performer, doula, scholar, the spatial conditions in which I do what I do are always very important for me because different kinds of environments and different kinds of spaces offer different kinds of stimulus, and as such they are a part of the embodied process of doing inquiry. Offering different kinds of interruptions, different stimuli, they affect us sensorially, even biochemically. So, the spatial conditions and care for that space in which one does inquiry become important. If that makes sense? As someone coming from outside of the academy into the university to do my doctoral research, these issues of time, care, and space have been things that I have come to think about. I have felt a little bit like an alien observing: “okay, so this is the space in which I am expected to do inquiry... it looks nothing like my forest in Finland...” And in this space we talk about relationality, we talk about space, we talk about time, we talk about care... but... show me. Where are they here? I would be interested to hear about these kinds of experiences from those who teach, like we heard from Kathrin, about the interventions that you do. And to imagine together how we can more creatively interact with the system.

Viv Bozalek: Wow, Thank you so much. Wonderful.

Pinar Türer: My mind has been racing since the beginning of the session, listening to all the wonderful thoughts that are shared here. And I couldn’t help but notice that all

three of us here had mothers who were teachers—a little intriguing coincidence, I think. As someone who is not currently working on something that connects me to an institution or collective, it is especially valuable to be part of these spaces that work for the practice of thinking together. Listening to Kathrin speak about philosophy and critical thinking, I realize how right my decision was to approach her for working together. First through the internship I had with her, and then through the thesis supervision process, I increasingly felt that our approaches to thinking were so resonant. Kathrin mentioned how she was inspired by bell hooks in seeing critical thinking as a laboratory where we can get glimpses of how life works. The way I see the world has been shaped by this broad desire to understand life, how it works, and how it can be reworked. But it is a large curiosity to carry responsibly. With Kathrin, I felt encouraged to acknowledge this rather fiery curiosity while practicing an approach that tries not to conflate everything into one big question or resort to universalized claims. My own curiosity has revolved around relationality and the questions about the self, and it became both so significant and so challenging to go into the nitty-gritty of this big curiosity I had around these topics.

I can also say something about our practice of writing together, which I think connects to the question of care that was brought up before. For those who may have read or skimmed through the article “Relation(al) Matters,” we address the effort of building a horizontal or non-hierarchical relationship as authors. But we also tried our best to acknowledge the complexity of such efforts in the process among each other. As someone fresh out of the first year of the master’s where Kathrin and Magda were my teachers, I had to make sense of this relation of peers/equals to be able to actually write and create thought with them. And it is not a neat relation; it is messy and complex. We read and maybe talk about “staying with the trouble,” but it became clear that neither for me nor for Kathrin these practices of critical thinking were abstractions. In that sense, I think the “trouble” really came to life. I found myself asking continuously, what is my role; how can I simultaneously embody the roles of both student and colleague; how do I contribute to a thinking-together practice where I am seen as an equal and expected to be vocal about my curiosities, doubts, and opinions while upholding the notion of the ideal student I expected from myself. I would not want to reproduce a strict binary of junior/senior here, but there is certainly a difference in power, experience, and positionality at play. This was also one of the questions we grappled with—the question of how to work with this differential power relations in our learning and teaching experiences. And although the experience and the questions that surround it remain complex, there was something freeing in noticing this messiness and letting it sit for a while.

And I think all of us shared certain vulnerabilities and practiced openness throughout this process, which also found its way into the article via our discussions of vulnerability and trust, although in a slightly different way. A memory that marked a turn in my perception of the process of doing inquiry and critical thinking together is of a moment when Kathrin and I were talking about our experiences of writing, and she shared with me how her experience of writing sometimes involves certain anxieties or insecurities. Until that point, I only interacted with Kathrin as my teacher, and as a student I often naively assumed that everybody else but me had it completely under control. Her openness meant that I could see the difficulties I faced as also part of the process itself, shared by others despite the level of “seniority”/“juniority.” This, to me, was as horizontal as I could perceive the experience. What is more is that what she shared with me (and how she shared with me) made me feel that I could let go of the neoliberal pressure to constantly keep up an appearance of being overprepared, of always asking the right questions or always having something sharp to say. I think this pressure was slowly but steadily crushing me already through my BA degree, even though I had caring and inspiring teachers, which makes me see that it is something that systemically gets to you—to perform in this way all the time. So, seeing Kathrin and also Magda, of course, as open as they were meant for me that another way of thinking, learning, teaching was possible. And I should note here that hearing Kathrin share a vulnerability in relation to writing did not mean that I now saw her as “less than before.” The point was that she practiced a certain trust in me and in the process, which can very quickly translate into a mutual trust that is not necessarily given or taken once and for all, but practiced over and over again. This is also a little bit in the article, where we talk about trust in relation to the failings of the academic institutions we are part of, and with Ettinger’s notion of “trust after the end of trust.” But here I am also thinking more with Deirdre, and I see this trust as part of the caring practices that we are part of in our academic lives.

This brings me to Kathrin’s supervision process, which was again a working together, but in a different modality—a different relationship of power as well as trust and care. The trust that I felt in our writing together was translated in the thesis supervision into a trust in me (as a thinker), in one’s intuition, and in the very process of writing. Starting and completing a thesis are connected to the idea of linearity in terms of production of ideas and written texts, which I don’t think is what happens in reality. I knew that what I wanted to do was about intimacy, for example. And I thought I was going to do that by thinking mostly about love, and working through love studies. Yet in the process it became something else; it formed into a study about intimate relationality and knowledge practices. And in hindsight, I even see it more as a potential intervention in love

studies. So, that practice of trust in the intuitive part of thinking/writing has also been about asking how to think *nonlinearly*: how to practice nonlinearity in a quite linear institutional space, where there is a clearly defined end-product (a thesis), and specific parameters for its evaluation against a set of standards which has to be performed by my supervisor, Kathrin. And I wanted to have a high grade, of course; I wanted to finish on time. But all of these things emerge partly out of the pressures that surround the neoliberal university. As someone with a non-EU (European Union) visa and on a scholarship, I especially struggled with this pressure. Because it felt like if I do not finish on time, they will kick me out of this program, as well as the country. Not having that luxury of “taking one’s time” due to geopolitical circumstances surely impedes on the playful, curious process of thinking-feeling or thinking as practice, and makes it even trickier to think nonlinearly in a highly linear and goal-oriented system. But I still think good supervision—a trustful, careful supervision—really matters to surviving the process better of creating critically within a neoliberal institution. Knowing that Kathrin always acknowledged the problems of the institution and tried with me to work from within it (from the belly of the beast, as we put it in the article) helped me to handle the stress relatively better. For example, I did not feel alone in struggling with the ways in which I could think of (or with) ambiguity in a system that does not like ambiguity, but rather is in the pursuit of clarity. Later on, this experience made me question the ways in which we address the complexities of working in the neoliberal university as students and teachers who want to practice critical thinking, who want to do inquiry in ways that are not so easily welcomed in the places we inhabit, and how much the relationships we form with each other matter for that.

Viv Bozalek: Thanks so much, I want to thank you all for sharing such personal things which relate so much to the theoretical issues that you are talking about and the philosophical issues.

They really are very provocative, I feel, for academia as a whole, and they are going to leave us with lots to talk about and to think about.

Candace Kuby: Great thanks so much. This first question [from an attendee] really connects to what I am hearing in this conversation about the university and the institution. So, I think it connects nicely to what we were just talking about. The question might be a little provocative as the writer writes, but the question is, “Why is the university or is the university still the space for this critical thinking practice of care and forms of relating otherwise?” In other words, is the university still a place for us to do what we do and ... how we think? I invite any of the three of you who wants to start up with thinking around this question.

Kathrin Thiele: Well, maybe I should take it up first and then also Pinar and Deirdre can continue. But first of all, also to you both, thank you so much for your contributions. It is really humbling to hear you speak about our time and relations together in the way you did. And you both I think already started to address the issue which also this question brings to the fore.

The question relates very much to what I would have said about the last question you posed to us, namely, how to see the university as an institution figure in all of it. And to answer this question, I need once more to be a bit autobiographical. When I came to the Netherlands, very soon after my PhD, I certainly came into the job with a different idea of what the university is and what it provides for all of us, than what I see in it now. It has to do with a learning curve, I would say, in terms of professionalization, but it also speaks to the fact that in the last 10 years the university has changed a lot—definitely in the Netherlands but I think we can safely speak of global development here. And I believe that is also what Deirdre and Pinar spoke about. I can fully relate to their accounts of learning or professionalizing in higher education. So, in relation to the question now, I would say that I was more convinced in the past of the western European and maybe even specifically Dutch attitude toward “the march through the institution.” It is a very good attitude; I want to also stress I learned so much especially in the Graduate Gender Programme here at Utrecht University (UU) from the founding generation because this walking the institution always tries to push further, to push beyond what is there. But to be honest, this affirmative institutional strategy is at this very moment difficult to uphold, and that is also what I believe Deirdre and Pinar have stressed. What I heard Deirdre say about “time” and that practices of care need time which is not provided in academia, is addressing this problem. And Pinar, you very much spoke about existential stress that also comes from issues not “counting” in academic contexts: who can stay in a place and continue studying; how can one maneuver a space “otherwise” that is structured according to specific, narrow ideas of how one should study.

All of this is definitely also connected to why we created Terra Critica and with it also other practices outside of academia. When we started, we actually decided quite conscientiously to not involve Terra Critica too much into the system of the university. To allow for, and to keep it “under the radar” as we called it. Not to go for research grant applications, for example, because of their inherent output orientation. You cannot avoid this in the system. But I would still say that the university is a space where education in the curiosity-opening up-sense is happening. As I told earlier in this conversation, I keep my mom’s experience very close, as someone who could not go further into higher education. It is somewhat ingrained in me, I cannot lose belief in

education as a potential for shaping “how we become who we are.” And the university is one of those spaces.

But I have to think a lot about the strategies to use today. How to stay “under the radar” and be a little bit more in the “undercommons” (to speak with Harvey and Moten).¹ Of course, we also want to ensure that our students and PhDs can play the institution and will play a role in the institution, but I think it is very important to sufficiently develop spaces where other modi of learning and teaching are also possible, beyond the academic. And if you like this potential of criticality that I conceive of as a creative process, an experimental process, a relational engagement, an intimate engagement, this is where it becomes meaningful, and in this way I also still claim that space of education not to let it be taken over by those who see education as a question of “transfer,” an economized approach to knowledge. We have to say “no” to certain things at this moment to keep education curiosity-driven and care-ful(1), and then create spaces in which “otherwise relatings” becomes possible.

Candace Kuby: We have another question, which connects to and continues the kind of thread here, so Erin [Price] do you want to continue us on this thread?

Erin Price: Of course. There was this question: “Is there a sense that a skilled and caring supervisor can perform as some kind of buffer or diffracting space and against the violence of the neoliberal university?” Maybe if you have notions on that, the *how* might also be very helpful.

Kathrin Thiele: Does anyone of you, Pinar or Deirdre, want to take this up?

Pinar Türer: I would say both yes and no. I did feel cared for and more or less sheltered in the intellectual intimacy of being supervised by somebody who allowed me the space to experiment with different methods of thinking, and even writing. I do not think I would be able to write in the way I did if I were in a different program or with a different supervisor. On the other hand, no supervisor can possibly protect me from the precarity in academia, the lack of funding in the field I am part of, or the discouragement from doing certain kinds of research.

Deirdre Donoghue: I would also like to say something further to the first question about the university. Not everything is perfect within it, but there is also a lot of good, right? So, I think, why not? It is what we’ve got, so let’s work with it. However, I think that what Kathrin said about having a practice “outside” (the academy) is key because it allows for our thinking practices to be applied and enriched in the “real world.” The question about can a good supervisor be a buffer? Yes, I believe so, but... poor supervisor... I don’t think... why should the supervisor become the buffer and sacrifice themselves? I think we need to look at it a little bit differently.

Maybe, the supervisor can say, “Right, this is how this place works,” and explain the space so that you can then figure out a strategy... Somehow, when I heard the question, I just had this image of the supervisor sacrificing herself by being a “buffer.”

Kathrin Thiele: Thank you, I very much like what you both are saying again. It is also what in our co-written text we treated in the context of vulnerability I would say, and what Deirdre now says also about “sacrificing.” I am with you, I also do not believe that relationality, those intra-active relational patterns that we discuss here, should be understood in a sacrificial sense. I would also say that it is actually about oneself daring to become vulnerable in a process, which is all about that issue of time or practicing; of what it means to intra-act and what it means to be entangled, to really explore a certain research question that leads you away from what you originally thought and to take that time to go deeper. And to supervise in a sense that does not see such zig-zagging or slowing down as failure, but as integral to the processes of and for accountable knowledges.

Viv Bozalek: It’s now time to close, it has been fantastic, the way in which you all have gone into all of your very personal experiences has made it so meaningful. So, thank you so much.


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ORCID iD

Kathrin Thiele  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2767-1424>

Note

1. See Harney and Moten (2013).

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Author Biographies

Kathrin Thiele is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Critical Theory at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on questions of ethics and politics from a queer, decolonial, and posthuman(ist) perspective. Her work pays specific attention to the planetary condition of differential relationality as onto-political implicatedness and entanglement. Together with Birgit M. Kaiser, she founded and coordinates Terra Critica: Interdisciplinary Network for the Critical Humanities.

Deirdre M. Donoghue is a visual and performance artist, birth doula, and a postdoc researcher at the Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Her recent doctoral dissertation focuses on maternal subjectivities and practices of care as aesthetic, political, and environmental forces in the creative processes of contemporary mother-artists, Institute of Cultural Inquiry, Utrecht University.

Pınar Türer is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on the potentialities of intimacy for a feminist, decolonial ethics. Working with art and literature from a transnational perspective, she examines how hegemonic modes of knowledge production can be reconfigured for an otherwise self/other relationality. She has a research MA degree in gender studies from Utrecht University and a BA in comparative literature from Koç University.