

Notes on a research proposal

Article

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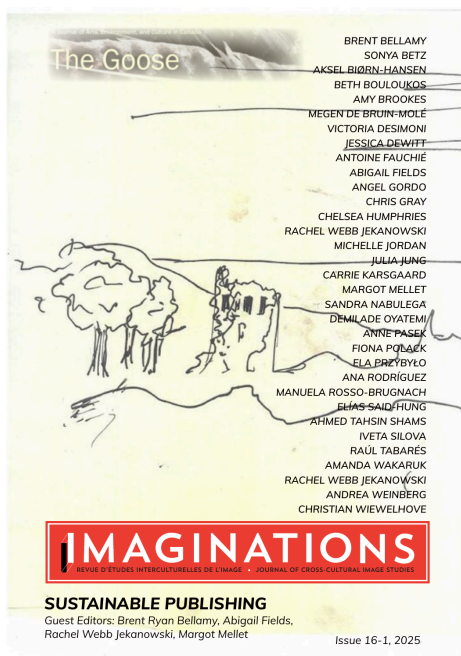
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NOTES ON A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

MEGEN DE BRUIN-MOLÉ

AMY BROOKES

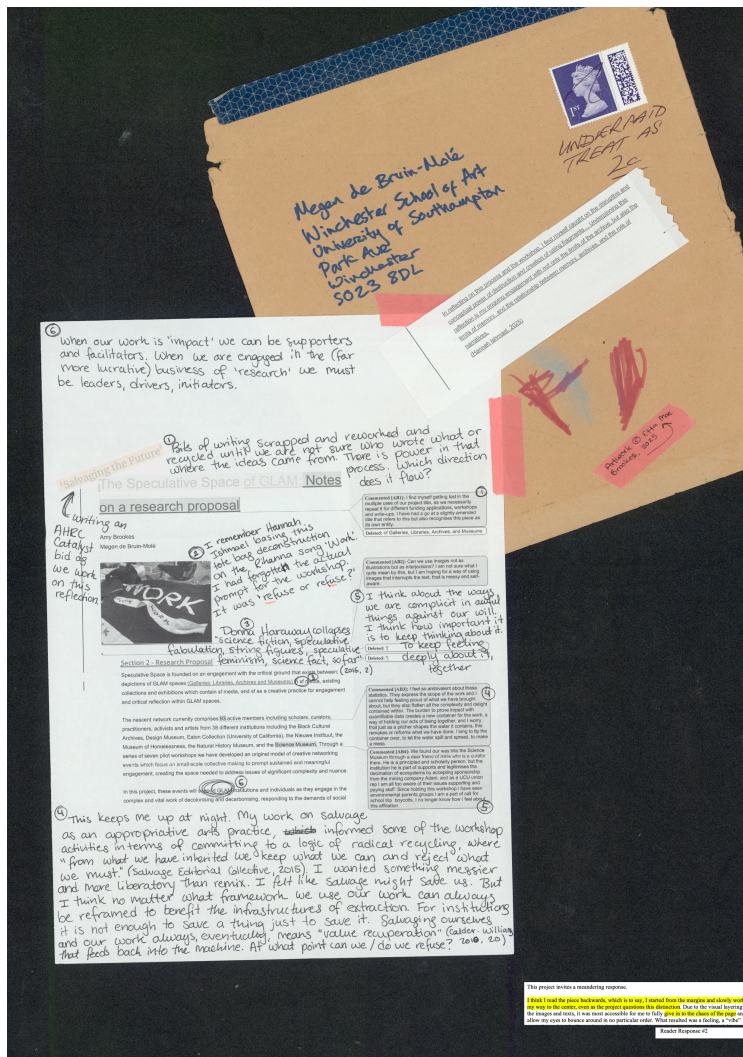
"We discussed which texts had lingered and shaped us while we sat in a café in the park, each feeling like we had stolen ourselves from work, freed from our desks and devices, despite the fact that we sat discussing a research project. I remember mentioning the work of Jane Rendell, Jack Halberstam, Donna Haraway, and Katherine McKittrick whose work I encountered thanks to you... These works do not include an introduction that details their originality and impact. To engage with them has been to follow a trail of breadcrumbs through the woods. They have taken me somewhere entirely elsewhere, but I have had to work to follow them. I picture their disdain for the slides I am shown in a REF Impact workshop, these strategies to make work appealing to assessors. I imagine them laughing and slipping away between the trees, or at least that is what I want for them, to remain untethered and elusive, free to revel in wild strangeness."

How do we sustain creative work in the face of burnout, institutional crisis, the end of funding, the mess of life? Like the workshops that it addresses, this article is a deliberate attempt to resist closure. It draws on the ongoing work of our "Speculative Space" project, which uses "SF as a creative practice for engagement and critical reflection within GLAM space"—galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. This project has comprised a series of workshops oriented around site-specific small acts of collective making. Over the last three years we have gathered in the back rooms of the Winchester

Gallery, the Women's Art Library, the Whitechapel Gallery, Science Museum London, the Museum of English Rural Life, the Natural History Museum, and in the digital institutional spaces of Teams meetings. Each workshop was fragile and fleeting, and the record of the work which lingers in photographs, quotes, and ephemera is only an echo of the true outcome which was in the act of gathering, the trust engendered, and the space created for concerns to be voiced. How then to document this work, and to answer the institutional demands to validate its worth using the metrics of academic research and funding frameworks?

In answer, this article consists of a series of images of scanned and annotated pages which revel in relational complexity. They are layered and non-linear, and while this reflects our ambitions for this work we do not want this form of representation to be an act of exclusion. Embedded within this work is metadata including the original bid and tracked changes as alt text, and image descriptions for each page and the photographs within, in a further digital layering of code and content.

Scroll down to view the images, or click [this link](#) to access the accessible version as a Word document.



NOTES ON A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

The essay in which other texts have been offered does answer this query, "I've practice that ordering but knowledge as well as ordering, I maybe we can exchange the connector, influence the connectivity, find ways to order". The piece is intended as a UK, as many require documents as I've opened to "read" it, reflects to offer instructions.

Reader Response #2

The shared space and a common ground of speculative queer liberation, but we also let our shared thoughts branch off into different places, all of which were deeply personal to our own journeys of growth in an oppressive system. Of course, I cannot speak for the individual experiences of the other participants. And this reflection, by its temporal nature, may have brought some elements of the workshop into sharper focus while reflecting others. Nonetheless, it was a wonderfully engaging session that I continue to hold fondly in my heart.
(Ultara Ahmed, 2023)

③ I think a lot about what "we" elides, the work it does to create cohesion but also the people who end up between the cracks. The "we's" in this sentence are not the same as the "our". We include some of the words and images of the "our" in this article, these notes. Our collaborators for each workshop, but also our project co-lead Dr Nonko Suzuki-Bosco, who does not work in academia and who chose to take a step back from academic work and writing. We could not write this without them. Yet our names are the ones at the top of the document.

What does it mean to produce 'work-leading' research? Can this be research that also feels important and meaningful to the people who do it? This is a question that has been considered as we sat down to reflect on our work as part of the 'Speculative Space' project, with the UK's 2023 Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment looming, and a push in Arts and Humanities work to intensify grant-writing activity in the face of sector-wide budget cuts. The 'Speculative Space' project was in many ways a direct response to this moment, as the situation conditions we find ourselves within, but it was also an attempt to subvert or resist these pressures.

These images are of others' work but we mobilise them here to make meaning in ways that make sense to us

The paragraph above is taken from our 2025 British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grants application. It summarises our previously funded work and makes claims that must be at once bold and achievable, but justify our request for more funding.

This phrase is taken from the REF assessment criteria. The REF assesses and ranks research publications based on their 'originality, significance, and impact'. The more stars, the larger the impact reviewers imagine for the work. world-leading (four stars), internationally excellent (three stars), recognised internationally (two stars) and unrecognised nationally (one star), with a separate category reserved for those submissions the panel decides don't qualify as 'research'. The higher ranked an institution's research, the larger the portion of a £2 billion pot the institution will receive for the coming cycle.

Commented [A8]: I long to write out the words, feeling but unable to place them in quotation marks to recognise that these are the words of REF grants and other bodies that sit judgement to determine which research is deemed worthwhile. They suggest that that which is more valuable than the literature or practice that we do not work. This is not our hope for this work.

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Commented [A8]: I read the words of fiction and history in The University and the Undercommons. David Theo James writes this. These letters, like the "critical academic" their work describes which questioning is "a postcondition" (p115), where James that in the face of these conditions one can only speak into the already and about what one can. To discuss its possibility, to seek its creation, to join its rupture, victory, its giddy empowerment, to be in but not of—this is the goal of the subversion immanent in the present emergency" (p101). We attempt to subvert and resist, to invent our present access to funding and resist it in the article, archive, lecture and past time workshop who create alongside us. But we also legitimise this work to sustain ourselves, we like credit, we justify our doing so in order to access more funding, and so we are closer further into the system.

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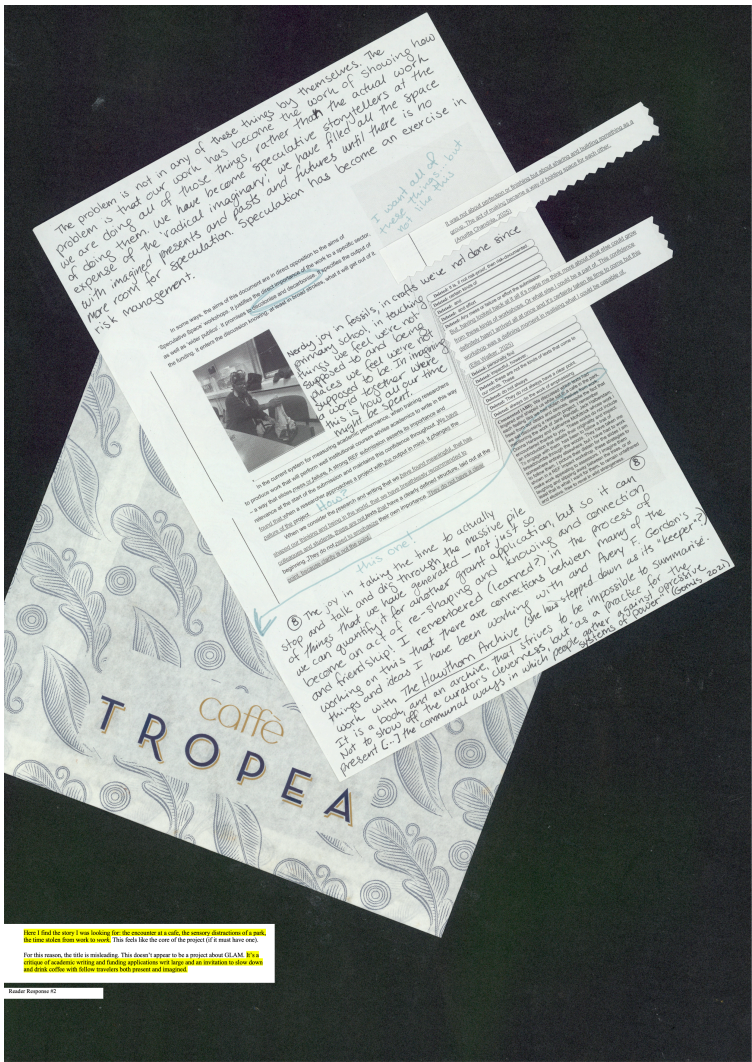
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Commented [7]: The work of putting together both the UK's research application and the REF is not that simple. Indeed, it involves many moments of meaning-making, from the choice of yet another grant application in the emergency, at times hustling and overworking, of assembling the various bits of financial and contextual information this particular set required. From the excitement when we collected our reports and realised just how many words they required, and anxiety enough together in the early part of writing through all of it, to the creative workshops and postscript of REF's opening and moments are part of the impact of the project.

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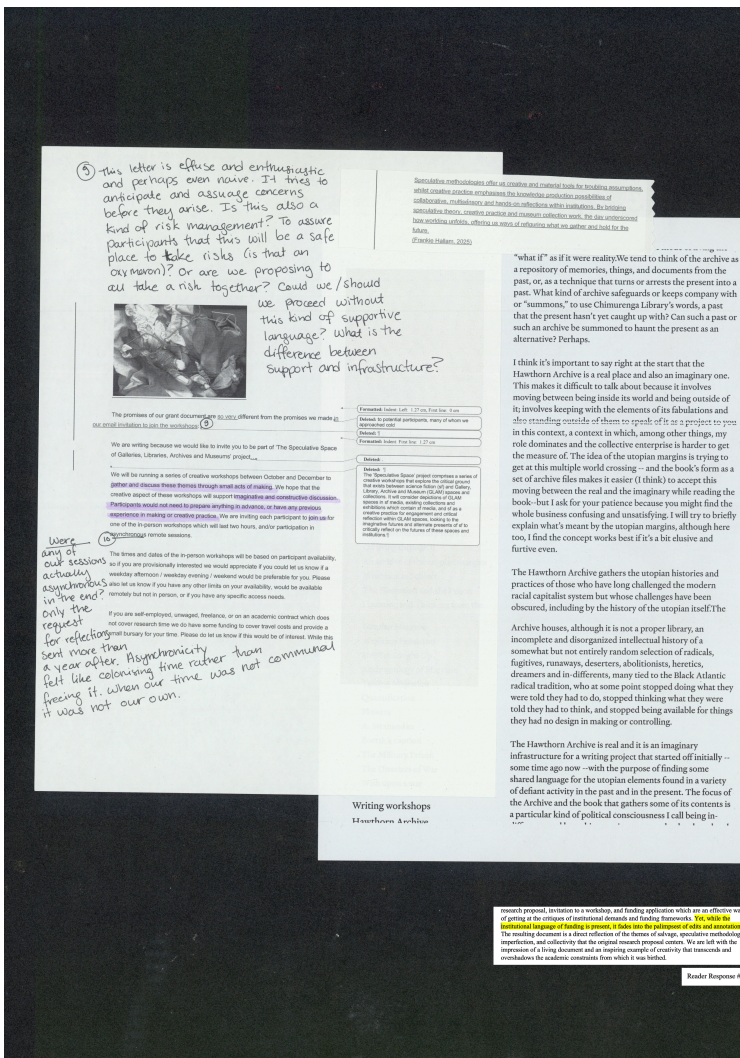
'Impact' always makes me think of meters. Deep Impact. It is a violent metaphor. And yet impact can also be a small violence, if we zoom out enough. Is there change without violence? Can we turn small impacts into big ones by shifting scale?

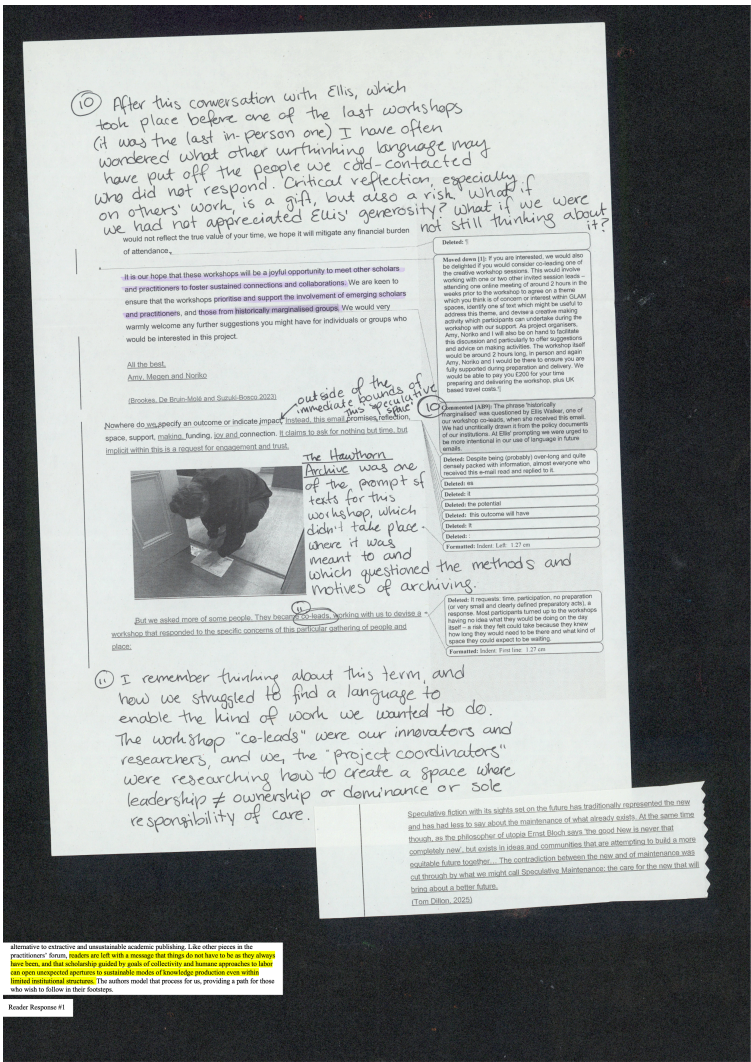


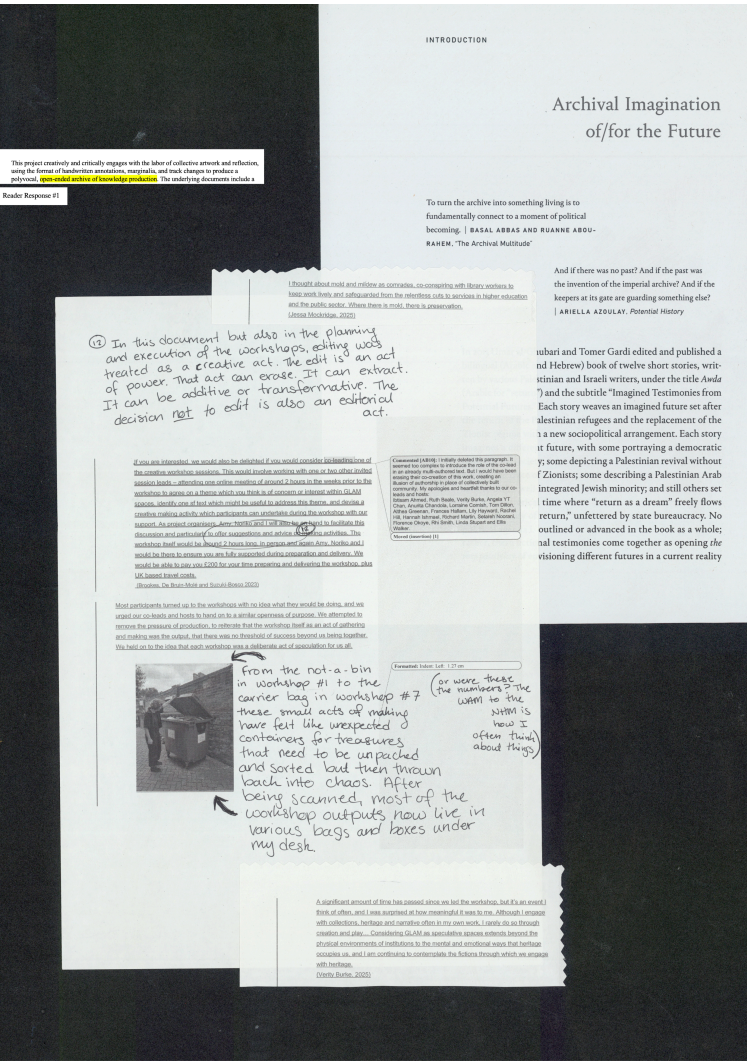
Here I find the story I was looking for: the encounter at a cafe, the sensory dimension of a work, the time when I was stuck in work. This feels like the core of the project (if it even here ever).

For this reason, the title is misleading. This doesn't appear to be a project about GLAM. It's a project of academics, writing and reading applications very large and an invitation to show about and think online with different readers both present and imagined.

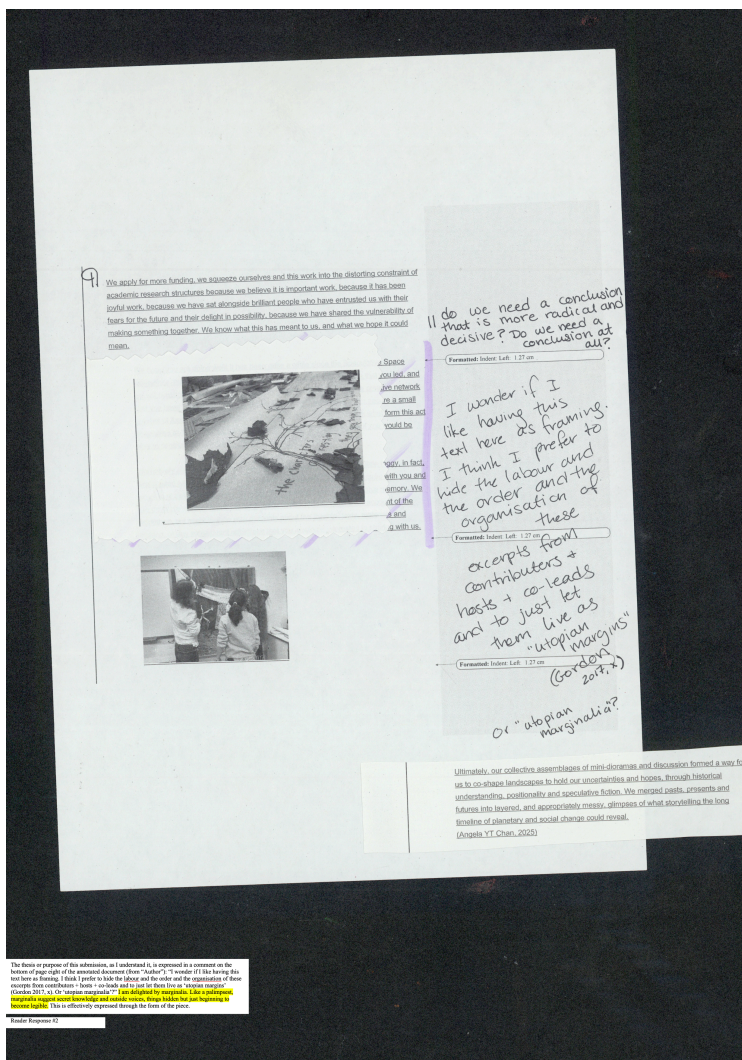
Index Response 21

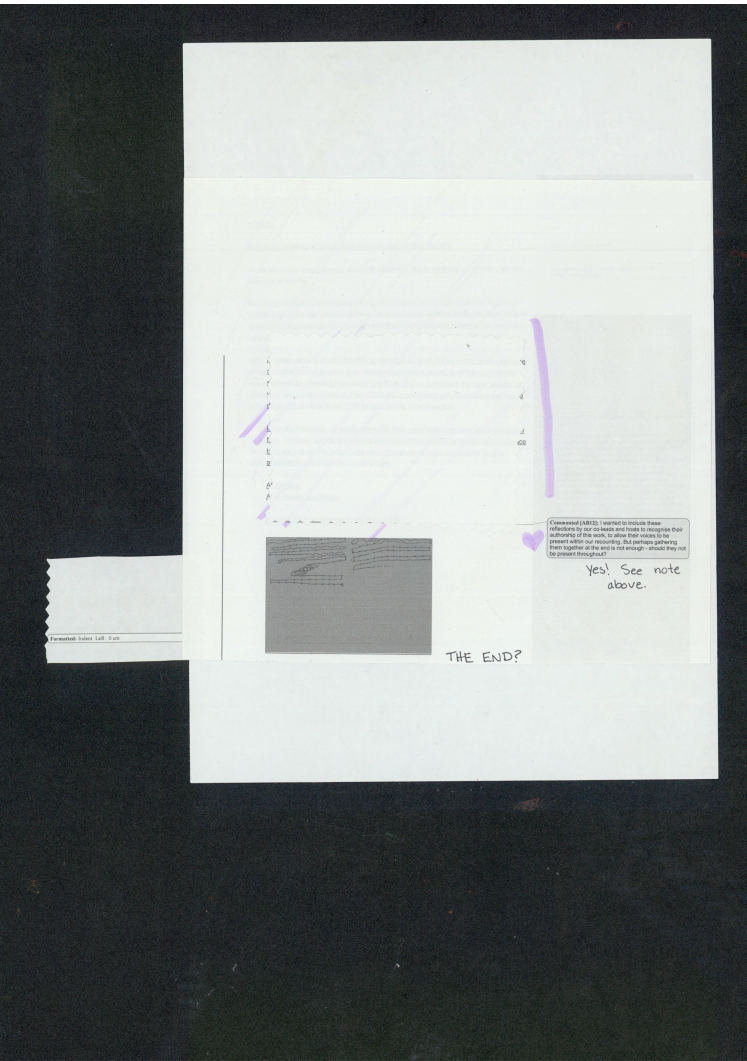






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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The original Speculative Space project website can be accessed here: speculativespace.wordpress.com. It includes images and materials from, as well as further reflections on, the workshops.

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