

Ingress and offering

Ngozi "N/A" Oparah & Janine Harrington in conversation

Transcript

[00:00:05]

Janine Harrington:

So I'm Janine Harrington. And I'm here with Ngozi Oparah. And today we're going to have a conversation which may or may not land on something that we have moved through in other kinds of conversations before, which is kind of around desire and the structures we might build in our work, or have built in our work, for thinking about moving into relationality and expression.

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Maybe differences in our practice around ways that we might play and explore. So, before we get into whatever unfolds in that conversation, shall we just introduce ourselves a little bit more. Maybe we could say for our listeners something about our backgrounds and the sites of our work and then unfold from there.

Ngozi Oparah:

Sounds good. Should I go first?

Janine:

Yeah.

Ngozi:

Yes. Hello. Ngozi Oparah.

[00:01:05]

I always don't know where to start with my bio. My background's in neuroscience and philosophy. I did that work for a very long time. And then I switched and I think my life kind of revolves around writing and storytelling. I'm doing a PhD in design at Loughborough University. I'm a writer. I have books that exist in the world. I'm also an editor at a queer magazine called *Foglifter*. And I'm a director of community programs at a storytelling organisation called StoryCenter that does work internationally but is based in the States in California.

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Janine:

I love when you say that you don't quite know where to begin with your bio. Because I think in the thirties that's -- it feels like the word "bio" is more like a container for just loads of experience and what

to say first depending on the context. So I'll follow your lead: my background is in dance but also in psychology and visual arts.

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I studied book arts as a way to think about containers; containers for different kinds of content. I say I work as an artist, rather than a choreographer or a dancer, even though my practice does involve choreography and dance, because I'm working between media and spaces and really concerned with being in different ways in relation to publics.

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And so working not so much in stage spaces. And I also have a writing practice, but it is not disciplined. Yeah. It's something I'd like to maybe think about it with you today: around how our different backgrounds and journeys have met each other through Satelliser as a project.

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And how we're seeing that process and that project that we've been involved with together, maybe, through some of those kind of filters or lenses or ways of knowing. I think that's what comes through, partly, when you talk about your background in storytelling, neuroscience, writing.

Ngozi:

Yeah. No, definitely. I'm interested in -- I'm obviously interested in your writing journey as much as mine.

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But thinking about -- I think is why I've gotten a lot of feedback from my mum, a very Nigerian mum, about being really confused. She's like, "You've done so many random things." And I think I've judged myself for that. But then, the older I get, the more I see that there's very clear connective tissue: storytelling being one of them. But also this idea of exploring ways of knowing and looking for being in spaces where I'm allowed to ask questions and be wrong with the answers. I think that's what science afforded me a lot.

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Specifically neuroscience, because it's fairly new, where you can just make conjectures. And then being wrong is part of the point, because that answer is no longer on the table. And that progress sometimes looks like that. And that's how it is with writing, too, for me. This idea of there's no "right". Specifically, because I do a lot of creative non-fiction or fictionalising, and so, there's not a right way or a wrong way to do it. So I think part of it is probably my ego: just not ever wanting to feel wrong.

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And putting myself in spaces that allow me to do that whilst still getting a lot of knowledge. So, yeah. I'm excited about this idea of ways of knowing as an orienteer, literally examining that.

Janine:

There's already so much, right? I can feel in myself this uncertainty about which path to take. When you spoke there, I was like, "Oh wow. OK, yeah." Of course, there's legibility to perhaps a different generation or people who have various kinds of investment in the career that we're each doing.

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And how they might process that and then reflect back to us what it is we're doing and what it means. And then you used this very physical -- the language of the body and of connective tissue to understand. And I think that's also, as I age, with the kinds of journey that I've been on, through different fields of knowledge and moving through different spaces and artists in response to different environments of commissions or communities.

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I have more and more the sense of -- well, of course, I have bodies of knowledge and there are ways of knowing that are identifiable. But I'm also just -- I'm a particular human bringing with me the knowledge that I carry in the in-betweens. I really like this connective tissue image as the communication between all the many articulations.

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It really brings me into the sense of what it is to work with the body in my journey as an artist, whether that is working with the body, because I'm trying to manifest and embody ideas or ideas are embodied.

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Or, whether in my life, I'm also working and dealing with embodiment in order to kind of centre myself and feel more maybe oriented or connected, even if the work that I'm doing at that particular moment is a different kind of job. I don't know if that makes sense. But it just took me to -- what are the kind of grounding practices? And I know we spoke in one of our conversations recently about groundedness and grounding.

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And how maybe with different information streams, and people having opinions about what we're doing, and we're still building something -- what are the practices that can ground us? So maybe that's a question for you. Is there, through your journey with neuroscience, with writing, with storytelling, are there practices -- whether they're orderly or otherwise -- which have helped you to stay or to be in a oriented relation with yourself in all of those different endeavours?

[00:07:47]

Ngozi:

Yeah. That's a good question. I feel like my answer is already so messy, which is telling of me. I think, when I think about things that have grounded me, it actually -- and I used this term with you before, I think, or in the space -- this idea of consensual disorientation. I think what is actually grounding to me -- I'm not sure how healthy this is -- is this idea of uprooting myself. And part of it is about listening to my own desires.

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And I feel like I often -- one of the desires I'm most familiar with, it comes across very clear in my body and mind is: you're done. You want to do something else. I even feel that about the book I'm writing now. I'm still not done, because there's editing. But I feel this desire to do something else; to be somewhere else. And to have my body exist in different spaces. And as disorienting as that is, it is very grounding to be able to pay attention to that. To feel like, oh, it's time to move. It's time to leave. It's time to transition.

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It's time to put this away, whether it's finished or not. But, that is a really grounding practice -- is honouring that feeling of "doneness", even if I'm in the mist of, "Yep, I'm one page in and there's something there." But I feel done and trusting that. And so -- why the consequences feel very tangibly scattering, so not grounding at all -- there's something that is very grounding about just being able to tell myself, "I'm finished."

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I think that's really because of a lot of things that I've experienced as a person and as an artist. I think it's important for me to be able to honour that feeling. To be like, "OK, you no longer want to do this." And so, you're allowed to trust that, even if you return trusting that. That's a very grounding practice.

Janine:

I hear so many things in your answer. One of them that I hear is -- I'm doing a movement with my hand that's like a slicing.

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It feels like it's also about time, in a way, of maybe -- yeah. Kind of putting permission to put something down, perhaps. And to -- I say it a lot -- and people who are engaged with this publication are going to find this phrase throughout it -- that it keeps coming back -- I think it's so powerful -- to something from Liz Lerman, who's a practitioner in the States, actually, in Arizona now.

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And she says, "We don't finish, we just stop." And when I first heard that, about three years ago from her, I found that so empowering; the idea that I don't have to be finished. One doesn't have to finish something. We can also decide to stop for whatever reason. So it's bringing me again to -- I think this conversation is going to be spirally. And that's just where we are.

[00:10:46]

This question that I have that I face in my practice as I mature around the discrete sense of the project -- and the particular containers that I might create or co-create for working -- and that being one experience. And then another experience being of the kind of bleed, or flow, of myself, my personhood, my whole self, between the projects that I might do.

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And there's something that I hear, that I think you might know more about than I do. Or that maybe there's a shared interest in knowing when something -- when it might be OK to leave something. Or

what each container might be able to do. And when we might need to find a different container, whether that's space or a job. Does that make sense?

Ngozi:

Yeah. Definitely.

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And I think that's one of the reasons I was drawn to the project. Because I think there's very clear metaphorical implications in how the work exists: where there's a group of people and there is a task at hand. But it is very much about desire and this idea of starting and stopping. And being able to -- there's some part of it where it's like you actually get to check in with yourself -- and even say, "Do I have something to say?" And that's different than actually saying something.

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Like, do I have something to say? And then, shall I say this thing? And then when does it end? I know that there's so many stories and facts that were brought into the space, and they never finished. We never did a concluding "this is my thesis". It was just you offer it. There's this offering and then there's this egressing from that offering. And I'm really interested in how -- there's so much intention in the project, but when you were building that -- what were you hoping for? What was your goal around offering space for people to listen to desire in that way?

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Or choice in that way? Entering and exiting: is that how you saw it when it was just an idea?

Janine:

Thanks for bouncing the question back at me. Maybe I can say for our listeners who may not know so much about the project. So Satelliser is the project framework that Ngozi and I have met through -- really, really started to get to know each other through.

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And it is a project which, for me, is -- it's containers. It's discrete containers for relating and for sharing. And those containers have involved, recently, being in galleries. So performing this ongoing dance whilst having a conversation. And, before that, involved meeting on Zoom.

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Or pre-pandemic, it was actual in-person meetings and people talking to each other. Your question for me, I think, was about intentionality. And I'd say I'm a queer person. I identify as neuroqueer. And, for me, that is -- part of that experience is around having sometimes some difficulty in the relational field.

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So I really enjoy being in conversation with people who have different experiences to me: younger people, older people. And sometimes it's hard for me to go to the party with the friends that I know. It doesn't really make sense. It can just be hard to show up in the social space.

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And some of the fringes of the social space -- the kind of "Hellos"/"How are you?" -- that stuff, I just find quite jarring. But I can do really well in conversations that just go straight into something. They just get straight into some subject. And I'm really interested in the padding that we don't need to know, necessarily.

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And I think this came up in a Satelliser conversation, I think it was. We call each other co-workers, as well. It was another co-worker, maybe, who said the question: "How much do I actually need to know about you in order to care?" And I really enjoy, in my life, circumstances where I might enter into a conversation between strangers: at the moment that's in the swimming pool a lot. Or it might be on the street or in the lift.

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And we don't need to know a lot about each other, but we can already know a lot just by our attitude to the other. And so, for me, an interest in this project was to create a kind of rhythmic structure of meeting. And then a reason to be together in the gallery which is, in a way, the dance: it's kind of the contract. The contract is we will show up and we'll do the dance between these hours and these hours.

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And then that there's space, because the dance is not so demanding that there's an excess of energy for the social space and the conversation. And I hesitate to think that I'm making work that I want to use to move through -- to kind of get something from. But at the same time also I feel sure.

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That is also what it is. It's a want for connection and it's a want for more spaces where people can be in a kind of contact with each other that is social, but the showing up for the sociality isn't the reason we're there. We're there because it's labour; because it's paid.

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And, so -- yeah. You can probably hear me trying to answer your question. No one's quite asked me that before, so I'm putting it together newly. Did that somewhat answer you?

Ngozi:

Yeah. I also deeply love the idea of creating a space for yourself that's also for others. This idea of how this is how I would like a party to feel. This is what my needs would look like.

[00:17:39]

And then actually bringing that to life. It reminds me a lot of about the work I try and aim for in writing, where it's like -- yeah. And that's actually one of the things -- like what you said -- this idea how little can we know and still care. That was the question. Or that was an idea I brought up because I don't use names in my writing. I don't know what my relationship with names is, but there's this -- I don't really --

it's not the most important. What would a world look like where we didn't have to refer to people by their actual given names, and more by the relationship to you?

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Your brother. Your sister. Your flatmate. And, so -- yeah. I love this idea of this is my kind of party. And then bringing that to life and letting people come and be like, "Oh, this is also great." Because there are these ripples that I think happen when you do that: when you show people other worlds that you would love and then invite them in. And I feel like the work really does that in such an explicit and powerful way that's inviting them in. Like, here it is. You're here. You're happening. And you're a guest. So I really appreciated you talking that through.

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I think that's more than enough intentionality: to create something that you need and then offer it in this public setting. So, yeah. Well done. I think the messiness got us there.

Janine:

No -- I sort of want to ask you a question. And I also want to reflect on something you said. Yeah. Maybe I'll ask you the question.

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Because you came into the project last year, so maybe seven months ago. And you came in with online meetings; meeting people entirely new to you. People you didn't know. So I'm curious. And you're a writer. You're working in -- you're writing books. And you're writing stories. And you're dealing words. You can tell us more.

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But with supporting other people to tell their stories or to talk about something important for them. And you just mentioned name and relationality, which I also really enjoy. Because the sense of the movement of the relation. It feels to me, the image I have in my mind, is of a mobile, where we could look at it in a fixed way, but also, if all the parts are moving, then we're going to be different in relation to different moving parts.

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I'm wondering, how was it for you to come into a space that is somewhat formed by sets of relations? But to come in without knowing people with maybe the kind of attention that you bring as a writer for story; for character. You could talk about that a little bit.

Ngozi:

Yeah. I worry my answer won't be as interesting as the question.

[00:20:38]

Yeah. No. I feel like I tend towards new situations, like I was saying, because I often -- this is why I move often -- I let go of projects and start other ones. So I feel very comfortable in discomfort. It's funny. With

another co-worker, we had this moment in the gallery where an elevator was coming and it was actually full and we didn't know it. And we were on the outside. And it was just the most awkward moment, because the elevator doors wouldn't really close.

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And we were like -- we can't really do anything. And I remember just like -- when the doors finally did close -- the co-worker's like, "Why are you smiling so much?" And I just love awkward situations. I think they're so full of a tension that's so rarely explored. And so, as a writer, I'm like, that's gold to me, that like [small groan]. There's nothing really bad, but it's just uncomfortable. I feel that way about meeting new people often, where there's just -- I become almost hyper-vigilant for information and detail.

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So, of course, I'm awkward sometimes and uncomfortable, but it's in this way that I'm very used to and excited by. But it was new in so many ways. Not only were they new people, but they were like -- I'd just moved to this country and just moved to this city. And don't identify as a dancer, formally, at all. So I just felt very aware of all the ways that I might -- not be missing, but that there could be just a lack of awareness or ignorances or even just dissidences.

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So, in that way, there was levels of discomfort. But also matching those levels were excitement. I felt kind of greedy. It took me a minute. I didn't feel like an imposter in any way, but I did feel like I was getting something. I knew it from the moment I was in the Zoom. I was like, there's so much I can learn here. And there's so much I could offer, too, that felt very clearly expressed to me. But, in my own body, in my subjective, there's so much to know. So part of me wanted to just lean back and just take in.

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And I remember watching the different positions of people's bodies on the Zoom screen. I have a screen capture of three of us leaning against our elbows. And I was like, that's beautiful. I want to write about the fact that we have these mirroring behaviours. But then, there was also this, like you were saying, there's this task at hand. So it was a really nice push and pull to not move into my -- go into my -- normal MO, where I'm like, I'm just going to listen. I'm just going to be a creep and take notes. And watch when exactly your eyebrows rise.

[00:23:08]

And when your smile eventually fades. But to also offer myself. And to express the vulnerability of existing alongside you all, not just, you know -- I wasn't here as this voyeur journalist. I was here as also a co-worker. And I think that language that we used of equity really became important. Because it was like, oh there's -- I'm not forcing you to talk, but there is a task. And you are part of it. You are part of this workforce. And I love that because you can't -- you can maybe.

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But then, to be a good worker, for me, is to offer when I can and offer when I should. And notice the difference of those things. I don't know if that answered your question. I got excited and then I kept talking.

Janine:

It's fine. Earlier on you said, "This is my kind of party." And I was like -- I feel like that's a great way to maybe just allow ourselves to be in this conversation. Be like, "Oh yeah, I have a little taste of this and a little part of this conversation." And it can kind of -- nothing has to be like a full meal, in a way.

[00:24:09]

It's interesting what you said -- what you alluded to: that the writer as voyeur -- or you said journalist, and the sense -- and you did this movement of leaning back. And the sort of leaning back into something or resting against. I don't know exactly. I don't really have a question.

[00:24:37]

It's just I feel like there's something around the postural support in rest, or a kind of physical, maybe, modality coming in and out of that. And a sort of -- what am I trying to say? I guess I'm thinking, to be transparent with my thinking, I think about the gallery space and how we dance; we sit and rest, we do some embroidery.

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We're talking. And, when we're not talking, we're listening. There's different ways of being a support. I don't know. I'm curious about that first experiences you were having of coming in to the Zoom. And maybe the sitting back -- although those are my words -- but that was the posture you did in order to see.

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And then how it is to be -- to come maybe more into the recognition of the co-working and it's moving parts. And, actually, we're in movement in that, together with these different orientations. And that's also what you spoke about earlier is this collective: the collective, the consensual, and the disorientation. Which is not to say that maybe we're sharing the same consent, nor the same sense of what the collective is, nor the same disorientation or orientation.

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But that we're all in movement together with some understanding of what it is that we're doing. And the different ways that we might play parts in that, whether that's the speaking, the listening, the dancing, etc, etc. So there's not really a question. But there's something about backgrounding and then being kind of "in" and it moving that maybe you could speak to.

Ngozi:

Yeah. That's actually making me think of those moments in the gallery.

[00:26:36]

Maybe I'll just speak for myself. I don't want to implicate anyone else. But there are these moments where I was in the middle of movement and I found myself also in the middle of voicing a thought. And I just had to stop. Maybe it's because I'm not a trained dancer, but I was just like, I actually can't do both. And so I rested my body and said the complicated thought I was -- I would lean against the wall. Or I

would just stand and walk. And I would then be able to finish my thought. There was something about resting this one part of me, giving it a break, so I could focus on this other part.

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And something about that is making me think about how there are these false dynamics or these false ideas of I have about what is rest and what is contributing. And I think there are many moments like that. That's an explicit one. This idea of stopping the dance to speak. But there are also moments where I was leaned against a wall or sitting on a comfy couch. And being in that space of -- I think something about it seems more passive, maybe, because my form is stationary.

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But there was so much work being done in sitting and resting and sorting through. And work that, I think for me at least, couldn't have been done unless I stopped moving. I couldn't even hear in the same way, nor could I voice or express things in the same way unless my body was paused. And I even think there's probably a parallel on the other side. This idea of you hear differently when your head is between your legs and you're staring at someone across the room. Maybe there's all these different filters that happen.

[00:28:07]

And there's not a good one or a bad one. And that they're all useful is my point. So I think that is what I'm -- that is what I felt, maybe. And now, I'm just putting language to it when I came into the room as a writer, to go back to your question. This idea of noticing that I do have contributions, but that they might look very different. And I feel very aware of that because I came in as a non-dancer. As a non-UK citizen. But it felt really explicit when I -- because I think differently. And this is why I think I write.

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Because there's space for me to express that difference in a way that feels legible, at least, to myself. But, yeah. I think in that room, it was -- and it felt OK. I think that was one other thing that made this project so wonderful: it felt OK to be silent for 10 minutes at a time and then to be like, "This is what I gathered." And not in like this way where I wasn't a part of it, but it was like, as I was gathering, I was also creating. That's just how my mind works. And there was a lot of space for my mind to work that way.

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And another mind to be in conversation with me and work completely differently. So, yeah. I felt really held to be in a place where rest was also seen as work. And was also showing itself as a type of work. And I think that was really, clearly seen, or visualised, in the gallery.

Janine:

Yeah. For me, too. I really recognise that. And you said a few times about not being a dancer and not having a dance background.

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And I think it's interesting to come into a space where maybe there's some assumptions about what it -- the way that others might be experiencing, because we assume that people have maybe a shared kind of way of operating or shared knowledge. I would challenge that, gently, because, actually, in this project each person has, I would say, an orientation and relation to moving.

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And for some that is dance training, but for others -- different relations to dance and dancing, and many other bodies of experience in the room. I really love the sense that you painted of the activity within rest of the writer.

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It's a space that also resonates with me as you said this. I had, actually, a very similar experience of -- I could speak a little bit whilst dancing, but at some point, I would just drop out of the movement in the middle, in the gallery. And I'd have to go and stand next to a visitor and address them and talk a bit to them. Or I'd have to kind of pace around. I would realise that my gesticulating, that I needed to do to support my thinking, would have broken through the choreography.

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And so there were these different -- there was something expressive that was happening, but was breaking through. And the word that I wanted to say was rupture, although that sounds more violent. But I'm thinking more like a seed sprouting in the ground. It felt more like that. If the ground is this ongoing moving that we're doing -- this quite boring dance phrase -- and then I'd be speaking. And then gesture would be needed to help me find my language or my words.

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And that gesture would just start to happen. Almost like it would wind itself in or break through the movement somehow. And then I would be like, "Oh, I've stopped doing the dance." And then I would be pacing through the space. And that happened for me, actually, very kind of organically. And I would realise. And then I would be like, "OK. This is fine. I give myself permission to do this."

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What am I trying to say? I think the way that the physicalisation of thinking, for me, would break through the dance. And then I would be somewhere else was quite cool, because -- yeah, I don't know. I just have all these images of a film and then pushing through it.

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And then, suddenly, you're in a different space of thinking with other people. But I think -- I don't know that that's always available to me, actually, or often available to me, I think -- the tension of having this other thing to do. So I'm also thinking when you said about the writer and the "busy-ness" that's happening, perhaps, within something that's perceived as rest. I was also thinking about how I used to watch.

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And I used to see more, because I wasn't carrying a phone around. Or, when I used to be on a break from a kind of work, maybe I would just sit somewhere, and I would just observe what was happening around me. And that kind of space of all the activity that's happening within supposed rest or inactivity would actually be feeding me. And there would be a lot happening.

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And that in -- so I'm kind of going somewhere else, but it really came up for me in what you were saying about being in the gallery. And taking different posture or positionality or movement in order to support thinking and contribution.

Ngozi:

Yeah.

Janine:

I guess -- yeah. Digital. Digital. Digitality?

[00:34:11]

That's not a word. Digits like hands, fingers, gesticulating, moving, moving and thinking. Metabolism of thinking. Rests.

Ngozi:

Yeah. I don't know why my mind is thinking of -- I'll just name it. And then I can, maybe, come back to where -- what you just said reminded me of this idea of, yeah -- I'm going to not judge myself and just say it.

[00:34:43]

This idea of low-stakes writing assignments. I think it's because of the way when you talk about the movement, you talk about -- like, you used the word boring earlier. Or you talk about something to do. And it has -- all the language feels very much like means to end, intentionally so. And I was just thinking -- or you called it like "something to do" -- like it exists in this way where it almost doesn't have an identity, it just has this very clear purpose. But it's not itself.

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And I think that's interesting. So one of my questions is just wanting to hear more about that as a process. But to create this non-entity that is driving, but also not. It's like, "Who's the driver?" And it's like this fuzzy blob of nothing. So I want to hear more about the choice around creating something that is a means to an end. But is also making me think about the improvisational nature of so much of what we were doing except for this dance, even having audience members come in and ask a question.

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There's no way we could've -- obviously to think and to just talk about different topics as a way of rehearsing. But to have a specific question come from a stranger is different. So I'm just thinking about -- and this is why low-stakes writing: I had this professor who called this assignment we would do in every

class a low-stakes writing assignment. It was just a normal writing assignment. But him using the language "low-stakes" allowed us to explore and improv, basically.

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And to play. Which I think is really -- I feel like all those things happened in the gallery. This idea of there was no right or wrong. And there was this unwritten or tacit understanding that everything that's happening, while the topics are not low-stakes at all, we talked about -- I mean some of them maybe were -- we talked about the Spice Girls. We talked about politics. We talked about health. We talked about death. We talked about sex. We talked about so many things. But there was still this idea, I think, because of the nature of it, because it was happening in real time with no phones.

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And with an audience that can talk with us -- beside us, on top of us -- there was this idea of low-stakes that allowed a lot of permission. So I don't know what triggered that connection. But there's something in me that is finding some parallels between something about low stakes. This idea of -- or just understanding, I guess. This shared awareness that this is happening right now. And so it doesn't need to be perfect.

[00:37:18]

Which kind of goes back to this idea of not finishing it but stopping. But being really present, which is kind of what you were talking about too: this idea of not having a phone. There's something about being present that affords you permission to maybe be human. I'm not sure where I'm landing. All these things just came up as very clearly connected, though the language I have is -- I'm struggling to make those connections explicit.

Janine:

No, you're great. This is the nature of this conversation, right?

[00:37:48]

Is that we're doing in a way as we do in the gallery, which is that we're not trying to "perform" thinking. We're doing it live, which is kind of what you're talking about being in the present. And trying to listen to the other person as they're -- it's like an exoskeleton of thinking, like external processing, which is not always how it is, right? Sometimes there will be something that's just placed in the space: a thought or an observation.

[00:38:18]

But sometimes it is this kind of talking of working out, almost from an outside, to then condensing closer and closer to something that we're like, "Oh, this is what we're talking about." Which is somehow where I feel like we are now. You were talking about the dance and picking up on the word boring. And something around that -- I was speaking about the intentionality for that dance.

[00:38:46]

And you said maybe it's -- you said something like -- maybe it's a means to an end, or it's like this means to an end. And I wondered if it is more a means to a means, because it just has this ongoing quality. And

it is -- I think the dance is boring. And I was thinking, as you were talking, about my background in psychology.

[00:39:17]

And I was thinking about motor skills and learning things. And I know we all in Satelliser had a different journey with that depending on whether we -- yeah. Familiarity with the physical language we were working with, which draws on some classical forms to an extent. But is also fairly pedestrian. Like, it's "steppy" and it's quite gestural.

[00:39:47]

And, yeah. So I was thinking about studies that I was involved with a long time ago that I can only kind of misremember, in a way, which I think is fine for our purposes. But about learning about motor skills and how we learn motor skills. And how they take up a lot of attention. So, I'm remembering my first job, which was working in a café, in Canterbury, opposite the cathedral.

[00:40:18]

And it was an Italian café and they had a whippy ice cream machine, as well as a scoop ice cream machine. And my first role -- so awful -- was to operate the whippy ice cream machine. So you had to coordinate the button, the speed of the ice cream as it was coming out, and how you would hold your hand to turn the cone, to try to get this perfect shape. And you'd put the flake in the top.

[00:40:47]

And the machine was a bit temperamental: not very predictable in the pressure, the consistency, the speed. And it was really a difficult task to understand how to physically be in relation to it in order to achieve the result, which is what everyone wants: the perfect cone. And, for me, it was like a disaster. Sometimes it would look beautiful. Other times it just looked like kind of a lump of ice cream on this cone.

[00:41:19]

And I remember -- and I was like 15 at the time, working in this café -- dreaming about it. Because I was learning how to operate this machine that was new. And it took up a lot of space in my mind, because I dreamt these disaster dreams that the ice cream was spilling over the cone and it's never-ending and I was seeing it everywhere. And that happened for a bit.

[00:41:48]

And then it stopped because I had integrated, I guess, those skills. And I think as a neuroscientist you know a lot more about this than I do, probably. But those kinds of -- and learning to drive would be another one. Or learning to cycle. Or anything that would require this coordination and attention. And I became really interested as a young student of dance and psychology in the things -- divided attention.

[00:42:18]

Like, when can I be doing something and also be doing something else? Because it's using different faculties. And when is so much of my attention taken up with the task in hand, but also, not just the motor skill, but all of my own commentary on what I'm doing. And so I remember you coming into the

project with -- I would say, just from observing you, you have a physical writing practice. There's lots of movement.

[00:42:48]

So you don't have a formal dance training or, maybe, lots of experience of dance, and similarly for others in the project -- that I remember saying to you that sleep helps. And putting some sleeps between learning this material and getting into the gallery and understanding that there's a structure of your experience about learning something new. And its coordinations and orientations will, in some time, hopefully, give way to an experience which is less demanding.

[00:43:24]

And can be more like in the space of the habitual. You know how to do that. You know where your body is. You know the directions. And it's just ongoing. And that that has this kind of motor -- becomes like a motor -- which then can support us in a kind of social space and thinking. So that was a bit of a ramble, in a way. But just the sense of the means to a means -- its ongoingness -- for me. Maybe this is the last thing I'll say.

[00:43:58]

When I think about writing -- and I like the idea of a low-stakes writing assignment -- but I put so much pressure on what every word or sentence is going to say to the point where I struggle to do it. And I hardly write anymore. And that feels like an opposite, in some ways, to the low stakes of the dance. But I wonder if there's a flip in there, because you have a discipline and a practice and a craft in writing.

[00:44:30]

And I have something like that in dancing. And maybe I'm able to talk myself out of writing, for example, because the stakes are so different for me. Because I actually don't have -- I don't think writing is -- I mean -- maybe there is a motor in there, but it's not -- I put so much weight on the expression rather than the just doing. The habit. Does this make sense?

[00:45:00]

I guess I'm trying to understand, or think about, something of where we're -- how we're -- understanding from our different backgrounds: how we're understanding the dancing, speaking, expression, the notion of the expressive. Help me out. Help. [laughs]

[00:45:30]

Ngozi:

Yeah. Yeah. I think I know what you mean. Like this idea of familiarity and what affordances come with that. And then the opposite of that. Definitely. I'm thinking about our first day and one of the moments where I felt uncomfortable in not a fun way.

[00:45:59]

It was the first day in the studio. And it was before we even got into the actual practising of the boring dance. But it was just, I felt very aware -- being in a space where language was not the point. Because I

feel like, ooh -- give me language. Come on. Give me anything and I'll turn it into a beautiful -- anyways. Confidence happens in language spaces. But in that moment, we were just bodies on a floor in the cold with socks on.

[00:46:32]

And I felt so uncomfortable. In a way where I actually had to start writing just to remind myself I'm good at something. So I had a little journal beside me. But there was definitely like -- and it was even -- it's funny, actually -- wrote about this for myself. But even things like stretching I started to question. Like, do I stretch right? Is this how you touch your toes? Is this the right way to touch your toes? And I would look around the room and everyone was doing handstands.

[00:47:03]

Not everyone. I'm lying. But that's my memory of it. That's my misremembering. I just remember everyone being better at being with their bodies or being in their bodies. And I felt this hyper-awareness that I did not have those skills. I did not have the ability to even cultivate those skills. So there was a lot of -- kind of what you were saying -- about coming to the page and kind of having the stakes feel so high that it actually causes or prevents progress.

[00:47:33]

And I felt that way about something. And I actually had to remind myself that -- or maybe even had co-workers end up reminding me. I think it was maybe you, also -- this idea of you actually do know your body better than we know your body. You actually have permission to be an expert on your body in the same that way that you feel like you're an expert with language. And that kind of worked. It didn't fully work because fear is real and takes time sometimes. But, yeah.

[00:48:00]

So I definitely have -- I think there are parallels with this idea of having -- and I love, I really love -- your description of the ice cream cone. I saw it. I mean, I've never had -- I'm sorry to smile about what sounds very hard to deal with. And you described it as really impactful in a negative way to the point where it entered your dreams. But I really love processes that do that. And I think this work also is doing that.

[00:48:31]

But this idea of breaking something down. And it's like -- in writing, there's this concept called defamiliarisation, which is this idea of making the familiar strange. So instead of saying a thing, you talk about it in a way, like -- wait, what am I talking about? And then you see the thing as a fresher version of itself. And it actually helps us be present in reading and in seeing and perceiving. And I like this idea of -- I've had an ice cream cone from a place like that. I've never really thought about the person holding it, maybe shaking with trepidation, as they try and make it perfect.

[00:49:04]

And I think there's something about that that really feels true about this work too. Because we're in process and I think it's so not cool to be in process in this world. It's actually so not OK to not have a perfect answer, especially with certain people -- as a person who identifies as queer and black and female and foreign. So, it's not to be like, "Yep, that's it. I already know it. I'm right on it."

[00:49:33]

It feels like there's a lot of shame that comes with that. And so, to have a space where the point is to be in process, where the point is to not have an answer, but to have a way of getting to it, I think is similar to that defamiliarisation where you remind people, like me as a child waiting on my ice cream cone, that there are stages. That there are steps and they are necessary. And they're sometimes of equal importance as the final product.

[00:50:02]

And that they all have emotional waves. I think I'll never forget you now as a young person, shaking, trying to make the perfect ice cream cone. And I think that has so many parallels in my life where it's like -- that sometimes so easily gets erased. Those middle stages and their emotional consequences. And I think that leads to a lot of -- yeah. Now I'm just kind of ranting, so I'll stop soon. But I think that leads to a lot of confusion as individuals where we end up somewhere and we're like, "Why do I feel so many ways about this thing I did?"

[00:50:35]

And it's like, maybe if you went back and started out holding the cone and trying to get it in the right position and noticing when -- if you break down all those steps you actually took, and the logics and the consequences and the fears and the successes that came with each of those steps, maybe you would see the myriad -- or the beginnings of the myriad -- of the feelings you're now feeling. And I love that about the work. Because I really saw people thinking.

[00:51:05]

I really saw people being like, "This reminds me of this and this." And I'm like, "Wait...What?" And then five minutes later they're like, "And here." And I'm like, oh -- that's actually what happens all the time. But usually that part is private or it's just reserved for this select group of folks. And I think it's so nice to make these things explicit. Because they do a lot of powerful work of reminding us of that we are in process and that is OK. It's OK because it's happening already.

[00:51:32]

We just don't give it as much light as being perfect or finished. So, yeah. I don't know if that's where you wanted me to go, but that's where -- the ice cream cone and, yeah. Yeah.

Janine:

My mind has gone somewhere -- loads of places -- because I was really tracking with you through your thinking and enjoying your recounting of my ice cream trauma.

[00:52:01]

I love this -- what you've just spoken about -- about making process transparent. And I'm thinking a lot about learning and application to different situations. And just how terrifying that can be to put ourselves, or to be asked, to even -- like we talked one time and we had an interesting conversation.

[00:52:30]

And a kind of different but similar experiences of being asked to cut fruit or vegetables in someone else's kitchen. And maybe the vegetable is unfamiliar or the fruit is unfamiliar. And just the paralysis that can happen even though these are my same hands. I know how to hold a knife. Gravity is still functioning. I can understand something of what might need to happen. But the unfamiliarity, and what this new situation might show me up as lacking, is really terrifying.

[00:53:02]

And I think there's something about cultivating in ourselves a sense of humble capability. Or, also, knowing that it's OK to ask for help. Or that things might take three sleeps to embed. I don't immediately have to be able to do something or good at something.

[00:53:29]

Or the baggage that I bring that I feel, maybe, very ashamed of when I'm learning something new and it's not going well. And I'm frustrated. And I feel so many ways about that is probably not exclusive to me. Probably many other people have this. And actually, those might be reasons why people don't do things. Don't put themselves in new environments. Or there's a lot of fear around "that's not for me." Especially coming to these kinds of new experiences as an adult.

[00:54:02]

I think as children we're thrown into that all the time: everything's new. So my mind went to somewhere quite funny because I'm looking out at the London skyline now, and it's a really beautiful day. And I was thinking about this quite terrible TV show *The Apprentice*, which you might know. And how the candidates on this TV show -- they brag so aggressively about being the best at everything and what they can do.

[00:54:31]

And then, for a succession of tasks in which they have to collaborate, they're shown up as making very poor judgments. And very -- not being able to be -- there not being space, actually, for process. And it just being like, "You've done this terribly. What were you thinking?" Rather than where's the curiosity around the application of knowledge and the space of not knowing?

[00:55:01]

And I think that just feels, today, quite a stark contrast to the kinds of spaces that we move through in this project. And I think, for me, if we're going to loop round back to one of the early questions of what you asked me around intentionality -- something about sets of permissions being there for each of us in the project, and hopefully our visitors -- to feel maybe a bit more comfortable with where we're at in that process, or in that present process, with the people that we're in present process with.

[00:55:44]

It's a bit of a tongue twister. And how the difference circumstance -- the different gallery. The different day. The different Zoom. The different set of people there -- are kind of functioning like indexes that are going to bring out different knowledge in each of us. Or different feelings, thoughts, words. So we're not -- yeah. It's what you were talking about a little bit earlier. We're relational.

[00:56:15]

I'm not the same today with you as I will be today with someone else in a different circumstance. And that does feel like the opposite of this bragging, very defined: this is what my job is. This is who I am. This is what I have. This is what I know. And I'm only going to push further into that that I know and that I can defend.

[00:56:40]

And I feel like, maybe, what I've heard a bit from you and others in our processes, also with like the feedback maybe from some versions of outsides, or the internalised outsides in ourselves, that are saying: do you know how to do this? Or, what is this that you're doing? Is about a bit more of a softness with being able to learn something new.

[00:57:12]

Or, yeah. To stay in this process of curiosity and learning and to not shut that down. Which is not to say not paying attention to discomforts. I think discomfort and those signals are super important. And also give us a lot of information about codes that are present in spaces and contexts which are not present for everyone. And how we might need to pay attention to those in order to shift them. But, yeah.

[00:57:38]

That's not quite a summing up, but it's an attempt at moving towards something of -- yeah, I don't know. Do I know? If I did know -- did that make any sense?

Ngozi:

Yeah, of course. [laughter] I love that --

Janine:

-- *The Apprentice*.

Ngozi:

-- I love that we keep doing that. It's interesting.

[00:58:08]

I don't want to analyse us too much and become too meta. But I do feel like every time we pass the mic, there's like this "does that make sense?" Or "did anything stick?" And this like -- I don't know if it's a performed worry or if it's a genuine, yeah. And I don't know how I feel about it. I'm trying not to judge it. I definitely feel like it's necessary, which is why I keep doing it. I think it's because maybe it just comes back to us being in process. And not having finished before we offer it to someone.

[00:58:39]

So there's all this doubt of -- is this thing on? Is it working? Did any of that -- did my thoughts as messiness, did that come across as any type of coherence? And just needing some affirmation around what is a new thing to do. Anyways. Not to get too meta. But I'm just noticing that we keep doing that.

And I probably will do it in five seconds. But, yes. That, of course, made sense. I think it makes a lot of sense.

[00:59:09]

And I do think it is a good summing up of this. And I really like what you just said about discomfort. And I think, selfishly, I like it. And I just think it's a good thing to name. Maybe it's implicit, but it needs to be explicit sometimes. But this idea of discomfort being a sign from the body just -- hello! It doesn't always need to be attended to. It doesn't need to be like: and now, do this. It's not prescriptive.

[00:59:39]

But it is a sign. It's like this sound, where it's like, "Hey. Notice me." So I like that you just named that. Because I'm thinking -- a lot of what we're talking about is these other ways of being oriented, right? Other ways of existing, too. I think we were, at some point, talking about desires. And we're also talking about being in process and questioning.

[01:00:07]

And all these things that aren't really given this much space, in big world, to exist. And so I think it's nice to -- and I feel like discomfort is one of those things, too. Where a lot of times, specifically more marginalised people, are told to quiet that siren. Like to finish what you're thinking and make sure it's perfect. And to quiet those discomforts that get in the way. Or just confuse something. It just makes it messy, it's like, yeah. And not knowing makes seeming like you know really messy.

[01:00:40]

And so I really liked those kinds of namings that happen: implicit and explicit.

Janine:

Right. I mean all of that. And I think that's sometimes where we get to in this project is also hearing that sometimes we don't know what to do with the discomfort that's named or where we've got to.

[01:01:07]

And the question, "Does that make sense?" Or, "Am I making sense?" can also -- could be reframed as -- "Am I being understood?" / "Are you understanding me?" I think it's not necessarily searching for approval. It's more like -- I've just done a big complex process which may be fairly new to me. I'm asking -- or we might be asking -- has that made sense? Not because I'm looking to you, the other or others, to say, "Yes, your opinion is valid and it has passed the test." But more like, is this new thought that we're making together also resonating and landing with you?

[01:01:48]

And if so, how? That might be a different way to say it. Because I think that, for me, in being a leader in this project, and I'm a white leader and in mentioned relationality and neuroqueer stuff earlier, I'm -- in some ways, there's lots I'm not taking for granted about others' experience. And then we have to -- there have to be some things that we can rely on.

[01:02:19]

And take as given. But then, at the same time, those structures are what then, hopefully, allow us to be in spaces where, collectively, maybe we don't know. Because -- yeah. What is it to have the sirens be heard, not silenced? In order that maybe different possibilities can emerge.

[01:02:52]

But they can't emerge if we're like, "Cool. Got it. Got it. Yeah. I hear that." Because, actually, have you heard? Have we heard? And I think that is also about being in this process together with where we're all coming from. So, yeah. I keep coming back to this thing: the means to the means. It's just like to be able to keep going rather than to be like, "OK. Cool. We've got it now. We're going to stop.

[01:03:22]

We've finished it. We're moving through."

Ngozi:

Yeah. This book project I'm working on now is -- it's like 7000 pages -- about discomfort. And I like what you just said, because it's also what I'm realising. It's one of the major motivations for my writing is this - is to ask the question. One: does anyone hear me? But also, if you're listening, am I the only one experienced this?

[01:03:54]

Can anyone else relate? And I think there's -- what you just said actually really resonates with me. This idea of longing for that, maybe, all the time. Maybe every time we talk there's some part of us that just wants -- am I -- because there's so much of us that happens just for us. All the thinking that we never write or verbalise or act on. It's just us. And then it even disappears to us. There's so much unaccounted for "us-ness" in us.

[01:04:24]

And so, when you do finally say something in context in a group, it's like -- and I'll speak for myself. I don't want to speak for humanity. But there's something -- and this is literally why I write. One of the reasons why I write. There's something that is so desperate to just be like, can anyone just give me a wink if this makes any sense? Because it's like, how do you know besides agreement? Especially if you're queer or you're neuroqueer or you're marginalised.

[01:04:53]

There's so much questioning that actually is logical to do. So much questioning of the self and so much doubt. I'm writing a scene about a therapist. And I'm like, what would a good therapist say to this queer child? And it would be like, yeah, it makes sense that you're doubting everything about you because that's all the messaging you're getting. Of course it makes sense. It's very logical. You have to do some anti-logic in order to see yourself.

[01:05:20]

So I really like that we're kind of naming -- I think now I'm just being selfish and treating this like therapy. But, yeah. I think that's really powerful when -- whether it's dance, or any kind of narrative or

movement -- creates space for people to ask for affirmation. Even if they don't get it, which is more times you don't. But to begin that journey of being: can I be seen?

[01:05:49]

And if so, what do you see? And is that what I thought I was showing? Those questions, I think, are essential. And there's very little space to ask them.

Janine:

I just wanted to add a couple of things from what you said and then I think we're -- I feel like we're almost at a stop, somehow.

[01:06:19]

But when you were just speaking about the therapist there, and I sense there's this moment of almost potential judgment around using the space as therapy. And I remember seeing on Instagram ages ago a kind of a call to people who were in therapy to share what they're learning in therapy with others who cannot be in therapy, perhaps because it's expensive, mostly. And I remember thinking, oh yeah, that's great.

[01:06:49]

And recognising that call as something that I think I'm interested in in our space at Satelliser: not to ask for us to be in therapy together, but to ask us to -- where we can, where it feels appropriate -- share process publicly. Not everyone has to reinvent the wheel again and again. And I think that's the beautiful thing about film or literature -- the arts -- is that we can learn more about ourselves and our experience by experiencing something about how the stories are told.

[01:07:25]

So there was that in what you said to me. And then there was something about -- there was something else, but it's a little bit elusive now. I don't know if I can land what it is. But when you said about marginalisation and the good therapist, I thought, wow: what a kind of gymnastics, cognitively, to have to write from the position of, perhaps, the experience you haven't had.

[01:08:06]

And thinking about neuroqueer-ness. And you mentioned how I'm working at the moment, which is provisional and is not true, but is a felt one, is of sometimes I feel -- I think I might have said this to you before -- I feel like other people can sight read, like, music. And I have to learn every tune. I have to actually study it and learn it and then reproduce it.

[01:08:35]

And then make up what the script of -- or the score of -- what's going to happen in a situation based on an amalgamation of all the different tunes that I know, in a way. And something about just making -- I don't necessarily know how to do that, and maybe your endeavour to write the good therapist is something that -- what am I trying to say? I guess I'm talking about process of just saying and exploring the process of that.

[01:09:09]

And having that be heard is maybe as good as being able to land the good therapist scene or -- I don't know what my equivalent might be. Maybe it's not that if Satelliser feels like a successful work, to also make -- which is what we're doing now -- to make available some of the process in that. And that it's still full of questions.

[01:09:38]

Maybe I'm trying to say something like that.

Ngozi:

Yeah. That's a good thing to try and say, I would say. And, yeah. Just to comment on what you said about maybe feeling shame or judgment around treating this as therapy, I don't. My background's in mental health counselling and neuroscience, and now I'm doing mental health literacy learning. And I feel like the definition that I often work with for something that's therapeutic is just anything towards the process of healing.

[01:10:10]

Not like to then heal. It's anything towards the process, which is so much. And so, I feel like, of course, this conversation is. And a lot of the conversations in the work were also extremely therapeutic. I was like [makes relieved sound]. Just to see yourself in someone else. Or to have someone else go through something that maybe you haven't gone through, but you want to. Or that you have gone through, but it went differently, I think, can be healing. So I think no judgment at all.

[01:10:39]

That's the benefit of having a fiction. To have someone else live in a world so you don't have to do it the same way. And same with these conversations we were having in the gallery. Maybe we were voicing the opinions, or the opposite of the opinions, of other folks in the room, whether they were other co-workers or audience members. I think there -- it could just do a lot of work to be seen. And it is affirming work to be like, oh yeah, yeah. I'm not the only one who had that doubt, who had that sister that they both love and hate. I think it does a lot of work to just see humanity: to just have it normalised, all versions of it.

[01:11:22]

So, yeah. Just to clarify.

Janine:

I love that. I'm going to take that into my day and my weeks. Moving towards healing, somehow. I think that's beautiful. Thank you so much for being in this conversation: this windy, messy, expanding, contracting conversation. I really enjoyed talking to you.

[01:11:52]

Ngozi:

Yes. The feeling is so mutual. Thanks for talking to me.

Janine:

So let's stop there, right? Great.