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Feminist Constellations: A Conversation about Epistemic Harm, Gender-Based Violence and (trying to hold on to) Joy in Academia

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Introduction

Our conversation starts from places of hurt as it delves into personal experiences of epistemic and physical harm in academia. Over the course of three meetings, we seek to broaden first and foremost our own and second scholarly understandings of what constitutes epistemic injustice and reflect on both the pervasiveness and devastating impacts of gender-based harassment and violence on knowledge and knowers. Adriana brought the three of us together, having identified our common struggles and shared interests by engaging with the work (and tweets) of Laura and Maja. Adriana and Maja met on Twitter and, after several years, also in person in Bogota, Colombia. Adriana first “met” Laura by reading her MA thesis on gender-based violence in academia (Castrillón Guerrero 2022), following the recommendation of a mutual friend, and then met in person in Bogota. Maja and Laura met thanks to Adriana, via Zoom.

We share some roles and positions in our societies and diverge in others. We all identify as women who grew up in working-class backgrounds in lands previously colonized. We all relate to the idea of doing feminist work in academia, feminist activism or having a critical approach to knowledge from a feminist perspective (and some other perspectives).

Adriana and Maja were both born in the margins of Europe, close yet never quite part of European society. Adriana was born in Romania to ethnically mixed parents, White and Roma, a few years before the 1989 Romanian Revolution. Given the charged political climate and the persecution of groups seen as opposition by the Communist regime, issues of religion and ethnicity were not broached in any measure throughout her time in Romania as a teenager. She emigrated to Sweden at 18 and has held dual citizenship since her early 20s. She now identifies as an immigrant of mixed descent and an atheist.

Maja was born in the former Yugoslavia during its most turbulent times in the early 1990s to an ethnic Vlach, atheist, communist family on her father’s side and an Orthodox Christian Serb family on her mother’s side. Today, Maja identifies as Serbian, socialist and non-religious, although culturally she continues to practice certain elements of Orthodox Christianity. Adriana and Maja completed PhDs in the UK and navigated the violent waters of UK academia as migrant workers at different points in their lives. Adriana has also lived and worked for lengthy periods in both Colombia and Sweden, being a naturalized citizen of the latter.

Laura was born and lives in Colombia to a maternal family coming from the borders between Colombia and Venezuela and a catholic background. The role of women and the impacts of armed conflict during early 2000s in her family history shaped her academic interests in community social psychology and placing *care, feminism and affection* not only as objects of research but as constitutive criteria for knowledge production. Laura completed her MA degree in cultural studies in 2022 and has been working on making gender-based violence (GBV) visible in university settings for nine years. She identifies as a lesbian woman, former catholic and a tarot apprentice.

Through these examples, we revisit the embodied experiences of women in academia and the context-bound politics of gatekeeping, competition, and silencing at personal, institutional, disciplinary and industry levels, paying special attention to uncovering the institutional support for abuse and structural conditions in which these forms of violence flourish. Ours is a call for action and a reflection on such action, as we proceed to explore the possibilities for change in academia. We reflect on our duties, roles and aspirations as feminists faced with the identified harms and provide some personal reflections on how those harmed and marginalized may maintain joy, hope, and their capacity to repair themselves. We are critically hopeful here as we tackle the conditions of our labour to comment on who gets to be joyful, when, and how, as well as what it means to be ‘doing’ something to combat and resist these harms. We conclude with reflections on the strengths and joys of building feminist constellations, restoring trust in others and self, and fundamentally changing one another through love and care.

I *Harms*

Adriana: Just an hour before this meeting, I heard about yet another junior colleague being plagiarized by an established senior researcher in the field of peacebuilding/transitional justice. From her account, the senior researcher, who had examined her PhD a couple of years prior, “borrowed” several ideas from her thesis on themes he had never worked on before, paraphrasing her work and using the same sources. This seems like a case of mosaic plagiarism, which is notoriously difficult to prove. She asked me what to do. This, to me speaks about two things, the trust relationships we build amongst feminists in academia, and how whisper networks can work both for and against us (see Johnson 2023; Jiménez and Hermann-Wilmarth 2020). Many of us who have suffered this type of harm are also afraid of filing formal complaints or otherwise denouncing bad behavior by established researchers informally because, at least in the early days post-PhD, we rely on a small network of contacts where most potential line managers know each other in some capacity. If a formal or informal complaint backfires, for instance if the claim of mosaic plagiarism is challenged and proven difficult to evidence, as the more junior researcher, you are at a higher risk of your work relationships souring than the senior researcher against whom you complained. You never know what people against whom you lodged complaints tell others, and what those others tell others, and so on. Making that calculation in an asymmetric relationship and carrying the burden of its outcomes is difficult, so my colleague decided to do nothing. The three of us come to this conversation having bonded through whispers about the harms that we, as feminist women, have lived through in academia in different ways and in different corners of it. This is a strange introduction, but I can see us now, reclaiming this space, our space, in academia together through these conversations.

Maja: It is interesting that you start by saying that some forms of plagiarism are difficult to prove. I was first subject to epistemic injustice in academia in the very first month of my PhD in a situation I thought was unfair but wasn't quite plagiarism. I learned that a professor who would have been my PhD supervisor had I chosen the institution they were affiliated with published a piece with a short section which in many ways resembled the PhD proposal I had shared with them some months before. As in the case Adriana was commenting on, this was not a topic they had written about before. My actual supervisors, both women, were incredibly supportive and advised me on different ways of 'claiming' this topic as something I was working on even though I had no publications to show for it.

However, we did end up debating that the case itself was not plagiarism and decided not to 'do' anything about it, i.e., file a complaint. 'Maybe they had the idea to write about this but forgot about it until they first saw it in your PhD proposal,' it was said. We acknowledged that even if the article was intentionally 'inspired' by my PhD proposal, in any case, I was powerless and at such an early stage of my career that this person might end up sitting on job/grant/promotion committees making decisions about my professional future. So, I brushed it off and moved forward with my PhD rapidly in a quest to publish something that would tie my name to the topic. At that time, I shared what happened and how it made me feel publicly only once, in front of my PhD peers and a senior academic who tried to reassure me. 'Well, look at it this way,' they said. 'If this professor is trying to steal your work at this stage, it must mean that it is good!' Over time, I started to doubt myself that anything actually happened. Coming to this conversation, I had to double check 'my evidence' to believe myself again that this was not an accident – two people writing about the same thing largely neglected in the discipline at the same time.

It was not until I read Jana Bacevic's (2021) work on epistemic injustice that I acquired a vocabulary for what happened to me and many other forms of abuse I knew had happened to others around me. There are many layers to epistemic injustice in academia, yet the main one students and academics continue to be trained to detect is textbook plagiarism, that is, copying someone else's work without citations. All this training on one concrete form of violation means that such forms of plagiarism are probably well-avoided by abusers who seek to extract and co-opt other people's knowledge although, of course, textbook cases of plagiarism continue to happen. What brings the three of us together are all the other, less known, forms of epistemic injustice and abuse in academia that we and many of our colleagues and friends have experienced even though at times we lacked the right words or a plan of action to address them.

Laura: Stories about epistemic injustice in my personal case began when I was doing my BA in Psychology, eight years ago. My colleagues and I were doing our final research on forgiveness. We sought out one of the most brilliant professors in our Faculty to be our supervisor. He co-authored a lot with students, and we saw that as good practice at the time as we were also pursuing the opportunity to publish our work. He agreed to be our supervisor and, when he asked us if we were interested in publishing an academic article about this topic together, we said yes without hesitating. So we started to do our research as he was leading the way, showing us *how things were done*.

There was another young female professor who was actually reading our work every week (not him) and she was the one who, until the end, knew everything about our research. Then, someone else came into the picture, another male professor from another university, who was jumping into this article we were writing, just because he had *contacts*. He never made any actual contributions, but he knew the "way" into the fieldwork and we were told that would be

a good enough reason to add his name to the article. We agreed, assuming *this is how it's done*. He also had two female psychology students who were doing the hard work at his end. So, there were five female students and one young female teacher doing fieldwork, in-depth interviews, literature review and writing for this one article. Both male teachers were just *supervising*. Our topic was forgiveness beliefs among victims of forced displacement in Colombia. There is no way that topic would be emotionally easy to dig into. We also had to process the impact of sharing stories with actual victims every day while doing our research. Now, I would do many things totally differently. I was a part of the whole machinery of instrumentalizing victims in the name of academia and I thought *that was the way it was done*.

I did not understand what was happening then. This thing I thought was a good practice, the whole co-authoring with students, was actually some sort of academic capital gain made off of free labor. In the end, we published an article (all of us, including those who 'jumped in' and made no contributions), which was a huge accomplishment for us. We understood that this professor, the original supervisor, could publish a huge number of academic articles every year because students were doing the actual research while he was *supervising* many research projects at the same time. Supervising is important for sure, but at the core, supervising is not doing the research. This modus operandi set a very high standard for his academic score and moved him into the highest professorial position at this university.

A few months later, I got an email from a university in Canada, talking about the logistics for an upcoming conference, where, apparently, our article would be presented. I asked my colleagues, and none knew anything about the event, nor had they submitted any abstracts. It turned out our *supervisor* was sending our article to different events abroad and never consulted us, nor did he offer us the opportunity to participate in them. When we confronted him about Canada, he pretended to be surprised that he forgot to tell us and was 'very open' about us going *with him* to present the research. *The only condition was that, while the university was funding his attendance, we had to do it at our own expense since there was no funding for students*. We didn't go, of course.

This experience got me thinking about how it all started for me: before supporting victims of gender-based violence (GBV) in academia, as I do now, I found myself doing free academic labor so a man would climb higher in his academic career at the cost others' efforts, in this case, female students. This whole idea of "*I'll show you how research is done*" can be related to what Espitia Beltrán, Ojeda Ojeda, & Rivera Amarillo (2019) call the *disciplinamiento de cuerpos feminizados in academia*, disciplining feminized bodies in academia. There is a hidden curriculum on research methodologies that keeps reproducing a patriarchal order in academia, where androcentric aspects of the making of knowledge are prioritized, such as not caring about emotions, knowledge production as capital accumulation, the idea of 'a field' as a colonized land that you can gatekeep from others, the idea of people being instrumentalized and seen with no agency in research, and so on. This also resonates with what Donna Haraway (1997) and other feminist academics like Liliana Vargas-Monroy (2010) have said before about *Testigos Modestos*. You have to learn a set of implicit rules that are deeply related to gender, race and class relations in the academic setting. In the end, the accumulation of epistemic capital can guarantee you will be staying in academia for any duration. And to me, this silencing of voices in academia, especially those of women and other minorities, is a form of GBV with epistemic injustice at the core.

Later on, when I became an activist at my university, I found out that this practice was not so different to other types of GBV as it has to do with displaying power and showing others who

has enough tools to keep reproducing academia as it is. If you are too sensitive, too soft, too much of a complainer, too much of a feminized body, too slow for “knowledge production” or not using enough data (or, for that matter, people) you may not “make it” as easy as others have made it. Your conclusions are also not that valid. And there is a link between this practice and the silencing of other forms of GBV such as sexual harassment. That is my argument in my MA thesis.

Adriana: As you were saying about Bacevic’s work, Maja, I started to read Laura’s MA thesis on GBV in academia (Castrillón-Guerrero 2022) to try and make sense of my negative experiences in academia, to find a language for what was done to me as well as why I reacted to it in the way that I did. By this point, I had been plagiarized in Colombia by a more senior colleague, in a permanent position, who has probably been plagiarizing many others for years, and I had been extensively bullied in the UK by several senior people in the project where I was a post-doc. What strikes me about Laura’s thesis is that, when all of this happens to you, it is not just the negative mechanisms that you would expect that are being employed against you. Reading her thesis was like playing a bizarre game of abuse bingo, but what I discovered was that, in the course of this spiral of abuse, there are also ‘good mechanisms’ being deployed against you. For instance, she describes the arbitrary use of sabbaticals and different types of ‘time off’ that disconnect the victim of abuse from their network and prevent them from following up on their cases. Some might consider what Laura’s supervisor did ‘mentoring’ and he might be able to get away with it in some circles. Yet, it is actually a form of epistemic injustice because he was not recognizing his more limited role in producing this knowledge, as a supervisor, and passing himself as its main contributor. Given his networks, he was well-positioned to do this, and the students may have never known this if it were not for that “misdirected” e-mail from Canada.

After #metoo, there is a sort of hypersensitivity to sexual violence and abuse in academia and this sometimes obscures other harms. When I first approached Human Resources in the UK about being bullied in my post, the first thing they asked me was if I thought there was a sexual component to it, and, looking back on it now, it feels to me like my saying “no” somehow deprioritized my complaint for them. What we see in Viaene, Laranjeiro and Tom (2023) as well as Laura’s thesis, is that sexual violence can be means to an end, I mean it can be used to silence people, but it can also be an end in itself. Sexual harassment or sexual abuse can be a way to break people when there are other forms of abuse involved, and this is the last and worst thing that can be done to them as they become more and more dehumanized. In its iteration as a means to the end, harassment can also be used to “break” others into a circle of abuse where they become allies of the abuser. Regardless of its use, what I want to highlight other forms of harm that happen at the same time as the sexual violence and abuse, as they are part of the package and usually spell a pattern that goes in a *crescendo*. When complaint mechanisms minimize these *other* harms due to the hypersensitivity to sexual violence and abuse, they create a climate where potential complainants also normalize them, ultimately failing to recognize them and including them in their reports.

Laura: Mansfield and colleagues (2019) theorize that academic cannons are established through violence and specifically through GBV. According to them, victims of different types of abuse, including sexual violence, are slowly pushed to the background and their work is appropriated by their victimizers.

This idea of some men having great careers just because they are brilliant has to be questioned. And we do have to start thinking about GBV beyond legal framework and beyond media (not

instead), where the most displayed forms of violence are sexual harassment and sexual violence. I am not saying, of course, that these forms of violence are not to be addressed right now, but I guess our point is to see that those types of GBV in universities are possible because there are some deeper levels of violence within academia and these are intertwined.

In the chapter Adriana mentioned before, Viaene, Laranjeiro and Tom (2023), theorize about the links between the production of knowledge and sexual power. They expose this very famous male scholar whose academic background is *epistemologias del sur* and talk about sexual harassment practices and other forms of displaying power in an abusive way, as he did, when he took advantage of institutional and leadership position in his field to appropriate knowledge production as well as sexually harass Global South scholars who were more junior or precariously employed. The question debated among academics the day after the chapter was published was: *Can we talk about the culture of cancelation?* I think this is a poor approach and definitely not the point. Instead, this is about believing the victims' stories and their experience as a source of knowledge, and this is also about asking ourselves, can we reflect on how, for example, the knowledge we glorify can actually be *poisoned* as Veena Das (2011) once said?

Honoring their stories can also lead us to this question: can we dig even deeper or wider into the academic knowledge network we are producing and reproducing? Are there women or other minorities who have theorized about issues we think only white cisgender men have theorized about, even the ones from 'the south'? How can we be even more accurate in mapping this network that makes silenced subjects not visible nor audible?

Adriana: In the course of bullying and institutional abuse in the UK, I was offered to drive the writing of a department-wide policy for post-docs. This was a strange proposition given that one of my complaints was that I was overworked in the project where I was a post-doc, a situation that only got worse after I approached Human Resources about it. Nobody was offering me time off to do this, but they kept coming back to these points to minimize my complaint: the PI was new in his role, the different types of post-docs in the department did not allow for comparison, because some people were employed by the projects, others had their own funding, some people had more experienced PIs and mentors, others like me – were in the worst situation: unexperienced PIs, with unreasonable demands, and an extremely dependent role. This whole crisscross produced a situation where nobody would take responsibility for improving this work relationship because I was not formally employed by the School and University, but really by the project and therefore by this PI. To borrow a term from Bandura (2016), they were deploying several moral disengagement strategies, but, as time went on, it seemed clearer and clearer to me that what they were trying to get to was that I was somehow complicit in my harm either because I did not accept the “misunderstanding and inexperience” explanation or because I did not accept to “train” my supervisors and department into doing better.

As this situation went on for nearly a year, with me waiting for almost six months for a mediation meeting, I started to think about how my experiences were embodied. I had difficulties sleeping and eating and therefore performing basic tasks. When I called Human Resources to explain that, in this wait, things were getting worse for me, they told me I should take more frequent walks and use the mindfulness room next to my office. Like with this department-wide policy, I was dumbfounded as to when I should do that. When I called a General Practitioner to ask whether it would be possible to take a few days off work for burnout, the only response I got was that they could medicate me for anxiety. But I did not

want to continue working in this environment and be medicated to be “at peace” while doing so. I started to dig myself out of this seemingly impossible situation by listening to Sara Ahmed’s recorded lectures (see Ahmed 2018), as recommended by a colleague. I have so many colleagues to thank for hanging on, but two women were particularly important for me: one suggested that some of this was happening because I am a young woman in research; the other - because of my mixed and immigrant background. I had never thought about this before: I am mixed, binational and went to the “good schools” wherever I lived and ended up with 7 degrees, so I kept thinking why was this happening to me? Her words still ring in my ears from time to time “You may look White, but you are not White *like them*.”

When a Colombian woman, whom I had considered a friend up to this point, plagiarized me in 2020, she told me that this was a mix-up with the translator and her research assistant. The e-mail said something like “if we learned something from feminism, it is to make amends and to forgive.” As a result, I am now wary about how rest, our work, and the values and wording of feminism may become weaponized and instrumentalized. I was being put on the spot and pushed into exercising compassion and empathy, but what have any of these people seriously done to make amends? I was told that it was a mistake in both cases and, when I accepted that, I went on to discover it was systematic and, given how they escalated things, likely done in bad faith. I am bothered by how these people make feminism complicit in the harms of others – but I still think a lot about what, if anything, they could do to redeem themselves in the eyes of those they harmed, if they ever were to decide to take us, our complaints, and our call for transformation in academia seriously.

Laura: One thing that you often hear from people when you express discontent is ‘but if there are all these issues, why do you stay?’ I see us here as collectively believing not only that change is possible, but also that we make changes in academia, beyond the cosmetic.

In my experience in universities, I would say I have seen things change not as quickly as I would like to but definitely change. Eight years ago I was an undergrad creating a student collective with my girlfriends because we saw universities did nothing to prevent and deal with GBV. The situation is still rough, but over these years we - feminist students and teachers around the country - pushed the government in Colombia to make universities adopt protocols on GBV. It turns out some universities realized they need people to make those protocols work. And some of us actually have the experience to do that. So now other feminist colleagues and I are working for institutions to make it happen.

Of course, I know that doing diversity work, as Sara Ahmed (2017) calls it, can be a way in which universities pretend they are doing the job but with no core and substantial changes. Some of us have decided to be there, strategically inside, in order to make change happen. There was no way I could find a visible feminist worker at my university when I was an undergrad, no allies, no one to reach out to. This is slightly different now. Not enough, but this is happening progressively. This is a reason I would not think about leaving. I see what I do as a way of resistance.

Maja: For me, at this stage of my career, retreating would be an un-feminist thing to do. I have to stress that this is not something I preach to other feminists, but it is what works for me. I, as a working-class immigrant, am here [at a Russell Group University in the UK] against all odds. I am not here alone but with and because of multiple women mentors, teachers and healers who have supported me along the way – taught me about the hidden curricula that Laura mentioned, created opportunities for me, read my drafts, and comforted me when I faced rejection. I am

also here with and for my mother and grandmother who did not even have a chance to go to university, let alone work at one. I see it as my feminist duty to be a change from within and to pay it forward. The changes I speak of are not uniquely tied to university settings; instead, the university is embedded in broader and intersecting struggles in our society and as such becomes a space to entangle and complicate struggles for justice and freedom both within and outside the university.

II *Constellations*

Maja: I have been reflecting on the concept of epistemic trust (Origgi 2012) recently. On account of the traumatic event I described earlier in the conversation, I developed a deep sense of mistrust in senior academics who were not my two supervisors, particularly in white male professors. I worked a lot on confirming that this mistrust was justified – by looking out for red flags, listening for warnings of where (not) to share my ideas, present my papers, and circulate drafts. But I did not work on developing epistemic trust and it took me several years to even attempt to co-author, which has so far turned out to be one of the most rewarding aspects of my work. How do we develop trust after epistemic harm?

Adriana: A friend recently told me that, in her house, her, her husband and her young daughter do not spend much time theorizing in the abstract about gender roles, what it is like to be a woman in academia, as both her and her husband are academics, or what is a good way to raise a feminist, but they are more focused on *doing* feminism in the everyday and involving their daughter in the doing of feminism. She jokingly said, we need less deconstruction theory, and more participatory action on feminism. When you do not have the tools to distinguish between people or situations, when the whisper networks are not functioning right, or you do not have access to the right channels, it is easier to fall into this fear pattern. Academics have an easier time saying the right things, especially in peacebuilding/transitional justice studies, where it is like a pastor who reads the Bible, they know all the social justice buzzwords. But social justice, epistemic justice, gender justice etc. start at home, including in the workplace, not in the articles. When I was a post-doc, going through all of that, my Union rep told me the hardest thing to do is to do nothing in such situations and just let things play out. You keep wanting them to see your side and they keep wanting you to slip up so they can go on to weaponize that mistake against you.

Laura: To stop doing things is actually doing something. It is taking care of yourself. It is a means of surviving in academia. We have different strategies for survival in academia. For me at this point is to try to do as much as I can even if the conditions of labor are not the best. Other people have different strategies. Maybe because I see this as a long-term accomplishment in my case, being a young woman in academia. Some people have decided to stay in academia despite the great amount of violence they were dealing with.

The broader research project within which my thesis took place was called ‘[the patriarchy] is going to fall because we will knock it down’ (Espacialidades Feministas, 2022). We asked students and teachers at four universities about GBV and the extent and modes of resistance they created to (be able to) stay. Teachers and students who participated expressed several ways of resistance, some of which are being with feminist friends along the way, feeling like someone or a collective had their backs in moments of need, feeling supported by others when

confronting institutions, accomplishing personal goals, seeing political purpose in it at the end of the day, keeping their families in good economic conditions, amongst other reasons.

So, the fact that you left the university where you were bullied, Adriana, does not mean that you surrendered. At some point, you realized the institution and everyone who was accountable for what they did to you were not changing. So could that be a way to take care of yourself? Resistance can also look like this: keeping yourself alive.

Adriana: I thought that if I left, they would somehow win. I also thought a lot about my responsibility towards the people who would come after me. Leaving that institution, though, and taking a step back from academia in 2021-2022, allowed me to meet other people, especially other types of managers. In the course of the bullying, they had me convinced I did not know how to write properly in English or anything about data because they had said it for so long as they kept excluding me from my role. When I started to work as a consultant, in my first big project, I was responsible for the research methods of this 10-month project, and I was feeling a bit overwhelmed. My supervisor called me after a meeting and she said “Adriana, you are the data queen, you can do this. You have to do this. Try, see if it works and if it does not, we will fix it then. So, just do it.” I felt so excited and seen by this woman because she was giving me permission, and supporting me, to be fully myself. And I tried. It worked. We continue to be friends today. When I became Project Director, I called her because I was having some issues with my contract, she gave me some advice and, when I thanked her, she said that the only purpose of a manager is to make sure that people come to work and do their job happily. I have never encountered a leader like that in academia, so earnest and open.

Academia is so low stakes, there is nothing actually on fire, but we are made to believe the contrary. Rather than focusing on collective problems in academia, we are focusing on getting a piece of *la rosca* [the cake]. For me this thing about trust, when I hear people explain their problems as individual problems and solutions as individual solutions, I do not trust them. The problems we are facing in academia are collective and solutions must also be collective.

Maja: This is making me think of Akwugo Emejulu’s *Fugitive Feminism* in which she talks about feminist connections, as ‘the precondition and a necessity for any kind of collective action’ (2022, 72). I felt this way when you and I met in Bogota recently, Adriana. I found the conversation about epistemic injustices and the privilege of being trusted to hear your story and trusting you to share mine incredibly reparative. I felt not only seen and understood but, in Emejulu’s words, ‘fundamentally changed’ (2022, 71) as if I was transported to another dimension to learn another ‘way of knowing and being’ through and after epistemic harms together with you.

Laura: That made me think about how lonely it could be to be in academia when you do not find other feminists you can share your experience with without fear of retaliation or reprisals, because they [the ones who demoralize and violated you] make you believe you are crazy and have problems adapting to this place. That you might be the problem. It is really hard to build trust from scratch in these places – but *connecting the dots* in the place you work makes a difference. When we did this research I mentioned, we created a map of one of the universities and we started to place dots in each faculty where we talked to students or teachers who survived GBV or helped others file their complaints. By connecting the dots, we realized we were not alone at the University. And so we tried to share that in our in-depth interviews. Connecting the dots makes you change the perception that it is not only you, or always you. So as feminists, we can start to connect the dots and find people who share our politics. Sara

Ahmed (2017, 2021) talks about this as well, when she argues that institutions try to atomize complainers so they feel alone and gaslighted.

I cannot say this is always easy. The last few years, working with my friends and *compañeras feministas*, have been very comfortable for me because I did not have to explain things as I do in my current place of work. Working together, we established trust amongst us. A month after starting this new position, I found myself crying in the cafeteria because I could not find anyone who could understand what I saw as problematic and actually see it from a feminist perspective. This is a place filled with very traditional men. I have people to talk to in my life, but it was not that kind of loneliness. It was more like I was a feminist who was alone in this place where people did not understand me or even saw my work as relevant. Gender issues always came in second place.

The work of Black and feminist scholars is known for being constructed in *constellations*, for instance, so recovering dissidence or resistance would just be the first step. Helena Sutachan (2023) theorized about this, following Clare Hemmings' (2018) work on citations. Citing other feminist colleagues is an ethical job to be done, mainly to spread some *redes estelares de escritura* (stellar networks of writing) in which there are a few well-known and visible academics, while others are left behind. This amendment also has to do with starting to see knowledge where we did not see it before. *Conocimiento sensible* I called it in my thesis: sensitive knowledge and the emotional labor that goes into academic work as a constitutive part of it, not a subsidiary issue. *Conocimiento sensible* is a category that sums up the ideas of knowledge and the practice of doing research as bonding, a day-to-day and collective task. Just as Juliana Florez Florez and Carolina Olarte Olarte (2021) theorized: feminist research as a *política de lo turbio*, or as Sara Ahmed (2017) theorized: feminism, *a job you take home*.

Adriana: When we build our feminist constellations, there is a time and place for liking somebody and still being critical and mindful of who they are as part of the system. As I was telling you about the woman who plagiarized me, I have seen colleagues instrumentalize feminism time and time again and give talks about feminism. This woman in particular continues to be the director of a Gender Affairs Observatory and still unabashedly gives talks about feminism although she was instrumental in pushing me out of academia. I believe it is important to recognize where we are and what the problem is and also recognize the possibilities to change academia.

III *Celebrations*

Maja: What we promised we would discuss but found it difficult to arrive at in these three conversations is joy. What makes you joyful, friends? And why is it so challenging to feel joyful or talk about feeling joyful in academia?

Laura: The other day I was in therapy and was talking about something good that happened at my current job. I did not think it was a big issue to talk about, so I moved on to the next topic. My therapist stopped me and asked a simple question. 'Wait, so this good thing happened, how did you celebrate?' I did not celebrate it, to be honest, because I saw it as a thing that had to be done, not an accomplishment. But as we talked during the session, I realized this work is so demanding in terms of listening to people, mostly women and giving a proper institutional response to them that you tend to stop seeing some of the things that are actually

great. You become part of the machinery and start seeing your work as something that is already expected instead of something you do because you have the knowledge and experience to do it.

Adriana: I find it funny that we are talking about therapy, all three of us go to therapy, not to mention that Laura is a licensed psychologist. I was reluctant to get myself involved in therapy, but in the pandemic, I had three jobs, and I was dealing with that plagiarism case at the same time, so I *had to* see somebody. I started to see the therapy time as *my time* and it would keep me going through the week because I could always return to this moment that was just mine to (re)think some things. I still worry that by overanalyzing things we are destroying our joy about things, but therapy has been mostly helpful for me. Most recently, I was talking to my therapist about how I am not used to celebrating things because I am always waiting for the next disaster and catastrophizing.

Maja: The way that academia works, with the fast pace of everything, you rarely get to enjoy the small or even big victories because there is always long-term planning involved and there is always the next thing to consider to keep being successful and relevant in this industry. There is never space or incentive to stop and reflect on whatever major milestone has just happened to you. I remember that I defended my PhD at 5.30 pm on a Monday and already on Tuesday at 7.30 am I was up and marking essays. Even though I was the first one in my extended family to receive such a degree, even though I worked on it for years, day in and day out, it almost felt like nothing. I was already steps ahead, trying to figure out what is going to happen to me once my fixed-term contract expires or when my visa runs out, trying to secure that next big thing. So therapy did help show me the joys of slowness, and the rewards of taking my time to reflect on a practice or a process *before, during and after*, both within and outside the bounds of my job. It helped me feel more present in my own life and this is a most rewarding feeling. But the real shift in me happened when I secured a permanent academic position last summer. Since then, I have started to prioritize slow scholarship and relationships of care, and I sometimes actively choose these things over unproductive committee meetings or rushing to clear my email inbox. When you are precariously employed, it is far harder to do any of this; both slowness and presence need structural support.

Laura: At the beginning of my MA thesis, there are two photos of two Tarot cards. The first is the High Priestess and the second is the Three of Cups – three women celebrating in communion. The first card is for the feminist women I learned from in the course of this and other feminist works since it represents the gate opening to very deep, mystical, and intuitive knowledge. This woman – the high priestess - is one of the most powerful women in the whole major arcana. So this is how I connected to my research all along. The second card is about women together in celebration. After everything I experienced and kind of metabolized in this 150-page document, I wanted to imagine myself and my colleagues inside of that Tarot card: celebrating that we are still here in academia, trying to subvert things from within. And now I think this is what this group is, and it is quite magical and prophetic that we are also three.

When I wrote the thesis, I wanted to thank these women that I had learned *from* and *with* and I felt like putting these two cards together encompassed that. Academia, and feminist work in academia in particular when you handle GBV complaints as I currently do, many of which never result in justice for the victim, is *exhausting work* and it is hard to hold on to those glimpses and moments of joy. I get it sometimes when a student or somebody I helped with a complaint on GBV walks up to me and says *gracias* and I feel like I have made a difference at least for this person. Maybe it will not be a change to the system, but at least I was able to listen

in a different way and use my role in the institution to make things move. This is not something I can put in a report, to be evaluated, so in some ways, it has no relevance to my job performance, but it reminds me of why I am doing this.

Maja: Adriana said in our previous meeting that academia is such a low-stakes game. And most of the time it really is - deadlines can be moved, projects don't meet their desired outcomes. We move on. For me, it is helpful to remember this when I feel like I am falling into the *emergency!* trap – respond to this email now or the world will collapse. But my emergencies are elsewhere, they are in and with my community, for better or worse. Joy, similarly, while it might be individually felt, is created in communities.

Laura: I think about how important rest has become for me. And how important it is to have these spaces and times when we are not at work and in the work mindset. For me, in the gender work I do at my job, everything is an emergency, everything is high stakes all the time. So my mind is always in alert mode. I have to tell myself I deserve to rest, and that my mind doesn't have to be in alert mode all the time. Rest is essential, care practices are essential.

Adriana: In quantitative research methods, which I taught for many years, we have a concept called a tipping point. There is a more complicated explanation behind it, but it basically refers to the point when you have to re-evaluate your assumptions because you have new data and so much of it that it changes your understanding of the outcome you are looking at because of this new overwhelming evidence. This is how I think structural change happens. You have to have a critical mass of people, working at different levels, interacting with these institutions, mobilizing for change so that something *does* change. Given this pressure, those operating these institutions, take a step back and reevaluate the course of action, not necessarily because they are great and institutions care about us, but because they fear for their reputation.

I sometimes worry about the weaponization of joy and hope. When Human Resources kept insisting I take time off although nothing had been done about my complaint of being overworked, I started to resist the idea that we are resting or exercising joy *for* something. I do not enjoy the thought that our joy should somehow become an anesthetic so that we can better tolerate an environment that is mistreating us.

Maja: Yes, of course, let us not individualize the problem or romanticize academia. It is not a joyous place by default. It is a place of structural violence. We know that many men (and others) continue to do bad things and get away with it or even get rewarded on the back of the sexual or epistemic or other forms of abuse they perpetrate towards others. But at the same time, we, the three of us and others like us are now here and this has created a window of opportunity. The fact that Laura's role even exists in this university is already a big change. The fact that I can have my collegiality and networks of care recognized as my contribution to my place of work, together with my research, is, I think, a change.

Laura: This makes me think about the teachers I learned the most from my whole academic journey so far again. Those are my feminist teachers who taught me that knowledge is a personal experience even when that was perhaps not the subject of the classes. When I finished my MA thesis, I wanted to do two things: first, cry – because it was such an exhausting process and second – text all of my feminist teachers and colleagues in academia to thank them for helping me in more than one way throughout that process. For taking care of me. I am more aware of how you never produce knowledge just by yourself but instead you create knowledge with others. I started to understand feminism then, not as an identity, which I feel may suggest

a static or somewhat uniform thing, but as a *process* – a *relational process*. For me, this is also about how I see myself as a social psychologist. Everything is systemic and relational.

Maja: I think identities are always relational and unfixed, and we continue to make sense of ourselves through our practice. I did not think of myself as a feminist until I was 21 because of my own misconceptions of what feminisms are, but in retrospect, of course, I had engaged in feminist practices long before then. Now I always make a point of being a feminist, particularly with respect to my work because it is reflected in everything I do there, from teaching to research to the emails I send. I do academic work, but I do not think I identify as an academic anymore because I have seen far too many people push against change or resistance because an attack on the institution or sector feels like an attack on themselves. A crisis in higher education becomes some sort of crisis of ontological insecurity. I care about my job, and I am good at it, but I want to continue to have a separate sense of self outside it and even, who knows, maybe one day without it. On the other hand, I will always be a feminist and guided by feminist ethics. If not in academia, then elsewhere, I will be caring, sharing, exposing, contextualizing, imagining otherwise.

Adriana: I am not sure when I began to understand myself as a feminist. It was probably a combination of the two colleagues I mentioned in one of our previous conversations and reading Sara Ahmed's work on complaint being a feminist practice. I feel I have been so lucky to be surrounded by these wise women. For me, feminism is a practice now, it is more of a thing that we do, and we do it differently with different people and moments of our lives.

Maja: I like this idea of different *modes* of being feminist and doing feminism. Much of it is exhausting work as Laura said, but some of it is joyful work, hopeful work. And we are here for both.

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