

Research Proposal

Myriam Doremy Diatta

Our Everyday Forms: Learning to cope through displacement and marginalization

Monash PhD Tuition Scholarships

Design & Learning, WonderLab

September 2, 2017

doremydiatta@gmail.com

616 W 207th Street Apt 4G

New York City, New York 10034

1 Project Title

Our Everyday Forms: Learning to cope through displacement and marginalization

2 Research topic outline

Our Everyday Forms documents and catalogues the coping mechanisms displaced and marginalized individuals have constructed for themselves. The work is about unpacking the tacit knowledge and de-institutionalized methods individuals learn to use—both in a one-off ad hoc manner, and steadily across generations.

3 Preamble

In 2015, I co-founded a design consultancy and lab for Emotion-Centered thought leadership, Matter-Mind Studio. The crux of our practice is developing and refining our inventory of methods and tools for Materializing¹ people's emotional needs. Our client work has ranged in the contexts of violence prevention, health care, and public health to technology, design, and organizational culture. My teaching in Pratt Institute's Master's in Industrial Design (MID) program uses speculative design and participatory design methods through a social justice lens to critique the role of the designer as problem-solver and to re-imagine the criminal justice system. My independent research takes the form of a public website that collects and archives coping strategies and encourages the process for Indigenous, Black, People of Color (IBPOC), and Queer People of Color to "decolonize themselves and to unapologetically take up space." The work that is foundational for all parts of my practice is a peer-reviewed work done across two years in MFA Transdisciplinary Design at The New School. I demonstrated a new process for design through a thesis that addresses a particular intersection between cognitive science theory and the materiality of design through practical application in a clinic-based family therapy program.

Each arm of my design practice since 2012 has consistently been contributing to my understanding of the ways people learn to cope and most recently has been galvanized into understanding trauma-informed coping strategies.

4 Project Description

Our Everyday Forms is most influenced by a few things including bell hooks statement, "To enter black homes in my childhood was to enter a world that valued the visual, that asserted our collective will to participate in a noninstitutionalized curatorial process,"² the story Teju Cole tells about James Baldwin and how Baldwin "had to bring his records with him [to Switzerland] in the fifties, like a secret stash of medicine... to keep him connected to a Harlem of the spirit,"³ the multi-generational, trauma-informed coping strategies Dr. Joy Degruy identifies through her work on Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome⁴, Elaine Scarry's writing on the topic of pain and justice, and lastly the discourse around oral histories, indigenous and vernacular architecture, linguistic dialects, and how they're each valued and devalued. Each of these illustrations are about how displaced and marginalized groups of people maintain their identity and cope in the context of, as bell hooks puts it, "white-supremacist-capitalist-imperialist-patriarchy."

The everyday coping through white-supremacy that marginalized and displaced IBPOC individuals must do manifests itself through the way we manipulate physical space around us. There is evidence individuals are very fluent at doing this. What does this look like? What forms does it take? What patterns might emerge from cataloguing these coping mechanisms in this context?

How might we use material thinking and design-led research to take care of this kind of 'coping knowledge'? What might we understand about learning from conducting this research?

¹ Diatta, Doremy Source: [JAWS: Journal of Arts Writing by Students](#), Volume 1, Number 1, 1 January 2015, pp. 63–75(13) Publisher: [Intellect](#)

² hooks, b. (1998). *Art on my mind: visual politics*. New York: New Press.

³ Cole, T. (2017). *Known And Strange Things*. S.L.: Faber And Faber.

⁴ Degruy, J. (2017). *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy Of Enduring Injury And Healing*. S.L.: Amistad.

Our Everyday Forms “will highlight design’s capacity to make tangible, to make visible, to make do and to make happen. Experimenting with designing learning resources this project will operate at the nexus between visual communication practice and co-design methods to explore where material thinking meets design thinking.”

In this project, the experimenting is specifically focused on learning resources for the design practitioner and the design process itself, as opposed to designing learning resources for participants. This project critiques and does not seek to ‘give participants agency’ or to ‘make solutions.’ This distinction I’ve made is important for the challenging and exciting work of embodying the principles that found this project—to subvert existing structures of power and authority. Instead, this work contributes to the discourse about design as a *means* for understanding, not solving. Therefore, a significant portion of this project will look retroactively and catalogue how individuals have form-ed sophisticated coping strategies and practiced learning-through-making *themselves*. “The emphasis here is on experiential, material knowing and how the two come together to create spaces of learning” *within and for the field of design*.

The two case studies to explore *Our Everyday Forms* may include IBPOC millennials living in New York City and individuals from North and West Africa who are migrants in northern Italy. Section [6 Methods](#) offers more background and reasoning behind choosing these contexts as case studies.

5 Significance of the projected work

In “The Sacredness of Sensitivity; Arriving At Truth in Our Hearts,” Danielle Stevens, a young activist and multidisciplinary artist writes,

Far too often we are told to distrust the wisdom spoken in our souls’ language; To rid ourselves of the emotional truths that ground & sustain us; To disregard the intuitive knowledge that guides us in creating our blueprints for freedom; To neglect the insight that ancestors speak through us during moments of isolation & chaos. The ways in which we feel and breathe are constantly under siege. The imposition of white supremacist patriarchal models of expression means that our society over-values oppressive, harsh, ways of showing up in the world.⁵

A priority of *Our Everyday Forms* is to offer IBPOC individuals more ideas and language (including visual, material language) for constructing their own ways to take up space. This work upholds and supports the beauty and authority of the tacit knowledge, learning process, and convictions that marginalized and displaced IBPOC individuals already have.

This project and its process over the potential coming years will also contribute directly to my practice and thought leadership at Matter-Mind Studio. How might we better practice the holistic work, long-term vision we set out to accomplish early on? How might we expand our practice beyond the business/consultancy format we landed on in these early years? How might we actively and rigorously establish our higher-order thought leadership across disciplines?

6 Methods

Practicing with Care

I’m invested in complicating and politicizing the ways we collect and analyze data—and considering that an important part of my methodological approach. It will be especially important for me to practice research methodologies in a way that does not further traumatize participants or perpetuate to the kinds errors and pain institutionalized practices—like the ones shaped through academia—have a history of making on individuals. And therefore, will be just as important in my practice to contribute nuanced understandings for design practitioners and researchers to consider. For instance, in a conversation at The New School, film-maker Arthur Jafa sheds light on how his methods have changed as he interfaces with individuals in his art practice.

⁵ This Bridge Called Our Health, P. B. (2014, October 11). “The Sacredness of Sensitivity; Arriving At Truth in Our Hearts” By Danielle Stevens. Retrieved September 02, 2017, from <https://thisbridgecalledourhealth.wordpress.com/2014/10/11/the-sacredness-of-sensitivity-arriving-at-truth-in-our-hearts-by-danielle-stevens/>

If you point a camera at black people, on a psychoanalytical level that camera is also functioning as the white gaze even if a black person is behind the camera. So I said, 'I'm just not going to point a camera at people at all.' ... It's about surveillance ... and the whole idea that the way power is structured, it always drifts upwards... presumably going to be a representative of white power... We can't very much go forward with this whole idea of never pointing a camera at black people... I want to privilege the idea of black people being able to speak freely.⁶

How might we adapt traditional research methods and make them acutely sensitive to the context they're applied? How might power, relationship-building, trust, and vulnerability be a consistent and prominent part of how we understand research methodologies?

Scale and Intimacy

I also intend the scope of my everyday practice to be grassroots, intimate, and very tiny-scale in terms of engaging with participants of the research. In *An Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Sigmund Freud reminds us, "Let us not under-value small signs: Perhaps from them it may be possible to come upon the tracks of greater things... And then, if one may, with good fortune and virtue of the interrelationship linking each thing to every other (hence, also, the small to the great), find, even in the course of such humble labour, a road to the study of the great problems."

Context for 'Everyday Practice': The approach for demonstrating the thesis

IBPOC millennials in New York City

Within this group, many individuals are particularly self-aware, active, and open about their efforts to resist assimilation, have a strong community, and participate in regular self-care rituals. The knowledge about our history, inter-cultural, and trans-generational trauma and displacement directly informs our community-building and personal care practices. These individuals are part of the Asian/Pacific, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin-American diaspora, and Indigenous community in the United States.

Migrants in Turin, northern Italy

Italy is currently riddled with a heightened "migrant problem" that is racially and economically charged. Immigrants, migrants and refugees in Italy that may be of focus within this project are from Senegal, North Africa, and Peru—with relatively large and geographically close-knit communities in the city of Turin.

These two groups possibly represent two points on the same spectrum when it comes to displacement and marginalization—both steeped and directly impacted by white supremacist systems and cultures. *Our Everyday Forms* explores the way individuals learn to cope both steadily across generations and in a one-off ad hoc manner. Together, these case studies may give me more varied opportunities to explore these two loosely defined environments for learning to cope.

⁶ bell hooks and Arthur Jafa Discuss Transgression in Public Spaces at The New School (2014, October 16). Retrieved September 02, 2017, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe-7ILSKSog>