

From Snap to Selfcare: Reading Feminism through Sara Ahmed and Phoebe Boswell

Emma Bond and Eleanor Crabtree

Abstract

How can we bring two feminist bodies of work that operate through different media into meaningful conversation with one another? Using Fournier's framework of autotheory, we work through this question by reading Sara Ahmed's critical theory and Phoebe Boswell's creative practice *connectively*, tracing intersectional feminist pedagogies and key concepts common to both as we go. Instead of applying critical theory to creative practices, we use creative practices as a tool to better understand how theory can be in 'touch' with the world. Co-writing this article is an initial step in seeking out the creative and embodied aspects of our own practice as feminist researchers.

“How do you arrive at the work that you do, and what stories do you bring to it?”

(Ahmed, Drescher Conversation)

This article seeks to establish a transmedial conversation between two feminist bodies of work and in so doing, to offer a methodological example of how to carry out meaningful autotheoretical analysis. Autotheory is a term that Lauren Fournier (2018) uses to describe contemporary feminist transmedial practices which fuse creative self-representation with critical theory. We use Sara Ahmed's hybrid textual work and Phoebe Boswell's multimedia artwork as examples of how new generations of feminist practitioners operating across different fields use their own embodied experiences to theorize (the self). In order to do so, we also draw on Marianne Hirsch's idea of constructing a feminist, connective reading rather than a comparison. This connective reading is bodily in and of itself: it is attentive to “the connective tissues and membranes that animate each case” and “foregrounds affect and embodiment” (Hirsch 206). Additionally, this way of reading aims to address uneven hierarchies of value and positionality between theory and creative practices, working instead towards “acts of repair” (Ibid.). We read Ahmed and Boswell's work *connectively* to see if we can engage creative practice as a tool to understand how theory might be better “in touch” with the material world (Ahmed, *Living* 10). In so doing, we also aim to position our own reading and writing practices as feminist researchers, through actively acknowledging our subjectivities as presences throughout. This

responds to Fournier's idea that autotheory can "become the discourse through which one's lived experienced is refracted" (658) and suggests a mode of fusing self and theory that is applicable for scholars and critics of literature and theory as it is for artists and creative practitioners.

Our reasons for selecting Ahmed and Boswell as agents in this particular connective reading are manifold. Both are feminist practitioners of color, and exploring the charged intersectionality of racism and sexism is fundamental to their work. Both are especially preoccupied with the spaces of the institutions aligned with their work, and with the question of how to orient oneself and continue to be creative within those spaces. Ahmed left the conventional world of academia when she resigned from her professorial post at Goldsmiths University in London, in protest both at what she saw as the empty nature of institutional 'diversity work' as well as a general failure to address continuing issues of sexual harassment. The authors of this piece met Boswell during her time as the Bridget Riley fellow at the British School at Rome. Her reflections—both written and visual—on the architectures of exclusion enacted by the spaces of the "white supremacist artworld" that she inhabits as a Black artist will inform much of our analysis to follow ("Letter").

Boswell uses her own body as well as the bodies of other women as a political and an artistic statement of intent; Ahmed makes theory itself *bodily* through her corporeal appellations of concepts. Both Ahmed and Boswell are thus engaged in constructing *feminist bodies* of work that are activist in nature and creative in their activism. As a creative autotheorist, Ahmed makes new meaning through wordplay: through creating a poetry that is, in Audre Lorde's words, "not a luxury" but one that "lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" (qtd. in *Living* 3). As an autotheoretical artist, Boswell works with the critical writings of Black scholars such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Christina Sharpe—not only to inform her own practice, but also to form a material part of it. Both create dwellings for their discourses from these 'feminist bricks', building community and citational networks at the same time as paying due attention to the need for *selfcare* for survival. Ahmed also understands Lorde's discourse on the importance of selfcare as an intimately physical practice. When faced with the fragility of the body in the face of intersectional attacks of racism, sexism and illness, Ahmed argues that we have to learn to be inventive in order to survive. This transforms selfcare into a practice of 'warfare' that is also political in nature and shows both Ahmed and Boswell seeking out "ways to exist in a world that is diminishing" ("Selfcare").

“Theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.” (Ahmed, *Living*, 10)

Ahmed’s 2017 *Living a Feminist Life* is a hybrid work that grew out of the “Feminist Killjoys” blog that she began writing online in 2013 and which forms the basis of the later monograph. She herself has written on the ambivalent nature of *Living a Feminist Life*, stating that she initially wanted to keep her writing “in touch” with the world of the everyday by producing a “mainstream feminist text, or even a trade book” (10-11). The book she had planned would fight against the reified abstraction of feminist theory away from the matter of everyday life, and was thus also aimed to be accessible to a wider readership. And yet as she wrote she realized that what was emerging was something that was still academic in nature. It is revealing that what frustrated Ahmed’s initial plans were questions of pace, tempo, and temporality that tend to accompany the process of academic writing. “I wanted to make a slow argument, to go over old ground, and to take my time” (11). Her appeal to slowness recalls Al-Saji’s location of hesitation as the moment where habits of seeing can be fractured and re-learned (“Phenomenology”). Hesitating encourages resistance to hierarchies of habit and seeks to interrupt racializing practices of looking that are based on subjective assumptions, rather than “feel[ing] one’s way tentatively and receptively” through images (“Phenomenology” 142). The deliberate slowness of this methodology speaks to the poetics of Ahmed’s writing practice, in which she

follows words around [...], turning a word this way and that, like an object that catches a different light every time it is turned; attending to the same words across different contexts, allowing them to create ripples or new patterns like texture on a ground. (*Living* 12)

Ahmed’s method of treating words as objects to be manipulated through writing points to the ambivalence at the heart of her project: to what extent can words in a text act as reference points to help a reader better understand the material forms that orientate their own lives and those of others? We propose reading Ahmed’s textual project alongside Boswell’s artistic practice as a methodology to help negotiate this ambivalence. How might the very matter of Boswell’s practice, the spaces and the objects she uses, allow us to think in-between the abstraction of textual form and the realness of the everyday? In the section that follows we interrogate how the connective tissues between the aesthetic practices of poetry and art allow us to better understand the ‘touch’ between the abstraction of theory and the materiality of the world. In so doing, our

analysis explores the potential of autotheoretical practices to provoke acts of (feminist and antiracist) institutional disorientation that might eventually lead to innovation and reform.

“How we see becomes a politics of touch.” (Manning, 153)

The poetics of writing are deeply important to Ahmed: she delights in the potential of words to make different meanings through their reduction to trunk elements, etymological digressions, and other modes of creative invention. “I think of feminism as poetry; we hear histories in words; we reassemble histories by putting them into words” (*Living* 12). This is a specifically feminist speech project, both a response to feminism as an archive of community history, and as a reaction to the violence and disorientation of racist and sexist speech acts and behaviours: “Feminist speech can take many forms. We become more inventive with forms the harder it is to get through. Speaking out and speaking with, sheltering those who speak; these acts of spreading the word, are world making” (*Living* 261). Ahmed’s writing also seeks to be ‘in touch’ with the world, a touch that is reinforced by her use of tangible, material reference points that often draw on familiar corporeal experiences (sweating, touching) and everyday objects or events (backgrounds, walls, lines, tables, snapping and shattering). In this way, Ahmed’s object-words (object-worlds?) function as a “teaching tool, as well as a way of teaching us about tools” (*Living* 67).

Living a Feminist Life is itself a hybrid text. The volume concludes twice: first, with a ‘Killjoy Survival Kit’ made up of ten ‘items’ of personal stuff that the author has collected and relies upon to keep going in the feminist struggle: books, things, tools, time, life, permission notes, other killjoys, humour, feelings, bodies. Second, with a ‘Killjoy Manifesto’ composed of ten principles that are worded as statements of will: what are you willing (or not willing) to do? Item Three in the Survival Kit is ‘Tools’, and Ahmed’s tools include “a pen, a keyboard, a table; the things around me that allow me to keep writing, to send my words out” (*Living* 241). Writing here is a physical action, a “willful carpentry”, just as feminism is seen as a form of DIY (*Living* 232). A pen does not write on its own, it needs an arm, and an artist needs her tools in much the same way as a writer: Boswell works *by hand* in charcoal, graphite, chalk, pencil and paint, alongside her multimedial work in video, audio and object installation. So, by virtue of its collective nature, feminist history is an ‘army’, but Ahmed also sees that history as being “a history of arms” (*Living* 233). Arms emerge to illustrate and embody critical points of Ahmed’s argument: from willful arms (following a Grimm fairytale, where a willful child’s arm resists

discipline even after her death), to broken arms (following Gloria Anzaldúa)—these are used to describe processes of striking and fracturing, as well as resistance and strength. “The arm can be the fleshy site of a disagreement. The wayward arm is another call to arms” (*Living* 233).

“Intersectionality is arm. Intersectionality is army.” (Ahmed, *Living*, 234)

Once installed in her residency at the British School at Rome, and feeling “consumed” by its “still beating air of coloniality” (“Letter”), Boswell abandoned her initial plans of reaching out to local migrant communities and transposing the stories she collected into large-scale artworks. She decided instead to spend her fellowship grant on works of Black scholarship with which to enrich both her own practice and knowledge, and which she would then bequeath to the library of the School. Alongside this, she would draw only googled images of white¹ male ballet dancers.

FIGURE 1. Phoebe Boswell, “Weird Flex But Okay”. 2019. Drawing installation, charcoal on paper and wall. British School at Rome. Photo by Roberto Apa. Courtesy of the artist and the British School at Rome.

Boswell’s drive was not only to *not* contribute what she felt might be a tokenistic Black presence in the artwork produced at the BSR, but also to see if her own identity as a Black woman artist would define this work which was completely counter to her own subjectivity, or whether it would be allowed its own. “Because unfortunately as Black artists, you can draw a circle and that circle will be about your Blackness, you can draw a flower and that flower will be about your Blackness, or your womanness, or any kind of asterisks” (“Interview”). The charcoal drawings of the ballet dancers in motion leave their arms floating, outstretched, and flexed on separate sheets of paper to the rest of their bodies. This gestures towards their realignment with the stretched-out arm of Ahmed’s willful girl, which constantly thrusts through the earth of her grave until it is struck down with a rod (*Living* 66-67). In this sense, these arms also record the latent resistance of Boswell’s artwork and her response to the exclusionary experience of the BSR – they extend outward, upward and downward, seeking, probing, pushing, and pointing out. The repeated attention to the white male body has a cumulative effect here, since: *“arms not only have a history; they are shaped by history; arms make history flesh”* (Ahmed, *Living* 234, emphasis in original).

¹ Our decision not to capitalize white draws on thinking articulated in this article: <http://dcentric.wamu.org/2011/10/when-to-capitalize-black-and-white/>

As stated above, Ahmed follows words in her writing of *Living a Feminist Life*, exploring and evaluating their potential as objects and as tools for rewriting new histories. The distinction is clear: she wanted to follow words rather than concepts, and, furthermore, she wanted to write from examples up. We have mentioned some of the examples she takes from other texts (the arm that features in the Grimm story, for one), but predominantly she draws on her own experiences to tell her story of living a feminist life, detailing acts of sexual assault, micro aggressions, and episodes of racial profiling. These are bodily stories, of sensation, imprints of hands on skin and body memories, but they are also stories of the reparative potential of feminism as a way to potentially “reinhabit” the body (*Living* 30). Feminism for both Ahmed and Boswell is located within the body: the body that writes and draws, a body which provides inspiration and sustenance. The body is continuously refigured across Boswell’s ‘unapologetically’ figurative work: “I draw from the figure, I love to do so. I need to. I draw (from) myself a lot. And from the quotidian lives of us” (“Letter”).

As well as the body, sustenance for the intersectional feminist project is also to be found in books, and indeed Item One in Ahmed’s ‘Killjoy Survival Toolkit’ is ‘Books’: particularly feminist works by Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Judith Butler. Likewise, as anticipated above, the companion work to “Weird Flex But Okay” was “Inventory” (2019), which Boswell created in response to a body of theoretical texts of Black scholarship, including Audre Lorde’s *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House*, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s *Dust*, Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, and Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection*. The books included in “Inventory” are presented as physical objects of art in ways that reveal how Boswell’s work functions as both a response to and as an original element of research along a continuum of scholarship and autotheoretical writing. “Books are themselves material, paper, pen, ink, even blood. Words come out of us, like sweat, like blood; tears. Your texts are littered with love. Words can pulse with life; words as flesh, leaking; words as heart, beating.” (*Living* 230) These works were a source of sustenance for Boswell as well as being a literal fortification against the predominance of whiteness at the BSR. Her own ‘Survival Toolkit,’ if you will.

“Other paths, paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines.” (Ahmed, *Living*, 15)

Boswell’s act of surrounding herself with works of Black scholarship after her arrival at the predominantly white BSR echoes how Ahmed intends to forge new disciplinary pathways

through her ‘strict citation policy’. In *Living a Feminist Life* she does not cite any “white men”, instead only citing “those who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism” (15). Here “white men” refers to existing institutional structures: “what as well as who has already been assembled in a general sense” (153-54). For Ahmed and Boswell, the act of selecting books for an inventory is a way of nurturing future invention that will help ensure the survival of feminist bodies of color in institutional structures which currently favour “white men”. As Ahmed reminds us (citing Lorde): “We have to be inventive in order to survive” (“Selfcare”). Acts of citational selection create paths made out of ‘feminist bricks’ which take directions other than those officially laid out by disciplines. By creating new paths, citational practice is a tool that provokes disciplinary disorientation for both Ahmed and Boswell.

In the following sections we explore this practice of disorientation and reflect on what it might contribute to the fast-expanding field of autotheory. Boswell’s reflections on her experiences of artist residencies and how she inhabits gallery spaces encourage us to foreground the creativity and playfulness of Ahmed’s theoretical writing and how we might draw on it in our own critical practice. Focusing first on how Boswell’s work has emerged from the disorientating effect of residencies abroad, we go on to reflect on our personal experiences of disorientation when viewing Boswell’s work. These are parallel acts of autotheoretical practice in which “embodied experiences become the material through which one theorizes” (Fournier 658). Building on the framework of autotheory, we explore what these bodily encounters—standing or sitting in a gallery—may share or not share with the way in which we are accustomed to encountering theory—sitting at a desk in an office or at home. What the juxtaposition of Ahmed and Boswell’s work shows us is that thinking of our research in terms of its inherent creativity and playfulness is also entangled with a commitment to make the urgency of our theoretical writing part of our lives: like feminism, it is a way of *living our lives*.

In the visual essay “Stranger in the Village” Boswell reflects on a residency she undertook in Gothenburg in 2015. She describes its inherent strangeness—even though the term ‘residency’ connotes a sense of belonging, you are “more often than not placed somewhere you have no connection with, no ties to, no friends in, and no reason for being there, except of course to make work” (“Stranger in the Village”). Having arrived in Sweden after a few months with a traditional healer in Zanzibar, Boswell’s change of location entailed a change of direction in her work, a dis-, or re-orientation of her practice. She was told on arrival by her hosts that Gothenburg is a “very segregated place,” a description which puts in place a very different local

'background'. Echoing Ahmed's observation that backgrounds are what sustain certain directions (*Queer Phenomenology* 31), this statement of segregation directed Boswell's practice along a pathway that she had not foreseen. She decided to use the opportunity to respond to James Baldwin's narrated experience of otherness in a rural Swiss village whose inhabitants had never before seen a Black man (Baldwin). She set up a profile on Tinder with the status 'Stranger in the Village', drew portraits of some of the profiles she swiped right on, and documented the ensuing conversations which manifested the casual racism and sexism of her local male interlocutors. Just as Ahmed writes that "so much political work begins with moments of disorientation" (*Living* 133), "Stranger in the Village" shows how the pedagogy of disorientation can also open up new political artistic pathways. The feminist killjoy is also an artist.

"The likeness is the effect.

Now we're talking."

(Ahmed, *Living*, 136)

How can we translate Ahmed and Boswell's concern for embodied, creative modes of expression into a pedagogy for our own academic practice as feminists? The genesis of this article was sparked by our realizations of the points of contact between Ahmed's and Boswell's practices. This direction emerged from the accidental, contingent experience of noticing two things having something in common. This recalls the everyday aesthetic experiences of "tracing patterns of commonality" across different contexts that Andrew Ginger locates as fundamental to comparative inquiry (Ginger). Our article thus emerged from chance meetings that might well not have happened, and from the absence of other meetings that could have led it elsewhere. In this section we continue tracing patterns of commonality between Ahmed's and Boswell's practices in order to reflect on the politics of space: how political allegiances and actions are shaped by how our bodies relate to spaces, and how spaces relate to our bodies. Within this framework of orientation, attention on spatiality is vital to our enquiry into feminist bodies because the political/gendered/racialized effects of spaces only come to *matter* through how the bodies that inhabit them are orientated in relation to them and in relation to one another (*Queer Phenomenology* 12). As a gallery artist, Boswell's practice is intimately linked to how she inhabits these spaces. It could even be said that she 'survives' there thanks to artistic acts of feminist and antiracist selfcare through which she continuously negotiates her relation to the orientations of the white walls of artistic institutions, and their relation to her. Boswell's feminist inhabitation of

institutional spaces through political creative/theoretical acts leads us to reflect in our conclusion on our own embodied inhabitations of the institutional confines of our academic research.

Boswell's more recent residency at the BSR provoked a similar experience of disorientation to her earlier one in Sweden, a redirection that led her to produce further killjoy artwork. She has described her immediate impression of the institution as a space still orientated by historically established white power, "knowing that I'm one of just a handful of Black artists who have ever been supported here" ("Letter"). This was perhaps a more unsettling disorientation than Gothenburg because, like "the freedom of London", the BSR is a British space ("Letter"). Boswell had access to the fellowship through her ties to Britain, but she related to the building in a different way than her fellow residents. It made her "question everything" ("Letter"). As stated above, Boswell had proposed using her time in Rome to engage with the city's migrant populations. Yet she was asked during her interview: "how do you actually plan to walk down the hallowed steps of the British School at Rome and communicate with migrants?" ("Interview"). On arrival, Boswell started to realise that this question was not *just* an act of gatekeeping; it resonated with the actual orientations of the building. The words of the question are revealing of the way in which buildings themselves, their tangible walls and bricks, are implicit in maintaining certain political orientations. There is something about the steps themselves—*hallowed*—that suggests they only allow certain types of artistic, (a-)political work to enter the building. In a way that echoes her work in Gothenburg, Boswell's experience of disorientation at the BSR provoked those reorientations of her practice described above (reading and purchasing works of Black scholarship, only drawing white male ballet dancers). From this second reorientation a more profound, *shattering* act of institutional disorientation emerged. For the show at the end of her residency Boswell exhibited a series of portraits using only the press images associated with three recent publicized Black deaths in Italy, those of Patch Sabelly, Emmanuel Chidi Fermo and Idy Diene. Displayed on two perpendicular walls and also taking up the more private space of an alcove, the drawings were gathered together as a collective force that defied the directions of the building's *hallowed steps*.

For Boswell this mode of inhabiting the walls of the BSR gallery was a way of doing political work. It echoes Ahmed's concern with metaphorical walls and their tangible political directions. Even within the context of her theoretical *abstract* writing, Ahmed challenges her reader to think about her reference to walls as something tangible, as more than metaphors. In the chapter "Brick Walls" of *Living a Feminist Life* she includes a series of photographs of

standard brick walls. The identical images are each entitled “A job description” (97) and “A life description” (143). They show how a brick wall describes the job of a diversity worker (when “[s]o much of the time you’re banging your head against brick walls,” [97]) as well as when it describes a life blocked by walls. When, just by living, we fail to inhabit norms, brick walls become apparent to us even as they do not appear to others who conform. They are “what does not allow you to pass through” (142). Boswell often draws directly onto gallery walls (“Stranger in the Village”; “I Need to Believe the World is Still Beautiful”). While acts of directly marking the surfaces of the gallery are not uncommon, considering Boswell’s practice through the pedagogy of disorientation points to the particular charge of this marking in the context of her practice. I recently went to view a work by Boswell exhibited as part of *Get Up Stand Up Now* at Somerset House in London, an exhibition that showcases the work of generations of Black creative pioneers in Britain.² “I Need to Believe the World is Still Beautiful” comprises a three-channel looped video in which each channel displays a third of the moving body of the London-based storyteller Buitemelo. Three screens are arranged vertically so that the three parts of her body are put back together, while the disjointedness is maintained as they are out of sync with one another. The videos were made by layering a series of outtakes of a film made by Boswell of Buitemelo. This layering creates the impression that we are viewing the video through rotating kaleidoscopic lenses. Highlighting its collaborative production, each time the work is shown, Buitemelo is asked what she wants to say in that space and context, and Boswell writes these words “directly onto the architecture of the space” (“I Need to Believe”).

Buitemelo’s words in Somerset House speak of the resistance and resilience manifested by the bodies of Black women (“We give the call to action / We love / We fall / We break / We get the fuck back up” [I Need to Believe]). On the right side of the screens Buitemelo’s words refer to the suffering that gives urgency to this resistance and resilience – “For it is now / in this foreign land / my mum and dad chose to / settle in, the people / are / not / like / us / These people want us to be / miserable [...]” (“I Need to Believe”). I read these words from where I am standing where my body faces the video of Buitemelo’s never still, partitioned and kaleidoscopic body. As a white woman, I am not part of Buitemelo’s “we”, yet the appellation recalls earlier work by Boswell (for example, “Mutimia”) that explores the agency of the viewer in the space of the gallery. This means I cannot help reflecting on my relationality to the work too. Thinking with Ahmed’s walls which have a history, I think about the space I am standing in: the West Wing of Somerset House. A building whose structure supports my weight, whose walls

² This and the next paragraph use the first person singular rather than plural in order to capture the personal experience of one of the authors in viewing Boswell’s work.

and roof shelter me from the rain outside. I think about how the work puts Buitemelo's words into a material bind with the structure they are inscribed onto, a structure I am inhabiting. I still have not looked up the details but I can feel the atmosphere of the building's architecture—Georgian, neoclassical. I have a sense of when the structure that surrounds me was built at the very centre of London, at a moment when the city and the nation were amassing wealth through violent colonial acts.³ Buitemelo's contemporary voice becomes entangled with this history, and Boswell's inscription of her words onto the architecture of the space makes the contemporary voice emerge from the wall and the wall's history. This is a history that has meant that I do not face the same bodily vulnerability as people of color—it is a history that protects me, just as the structure of the building surrounds me. I am aware of the violence inherent to describing this work in relation to myself, yet reflecting on this feeling is, I believe, an instructive act. Standing in the space of the gallery, actual material bricks surround me and I respond to them. Reading theoretical texts in the private spaces I inhabit, holding books in my hands, I register and remember the words consciously. While I comprehend their urgency through this conscious registering, in the gallery I feel their urgency as an embodied form of knowledge. This stays with my body even after I leave the gallery. It provokes a heightened awareness of how my life is orientated (protected, streamlined) by the history of the architectural spaces of the nation I call my own. Boswell's artistic inhabitation of this space thus heightens my awareness of how Ahmed's theories *touch* my world.

Thinking of the history of walls and their resulting orientations sheds light on Boswell's feminist and antiracist use of the gallery space at the BSR. On her arrival in Rome, Boswell was concerned with how the institution's history had been “built on empire” (“Letter”), and indeed with her own complicity with this history as an artist supported by the institution. Boswell challenged this complicity through an act of disorientation which gestured towards a shattering of its material form. The night before the June exhibition:

...I smashed three flowerpots, one for Pateh, one for Emmanuel, and one for Idy, In Solidarity and Remembrance in the centre of the space, flanked by my drawings. I took these pots from the fountain in the institution's courtyard, without permission [...]. (“Letter”)

³ I do look this up later and find out that the West Wing of Somerset House has been used in the past for purposes directly linked to the racialized colonial violence of Britain: the West Wing was the home of the Salt Office of the British Empire from 1702 to 1798, when it sat alongside the Naval Office (Shah).

FIGURE 2: Phoebe Boswell, “In Solidarity and Remembrance”. 2019. Broken flowerpots from the fountain at the British School at Rome. British School at Rome. Photo by Roberto Apa.

Courtesy of the artist and the British School at Rome.

In Ahmed’s terms, Boswell’s shattering can be seen as a “snap,” a feminist pedagogy (*Living* 187-212). Even though a snap may appear sudden, Ahmed encourages us to think of snap as a “moment with a history”: “A snap is only the beginning if we did not notice the pressure on the twig” (*Living* 189). The recent history of Boswell’s snap includes her experiences of disorientation at the BSR, but it also includes the history from further back that Boswell still felt in the atmosphere of the building—“its still beating air of coloniality” (“Letter”). Through their expression in the shattered flowerpots—institutional property taken from the private space of the courtyard—the histories of Black suffering made visible by the drawings become entangled in the history of the building. Boswell’s snap sheds new light on Ahmed’s use of the wall as “more than a metaphor”, and actually as “a way we can offer a materialism that shows how history becomes concrete” (*Living* 136). The performative act of breaking the flowerpots transposed the walls of the institution and the intangible histories that direct them into a literal object that could be *felt*, even if at first only in the form of shocked and offended reactions on behalf of the BSR (“Interview”). Even if it wasn’t the response Boswell anticipated, the act *forced* a reaction. Individuals at the BSR had to *relate* to the pots as matter and as symbol (the history of Black suffering they made tangible) in a way that, the artist hopes, will help sustain an internal discussion about what the institution represents (“Interview”). Boswell’s snap presents an example of how her artistic selfcare transforms into a practice of ‘warfare’ that concerns both the artist and members of the wider community for whom the institution’s hallowed steps may be experienced as a ‘brick wall’. For “protest can be a form of selfcare as well as care for others: a refusal not to matter” (*Living* 240).

“Everything we do in life is rooted in theory.” (hooks, 19)

Reflecting on our own complicities in institutions and practices, we can think of Boswell’s snap as a teaching tool or an educational method to care for our own feminist bodies and those of our communities. Principle Nine of Ahmed’s ‘Killjoy Manifesto’ is: “I am willing to snap any bonds, however precious, when those bonds are damaging to myself or to others” (*Living* 266). Snapping is a scary proposition that makes us vulnerable to violent reactions. But reading Boswell’s practice alongside Ahmed’s writing urges us to think about our own embodied

practices as feminist writers and researchers. Thinking about this act as creative is perhaps not enough. Our exploration of an artistic practice as autotheoretical suggests that if our academic practice does not simply take writing as an “add on’ process” (Manning 11) then, like for Boswell, it also cannot take our lives as an add-on. Living our academic lives overlaps with living our feminist lives when we try to take care of that community through our work.

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Biography

Emma Bond is a Reader (Associate Professor) in Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of St Andrews. Eleanor Crabtree is a final-year PhD candidate in Italian Studies at the University of St Andrews. Her thesis explores new ways of conceptualising Rome through the contemporary creative practices of artists and writers.