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‘Zine-ing’ research otherwise: care, joy, and creative co-design with racially marginalised communities

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CREATIVE FORMAT

‘Zine-ing’ research otherwise: care, joy, and creative co-design with racially marginalised communities

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This zine emerges from a participatory research project, focused on co-designing equitable digital services in energy, housing, and health sectors, rooted in the lived experience and insights co-produced with racially minoritised communities in England and Scotland. The zine documents not only the output of our creative workshops, such as the code of practice, but also the processes, values, and critical reflections that shaped our participatory and anti-racism work. By sharing the zine, we highlight the generative potential of creative methods to foster ethical, inclusive, and transformative spaces for collaboration and meaningful participatory research. We argue that the zine format embodies a politics of care, inviting reflections on how research can be done and shared differently. We sought to resist institutionalised and extractivist modes of knowledge (co-)creation and dissemination. Instead, centring reciprocity, joy, and accessibility as significant to participatory practices. Our creative co-design choices in the workshops, including: playful metaphors (‘cooking a dish’), collective storytelling, and graphic recording, facilitated spaces to engage participants in ways that felt meaningful and restorative. Beyond reporting the findings, the zine acts as a creative non-traditional means of dissemination that makes knowledge accessible without gatekeeping and academic jargons. Through the zine, we explored the process of participatory research, challenging dominant conceptions of rigour and impact, which are often tied to metrics that undervalue relational and process-oriented work. Thus, the zine offers both a record of our co-design process and a provocation of how might creative research dissemination contribute to reimagining research not as extraction but as repair.

Keywords participatory research • zine • creative • ethics of care • anti-racism

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FOREWORD

This Zine presents the **why**, **how** and **what it means to do** participatory research with marginalised communities. It is grounded in the voices and experiences of participants from communities and representatives from across different sectors.

We present key insights, reflections and considerations that are central to carrying out participatory research in more *meaningful* and *equitable* ways.

We invite you to reflect on the value of listening to people's lived experiences of racism in digital services, ethics of how one might approach participatory research in practice, and Minoritised Ethnic people's hopes and recommendations on how to make design of digital services fairer and more equitable.

The work presented here is part of the PRIME project. The PRIME project researched people's experiences of using and navigating the increase in digital services in three sectors—health, social housing and energy. The project was in response to the growing evidence which has shown the disparities minoritised ethnic communities face in the outcomes and access to key public and essential services, and the potential for discrimination and racism to be replicated by services going digital.

THE ZINE INCLUDES A COLLECTION OF CONTENT CO-CREATED WITH INDIVIDUALS WHO PARTICIPATED IN FOUR WORKSHOPS HELD IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND OVER 6 MONTHS IN 2023-24. THIS CONTENT INCLUDES WRITTEN FEEDBACK, VERBAL REFLECTIONS, AND SMALLER GROUP-WORK RELATED TASKS. WE ALSO DRAW ON MATERIALS FROM GRAPHIC RECORDINGS CREATED IN REAL-TIME BY DIGITAL DESIGNERS AND ILLUSTRATORS PRESENT AT WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS.

This Zine has been created by a team of scholar-activists with a passion for participatory research, ethical practice and advancing anti-racism.

BUILDING THE BRIDGE

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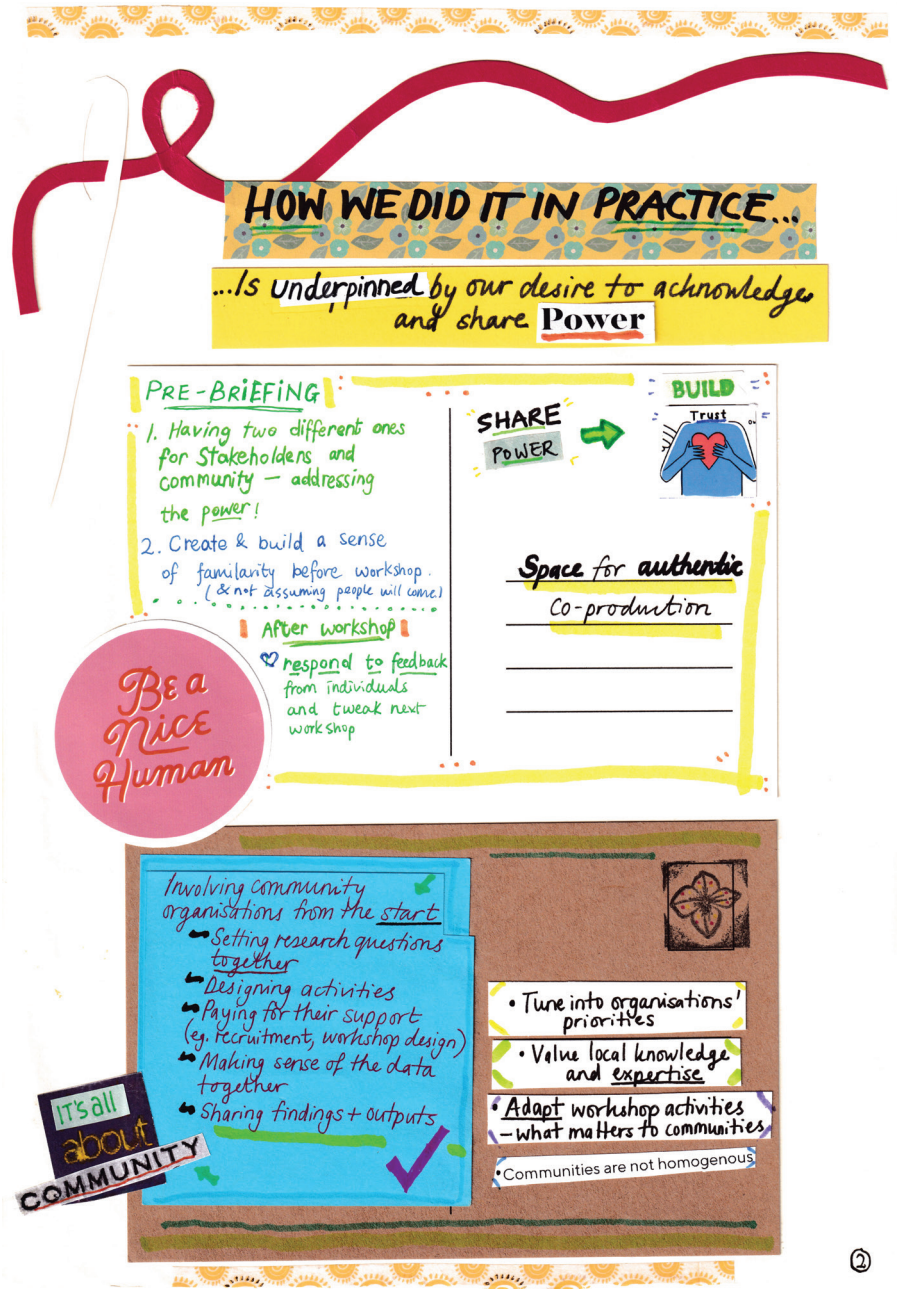

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Time	Activity
10:00-10:15	Welcome and arrival teas/coffee
10:15-10:20	Short introduction
10:20-10:25	**Activity** (Generating values – values you want reflected in digital services)
10:25-10:40	**Activity** (Prioritising values – what are the 5 must-have ingredients / spices in "cooking the dish"? What is the top 1?)--discuss in groups
10:40-10:55	Feedback to groups on top 5 and top 1
10:55-11:00	**Self-reflection** (which value / ingredient is most important to you – post on wall)
11:00-11:10	**Break**
11:00-11:50	**Activity** (Instruction for "cooking the dish" - Defining the values, Write down Do's and Don't's, example of the value working – real or imagined in future)
11:50-12:00	**Break**
12:00-12:50	**Activity** (What the value looks and feels like in practice in each sector, 3 tables to walk round / "must-have, should have, could have" in these services)
12:50-13:00	**Wrap up** (reflections from participants, next workshop)
13:00-14:00	**Lunch**

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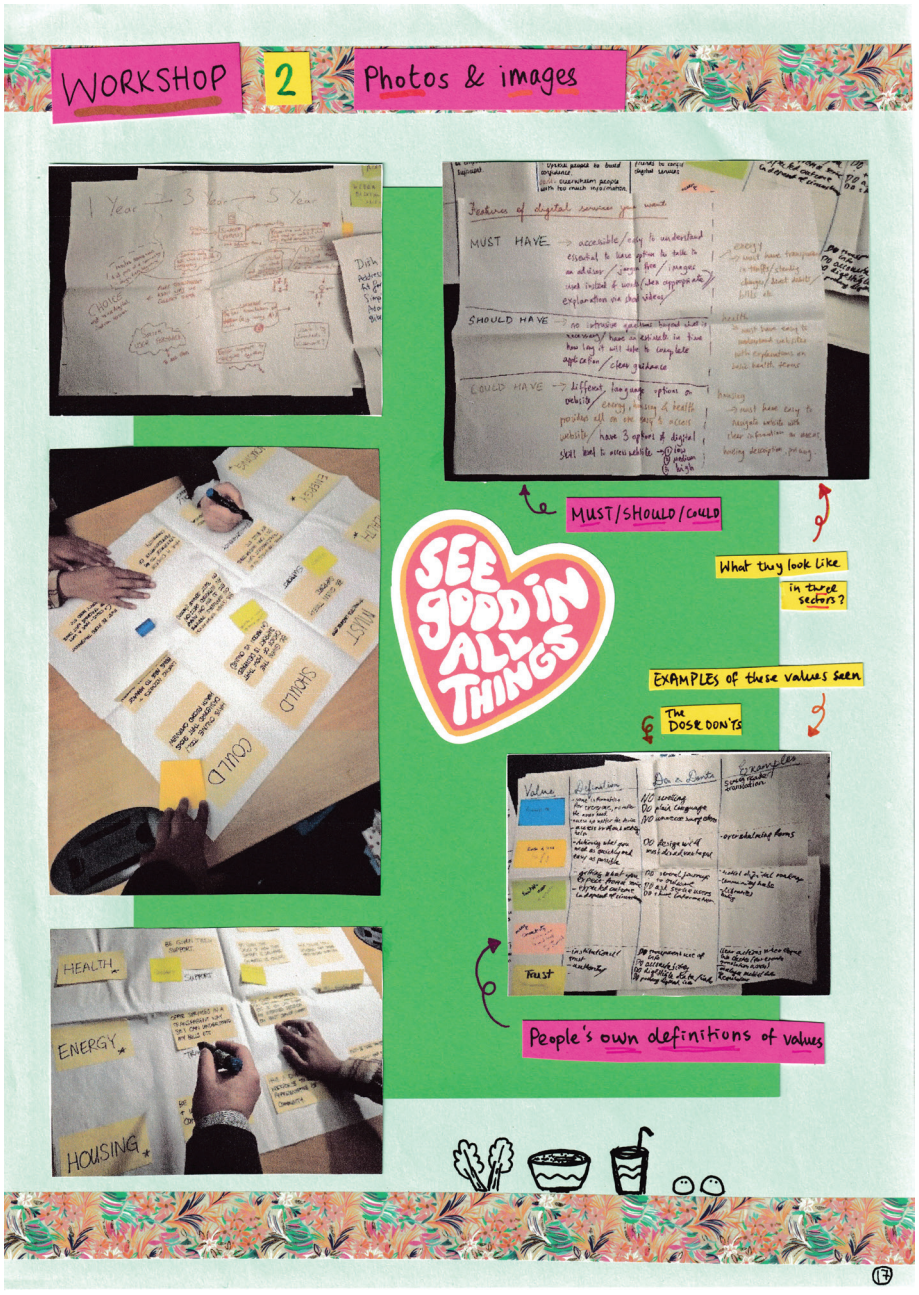

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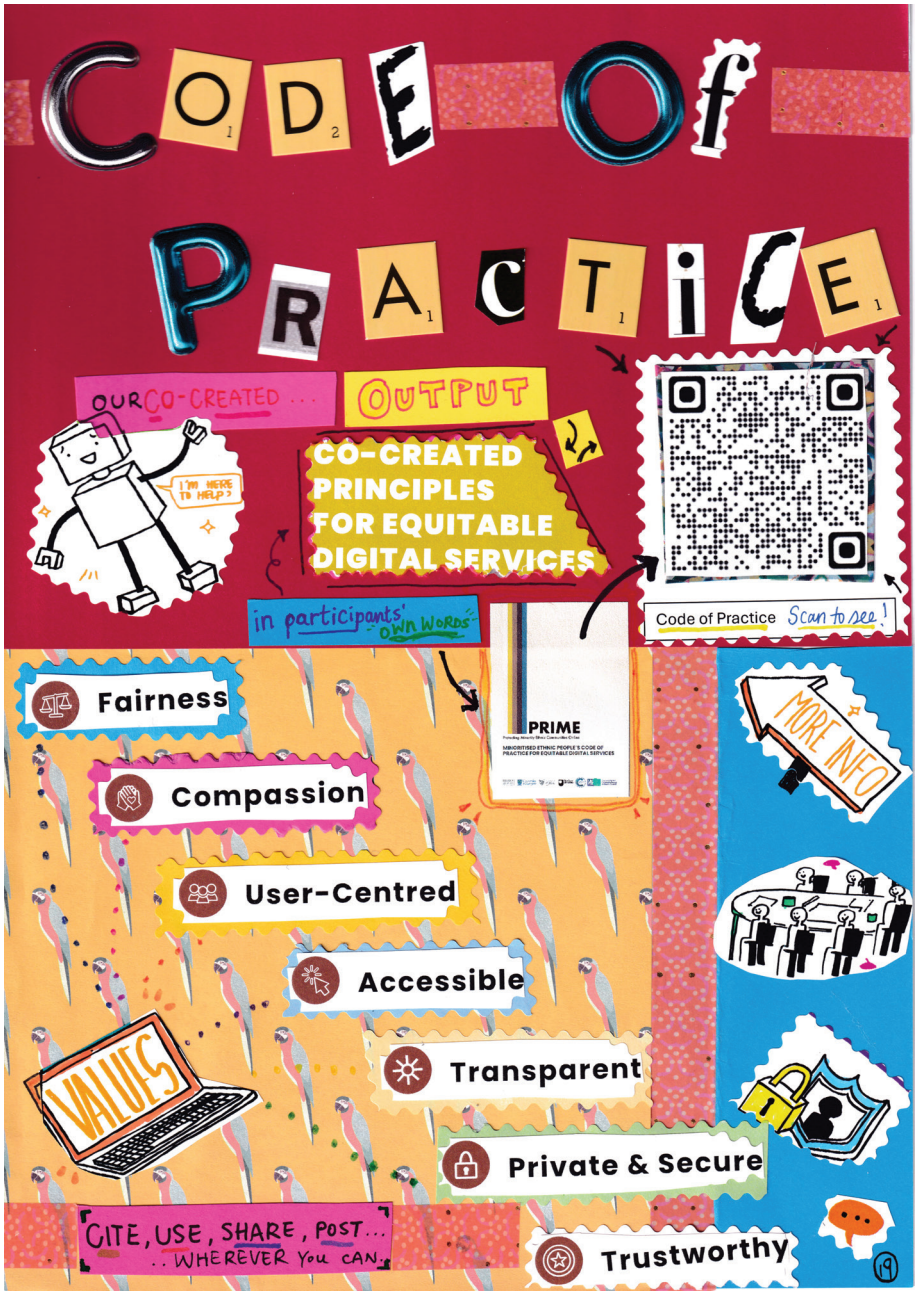

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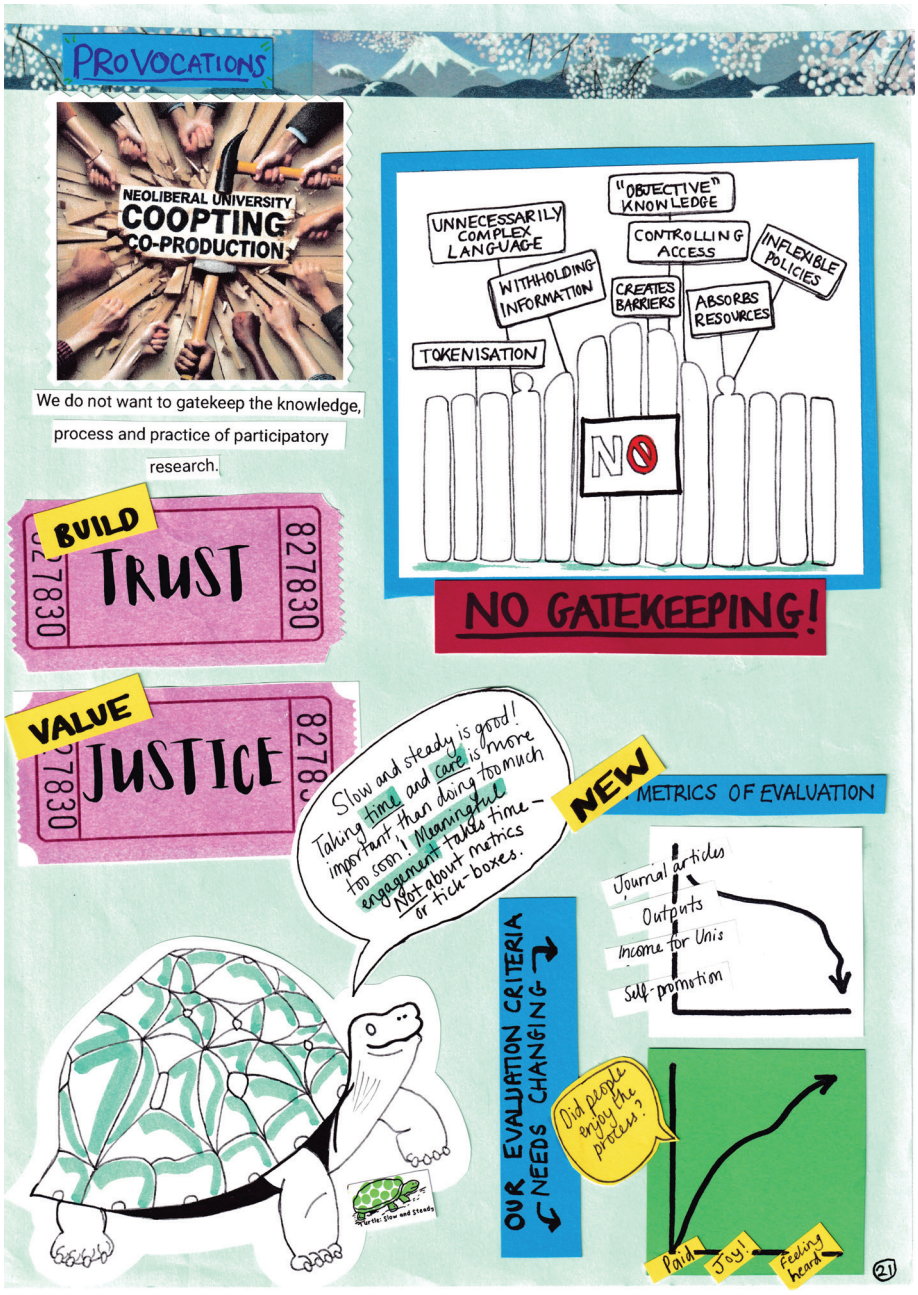

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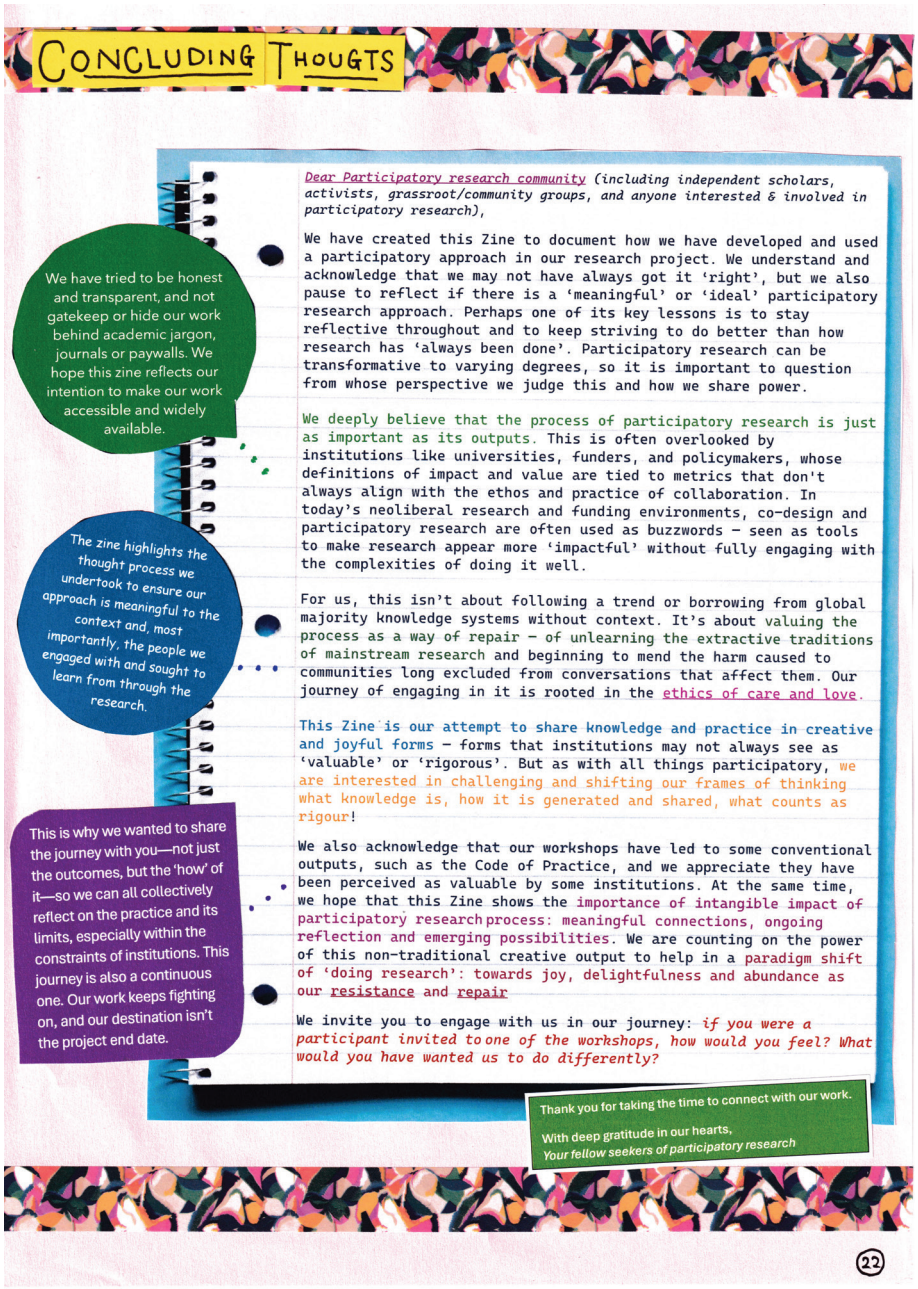

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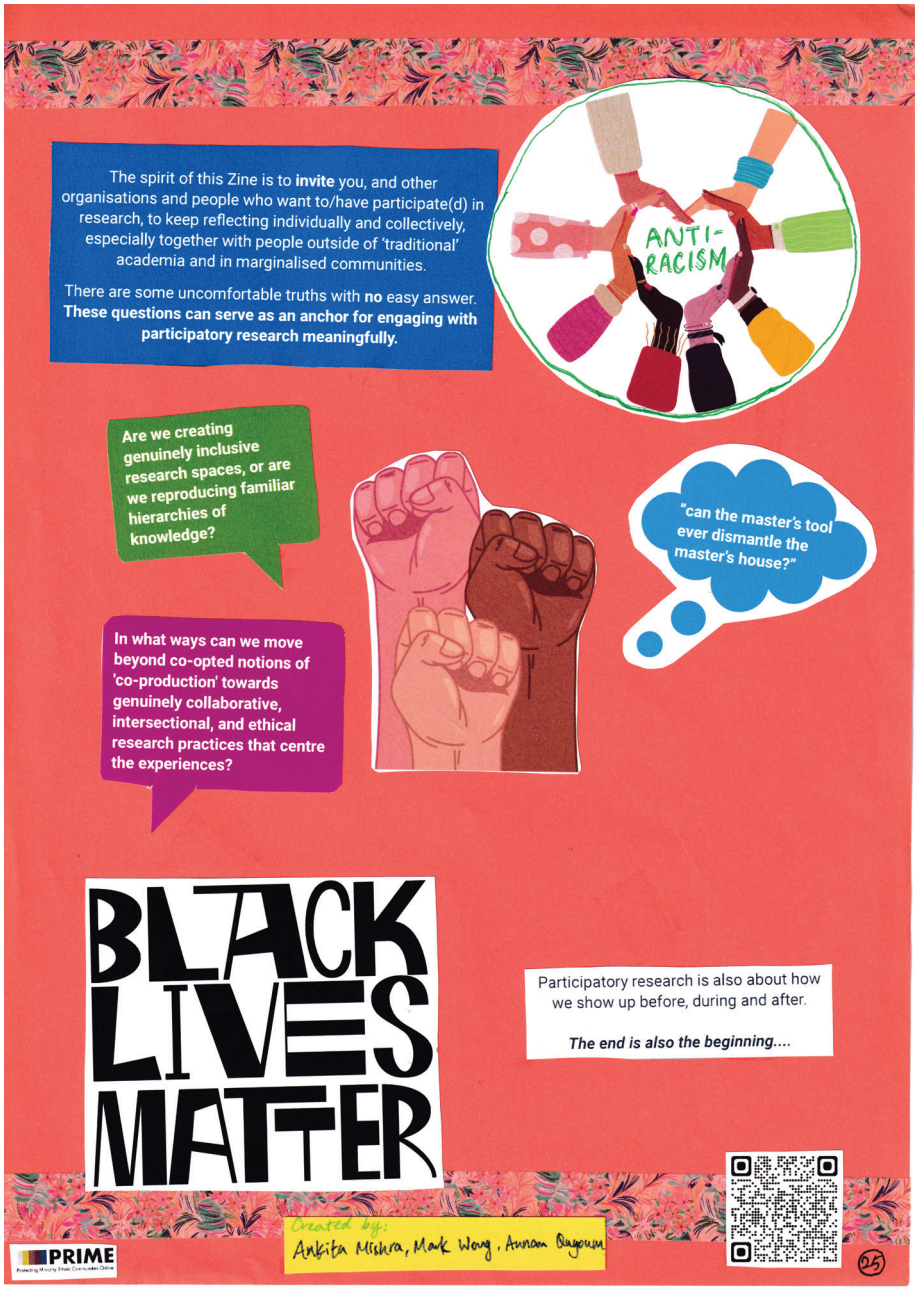

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Reflective statement

Zines have long been used as creative tools of resistance, refusal, and collective imagination rooted in deeply political histories of feminist, queer, punk, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist movements (Liu et al, 2025). Zines offer space to counter dominant narratives and resist erasure of marginalised voices (Ghaffar, 2022). We were drawn to this history as it resonates with our own research commitments and ethos of creating spaces of joy, care, collaboration, and resistance with racially minoritised communities. Making a zine about our research process felt like a continuation of that politics of doing research *otherwise*.

The growing academic enthusiasm for zines risks reducing them to *outputs* neatly aligned with impact agendas (Sou and Hall, 2023). Our own zine refuses this narrowing. We treat *zine-ing* as an ongoing, collective process through which creativity, care, and joy become both method and politics.

What doing the zine helped with

For us, making the zine was a part of the research process itself where it required us to slow down and return to conversations, re-engage with workshop materials, and reflect collectively about what mattered and how it should be represented. In this slowing-down, we practised refusal: a refusal of extractive speed, metrics of productivity, and the hierarchy that privileges polished 'outputs' over relational labour. Our zine became a site of processual knowledge, where the tactile acts of cutting, arranging, colouring, and conversing enacted an ethics of care and anti-racist solidarity.

How a zine works as an output

Recent studies caution against zines being reduced to token outputs within neoliberal institutions (Brebenel and de Bruin-Molé, 2020); we echo that warning and present our zine as a deliberate political choice and a small act of joyful resistance and repair. Zine-making helped us challenge institutional power around what legitimate research outputs are and who they are for.

In creating something relational and non-linear, we reversed the hierarchical logic of dissemination. We consciously chose to create a zine before writing a journal article. Not least to practise rest and joy as resistance, but this format allowed us to prioritise community relevance, artistic expression, and accessibility over compliance of metrics, rigour, or what 'counts' as impact. The zine allowed us to hold space for multiple forms of knowing, which would otherwise be flattened or erased in conventional academic writing (Licona, 2013). It also held the tension and emotions of being caught between doing anti-racist participatory research and constrained by a neoliberalised university/funding landscape. Zine-making, for us, became a creative expression and release of these discomforts, contradictions, and refusal of co-option. In this sense, our zine is a site of a 'living' archive, where it carries ethical and relational significance, and invites reflective and restorative work.

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The act of crafting the zine together invited care and reflexivity into the process, such as whose words we are amplifying, how might colour, pictures, and design and visual elements communicate warmth and joy. Our workshops ensured people's experiences were joyful and delightful, whereby the zine allowed us to continue to reflect on how to sustain joy and reflexivity after and how to redistribute power.

How the zine was made

The process was intentionally slow and collected, with no specific deadlines and unencumbered by a funding end date or reporting, trying to centre and sustain connection, delight, and joy in doing the research.

A lot of this work happened in spaces that rarely featured in research write-ups, such as being seated on office floors with coloured pens and papers scattered around, conversations with no meeting agenda, outdoor walks in nature, gatherings in each other's homes, and sharing food from our own cultures (see Figures 1, 2, 3). We contested the formal and institutional with the informal and relational, prioritising making creative decisions together and time spent with one another enjoyable. This provided a sense of generosity and indulgence, in which we were momentarily freed to be creative, to think, to laugh together, and to reflect on the affects and care ethics in and through our work.

Figure 1: Our process of making the Zine on the floor

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Figure 2: Zine-ing through shared meals and craft when we gathered at each other's spaces (office, home, restaurant/cafe)

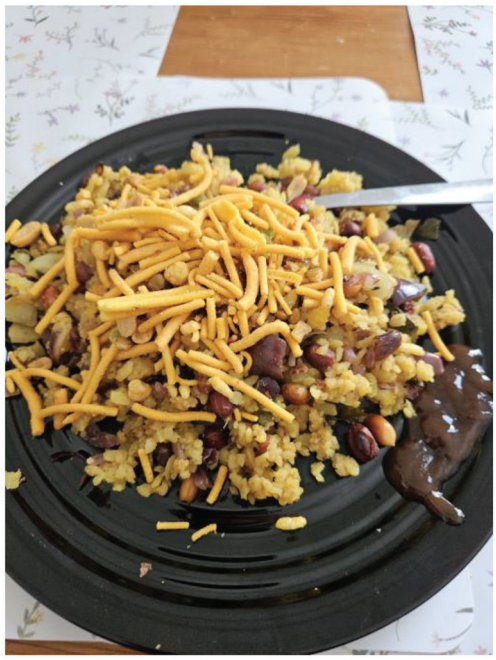

Figure 3: Our reflective walk in nature while making the zine

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Zine as a creative format

The zine is, therefore, not just an output but also a living, organic, *relational* tool for us as activist scholars. It nourishes our connection with one another, prioritises communities we collaborate with, and opens a rare moment for readers, within and beyond academia, to reflect collectively on the tensions, and joy, of doing participatory, anti-racism work. Making the zine was a continuation of the co-production process.

Creativity, thus, can be a mode of collaboration, care, and refusal to conform. Not just for reporting research – we consciously chose the zine as a creative, accessible format to share our learning and invite others into our research process. This is why our zine's final page, and throughout, is filled with questions for readers instead of conclusions or instructions.

Our zine invites readers to reflect on what makes it playful and engaging for participants, while we also practised playfulness in the design choices, such as colours, patterns, and collaging. Collaborative decisions about aesthetics (sequence, colour, texture, and layout) also became conscious and political choices. The zine allowed us to return to these questions, grounding the knowledge in care and connection while also attending to how readers feel when reading the zine.

We hoped to invite the readers into the atmosphere of the work, and not just the findings, by resisting an extractivist mode of communication. As a creative format, we intended to offer our zine as a relational form, which can be circulated freely, adapted by others, and communicated in an accessible way without academic jargon or frames of references.

Sharing what we learned with fellow researchers

The zine enabled us to convey relational processes, affective textures, and reparative practices in ways that conventional outputs rarely permit. It reminds us that collaboration is not just intellectual, but also embodied and emotional – such as through shared meals, collective joy and laughter, and unpacking tensions.

In our process of zine-ing otherwise, *joy* became *our methodology* reasserting delight, play, and care as rigorous modes of enquiry and accountability. Creative dissemination can, therefore, redistribute authorship, make findings accessible, and hold ethical commitments visibly.

For fellow researchers, we hope our experience and process of making the zine is a vital mode of enquiry itself and *not* just a supplementary mode to traditional output or 'real' research. It opens possibilities of imagination, joy, and care, which are essential to community collaboration. Zine-ing becomes a way of doing research that honours collectivity and sustains care. As zine-making makes space for care, delight, and collective imagination, it reminded us that research can be playful, rigorous, and restorative. The zine is, therefore, a metaphor of what we did, and itself a method that insists that creativity is central to anti-racist and transformative practice, connecting with and showing care towards people.

The learning we hope to share is that creative formats such as zines are not after-the-fact translations of research but methodological sites in their own right. They allow joy, vulnerability, and imagination to coexist with rigour, opening up possibilities of imagination, dialogue, and solidary that academic articles would not typically allow.

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We invite fellow researchers to embrace the messiness of the zine-making process as it mirrors the messiness and emergent nature of doing participatory research.

In treating the zine as *process over product*, we affirm that creativity is central to anti-racist and participatory praxis: a way of doing research that is as much about how we make together as what we make. In keeping with the spirit of the zine, we would like to end by inviting readers to reflect on some questions to carry forward:

> *What if creativity is resistance to the status quo?*
> *What if sharing of joy is our metrics of success?*
> *What if care, creative, and affective work is the work?*
> *What is stopping and oppressing us from reimagining what, and who, our output is created for?*

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Research ethics statement
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Conflict of interest
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