

A Review of Loveless's (2019) How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation

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Article abstract

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A REVIEW OF LOVELESS'S (2019) *HOW TO MAKE ART AT THE END OF THE WORLD: A MANIFESTO FOR RESEARCH-CREATION*

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Abstract: This piece is a review of Natalie Loveless's *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (2019). Poetic responses frame a more traditionally structured review. In her book, Loveless draws upon a diverse combination of theories to collage an argument for a care-full ethic in the increasingly neoliberal university. Her manifesto positions research-creation as an opportunity to reframe the narrative of research and pedagogy by going beyond what we study and attend to questions of how and why.

Keywords: research-creation; poetic response; pedagogy; higher education; interdisciplinary, review

Being Read at the End of the World

Air rushes beneath my cover
 when the weight of my peers is lifted.
 Warm hand clutches
 my stiff, uncreased spine.

Is this it?
 From the stack by the doorframe,
 I am carried. Gingerly placed
 on the lilac coffee table
 upon which I have gazed for months.
 Is this my time?

Flick!

Not tonight.

Golden hour peeks through frosted glass,
 hope wrapped in the heavy thud
 of sleepy footsteps.
 No rush, no impatient cries from feline

companions. Warm hand
 on my pages this time.
 Ball point ink tickles margins and we sink
 into the sofa

together. Four mornings,
 we rise with the sun.
 I am creased, tabbed, marked,
 shared.

In 2020, the world saw unprecedented events occur as if by design, a line of dominoes set up only to fall, one after the other. In many ways, such a year epitomizes Natalie Loveless's observation, "The language of the end of the world . . . seems to be everywhere these days" (2019, p. 99). However, as Loveless addresses, the language does not necessarily indicate the end of the world, but rather the end of a world, a particular iteration of the world as we know it. In *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (2019), Loveless pulls from diverse theoretical perspectives and personal experiences to make sense of and argue for research-creation as a means for opening possibilities—perhaps a new world—in university settings.

In an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion, together spanning just over one hundred pages, Loveless not only seamlessly engages with a variety of theoretical stances but organizes them in a pedagogical manner. She scaffolds concepts from one chapter to the next, takes time to explain the etymology of words to illustrate differences in use, and utilizes frequent and diverse metaphors and pop culture references. For example, Loveless briefly discusses curiosity in the first chapter, then returns to curiosity in chapter two and offers an etymology of the word on page 47 as she places it in context of her discussion on academic disciplines (the topic of chapter 2). This book is an invitation for university educators to recognize, name, and attend to the ways in which their programs, institutions, and fields have disciplined them and their work. It is an invitation to make brave and supportive space for new ways of being in the university through radically interdisciplinary work that is not necessarily defined by a single method within a single discipline but transcends imagined borders to be recognized in multiple fields of work simultaneously.

As a junior scholar, a budding teacher educator, and an amateur artist, Loveless's manifesto is both freeing and terrifying for me. I am consistently encouraged to "write to think" and while that is a generally useful strategy in a PhD program, it's not always the most effective for me. I write to think. I also paint, dance, build sculptures, and teach to think. Sometimes, my paper is not a paper because an academic article simply is not the best way to communicate the idea at hand. I am interested in the ways doctoral students think. What do they do when working through dense texts and complex, contradictory ideas? Why is it that they do and think in so many ways, yet the university still prescribes scholarly writing, even when a beautifully written paper doesn't do the content justice in the same way another medium might have? How does that affect the way doctoral students in education go on to train preservice teachers? With this book, my research interests and the ways I exist in academia (interdisciplinary, artist, teacher) are validated and placed in conversation with theory in a way that requires acknowledgement from those who might otherwise argue that the arts are neither rigorous nor relevant.

In her introduction, Loveless positions the work and her argument for research-creation by discussing the historical conflict between art thinkers and art makers (2019, p. 12) in the increasingly neoliberal university context. She addresses the near-impossibility of new work, conceding that research-creation, even in its infancy, has in some places already been mobilized to benefit the existing structure of the university. Her work in *How to Make Art at the End of the World* is to "ask how drawing on earlier, arguably more hopeful, approaches in political art practice and the interdisciplinary humanities might offer us a road map that can be collaged into a new/old way forward" (p. 13).

Thus, Loveless writes a theoretical collage in the four main chapters of the book. As a PhD student, I have noticed scholars often "stay in their lane" theoretically. That is, there are ways some theories can be put together, but there are some theories that cannot be put together. They are epistemologically and ontologically incommensurable. Loveless draws

from several theories and disciplines, including the arts, art history, feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, and Indigenous practice. I use “collage” because the experience of reading Loveless’s work has the variety of a buffet without the nonchalant attitude. When presented with a buffet, the connotative expectation is that one takes whatever looks good in the moment without regard for how the items, once on the plate, interact. A collage as an artistic endeavor utilizes a multitude of diverse words and images with a unified and specific intention. *How to Make Art at the End of the World* is a written theoretical collage. Loveless makes intentional connections not frequently seen (in my experience) and demonstrates how they interact harmoniously.

In the first chapter, Loveless grounds her discussion on curiosity, love, and accountability in Thomas King’s *The Truth About Stories* (2003) and Donna Haraway’s *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). She argues that stories write us as much as, if not more than, we write them. Applied to universities: “Disciplines discipline us” (Loveless, 2019, p. 29). Consider an academic career as a story. Before the first sentence is written, the plot is severely restricted when a single discipline is chosen. Each field (discipline) has expectations, methods, and accepted ways of teaching and doing research. Therefore, when we begin in academia as graduate students, the possibilities for our work are immediately restricted by the field in which we work. Without exposure to alternative ways of thinking, being, and questioning, our research may be more likely to develop as efficient than innovative. In this way, the story of an academic’s career writes them as much as it is written by them. The metaphor of disciplines as stories continues into the second chapter, in which Loveless dives into the curious spaces of interdisciplinary work, situating research-creation in the uncanny as an “emergent phenomenon” (p. 51, emphasis in original). It is here where Loveless uses the work of Frayling (1993) and Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) to help situate research-creation in the world of academic production, funding, and methodological support in Canadian universities. Loveless asks how ethical work can occur when one pursues multi-modal paths and curiosities.

The question of ethical work is beautifully addressed in the fourth chapter, as Loveless conceptualizes interdisciplinary work as a polyamorous relationship. Of the theories utilized in the text, queer theory is the one I have the least experience with, and I was curious not only how polyamory is related to research-creation, but how Loveless would help me see the connections. Loveless coins the term “Polydisciplinamory” (Loveless, 2019, p. 59) as the chapter’s title. Loveless explains, “Traditional interdisciplinarity. . . could be said to be about who (which disciplines) one commits to, while research-creation, as a polydisciplinamorous orientation, becomes about how one commits to producing new kinship ties not only in terms of content (the “who”) but in terms of form (the “how”)” (p. 63, emphasis in original). Here is where her work beckons back to previous chapters, engaging the reader in questions of ethics and accessibility (What counts as knowledge and who decides?) by engaging in a critical discussion on privilege and power. In the university, monodisciplinarity is generally accepted as the only rigorous work. Not all have the privilege of speaking back

to that narrative, so those who do must recognize that polydisciplinamorous work is not a right and therefore those with privilege in the university must “speak truth to power, in power, and with power” (p. 64, emphasis in original). Research-creation allows for passionate curiosity not only to exist, but to drive research wherever it may lead. Her argument is a strong critique of a more traditional route to first choose a method, which informs the question, which slices the possibilities for curiosity razor thin.

In the final chapter before her conclusion, Loveless leans heavily on Lacan to write through the tension of research-creation as both emergent and oppositional. She utilizes Lacan’s psychoanalysis to point out that it is the condition of contingency, of limited perspectives, of blind spots, that serves as a lighter fluid to accelerate the fire of curiosity, thus driving the force of research-creation because research-creation begins with a question (rather than a method) and questions are sparked by curiosity. I identified with Loveless’s story of how she felt her drive and desire to learn was dampened by the “pedagogical mandates of elementary and high schools” (Loveless, 2019, p. 78). Curiosity is a desire to learn which manifests at a point where you know enough to ask questions but not so much that the topic is no longer interesting. In addition, our desire to learn more implies the content has somehow clasped onto us.

Loveless concludes by widening the lens from doctoral research and universities to life in the Anthropocene, and to the end of the world as we know it. The university-as-site currently exists as it does because of a particular set of conditions. Loveless nods to the pattern of recent work spelling the end of democracy, capitalism, and higher education. However, these are not discussions about the end of the world, but rather the end of the world as we know it (singing encouraged). At the end of a world, how do we make, teach, and live? Why do we make, teach, and live in the ways we do? How could we choose differently and what might happen if we did?

Through diverse theoretical entry points, personal experience, and engaging examples, Natalie Loveless calls upon the world of higher education to be more open and full-of-care, as the work in any discipline at a university is still to teach. Regardless of the field of study, what is taught—and how—is a story told in a particular manner, based in a particular history. University educators are not only responsible for what they teach, but how they teach it; they are responsible for the stories they tell. Loveless’s stance directs us to the potential for doing academia differently, for living differently.

Having Read at the End of the World

as I know it,
I’m not sure
I knew
anything
at all.

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