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“Love is calling”: Academic friendship and international research collaboration amid a global pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In this intervention we desire to document and celebrate our own international research collaboration as an intimate long-distance relationship that sustains us amid a global pandemic of the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. We share “love letter” poems that we wrote to each other, in response to a poem by Yayoi Kusama titled “Residing in a Castle of Shed Tears,” incorporated into her mirror room installation “Love is Calling.” In our discussion we reflect upon the emotional connections that sustain academic researchers, particularly those relationships that extend beyond national boundaries and conventional heteronormative expectations.

1. Introduction

In the best of times, international research collaboration necessitates maintaining a long-distance relationship between academic colleagues who may see each other in person perhaps only once or twice per year. Now, amid a global pandemic, international research partnerships are under strain as individual academics struggle to cope with uncertainty and vulnerability at home and at work, and as international travel is suspended by governmental mandates. As academic researchers, we are forced to prioritize our own survival and basic needs as our universities shutter their doors and suspend campus-based research programs indefinitely. Under “physical distancing” prescribed by the World Health Organization and local public health experts as a method to contain the spread of COVID-19, much of our academic lives have migrated to online platforms. Yet, familiar relationships endure during these transitions, providing valuable perspectives as we try to make sense of what is happening globally. Academics who have built trusted relationships with colleagues across national borders may in fact find that their “closest” friends in this crisis are the most geographically distant ones.

In this creative intervention we desire to document and celebrate our own international research collaboration as an intimate long-distance relationship that sustains us within these troubling times. As the academic environment becomes all the more tenuous due to the spread of the novel coronavirus, we situate ourselves within an academic relationship that is mutually constituted, supportive, and self-referential. If academic friendships are “the ‘glue’ for international interactions” and “help faculty to establish trust, spark the motivation to work together and help them to overcome hurdles” (Zippel, 2019, p. 1801), the bond we have formed through research collaboration is now seeing us through problems of an entirely different sort.

The phrase “Love is Calling” in our title references an art installation by Yayoi Kusama that we witnessed together at the Tampa Museum of Art in November 2018, during a conference trip and research meeting. A central component of the art exhibit was the poem “Residing in a Castle of Shed Tears.” Kusama’s artwork inspired us to write poems as “love letters” to each other, describing the nature of our academic friendship, which we now share in this intervention. Our experience offers an opportunity to reflect upon the emotional connections that sustain academic researchers, in good times and bad, particularly emphasizing the value of close relationships that extend beyond national boundaries and conventional heteronormative expectations.

2. Together and apart in the art gallery

We began writing this essay during the pandemic lockdown of early 2020. Amid our seclusion, we longed to be together, seeking the comfort of our enduring friendship, dismayed by the events unfolding around us. Accustomed to expressions of affection not typically afforded to men and women in the heteronormative academic workplace, our cross-gender, “queer friendship” (Rumens, 2012) provides us an emotional safety-net amid an increasingly impersonal and dispassionate academic...
context (Cronin, 2014; Muraco, 2006; Rumens, 2008). Our relationship, existing somewhere in the space between “queer kinship” and “intentional family,” offers a protective embrace unlike many other workplace relationships, especially reassuring in times of distress (Prasad, 2020). In the early days of the pandemic we cherished our online conversations and reminisced about an intimate artistic encounter we experienced together while attending a conference in Tampa years earlier.

We recalled being immersed in Kusama’s Infinity Mirror Room “Love is Calling,” a space of many colours, reflected light, and dots. Compression and expansion of time and space could be read in the quotation by the artist that greeted us at the entrance of the exhibit: “Dots are symbols of the world, the cosmos. The Earth is a dot, the moon, the sun, the stars are all made up of dots. You and me, we are dots.” Long known for her ability to shatter social expectations through staging transgressive, affective and naked “happenings,” Kusama’s more recent Infinity Mirror Rooms speak to our desire for connection within an individualistic and technologically-mediated culture (Jerrett-Poole and Brophy, 2020; Kennell, 2019). M Yoshitake (2017) noted that “…Kusama has been deeply invested in working at both a microscopic and cosmological scale, creating works in which the simultaneous experience of intimate compression and epic expansion of the body in space remains a constant feature” (p. 14). In her autobiography, Kusama stated, “My desire was to predict and measure the infinity of the unbounded universe, from my own position in it, with dots—an accumulation of particles forming the negative spaces in the net” (Kusama, 2011, p. 23).

Kusama’s experiments with “embodied time” hold greater meaning for us now as we become more aware of the viral consequences of hypermobility, migrating toward digital-only encounters with co-workers and extended relations (Cronin, 2015; Koerner, 2017). From the standpoint of the COVID-19 crisis, Kusama’s mirror room represents the impermanence of our lives, human interconnection, and the technological facilitation of human-to-human contact. As friends and collaborators, we are like the reflections created within Kusama’s enclosure: both far away and moving closer at the same time, as it often seems in our work-at-a-distance. The push-pull of our present condition is literally mirrored in the artwork, accentuated by the artist’s vision, in which, “Two extremes—infinity and nothingness—are held together by polka dots. Both are absolute; neither can be confirmed given the finitude of corporeality of human beings. Infinity and nothingness must be imagined …” (Dumbadze, 2017, p. 126).

Reflecting on our shared experience in the Tampa Museum of Art years ago, we now recognize it as a prefiguration of the reality of our present separation; computer screens become our “meeting rooms” and our next in-person encounter is indefinitely postponed. Our friendship exists within the suspended animation of data packages traveling back and forth in the electronic ether between us. We are not alone in this (r)emit existence. We cannot imagine what will emerge from this period of physical isolation and separation, for ourselves or for the world at large.

### 3. Letting academic guards down: love letters and shed tears

The installation “Love is Calling” includes a sound recording of Kusama reading her poem “Residing in a Castle of Shed Tears” in Japanese. An English translation of the poem was affixed on the gallery wall outside of the Infinity Mirror Room in Tampa, to be read before entering. The poem begins with the following stanza:

> When the time comes around for people to encounter the end of their life having put on years, death seems to be quietly approaching
> It was not supposed to be my style to be frightened of that, but I am
> In the shadows of my loved ones footprints, distress revisits me at the dead of night refreshing my memories

Being in love with and longing for you, I have locked myself up in this “castle of shed tears” Now may be the time for me to wander off into the place, the guidepost to the otherworld points to And the sky is waiting for me, attended by numerous clouds

Re-reading this excerpt in a time of outbreak and “viral modernity” (Peters et al., 2020) provides another interpretation of human fragility and mortality. Life expectancy and our expectations of life are shifted in the face of this global pandemic. It is clear that our interpersonal connections are both necessary and dangerous, rewriting the script of the human experience. Considering all that we have lost, in a global sense, we do dwell within castles of shed tears. The opposite is also true: “to speak of death, you have to be alive” (Baudrillard, 2006, p. 13).

Kusama’s poem ends with the line “This is my message of love to you.” Building upon our shared interest in creative writing and artistic expression, we decided to write poems to each other in the style of Kusama’s, reflecting on our experiences of international collaboration, its dislocations, and the friendship that resides in the spaces between us. We wrote our “love letters” as an extended response to the Kusama exhibit, and shared them with each other while on opposite North American coastlines, thousands of miles away. This is how we usually work, inhabiting different time zones but sporadically catching glimpses of one another in “real time” through textual appearances within a shared manuscript on Google Docs. These days, this is how we most frequently relate with each other “face to face”: smiling at the screen or choking up with tears in front of it. We made an appointment with each other to gather before our laptop screens to see the letters of our poems being typed within a Google document in real-time, breaking the false wall of asynchrony within our collaboration by acknowledging that we share our thoughts in a time-space that transcends our respective locations.

Kusama’s “Love is Calling” provided the impetus for a more affective appreciation of our collaboration and friendship, now in its seventh year. After sharing our love letters with each other, we debriefed extensively via videocall. We reminisced about our first encounter, a conference, as mentioned in our poetry. We shared with each other nuances of our friendship that we had not previously acknowledged, while we re-read emails previously exchanged to help us better remember the exact sequence of our first experiences together. Surfacing our academic friendship as a central aspect of our collaboration made evident the initial fragility of a relationship we have grown used to, even if not taken for granted. Our shared vulnerabilities contribute to our capacities for intellectual risk-taking, and to the support we can offer each other as we lightly tread toward research topics with emotional resonance for us personally (see Blanco Ramírez, 2017).

We include the full text of these love letters below, in the hope that our shared intimacy may prompt others to acknowledge the significance of the academic friendships in their own lives.

#### 3.1. Taking off together

Time to move on, we have always known when that time comes Despite what they say, we always move away from something
Somewhere between refugees and jetsetters
Have we even spent a month together?
Your words matter, I care about the visual for the way you see me
I fear seeing my reflection on you
At once ashamed and delighted, horrified, by the stamps on my passport
I often go places we are not supposed to
You are the mirrors in my room, the ones that create infinity
We write about belonging, grounding—like the trees in your research
We write about the pain we see, and the pain we feel when others aren’t looking
“I am very fond of your work”.
We are team North America, not-American
“I hope you remember me; I had the pleasure of being discussant for one of your papers”.
I strive for meaning but I worry I may settle for visibility
Seeing my reflection on your surface, I dare to see myself in another light
I hope you see yourself the way I see you, “looking up” is not enough
I thought I first saw you in America where I was Mexican
I visited you in Canada, when you were American
The smell of rubber and tires in a hangar is one of my earliest memories

3.2. Love is calling for you

Becoming with is a rejection of the possibility of becoming without Stardust and dreams
Now as I am nearer to the end of this path I see that very little matters much
Except seeing space in-between as interstellar
You did not know that you found me in my darkest time
Being away from my family meant that I was not there
When their living began and ended
We move to be and provide, but find that we are unable and without
And then you said, let’s talk about something else than what everyone is saying
Let’s speak about what it means to love elsewhere
In a workplace where rejection is common, hope can be self-destructive
Yet without hope we have no self
And then you said, Let’s share our hopes for each other
And as self became selves, we began to create in the ether in-between.
Watching your words form on the page thousands of miles away
I hear your voice and see you clearly
Being apart is now being a part of something beyond my separation
This must be how it was before us, before the isolation of time
Before hope for the world was nearly impossible
This is my message of love to you.

3.3. Attended by numerous clouds

The move to remote academic work calls into question just what is “international” about our “cross-border” collaboration, normalizing the distance between us relative to other academic relationships. Through our “love letters” we see how our friendship sustains us even as we struggle to maintain connections with colleagues and friends nearby, due to physical distancing and other pandemic restrictions. Our expressions of mutual affection do not make us immune to COVID-19, yet we find comfort in these gestures at a time when the mental health implications of this pandemic cannot be understated (Pfefferbaum and North, 2020). In response to the pandemic, our personal and professional lives have merged into one under state-regulated quarantines and institutional “work from home” mandates, as gender and racial disparities within the academic workplace intensify (Oleschuk, 2020; Wright et al., 2020). We join video calls with our intimate family surroundings visible in the background, lifting the veil that previously existed between our domestic and professional worlds. These revelations of personhood beyond the academic persona have the potential to disrupt carefully constructed academic identities and gendered expectations, contributing to “role stress” and professional insecurity in already tenuous circumstances (Blanco Ramírez & Palu-ay, 2015; Canto et al., 2010; Padilla and Johnson, 2016). The pandemic exposes our profession’s poor record of work-life balance and equity, calling for a new “ethics of care” within academia (Cobera et al., 2020).

The pandemic has intensified the need to reflexively examine these everyday realities. In times like these, it is a relief to be able to rely upon academic friendships where we can be less guarded, permitting a form of “productivity” that is compatible with our sense of self. Creative acts that name and affirm significant friendships in academic contexts are “disruptive practices” that might offset the otherwise debilitating and performative aspects of the masculinized and heternormative academy (Puawai Collective, 2019; Rumens, 2008, 2012, Webster and Boyd, 2019).

4. Viral postscript

In April 2020, “A Message from Yayoi Kusama to the Whole World” was released in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Brown, 2020). Ninety-one year-old Kusama, who has voluntarily lived in a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo since the 1970s, publicly faces her mortality in the face of the outbreak as she has explored cosmological connections in her art. In her poetic message, she states, “It is time to seek a hymn of love for our souls” and continues by saying:

Embraced in deep love and the efforts of people all over the world
Now is the time to overcome, to bring peace
We gathered for love and I hope to fulfil that desire
The time has come to fight and overcome our unhappiness
Drawing upon our experiences of viewing Kusama’s art together in person and communicating remotely during this period of extended isolation, we are moved by her recent message and call to love. We continue to write with and apart from one another, seeking a “hymn of love for our souls,” in the expectation that we will all someday soon be reunited.

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