
Between Boxes: A Conversation with Amanda Carvalho, Devon Kerslake, and Mika Castro

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Transcribed by Mika Castro

Mika: We're here, really, today because I really wanted to hear more about, you know Amanda your written piece and, Devon your graphic recording, but mostly I wanted to hear about, you know, both of your—the collaboration that you both went through to create the graphic recording. So, the graphic recording, I think, was—it came out late last December, right, I think?

Devon: Mhmm.

Amanda: Yeah.

Mika: Last year?

Devon: [laughs] What day is it?

Mika: [laughs] COVID time!

Devon: It feels like a long time ago in some ways, doesn't it?

Amanda: Yes, yeah.

Devon: Yeah.

Mika: It feels like forever ago, but also, like, two weeks—

Devon: Yes. Everything feels like that [**Mika:** [laughs] weird, weird COVID time]. It's like two weeks or like last year.

Mika: Mhmm, so yeah. The graphic recording, I guess is the—your graphic translation of, Amanda, your autoethnography, “Between Boxes.” This was a piece that you made for CRiCS, the Cultural Research Center—Center for Research and Cultural Studies? Yes! [laughs]. So CRiCS, and their COVID-19 Series, so I sort of wanted to begin with you, Amanda. Can you sort of tell us a little bit about how this work came about and your inspiration for it? Beginning with your original written–audio piece.

Devon: Sure, Mika. So, I think this work was born out of a mix of boredom, uncertainty about the future, and the need to let my feelings out. And it was also inspired by a book that I had recently read at the time for my MA program at UofW, and the book is called *A Different Kind of Ethnography* by Danielle Elliot and Dara Cullhane. And I, at first, I remember I had this sense of “Wow, everyone is going through the same global event that is unprecedentedly affecting all of us,” but soon I realized that it was not affecting all of us equally and proportionally. And it was like we were putting a spotlight on to all of those societal inequalities that were always there and I was personally going through very tough times when COVID hit, and I just kinda started writing down some short flow of consciousness, texts, as a relief mechanism, I guess, and also as a form of immersion in myself and an opportunity to investigate, self-observe, to document, self-reflect about my personal experience, and my journey through this new pandemic world that we were living in. And the central idea of the text, the boxes that I talk about, were inspired by the boxes we check whenever we are filling up forms. So, you have to state your gender, your ethnicity, your immigration status, and so on. And depending on which and how many of those boxes you check, and how they intersect with each other, the more or less likely you would be affected by COVID. So, I called it “Between Boxes,” because being Brazilian, woman of colour, and ethnically ambiguous, I’ve always struggled with finding the boxes that are meant for me. Because I feel I am all and none of those boxes at the same time. And in that sense, it made me reflect how the absence of some boxes or how intersectional boxes may imply a lack of understanding of how COVID might be affecting different people in different ways that we don’t even realize. So, for me to be between the boxes is basically to resist the idea of being assigned labels, boxes, or categories. And to exist in a much broader space where all of our intersections and with our positionalities can coexist, can be combined, so we can have a sense of identity that is more complex and holistic.

Mika: That’s such a... I loved, I think, your—what you brought up about existing as certain identities during COVID and that idea of the ticking boxes—no wonder, I think that translated so well into the graphic recording, because that’s such a—I think that’s such a beautiful way to put it. Or, maybe not beautiful, what is that...? Just a really good way to put it. Like I can picture what you’re trying to tell me in my mind. So, I guess, to transition from that, I guess what did it mean for you to embark on this graphic recording project with Devon and can the both of you sort of walk me through what that process sort of looked like?

Devon: Yeah, so it came really fast. And kind of furious, eh? Like in the—we had a few conversations back and forth in email and I was so excited to start working with the motif of the box and also the body. Because spatially, it was like fascinating to me that on a page, which is already kind of a box—it’s got borders, there’s things that are on the page,

there's things not on the page—within that, it was like, the labels that Amanda talks about in the early part of her piece, I was like those are boxes too! And all these overlapping and receding spaces can be defined by lines, and just black and white space. So it was fun to figure out how to draw enough, but not draw too much that it would kind of hold up what Amanda was saying and allow your mind to kind of wander and consider spaces and how they're defined, right? And especially with the box and the body repeating and receding as she's talking, and it goes to different parts of the page. It happened really fast. It came together really fast. We talked about brushes, and textures, and patterns. Remember in the early conversations? And I kept coming back to that image of Amanda with her tattoo. It's a black and white photo, and she's got that beautiful tattoo on her arm, and I just kept thinking about, like, refractions, and lines, and then charcoal, and the kind of making it visible, the work that she was trying to describe without overstepping. Because it was that dance that I was trying to play. Not just do a straight-ahead graphic recording, but more kind of exploit the motion of sketching out and drawing out ideas. Like to support what she was saying. It was really fun to go back and forth. I remember looking at the emails again, just like, we were on fire those first few—[laughs]! [**Amanda:** laughs] We were like really, like, uncovering it as we were trying to explain in visuals what we were thinking about.

Amanda: Yeah, it was so much fun, and it was so smooth. And I think Devon did an amazing job and that just the opportunity to collaborate with you on this project—I mean it's not always that we get to have something we wrote being transformed into a beautiful graphic recording by such a talented artist. So, it was a brand-new process to me and yeah I was just surprised how “fast and furious,” as you mentioned Devon, we were. And I'm not sure because I am a designer, so I am a very visual person, but I feel like we had a lot of synergy with our aesthetics [**Devon:** Mhmm] and our creative visions for the video, so everything you were envisioning, I was kinda like, I had this in the back of my mind. So, it was kind of crazy in that way. Cause we were really like complementing each other with our ideas, and I felt that it captured nuances that the written word and the audio were not conveying, because you were also adding your visual interpretation of my text, which was very rich for me just witnessing whatever you were transforming the text into something else, but that was just adding more layers of depth, and you know different lenses. So, it was a really neat process.

Mika: The graphic recording actually came out so great. I actually got to see—'cause I remember earlier Devon you made a Dropbox, and Amanda I could see some of the references that you gave Devon in the beginning. And then afterwards when the graphic recording finally finished, I was actually comparing some of the references that Amanda gave to you and the final graphic recording and it actually turned out so well! The references that you gave Devon, Amanda, were really translated well into the piece. This

is something that I actually wanted to ask the both of you, like, what were... So the style, I guess, of the graphic recording, is very sketchy, black and white, I could definitely see the refractions, sort of, idea that was going on there. Can you both sort of talk about these artistic decisions and what made you think of these certain images, Amanda? And I guess because you also sort of have experience as a designer, you said? What was going through your head?

Amanda: Uh, okay. So it was crazy because whenever I was, when I was writing the text I always have a lot of visuals going on in my mind as well. And I had photography along with the piece, so you already had some visual reference in that way. But I remember talking to Devon and then we—she was the one coming up with the idea of going with the more sketchy, rough, sharp, kind of like look. And I thought that was perfect. I wouldn't do any other way, because there's some rawness to the text that I thought would translate really well with those aesthetic choices. So, I felt we were super in synch. So, she actually, she came up with those aesthetic choices, and I was like yes this is actually brilliant, this is perfect. So, the references is the other visual references that I put in the Dropbox folder, were informed by uh, Devon's ideas and then we were just, yeah [Devon: yeah], it just worked!

Devon: Yeah, it was kind of like going back and forth really nicely, because I was using your imagery and your photograph and your body and your tattoo, and then like kind of firing it back at you and you're like, "Yeah". And then this, this, this. And then you gave the references and it did—I remember looking at some... 'cause I felt like it could go either way. I remember early days, I had this vision of it being really kind of like emerging, rough, charcoal that kind of planning look. Or, remember I was saying, it could be really geometric? And really, like really, mechanical lines and really... like no greyscale. Like just super—and I think that would have done such a different thing to your work. And maybe the one that we went with is better, because it was more... it was kind of looser for the viewer. You know what I mean? Your words are so beautiful and they're... they're sharp, in a way. Like, they're so succinct, that when you're looking a visual that compliments it, but it's not matching perfectly, I think... But yeah, it's so interesting. I think about that a lot. Like, how much the visuals could actually change the interpretation, right? And so, the fact that we were in sync... helped. And the fact that you're visual, right? Like, you were able to flesh out those visuals and speak the same language as me from the very beginning, which was pretty cool.

Amanda: Yeah, absolutely. Like you said, if we had gone to like, more geometric creative concept, I keep imagining how it would turn out and I think it would be really cool. Like I can see it in my head, and I almost feel that if we had gone that way, it would be mostly an outsider kinda like having an interpretation of the text [Devon: Totally]. Where the

way we did it is mostly, like you said, complimenting the text from my personal standpoint. But maybe if we had done very geometric, and just lines, and boxes, and very, you know, kind of organized, it would be almost like a commentary on—

Devon: And you know what? That just occurred to me, is when you were talking about the “checking off boxes on the form,” that imagery was never in my mind, and when you said that it totally blew my mind a little bit, today! Because I think if we had gone more geometric, it would've been almost like that lens of a form. Like it would have been too... and because we were in this sort of, like, more like a gray space, we were in between and we were on the intersectional plane. We weren't making it really specific and easy and literal. So, I think I didn't have that feeling until today, when I realized you had this whole other symbolic element to the boxes, but oh my gosh... thank goodness.

Amanda: Yeah, I didn't want to influence you, because the text is so metaphorical [**Devon:** Yeah!], and like, I did it in that way, because I want everyone to have a different interpretation, you know—

Devon: Yes! And that's what's beautiful about it.

Amanda: Yeah. So, I just don't like giving it out [laughs] so I didn't want to influence your vision.

Devon: I'm glad you didn't!

Amanda: Yeah [laughs].

Devon: I'm glad, 'cause I think we got-we got there.

Amanda: Mhmm.

Mika: I think that's why the recording works so well, because, Amanda, you didn't want—sorry, like, not literally—you didn't want people to put you in a box, right? And so, I guess, if Devon... if you told Devon about, you know, that ticking boxes of identity, and if Devon actually drew that, then that is something you wouldn't have wanted in the first place? You wanted that—

Devon: Yeah, it's too—

Amanda: Exactly.

Devon: That's so true. And [**Mika:** yeah!] sometimes in more formal graphic recording, that's what I'm trying to do, right? Like if Amanda was talking about, you know, filling forms and ticking boxes, I would have straight up drawn that in a room. Like, if let's say you were presenting it, I would have gone for the literal, like, "What's the easiest way I can get this message? What, you know, kind of simplistic drawing could I do that gets that—that hits it home as fast as I can?" But the I, on purpose, did the opposite for this piece. And I'm also going to do the opposite for you, Mika, 'cause I want to strike that same, like, in between space of interpretation, cause I think... well, first of all with this body of work that you guys are researching and talking about, it lends itself perfectly to a more artistic, more open visual, you know? It's almost like, it goes into, I don't want to say bad territory, but like it would do something that I would kinda go against your work, if I was—

Amanda: Yeah, it could just reinforce whatever we're trying to say rather than resisting, and you know, like, trying to fight back those ideas. And I guess, yeah, doing, in a more abstract, unknown, obvious visual form, you can really, you know, like, fight back and allow people to have a new interpretation. So, in my case, I wanna resist those boxes. I don't want to be in those boxes, because I didn't choose them. You know? So... and also like I don't like the idea of being in a box [**Devon:** yeah!], it seems really boring [laughs]! So, I feel like by not doing the literal translation, you know, we are actually fighting it back and resisting the idea and saying "Hey, identities are way more complex and way more holistic" and they are not as simple as, you know, just being reduced to boxes being checked in a form.

Devon: And then the other thing is, too, like, I did put you in several boxes in the drawing, because I was thinking about—I was thinking about COVID and isolation and your physical white box—I'm assuming it was your apartment, I never asked you.

Amanda: Yep.

Devon: With windows? Yeah. And so that juxtaposition is really interesting, 'cause like I think that's what you're driving out with your piece. It's like it's these two things going on at the same time, it's like resisting it, and yet "I'm stuck in this space." But then it's got more possibilities, but it doesn't 'cause of, you know, and I just found that so fascinating and so fun to work out. Almost like a problem, like how to work out: draw enough, but don't draw too much.

Mika: I love that you brought up the apartment, the windows part of the graphic recording, because that was actually my favourite part of the graphic recording itself. When you were drawing, like, the windows, the boxes of windows on the [**Devon:** four panels?] and

you began to, like, shade around it, I think and then that's when Amanda's voice came into the piece. And Amanda you were talking about (I wrote it down) "distance within the distances that displaced bodies experience" and I... I loved that part of the recording, I was just—

Devon: I love that that part slows down too [**Mika:** Yes!]. The imagery goes waaayy down and then Amanda's exploring this idea, and all of a sudden you're pausing cause you're like, "Oh, she's saying one more thing" and then like a tiny thing happens... okay." And then there's like this shades in and this shades in and I really loved how that worked out.

Mika: Was that intentional, because that my favourite part. I loved that you brought up the pause, because, yeah, that's what I felt like. That slowing down and, like, sort of letting the piece breathe, but it was also such an impactful part of the piece, and really, you know, was just able to capture that feeling of alienation that I see when I read Amanda's work. Yeah, I loved that.

Devon: It was intentional and it was also lucky. The way that it lined up. Because when I drew it, I was intending for that to happen at that same moment, but when I time-lapsed my original drawings, it just dropped several frames. When I would be drawing slower, it would just kind of erase drop, it's just a function of this app that I was drawing inside. And so, when we edited it, there was less information and it just slowed down for that one part, because I wanted the pacing to stretch out to match what Amanda was doing. And in the end, it was sort of like, both, like it happened and I was like "Okay, that works." I was going for this, and this version of that happened, and it was actually... lucky, to be honest. Because I had filled in a lot more shading live, like when I was drawing I did more shading around the windows, I did more line work. I was deliberately pacing different things, but then when it happened, when I got it back from the editor and he managed to slow that part down, there like—there was less information of drawing, which I actually was really happy about. And it was still abstract drawing. It was still shading, like you're saying, but it wasn't, there was more of and I'm glad that it's more sparse there.

Mika: Yeah. It was such as a good part, and this is sort of where I want to ask if you had—I mean Amanda did you have a personal—I was gonna ask if you had a favourite part of the graphic recording, but I think it's better if I ask did the graphic—I know you spoke about this earlier but how did the graphic recording sort of add to your piece, do you think?

Amanda: I think it adds a whole new layer of meaning and subjectivity. Like you were both saying, like about your favourite part and slowing down that pace, and how that kind of

like allows you time to reflect and, you know... And I think visual, animated, it's a multisensory kind of knowledge that, sometimes the written and audio version of the work are—can be too literal. And sometimes um, it doesn't allow you to reach a more affective and embodied level of, you know, interpreting a piece. And I think by doing that we allow that information to be more accessible to different people, because everyone absorbs information through different mediums, and some mediums may affect us at different levels. This is very personal and it varies depending on person, so the medium that speaks to me might not be the same medium that speaks to another person. So having different ways of experiencing a work and a piece, I think it just adds more possibilities as ways of knowing.

Mika: Yeah, like the graphic recording is already in itself a different translation of your work. That makes me wonder about whether—so I'm going to bring it back to COVID then. But you know, Amanda, your piece was already speaking about your experience as how you existed as a migrant woman during COVID, right? And, you know, the collaboration was during COVID. But that's sort of where I wanted to turn the question to you, Devon, because you know, you are responsible for translating Amanda's work. And the fact that, I guess, you too were living or experiencing the era of COVID, was that some point of connection maybe? Like how did you connect to Amanda's work. Because I feel like, inherently, there's already a part of you in the graphic recording, right?

Devon: Mhmm, there has to be. I'm kind of a filter. Right? But you're right. That's interesting about living through the same pandemic in different—like as different sub—like we have different subjectivity and different experiences and... My experience of isolation, for example, logistically [laughs]... I'm so envious of Amanda's experience of being lonely and isolated, cause I have none of that time. It's very—it's very involved and full on, and I'm actually quite introverted and so I find it exhausting, but anyways, I couldn't help but resonate Amanda's words. Just trying to describe that weird kind of like prolonged uncertainty, isolation, exploring different things of what you knew to be familiar through this whole other lens of pandemic, and stay at home orders and that sort of thing, and not travelling... But I also was very aware that I didn't want to overinterpret, and I didn't want to overstep and take up space for my own experience. 'Cause that was kind of, like, precisely what I was trying to not overdo. You know what I mean? I wanted to give that space for Amanda. I think that's why the pace of it in the planning and drawing went nicely. Like it was a nice feedback loop, and that as I had the spontaneity of hearing Amanda's point of view and what she was looking for, and what those, you know, textures, and shading, and shapes... I was... Like I was literally translating it right in the piece in those days, which is why it was fast and yeah. I don't know. I don't know what else to say about it. I'm very aware of, like, our experiences being different in the pandemic, for sure.

Amanda: I can say that seeing your interpretation of the work for me... It's almost like you could actually feel, in a very empathetic way, whatever I was trying to convey and feel and it was really [**Devon:** good]... Yah, like if I had to draw something, like, the way I was feeling, maybe it would be in a very similar way as you did it. So, you got the message and you were able to translate it in a very empathetic way, even though we were coming from different places [**Devon:** Mhmm] and personal experiences. So this was a really, really amazing process. You know? Just seeing that you were actually able to convey those ideas and those feelings into [**Devon:** Yeah], you know, like, something that is beautiful. It has movement, and you know like, it's... It might speak to other people much better than, you know, just my text or the audio.

Devon: Yeah, that's really beautiful. That's what I'm always trying to do when I'm doing graphic recording is just, like, let things go through me. You know? Like take what's there, what's happening, and synthesize it and put it with as little—I'm aware of my subjectivity—but like, as little of it as I possibly can, and just to empathize with information that's trying to be shared so... I'm really glad that you felt like that, because I also felt like that. Like I felt like your text was so empathetic and was so amazing to jump into and like even your voice is so—it's almost like vulnerable and intimate the way the recording is and I think that's a testament to the piece, but how you read it. So, each layer of it is really interesting to me, like, just your text is interesting, just your black-and-white photograph is interesting, just the audio. And then you add in the graphic recording and there are all these pieces that are doing a different thing, but ultimately the core is the same. You know?

Mika: I really like that you both brought up the subject of empathy. And one of the questions, you know I feel like when people think of research they don't think of... empathy [laughs]. One of the questions that I wanted to ask both of you was about research creation. So do you find that this work is a form of research creation? Do you think that the graphic recording process not only translates the original piece into a different form, but makes new meaning out of the autoethnographic experience that Amanda, you provided in the first place? And I was wondering if you could both talk about empathy in that research creation.

Amanda: For me this work would fall into research creation because it's a form of creative writing, photography, audio, and it's informed by my academic studies, and my embodied reflexivity going through COVID. So, I'm juxtaposing a global pandemic event with my personal, embodied, affective experience, from intersectional positionality standpoint. And second, it is a collaborative work involving Devon, involving Lauren, Angela, everyone that enabled this work to happen. So, we have different people,

different perspectives, different mediums, graphic recording, photo, text, audio, and I have a quote here from an ethnographer, Dwight Conquergood and he says that “Ethnography is an embodied practice and it’s an intensely sensual way of knowing. The embodied researcher is the instrument.” So I do believe that’s exactly what this work is doing: it started as an experimental autoethnography, and then it evolved into this creative, collaborative research creation with Devon.

Devon: And I would add that the archive of the, you know, the transcripts of our emails and the Dropbox folder and the, you know, Angela chiming in, and Lauren chiming in, and people kind of responding and reacting and... I feel like that whole kind of pile of things it has its own life as well, you know? It’s its own kind of research creation, like, an emerging something. There’s something to it there. There’s such substance to those uncoverings that we were doing together that resulted, that kind of informed the final piece in a lot of ways. Like “Oh they made this decision, they didn’t make the decision. Oh they, you know, these are the reference photos that Amanda shared and then this is, like, you know the original audio and...” I don’t know, I just think that—I think you know what I’m trying to say but I find it fascinating the whole correspondence and collaboration, you know.

Mika: I love that you mentioned that behind-the-scenes work that happens to-to create this piece. You know of course it’s really between you and Amanda, but yeah—I know Lauren isn’t in the recording right now—but you know just the fact that Lauren had to schedule it and we had to do meetings [**Devon:** Oh yeah] and, you know, is that something that you sort of had to- you- is that something you were trying to bring up? Like the behind-the-scenes...

Devon: Yeah, like, and just think of all the kind of the labour, and the empathy, and, like, weighing in with different perspectives that was happening at every stage. It does inform the final that we did get to. And that I would argue that people coming to that piece, now, they’re going to have their interpretation that kind of fractures off again, you know, and I just find that really interesting. If you, like, zoom out and you can consider not a line of “Here’s the final piece. Here’s Amanda’s one thing. And here’s the collaboration.” It’s almost like a web of intersections, and it’s almost like you wanna put it in a box. We’re not gonna do that [laughs]. Like I almost wanna collect it, and archive it, and label it, you know, because it’s like— it exists as this interesting pile of stuff.

Amanda: Yeah it’s super seamless. I feel like it’s everything. It’s not like “Oh I did this” and “You did that.” You know it’s like [**Devon:** Exactly, yeah!] everyone was collaborating [**Devon:** Completely]. Behind-the-scenes or not, and... and then we allowed the process to happen. We didn’t know exactly what’s gonna happen, and I think this is very

important for research creation, you know? You start with something, but you allow the process to uncover things that you were not expecting, and I think this is where the magic really happens and it's when you co-collaborate with other people, cause then it's so much richer, you know. 'Cause the possibilities are endless, and like you said, someone is gonna see that work and they're gonna have their own interpretation and it's gonna be a living work forever [**Devon:** Yeah!]. And that's the beauty of it.

Devon: I love that. Yeah, I love that you were able to articulate the know—like we didn't know where we were going, where we are going. Like that's maybe exactly why it's research creation, you know?

Mika: And I think too, the—I mean the fact that, you know, socially, you know, just as a researcher yourself living during COVID, you already don't know what's happening. But the fact that you both are willing to... to still find a way to create, make research, do research, at a time of uncertainty, willing to make research flexible, I think that that is the magic, as what you said Amanda. And I also, just the willingness to collaborate with each other, still, is something beautiful—it's what's so beautiful about the piece as well. But we're almost closing in to the end of the interview, so I wanted to ask if there was anything that the both of you wanted to say about the graphic recording? Any last words? Anything else to add?

Amanda: I just wanted to say that I didn't even know that I was gonna submit anything, you know, for the COVID-19 and Cultural Studies series in the first place, and I only did that because Angela encouraged me to do so. So, it was funny cause it took me a while to show the work like to my colleagues, family, friends, because it was so personal and so vulnerable, like you said Devon, and I felt like very self-conscious of the work, mainly because it's very metaphorical and I'm not sure how people were gonna interpret this work. And like seeing the graphic recording, it kinda like, made me surpass that self-conscious zone, and share the work with everyone. And after I've done that, I received a lot of positive feedback, and it was kind of a cure, because the feelings that I approach in my text, they kinda like slowly started to dissipate. So, it was a really, really nice experience, personally. And like acknowledging my positionality, my intersectionality, within the pandemic, also allowed me to better understand how COVID was affecting us in a wider, like, societal sense. And how to better navigate, and cope with it, so yeah I feel like it made everything more tangible, and I thought people would engage more with a graphic recording rather than just text and audio. So, it's almost like I completed, like, this kind of like experience and immersion.

Devon: Yeah, people were reaching out to me as well. I think I shared it on my Facebook? And a lot of people in my circle were reaching out and just being like, "Wow! That really

articulated this experience so beautifully” and, like, it really resonated with a lot of people. It was—I think that combination was just it made it more accessible to people. People felt like they could click on it and see something, yeah. So, people were really responding to it over here too!

Amanda: That’s awesome.

Mika: Thank you. I mean you’re—even before the graphic piece, your written piece was already such a solid piece, something that I actually, personally, very much resonated with. So, thank you so much for sharing it, because it’s so important to be able to, you know, connect to—I mean, I’m also another, like, immigrant, racialized woman in Canada right now, so it was very personal for me to even hear it, but also just looking at the graphic recording, and, you know, how much it added to the written and audio piece was—it was just really, it was really good [laughs]. So, I’m so thankful that the both of you came out here to talk about it and also thank you for sharing and [laughs]—Lauren did you, I don’t know if you can—no—okay. But thank you both so much!

Amanda: Thank you both that means a lot of me. This work is gonna live in my heart. Forever. Yeah it’s very precious to me.