

# deem



Generative Practices in Knowledge Production with LAUREN HALSEY,  
DORI TUNSTALL, MONA CHALABI, ACTIVATION RESIDENCY, and more.

# ON THE NECESSARY LABOR OF THINKING WITH

BY NORA N. KHAN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
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## 1.

Teaching online mounts a profound challenge to one's pedagogy, values, and position. Each day I log on, I wonder if I can eschew the grip of technological solutions, which seduce me into default modes of interaction. How can I critically activate digital spaces through pedagogical styles that refuse to enact the modes of passive surveillance and capture embedded in platforms, software, and tools? As a critic of technology, these are questions that keep me up each night. As an educator in an art and design school, it is necessary, hard labor to resist implied defaults in technology, in education, in the arts. "Going online for now" has put all the unsustainable aspects of the culture of arts pedagogy starkly in relief. Sourcing the energy to critique the apparatus of higher education, especially art education, is becoming more difficult. The desire to default is like an undertow. From the worship of genius and mastery to the encroachment of neoliberal, technocratic values into the very terms of evaluation, production, and thinking, one might ask, *What else can an art school be? What else must it be?*

I teach writing and critical theory, research, and criticism to artists and designers. We read, we watch, we write, and we discuss. This year, my teaching practice has been, along with that of many, forced to change. I have had unexpected space to reorient and evolve. Once we got over the grief, as teachers, we moved swiftly, putting in hundreds of hours to convert our courses and materials, to meet students to discuss *the other things*, to be present as much as possible. I tried to gather students more around principles and methods we decide to enact and uphold collectively, rather than dispersing information and content down to them from some imagined,

*"How can I critically activate digital spaces through pedagogical styles that refuse to enact the modes of passive surveillance and capture embedded in platforms, software, and tools?"*

shaky pinnacle. The interface, in its way, demands this change. The Zoom classroom is a flattened one, with an unfortunate emphasis on rough visual capture. And the task of "capturing" 15–25 people across a grid to glean the "feeling" of a whole class, let alone nuanced shifts in individual attention and feeling, is unforgiving.

A meme has emerged this year, that crops up at midterms and finals: *There is no tired like distance*

*learning tired*. I felt I needed to try to evolve past pre-set methods of capture and assessment, in which seeing translates to understanding and the legibility of an idea translates to success. This is not to laud opacity or illegibility; in ways, much student work was the strongest I've seen this year; books were written and theses created, and the thinking was brilliant, beyond what many thought possible. Many of us, teachers included, were surprised by what we were capable of.

## 2.

Once I gave up the myth of replication of the physical classroom, I used the principle of prototyping and recoding. An online class is modular and so time within it becomes a matter of choreography. I moved to a practice of thinking *with* which is another kind of necessary labor, the dimensions of which I would like to explore here. I gave up trying to track people's facial tics and gestures to glean their meaning or trace their productivity through unforgiving metrics in a pandemic.

My responsibility, instead, was to make way for what the space of disembodied meeting makes possible. In it, we project ourselves into a third space, meeting in language. We already spend days replying and engaging with people we will never meet, who we only know through written ideas, statements, and arguments.

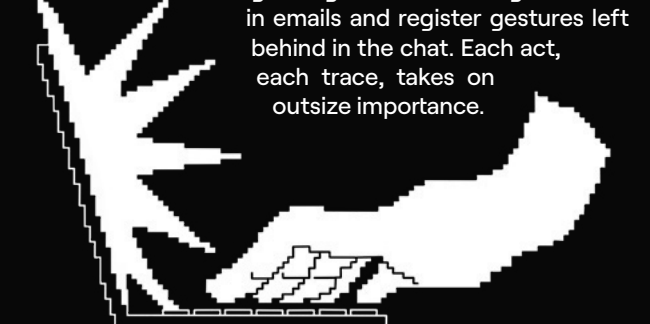
The *thinking with* that can happen in this space is profound. We are able to perform, try on positions, annotate ourselves, assemble the knowledge that we actually need. Loosened, our minds meet in this space of play, even as the smoothness of the interface atomizes us.

I had to learn better rituals for maintenance and for cultivation of presence. In my thesis writing class, students created stunning 'digital altars' each week, bringing meaningful totems as writing inspiration. One student read tarot for conjuring and framing the whole process. These gestures changed the space. I created meditation scores and we wrote to the simulated sound of artificial rain and seas on YouTube. Acutely aware of others' fatigue, and of my own, I now triple-consider what I write and say over the screens. I am more conscious of how small offhand comments linger. I try to speak with intention or not at all. Zoom time is not a place

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to riff, filling the room and other people's heads with one's own digressive thoughts. I know I should take up less space, not more. Perhaps the professor should fade away altogether.

Further, I sense the immense pressure placed on legible, represented expression in a graphical interface, and how that blinds me to what I do not read or see or hear. Being online makes less room for non-verbal and non-written communication; intellectual spaces are mediated through official scripts, bureaucratic rules of engagement, timelines. Obligation, fear, and shame seem poor if effective motivators. I have to instead trust in the disembodied knowledge and learning taking place. I must let go of my love of eloquence and be conscious of what I praise and valorize—beautiful media and cunning designs. That is to say: everyone is finding the language that works for them, and my role is to meet their language and to sense the limits of my hearing. There are many ways to express, manifest, and make one's thoughts legible. I note changes in tone



in emails and register gestures left behind in the chat. Each act, each trace, takes on outsize importance.

## 3.

A temporary contract is established when we meet others in these ephemeral online spaces, constructed and suspended between us for a limited time. The frame's flattening, on one hand, helps one meet others as peers. No matter the institutional space or the titles we carry, each interlocutor is one's peer, not "my student." They do not exist in any hierarchy in relation to me. One is not above them or beyond them, not in that precise, pure moment of exchange. We all share a familiar frame. But the frame also demands we reimagine and mark difference, too, and hold it in mind. I have to battle the simulated neutrality of the interface and remind myself of the facts of racialized and gendered and classed experience that are alive for each person in each tiny Zoom box. I have to work internally to honor the gift of what they offer as coming directly from their set of experiences, values, and talents, within the context of this moment's limits. I cannot revert to default.

4.

The change in the classroom's tempo and textures has allowed us to think of our dissatisfaction with what the embodied classroom was. Each aspect is thrown up for debate when brought online. For one, I see more artists and designers contest the myth of the "neutral" or blank slate of virtual spaces. We bring ourselves, our histories, to any supposedly pure space. There is no pure space. There is widespread re-evaluation of the ways the "hard-core critique" of art school studios embed vague and unspoken metrics of qualification that clearly are there, as they are felt in devastating ways. I see more impatience with implied standards of objective truth, of the superiority of one aesthetic over another, of preferred or canonical traditions of making and design. As these debates about neutrality and objectivity are waged, we need to actively note and deconstruct such myths that come into the classroom, turn *with* students to examine presets, and ask, "what do we need in their place?"

I often hear faculty express bitter annoyance when anyone online chooses to keep their videos off, demanding instead that they be present. This is a more aggressive mapping of physical expectations for legibility onto the digital space, which snuffs its potential. What presence can we demand at this moment? What if we dove into considering the desire and thinking of someone who doesn't want to be seen? Rather than interpreting the choice as disrespect, one might see it as overwhelm or a pause from a relentless demand for legibility. Possibility opens up once we refuse the idea of default visual capture and think through other ways to show presence. This demands that teachers reconsider what is the precise type of presence they *need* in a classroom. Perhaps it should just be enough that students engage mentally and absorb ideas as they can and as they desire.

5.

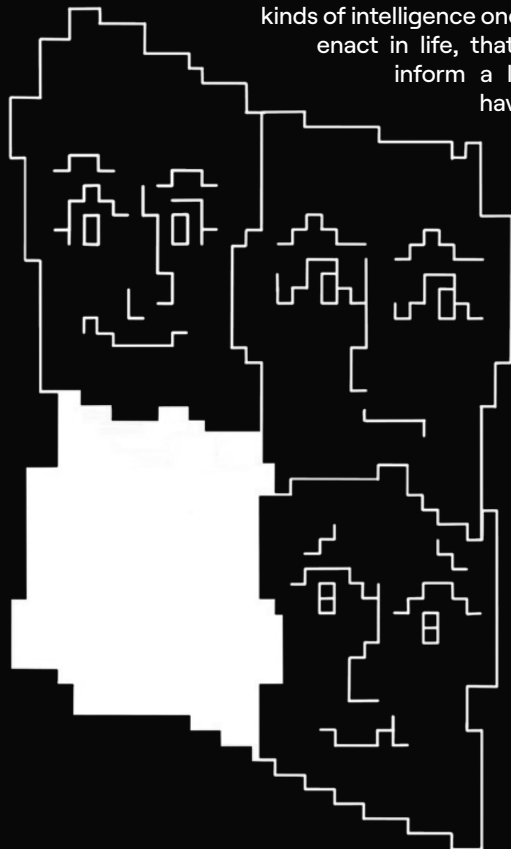
In a recent writing group, our group leader asked for our first memories of making. My sharp memory is of getting in trouble in second grade. I forget what I did, but the consequence remains: I could not go to the "zoo parade" in our town. I was left completely alone in detention, in our classroom, in a colonial-era schoolhouse in Norfolk, Virginia. I cried, then I wrote an illustrated story in which I went to the parade, saw the elephants and tigers and giraffes, and had a fantastic day with everyone. My teachers were stunned that I made use of the time to imagine myself into a better story. I imagine they thought it was almost better that they weren't there, hovering, that good things can happen when they let go.

6.

When I was in high school, the art room was my refuge. The art room was led by Mr. Percy. He was known by all for the space that he gave: what felt like infinite space to think freely, to experiment, and to play. The art room was an oasis for all of my strange, unwieldy ideas that did

not fit in any other classroom. I now realize that his room was a place to invent and nurture a new model. Even though we studied the lives of artists and writers in our literature courses, in my own life there was no clear path to making a creative life, no immediate footsteps to follow in that I knew of. They may have been there in the past, but they are obscured in the erasure of exile and the violent restart of joining diaspora. As time went on, I learned I would have to invent such a life in the absence of models. Each time art students gather I now see as a chance for model creation. I draw from my own experience, sharing how that model must often be rendered in spite of art education. I outline some rules: I will not obfuscate the unsustainable facts of the MFA structure or dare suggest that the crippling debt is worth it. I will not be evasive about the sacrifices or the labor that a creative life involves. I will describe how art and writing can help imagine futures in which we thrive, and live with dignity in. I will account for how art and writing saved my mind and life, gave me the world, gave me language to acknowledge the past, to break ground, to extricate myself from evaluative systems in which I am not valid. I will stress stories of thinking and making outside academies while still inside them. In these ways, a classroom can prepare one for the reality of practicing art in the world, not an idealized version of what it should be or was for others whose lives are at total odds with our own.

Teaching's deep responsibility is to think with the complexity of personal history that goes on inside and outside the classroom. It is to understand what goes often unseen, to name all the other kinds of intelligence one can enact in life, that can inform a life. I have to



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students have or have not had.

I need to know that some have no sup-

port, or worse yet, a family hostile to their being

here. Their presence in the classroom may seem

a gamble to everyone in their lives. Some might have

no one to speak to about what they make, while others

have several generations of wealth and famous artists,

designers, and writers to call mentors.

*Thinking with* might mean that together we re-evaluate each metric that has both protected us and kept us from making new models that resist extractive forms of capitalism. These include sure praise for high performance and an obsession with success as determinant of self-worth. It may mean praising highly legible work—work that makes sense—as effective and good, valuations which imply one should mostly use conceptually legible forms.

There is great power in affirming the illegible, in sharing a student's curiosity about what's not evident, what does not yet have a name. As a companion with their thinking, I must encourage the thought, not let it disappear. There is fire in valuing intuition and the ability to articulate nuance of feeling. There is intellectual value in keen perception, which tells you what you want, where you want to share your energy, which questions you want to pursue.

1  
Letters: *The Classroom is Burning, Let's Dream About a School of Improper Education*, by KUNCI Study Forum & Collective, was published by Ugly Duckling Presse in 2020. My copy cited is an advance reader copy. The book can be found at: <https://uglyducklingpresse.org/publications/this-country-is-burning-lets-dream-about-a-school-of-improper-education/>.

2  
Like many educators and individuals in para-institutional spaces who are avid readers and enactors of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's concept of *study* as informal practice, KUNCI has sought ways to activate and create spaces for study since 1999. Unsurprisingly, Harney offers praise to KUNCI's new book, suggesting it shows how "revolutionary" study can be, how we might learn to "live together in the richness of our general antagonism."

3  
Juliastuti's chapter appears in *Forces of Art: Perspectives from a Changing World*, published by Valiz and supported by three foundations: Hivos, Prince Claus Fund, and the European Cultural Foundation.

4  
*Forces of Art*, page 308.

7.

A recent "story advertisement" has flooded my Instagram feed, about the historic struggle for gay rights and gay marriage in Finland. My algorithm has been good to me. A Finnish man in his 70s reflects on his partnership and marriage. He describes himself as both a romantic but also an operative. He was like an agent, enacting instructions towards an elevated goal, in a practiced fashion. He describes how the terms created dual roles. They helped hold onto love while also committing to a political movement, which requires strategic maneuvering. These

They build scaffolds up and out of a hostile monolith, out of polished marble tombs."

two words—*romantic* and *operative*—have stayed in my head. I imagine romantic operatives as agents toiling at the dream, in spaces within or alongside power. Romantic operatives clutch still to some ideal of trust, equity, or love that will be essential for new futurities. They build scaffolds up and out of a hostile monolith, out of polished marble tombs.

Many big university libraries look like cenotaphs, like mausoleums. There are long stairways to scale. Inside, they are cold and unwelcoming. I see many romantic operatives in their halls, in the stacks, pulling out pages from the archives. Romantic operatives are crafting strategies in covert meetings, heated discussion, working through theory to write manuals for assembling. They are writing and building a way outside of the walls of the institution.

8.

Burning classrooms in burning countries. When I first received a draft of KUNCI Study Forum & Collective's new book, the title read, *Letters: This Country is Burning, Let's Dream of a School of Improper Education*.<sup>1</sup> Once published, the first half of the title became *This Classroom is Burning, Let's...* Both titles seemed fit: the country and the classroom are both burning. Maybe the burning of the classroom is quieter, but its dissipation holds big clues to why the world is breaking and in what ways. For two decades, KUNCI has been creating methods for "collective study." In 2016, they established the School of Improper Education, which espouses unlearning as a mode through which artists can question established knowledge and center an ongoing, active debate on methods of schooling as they are used.<sup>2</sup>

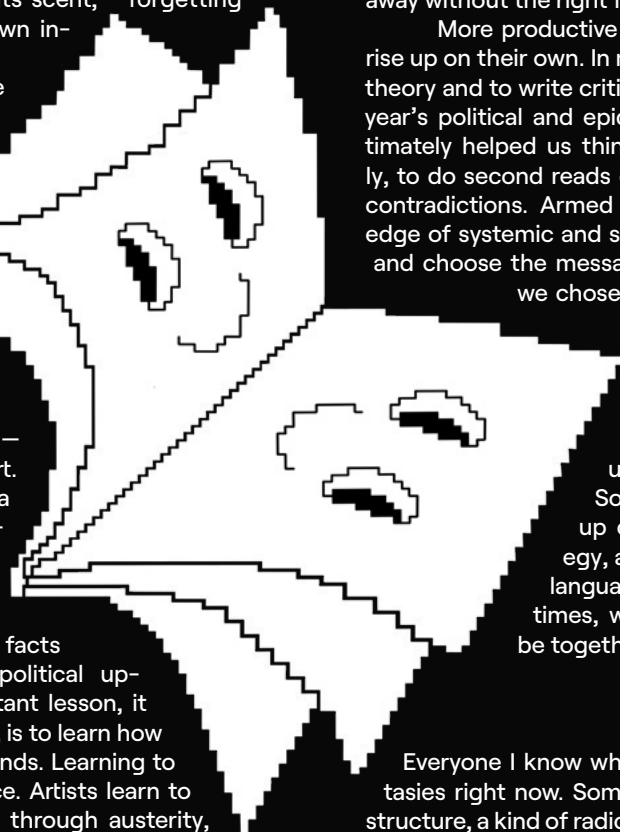
Earlier this year, I got to know Nuraini Juliastuti, one KUNCI's co-founders. I was an editor of a book in which they had written a chapter.<sup>3</sup> Juliastuti's contribution centered on collective learning and free education in Arte Moris and Tiny Toones: "free schools" in Timor Leste and Cambodia, respectively. Throughout, Juliastuti beautifully formalizes her notion of "*the studying-turn*," a concept of study "in between what we can do and what we fail to do," as a "readiness to accept the condition in which the future does not always lead to an expected outcome."<sup>4</sup> Editing, I was electrified, feeling the defi-



nition of artistic practice opening up again, as it might from time to time. I wanted to be near these artist collectives with no interest in producing works as salable objects, interested instead in activating artistic research, critical theory, and political organizing through the act of living together. When I read about Oulipo or Fluxus, I often wonder, where are the wild radical teachers of our time? Juliastuti and KUNCI surely are radical in our time, a powerful example of the para-institutional pedagogies that emerge from artistic practice.

In contrast, setting up little stations to teach at, on unsteady tables in poor light, neck and back pain out of control, I was struck by how distant this style of pedagogy felt from the radical joy and lightness of learning. So little of what we were teaching had to do with well-being and mental health, or risk, or the wild and unstable world outside school. The training was really about working harder, no matter what, and hitting one's marks, no matter what. It seemed inevitable students would suffer or be totally put off the winding road to artistic practice. Worsening things, some professors needed to recreate the power dynamics of the embodied classroom and became more rigid in their expectations, weighing on students to perform. Despite all official university statements about showing radical generosity, I saw a double down on hustle and grind culture. Those who dazzled in critiques were congratulated for their overwork, as they always had been congratulated. They had grit, mettle. We share lists of top 30 under 30 *absolutely killing it in a pandemic*. Avoiding any result that looks like failure, one begins to cringe at its scent, forgetting the process and one's own instructive failures.

Juliastuti stresses that the acts of space maintenance, of house-keeping, of informal hanging out and being intentionally present—acts often misunderstood or overlooked as being of peripheral importance—are foundational for art. Art is both practice and a support system, a collective space. The education that artists make possible is one that is responsive to the sure facts of present social and political upheaval. “The most important lesson, it seems, for being an artist, is to learn how to survive,” her chapter ends. Learning to survive is creative practice. Artists learn to survive through hostility, through austerity, through disbelief.



## 9.

These lines about creative survival sank into my core right as the first lockdown was turning the corner of its third week. There was a desperate need for flexibility here: to teach in a way that accounted for survival, that could tell the story of all the ways creative practice can navigate uncertainty, can teach us how to live. I felt silly, at points, to be talking about artist statements or research methodologies, to be asking anyone to *articulate their position*. What position could be sure of except one of flux and doubt? How could students justify this mad financial risk? How did they live before and what would happen after? What was it all for?

My first semester teaching, I saw students set up sleeping cots in their studios. I would see this “practice” repeated for the next few years. I wasn’t quite sure where they precisely had learned that they needed to sacrifice their health to become a great designer or a great artist (that word, *great*, again). It could only come from the culture of the school. In this past year, pursuit of greatness felt unforgivably boring and predictable and much like denial. However, I find it hard to say things like, carefully curated signals of mastery will do nothing to keep you safe. I can’t say, you can make your website an Excel spreadsheet of institutions, appointments, and names of those who vouched for you, but you will need so much more than prestige marquees and perfectly curated biographies. Publishing in all the right places and going to all the right schools will not prevent it all being taken away without the right family name, origin, look.

More productive was allowing these thoughts to rise up on their own. In my classes, our purpose—to read theory and to write criticism—could easily be tied to the year’s political and epidemiological crises. Criticism ultimately helped us think together, to listen intelligently, to do second reads of the university’s demands and contradictions. Armed with a shared historical knowledge of systemic and structural inequity, we could pick and choose the messages we would accept, the trust we chose to invest. We asked each other, what futures are we modeling? Are these futures ever more paths to being diligent, good, serviceable intellectuals and creatives? Criticism helped us hold space for personal risk. Sometimes, we were able to take up criticism as a decentering strategy, as a way to listen together to the language beyond the institution. Other times, we stayed quiet, content to just be together.

## 10.

Everyone I know who teaches has one of a few fantasies right now. Some want an alternative education structure, a kind of radical schoolhouse where one might offer new learnings beyond extraction and capitalist log-

ics, or they want to leave everything for a home in the woods, off the grid. There they dream of a learning style that is firmly outside the reach of technocratic aims, one that is resistant to or at least openly questioning of neoliberal values. A place for thinking beyond production, beyond shaping good creative workers.<sup>5</sup> A place to abandon narrating one’s artistic life as tidy entries towards a sure end. A place to take up the intellectual path as a series of unanswerable questions that are iterated and refined through the arc of one’s life.

Others share dreams in notes and letters filled with long backwards glances, peering at hazy moments of genesis when they found art, when art was the place where they felt they could freely do what had no other name. Linger, digress, work without a goal, fail, and be slow. Learning is trusted to come indirectly, through relation and experience, as much as from any manifesto of principles of good design and creative practice. Their imagined future sounds, to me, a bit like a schoolhouse in a lush, remote wild. The schoolhouse for wasting time.

When I was in second grade detention, imagining the parade unfolding in the world, my joy was sourced in being doubly illegitimate: first cast out from the parade, and then, in that space of punishment, not asking for permission to write and draw. Where else, except in such a projected, simulated, fantastic space could the dream of art unfold and its power—to disrupt both my present and future—make itself known? No one had asked me to do a thing in detention except to wait. Art holds the third space for the possibility of work that has no legitimacy. This illegitimate work continues through illegitimate means, whether we are on Zoom or out in the field.

## 11.

Composer Élane Radigue’s “The Mysterious Power of the Infinitesimal” is a breathless two pages, in which the genius of experimental music speaks of how the “crackling, roaring, howling and growling, the noises of life,” have changed into “coordinated sounds and with reflection, become a language,” over millions of years. It is a piece about enchantment, about the creation of form, music:

<sup>5</sup> In *Letters*, interlocutor Sulastris Nirvana Trimurti, a researcher and writer, remarks, “Actually, I often asked myself the same thing—what would I do if I worked in a university? To be really honest, I never really see the university as an appropriate place to nurture the imagination of an intellectual.” Page 2 of Advanced Reader Proof.

<sup>6</sup> Élane Radigue, *The Mysterious Power of the Infinitesimal*. (The MIT Press: Leonardo Music Journal, Vol. 19, Our Crowd—Four Composers Pick Composers, 2009), pages 47–49.

*I dreamt of an unreal, impalpable music appearing and fading away like clouds in a blue summer sky. Frolicking in the high mountain valleys around the wind, and grey rocks and trees, like white run-aways. This particular music, that always eluded me. Each attempt ended in seeing it come closer and closer but remain un-*

*reachable, only increasing the desire to try again and yet again to go a bit further. It will always be better the next time. How can sounds or words transcribe this imperceptibly slow transformation occurring during every instant and that only an extremely attentive and alert eye can sometimes perceive, the movement of a leaf, a stalk, a flower propelled by the life that makes it grow? How to know a little, just a very little, simply to try, to train oneself to look better in order to see, to listen better in order to hear and to know these transient moments of being there, only there?*

*... I have known the enchantment of discovery by forgetting all I had learned, I have of course also encountered doubt, denial, and the feeling of absurdity during long years ...<sup>6</sup>*



The art school classroom, the studio, is still a place you can speak with someone about a kind of impulse like Radigue’s, to pursue the sound or sight or world that eludes, to find mediation of an infinite, to train oneself to capture a sensation, a thought, an insight. Here, there’s no perceived naïveté or shame in speaking of the infinite, of hidden sensations, of the unimaginable. These are moments that really need to be fought for.

Radigue says she rediscovered wonder only in “forgetting all [she] had learned.” To get to forget with someone is a matter of maintaining space, of holding up the walls for that forgetting to take place in. This is the labor of thinking with others about the unknown. The search for this forgetting is on a long timescale; it may take time to find others to think with about the mad leap, trusting that an unreal music is there, that the words that elude can be found. I just know that once I caught a glimpse, I felt compulsively drawn to acknowledge the glimpses of others right when they find themselves in touch with the unimaginable, the wild. To say, I know what you are talking about; I have been there and I can meet you there.

I hope to suggest that this disembodied education moment is an opportunity to slow down, to listen to what’s being unsaid, in order to forge the artistic life that universities insist is on offer to us all, in the same way, with just enough effort. Moving into my final semester, I will be trying my best to unlearn and to invite others to unlearn with me. I will keep trying to think with, as a way to hold that space of unknown language, unknown sights, unknown sounds. ●

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