

## You Are My Way to the Universe: Critical Collective Research Through Feminist Community Building

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**Abstract:** In this article, we draw on the scholarship of feminist communitarianism to develop a critique of the predominant neoliberal qualitative social research collaboration model. We argue that feminist theories and praxis about community building and political activism have the potential to transcend the highly institutionalized, individualistic, and managerialist collaborative culture. Feminist insights can help today's researchers navigate collaborative research and address key issues such as reflexivity, consensus formation, knowledge validation, and group solidarity. We use our own work in the Feminist Research Collective and in the WomenWeLove project to present an alternative orientation and a collective way to enact transformative research. This feminist intervention against the neoliberal research culture contributes to the ongoing reflections of how we produce knowledge via qualitative social research and why we shall do so in the current historical juncture, expands our imaginations of researchers' responsibilities, and engenders new possibilities for resistance and emancipation.

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## 1. Introduction

As neoliberalism expands its terrain to higher education, researchers find it has profoundly transformed universities' organizational culture (GIROUX, 2010; MUSEUS & LePEAU, 2019; OLSSSEN & PETERS, 2005), resulting in an increasing instrumentalization of research. Epitomized by the evidence-based practice movement, the managerialist discourse of "what works," accountability, and impact prevail across higher education institutions. Collaboration then is advocated as an effective approach to address large-scale complex social issues, elevate research impact, increase accountability, and maximize research output. We have also seen a rising interest in research collaboration from funding agencies, higher education administrators, and researchers themselves (BRACKMANN, 2015; HANESWORTH, 2017; OLSSSEN & PETERS, 2005) as a means to certain ends. Consequently, the prominent discourse on research collaboration tends to focus on *how* to best collaborate with the assumption that the desired outcomes will necessarily follow. In this article, we contend that a push for collaborative research could be risky and even perilous if it is not coupled with critical reflections on the nature of collaboration. We argue that to perform such a critical reflection requires us to go beyond the procedure-oriented strategic methodological discussion. Instead of merely asking the *how* question, i.e., how a research team can enhance the validity and reliability of the collaborative work, we propose that there are three *what* questions closely tied with this *how* question and cannot be neglected: Under what social and cultural conditions are the collaborations conducted? What underlying assumptions about truths and knowledge do the researchers bring into their work? What are the goals and commitments that the researchers hold in performing the research? We do not seek to downplay the significance of the *how* question. What we intend to demonstrate is that the *how* question would be more meaningfully addressed if it was grounded in an ongoing dialogue among the collaborators on the *what* questions. [1]

In this article, we mobilize feminist theories and practices to address these *what* questions. Drawing on feminist collaborative tradition (McHUGH, 2014) and participatory research (FINE, 2018), we not only formulate a critique of the current model of educational and social research collaboration but also discuss an alternative approach to collective research. Introducing feminist community-building as an antidote to the competition-oriented institutional culture, we bring forward a critical feminist framework in approaching collective research. [2]

A metaphor we use to distinguish our feminist collective work from conventional collaboration is the *universe* which can be contrasted with the *solar system*. Using the model of a solar system, we explain conventional mainstream research collaborations. The solar system comprises stars, sun, orbiting planets including Earth and myriad moons, asteroids, comets, rocks, and dust. In the Milky Way Galaxy, the sun is one star among the billions of stars, and billions of galaxies are the universe (JET PROPULSION LABORATORY, n.d.). The metaphor of the universe best captures the multi-centered, inclusive, and open-to-evolving nature of our collective work. In contrast, conventional collaborative knowledge

production is conducted based on the presumption of the achievement-driven strategic orientation, a more fixed division of labor, individual responsibilities, and accountability. The latter is very often organized around a central task in a relatively closed system, just like all planets revolving around the sun. [3]

In Section 2, we describe neoliberalism's deep roots spreading beyond economization of market places to public and private lives of individuals. To this end, academia has been captured with market logic, managerialism, and competition to homogenize performativity, accountability, and culture. In Sections 3 and 4, we discuss in what sense our feminist collective work challenges this conventional collaborative approach on multiple fronts. In its replacement we offer a refreshing, critical, and empowering set of experiences for both researchers and research participants to engage and to open dialogues for the engagement of others. We aim to offer an example that would empower other collaborative teams, buffering them against the increasingly competitive pressures within academic institutions. We present our critical feminist approach as both a critique of the current neoliberal academic culture and as a way to envision an alternative future by integrating technology, art, and feminist communitarian ethics. [4]

## **2. Social Research Collaboration in an Academy Influenced by Neoliberalism: A Solar System?**

Over the past three decades, the discussion of neoliberalism has proliferated in multiple disciplines in academia and in global geopolitical spheres. In the context of the United States, neoliberalism was first conceived as an economic move toward marketization and deregulation starting from the 1930s and becoming increasingly popular during the Nixon years (HARVEY, 2007; JONES, 2014). Marketization quickly moved beyond the domain of economy and started to erode public domains and private life (BROWN, 2015; FINE & SAAD-FILHO, 2017). As scholars critically examined the multiple faces of neoliberalism, the meaning-loaded term has been conceptualized from diverse perspectives ranging from economy to politics, culture, public sphere, everyday life, and intimate relationships (BOAS & GANS-MORSE, 2009; BROWN, 2015). [5]

BROWN (2015) offered a particularly compelling discussion of how neoliberalism, as a particular type of governing reason, takes deep root in the social life, governance, subjects, discourse, and worldview in contemporary society, including through the ways in which social research (research oriented toward social life and human experience/existence) is conceptualized. Through revisiting FOUCAULT's (2010 [1979]) later writing on neoliberal governance, BROWN (2015) demonstrated that the latest development of neoliberalism is characterized by a new form of rationality, namely, the economization of non-economic domains and the configuration of subjects as interest maximizers. Consequently, competition, as opposed to exchange in classical liberal literature, has become a normative approach to order peoples' lives, even in the domains where seeking profit is not the ultimate goal. Against this backdrop, everyone is *their*<sup>1</sup> own

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1 We use the gender-neutral pronouns, they/their/theirs, in this article.

entrepreneur. She pointed out that this process does not necessarily involve monetization. Instead, individuals must adopt the market logic to understand the value of themselves, their work, and even their intimate relationships. Financialization also sneaks in: "Its (the neoliberal subject, note from the authors) project is to self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence" (p.39). [6]

BROWN's discussion is particularly relevant to higher education, as it is a fiercely contested site where corporatization and marketization prevail. Scholars thoughtfully documented and problematized this trend from multiple aspects, such as the deepening of the budgetary, regulatory, and legitimation crisis (BURAWOY, 2011), the prevalence of corporate culture (GIROUX, 2002), the declining of humanities (DONOGHUE, 2018), the shift in higher education from a public good to a private good (BONDS, 2006), and the increasingly widening gap of educational inequality (METTLER, 2014). Neoliberalism has reached into the academy in impactful ways. Zooming into research collaboration, neoliberalism contributes to a ubiquitous and peculiar set of tensions, as researchers are encouraged to treat their research programs as entrepreneurs, to invest their time and energy with the calculation of gaining market value in mind, and yet, atomized and self-calculated researchers are incentivized to collaborate in large-scale, multi/trans/inter-disciplinary research projects. These neoliberal-informed ways of working are presumably warranted "on the assumption that solutions to complex social problems require the contributions of multiple disciplines and the engagement of nonacademic 'research users'" (CORNISH, GILLESPIE & ZITTOUN, 2013, p.79). Collaboration in research is promoted as a mechanism for the strategic production of knowledge to serve the purposes of evidence-finding, policy-making, and governance. At the same time, it is a strategy for survival. In a competitive academic job market, evidence finding often takes second place to the faculty scramble to publish in order to find jobs and keep them, and to generate funding. Collaboration, in this environment, becomes instrumental. Consequently, accountability, managerialism, hierarchy, and division of labor, are at the center of collaborative knowledge production. The motivations for collaboration become muddled in a milieu where one is asked to navigate the pressures of economic survival. Because social research both studies and employs knowledge landscapes, neoliberalism can impact the how and what of social research practices. [7]

Fighting against these pressures, particularly centering managerialism, LATHER (2018) revisited the controversies revolving around the pushes to make research more scientific, evidentiary, and objectifiable from funding institutions, professional organizations, and academics. She noticed that this push is manifested in the move to set "gold-standard" research methods that privilege random control trials (TOWNE & SHAVELSON, 2002), in regulating qualitative research using quantitative templates (BRAD & COLLIER, 2010), and in federal funding agencies' training that result in the marginalization of qualitative research methods. LATHER (2018) made a strong case in critiquing the tacit yet unavoidable connection between knowledge and the neoliberal managerialist

model of research. Social research as a particular type of social action is conditioned and enabled by the larger sociopolitical structure and consequentially shapes social reality (ZHAO, LI, ROSS & DENNIS, 2021). In this sense, how collaborative social research is conducted in the neoliberal era is inherently connected to not only the process of knowing but also the product of knowing. Unfortunately, this looming context encourages a certain kind of collaborative research as a key means to generating knowledge—in its various forms and diverse disciplines—which renders it vulnerable to managerialism (BIESTA, 2007). [8]

Collaborative social researchers, like ourselves, often hold the tensions of neoliberalism implicitly through the architecture of our work (e.g., DENTITH, MEASOR & O'MALLEY, 2012; O'NEILL, 2014). We critically interrogate the institutional environment and general structure of research collaboration tendencies in the neoliberal era because it has established the ways in which collaborative research is "intuitively" enacted within the academy, opening up those collaborations to the perils of managerialism, hierarchical power structure, and corporate culture. Neoliberal assumptions can be unwittingly taken up by academics in a way that supplants and impacts the democratic ideals of collaboration (HALL, 2018). As a Feminist Research Collective (FRC), we experience this firsthand as we explicitly struggle to engage a democratically energized collaboration. [9]

Just below we summarize the characteristics of conventionally-neoliberalist research collaboration using the model of a solar system. Then, in Sections 3 and 4, we elaborately describe our alternative model, the universe, using our feminist collective work as an illustration.

1. The solar system model primarily conceives research collaboration as an institutionalized practice. Consequently, researchers constantly need to navigate the tension between the institution's economic and marketization priority and their research agenda. The constitution of a research team is construed as an assemblage of multiple individualistic, and very often decontextualized expert voices. The designation of roles in a team is primarily based on the team members' expertise and, therefore, is inherently uneven. Generally speaking, the person claiming most expertise takes the principal investigator (PI) role and other personnel assume co-principal investigator, research scientist, or assistant roles. The distribution of roles in a research team is often in accord with hierarchical institutional roles. This functional structure of research collaboration is susceptible to the influence of managerialism as the PI and/or co-PIs could become the *boss* of other team members and the institutional power structure could be replicated or reproduced in the research process. KUNTZ (2015) probed this tendency with a perceptive analysis focusing on the role of methodologists as middle managers whose expertise arise from their training to represent the reality in a select and codified way.

2. Along with the assemblage of multiple atomic expertise is the organization of research work centering on a clearly defined central task. Ideally, the effectiveness and impact of the work should be evaluable and measurable. Aggregating toward a central task and moving to achieve predetermined goals, conventional research teams also feature a clear-cut boundary. As team members usually join with differential expert roles, the division of labor is relatively well defined. This is where we see a solar system, as a metaphor, which best characterizes the feature of conventional research underpinned in hierarchies defined by neoliberal managerial models. Just as the planets in the solar system cycling around the sun, the organizational structure of a research team revolves around a set of central, predefined research goals. The PI comes to represent the manager responsible for attaining research goals.
3. Together with the internal differentiation of roles and the division of labor, the distinctions also extend beyond the research team when working with research participants. In this sense, conventional research collaboration is bounded with the binary distinction between researchers and research participants. Participatory action research and related approaches offer exceptions to this tendency, and we have been inspired by these examples (e.g., CHAZAN & MACNAB, 2018; GUISHARD, HALKOVIC, GALLETTA & LI, 2018). Yet the vast majority of collaborative social research juxtaposes researchers' expert positions with research participants' corresponding othering positions as non-experts, outsiders of the research practice, and passive recipients. Bringing this back to the extended metaphor, the solar system features relative exclusivity and closeness. Research participants cannot find their positions in such a picture.
4. The quality of collaborative research is a complex yet less explored issue. As mentioned above in our discussion of LATHER (2018)'s work, collaborative research is often sustained through external funding and thus more likely pressured by evaluation expectations that recapitulate the funding agency's preferred quality criteria, whereas these criteria may not necessarily reflect the diverse and proliferate understandings about research quality held by researchers. This means that the quality of the *product* of knowing is often connected to the *process* of knowing in a technical and objectified manner. For instance, the concept of inter-rater/coder reliability takes the overlap of two or more researchers' coded content of qualitative data as reified evidence of consensus and implies an understanding of validity based on perceivable, quantifiable evidence, but attends little to the iterative and evolving nature of qualitative research collaboration (CORNISH et al., 2013; PAULUS, WOODSIDE & ZIEGLER, 2008; ZHAO, LI, ROSS & DENNIS, 2016). [10]

In a system where everyone's position is relatively fixed, democratizing collaborative educational and social research faces two separate tasks, exploring the potential to democratize 1. the interactions within a research team and 2. the interactions between researchers and research participants. Yet we would like to call on researchers to actively problematize this hierarchical, individualistic, institutionalized, and center-peripheral structured collaboration model. The feminist work we discuss below invites us to imagine a more communitarian, fluid,

and inclusive research collectivity, one that is supported by caring and loving relationships among team members and rooted at the border of higher education institutions with a potential to evolve beyond a multitude of boundaries. [11]

We have used the phrase social research collaborations to indicate the practice of engaging in social research through the involvement of multiple researchers. How "collaboration" is enacted and conceived will differ, and our use of the two contrasting models, the solar system and the universe, is intended to illustrate crucial aspects of these divergent ways of collaborating in social research. The universe model we advocate for is characterized by principles that are a good fit for feminist work, but might also help social researchers who enter collaborations from alternative theoretical commitments reflect on their own conceptualizations of "collaboration." Overall, we argue for a robust refusal to take the meaning, implications, and practices of "collaboration" in social research for granted. [12]

### **3. The Feminist Research Collective as a Collectively Emergent Imagination of a Post-Managerialist Community**

The work of the FRC demonstrates our engagement with the question that LATHER (2018) powerfully raised: "How might we move from what needs to be opposed to what can be imagined out of what is already happening, embedded in an immanence of doing?" (p.114) A feminist community in which all the authors have actively participated, the FRC embodies our *collectively-emergent imagination* of a post-managerialist community, being simultaneously scholarly and transformative, synergic and inclusive. In Section 4, we use our experience and practice in the FRC as an example to unpack the affinity between feminist community building and our collaborative qualitative research, as well as the potential for the two to build upon each other. Throughout our work we have sought to democratize the process by actively reflecting on the power relationships around and between us and by breaking away from higher educational institutions' hierarchical culture. In alignment with the ethical and onto-epistemological commitments of critical feminism, we deliberated on our approach to building consensus and solidarity, addressing intrateam difference, as well as strengthening the validity of our collaborative work. In the FRC, the community we envisioned and created is not *rooted* in a closed geographical or hierarchical imaginary of a center-periphery relationship, but open and extendable to encompass the lives of women from different parts of the world. To capture these characteristics of our work, we liken this feminist collaborative research approach as a universe model. To illustrate this alternative approach, we first offer a brief history of the FRC and then explicate in what sense our feminist commitments have been enacted in this work. [13]

The FRC was started in the fall of 2017 by a group of like-minded scholars including researchers, instructors, and graduate students based in the School of Education at Indiana University Bloomington. The original callout for the group focused on three areas: engaging in activism to fight for gender equity and social justice, developing shared collective feminist scholarship, and offering mutual support for members' personal growth. In the initial e-mail encouraging

engagement with the group, we were explicit in naming the democratization process of our agenda and efforts moving forward. The group has since been working together to achieve our goals while actively reflecting upon the strengths, challenges, sociopolitical implications, and future directions of our work. In this process, we have expanded to include other universities while placing a high value on collectivity and member buy-in in the conception of our work. Since its debut, the FRC has organized multiple forms of activities, including but not limited to reading groups, writing retreats, letter writing, and virtual workshops. Meanwhile, as the FRC became more pro-active and mature in engaging in political movements, we co-sponsored a local protest against police brutality during the 2020 Black Lives Matter Movement. [14]

At an early stage of the FRC's development, we found ourselves enthralled with a project mapping out the stories of women in our lives in a moment of pure collaboration and cohesion. Later known as the WomenWeLove project, this endeavor has been at the center of our activist scholarship and collective efforts since the spring of 2018. It features a participatory ethnography that mobilizes the ArcGIS interactive mapping technology to build a [website](#) dedicated to the life stories of the ordinary women in our lives that we love. We first conducted life history interviews with these women and then, working with them, we turned their words into multimodal digital stories hosted by a StoryMaps website. ArcGIS mapping technology allows us to pin down these women's stories on a global map and re-envision the world featuring ordinary women's life stories. The project is an ongoing effort and in its current stage, we are inviting worldwide contributions from citizens of diverse backgrounds. We situated this collaborative research at the margin of neoliberal higher education institutions and strived to break away from the gravitational pull of the institutional culture of universities. The theorization has provided an opportunity to shed light on a methodological and ethical possibility carved out by FRC's praxis. [15]

#### **4. Orienting Toward an Alternative Universe Model of Collaborative Social Research**

In Section 4, we use the universe model to articulate how we make sense of and engage in our ongoing collaborative social research. We offer four domains through which this alternative model can be contrasted with the solar system model of collaborative social research. Those four domains of action include reflective feminist community building; ethical and epistemological understandings of difference; formulating an inclusive political solidarity; and shifting toward collective accountabilities. These domains of action are not prescriptive, but rather descriptive. [16]

##### **4.1 Building feminist community by reflecting upon the predominant social norms outside and within the community**

In our discussion of the solar system model, we pointed out that social research collaboration is often considered a strategic means to a clearly defined end, such as the completion of a research project and the dissemination of its findings. In



our FRC work, we strived to prioritize the intrinsic value of feminist community building with the emphases that feminist community building itself has the potential leading to reflexivity and self-transformation. We consider that doing feminist participatory research, reaching out to each other, and organizing activist events all help us move in this direction. Turning the strategic action embedded at the center of the solar system model on its head, we contend that our FRC work must be grounded on reflection and critique of the social norms prevalent in modern societies. [17]

We are aware of the troubling relationship between feminism and community. Conventional communities have been a site of oppression and hierarchy for women, where patriarchal domination continues to silence, exploit, and marginalize women, and where women's communities based on conventional kinship or sex roles only thrive in the cracks of the patriarchal society (WEISS, 1995). Through examining this troubling relationship between women and conventional community, feminist scholars launched their critique of communitarianism, a belief that typically views conventional communities as the ideal of social groupness (FRAZER & LACEY, 1994; HEKMAN, 1992; WEISS, 1995). A major difference that demarcates a feminist advancement of communitarianism and the communitarianism as represented by philosophers is the degree to which one can and should take a reflective attitude toward the social norms claimed by the communities to which they identify, in particular, the norms associated with the social roles that one performs in their community of origin (e.g., daughter, wife, sister, etc.) (FRIEDMAN, 1996). FRIEDMAN, for example, urged us to distinguish a moral psychological description of such a community's constitutive role in identity formation from an unreflective tendency to take this moral starting point as bonded and fixed, the latter of which, as she noted, often underlies communitarian philosophers' writing such as SANDEL (1981) and MacINTYRE (2011 [1981]). [18]

FRIEDMAN (1996, p.197) distinguished "communities of choice" from "communities of place," by which she envisions a community-building process by choice, or in other words, starting with autonomous individuals that actively respond to the needs of the community and to each other, and in which both individual rights and responsibilities to the whole group are preserved. While she advocated "conceding the influence of those communities [of place] without needing unreflectively to endorse it" (p.204), her work highlights community members' voluntary engagement and reflective attitudes as key conditions for the founding of a contemporary community and the formation of mutual nurturing relationships. [19]

FRIEDMAN's distinction between communities of place and of choice is both illuminating and thought-provoking for our feminist work. Since the outset of the FRC, we have been explicitly or implicitly contemplating two questions: 1. Is it possible to engage in feminist and activist research work with this presumed autonomy and volunteerism? 2. What is the role of reflection in building feminist communities at the margin of conventional communities and which is often silenced by the liberal individualist society? [20]

When the FRC sent out the call for participation, all the members joined voluntarily and fluidly. At the beginning of the FRC, we spent time articulating our visions, laying out ground rules, and testing feasibility. One could consider this was the period when individual FRC members made their *choices* about and *commitment* to our burgeoning feminist community. Through our work we have realized that, even though participating in the FRC seemed to be a voluntary choice, to sustain this commitment, however, requires much more than individual autonomy and calls for more collective consciousness raising. [21]

Often academic women were socialized to believe that their life is constituted by primarily two distinctive spaces, the work space and the personal life space, in the former of which women are occupied with professional pursuits indifferent to gender equity and in the latter where women are struggling with negotiating against conventional sex roles (LANE, TABER & WOLOSHYN, 2012). Women's entry into academic workspace, for instance, is contingent on personal life space. In reality the boundaries of these spaces are often permeable and fluid. The blurring boundary of the spaces, however, does not necessarily contribute to the improvement of gender equity. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic and the work-from-home trend did not close the gendered achievement gap in workplace but exacerbated gender inequality (BEIDAS, HANNON, JAMES & EMMONS, 2022). What the FRC has been striving to do is to carve out a third space where women offered mutual support to each other through feminist advocacy. We cannot build this third space under the presumption that other spaces would be separated from the third space or left intact. Instead, the third space must be built upon the rest of our lived experiences as we navigate our lives in conventional communities and in higher education institutions. On the one hand, as mothers, daughters, sisters, and concerned community members, we could never walk into our meeting room leaving behind our beloved ones and the community. Being bitter or sweet, we always carry the burden with us. On the other hand, we do not conform to the roles that the institution has set for us, nor do we compartmentalize our lives for the sake of strategic boundary setting. FRC offered a space for us to reflect upon, interrogate, and heal from what we encountered outside FRC. For instance, we always start our meetings with personal check-ins. Intimately grounded in our lived experiences, the check-ins carve out space for us to reflect upon our roles as women in society. Our writing retreat is another intentional effort to build a feminist communal space where we foreground care, listening, and our commitment to each other. Choosing to retreat in the woods further symbolizes our intended move away from the conventional institutional gaze. Methodologically, we practice critical reflexivity through situating ourselves in our socioeconomic settings and her-storical contexts, which are shaped by the intersecting power relationships of colonialism, racial injustice, patriarchy, and neoliberalism. Our *how* questions revolve around maintaining the dignity of people and the impact it has on people we care about, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the research we undertake. [22]

Meanwhile, through our efforts of community building we learned that a critique of the power relationships operating *outside* the community does not always meet the *internal* needs to build a community that is not bounded by places. In

FRIEDMAN's (1996) critique of communitarianism, she acknowledged the need for women to recognize the conventional community's constitutive role of a person's identity formation. If conventional communities have all shaped identity and our efforts to build the feminist community do not leave our existing lived experience outside the door, then we need to accept the possibility that there is always the chance that we have brought the traces of the external communities into the new space. There is always the possibility that the creation of the FRC is normalized intentionally or unintentionally by racist, sexist, homophobic and other oppressive structures and biased views. After all, we all entered the feminist work with different social statuses and varying privileges. The scholarship and practice of Feminists of Color, especially Black Feminists, have inspired us to address the interlocking power relationship within and beyond the community itself (COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE, 1979; CRENSHAW, 1990; ONG, 1996; SANTA CRUZ FEMINIST OF COLOR COLLECTIVE, 2014). Indeed, as WEISS (1995) keenly articulated three decades ago, feminists are "taking advantage of the opportunity to learn about the dynamics, costs, and benefits of traditional and alternative communities by listening to the voices of women who have lived in them" (p.4). What WEISS considered as the essential task remains at the center of our commitment to building feminist communities, as the voices of women from various traditional communities are still at risk of being erased. A feminist collectivity can become the source of solidarity in making visible these women's experiences and critically examining the power relationships in which women are embedded. [23]

Critiquing the power relationship within women's personal lives and work setting and reflecting upon its potential constitutive impacts on us offers an entry point for us to intentionally democratize our group dynamic. Contemporary qualitative researchers said much about democratizing the researcher-participant relationship, yet we think researchers would benefit from more conversations on how we can democratize the researcher-researcher relationship in a collaborative team. As we mentioned in discussing the solar system model, knowledge production in the neoliberal era increasingly moves toward a managerialist mode of team organization. Ranks and division of labor are created, and accountability systems are built based on such hierarchies. What we have done in our work is to develop consistent ways to ensure the equitable division of labor that allows enough flexibility for being absent or taking on larger responsibilities. For instance, we usually create specific roles in an ad hoc fashion and group members can choose the tasks they would like to complete based on their interests, strengths, and availability. We also developed our own approach to addressing the issue of authorship as we alternate between two forms of collective authorships: as the FRC, and as a list of the individual names rotated in order. Although one could develop ways to deconstruct authorship, for us it remains a social, cultural, and political issue that cannot be easily bypassed. We have allocated time to discuss this issue among ourselves, deliberating on the sociopolitical effects of adopting different forms of authorship, in particular, what it means for each and every one of us to have a unified voice under the name of the FRC. We also practice organizing brief discussion sessions before and after each major task (workshop organization, paper writing, and presentation, etc.), in

which everyone identifies to what degree and in what form she plans to contribute/has contributed to the work. Typically, without preconceived judgment or guilt, each member of the collective assesses her own ability and commitment to contribute using fists (little to no capacity to commitment) to fives (all, in terms of one's commitment to contribute), from which we then work together to determine how we would like to move forward. What is important about this practice is that each person is using her own autonomous scale to establish her own involvement and that personal assessment holds an unquestioned respect. Such personal autonomy is fundamental to how we democratize the research process of collaboration in our division of labor. [24]

The process of democratizing research has brought unique challenges and uncomfortable moments. We sought these opportunities to learn and grow with our participants. For instance, during a presentation, we invited two of our participants to share their experiences with the project. An uncomfortable moment ensued when one research participant made a comparison between her skin tone and that of an FRC member in discussing the hardship she endured in her youth. This moment was followed by days of deliberation within the group. The FRC member who has been working with this participant most closely especially found herself stuck in this ethical dilemma. On the one hand, she felt compelled to acknowledge the inappropriateness of the participant's discourse, and on the other, she also knew very well the vulnerability of the participant and cared about her deeply. After moments of soul searching and a sleepless night, she reached out to a few other members to think through this challenge. Later, we were also able to discuss it as a whole group at a weekly meeting session. [25]

Moments like this make us realize that none of us, including our participants, are perfect and we do not exist in a perfect world, either. We have our flaws and are the products of societies and ideologies around us. Nevertheless, it is our responsibility to destabilize existing hegemonic social structures and simultaneously be open and frank about our (and our participants') burdens, limitations, and vulnerabilities. Therefore, while we are not personally accountable for the statements made by our participants, the responsibility is on us to have conversations on inappropriate language use while keeping in mind the vulnerability of everyone in the community. Through staying with these challenging moments, we deepened our engagement with each other and further understood the complexities of the feminist work we have been doing. To return to FRIEDMAN's (1996) discussion of communities of choice, FRC's practice has shown that feminist community members' choices alone are not sufficient to sustain a marginalized community. Instead, both feminist community building and collaborative research benefit from continuous and formative reflection on the power relationship within and outside the community. [26]

## 4.2 Understanding difference and its ethical and epistemological implications

We devote Section 4.3 to exploring the issue of difference and its ethical, sociopolitical, and epistemological implications in feminist collective research. So far, it has been well recognized that feminism is inherently heterogeneous; contentions do arise because of the insufficient acknowledgment of this heterogeneity and the erasure of internal diversity. Therefore, we consider it meaningful and pressing to raise the question of how a feminist group shall address its internal difference and even disagreement to build larger consensuses. For instance, after examining empirical cases of feminist communities across different cultural contexts, WEISS (1995, p.13), citing ALLISON, suggested that "an effective collective is capable of confrontation." In what follows, we unpack our thoughts and practice revolving around this issue: we find it important to acknowledge that effective collectives can navigate through confrontations, but we would like to rethink the idea that somehow to be legitimate and authentic, a community *must* have confrontations. Before we dive into this discussion, we also connect the issue of difference with collaborative social research. [27]

Conventional collaborative social research tends to see differences as potentially disruptive. In the meaning making process, difference is something to identify, confront, and overcome. As we illustrated using the metaphor of the solar system, researchers usually analyze data with the goal of aggregating toward unified, fixed findings in mind. As effective as this work may be, the conversation on this topic has focused primarily on the technical and procedural aspects of the issue yet very few have attended to the very presumptions of this approach, namely, why we need to move toward this unified voice and what kind of voice we foreground. Furthermore, although researchers have proposed different approaches to validating the consensual nature of the unified voice, considerable discussions revolve around the objectifiable evidence of the consensus. [28]

Although at first sight feminist community building and collaborative research diverge from each other in their goals and orientations, we hope to establish a dialogue between the two on the basis that both are social actions involving the coordination of multiple actors as well as the development of an intragroup dynamic of addressing disagreements. Our work on the one hand grappled with the meaning of confrontation in the process of feminist community building, and, on the other hand, moved away from an objectified understanding of consensuses that lack sufficient deliberation or reflection in some strands of collaborative research. The feminist insight lies in that healthy communities do not restrict difference or disagreement, nor do such communities enact power relationships to silence perspectives or police differences (WEISS, 1995). Refining this line of thinking, our work emphasizes that there is no rush to consensus, but an honoring of difference and time. It is possible for a community to be inclusive enough to honor the positiveness of the community and affirm its members' experience. When disagreement and confrontation are conceptualized in this way, multiple perspectives are welcomed based on a rudimentary,

foundational agreement, namely, that the group members are willing and committed to working toward mutual understanding. As such, consensus is not superficially about resolving differences, but rather deeply invested in the ongoing differences created and sustained through our agentic actions. Our interconnectedness derives from our mutual commitment to each other rather than from the sameness among us, and it underlies the quest of difference and disagreements. [29]

The FRC is an inclusive space because difference and disagreement magnify our work and do not become a source of conflict. The most basic sense of *inclusivity* in our practice denotes having your differences neither erased nor violated. In reflecting upon the FRC's practice, we do not intend to present a unified, filtered, and unrealistically perfect picture of our feminist collectivity. Just as feminist scholar KARAVANTA (2019) pointed out, the mainstream discourse on community, deeply rooted in the modern nation-state system, often fails to address the multicultural, interethnic, hybrid, and multilingual characteristics of contemporary communities. KARAVANTA further contended that this failure "contributes to the rise of new forms of xenophobia, racism, and ethnocentrism" (p.450). To some degree, the FRC's practice could be understood as an endeavor to address the challenges that KARAVANTA delineated. The uncomfortable moment discussed in the Section 4.2 has taught us that such community building work is never immune from the ideological idiosyncrasies associated with the existing identity markers that are rooted in the current nation-state system. The endeavor has also reflected in how we designed and performed the WomenWeLove project, in which we seized the opportunity afforded by the advancement of digital technology and the participatory methodological approach to build an online and offline hybrid, multicultural, multilingual, and inter-ethnic community. [30]

The second point we would like to make is that confrontations should never be made public by communities. An inclusive space requires privacy. Public confrontation has long been associated with maleness and has a paternalistic and violent way of conceptualizing disagreement. Internal disagreement should not be silenced or squelched. However, taking conflict as the *primary* indicator of freedom in feminist groups suggests that this is the only way to express diversity. The main point of disagreement and confrontation is the opportunity to speak freely and to have your voice valued. This relies, not primarily on the allowance of disagreement and confrontation, but on an understanding that we are already mutually entangled and can orient through respect. We have found this point essential in strengthening the authenticity of our inquiry. We contend that working toward building an inclusive space and pursuing trustworthy research mutually reinforce each other. As such, building an inclusive space is a prerequisite for the free expression of different opinions and for all voices to be heard, instead of *vice versa*. Recognizing the nuance here allows us to take a more careful approach to the differences emerging in our research project. [31]

### **4.3 Formulating political solidarity through a "weak universal of female emancipation"**

Closely related to how the FRC approached difference and disagreement, we built solidarity without aggregating toward a solar system of collaboration. As we discussed previously, the solar system foregrounds one voice/one meaning/one research goal, the sun, in a highly competitive environment that identifies people's roles and responsibility as conflated with the "goal" by systematically ignoring their onto-epistemological beliefs of themselves, whereas the multifaceted meanings generated through the FRC are best manifested in the WomenWeLove project as a movement between de-centering and re-centering "we" in feminist work paving the way to the universe metaphor. [32]

The historic document of "Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement" (COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE, 1979) reminded us of the significance for feminists to hold each other accountable in addressing sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of exclusion or oppression. It also attests to the intersectional nature of the feminist work of community building today and the much-needed efforts we should put into addressing the issue of power within a feminist group, including avoiding a one-dimensional focus on gender. This requires our work to be not only racially inclusive but anti-racist in nature. In their writings, the SANTA CRUZ FEMINIST OF COLOR COLLECTIVE (2014) and ONG (1996) further allowed us to see that, although, under the same name, feminists coming from strands of life and social, cultural, and political contexts may not necessarily share the same agenda and approach. Therefore, a key challenge for feminist community building today is to build solidarity across the boundaries of other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, nationality, and social statuses. We as feminists value the situated knowledge that each one of us has carried with us to this collectivity (HARAWAY, 1988). What matters most for us is not to move away from these identity markers and build something new from scratch, but to acknowledge our varying paths of life and build our solidarity from there. Furthermore, we contend that erasing our past is dangerous as it often functions to silence some of the group members and at the same time foregrounds the hegemonic discourse, and in this context, the white, middle class, cisgender, women's agenda in the context of western developed countries and academia. [33]

The eventual design of the WomenWeLove project reflects our efforts of creating a dialectic between the "I" and the "we": at the entry page of the WomenWeLove website, we scoped the geographic locations of the women's life stories on a global map. A hyperlink was created for each of the life stories. By clicking the link users can access a separate page presenting a specific woman's life history. In Phase I of the project, webpages honoring individual women's lives were completed by the FRC members and the women they love. Women who shared their stories had a predominant and final say about what they would like to include and exclude from the page. In Phase II, we openly invited women outside the FRC circle to participate. Mapping multimodal stories from different cultures, areas, and generations together on a global map creates opportunities for non-

linear reading, juxtaposition, and conversation. The way the project is set up grants each author a larger sense of autonomy without jeopardizing the collective goals or coordination among the group members. More importantly, each of the authors created her own meaning horizon through intimately working with her participants. For instance, featuring the reciprocity of love, Samantha's writing of her grandma's story differs from Betty's life story composed by Suparna, which embraced a rich historical account of a Japanese American young girl's witness of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Pengfei's work of tracing a family's generational stories before, during, and after China's high socialist era is also distinct from Lucinda's efforts of interviewing a transwoman of a younger generation and contemplating the meaning of future and hope. Putting them together, we find another layer of meaning by discussing what it means for us to establish long-term valuable relationships with women we love. [34]

While decentering in the sense that we chose to work with women of different cultures, regions, and generations, and also to conduct the project in different ways—through recollecting stories, talking about recipes, working through metaphors, and featuring old pictures, our collectivity is sustained and strengthened first of all through the proliferation of multiple voices and agendas. The solidarity of FRC is derived from our commitment to engaging and supporting each other as opposed to any abstract, generalized, and decontextualized principles. [35]

The re-centering of "we" emerged from this profoundly decentering yet interconnected experience. Starting from the very beginning, we have been discussing what we would like to achieve as a group. Evolving along with our performance of the collective work, we also held conversations to reflect upon how we experience and envision our bonding in this collective. It is not uncommon for feminist groups to evoke the kinship term of *sisterhood* to describe the relationship among group members, yet we cannot neglect that *sisterhood* carries with it loaded meanings in the feminist fight against sexist and patriarchal social orders across various cultural contexts. LUGONES and ROSEZELLE (1995, p.137), for example, problematized the unconditionality of sisterhood as "if the bond is unconditional, it is to be upheld even when the relationship is not egalitarian, caring, affirming." HOOKS (1986) further situated the use of the term *sisterhood* in the context of second wave feminist movements in the United States:

"The vision of Sisterhood evoked by women's liberationists was based on the idea of common oppression. [...] The idea of 'common oppression' was a false and corrupt platform distinguishing and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps are taken to eliminate them" (p.127). [36]

Feminist scholars who work in transnational and cross-cultural contexts also guided us to think through what sisterhood means for forming cross-cultural coalitions. ONG (1996) demonstrated that a single notion of sisterhood with a



strong universal undertone, often dominated by Western feminist understandings of agency, oppression, and emancipation, is not necessarily an effective approach for women from the third world. Instead of solidifying a rigid vision or pushing for unified strategies for women's emancipation, ONG emphasized the possibilities that cross-cultural communication has afforded for women to form negotiable, partial, and alternative collaborations. [37]

These feminist scholars' writings have informed our discussion on how we shall approach our solidarity in the FRC. The first consensus surfaced when we realized that we cannot pretend that we share the same oppression or are bonded together due to this oppression. In becoming feminists together, we bring with us the traces of our lived experience in the communities where we grew up, worked, served, and raised our families. The FRC does not uproot us from where we locate ourselves but creates fluidity to cross boundaries, raise questions about our past, and improvise renewed possibilities and imaginations as we move forward. Therefore, the formation of collectivity in FRC should not require us to abandon who we are as situated and culturally differentiated women, but to cultivate a mutual understanding of what it means to become women in our different cultural and historical contexts as well as what leads us to sit with each other. It is in this sense that we move away from a vision of solidarity that resembles planets revolving around the sun but invokes the image of the universe as catalytic for multiple intra-connections and inclusive for new additions. [38]

In this spirit, we discussed what *sisterhood* means to us. For instance, Pengfei reflected on how being the only child in her family — a consequence of China's implementation of the one-child policy, siblings/sisters were always absent from her growing up experience. Using sisterhood as a metaphor thus compares her experience to a relationship that has regrettably never been fully realized. Sylvia noted that she usually reserved the term "sister" for her Black female friends in her college sorority for their shared understandings and experiences about Black communities. Barbara is the eldest sister in a family of five young girls, so sister/sisterhood was a prominent part of her core identity. She easily finds a place in that language—a place of affinity and self-recognition. Suparna and Pooja both commented on the meaning of sisterhood in Indian culture. While Suparna discerned the presumed superiority of the older people in referring to someone as *didi* (meaning elder sister in Hindi and Bangla), they also drew our attention to the intra-cultural nuances in the meaning of sisterhood. As our ongoing conversation moves in between "sister," "sis" and "behen," "jiejie" (姐姐) and "meimei" (妹妹), we dislocated any particular conceptualization of sisterhood and acknowledged that "the possibility of cross-cultural and cross-racial bonding depends on cross-cultural and cross-ritual investigation" (LUGONES & ROSEZELLE, 1995, p.136). As such, we move toward a shared understanding of solidarity that resembles pluralist friendship in LUGONES and ROSEZELLE's sense, or a political solidarity based on a refined understanding of *sisterhood* as HOOKS (1986) advocated, or the adherence to "a 'weak' universal of female emancipation" in ONG's (1996, p.108) formulation. [39]

#### **4.4 Shifting from individualistic to collective accountability of research practice**

The work of the FRC, specifically the WomenWeLove project, allows us to explore the connections between knowledge production and community building. At the very heart of our discussion lies the idea that knowledge matters to us in terms of not only its products but also its process. An egalitarian community keen at developing supportive and reflective relationships can cultivate our knowing and engender refined understandings of key epistemological questions, such as truths, validity, and the relationship between the knower(s) and what is to be known. [40]

Knowledge and community have for a long time resided at the center of feminist philosophers' epistemological quest. Departing from classical empiricism, which presumes a clear-cut distinction between an autonomous, value-neutral, and detached knower and an observable, measurable reality, feminist philosophers approached knowing as communal efforts in which an intellectual community shares the burden of truth-seeking. As CODE (2000) pointed out in her review of feminist epistemology, the affinity to collective knowing as opposed to individual accountability has manifested in different ways in the works written by empiricist, standpoints, and postmodern feminist scholars. [41]

For instance, empiricist feminist theorists (LONGINO, 1995; NELSON, 2010) built upon KUHN's (2012 [1962]) important yet contentious work and acknowledged that knowledge is not produced by seemingly autonomous and independent individual investigators who seek to provide evidence to support propositions. More likely, knowledge production is a communal effort through which members of an intellectual community share the responsibilities of identifying and interpreting evidence, as well as engaging in dialogues to shape arguments. Collectively, researchers offer evidence to support, problematize, and revise a proposition. As a result, a communal approach to knowledge production removes the accountability of providing evidence to support propositions from individual researchers to the community that they belong to. Empiricist feminists thus reconceptualized the meaning of researchers' responsibility and accountability and put forward a refined understanding of objectivity based on relationality and dialogue. [42]

We found the work of empiricist feminism very appealing as it forcefully uproots the individualist tendency in knowledge seeking as conceptualized by classic empiricism and positivism, an approach still prevalent in social research practice. Yet we also feel less agreeable to a presumed distinction between object and subject, as well as a realist ontology foregrounded in empiricist feminist work. Working within the domain of critical social science, this divergence has moved us toward an orientation closer to a praxis-informed standpoints feminist theory. As CODE (2000) insightfully reminded us, "[a] feminist standpoint is not to be confused with a 'women's [sic] standpoint', which would be theirs just by virtue of their femaleness; nor is it merely an interchangeable perspective which anyone could occupy just by deciding to do so" (p.180). A feminist standpoint is derived

from women's engagement of various praxis under certain historical and material conditions. We formulate our knowledge and self-understanding through critically investigating these conditions and situating ourselves in this knowing process. In the FRC, no one carries the weight of this critical investigation alone. We unpack the process through engaging with each other and through working with the women we love. [43]

In this sense, we put forward an understanding of knowledge very different from the prototype of knowledge which the empiricist feminists envision. As we emphasize that knowing emerges from a collective interaction and learning process, knowledge is first of all local in the sense that we are not seeking to demonstrate a generalizability in our life history interviews but to grapple with the meanings of the stories for us and for those who narrated the stories. Yet, knowledge does not stop at the local level. It migrates in many ways and generates meanings beyond its immediate circle. Migratory knowledge differs from generalizable knowledge as we do not dictate what it means for those who are not present when the stories are first created (DENNIS et al., 2020). We envision a much more robust, evolving, and localized meaning making process that is at least partly realized through the digital interactive ArcGIS platform. [44]

As much as we agree that knowledge production and meaning making process is a communal effort, it highlights the need to understand the historical and material circumstances of community formation itself. This is the place where our discussion departs from a pure onto-epistemological discussion to embrace a transdisciplinary investigation featuring a sociopolitical analysis of the potential issues of our contemporary intellectual communities. We also explored the potentials for feminists to offer an alternative framework to address these issues. In this process, the ethics of producing valid knowledge does not refer to the study of the object, nor do we start with the assumption of the object-subject dichotomy. Instead, we expand the ethics of knowing to our relationship with those who walk with us in the way of knowing and becoming. Responsibilities are evoked through the process, which encompasses the commitments for the whole group to articulate evidence to support the propositions but never stops there. What matters more is the articulation of transformation and the potential of transformation brought into realization through the collective. [45]

## **5. Conclusion**

To conclude, in this article, we drew on feminist scholarship and practice to develop a critique of the predominant research collaboration model. We argue that feminist knowledge and experience about community building and political activism have the potential to transcend the highly institutionalized, individualistic, and functionalist collaborative culture. Feminist insights can help today's researchers navigate collaborative research and address key issues in this process such as boundary making, consensus formation, knowledge validation, and group solidarity. Instead of prescribing any procedures, we use our own work in the FRC and in the WomenWeLove project to present an orientation and a way of enacting the feminist model of collaboration. We articulated four domains of

action to describe our own social research collaborations through the universe model. [46]

In the end, we would like to return to the title of the article: "You are my way to the universe." Our relational orientation is best revealed in the second person position we enact in this title. We take each and every woman who has participated, is participating, and will participate in this project as a "you." To engage "you," we position ourselves not as observers, outsiders, or judges, but as friends, dialogue participants, and community members. We bring our commitment to "you" in this project. The universe can never be reached by observing it. Each gaze just deepens our feeling of how confined and temporary we are in front of the eternal and the infinite. The universe is reached through reaching out to you. You are my way to the universe. [47]

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