



**GENDER, DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE**  
SERIES EDITOR: WENDY HARCOURT

# Feminist Methodologies

Experiments, Collaborations and  
Reflections



*Edited by*  
**Wendy Harcourt**  
**Karijn van den Berg**  
**Constance Dupuis**  
**Jacqueline Gaybor**

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# Gender, Development and Social Change

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Wendy Harcourt · Karijn van den Berg ·  
Constance Dupuis · Jacqueline Gaybor  
Editors

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# PREFACE

## ON THE SHORES OF A LAKE

I will always recall when this book began. I was welcoming people to the Convento “Santa Maria del Giglio”, in Bolsena, Italy in August 2019 under a stunningly beautiful sunset of reds and indigo sweeping across the sky, down to the deep blue lake below us. I hold that moment in my mind’s eye as an accumulation of many hopes and dreams. We were gathered in Bolsena for a feminist scholar writing retreat. Participants were from feminist circles at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and the Well-being, Ecology, Gender and cOmmunity—Innovation Training Network (WEGO-ITN). We were on the front lawns of the seventeenth century Convento, the home of a feminist community-based organisation, Punti di Vista. It had been at the Convento where the first book in the Palgrave Gender, Development and Social Change Series, *Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods*, had been born. Ten years later I was able to create the space once more for an edited book, the 20th in the series, nourished by the peace and sense of possibility of the Convento.

Though the setting was the same, the books differ, marking a shift in the series and in my own journey as a feminist activist-scholar. The authors contributing to the first book were feminist advocates and activists writing about women and environment in 12 different countries, with the goal to change gender and environmental policy. The book was organised and funded by NGOs and its goal was to contribute to discussions at the

2012 Rio+20 UN environment and development summit. The collection set out from diverse feminist perspectives, the shifts in policy narratives on gender, development, agriculture, business, environment and technology. In contrast, this volume, the 20th in the series, emerges from a different political process. It turns inward and presents a reflective look at collective and individual ways of doing feminist research.

The two meetings, and resulting edited books, both share a sense of being positioned on the edge of academia. The authors come together not only to write a book, but also to contribute to broader feminist debates—both in theory and practice. They reflect feminisms’ strength incoming from both academic and political discourses. The books (and the series) underline that feminist knowledge is about collective struggles to transform unequal and unfair economic, social and political systems. They question the primacy of economics in determining our well-being by looking at how gender relations intersect with ecological, technological and political-economic processes. Feminisms, in practice and in analysis, expose the way power operates in economics, society and culture and how gender intersects with other categories of domination and oppression, such as race, ethnic and cultural origin, sexual orientation and age.

The first book was duly produced in time for the Rio+20 event and copies were distributed in an effort to contribute to the debates in Rio and beyond. The aim was to respond to gender policy on the global scale, and to provide timely messages to civil society on how to bring women’s and other marginal voices into political spaces. At that time, participants (including me) could hardly believe that there were funds and time to allow us to meet at the Convento “just” to talk and write. Writing was a luxury and what we wanted was that the book could contribute to the specific historical debates on environment and development. Academic writing was seen as something of a side path to feminist practice.

The retreat from which this current book was born, was also not an official academic meeting with papers presented. It was designed by three of us from ISS, as a welcomed break to academic pursuits and as a moment to step out of institutional settings. We wanted to enjoy the spirit of the Convento—as in the original meaning of a community or people coming together.

While the first book was full of strong political statements sharing stories from feminist advocacy in public debates, this current book is of a different tempo. It illustrates how feminists do research “otherwise”, what methods are required to create knowledge, in academe, learning from feminist practice and commitment. We broke out of traditional academic discussions in the Convento. We spent time learning from each other, breathing in the history and beauty of the place, the food, the animals, the plants, the sense of quiet and the chance to reflect. We went for walks in groups in order to discuss inspiring articles on ethnography, intersectionality, slow scholarship and intimacy in field research. We did drawings, wrote collective poetry, experimented with connections with the more-than-human. We ate light, delicious food, made from local produce. We sketched the mythical pottery figures that decorated the castle area. We ate ice cream and enjoyed the blue waters of the lake.

The beauty of the place formed the backdrop to our discussions. We worked together in the mornings, and had time to wander, or swim or write or paint in the afternoons. We would come together in the evenings to drink wine and think what next. We explored the boundaries of what knowledge counts. The seventeenth century building welcomed us, as did the goats, the olives, the shade by the vines and pear trees, the smell of lavender and the cool of the evening breeze that greeted us in the open windows, courtyards and cloisters. We felt refreshed and energised to share, to laugh, enjoy and to write.

We debated: how our feminisms shape research questions and processes; how to understand our positionality as feminists in academic processes; and how to share our research results beyond academic avenues. These questions proved to be the starting point for this edited book on feminist methodologies. We deepened our intellectual and emotional relations during our time in Bolsena. We decided to continue the conversations that had nurtured us by doing an edited book in order to share our insights for others wanting to journey into feminist methodologies.

The introduction tells more of this collective project and all that we found together. Below is a group poem was written during the retreat that captures something of the magic of that moment:



Thoughts on Bolsena: A Collective Poem

If we are the soil in which new roots can grow  
How do we take care of us and the seeds?  
Maybe my own insecurities lend security to those who are not me  
And they might cease to exist altogether as we grow strong and  
powerful  
I am a gatherer of thoughts, wanderer of the nights burnt  
as a witch. I rise from the ashes so others can gather.

*Bruja*, magical lunatic. *Ancestra*, magical star. *Abuela*, *luna*.

Worlds create selves, create worlds.  
Personal, flawed, joyful ... I cannot take myself out of my "work"  
And I cannot put myself in!  
So, I fan away the dull plod of academe and fly to recover the  
"we" of creativity  
Playfully moving between times, the sometimes surprisingly quick  
time of new friends and the slow time of the lake water  
As it embraces me, I know that we are many.

The Hague, The Netherlands

Wendy Harcourt

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# Introduction: Feminism as Method—Navigating Theory and Practice

*Constance Dupuis, Wendy Harcourt, Jacqueline Gaybor,  
and Karijn van den Berg*

## INTRODUCTION: NAVIGATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

This introduction sets out what the book is seeking to trouble and what we are troubled by when speaking about feminist methodologies (Haraway, 2016). In introducing the collection, we do not set out to define what feminist methodologies are. Rather, we highlight the commonalities and differences across the book in order to show the range

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of methodologies feminism has inspired and shaped. The way in which this collection evolved is itself an expression of how feminist methodologies contribute to research and practice within but also on the margins of academic scholarship. The process of putting together the book has been deliberately about not only content but also form and the process of knowledge production as our collective, feminist contributions to social, economic, ecological and cultural transitions. For over two years, the authors have been involved in a process that has been rich in collaboration in person and online. It is the excitement that underlines putting such a book together which we, as editors, hope to share with the readers.

In writing this together we had the pleasure to read and reread all the chapters in the book with time to debate what we found. In the process, the four of us delved into the patterns we saw woven across the chapters. We do not aim to capture all that is in the book, rather we give our impressions as editors of what we saw as the major themes that emerge in the book as a whole. For the spell-binding descriptions, the candid and honest reflections, the feeling and sensings, that come from the heart as much as the head, we encourage you to read the individual chapters. Here we set out what we, as editors, see as binding the chapters together, pointing to the methodological innovations the book brings to the theory and practice of feminist research. We point to what doing feminist methodology entails from the various entry points of the authors. We reflect on what we learned, what surprised, and what delighted us, as well as the ways in which the creative tensions and the inevitable silences and gaps invited us to reflect on what we could not do, the queer art of failure (Halberstam, 2011) that is also part of our feminist method.

Somewhat paradoxically, our collective willingness to acknowledge diversity and difference is what binds the book together. As explained in the preface, when we first met at our feminist methodology retreat on the shores of a lake, we were not sure if our conversations would lead to a book. Nor did we imagine much of our interaction would have to be online due to Covid-19. We gathered to share how we were doing feminist research in an informal, non-institutional environment. Little did we know how the pandemic would interrupt our plans. At first having

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to switch to working digitally seemed complex and limiting. However, we found that working online created unexpected possibilities. Over the two years we were able to organize, easily and inexpensively, two authors' write-shops on Zoom and four editorial retreats. These digital encounters enabled us to exchange ideas, feedback and think through together what was emerging in the different chapters. We were able to communicate across time and space wherever we were geographically placed.

Our book is grounded in that experience of self-reflection and collaboration as we shared some of the joys and troubles of doing feminist research (Haraway, 2016). While troubling and being troubled by doing feminist methodologies in western academic institutions positions us broadly, it is important to note that the authors call on knowledge from diverse entry points: queer ecology, cultural anthropology, critical development studies, feminist political ecology, feminist science and technology studies, decolonial feminism and feminist geography (Haraway, 1988, 2003; Harding, 1992; Icaza, 2017). The book intentionally does not seek to position itself into any single literature of those boxes, nor is it quite correct to say it is transdisciplinary. The authors use a variety of insights from theory and experience to help explain and engage in their research puzzle. Similarly, while embracing feminism, the book holds many different understandings informed by diverse histories and contexts to what being a feminist doing research means. It does not attempt to label or confine feminisms. As the authors explain in the chapters, they each write as feminists from specific genealogies, embodied contexts and experiences.

The embrace of diversity positions the book in different literatures, geographies, moments in time, as well as experiences of doing research with human and more-than-human beings. The dense tapestry of the practice of feminist research weaves through and threads together each author's storytelling from the intimate and personal to the ecological and political. What emerges is the strong, creative and powerful shaping of feminist methodologies. And, at the same time, the authors also point to what needs to be troubled around the privileges of the group, with our collective resources and freedom to study and write. As we explain below, the authors reflect with great honesty the difficulty to acknowledge privilege, whiteness and the racialized other and to move beyond dichotomies of North/South and academic/activist.

In this introduction we first map out the rich and engaging patterns that emerged in the book. After a general look at all the book achieves,

we dig deeper into four creative tensions we identified by tracing how intersectionality, embodiment, relationality and emotion travel through the chapters. As part of our process of reflection we then turn to the silences, gaps and absences in the book—looking at what this collaborative process allowed, and what it did not. In this way we invite the reader to be aware of and engage with failure as a way to avoid closure and to be open to transformative knowledge production.

## MAPPING OUT THE PATTERNS

The book captures the contributors' collaborative reflections on the choices and challenges of conducting feminist research. We reflect on the process of navigating theory and practice, individual and collective engagements, and the challenge of producing knowledge on the edge of academic and activist desires. In so doing, the chapters in the book aim to both contest dominant and normative notions of research as rational, disembodied and “objective”, as well as provide narratives, examples and experiences of doing research otherwise (Walsh, 2016).

Feminist methodologies are thus engaged as counter-narratives to dominant traditional models of research and science, as well as through foregrounding the experiential and embodied nature of doing research. But the chapters also go beyond a mere critique of traditional research methods by showing how feminist methodologies can entail a recognition of how knowledge is inscribed in the body, sense of self and community. Through sharing stories and making visible the negotiation of multiple identities and positionalities, ethics and the complexities of everyday research, these chapters show that knowledge is not disconnected from, but rather entwined with, emotions and experiences. The knowledge that feminist researchers produce is shaped by our lives, cultures, communities and feminisms. Departing from this recognition, the chapters in this book offer understandings of and experiences with feminist methodologies through practices of sharing, storytelling or by engaging creative and artistic mediums (Millora et al., 2020).

The role of ethics and responsibility in research—and what this means for the kinds of knowledge that is being produced—comes through in many of the chapters. Common across several chapters is a careful attention to why and for whom knowledge is sought. Marina Cadaval Narezo (Chapter 7) tackles the question of how to do collaborative research across epistemologies in the context of a scholarship program improving

Indigenous Mexican women's access to higher education. Beginning from a place that understands "thought as collective and contextual", Marina engages in a deep discussion of the feminist and decolonial ethics that allow her to connect across differences (Wilson, 2008). Karijn van den Berg and Leila Rezvani (Chapter 2) explore negotiating plural identities and the feminist ethics of fieldwork as they bring forward more-than-human concerns within feminist research. Navigating feminist ethics in the context of a pandemic, Constance Dupuis (Chapter 3) sets out to unpack how assumptions in her research were brought to light as a result of Covid-19 and what can be learned from such oversights. Daniela Flores Golfin, Tamara Rusansky and Fleur Zantvoort (Chapter 10) unpack, by way of a dialogue, the ethics of researching alongside social movements, being deeply committed to the struggles they accompany, and the complexity of straddling the fluid divide between activism and scholarship.

Several chapters also centre the everyday and often overlooked aspects of research, being intentional about making visible the unseen and messy facets of enacting feminist methodologies, many times in the form of storytelling. The stories that emerge are often intimate. Sharing, here, serves as a way of troubling and being troubled by. Karijn and Leila share stories from their fieldwork which challenge dominant ideas about what separates the human from the non-human, and how this helps in letting go of binary positionings. Martina Padmanabhan (Chapter 6) explores the everyday possibilities and complexities that come with being accompanied by a child in field research. Martina tells stories about "mistakes, detours and fear" which revealed themselves to be important points of intellectual and emotional inquiry. Stories about maintaining the emotional, bodily and spiritual well-being of both her child and herself as a researcher and as a mother, speaks to how being accompanied can humanize a researcher. Through reflecting on her own uncommon positionality within the context she carried out research, C. Sathyamala (Chapter 8) tells stories about the subtle and overt ways in which identities and subjectivities are lived, questioned, and resisted within her research context. Rosa de Nooijer and Lillian Sol Cueva (Chapter 11) discuss storytelling as a feminist methodology through the form of written and drawn storytelling. Their chapter speaks to the methodology of feminist storytelling by way of enacting it. Emily O'Hara (Chapter 13) shares stories about her own experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) as she tackles the topic more broadly. Daniela, Tamara and Fleur tell stories about the role their collective friendship has played in each of their individual research

projects, offering insights into the role of friendships for feminist research more generally. Jacqueline Gaybor (Chapter 4) teases out the layered complexity of using a menstrual tracking application, raising questions about the unseen dimensions when intimate bodily processes meet tracking software as she shares her own journey of using this technology. Constance (Chapter 3) attempts to make visible her own clumsiness as she attempts to trouble and be troubled by the ethical commitments of feminist methodologies. The different forms of storytelling present in the book allow for an exploration of the everyday aspects of feminist research and what can be learned through deep listening.

This brings us to the different ways in which creative expression emerges across the chapters. Creativity, in other-than-conventional-academic-text form, comes out in the collection varyingly: as a companion to theorizing or fieldwork, as infusing feminism into an existing methodology, as healing, and as methodology itself. The drawings by Wendy Harcourt and Ximena Argüello Calle are a tool for their intergenerational exchange as well as an outlet. “Our drawings which accompany this chapter are also an attempt to probe beyond the academic text. We draw not as artists but as feminists who are trying to capture the sensing/feeling informing our subjectivities through these images” (Chapter 5). Mahardhika Sjamsoe’oed Sadjad (Chapter 12) uses knitting as a way for her to “check in” with herself emotionally and mentally during her fieldwork. Using different colours to denote distinct feelings, she tracks her own well-being by knitting at regular intervals and journaling about why certain colours were chosen. She also explores how the practice of knitting opened up other avenues through which she was able to connect to research participants. In the context of exploring how women navigate public transit in the city of Guadalajara, Azucena Gollaz Morán (Chapter 9) uses various forms of creative mapping to bring corporeality and emotion into conversation with more conventional and sterile methods of maps. Emily speaks of the possibilities of research as healing through poetry and creative writing, interweaving her chapter with her own and others’ poetry. Rosa and Lillian explore feminist storytelling as methodology as they interweave writing and drawing. In an experimental and profoundly rich chapter, these authors push the boundaries of creativity as a way of producing knowledge. While not always theorized as creative methodology, these examples speak to the possibilities of feminist research both accompanied by creativity and beyond written academic text.

The book offers a series of reflections on how we, as feminists, shape research questions; understand our positionalities; share our research results beyond academe and produce feminist knowledge. While there are some shared notions of what the “doing” of feminist research can entail, underlying these reflections are also different understandings of and experiences with feminism.

For some of the authors, doing feminist research is focussed on people who identify as women, and/or looking at gendered experiences of certain groups. For example, Rosa and Lillian (Chapter 11) explicitly centre “women’s voices” and “women’s stories” in their engagement with storytelling as a form of feminist methodology, and Marina (Chapter 7) centres narratives and experiences of a specific group of Indigenous women in Mexico. Other authors focus on how gender, along with other identity factors, impacted research positionalities and encounters. Wendy and Ximena share auto-biographic/ethnographic stories about embodied gender and sexuality power relations, in a similar vein as the personal reflections of Mahardhika (Chapter 12) and Emily (Chapter 13) (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008). Karijn and Leila (Chapter 2) challenge the links being made between feminist research and womanhood or gender, by bringing in queer experiences and theory and emphasizing a plurality and fluidity across genders, positionalities, species and identities as central to doing feminist research (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005). For others gender is less of an explicit issue or element in their chapters, but feminist research is foregrounded as revolving around certain research ethics, methods and responsibilities rather than studying a certain group, or taking up the question in specific ways.

These converging ways in which the relation to feminism is made explicit or is worked into these chapters then reflect that feminist methodologies are not only taken up differently, but that notions of gender and feminism also differ across the book, in ways that are sometimes in contradiction or in tension. However, the goal of this book is not to provide ready-made answers on what feminist methodologies are and how they should be “practiced” but wants to acknowledge that these methodologies can be underpinned by a variety of identities, positionalities, motivations and political, personal and gender(ed) orientations.



## INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is by now a well-known feminist tool, method and way of thinking originating in the activism and research of Black women (Collins, 1986). The authors in the book recognize this tradition and perceive intersectionality as a way to visualize co-constituting identities, structures of power and oppression as well as intersecting and overlapping political issues. There are several ways intersectionality is approached in the book. For some, intersectionality is used to recognize the embodied, situated and intersectional identities of themselves as researchers looking at the changing identities that a researcher carries. Marina (Chapter 7) brings feminist methodologies of care and collaboration in order to work with the Indigenous women rather than about them. She speaks of the “strength, conviction and clarity to the methodological and epistemic mosaic of intersectional feminist proposals” that allows her as a mestizo/white woman in coalition with Indigenous women to “reveal together exclusions, inequalities, injustices of colonial patriarchy”. Wendy and Ximena (Chapter 5) describe how both of them are shaped by collective and individual feminist positionalities and how different sensations and memories “intersect” over time and space. Martina (Chapter 6) offers a personal reflection of how being accompanied by a child during fieldwork shows how “multiple identities intersect in the process of field research”, including the personal and the professional, positioning herself as a “gendered, classed and ethnic subject”. In the same candid way, Sathya (Chapter 8) scrutinizes her time in the field and shares insights into how meanings of caste, class and gender intersected and shifted in contesting understandings of her positionality in interactions with the villager people. Azucena (Chapter 9) also analyzes intersectionality in relation to identity, examining how gender, age, social class, ethnicity/skin colour, corporality, religion, sexual orientation and ability operate socially and spatially in Guadalajara. She uses intersectionality as a methodological tool by mapping out the different emotions that are experienced by women across intersections (of gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, age, religion, race, class) at different (urban) localities and time.

As well as recognizing the multiple identities of researchers or research participants, intersectionality is also used as a methodology in the book to analyze how different cultural and socio-political issues are entwined. Constance (Chapter 3) shows how intersectionality can shed light on

ageing and environment, as well as what role “age” and ageing play in existing work on intersectionality and intersectional environments (Katz & Calasanti, 2015). In her use of intersectionality as a political location Constance parallels race, gender, class or ability relations, in order to underscore the importance of taking age seriously in intersectionality. Karijn and Leila bring a further political dimension to intersectionality’s concern with power and difference by asking feminist methodologies to disrupt the boundaries of human and other-than-human beings as part of an understanding of how capitalist science “oppresses women, people of colour, gender non-conforming people and other-than-human beings” (Chapter 2). Their chapter shows the importance of giving attention to how other-than-human beings intersect with human worlds and how relations among human and more-than-human worlds are implicated in feminist research. While the understandings and applications of intersectionality vary across these chapters they all attest to the importance of this feminist tool as a method and way of thinking through research processes.

## EMBODIMENT

Doing feminist research is necessarily an embodied practice given that bodies, embodied experiences and feelings are at the heart of feminism (Sinclair, 2018). The book follows this long tradition of feminism by inserting the embodied self into the text. Embodiment is evoked in reflections, memories, stories, illustrations and drawings as authors explore the importance of bodies and feelings in the ways feminisms shape their research and lives. The book is full of beautifully described embodied encounters—from the touch of cabbage leaves, to the warmth of an embrace, from the visceral pain of motorbike accidents to the touch of a cotton sari and the feel of gold bangles, from the fear of walking in dark streets to the hot tea served by a friend. As these snippets of description indicate, the book is a testimony to how embodiment as a concept and practice informs the book, sometimes in surprising ways, bringing agency, pleasure but also discomfort.

Constance (Chapter 3) speaks about embodiment in terms of ageing, intergenerational care and well-being, analyzing the disruption of Covid-19 materially and discursively in her research (Tronto, 1988). Karijn and Leila (Chapter 2) point to the “importance of the sensory, affective and

embodied” sources of information in their reflections on how other-than-humans are active collaborators in the research process (Barad, 2003; Puig de la Bella Casa, 2017). They use embodied, interactive and processual research methods by inserting their selves—memories, feelings and senses—into their research method. In their chapter we learn how human bodies adjust to “the rhythms of other-than-human creatures” during manual labour alongside farmers and other farm workers as human work adjusts to “the dictates and rhythms of plant and animal co-workers”. The chapter moves in and out of diverse bodies and embodiment as it opens up ways for queer bodies including, “multispecies extended family of vegetables” to have “a place and be ‘natural’ in their own right”. The chapter holds the tension of various embodied identities, feminists, researchers, farmers, activists, queers, which shift in meaning in the different spaces—farms, resistance sites, academic institutions. Their writing, in its descriptive power, embraces the contradictions of what doing feminist and queer research means. Wendy and Ximena (Chapter 5) also look at queer embodiment across time and place as part of intergenerational embodied research processes. They explore how safe feminist and queer places build a sense of belonging where embodied sexuality and gender power relations can be shaped in the digital world. Their drawings present their sense/feeling of the embodied research experience. Jacqueline explores the body and embodiment in the digital world by examining menstrual apps. She records her relationship with her body “reconfigured through a self-tracking app that is powered by my personal digital traces” (Chapter 4). Her chapter reclaims her body and its “interconnected system of muscles, nerves, hormones, emotions, cycles, and actions”, illustrating how menstrual apps have become part of a web of cultural norms, power relations, beliefs, and identities that are reshaping embodiment. Self-reflection and using your body as the subject of feminist research, including menstruation as an embodied statement of gender identity, also features in Emily’s on intimate partner violence. The tensions and difficulties of self as subject resonates in her poems in what she describes as “constantly triaging. Haemorrhaging in silence” (Chapter 13). Mahardhika (Chapter 12) looks at the emotional dynamics during fieldwork triggered by her mental and physical health. Her response was to take up knitting and the resulting colours in the scarf record her fluctuating “emotions between hope and despair”.

Sensing feeling and embodied experiences of doing research reverberates throughout the book—from the care evoked by Daniela, Tamara

and Fleur (Chapter 10) who speak of how their friendship enabled them to write together, to the drawings of Rosa and Lillian (Chapter 11) that give us the scent and taste of sharing food acknowledging the other-than-human beings that provided it (Degnen, 2018). Marina (Chapter 7) shares stories of food, coffee and adventures in rural Mexico as well as the care and friendship shared, built in the stories that inform her research. Her reflections as she walks in the woods in The Hague listening to the tapes of her interviews take us to the core of embodied research methodologies. Similarly, we find ourselves walking with Azucena (Chapter 9) and the women who work in crowded, racially and status divided Guadalajara, as they make their way home in the dark, in unsafe places and in crowded buses using WhatsApp to check the others' safety. Her thick descriptions of embodiment in urban dynamics socially and spatially, suggest the everyday embodied identities of working women in a highly urban and oppressive environment. The embodied experiences of Sathya (Chapter 8) in a village in Tamil Nadu, India, are evoked as she describes the dust and heat as well as the villagers' expressions of care towards her. Martina (Chapter 6) describes her embodied feelings as she works through her personal and the professional intersecting and entangled identities. She underlines how embodied knowledge is as important as "conventional data collection" and how auto-ethnography can reveal as much as graphs and numbers, describing how the "basic care for our bodies entangles us with the geography of our neighbourhood". She analyzes how religion was sensed and felt—visible and audible—in her surroundings and how she navigated the different embodied cultural experiences, commenting: "feminist knowledge production is concerned with emotional, bodily, and spiritual maintenance in place making".

From so many different perspectives, the authors pay attention to how the embodied, lived experience plays out in research interactions, their analysis and writings. These embodied experiences, whether written, visual or poetic, show how sensing, feeling, or what we feel on the skin and in the heart, and on our bodies, informs how methods shape feminist research.

## RELATIONALITY

In a sense, most, if not all, research is at its core about relationships—examining, looking at and unpacking connections from different

perspectives. Beyond seeking out and exploring connections, relationality, as Haraway offers, requires an understanding that “beings do not pre-exist their relations” (2003: 6); “reality is relational through and through” (Escobar, 2015: 459). Karijn and Leila explain how for relational research “the unit of inquiry [becomes] not a discrete being (human or other-than), but the shifting and *co-constitutive relations* between them” (Chapter 2). A conversation about relationality emerges across the book helping us to refuse many taken for granted binaries by inviting us to look and feel beyond separations. “[T]hinking in and through *relationality* is a way of overcoming modern dichotomies and moving towards non-dualities” (Vázquez, 2012: 248, emphasis in original).

For some chapters, relationality is brought out as a way to think through research relationships differently. Karijn and Leila exchange experiences of tuning into the more-than-human dimensions of their respective relational research. Their stories explore human and more-than-human connections, bringing out the relational complexity of their work. Marina (Chapter 7) shares the relational responsibility that accompanies her cross-epistemology engagement with Indigenous Mexican women, reflecting on what accountability means in this context. Daniela, Tamara and Fleur (Chapter 10) speak to navigating relationality as researchers learning from and with social movements. They reflect on how their positionalities in relation to the movements affected the questions they were able to pose and the spaces they could access. Wendy and Ximena (Chapter 5) each reflect on their own experiences of building relational connections in digital spaces. They interweave these reflections with their methodology of relational, intergenerational dialogue.

For others, relationality emerges as a way to think through knowledge production and units of analysis differently. In Lillian and Rosa’s chapter (Chapter 11), feminist thinkers are brought together for an imagined dinner to share a meal and a conversation across time and ideas. In their playful chapter, they invite us into their relational process. In the context of isolation brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, Constance (Chapter 3) discusses how a deep engagement with ethics can allow for connections to flourish. Learning across generations, she touches upon knowledge as itself relational - rooted in the relationships that produced it.

While the treatments and understandings of relationality vary, and are sometimes in tension, these chapters speak to the possibilities of research informed by relationality in important ways. Seeking out connection, the dichotomies that are challenged in this collection cross time, cross ideas that separate the human from the other-than-human, cross generations, cross epistemologies, and cross the academic/activist divide (Fuentes, 2017).

## EMOTION

Though emotions are often dismissed as less serious or not particularly relevant to academic research, feminist research approaches have a long tradition of paying attention to emotions, grappling with the role of emotions in research and how to access and understand such forms of knowing (Cahill et al., 2007). Building on understandings of emotional geographies, emotion in feminist methodological approaches is understood not so much as an internal process bound to individual subjectivities, but as “being relationally produced between peoples and places” (Sultana, 2007: 634). While feelings and emotions were touched upon in our discussion of embodiment, it is also important to underscore the ways in which emotions are linked to the ways the authors have approached research as an integral part of feminist methodologies.

Several chapters illustrate how emotionally engaged feminist research is guided by an ethics of care (Puig de la Bella Casa, 2017). Wendy and Ximena (Chapter 5) explore how digital feminist and queer safe spaces become places for emotional connection and care between known and unknown others, who share similar concerns for a person, an issue, or a community. Marina engages in the importance of care, which for her entails “respecting the ideas of the collaborators, as well as recognizing - naming - the bodies, the stories, the contexts that build them”. She takes us to an emotional encounter with her participants, through what she calls “reflective conversations”. Marina (Chapter 7) explores emotions as departure points of inquiry. In her chapter, she is in tune with the feelings of her research participants to ask questions around her role as a researcher, her responsibilities for her research project and particularly, to the participants.

Other chapters explore how feminist ways of doing research can also be forms of healing. Authors engage in creative responses such as writing/crafting poetry and knitting, respectively. As a survivor of IPV,

Emily explores how writing has provided her healing by helping “me come home to myself” (Chapter 13). Her chapter is an invitation to explore personal and political issues through emotions by looking at “how they are embodied and felt, not just measured and observed”. Mahardhika (Chapter 12) focuses on the emotional dynamics during her fieldwork in researching migration. She documents these emotional dynamics by knitting coloured yarns that represented the different emotions she felt and wrote in her fieldwork diary. While knitting became a ground wire and a “catalyst for these emotions”, it also became “a representation of the emotional labour that goes into doing research”. The exploration of emotions related to fieldwork is significant also in the process of feminist knowledge production, as echoed in the reflections brought by Martina (Chapter 6). In a beautifully written piece on her ten-month fieldwork in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in the company of her son, she reflects on the importance of “listening with care to affects and emotions” as she thinks on her son’s presence during her fieldwork.

By paying attention to the way the authors infuse emotions into the text, feminist methodologies also open possibilities for exploring alternative ways of theorizing and expressing themselves through storytelling, visual illustrations, and drawing. Rosa and Lillian (Chapter 11) justify their choice of using storytelling and illustration as these forms of expression offer possibilities to “create dimensions and movement, provide an atmosphere and give a face and emotions to the characters”. The drawings authored by Wendy and Ximena (Chapter 5) “far from remaining innocent or actionless” are powerful tools to shake “emotions and generate empathy in different ways than descriptive text”.

Across the chapters more generally, there is a focus on how we feel and what these emotions add to our research. In the sharing of a quiet look of understanding while having a coffee with a research participant, in the sinking into the listening to often-told stories, in moments of mutual support, our own and others’ emotions are brought out and their importance for the research process is examined.

In the process of how we have put together the book, even in this introduction, we have tried to be transparent about how emotions inform us. Emotions come through across the chapters in different ways, as they relate to an ethics of care, to healing and well-being, and as we try to transcend the limits of the written word.

## LISTENING TO SILENCES

In addition to the joys that we have found in the process of writing and putting together this volume, we have also reflected on staying with the “troubles” of doing feminist research, learning from the failures and what the inevitable gaps in the book imply. In this section we speak to some of those gaps and failures.

While the authors are from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, we are all in one way or another connected to elite European academic institutions. Our shared privilege has meant that the tensions between Global North and South has not dominated the book which might have been expected. Coming from the Global South or the Global North is not clearly discussed, rather the intersectional differences of class, caste, race, gender, age. Our privileges permitted us to dedicate time to study, do a Ph.D., conduct fieldwork, reflect, write, or connect via Zoom for our write-shops. Indeed, that privilege enabled that first trip to the magical Bolsena, in Italy, where the book began. Nevertheless, we are aware of our privileges, and uncomfortable questions come across in the book about whose voices are not there and what are the gaps.

The politics of citation is another element of the book that requires listening, which we—as contributors to the book—did not speak about together, and inevitably it has led to unevenness in the writing process. This means that some chapters intentionally cite beyond the expected feminist canon while others have paid less attention to whom they cite, particularly given the way we are related to academic privilege and institutions that build on the hierarchies of the written text, the gate keeping of certain voices through academic journal/books publication processes and the dismissal of the wisdom and knowledge of oral traditions.

Here we also have to reflect on the issue of language and the dominance of English (used synonymously with academic language). Being able to speak and write in English determined whether authors could contribute to this volume. English, as a global and academic means of communication has served as a key bridge to communicate among ourselves, carry out this collective process, and has been instrumental for the realization of this project. Its dominance implies an absence in the book of the voices that do not speak English as well as an absence of who was cited and referenced. Although the authors spoke several other languages and conversations were translated into English in many of the chapters, these multiple exchanges across the language barriers



are mutely heard. For example, the experiences of the Cuir copensantes project (Chapter 5) was conducted in Spanish and translated to English for this book. Although the final written version of the project was translated by one of the copensantes (from English to Spanish), many nuances, contextual particularities and probably some experiences were lost in these translation processes. This and many other gaps can be seen in the book. The gaps that lie between the layers of language and interpretation from Indigenous language to Spanish to English and from spoken to written to digital spaces is evoked but not explored fully. The collaborative process with its multiple exchanges in other languages had to use English to enable it to happen, leading to an approximation of what could be heard in the original language. Sathya (Chapter 8) explores these tensions when narrating her visit back to Oru-oor village in India to show the photographs and her published thesis. She describes that “although almost none could read English, my book was held tenderly, flipped through, as each one tried to guess who the woman was on the cover (as I had blurred her face). With a general delight in my accomplishment, they felt that they owned it because it was, after all, their stories between the covers”.

The contributors to this volume have made important, sometimes collaborative efforts among themselves not to lose the meaning of the words in their original language and to do justice to the stories they tell us and their protagonists. This was not easy. Even among Spanish speakers from different Latin American countries, it proved challenging to understand the depth and meaning of certain words or phrases in Spanish in an effort to render them into English. The authors are aware of who and what we erase or silence in the process of translating but it was hard to give full attention, even if authors, with care, did try to do justice to the translated conversations, words, and sayings.

These questions push us to reflect on which voices (although sometimes removed from their original language) are amplified in each of the book’s chapters and, probably most importantly, how? Some delve deep into these questions and inquire about what it means to do feminist research with and for people. Daniela, Tamara and Fleur reflect on how they engaged in a collective effort to create spaces of “co-learning and reflecting” with social justice movements from Costa Rica, Brazil and The Netherlands. They discuss some of the difficulties associated with creating a collaborative process while dealing with the restrictions imposed by academic research. Constance (Chapter 3) sees her research as “not only

as spending time with older people, which some colleagues have found to be a sweet but not particularly serious research focus, but also as looking for absences and listening to silences”. Through her research she wonders “How can we (re)build intergenerational bridges?” Marina (Chapter 7) develops “collaborative, respectful and caring methodological processes” through which “I have adjusted my centre to their centre and created also a common one”. In Marina’s experience, “to be able to shift the centre of a study is necessary to be flexible and humble about our limitations as researchers. It is necessary, as well, to listen, to pay attention, to care—not only about our individual academic process, but about the people involved, the processes triggered”.

Among the more subtle, if not silent, threads in the book is an exploration of failure. Karijn and Leila (Chapter 2) suggest that though things may not go as wished or planned in fact those failures can offer new possibilities, indeed surprisingly creative ways of being in the world. Martina (Chapter 6) builds intentionally on the “mistakes, detours and fears” seeing them not as mishaps or fortunes, but rather as necessary to her intellectual and emotional enquiry. As she states: “It has been an exercise of imbalances and inconsistencies, but by identifying, by naming them I have tried to balance, assume them”. Marina (Chapter 7) in her resistance to “the normative” - the western, the patriarchy, the oppressive - learns to shift the centre of her study from individual academic work to acknowledging the limitation of researchers. Jacqueline (Chapter 4) deflects her initial failed idea on how to study menstrual apps from a science and technology perspective into self-reflection about embodied reality, building into the research her doubts and concerns.

The authors are all, as part of their feminist methodologies practising the art and the politics of noticing—notably in terms of the everyday emotions around care for others, including more-than-human others, in creative and innovative ways. It is interesting to note what we were not noticing. Sexuality is decidedly muted and referred to in terms of identity not as an embodied experience. The quintessential notion of embodied femininity—motherhood—features very little in the book and mostly in relation to the need to balance the demands of work and care for children, or one mention in relation to avoiding miscarriage and another about abortion as a political struggle as well as the study of menstrual apps. This reflects the age and experience of the authors generationally, as well as being a reminder that motherhood and pregnancy figure less prominently

as subjects of feminist research than they once did in the second wave of feminist writing in the late twentieth century.

## CONCLUSION

While common themes and concerns run through the different chapters, we don't write from a single understanding of feminist methodologies. The authors have different pathways into feminism and our feminisms do different things. We have mapped out some of the patterns that as editors, we are excited to see emerge across the collection. We also discuss the different ways in which intersectionality, embodiment, relationality and emotion are understood within the book as well as point to some of the silences and creative failures. Even given the widely different actors, places and emotions in the book, one thing that is clear is the desire to go beyond the academic exercise of producing knowledge for an academic audience only—these are committed stories. We have grappled with the politics of knowledge production both in the community and in academia, underscoring some of our feminist concerns. We leave you to enjoy the volume.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# Senses of Discomfort: Negotiating Feminist Methods, Theory and Identity

*Karijn van den Berg and Leila Rezvani*

### INTRODUCTION

Leila: My memories of the Convento are suffused with a mellow golden light. I think it was the sunsets, the way they filled the bowl of the sky with rich, deep colour. The light was one thing, the water another—brown and warm at the shores, dark and clear in the centre of the lake, holding shards of light in hollowed wavelets. Both held us in our bodies, individual but in shared awareness.

Karijn: I also remember the sun, in many colours, facets and shapes. Warming our faces, creating beautiful sunsets, turning the sky pink. A rose-tinted glow over our own “feminist community”, holding us

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together over food, wine, swims and conversations around feminist methodologies.

Over five days, the Convento felt like a place and time apart—a container for our shared thinking, shared sensations, sentiments and everyday habits. Each day, our individual paths traced lines across the landscape: out of our separate bedrooms in the morning, together for breakfast and gathered in circle for talks and workshops, breaking up again in the afternoon to walk down the hill for a swim in the lake, or into cloistered corners of the garden, under a persimmon tree or a shaded spot on the scratchy, parched lawn. Our trajectories converged there from disparate corners of the world: The Netherlands, France, Mexico, the UK, Spain. We brought our individual experiences to bear on shared ideas of feminist methodologies, knotting strands of thought and feeling to construct an understanding of feminist research as a collective and ever-shifting endeavour. At the Convento we began weaving patterns that hold us still, our threads following us as we write, together-apart, in our pandemic bubbles.<sup>1</sup>

The two of us came together during this time at the Convento, recognizing our shared concern with what we broadly call the “more-than-human” and its place in feminist thought. Multispecies and more-than-human studies share with feminism (feminist science studies more specifically) a concern with power and difference, a drive to “blur the boundaries of human and nonhuman to disrupt hierarchies” (Ives, 2019: 1) and expose how the ranking and ordering operations of capitalist science oppress women, people of colour, gender non-conforming people and other-than-human beings. Together, feminist and more-than-human thought “celebrate the political and theoretical possibilities of foregrounding more-than-human worlds and human–nonhuman relations” while recognizing the ways in which the violent legacy of settler colonialism and capitalist expansion is written onto the land and the bodies of those deemed “less-than-human” (Ives, 2019: 2).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Our feminist methodologies workshop took place at the Convento in Bolsena, Italy in August of 2019. Tending the seeds of ideas germinated there, we (Karijn and Leila) wrote this chapter between early 2020 and the spring of 2021.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, we use both “other-than-human” and “more-than-human”. We recognise the unwieldiness of these terms as well as the ways they may reinscribe the very dualisms we hope to undo by naming humans as the centre against which the other is

Methodologically, more-than-human thought engages the other-than-human, both biotic and abiotic, as active participants in everyday life and the research process and environment. In so doing, more-than-human thinking points to the importance of the sensory, affective and embodied as sources of information, and foregrounds the other-than-human as an active collaborator in the research process, rather than inert matter acted upon and understood by the researcher (Coleman et al., 2019; Wazana-Tompkins, 2016). This chapter finds tentative connections between more-than-human thinking and feminist methodologies, adding to the broad sweep of conversations begun at the Convento and picked up in this book, asking questions like: how do we relate to and with others we engage with in our research, whether human or other-than-human, and how do we understand “researcher” as just one piece of our multifaceted identities? How can fields of thought such as relationality, more-than-human thinking, queer theory and ecology help think such issues through (Barad, 2007; Hird & Giffney, 2008; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012; Sundberg, 2014; Watts, 2013)? These were some of the questions that inspired, moved and encouraged us to write this chapter, both in our situated environments and interconnected with beings around us, while writing together virtually. In this chapter, therefore, we build upon feminist understandings of relationality and the more-than-human in order to make sense of and speak back to our experiences of doing field research, and how these have shaped our experiences with and understandings of feminist methodologies.<sup>3</sup>

defined. However, we also use these terms to indicate the academic lineage of multi-species studies, or “anthropology beyond humanity” (Ingold, 2013) in which they are defined, which holds that the human is always constituted by its relationship to other non-conspecifics (Haraway, 2003; Sagan, 2011), personhood is not limited to humans (Degnen, 2018; Kohn, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1998), and that the environment and its inhabitants are active participants in shaping the research process (Country et al., 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Here we follow ethnographic understandings of fieldwork that can be broadly defined as an interpretive method, focused on understanding collective, negotiated processes of meaning-making through investigating human action and discourse, social processes and institutional structures (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). Ethnography is often posited as uniquely suited to feminist research because its “contextual, experiential approach to knowledge eschews the false dualisms of positivism”, creating a more egalitarian relationship between researcher and subject while problematizing the separation between known and felt, personal and academic (Stacey, 1988: 21).



By highlighting the potential insights that can be gained from more-than-human approaches in the context of feminist methodologies, we aim to speak back to critiques of the overly theoretical nature of more-than-human approaches, showing how they can be put into practice. In particular, we focus on (more-than-human) relationality through embodied, interactive and processual research in order to destabilize the notion of method as a tool used by a disembodied researcher observing an inert or external world—a central concern of feminist research (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1992). Together we attest to the feminist merit of methodologies in which the unit of inquiry is not a discrete being (human or other-than), but the shifting and co-constitutive relations between them. In so doing, the chapter does not aim to resolve the ongoing quarrel between feminist postmodernist and empiricist epistemologies that want to either undo categories or “give voice” (van der Tuin, 2014: 33), but shows precisely how a processual, relational approach allows for unwarranted surprises that might ultimately undo the very assumptions and categories underpinning our research.

We structure this chapter around several themes we held in common in our research experiences: using the sensory as a source of information and the importance of embodied knowledge; taking a stand against rigid, rational/objective knowledge-making; being open to surprise, uncertainty and failure; valuing process over product and exploring a multi-directional sense of positionality. We argue that bringing these schools of thought and our own affective embodiments to bear on our work has the potential to “queer” feminist methodologies, potentially making other types of relating—between human and other-than, between researcher and “subject”, between colleagues and peers- possible. The words that follow are structured as a dialogue between us as the two authors. By speaking in the first person, linking our names and voices to our academic pursuits and concerns, we hope to put into practice the feminist concern with strong objectivity (Harding, 1992), showing how the personal and scholarly always overlap and intertwine.

### STARTING POINTS: UNSETTLING THE ORIGINS OF MORE-THAN-HUMAN THINKING

Throughout our fieldwork and writing periods, we have both felt uneasy in our engagements with more-than-human thinking: which texts are we reading, what authors are we citing? And in so doing, which bodies

of knowledge do we embed ourselves and our work in? As we engage with, respectively, interspecies ethnography of farmers and their seed crops (Leila), and the relations of environmental organizers with their activist praxis (Karijn), how do we make more explicitly, and potentially “feminist” choices in this regard?

L: I’m wondering how you came to be interested in what we call the “more-than-human”? What initial experiences sparked your interest, and what thinkers/academics have you thought with since then?

K: I think that has to do with my own academic background and journey, as a lot of “feminist new materialism” was for example used in my Gender Studies Master’s Programme that I did a few years ago. This was also the time that I developed my research interest towards intersections between feminism and environmentalism, feminist political ecology, as well as broader feminist thought on environmental conflict and relations. Reading, for example, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Rosi Braidotti helped me to contextualize gendered and otherwise charged power relations in wider patriarchal, colonial, Eurocentric and capitalist structures and traditions, the hierarchical binary between “humans” and “nature” as one among many. Only during some of my more recent research experience did I come to contextualize such thinking in much more long-standing traditions of cosmology, ontology and indigeneity (Blaser, 2014; de la Cadena, 2010; Sundberg, 2014; Watts, 2013).

L: I had a similar experience and reading Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Anna Tsing and others as well, weaving them into my thesis work and other writings. I was working on this chapter in the thick of the summer of 2020 in the US, as protests over racial justice pushed me to recognize how white supremacy is baked into the ways in which we police, house, feed, govern and even think and feel. In this context, I began to look differently at works I was using to flesh out my own writing.

Where Western intellectual traditions still shy away, for example, from seeing plants as agential selves and continue to present “environment” as a bounded, separate entity subordinated to or in need of protection from humans, many Indigenous traditions view plants and non-humans as relatives, as actors in their own right and in concert with humans. Vanessa Watts explains “place-thought” in Anishnaabe and/or Haudenosaunee cosmologies: “our cosmological frameworks are not an abstraction but rather a literal and animate extension of Sky Woman’s and First Woman’s thoughts” (2013: 22). What we (white Westerners) call “habitats” or

“ecosystems” are understood as societies, structured by interspecies agreements and ethics, in which non-humans are active members who “directly influence how humans organize themselves into that society” (Watts, 2013: 22).

K: Exactly. Where well-known, Western and white academics are lauded for challenging the anthropocentrism of social scientific and philosophical thought; for suggesting that non-human beings and even things have agency, many Indigenous cosmologies start from a framework that never made such a sharp distinction between human and more-than-human vitality in the first place. Throughout both my fieldwork experiences and writing periods, I felt uneasy in my engagements with more-than-human thinking: which texts was I reading, what authors was I citing? And in so doing, which forms of knowledge was I taking for granted, putting forward and which ones was I potentially implicitly erasing? I am wondering if you have any insights after writing this chapter together: how do we make more explicitly, and potentially “feminist” choices in this regard? How can epistemological justice figure into feminist methodologies and feminist practice as a whole?

L: First, I think it is important to voice our discomfort with what we view as our intellectual lineage; the scholars and academics whose work we cite most in our writings, whose thoughts we continue to think with. White, western scholars, ourselves included, are often guilty of “cherry picking parts of Indigenous thought that appeal to them without engaging directly in (or unambiguously acknowledging) the political situation, agency and relationality of both Indigenous people and scholars”, thereby becoming “complicit in colonial violence” (Todd, 2016). But at the same time, changing a few citations doesn’t feel like enough in the face of such wrongdoing.

K: It is and it isn’t enough; it’s one step among many. Feminist methodologies can and need to move beyond practices “in the field”—they should extend to our analysis, our writing. The politics of citation are huge in the academic world, and as feminist scholars working in more-than-human worlds, we must commit to centring voices that are marginalized and actively silenced in academic spaces: Indigenous, non-Western and decolonial intellectual and spiritual traditions; BIPOC and queer, trans, non-binary and two-spirit voices (TallBear, 2014; Todd, 2016; Watts, 2013).

L: I agree. And not only because these voices are marginalized but because the theorizing, the ideas themselves are rich and deep and world

changing. These ideas animate the core of more-than-human, relational and multispecies thought. We must acknowledge the ways in which much multispecies work in the academy today is rooted in non-Western intellectual traditions while effacing those very origins by centring white voices. These supposedly “new” approaches appropriate ideas of non-human agency, liveliness and non-dualistic thinking from the very traditions that are subjected to physical and epistemological violence by Western nation-states and the academies they support. I think it’s also critical to recognize what is lost in translating oral tradition to written text, and Indigenous languages to English. Because colonialism sought to fracture and remake the relationships between Indigenous peoples, other living creatures and the territories within which they all situate themselves, decolonization must take an interspecies approach. The work and words of colonized peoples themselves must guide this process (Belcourt, 2014; Montford & Taylor, 2020).

K: Absolutely. I also want to highlight that this is a thread we picked up together in the process of writing, an opening note to this chapter that hopefully sets its tone. Rather than moving away from our feelings of unease and discomfort around our own intellectual lineages and the ideas and identities we attach ourselves to, we want to sit with this discomfort, to see what we can learn from it and how. Rather than shying away from using these lines of thought, we thus embrace our discomforts and think through what our engagements with relationality and the more-than-human teach us as we write this chapter.

### FIELDWORK: PROCESS, SURPRISES AND (THE QUEER ART OF) FAILURE

K: In our efforts to unpack more-than-human thinking and how such thinking has affected our sense and experience of feminist methodology, I am quite curious about your experiences and ideas around more-than-human and multispecies ethnography. Is this something you started out with, or that you changed or turned to as you were in the field?

L: I knew from the outset that I wanted to centre plants in my ethnographic work. Being a farmer myself, I felt there was no other way to approach agriculture and seed saving: it is fundamentally a multispecies affair, albeit one that too often places humans as protagonists and actors. I even began my fieldwork period wondering how I could manage to interview a cabbage plant. I had taken my ethnographic methods course,

read everything I could get my hands on about multispecies ethnography and concluded that the cultivated Brassicaceae were my botanical family of focus and that I would observe and interview them, centring their “voice” and experience in my research, as well as those of the farmers who cultivate them.

As my fieldwork got underway, it quickly became clear that there was no strict formula for what a multispecies ethnography would look like, and the pace of production farming in the summer season couldn't accommodate hours observing and listening to cabbage plants. Even as my ideas of what my ethnographic field work would look like shifted, my emphasis on working with farmers in the field, engaging in and helping with their everyday tasks never wavered. I came to think of my work as interspecies ethnography, an immersive and sensorially rich research practice in which the unit of analysis is a socio-ecologically specific relationship between human and other-than-human. By allowing both human farmer and crop plant interlocutors to speak back to my methodology, my research became an opportunity to instead examine these relationships, building an understanding of how humans and plants cultivate one another, becoming both subjects and objects to each other in intra-action (Barad, 2003; Haraway, 2008).<sup>4</sup> By centring the unique capacities of plants in both methodology and analysis, I wanted to demonstrate how feminist research may deepen its problematization of anthropocentrism and dualistic, hierarchical thinking by incorporating “the embodied knowledge, the sensory capacities, the temporalities of other species” (Livingston & Puar, 2011: 10). I think making a commitment to including non-human voices and perspectives in feminist research might also entail a further rethinking of our methodologies.

Just as feminist new materialism posits a turn away from the discursive and linguistic towards the “real”, the vital, the fleshy, I propose that our methods turn away from a focus on the verbal speech of humans towards the subtle but lively communicative modes of other beings, and how humans may understand, record and respond to them. This meant engaging in repetitive manual labour alongside farmers and other farmworkers: planting, harvesting seed, weeding. Farm work is material engagement with non-conspecifics, often meaning conforming our human work to the dictates and rhythms of plant and animal co-workers.

<sup>4</sup> See Rezvani, 2019.

Moving in the pace of the farming season, which is sometimes fast, sometimes slow, often linked to weather, plant growth and day length, gave me a vantage point from which to critique the breakneck pace of academic life, the punishing schedules and focus on “productivity” we know all too well, in which care for self and others fall away in the face of deadlines. Feminist academics and scholars have long critiqued how the neoliberal paradigm values output rather than depth, disciplinary boundaries and competition rather than collaboration, and those departments that can pull in big grants rather than the fringes (where the most radical ideas often originate) (Caretta et al., 2018; Mountz et al., 2015). How to alter the pace of life (and research) to that of a photosynthetic being or a human whose life is more closely linked to the seasons and the land? How to bring ideas about the power of plants to affect political change into the decidedly anthropocentric realms of development and critical agrarian studies (the disciplinary context in which I did my Master’s)?

When I returned to my home university after my summer in the field, I fell into an anxious tailspin: everyone around me was comparing the number of interviews, hours of transcription, coding methods, tables and charts. The general sentiment among other Master’s students was that more hours of transcribed interviews, more complicated coding, and more charts and tables meant better research. I had little to show besides pages of scribbled notes and journal entries, hundreds of photographs, a few long recordings and seed packets, lovingly hand-labelled and dated; less in the way of quantifiable data and much in the way of embodied learning. As a researcher a bit further along in your “career”, I wonder if you have had similar experiences? Did you have to face resistance or misunderstanding?

K: The anxiety you describe upon your return is, I think, such a big part of this type of research. Though usually I think it is something that is common before one undertakes field research, when you worry about how everything will go and whether you are prepared “enough”. Which is also a myth: if we have to wait around for the moment that we feel ready and perfectly prepared, the fieldwork itself may still surprise us and present us with the unexpected. This is something I experienced during my own field research, when I felt I had done everything I could to prepare, on paper anyway. I had printed flyers describing my research to hand out to environmental activists and organizers whom I wanted to interview, I had forms with questions for the interviews and how they would follow each other. But of course, as soon as I entered my different field sites

and my fieldwork began, my nerves took over. I had to improvise, “go with the flow” of the events and encounters I stumbled upon, the flyers untouched in my backpack. I still thought that such preparations were not useless, but their purpose was one of making me *feel* prepared rather than actually preparing me for the experience of doing research, of engaging with others.

And then, as you describe, in the phase where you want to make sense of your data, it can hit you again: how do we go about this process? What counts as data and what is “too trivial” or too personal or emotional to make it into your “data”? Especially when your peers may not take seriously or understand the type of research you have undertaken, and it may not, in your case, be easy to turn back to your interlocutors. Although my own fieldwork and research focused on human research participants, environmental activists and organizers, I recognize these anxieties you describe. I was concerned with whether I had enough interviews, and what they all meant. Somehow these notions of what research is, what a researcher does, and what kind of findings one should have after being in the field are quite rigid and structure our fieldwork expectations to this day. But reflecting on such anxieties with more-than-human thinking and approaches in mind can actually help us, as it allows for a more plural notion of the researcher and their environments and contexts. I think it is important that we reflect on and acknowledge that such anxieties remain very rooted in the idea that a researcher can exist independently of the “field work”, independently from the “data”, whereas I think we would both agree that it is the researchers themselves, in their dynamic and situated encounters, that brings the data into being. Only in practice we realize that ethnographic research is never a “linear accumulation of more and more insight” (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007: 5). That fieldwork is a hugely messy process is key here: it shows how our research is never a linear journey, but a process in which we continuously have to improvise and trust our gut (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007: 54). This also means we need to be open not only to surprise, but also failure. If anything, we may need to learn how to embrace what Jack Halberstam calls the “queer art of failure”: although things might not go as wished or planned, experiences of “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam, 2011: 2). Ultimately, Halberstam argues, we may want “more undisciplined knowledge, more questions and fewer answers” (Halberstam, 2011, 10). If we

embrace process, surprise and failure, alternative ways of knowing can become visible. I think it is precisely this non-linearity, the not-knowing, the unplannable, that more-than-human and relational thinking can help us become better equipped to understand, and more open to the plurality of relationships and identities we may hold throughout this process.

I feel that in my own process of working with “my data” and how to interpret it, I was too fixed on ideas of how to order my interview outcomes, how they could either confirm or reject my hypotheses. Instead, my empirical material ended up confusing me and did not neatly fit into existing literature or ideas at all. This was something that I experienced as contradictory at first, but then could make better sense of, aided by relational and more-than-human modes of thinking, which challenge binary categorizations in favour of plural views, values and worlds (Blaser, 2014; Watts, 2013); For my Ph.D.<sup>5</sup> I was studying environmental practices at the individual level, and critiques of such practices as being a form of individualized responsibility or neoliberal co-optation, and wanted to gain a better understanding of how those working on environmental and climate justice perceive and negotiate such practices. While interviews with these organizers largely confirmed these critiques, there was also something else going on that I could not quite make sense of. Although organizers were highly critical of individual practices in the first instance, deeming them ineffective, “small-scale”, forms of neoliberal co-optation and privileged, their accounts also reflected something else. Not only did they reflect that they took part in such practices themselves, they also pointed to the limitations of fully dismissing such practices as privileged and individual only: doing so closes us off to how environmental practices of varied kinds are perceived and travel across locales.

Relational and more-than-human thinking allowed me to make sense of this. To give an example, in “overdeveloped” contexts, environmentally conscious household practices are often associated with particular diets, such as veganism and vegetarianism. My engagement with Indigenous activists and their allies puts some of these practices into question as inherently reinforcing distinctions and hierarchies between humans and animals, and animals and plants. Activists that I interviewed from India, also stressed that veganism and vegetarianism as portrayed in the Global

<sup>5</sup> I did my PhD at Aberystwyth University, Aberystwyth, United Kingdom, where I wrote my thesis entitled “Making sense of personal environmental action: A relational reframing through the study of activists’ experiences” (2021).



North does not travel well to other contexts. One interviewee described that in her rural context being environmentally conscious is not about “expensive green products in special stores”, and that we need to recognize a plurality of ways in which subjects may engage in environmental practices, and with what is perceived as “the environment” in and of itself. Thinking of our (environmental) practices in terms of relational engagements involves us becoming aware of how our lives and practices are embedded in, connected to, affected by and affecting others and environments. In the end, my empirical material reflects that those activities that appear as individual or individualistic are in fact always connected to wider networks of others (van den Berg, 2021). This idea, that individuals and their practices (environmental or otherwise) are embedded in webs of relations means that such practices necessarily have “consequences for ourselves and our kin”, and that, vice versa, our connections with others “transform our personal life” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017: 147), a conviction I think that not only applies to my analysis of “individual” environmental practices, but also extends to the doing of fieldwork. More-than-human and relational thinking thus became a part of my methodology as they helped me make sense of some of the contradictions and the messiness that came out of my fieldwork.

L: Exactly. The messiness and unpredictability can be so generative—it reminds me of one afternoon I spent working with a young farmer and his mule Danech in hilling green beans. The farmer taught me how to call out the orders so Danech would walk the row in a straight line at the correct speed and turn right at the end. He emphasized confidence—a steady hand and loud voice were crucial. I had never worked with a draft animal before and I was uncertain, but we hilled the beans with few problems besides a few munched plants. As I was leading Danech back to his enclosure after the field was hilled, he stopped short, looking at me and refusing to budge. I tugged his lead, calling “Allez! Allez!”. His farmer turned to me and said simply: you have to wait until he decides to move—it could be ten minutes; it could be an hour (thankfully it was the former). Pausing for a moment with Danech, I looked up to notice the lengthening late afternoon shadows, the farmers in the next field over harvest broccoli with a giant conveyor belt-tractor, the rich brown soil studded with potatoes leftover from an earlier harvest. Adjusting to the rhythms of other-than-human creatures opens space for different “arts of noticing” (Tsing, 2015), removing humans from the centre of knowledge-making—an endeavour that is critical to feminist studies of

science and more-than-human thinking alike. I was prompted to pay attention to Danech's rhythm and pace of work by his closest human ally, the young farmer. Through this experience of working alongside each other, farmer, Danech and I, I was given insight into their particular form of collaborative, interspecies labour. The research collective working out of Bawaka Country in Australia reminds me that this process of working collaboratively with the landscape in which we find ourselves researching, this process of "decentering human author-ity", is one always guided by care and affective engagement with one's surroundings (Country et al., 2015).

Remembering working with Danech, I'm reminded of the call to "go with the thicket of subjugated knowledge that sprouts like weeds among the disciplinary forms of knowledge, threatening always to overwhelm the cultivation and pruning of the intellect with mad plant life" (Halberstam, 2011: 9). While Halberstam is here referring to those "naive" or "subjugated" knowledges that exist in the interstices of traditional academic disciplines, I wonder also if the land-based knowledge of farmers, the sensibilities of draft animals and crop plants can provide other sources of information to counter objective anthropocentric modes of thinking.

Writing about our experiences of and with fieldwork together, in relation to feminist methodologies and the more-than-human, has also become a source of comfort. Discussing our experiences and concerns and finding commonalities led us to realize that we were not "failing" when we encountered roadblocks or "data" that did not quite fit or made sense. This is truly a benefit of working collaboratively and finding feminist comrades within the academy.

## NEGOTIATING PLURAL IDENTITIES IN AND BEYOND "THE FIELD"

L: Many of our conversations within the collective formed at Bolsena revolved around negotiating the various identities and positions we hold: researcher, activist, friend, ally. Holding these various identities together, navigating tensions and openings, is a shared concern in feminist thinking. I wonder if you had experiences working with activists and organizers that allowed you to step outside of your role as "academic" in a way that enriched your understanding of fieldwork or altered your position as a researcher.

K: Hm, that is such a good question. I have been thinking a lot about activist/organizer positions and identities in relation to that of “researcher”, as I have at different points identified with both. Going to events where a lot of political organizing and activist communities are present, but being there in the position of researcher was something that I felt quite anxious about beforehand. So it is funny to think about how my own thinking on these positions in some ways has shifted. I feel that earlier on in my journey as researcher, I really felt that I could be both—a scholar-activist or activist-researcher. But more and more I realized that despite such identification, you may be perceived very rigidly into one category or the other, and it is usually those in the academic “camp”, or those at least somewhat connected to academic institutions who give themselves that label. I do not know about you, but at least I have not come across anyone whose primary occupation was activist, organizer or farmer, but who then also engaged in research and actively used such a hybrid label.

For me, through my fieldwork, I came to realize that it is also important to acknowledge that to label or introduce myself as “scholar-activist” I put myself in a certain category, because it is an idea I would like to have of myself, or it is perhaps because I feel guilty for not “doing enough” on “the activist” front. So during my fieldwork I felt it was actually much more ethically sound and honest to be up front with those I was interviewing, I was open about how I saw my plurality of identities, but made very clear that I was there in the position of researcher, in the sense that I had a purpose and needed to gather “data”. I think that this helped a lot, and in the end also allowed to blur the distinctions a little between these subject positions. That may sound contradictory, but I think through being clear about my intentions and motivations for engaging with people it became easier to build bonds of trust and exchange on an equal level. By making clear what my position and intentions were, there was room to configure these relations differently: to together explore common grounds and shared understandings of and approaches to environmental challenges and well-being. Through my fieldwork I think that both my understanding of theory and practice, of activism and of research have become more dynamic. When you depart from the relational understanding that “we’re all in this together”, I felt that the distinctions that I tried to enforce in order to come across as honest and transparent, in fact blurred.

L: I think both of us feel very deeply what Kim TallBear calls the “feminist ethical imperative to study a community in whose projects [we] could be invested” (2014: NP). As a farmer, I felt I was studying the practices of those I was working with not as an outsider, but as one inhabiting and invested in the same world, the same daily practices and the same political goals. Being able to care for and be invested in these farmers’ work “compromised” my ability to stand by objectively and “report”, something TallBear calls “standing with in the act of inquiry” (2014). I am wondering if and how you experienced this in your work, and how you negotiated the roles of being at once a researcher and wanting to learn from and strengthen the political project of your interlocutors? What were challenges you had to navigate in this position?

K: Yes, I feel very similar. I think this relates to ideas on situating oneself as well as traditional notions of objectivity. What are the implications of studying those one sympathizes with and how does this affect not only our investment but also the outcomes of our study? If we recall the work of feminist STS scholars such as Donna Haraway, such an implication in our work, what we study, why and how, is inevitable. I also do not think we should shy away from the subjects we are invested in because we may come too close or are too embedded. As I reflect above, the negotiation of this investment as well as my positioning as “researcher” was not something I “did” and resolved before I entered the field, but it constituted an important process throughout, and was also different depending on every field encounter I had. One way to negotiate this, for me, was to be open, not just about my aims or intentions as a researcher, but to reflect my own motivations for doing this research, and to discuss how my research could also be of interest to them. This reflects a central concern of feminist methodologies: challenging the hierarchy between researcher and researched and the one-way extraction of knowledge that characterizes colonial research paradigms. But beyond challenging this hierarchy, working and participating in plural and more-than-human worlds importantly challenges also the binary positioning of subject-object, possessor of gaze and gazed-upon, which holds even within feminist critiques. Could you elaborate on how your work with plants and farmers helped you locate yourself within these multi-directional and shifting lines of relationship?

L: I can think of one day spent on a farm in Morbihan, a province in central Brittany:

In her characteristically terse fashion, S, the farmer, told me to go harvest lettuce seed in the hoophouse, then disappeared to prepare the salad mix and tomatoes for delivery to the organic grocery store that afternoon. I stepped into the largest hoophouse, which contained a wild profusion of plants that, to the untrained eye, resembled a weedy, untamed jungle. Closer inspection revealed the complexity and biodiversity one might expect of an uncultivated meadow or forest edge: tiny Mexican gherkins like mouse watermelons strung up on a trellis, also occupied by a bean plant long past its prime, with dried yellow pods to be harvested for seed. Volunteers from a previous seeding of basil took advantage of the ring of moisture created by drip irrigation, sprouting up next to a new squash plant. A row of tomatoes occupied one side: some fruits tiny and orange, some deep purple-blue, some red and bulbous. A strong old grape vine looped over the metal frame, shading the tall, leggy bolted lettuce plants I was to harvest for seed. I headed there, stopping to eat a few fat, sweet raspberries from a well-established bush on the way. A plastic bucket was secured around my neck on a loop of string, leaving both hands free. I squatted low, the lettuce flowers now at eye level. My focus narrowed, finding a single flower, judging its dryness and likely number of seeds by its size, shape, colour and feeling between my fingers. Gently taking the bottom of the flower between two fingers, I grabbed the white tufted top of the dried bloom (think of a dry and closed dandelion flower but much, much smaller) with the other hand, tugging to free the seeds. I knocked the seeds into the bucket, keeping out as much fluff as possible. The plants towered above me, I sat in their cool green shade. I felt dwarfed and lingered with gratitude in this reversal of perspective. I still don't know how long I kept at the lettuce seeds: S was occupied elsewhere, the neighbour's cows munched grass in the field, the other neighbour's pigs munched soy feed in their long, enclosed barn. The sun wheeled; the wind was low. The minute radius of my focus was a single lettuce plant: in the course of its life, this one plant had again become potentially thousands, just by bolting up, going to flower and setting seed. I was now collecting those thousands of tiny potential lettuce lives, pinching and dropping them into a bucket. I had never felt so still and focused, and never accomplished so "little" in the space of so many hours: when I left the greenhouse a thin film of minuscule lettuce seed barely covered the bottom of the bucket.

On most farms, plants are never allowed to reach the point in their life cycle at which they set seed: they are harvested well before, shipped off and sold to a supermarket or (more rarely) directly to the consumer. S made a point of saving her own seed for dozens of species of vegetables. For her, the added labour was a pleasure in itself, and represented

a contribution both to global agrobiodiversity and a stand against corporate control of the seed supply. One evening, S's wife, T, explained why she also valued seed saving: she saw it as cultivating a multi-generational family of plants; the seeds as children carrying memory of land and place into future seasons. Working and speaking with S and T, as well as their queer, multispecies extended family of vegetables, showed me how plants challenge our notions of the bounded, self-contained individual: a lettuce plant is singular and itself, but also vehicle for future generations (in interaction with pollinators, who help make fruit and seeds), and also a source of human nourishment in the form of food. This is where the abstraction often found in more-than-human thinking and feminist science studies touched down for me: I often read critiques of how Enlightenment thinking spawned individualism and informed the capitalist rational actor (as propertied, able-bodied, white male). There, with a palm full of lettuce seeds, I experienced a tangible critique of that idea.

If I had not observed and participated in the relationship between S, T and their plant community, labouring alongside them both, I would not have gathered this insight. This is the core of an interspecies ethnographic inquiry—an exploration of the relationship between two types of beings who are both subject and object to each other, joined in a call-and-response that alters genotype, phenotype, environment, livelihood, politics and ontology over human and plant generations. As Haraway explains in her exploration of human–dog co-becoming: “the relationships are the smallest possible patterns for analysis, the partners and actors are their still-ongoing products. It is all extremely prosaic, relentlessly mundane, and exactly how worlds come into being” (Haraway, 2008: 25–26). These real-life examples showed me the importance of letting fieldwork unfold in an unhurried and unplanned manner, of opening myself to the lessons and messages from plant interlocutors as well as human ones.

K: My fieldwork also afforded opportunities for rethinking the individual. As I reflected above, my empirical findings did not neatly confirm or reject my hypotheses, but ended up blurring binaries between self/other, human/environment and individual and collective. Thinking differently about the relations between these presumed categories, not only affects the ways in which environmental challenges and practices are conceptualized, but in particular relational thinking and more-than-human encounters can bring about “confronting, difficult and uncomfortable challenges to the ways subjects and ‘selves’ come into being, are

mobilized, and act in the world” (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015, 48). To be alive and act in the world then, involves a process of “learning to be affected” (Latour, 2004; Roelvink & Gibson-Graham, 2009). Within this frame, both my fieldwork encounters themselves, as well as the environmental practices at hand that I was studying, became performative outcomes of the interdependencies between environments, humans and more-than-human beings.

Ultimately, this also affected my own sense of self and how I came to reflect on supposedly “individual” “environmental” practices as these categories were called into question through my research. I started to consider myself and my practices of research, care and activism as mutually constitutive and embedded in plural webs of relations. As I reflected in my research diary during our week in Bolsena:

As I am writing this, in a convent in rural Italy, I think about what relationality means for my research in practical terms and what it might look like for myself. As I resist the urge to scratch the mosquito bites that have accumulated on my legs I am reminded by others how these bites are feeding insects and, down the line, help the local bats thrive. This is one way in which relationality might help shift my perspective (and encourage me to embrace the mosquitos). Perhaps more importantly, during this week, we have discussed how “feminism” is never individual, always a collective effort in conversation with others. I think as I am up here in the library space of the convent, how this researching and writing is somehow collectivized, a relational undertaking: not only am I influenced and embedded in the work of others and the perspectives of my interviewees, this week literally my “individual” writing hours are book-ended by collective meals, workshops and walks. Not only am I taking up space or embedding myself in the local ecosystems, alongside mosquitos and bats, I am also taking up the collective engagement of writing, thinking and research, recognizing that no ideas exist in isolation.

As such, by sitting with and “staying with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) of the contradictions that my fieldwork brought about, rather than seeking clarity, I was able to shift my thinking and remain open to alternative possibilities.

This negotiation of different identities and positionalities is something inevitable to fieldwork, to embodying being a “feminist researcher” or taking on feminist methodologies, but certainly not limited to that. I think it is a process exemplary of how we negotiate and embody different

identities through our lives, and acknowledge how this affects the ways in which we enter research spaces and worlds. Most clearly, feminist intersectionality has brought this to the fore: how we always inhabit entangled elements of gender, race, class, sexuality, location and ability (Crenshaw, 1991; Puar, 2012). Queer theory, activism and thinking, however, feels particularly apt to me in articulating a fluidity of identities, and a negotiation of binary categorizations that can become a source of discomfort in and of itself. Here I refer to queer as both an adjective and a verb, signifying “the continual unhinging of certainties and the systematic disturbing of the familiar” (Hird & Giffney, 2008: 4). In this way embodying queer identities, informing ourselves through queer politics and theory is helpful in making sense of our identities as researchers in a “field”, and in negotiating feminist methodologies and feminist spaces more widely. Queer theory for me connects the personal with the political, as well as the personal and the “academic”. How I have come to think of myself, and more widely of my sense of self as something fluid and non-linear through the term queer, inevitably affects how I take on positionalities of researcher or feminist, as well as a combination of the two. Still, feeling or being exposed/outed as queer in some spaces can lead to strong feelings of discomfort: to stand out, to question binary positionings and assumptions, outside of but also within feminist spaces. This confirms, as Sara Ahmed (2014) describes, the unconscious comfort and ease that accompany positionalities of normativity. However, when discomfort is experienced, even when it cannot be clearly articulated, something else happens, existing narratives and assumptions—regarding gender or sexuality, but also extending to “being a researcher” or “doing fieldwork”—can shift or be disrupted. I think both of us, throughout the writing of this chapter, have experienced how when discomfort is felt and expressed the status quo is no longer taken for granted—this can in turn become a great source of comfort. How do your own experiences with the more-than-human and with doing (feminist, fieldwork) research relate to your sense of identity and queerness?

L: As a queer and non-binary person whose research does not deal explicitly with either women or gender, I’ve always felt somewhat out of place in feminist spaces—as if I had to explain or justify my presence. This discomfort sometimes made me feel hyper-visible, sometimes as if I wasn’t really there or had nothing to offer. Working outside, with plants, is one form of refuge I’ve found, a way to access comfort: Ahmed tells us that “comfort is about an encounter between more than one body; the



promise of a ‘sinking’ feeling. To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body ends and the world begins” (2014). The dissolution of boundaries between my body and my surroundings, where rational thought tends to dissipate and I can tune into what other-than-human kin are saying and doing: this is a space of comfort, where I don’t have to explain my presence, my gender, my relation to womanhood or feminism. I can find this comfort most often with plant friends and allies, a realization that has led me to farming and to queer/feminist/multispecies studies.

For me, linking queer ecology and feminist thinking through the more-than-human also feels like finding a refuge. Both lines of theory teach us how “nature organizes and is organized by complex power relations” including sexuality and gender (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005: 6), pointing out how acts of division that categorize and demarcate the natural world also included male–female, developed–underdeveloped, civilized–savage etc. A queer perspective (on nature) sees the violence in this boundary-making and seeks to undo it. By centring (our) queer experiences, we may de-link nature/biology/evolutionary fitness of the species and heterosexuality, rebuilding natural spaces as ones that are and have always been inhabited by queer (human and non-human) bodies (Mortimer-Sandilands, 2005). This delinking and undoing can be a source of comfort—by questioning the foundational categories we are conditioned to accept, by asserting that queer bodies have a place and are “natural” in their own right, by allowing us to hold in tension our various identities, which shift in meaning in the different spaces we occupy.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have shared aspects of our individual and shared experiences of doing fieldwork, engaging with the more-than-human, our intellectual lineages and responsibilities, and working with/through feminist methodologies. Experiences such as these, that focus on the affective, and our personal embodiment of “researcher”, “feminist”, “individual” or “farmer” often do not make it into academic texts or curricula. Rather than providing neat narratives or recommendations of how to engage with or “do” feminist methodologies, our experiences reflect the messiness and open-endedness of such an endeavour: a process riddled with anxiety, discomfort and failure. In this sense, our chapter cannot offer

slick and precise suggestions, but instead reflects how discomfort is not only part of the process, but can also be generative.

In writing this chapter together we have reflected the generativity of discomfort, recognizing how to take advantage of that “subtle sense that something usually clear, predictable, and scripted is being disrupted and opened up to negotiation” (Murray & Kalayji, 2018: 19). How can we as queer feminist thinkers use discomfort and its range of affects to start to imagine new ways of relating within spaces of (feminist) knowledge-making, to use it in order to experience “pleasure and excitement about a world opening up” (Ahmed, 2014)? How can we seek out and create spaces of refuge and comfort in which to recuperate, with more-than-human and queer kin? How can we parse the different forms of unease we feel—in fieldwork, in embodying being a “researcher” and our politics of citation, in academic or activist spaces—learning when to recognize that we lack the emotional resources to take on feeling out of place or discomforted? We hope to outline queer feminist methodologies as a “necessarily contradictory practice”, a practice of “doing imperfectly with a view to someday doing better but inevitably never quite right [...] which aims to hold the past in one hand and the future in the other, living the same realities we endeavour to undo” (Murray & Kalayji, 2018: 17). This sort of prefiguration is what queer and feminist thinkers and organizers have always excelled at and the legacy we hope to build on and extend.

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# Feminist Ethics Amid Covid-19: Unpacking Assumptions and Reflections on Risk in Research

*Constance Dupuis*

## INTRODUCTION

My academic trajectory has been guided by my interest in research's ethical entanglements—the possibilities and the responsibilities of research. An early encounter with these entanglements was, for me, the work of Maori Indigenous education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith. I have been troubled and deeply challenged by Smith. She begins the groundbreaking volume *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* as follows:

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From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary. (Smith, 2012: 1)

Though I did not grow up knowing and feeling research’s role as a tool of domination, Smith, and others teach me about the non-innocence of research.

On the surface, Smith is speaking out against dominant forms of research that are rooted in positivism’s quest for *the* truth and extractive inclinations which seek to do research *on* and *about* people, rather than *with* and *for* people. There is also a deeper questioning of the drivers of knowledge production; why and for whom is knowledge sought? At what cost? And perhaps most importantly: whose role is it to answer these questions? Who should set the terms within which research takes place? I begin here not to argue that research is unredeemable, but to underscore what is at stake when research goes wrong. As Unangax scholar Eve Tuck and co-author Wayne Yang put it, “as fraught as research is in its complicity with power, it is one of the last places for legitimated inquiry. It is at least still a space that proclaims to care about curiosity” (2014: 223). Tuck and Yang underscore that curiosity is worthy of nurturing in research, while simultaneously cautioning that “[r]esearch is just one form of knowing, but in the Western academy, it eclipses all others” (ibid.: 237). This brings me back to the importance of the questions I pose above. In grappling with these questions, Black feminist thinker bell hooks has been another guide for me. She speaks of theory as without the possibility of purity; theory, and by extension research, is what we make of it. “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfils this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (1994: 61). From this, I take the possibilities and responsibilities of doing research. If research, as Smith says, is a dirty word, how can research also be otherwise?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Otherwise” has become shorthand to signal a questioning of Eurocentric norms and understandings which emerged from within Latin American decolonial and post-development thinking and beyond (Icaza, 2017; Escobar, 2007; Walsh, 2012, 2016).



Currents of critical feminist and decolonial<sup>2</sup> ethics speak to the possibilities of research which centers values other than those dictated by dominant forms of research. When it came time to design a doctoral research project, I felt a responsibility to pursue research rooted in relational ethics. Eve Tuck and Monique Guishard describe the need for a commitment to relational ethics in research:

Decolonial research necessitates a posture to ethics that frames discussions of ethics away from an emphasis on procedures that attempt to safeguard individual rights and autonomy towards conversations about relational ethics in which partnership, commitment, accountability, and social justice are central tenets. (2013: 3–4)

Who is my research for? Who am I accountable to? These are questions that guide me.

These understandings of ethics in research stand in stark contrast to understandings of ethics enacted through institutional ethics review processes. Speaking to the “(im)possibilities of becoming an ethical researcher”, Halse and Honey discuss how institutional ethics processes establish normative understandings which limit possibilities for more full understandings of feminist research ethics (2005: 2155). Such processes do not account for the fluidity and time required for establishing and maintaining relational ethics, instead of reducing research ethics to the procedures set out by institutions (Cahill et al., 2007: 307). Matt Bradley (2007), in an article entitled “Silenced for their own protection: How the IRB [Institutional Review Board] marginalizes those it feigns to protect”, highlights the frustrating contractions by which institutional ethics processes inhibit the possibilities for more robust participatory ethics through a strict adherence to narrow understandings of research ethics. “These requirements are part of a bureaucratized higher education space that frames the Ph.D. thesis as a ‘product’ of a knowledge production process guided by neoliberal logics of efficiency, speed and value for money” (Millora et al., 2020: 11). Such logics run counter to the kinds of relational ethics I hope to enact in my Ph.D. project.

<sup>2</sup> I claim neither a complete understanding of feminist and decolonial perspectives on this topic, nor that these are the only locations for such possibilities to thrive. These are the methodological conversations which inspire me.

The focus of my research is aging, intergenerational care, wellbeing in later life, and exploring what possibilities lie at the intersection of aging and environment. I came back to academia for my doctorate, like many of my peers, with ambivalence about the university and uncertain about whether to pursue the competition and isolation of an academic career. I came back for the possibilities of learning from and with others; I came back for the luxury of time, being able to sink into the telling of well-worn stories; I came back to be able to learn from my biological and adoptive grandparents.

I was prompted to explore these themes within the context of an Innovative Training Network<sup>3</sup> in feminist political ecology. Though the topic of aging and old age was a new research focus for me, I understood this work as building on earlier engagements with cultivating justice-oriented relations. I had the privilege of growing up in a multi-generational household and in a community that modeled many ways of living intergenerationally. As a Canadian settler of French, Irish, Scottish, and English ancestry from Toronto, I am still learning to contend with the individual and collective responsibilities to disrupt and dismantle settler colonialism. As I move out of early adulthood, questions of age and aging have also begun to feel real for me in an embodied and emotional way. I admit that within my own academic circles, I had encountered very few examining what it means to age well. I have since learned that these are conversations taking place in many contexts, and my hope is to carve out space for serious consideration of old age and aging within feminist political ecology. At the core of my research, I am interested in how learning deeply across difference—inter-generationally, inter-culturally, inter-cosmologically—can have transformative outcomes.

I was introduced to dominant ideas about aging by examining the biopolitical projects of “successful” aging and “active” aging<sup>4</sup> that have emerged primarily from the United States and Europe respectively. Both discourses construct fairly narrow normative frameworks of what later life should look like. I quickly began asking questions about how such ideas

<sup>3</sup> Wellbeing, Ecology, Gender and cOmmunity (WEGO) is funded through the European Union’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie program.

<sup>4</sup> Picture an advertisement for a seniors’ living community, with a wealthy, white, able-bodied, heterosexual couple with perfect smiles lounging by a swimming pool. Such depictions of old age are the embodiment of active and successful aging, and they construct understandings of failure in old age as a failure to achieve such a lifestyle.

limit our imaginaries of what it means to age well (Katz & Calasanti, 2015; Lamb et al., 2017; Ranzijn, 2010; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015; Sandberg & Marshall, 2017; Wellin, 2018). I wanted to learn from other imaginaries of what the end of a life well-lived could be. I had planned to focus on different collectives of older people, in both Uruguay and Canada, who are actively reimagining and creating the possibilities to age how they want to, beyond the logics of dominant discourses. I had hoped, as I will discuss below, to learn from these hopeful experiments in living well.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting emotional, social, and economic upheaval have shed light on assumptions in my research. While I knew I would inevitably get some things wrong in the research process, I was surprised to be confronted with assumptions that I hadn't realized I had made as core to my research. Having arrived in Uruguay in the last week of February 2020, I was three weeks into a several months research stay when questions about the ethics of seeing older people face-to-face surfaced for me. Only when a global health crisis meant that my physical presence had become a threat to my research collaborators did I realize that my being non-threatening was a core assumption of my research design. I believe this gap in my own self-reflection has something interesting to add to discussions about ethics in feminist research.

In the context of a volume on feminist research methodologies, I set out to explore the complexities of navigating feminist research ethics in the context of a pandemic. This chapter begins by situating how I entered the research process and where my thinking about research ethics began, discussing how my assumptions were partially validated in my early data collection. I then explore how the Covid-19 pandemic has flipped some of these assumptions on their head, underscoring some of the unexamined ageism that fed these assumptions. I also reflect on how my understanding of risk in research has been problematized as a result of Covid-19. I close with a reflection on feminist research ethics as a practice of feminist methodologies, and gesture toward how I might put what I have learned about unpacking assumptions into practice.

## STARTING POINTS

We, each of us, carry our histories and our experiences with us into the research process. Often called biases, these are the impacts of how our lives have shaped us. We are marked by our chosen and socially

imposed identities, these shape what we notice, how we think, how we feel. While some currents of research claim to produce knowledge from a place of objectivity, many feminist (and other) researchers argue that our experiences inform and enhance our ability to ask questions and seek understanding. Feminist contributions to knowledge production have had important impacts on methodology and on how to pursue knowledge. Strong objectivity (Harding, 1995), standpoint theory (Collins, 1986) and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) have had profound effects on how critical research is done. Through reflexivity and an engagement with one's own positionality, we can better understand how our identities and experiences shape both our perspectives and how we are in relation with those whom we engage in our research (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). Farhana Sultana offers the following:

A reflexive research process can open up the research to more complex and nuanced understandings of issues, where boundaries between process and content can get blurred. [...] Being reflexive is important in situating the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained. Often ethics are then shifted away from the strict codes of institutional paperwork, towards moral and mutual relations with a commitment to conducting ethical and respectful research that minimizes harm. (Sultana, 2007: 376–377)

The importance of the research process figures centrally in both feminist and decolonial approaches. Decolonial thinkers push us further, asking researchers to grapple with the complexity and possibility of understanding our plural positionalities (Icaza, 2017).

Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson teaches us that a central idea of dominant research paradigms is “that knowledge is seen as being *individual* in nature. This is vastly different from the Indigenous paradigm, where knowledge is seen as belonging to the cosmos of which we are a part and where researchers are only the interpreters of this knowledge” (Wilson, 2008: 38). Though my research focus isn't precisely situated within Indigenous contexts, this understanding of researchers as knowledge interpreters resonates deeply with the kinds of research ethics I am hoping to enact. I approach the role of interpreter with the perspective that, “rather than the truth being something that is ‘out there’ or external, reality is in the relationship that one has with the truth” (Wilson, 2008: 73). This research has been, for me, a process of learning to see knowledge as relational.

Though by no means the standard around the world, I grew up in a context where institutionalized care for the elderly is the norm. Despite this, I feel fortunate to have had many examples within my family and in my community of cross-generational care. Here I do not intend to vilify care institutions,<sup>5</sup> but I see one of the broader purposes of my doctoral research as critiquing the current capitalist system which makes such institutions necessary. The neoliberal retrenching of the provisioning of public services such as care institutions and the resultant proliferation of for-profit care has furthered the commodification of care (Fabbre, 2015; Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015). Simultaneously, the increased separation between older people and the rest of society in many western contexts has allowed for a devaluing of older voices, experiences, and knowledges. I see my research as not only spending time with older people, which some colleagues have found to be a sweet but not particularly serious research focus, but also as looking for absences and listening to silences. How can we (re)build intergenerational bridges?

As a relatively young woman, I began thinking about the discursive politics of what constitutes “success” in later life without the material and emotional weight of these discourses. “Unlike other hierarchies, in which the privileged rarely become the oppressed, we all face age oppressions if we live long enough” (Calasanti et al., 2006: 2). Despite the hope that I will have the opportunity to grow old myself, being elderly is not my everyday. Calasanti et al. (2006) also present age as a political location, paralleling race, gender, class, or ability relations, and underscore the importance of taking age seriously in intersectionality. Though I might not feel myself the focus of successful aging discourse, I am exposed to them every day. Still, it has taken this research process for me to notice just how prevalent ageism and normative ideas of successful aging are around me.

I began my Ph.D. on the topic of aging in deep conversation with the elders in my own life; my grandmother, my godmother, my parents, my adoptive mothers and grandmothers, my aunts and uncles. These are the relationships in which I am grounded in this research and some of the relationships to which I strive to be accountable. Wilson, in the context of Indigenous research, speaks of relational accountability as being rooted in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (2008: 77). This means being true

<sup>5</sup> By care institutions, I mean long-term care facilities as well as retirement homes and other assisted living institutions, both public and private.

to the relationships from which my learning, unlearning, and relearning emerge. It also means that my insights do justice to these relationships and that they are useful. I furthermore see my role as a researcher working with older generations as a scribe of sorts. Returning to my motivations for pursuing my doctorate, I see value in bearing witness, in deep listening to the stories of older generations. As my research relationships continue to grow beyond my family, I will continue to be guided by relational accountability.

Having spent many months delving, as one does in the beginning of a Ph.D., into the cultural, medical, public health, policy, and economic discourses that surround aging, ageism, and wellbeing in later life, I wanted to look beyond the binary narrative of “success” and “failure” constructed within aging discourses across these fields (Lamb et al., 2017). Instead, I sought out examples of hopeful, wholehearted, and connected aging<sup>6</sup> that are not bound by dominant aging narratives. With my elders in mind, I had strong examples of what norm-defying aging could look like. I wanted to learn from those living their own understanding of aging well or otherwise.

I was able to do a few months of early data collection in Uruguay in mid-2019 to begin getting to know an inspiring network of older people, Uruguay’s National network of elderly persons or *Red Nacional de Personas Mayores* (REDAM). The REDAM is a civil society network that brings together various groups and organizations around activism and advocacy for older people. They were active participants in the creation of the 2015 Inter-American Convention on Protecting the Human Rights of Older Persons. Members of the REDAM have more recently focused on a critique of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), asking “where is the aging?” and identifying how they would like to be working at the intersection of care for older people and care for the environment. In their work, I have been greatly inspired by how members of the REDAM mobilize mainstream discourses of international human rights frameworks and the SDGs to carve out space for the kinds of aging and the kinds of activism they want.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to note that the adjectives I use here generally evoke positive connotations. I am not trying to paint aging with rose colored glasses, ignoring the difficult and painful realities of getting old. A politics of hope, and living in “connected” ways requires work, hard work.

Getting to know members of the REDAM took me to several different regions of Uruguay. I was able to spend many slow afternoons, sharing tea or mate<sup>7</sup> and listening to stories. These conversations often led to someone pulling out a few photos from their wallet or photo album. I am always grateful to be offered the stories of people's activist and personal lives told through photos. While many such stories centered on joyful and triumphant moments, struggle and hardship also figured prominently. In the context of happy and hard stories that wander and lead from one to the next, deep listening is a feminist methodology of choice. While exploring aging and sustainability with REDAM members, I was asking "not just 'what do I think about this?' but 'what does this mean to my life?'" (Freeland Ballantyne, 2012). I feel this is part of my relational responsibility for receiving these stories.

Having lost my maternal grandmother months earlier, my last grandparent, I was very happy to have a reason to be spending time with older women. Wilson says: "[t]he source of a research project is the heart/mind of the researcher, and 'checking your heart' is a critical element in the research process" (2008: 60). Despite being on a different continent, thousands of kilometers from home, there was something so familiar, so comforting, about being in the company of wise women. This time allowed me to "check my heart". I use the term "wise" in order to describe these women not to evoke the trope that being older makes one necessarily wiser, but for two clear reasons. First, as a way of underscoring the value of the time these women chose to spend with me, sharing rich and meaningful reflections about the lives they've lived. Second, one of the goals of my research is to make visible the ways in which the knowledge and experience of older people is dismissed and devalued within academia and more broadly in many western societies. As such, I aim to be explicit about highlighting the importance of older people's knowledge.

Enmeshed with the affective layers of my fieldwork, I now realize that these experiences validated some of my unconscious and unexamined assumptions about my research—primarily that I am non-threatening. My positionality as a researcher in this context is necessarily layered with nationality, whiteness and education, knowing this meant the understandings I gained would necessarily be partial. Despite this, the people and collectives I met through the REDAM in Uruguay were very happy to

<sup>7</sup> Mate is an infused caffeinated bitter tea popular in Uruguay, Argentina, Paraguay and southern Brazil, shared often among friends.

speak with me, they invited my questions, and were keen to showcase their work, their thinking, and most of all the stories of how they came to be working on care for the old and care for the environment. Not encountering much friction or resistance, I interpreted this as being “on track”.

In the Uruguayan context, the strong Montevideo-interior divide also played a role in how my positionality was read.<sup>8</sup> Because I was spending time with initiatives outside of Montevideo, I was aware that my interest was often read as validating the work of the people I was interviewing. Through this, I came to understand that my interest in these initiatives was being utilized to underscore the importance of their work; I was often asked to speak on television and radio with members of these groups to explain why I was interested in what was taking place. I was happy to be able to lend support in these kinds of ways and understood this as a form of reciprocity.

I returned to Uruguay at the end of February 2020 with plans to pick up the many connections and conversations that had begun nearly one year earlier. By mid-March, I was told by my university that I had to leave.<sup>9</sup>

Covid-19 has made more visible many forms of ageism and age disparities around the world. It is important to examine who has had to bear the majority of the costs of both the pandemic and the consequences resulting from governmental pandemic responses. The death toll of the virus within long-term care institutions, where the majority of residents are elderly, has exposed the consequences of “warehousing seniors” in care facilities (Muscedere & Williams, 2020), what aging studies scholar Stephen Katz calls “state-sponsored elder abuse” (Katz, 2020). More broadly, narratives of decline and vulnerability have, almost overnight, stripped an entire generation of their autonomy and agency in the name of protecting high-risk people (Ayalon et al., 2020; Ehni & Wahl, 2020). And yet, as the pandemic drags on, the mental and physical consequences of loneliness and isolation are showing themselves.

<sup>8</sup> With roughly one third of the country’s population living in Montevideo, and with a long history in disparities between the interior and the capital, the interior of Uruguay is sometimes overlooked. The urban/rural divide means those based in Montevideo often find themselves closer to the center of political, economic and cultural power.

<sup>9</sup> Being “evacuated” by the university made explicitly clear whose risk is valued by the university.



For my own research, this has meant that I now encounter far less bewilderment when discussing my research topic; I no longer have to justify the importance of asking questions about aging and wellbeing in later life. As I will discuss in the conclusion, the consequences of the pandemic for older people have also meant that I recognize a certain level of urgency, with the consequences felt so disproportionately by older people, when thinking about how to do aging differently.

The far-reaching effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have made visible many of my assumptions and cast conversations about risk in research in a whole new light. This is what I turn to next.

### UNPACKING ASSUMPTIONS

Having defended my research design in mid-February, I had only been in Uruguay for a short time when Covid-19 became real for me. While there were not yet any cases of the virus in Uruguay in early March 2020, I realized that my research had become much more ethically complex. Was it ethical for me to continue connecting with potential research collaborators in person in light of the virus? What was the risk of transmission involved, particularly as my research relates to older people? Was it ethical to even suggest face-to-face interactions, when someone may have to weigh the risks of severe illness or death in order to meet with me?

I became physically threatening in the eyes of my research collaborators, and this reversal has put into relief this and other assumptions that have underpinned my research design. My early fieldwork experiences reinforced the narrative that I had constructed about who I am as a researcher and validated many underlying assumptions. Thinking through how Covid-19 has shifted my understandings, I am brought to confront these assumptions.

Looking back, I see that, despite setting out with the goal to be reflexive, I spent much more time thinking through the subjectivities of the people that I would do research with than truly thinking about how I am read and where I fit. Why was my being non-threatening so important to my project? I think this was the case, in part, because I thought that being with people would be the easy part. I have also come to understand that this process of reflection was cut short by my having to leave Uruguay. I am reminded of Sultana's description of the fluidity of positionality: "[m]y experience has been that positionality and subjectivity are tempered both spatially and temporally, and are unstable and

not fixed. Dynamics change with context” (Sultana, 2007: 382). Writing this chapter has served as a way for me to continue these processes of reflection.

I see now that I had also assumed that some people would want to talk to me. This assumption was based on my being a relatively young woman, interested in the life experiences of older people who aren’t often heard. Compounded with whiteness and nationality, I had assumed that my interest would be enough for some to want to spend time with me. An extension of this is the assumption that someone would be pleased to participate in my research. I see now that I would have problematized this assumption in so many other contexts, but I hadn’t questioned it here with regards to age. While I did meet and spend time with many people who were eager to share their stories of both triumph and frustration, and happy for me to spend time with them, there is a layer of discomfort for me in realizing this gap. I have had to continue to unpack the underlying thoughts about older people that enabled this assumption, and this experience has served as an important reminder that unlearning ageism is a perpetual process.

## REFLECTIONS ON RISK

As I am sure it has for many, Covid-19 has also shifted my understanding of risk. Discourses of risk have been instrumentalized in many ways in this pandemic, particularly when it comes to older people.

[W]e are seeing in public discourse an increasing portrayal of those over the age of 70 as being all alike with regard to being helpless, frail, and unable to contribute to society. These views are being spread by social media, the press, and public announcements by government officials throughout the world. (Ayalon et al., 2020: 1)

What are the consequences of representing entire generations in homogenizing ways? Who is at risk? Whose risk matters? What kinds of risks are centered? What does risk hide?

In research, for whom is risk being considered? The focus of discussions about risk within the research institute where I am based revolve around a place, such as a geographical location, or a context, such as war or disaster, being risky. A researcher inserts themselves into this place or context. Where vulnerability of research participants is discussed, what is

taken into account are circumstances or contexts which make participants “vulnerable”, such as the difficulty of informed consent when dealing with research participants who live with cognitive impairment. What about the risk that you, as a researcher, bring with you to a place, to people, or to relationships? Going back to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s “research as dirty,” this speaks to the risks the researcher represents, the risks I bring with me as a researcher.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Now, one year later, we know more about the virus, about how it spreads, how to diminish risks of transmission; we are beginning to see the effects of vaccine rollout. And yet, it is still very unclear what the post-pandemic world will look like and feel like.

This has been a necessary period of unlearning and relearning for me. This has also served as an important reminder that even with commitments to feminist research ethics and principles of mutuality in research, even while trying to do things differently, I get things wrong. We all come to research with gaps. The question then becomes how do I build research practices of noticing my own unconscious assumptions? And how does this add to conversations about feminist research methodologies more broadly?

Feminist ethics in research is understood as always in process; it is a commitment to continuing to work through the messiness of asking questions. This sometimes means making visible one’s own clumsiness, as I have attempted to do here. Decolonial approaches to ethics remind us about relational accountability and ensuring mutuality in the research process. Resisting the narrow understandings of institutional review processes, we can choose more ample understandings of ethics.

While the virus has made the need to rethink wellbeing in later life painfully clear, I feel compelled to ask more immediately change-oriented questions. By change-oriented I mean that the pace at which Covid-19 is changing how lives are lived, or making visible unjust logics dominant in society, is not compatible with the markedly slow pace of academia. I feel now more than ever that the academic work I am able to do at the moment must be coupled with more tangible contributions to justice-seeking processes—because academia functions in temporalities not always compatible with human lives.

As the pandemic wears on, I have also begun to question some of the assumptions I made early on in the pandemic. Is distancing myself from older people, because they are more at risk of Covid-19, denying older people's agency? What of the consequences of staying away? In the first weeks of the pandemic, I was confronted by the question of whether it is ethical to see people. I now wonder whether it is ethical to not see people.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Of Apps and the Menstrual Cycle: A Journey into Self-Tracking

*Jacqueline Gaybor*

### TRACKING THE ORIGINS OF THIS CHAPTER

The use of mobile apps for self-monitoring of health and well-being has grown exponentially in the last years, reaching 6.1 billion users by 2020 (Statista, 2020). A major attraction of self-monitoring health-related aspects such as food consumption, hours of sleep, weight changes, physical activity, or the menstrual cycle through digital technologies is to use personal information to achieve health-awareness and self-improvement, defined as “the belief that the self-knowledge that will eventuate will allow self-trackers to exert greater control over their destinies” (Lupton, 2016: 115). Digitized strategies for self-tracking the menstrual cycle, the focus of this chapter, is a subgroup of health apps developed to track a person’s menstrual cycle, sex life, and health to provide them with algorithmically derived insights into their body and lives.

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I have wanted to investigate menstrual-tracking apps since I was finishing with my doctoral thesis on the body politics of menstruation and reusable technologies for menstrual management in 2019. At first, I conceived this research from a different angle than the one I have eventually used in this chapter. My interest initially was to explore whether menstrual-tracking apps (MTA) developers were fulfilling their legal obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). I wanted to research how menstrual-tracking apps were processing user data and what data was collected and stored. From a feminist political perspective, I felt it was important to research issues of security and privacy related to the menstruating body in online spaces. I had serious concerns, especially around consent, privacy and transparency in relation to how personal data, specifically medical data, is handled by these companies. Just to give an idea, Privacy International (PI), an organization based in the UK focussed on the promotion of the right to privacy, found that of the 36 apps tested in their study, 61% automatically transferred data to Facebook the moment a user opened the app. This happened regardless of “whether the user had a Facebook account or not, and whether they [were] logged into Facebook or not” (Privacy International, 2020).

At the same time, on a personal level, and because of my Ph.D. research on the body politics of menstruation, I found myself more and more frequently involved in conversations about the use of these apps with my friends, family and colleagues. While there was somehow a recognition of the risks to privacy by filling personal data into the app, other dimensions were often highlighted. They emphasized the positive gain in knowledge about their body and learning about their menstrual cycle. In these conversations it was automatically assumed that I was a user of a MTA, and on numerous occasions I was asked which MTA is the best, my (presumed) experience in tracking my menstrual cycle through an app, or whether I ever felt it had helped me justify my behaviour or enhanced my body awareness. Or if I ever used the app to validate certain feelings and emotions at a specific time of the month.

My experience? Well, I began to wonder, how would I know? Should I know? Before conducting this investigation, I had never used any form of health tracking app, including the MTA. My distrust towards how medical data is handled by app companies, which motivated my interest in researching MTAs, was an important reason that kept me away from using them. I did not find it appealing to use digital technologies to self-monitor my body and my menstrual cycle, probably because I have

always had very regular periods. I used the old fashioned “analogue” menstrual-tracking method through which I rely on my memory or pen and agenda.

Nevertheless, I became puzzled by the questions I was asked and started to reflect on the possibilities of building body awareness through a digital technology. I was interested to know how the different interactions between the user and the MTA could give rise to different forms of experiencing the body and the menstrual cycle. Could self-knowledge be gained by sharing, then collecting, and ultimately reflecting on information produced by the MTA out of the user’s data? Could my relationship with my body be reconfigured through a self-tracking app that is powered by my personal digital traces? And most importantly, how should I approach this exploration? While such questions motivated me and guided me throughout this journey, they will be addressed in a somewhat different way. Rather than theorizing and problematizing the results of my journey while using the app, I focus on the process of knowledge production grounded in my own messy experience of familiarizing myself with the world of MTAs by becoming a user of one of them.

In this chapter, I describe and reflect on this journey, which I took from the summer of 2019 to the winter of 2021. The first stage, which I call “the overwhelming period” is when I first approached these apps, and where my personal bias about the MTA combined with my training as a lawyer complicated the process of adopting the use of an MTA. Then, I moved into a different stage, characterized by intimate encounters with others, which I call “analogue intimacy”. In this stage, I left my individual research quest and interaction with the digital realm and found myself sharing emotional and embodied life stories with friends who are users of MTAs. These encounters pushed me to question my own preconceptions and biases. In the next stage, called “Flo and me”, I share my first impressions of Flo, the MTA I ended up adopting for this journey. During this last stage of the journey, “the production of disembodied knowledge of the body”, I reflect on the tensions and dilemmas I encountered as a user of Flo. In “final thoughts”, I highlight the importance of creating “dedicated times, spaces and contexts within which to be reflexive” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 425) in an effort to be transparent about how my pre-conceived ideas and assumptions influenced the process of knowledge construction and production.

To document the MTA journey, I used a “field” diary, the field being mostly located in my house in The Hague, where I have spent most of

my time during the Covid-19 quarantine in 2020 and 2021. In this diary I documented my embodied and emotional experiences, which I consider central to the process of knowledge production. This has been a crucial aid for my memory and has supported my process of reflexivity as a tool “for analysis whereby the representation of this process of understanding is as important as the product of this process of knowledge production” (Willemse, 2014: 38).

### POSITIONING THE JOURNEY

In qualitative social science research, there is a general acknowledgement that the interpretation of data is a reflexive exercise through which meanings are creatively constructed rather than found (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Within discussions of reflexivity, feminist scholars (Grosz, 1994; Harding, 2004) have drawn attention to the importance of recognizing the researchers’ epistemological and ontological positions and their social and emotional locations and how they influence the process of knowledge production. Feminist methodological critiques have thus rejected the positivist notion of the neutral status of the researcher and recognized the partial and provisional nature of knowledge claims (Letherby, 2002; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). In this chapter, I engage in a feminist methodological exploration by detaching from notions of the neutral and objective researcher. I draw on my personal and messy story, making explicit my social position, interests, and background assumptions, and writing about these in the first person. The choice of revealing rather than covering up the messiness of my lived experiences in my writing is as Ellingson (1998) describes, a way to debunk positivist assumptions about a researcher’s neutrality and objectivity with the clear intention of “positioning scholars as imperfect social actors” (Ellingson, 2006: 299). This required me to go beyond just stating my own biases and pushed me to look carefully at how different influences, life experiences, including multiple discussions, emotional conversations, and how the writing and later reading and reflecting on my field diary affected this process.

My methodological choices explain why I found myself frequently involved in conversations about the use of MTAs. In addition to defining

myself as a cis-woman<sup>1</sup> and of an age where people menstruate, for more than a decade I have been involved with menstrual activism in Ecuador, where I am from, and in Argentina, where I conducted my Ph.D. research between 2015 and 2020. As part of my involvement with menstrual activism, I have frequently attended get-togethers on DIY reusable technologies, self-management gynaecology courses, menarche welcome ceremonies, and painting workshops with menstrual blood, among others. All these experiences have shaped my relationship with my body and my menstrual cycle, as well as inspired my Ph.D. research. During these years, I have investigated various reusable technologies for managing menstruation, not only from the comfort of my desk in The Netherlands, where I have been based since 2012, but through my own embodied experience, as a user of these technologies. I agree with Ellingson (2017) that a researcher's body plays an important role in producing all types of qualitative research. It is through the body, understood as "simultaneously physical and affective, social and individual, produced and producing, reproductive and innovative" (Jones & Woglom, 2015: 116) that knowledge is produced. The body as stated by Ellingson (2017) is inseparable from the self that produces knowledge.

In a previous work (Gaybor, 2019), I (self-)explored the menstrual body (using my own) as a site of knowledge production. My body was engaged in all aspects of the research process. By using certain reusable menstrual technologies (such as the menstrual cup, reusable panties, and pads), my body became a known and inhabited space, with temperature, texture, and a 3D depth. This (self-)exploration has been key in my understanding and development of body awareness through the assemblage of my body with technological artefacts. In the MTA journey, I also engaged, although differently, with digital technologies: social media platforms, like blogs, Instagram Live sessions, and Facebook closed groups. This engagement pushed me to recognize the potential of digital media culture in pushing forward the political agenda on the body politics of menstruation (Gaybor, 2020). However, as I mentioned above, my concerns about privacy, surveillance, and forms of monetizing information have unquestionably lowered my optimistic vision about social media and its role in addressing key feminist political issues. Facebook, for

<sup>1</sup> I recognize that not all people who menstruate are women and that not all women menstruate. As a biological event, menstruation can be experienced by women, girls, and other bodies and identities. I find the term "menstruators" (Bobel, 2007) useful here.

instance, has been criticized for invading user privacy through its continuous surveillance for commercial and political purposes (Shaw, 2016), or Instagram, for the censorship of certain information over other information (Kaur, 2015). Furthermore, I was not eager to include MTAs in my previous self-exploratory journey with menstrual technologies since I was concerned with privacy violations when personally identifiable data is collected through digital technologies (Mahdawi, 2019; Privacy International, 2018; Shipp & Blasco, 2020).

### THE OVERWHELMING PERIOD

Since I embarked on this research, I knew that defining which MTA to use was going to be challenging. But I did not envision how challenging this was going to be. To begin, there were many options, which I found overwhelming. Moreover, while there was a great variety regarding the number of apps, the same cannot be said regarding the type of subject that is continuously promoted in these apps. My observations fit what scholars (Lupton, 2015; Thomas & Lupton, 2015) have argued: that MTAs are mostly advertised to a white, heterosexual cis-woman. This became evident when looking at the type of interface (photographs or designs) that these apps use. They portray beautiful mostly white women, in their 20s and 30s and mostly thin. There was an emphasis on talking about conception and romantic or sexual relationships, but from a heterosexual perspective. The next hurdle I encountered concerned the commercialization of these apps. While there were MTAs that were free to download, most of them had paid upgraded versions, which supposedly gave access to top services. After these two first filters, I spent a couple of weeks reading some of the apps' privacy policies. This stage took much longer than planned. My previous training as a lawyer emerged and with it my scrupulous attention to detail. In general, I was alarmed to see how short or general these policies were, providing almost no information about how data was handled and processed by the developer. In some cases, what struck me was the lack of clarity and the use of ambiguous language. Most of these policies were, to my view, strategically written to create uncertainty. Keywords such as "possibly", "may", or "potentially" were frequently used and linked to the actions of the developers. I commonly found sentences structured as follows: "When you access or use the App, we may automatically collect the following information: [...]", or "When

you sign up to use the App, we may collect Personal Data about you such as [...]”.

This both disappointed and worried me. All the privacy policies I reviewed were difficult to understand. They used verbose, unintelligible and confusing language. As I feared, I did not find one MTA with which I could feel comfortable or at least safe to start this exploration. As I navigated these confusing waters, trying to seek clarity and devoting time to learn about GDPR and privacy protection, without noticing, I was deviating from what I wanted to write in this piece. At this stage, I wondered: what is the purpose of this investigation? Should I be rather writing about data privacy or embarking on a legal exploration on how MTA developers are obtaining, using and handling user’s data? At the same time, I was puzzled. There is an abundance of MTAs. Millions of people have installed them on their phones. They voluntarily share their private and intimate everyday life information: the day they menstruate, the consistency and quantity of the discharge, when they have sex, whether they use protection, or their mood swings, etc. It is difficult for me to picture people sharing this information in an analogue way with complete strangers. The stigma and taboo that surrounds this topic normally prevents having these conversations even with close friends or family members. At what point does sharing this information lose its intimate aspect? Is it because an app is distanced from the physical body? Does this act of separating private information from the physical body, the analogue body, allow it to feel anonymized, despite the reality that the information can potentially be accessed by others? This made me think that MTAs might be offering users an opportunity to escape, yet not challenge the stigma associated with menstruation. On the other hand, Karlsson (2019) argues that privacy concerns do not seem to play a significant role in influencing the use of MTAs. She states that when the female body is put into data through MTAs, users expect to disappear in the abundance of data, assuming that the information that corresponds to their bodies cannot be traced to them. This emphasizes why “privacy continues to be such an important issue for feminist theory, beginning with the attack on the public/private divide and progressing to an ongoing investigation of privacy related to the female body in off- and online spaces” (Karlsson 2019: 120).

## ANALOGUE INTIMACY

After an intense initial phase of reading the apps' privacy policies, familiarizing myself with what had been published in the context of mobile health and MTAs, and imagining my personal experience of using them, I started to speak about this topic with friends and family who were long-term users of these apps. Reading my diary back, I see that this process was challenging as I struggled to cope with my own prejudices of the apps, the emotions of helplessness that I felt when reading the privacy policies and at the same time listening to different and more positive perspectives and views regarding MTAs. I see how listening to people who have lived through the experience of using the apps, was an important step in my overall reflective process. As Sörensson and Kalman (2017) state, knowledge is developed in connection and dialogue with others of a community, not in isolation from them.

As I took part in these dialogues with users of MTAs, I often found a common language and relatable menstrual stories. This, I believe, is partly because users of MTAs belong to a specific minority, mostly young, socio-economically privileged, health-conscious and technologically oriented (Lupton, 2016). It is a privileged minority of which I am part. I could relate to some of these stories, I noted peoples' tears and feelings of despair that I could understand and empathize, even if not personally relate to from my own experience of menstruation. Intense physical pain because of endometriosis, or emotional wounds because of health problems that led to problems of conceiving, were among the reasons that people had begun to use the apps. These were not my reasons.

Here it is probably important to say that MTAs are promoted as technologies that allow for a close observation and monitoring of the cycle, measurement of other vital signs, and support with the detection and estimation of the ovulation timing, which is critical for conception. Observing and having access to processed personal data, I heard on multiple occasions, helped to see patterns, understand symptoms, and sometimes explain causes that could lead to a diagnosis. MTAs were used as normative standards of comparison.

When I worked with reusable menstrual technologies, I found engaging in dialogue with others about MTAs was incredibly enriching. It brought me closer to people; to an intimate space where we could both share and listen. These narratives, where people shared their lives, both in the past and in the present made me realize how fortunate I was to

enjoy a healthy body. It was perhaps for this reason that I did not see the need to use MTAs earlier. These conversations were an important step into questioning my vision of these apps as superfluous, which I became conscious of while in dialogue with others. I had to learn to be aware of my own biases about the apps and leave my prejudice aside in order to understand other people's perspectives and embodied experiences when using them.

Revisiting my diary notes, I see how my perspective on these apps has been continually nuanced as more questions emerge with the passing of the days. This diary turned out to be an important document for tracking, in an analogue way, my thought process and emotions throughout this research journey. I began to better understand how the automated interpretation of personal data could be informative and even necessary for some health purposes. In cases where conception was desired, the MTAs represented something more than a digital tracking method, they were a form of materialization of hope. Something to hold on to in extremely difficult and emotionally draining circumstances.

I was navigating the tension between the optimistic outlook, which endorses the resounding celebration of MTAs from medical professionals, fashion, and beauty magazines. MTAs have been widely advertised as being able to revolutionize health care, medical research and help to achieve well-being (Sanders, 2017). This narrative reinforces the idea that having the possibility of knowing more about ourselves and our bodies through data can be experienced as powerful, educational and can lead towards self-improvement (Lupton, 2016). This positive outlook was contrasted in my mind with a more careful and critical stand that questions the insidious effects of MTAs in placing an unnecessary burden on people's lives and on commodifying their personal data. Along similar lines, I found myself questioning, more and more, the presumed benefits of neutrality offered by digital data and their accuracy, for instance, in diagnosing and in predicting fertile windows to aid conception (Setton et al., 2016). How to balance the digital data vis-a-vis people's own embodied knowledge of their bodies?



## FLO AND ME

Despite the hesitations outlined above, I became one of the “over 130 million women”<sup>2</sup> users of Flo around the globe (Flo, 2020). For the readers who are not familiar with Flo, I would like to introduce the app briefly as part of the contextualization of my research journey. The app offers two versions: free and unlimited access. The free version offers users varying degrees of information and engagement. In the “insights” section of the free version, a series of topics and articles are displayed in different categories. These range from information and advice on how to balance nutrition and female health, reproductive health, self-care, cycle phases, and periods. However, not all the content within these categories is freely accessible. To gain unlimited access, users are required to upgrade to the “Premium” version. For this, payment of 9.99 Euro per month is required. While I was writing this chapter, there was also a promotion that included a 30-Day free trial, but that requires payment for the full year in advance. There the cost drops to 4.17 Euro. The app was constantly, but unsuccessfully, inviting me to unlock the premium version, which included: “a daily well-being plan, advance health assistance chats, video courses with top experts ... and more created with top medical experts” (Flo, 2020). Throughout the research, I stayed with the free version of the app.

Regarding the design and interface of Flo, I realized that contrary to the digital calendars of for example my iPhone, Outlook, or Gmail, whose interface looks gender-neutral and “serious” or “professional” in terms of the neutral colours that are used, Flo, like most of the menstrual-tracking apps I initially explored, used stereotypically feminine attributes in their calendars. Pastel colour palettes, a display of images of flowers, hearts, and cartoons or photos or drawings of only young women, in their 20s to late 30s. Sometimes from different racial backgrounds, but mostly white. These characteristics appear to be a common trend in menstrual-tracking apps (Epstein et al., 2017). Flo also assumes that the user is both a cis-gender and a heterosexual woman. This is evident for example in the wellness advice the app gives to the users and on the use of the language, being its default user a “woman”, not a menstruating person, or a menstruator or ultimately, a more general term such as: a user.

<sup>2</sup> As stated above and as it will be discussed, most apps, including Flo, assume the user is both a cis-gender woman and heterosexual.

I read Flo's aims with a certain degree of cynicism: "to improve the health and wellbeing of every girl and woman worldwide". Therefore,

[the app] helps women put themselves first. Flo exists to empower women by giving them a space they can access the knowledge and support they need to prioritize their health and wellbeing.

While I understand and even endorse the idea of empowerment through knowledge and prioritization of health and well-being, I consider empowerment a collective process powered by solidarity and more importantly a sense of not being alone, rather than an individual achievement. As explained by Kabeer (1994: 245–246), empowerment "entails reflection, analysis and assessment of what has hitherto been taken for granted so as to uncover the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems". The app "empowers women", as users collect, monitor, record, and share a range of information, that are, as Deborah Lupton (2016: 70) suggests "part of the ethical project of selfhood". I see this not as a form of empowerment, but rather as a way to become part of the quest for individual self-optimization. Digital as well as other forms of technologies should not be thought of as "[the] irreducible first cause from which social effects automatically follow" (Noble, 1979: 374).

To produce more accurate information about myself, Flo constantly requested data that was related but also unrelated to my menstrual cycle—including sensitive personal information about my sexual life, eating and sleeping habits, overall health, and mood. I had to build a more accurate profile that, according to the app, would ultimately benefit me. But would it? The need to protect my private data accompanied me throughout this research journey and stopped me from entering any information other than the days on which I was menstruating. I only filled in data that was necessary for what the app refers to as "track cycle". Despite my stinginess in providing more information, as will be discussed later, with the little information I entered, the app offered me advice towards betterment and, for example, avoid the supposedly unwanted effects of hormones on my premenstrual body. As if there was something undesired or that should be removed from my embodied self. The app considered that premenstrual symptoms, be they feelings of discomfort, annoyance, sadness, or anger indicate a chaotic body that needs to be ordered, using the digital data to do so.

## THE PRODUCTION OF DISEMBODIED KNOWLEDGE OF THE BODY

I see Flo as a digital mode of knowledge production about the body. However, as contradictory as this may sound, through my experience using the app I realized that this production of knowledge of the body somehow removed my corporality and context from the equation. To illustrate this point better, I will share some posts I received through one of the apps' features called "Dive into your cycle day". This feature is designed to offer daily predictions based on the limited data I supplied to the app.

Today is your cycle day 10. What you may experience: tender breasts, high sex drive, bloating. The hormones responsible: Two hormones dominate your body now – estrogen and luteinizing hormone (LH). They both may cause ovulation symptoms like high sex drive, bloating, and others.

Or,

Today is your cycle day 18. What you may experience: Oily skin and hair, sugar cravings strong stamina. The hormones responsible: Today the concentrations of progesterone in the blood are at their maximum, so you may feel a surge of strength and experience sugar cravings.

Or,

Today is your cycle day 22. What you may experience: Cramps, mood swings, tearfulness. The hormones responsible: The closer the menstruation gets, the less progesterone there is in the body. Estrogen levels have been low for a while. You may experience fatigue, swelling, acne, problems with the gastrointestinal tract, or mood changes.

While getting these predictions I often wondered what kind of knowledge is produced through the app and, am I benefiting from it? As a user, I noticed that the app posts served as a normative standard to measure and evaluate my physical and emotional experience throughout the menstrual cycle, inviting me to question: am I normal? Moreover, there was a constant supposition that any feelings I experience, being of joy, relaxation, happiness, annoyance, tiredness, or sadness, and changes in my physical appearance came directly from me and my hormones. While

I think my emotions and embodied experiences are far more complex and that they are interrelated to a wider social context, I was finally able to understand the feelings of comfort and reassurance my friends spoke about when explaining their motivations to use MTAs. The app algorithms are able, for instance, to predict “emotionally volatile days” associated with the so-called Pre-Menstrual Syndrome. However, the app’s predictions regarding my bodily and emotional changes did not often fit my experience. So, I found myself wondering and comparing myself again to the app’s predictions: am I normal? MTAs “assume the objectivity of the data, which would result in the assumption that the bodies of similar data would have the same experience” (Çerçi, 2018: 12). Several times I wondered: “for whom are these predictions accurate?” Or in turn, “to what extent do they influence user’s experiences and behaviour?” I suppose this depends on the power that a user gives to this information and the degree of trust users have with the app. It did cross my mind that it bore comparison with the horoscopes of the Ecuadorian Sunday newspaper. As with the horoscope, there was an underlying idea that the newly acquired knowledge of the app would help the reader/user to achieve fulfilment and better control of one’s life. But at the same time, it could influence the reader/user’s emotions and experiences in that day.

On the other hand, I enjoyed being aware or learning about the natural chemicals produced in different sites of my body and released into my bloodstream. The production of hormones is silent, painless, and odourless to my senses. Throughout my—more than a year—engagement with the app I learned and was frequently reminded about this invisible yet very powerful process of what according to the app represents the working of hormones in my body: “Higher production of estrogens today”, “ovulation day”, “lower production of progesterone”, “rising progesterone” on this other day, “the corpus luteum has grown to it maximize size”, etc. I appreciated the informative process and the awareness about what is possibly going on in there, possibly because neither the app nor I know exactly about this. But this enthusiasm was accompanied by suspicious questionings on the quantification of knowledge about me. “OK, it is fun and interesting to know about this, but, do I need to know this information?”; “What for?”; “How does it contribute to my relationship with my body and with my relationships with the people from the community to which I belong?”.

Likewise, I started to notice that these moments of acknowledgement of the chemical dimension of my cycle were quickly trivialized and

reoriented with information on the negative side effects of, for example, low oestrogen that corresponds with the end of the menstrual cycle and possible emotions to be wary of as they might interrupt pursuits of happiness and productivity. Or, the opposite, the app described the positive side effects of high levels of oestrogen in my body and what to look forward to in the coming days. The predictions of sadness and discomfort and the incentives for happiness or success were placed on me as the individual user. These narratives fuelled by a grammar of individualism were making me, or my hormones, solely responsible for how I was feeling, replacing “notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or even influence from the outside” (Elias & Gill, 2018: 64).

Leaving behind the questioning on whether this information is accurate or not, I was intrigued by how predictions were framed. The language used gave me the impression of offering a precise assessment of the state of my body, as if the app knew me well or as if it had a standard to which I should compare myself. I could hardly see this as a way of reclaiming knowledge of my body. Instead, it resembled more a digitalized form of control or self-surveillance of my body. It is hard for me to condense or rather, reduce the complexity of elements that make up my understanding and experience of my body in just the flow of hormones during the different stages of my menstrual cycle. I see my body as an interconnected system of muscles, nerves, hormones, emotions, cycles, and actions and as having the capacity to memorize physical and emotional pain, joy, and pleasure. That same body is part of a web of cultural norms, power relations, beliefs, and identities. Moreover, my body’s biology, its performative dimensions (Butler, 2011), and its cultural meanings are in a continuous state of change due to inner and outside factors.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In this chapter, I shared my research journey of becoming acquainted with the world of MTAs. This journey led to my encounter with Flo. I am reflexive about how my standpoint constituted my meaning-making processes while writing this chapter (Harding, 2004). The observations and reflections I presented here emerged through a process of knowledge production that resisted the notion of presenting an objective reality (Harding, 2004). I did not attempt to give a complete view of what it is to experience the use of Flo or any other MTA. This story reflects a partial

perspective on the use of one app, which is situated in a specific moment in time, and it comes from my “specific location, embodied and particular, and never innocent” (Rose, 1997: 308). In this exploration, I had moments of tension and delight. The latter while sharing experiences with friends and family.

These moments brought me to delve into different perspectives and emotions related to the MTA and challenged some of my biases. My moments of tension were mostly connected to my concerns around privacy, which I described in “the overwhelming period”. The review of the privacy policies pushed me even further regarding my distrust of how digital data is processed and handled by MTAs. Nonetheless, these moments also helped me reflect on my political motivations for doing research in this field and pointed out the need for a future exploration around ethics of care, privacy, and (datafied) bodies. Likewise, I also encountered moments of joy and intimate connection, which I explored in the stage called “Analogue intimacy”. Through listening and in conversation with people with whom we shared intimate stories, I was pushed to question my own biases and expand my understanding of these digital technologies. While I understood how MTAs become tools for health-awareness and reassurance for some, my experience with Flo was different. This relates to the ways I used (not as a committed and detailed self-tracker) and the ways I gave meaning to the app. In particular, that the digital data did not acquire a significant meaning in my life. I am left wondering how these predictions would have been if I had fed the app with more detailed personal data? And how at the same time, I would have related to the app, maybe more intimately?

Finally, while I wrote this chapter intending to be reflective about my journey with Flo, I am aware that there may be limits to reflexivity “both at the time of conducting it and in the years that follow” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 425). As put by Grosz (1994: 13) “the author’s intentions, emotions, psyche, and interiority are not only inaccessible to readers, they are likely to be inaccessible to the author herself”. What I aim to point to here is that some perceptions, feelings, and influences are hard to recognize and convey in the moment of writing. Gaining perspective through time, distance and detachment from the investigation could substantially enhance the ability to be reflexive about what I wrote in this chapter. In that sense, I see this journey with MTAs as a continuous and opened process, that will most likely change in the near future when, for instance, I revisit and reflect again on my diary notes.

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# Embodying Cyberspace: Making the Personal Political in Digital Places

*Wendy Harcourt and Ximena Argüello Calle*

## INTRODUCTION

Our chapter builds on an intergenerational transnational exchange about how feminists can create safe places of engagement via the internet as part of embodied active research processes. The focus of the chapter is two stories separated by over two decades that illustrate how safe feminist and queer places are co-created and embodied as vital for connections and communication in cyberspace. Inspired by feminist geographies, we employ the term “place” as a term to explain a virtual sense of belonging where people could explore possibilities of embodied politics within cyberspace. We follow Doreen Massey in differentiating space as the “simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations”, from place as the

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hosting of social interactions that are unique and particular that “will in turn produce new social effects” (Massey, 1994: 168). Our two stories illustrate how embodied sexuality and gender power relations are shaped in the digital world. It explores the potential for feminists in online worlds to create places where individual and collective transformative processes are possible.

The chapter brings into conversation what is similar, as well as what is particular and unique to each of our stories. Women on the Net (WoN), the first story, comes from the very early days of the internet in the late 1990s when feminists began to see the internet as a possibility for transnational organizing. At that moment transnational feminism was beginning to explore how to connect in the digital world, and where internet (basically just email) was (tentatively) being seen as a potentially accessible and safe place in cyberspace where feminist dialogues on intimate and political levels could engage.

Cuir Copensantes (CC), the second story, explores the process of organizing feminist and *cuir*/queer<sup>1</sup> research digitally in 2020 during Covid-19. In this historical moment, cyberspace becomes the only completely safe space for social interaction (no risks of infection). Online platforms (particularly video call platforms) offer the possibility to create connection and be “close” among physically “distanced” people during chaotic times. The term “physically distanced” speaks both to Covid-19 measures and also for *cuir* (queer) people to the idea of distance as safe and where conversations about intimate emotional lives can be expressed safely.

The chapter reflects on how feminist methodologies enabled us to participate in unorthodox research processes that crossed different borders of time, space, knowledge and embodiments as we created feminist digital places that unpacked meanings of technology, gender and

<sup>1</sup> Following Sandra Harding’s work (1992) on situating knowledge, the project paid particular attention to the situated context and embodiments of the participants. For this reason, the word “*cuir*” was employed as a feminist (and *cuir*/queer) act. While “queer” no longer carries a negative connotation in the Spanish-speaking world and thus, its appropriation does not represent a political act, the term “*cuir*” is an “epistemological point of departure, while also acknowledging its insufficiency to speak from the global South” (Chernysheva et al. as cited in Trujillo, 2016: 5). “*Cuir*” speaks to the necessity to situate struggles and decolonize the concept of “queer”, all without disregarding the transformative potential and the political history of the term queer. Employing “*cuir*” was a decision informed by a feminist (and *cuir*) embodiment that has developed in me (Ximena), a strong desire to stay loyal to situatedness of knowledge while still seeking inspiration from others’ resistances.

sexuality. As we tell the stories of how these digital places were created, we explore the possibilities as well as the troubling tensions in digital communications. We ask: what does digital embodiment mean? How is care constructed and experienced online? What does it mean to build trust digitally? How safe is safe as we communicate through technologies and machines? How do feminist ideas travel over time as well as between physical places and cyberspace? How do these spaces become border-crossing places?

Our methodological approach reflects our strong feminist ethics which we believe are required to build places of trust and care. Such an ethical approach enabled us to create and embody digital safe places. It is impossible to disentangle the feminist and the queer/*cuir* approaches that informed this safe place that provoked and intrigued us throughout the process. Our experiences, ways of seeing and interacting informed a particular form of understanding. In writing together, we intentionally aimed to live our feminist values of empathy and care that were the base of our ethical exchanges. We simultaneously celebrated our struggles and wounds by respecting our diversity. Our shared feminist ethics also helped us to breakdown hierarchies of age and academic positioning in our co-production of the chapter. We believe in the importance of raising our voices as feminists and also to embody the transformative potential of doing/researching/living otherwise.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the chapter has the ambitious intention of bringing our diverse yet collective digital subjectivities to a discussion on feminist methodology through stories across time and place.

In this chapter, we decided to use art with a feminist and queer/*cuir* political intention of not only dismantling the traditional forms of knowledge production, but also questioning (and queering/*cuiring*) the concepts of talent and expertise. We propose that art should be seen not as a professional construct that requires talent and artistic learning, but instead can be embraced as self-expression that can be freely explored, in ways that disrupt academic boundaries and cross borders of what is acceptable knowledge. We see art as a powerful tool for making visible

<sup>2</sup> We use the evocative term “otherwise” inspired by post-development scholars, such as Arturo Escobar (2007) and decolonial feminists such as Catherine Walsh (2016). Here it refers to alternative ways of doing research that are not ruled by methods that rely on empirical observation that is considered objective, or relate to some universal idea of knowledge set by the Western academy.

what is disregarded or labelled as “invalid” or “negligible”. Through our drawings we present art as a fluid, diverse and malleable tool with political intent. We use our drawings exploring the transformative potential of art as “contagious” in its ability to carry political meaning. Far from remaining innocent or actionless, the transformative desire embedded in art can mobilize embodied intentions and emotions and generate empathy in different ways than descriptive text.

**BACKGROUND TO WOMEN ON THE NET  
(WON): A FEMINIST RESEARCH PROJECT  
FUNDED BY UNESCO 1997–1999 (WENDY)**

Women on the Net (WoN) was set up by UNESCO in the late 1990s in order to understand the feminist approach to the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). WoN was a meshwork of connections with 20 women and men contributing to the (English) language listserv (an electronic mailing list which allows a sender to send one email to the whole list), connected from the Pacific, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe and the USA through the auspices of UNESCO. I (Wendy) was the coordinator of the project which was shaped through conversations with Lourdes Arizpe, the deputy Director General of UNESCO. Arizpe saw WoN as part of a new “Gaia of cultures” made possible through this new world of ICTs (Harcourt, 1999: 22).

The WoN research was undertaken at a particular moment at the end of the twentieth century. The period was imbued with the rhetoric about the new millennium with the internet as a shiny new global technology that was opening up the freedom to create and build new civic places in cyberspace. As a UN funded project, the scope was unapologetically large. The remit was to create a cyber culture which could foster and create caring relationships between genders, generations and communities. The project presented the internet as a political tool that would “empower” women from the Global South and marginal communities in the Global North. The WoN research was undertaken on a listserv that shared ideas on how to advance a gendered local and global perspective to cultural and policy debates on the internet. It was intended to illustrate how feminists could navigate the internet in a period where feminists were deeply suspicious of capitalist, patriarchal and military roots of the technology. WoN embraced a science and technology feminist perspective. Donna

Haraway's concept of the cyborg (1985/1991) (see below) was adopted in order to analyse the different researchers' personal and intimate histories and experiences to counter the refusal of radical (eco)feminists who were advocating a return to nature.

The research project led to nearly 3000 email exchanges that crossed personal, spatial, political and professional boundaries. We debated who would be enabled to speak? Who would remain silent? How could we use feminist theory to strategize? How did the circuits of meaning we were creating defy academic boundaries? We tried to bring together the technical, the theoretical and the practical in our two years of discussions.

Who joined the project was somewhat haphazard. Mostly they were women (two men) in their 20s to 40s, the majority from the Global South, from different race, class and professional backgrounds—technicians, engineers, activists and academics. I (Wendy) sent out a general invitation to different feminist networks asking who saw the new ICT as a potential political tool for feminists. What kept us together over the two years was our curiosity and hope that ICTs could support transnational ways of communicating among feminists, from wherever we were based—as long as there was the infrastructure. Three of the group were engineers who were providing the infrastructure. The debate began on technical and political grounds, but as we shared stories, we started to build trust and to share information about our more intimate lives.

It felt exciting (and new in the 1990s) to create a place-based global community that was intentionally exploring how to link the different places where the participants were physically based in a place of global political possibility in cyberspace. The community looked at how women could understand themselves as active agents harnessing this new technology. Many questions that seemed so challenging and important then appear now as somewhat extraneous: Can values of care and love be filtered through metal machines and optics fibres? How can women soft-wear the new technologies? Can we get the right mix of imagination and technology? How will the internet allow cultures to be carried across countries and continents? Can feminism create a global world of one's own?

What is important to emphasize over twenty years later was that it was a new process to be able to use computers to write emails that encompassed personal as well as professional concerns. It also felt excitingly strange to be able to connect so rapidly without using the expensive telephone or having to meet physically.

As WoN evolved through our messaging on the listserv we decided not only to write the required report for UNESCO but also to publish a book—*Women on The Net: Creating Culture in Cyberspace* with Zed Books—a London based radical development publishing house. As we created a place to explore these ideas, we felt we were learning as we were creating, thinking as we were running, embracing an emerging sense of being part of the global not yet fully understood. The report and the book reflect this excitement and engagement. We proclaimed at the end: “the Internet has become an increasingly accessible learning space, a place to network, and to gain power and strength ... to create a new politics emanating from place” (Harcourt, 1999: 223–225).

### BACKGROUND TO CUIR COPENSANTES (CC): RECALLING [RECORDANDO], SENSING [SINTIENDO] AND HEALING [SANANDO] TOGETHER [JUNTES] (XIMENA)

Inspired by a previous experience of creating and participating in a queer safe place,<sup>3</sup> I (Ximena) decided to employ it as a method of research and as a form of moving away from normative ways of knowledge production. Creating a safe place represented an opportunity to think about a research paper (RP)<sup>4</sup> differently. The attention was not centred on the production of a thesis to obtain a master’s degree, but on co-creating a common place of sharing and healing where people feel comfortable and safe, and from where knowledge would be constructed collectively.

CC was designed, co-created and written in 2020, and thus, all its stages were shaped and informed by the global Covid-19 outbreak. We experienced and embodied the measures to reduce the risk of infection, the new strange and unknown “socionatures”—a term recognizes how the natural world, in this case the virus, shapes social relations—and the diverse emotions. When travelling to Ecuador, as originally envisaged, was not possible for me due to Covid-19, the digital space became our site of encounter. Six *cuir*s—five based in different cities of Ecuador and myself

<sup>3</sup> This safe place was organized by the 2019–2020 master students who were part of the Sexual Diversity Committee of the International Institute of Social Studies. The objective was to support each other during the academic journey, and to reclaim visibility and space. We shared stories, mostly related to sexuality and the challenges of our own experiences. It quickly became a network of connection and relief.

<sup>4</sup> A research paper or RP is the equivalent to a thesis for obtaining a master degree.

in The Hague—engaged digitally in the construction of a safe place to share stories, feel accompanied and become *Copensantes* (co-thinkers). We chose the term *Copensantes* because it captures the collective decision to recall, reflect, feel, experiment and be rebellious together. Art, storytelling and art as storytelling were at the centre of the exchanges. The discussions were about the implications of the heteronormative understandings extracted from the nature/culture divide, that locate *cuir* bodies as “unnatural” and upon which violence and discrimination against these bodies rest. The narratives oscillated between the personal and the political, abstract theory and material experiences, crossing the borders of time and space between past emotions and experiences and Covid-19 times.

The project had four stages with approximately twenty online encounters held via Zoom, from July to November 2020. Some of the conversations had a group format and others were one-on-one discussions (all in Spanish). The entire process was informed by the ethics of care and concern (Sörensson & Kalman, 2018) so that the Copensantes also engaged in the writing process, either by the online participation in the seminar where the progress of the RP was presented, or by WhatsApp, where reflections, discussions and comments travelled across space. A final Zoom encounter served to collectively review the draft that was translated from English to Spanish by one of the Copensantes to safeguard the confidentiality and the accuracy of our stories. After the formal project ended, ongoing conversations are leading to its possible continuation or its replication with queer/*cuir* local organizations in Ecuador.

## FEMINIST GENEALOGIES

While WoN and CC inhabited different eras and were formed through different technologies, the projects shared the goal of politicizing and embodying cyberspace through very different interactions and embodiments. In both projects we created a place of intimacy and connection in order to explore our embodied lives as expressed through digital communication. In these discursive explorations the importance of a safe place emerged, as part of feminist and queer resistance. This politics of place grounded and connected our feminist and queer/*cuir* lives, and our networked connections, where the body as place (in the flesh or digital) could be embraced as the first entry point to feminist and queer/*cuir* political change.

At the heart of both stories is the feminist adage that the personal is political as the participants used different digital formats to explore images



and meanings that allowed an exploration of the embodied self, paying attention to emotions and intimate understandings of difference, seeing the digital world as an ecology, stretching the idea of bodies beyond the material.

The chapter is deeply shaped by our theoretical interest in how feminists create new forms of ethics in processes of knowledge production. Working across time, our two different narratives build on diverse situated, contextual and intersectional identities in the navigation of digital connections that are informed by our collective and individual feminist positionality. Both narratives are about building a safe feminist place in order to share personal and political concerns. The ethics of care and concern which underline the stories and the reasons for writing the chapter were shared so that the sense of safety and well-being of the participants (particularly for CC) was integral to the research.

We both experienced safe places as a possibility for border crossings during which the assumed boundaries between being a researcher and a participant began to blur, involving a complex process of self-reflexivity. At times writing as researchers, theorizing and analysing stories, but at other times speaking from our own experiences, our feminism and our queer/cuirness (see Fig. 5.1). And in writing this together we engaged in the messy process of being ourselves as writers who are sharing knowledge production from very different positionalities yet seek to produce something in common. In this we are never not ourselves, even given the many layers of identity that inform the way we navigate everyday encounters, including research, our relations to the other, and to the people in our stories. We acknowledge and embrace the impossibility of “detaching” from our subjective selves when producing knowledge.

Within these safe places, as well as while writing this chapter, we embrace a self that is “un-centered, un-certain, not entirely present, not fully representable: this is not a self that can be revealed by a process of self-reflection” (Rose, 1997: 314). Thus, our reflections are hesitant, at times contradictory but allow us to push forward in exploring what the digital space can offer to feminists. The writing of the chapter is part of the co-constructing identity in a relational process where positionality is a fluid process.

We could write together because of our formal connection with International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and our shared interest in feminist and queer activism. But going deeper, we also came together because of our love of story writing and our desire to bring that love



**Fig. 5.1** Melting on water by Ximena

This is how I see our desire for fluidity. Disrupting fixities and embracing the way water teaches us to be, to melt. To feel ourselves unweighted and floating with no constraints, without binaries, without norms. That fluidity allows us to be one with our surroundings, to relate with the environment differently, letting it to be part of us and being part of it. To create deep connections that penetrate our souls, healing us and guiding our journeys of learning about the world

into feminist academic writing. Theorizing through stories helps to make knowledge more relatable and shows that theory is not an “abstract” thing “out there” but is present in our everyday lives.

What was key to our shared way of doing feminist research is using first person narrative and story writing. Sitting together in The Hague in Wendy’s sitting room or meeting over Skype or zoom in digital places, we recognized the importance of pushing academic rules of what counts as knowledge and expression and the need to experiment beyond formalist writing. In these places, we oscillated between the personal and the political, and we went far beyond our initial professional relationship. The process of writing this chapter together as two feminists who believe in the potential of embodied action, was part of our resistance to the

normative, open and curious to see what opportunities writing together about cyberspace could bring to our way of being.

Our drawings which accompany this chapter are also an attempt to probe beyond the academic text. We draw not as artists but as feminists who are trying to capture the sensing/feeling informing our subjectivities through these images. The drawings express our imaginings of the emotions and connections shaped by personal/political specific historical moments and our feminist theorizing.

We chose to use drawings in our text as it allowed us to slow down, reflecting further on what we are sensing and feeling as we gave ourselves time to recall when we wrote about our experiences then, linking the two historical dimensions. The drawings are relational across time connecting to our past and present selves and discovering those connections in art. Going beyond words allowed the unexpected to emerge and to find other ways to communicate as the drawings capture feelings words cannot. For us the drawings are experimental and have fluid meanings, they are what the reader wants to see in them. As feminists committed to doing research otherwise we gave ourselves permission to use art as part of our reflections and contributions to the book. It felt courageous to do so, as art is not what we would see as our “expertise”. At the same time, we see the power of art. We were inspired by the illustrations in Rosa and Lillian’s chapter (Chapter 11) and also by pedagogical approaches to knowledge production using art in the class room.

From these shared understandings, our writing and our projects have been inspired by specific feminist theory. WoN was directly inspired by Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985/1991). The Manifesto invites feminists to look at how technology is infused with the political cultural and material embodied experience. The manifesto influenced a generation of feminists. Haraway uses performative and autobiographical language to describe the cyborg in materialist feminist terms that is deliberately ironic. She defines the cyborg as a “cybernetic organism”; a “hybrid of machine and organism”, a “creature of lived social reality”, and a “creature of fiction” (Haraway, 1991: 221).

The cyborg is both metaphor and real-life being and Haraway proposes that “cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves ... It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationship, spaces, stories” (Haraway, 1991: 223).

Haraway’s cyborg represents different forms of border crossings that change late twentieth/early twenty-first century feminist experience in

important ways. Haraway proposes several “border crossings” (1991) which has continued to elaborate in her writing about companion species as well as cyborgs. She points to the blurring of divisions between humans and animals due to increasing human experimentation and exploitation of animal bodies for science and medicine, for example medical transplants that use baboon or pig organs. She also analyses how stealthily machines have become part and parcel of our lives and bodies, where the natural and artificial blend and “[o]ur machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway, 1991: 228). Technology has become so much part of our lives that we do not notice it—so much so that we accept its encroachment as normal, such as the pervasive level of stress due to our reliance on consuming technology everyday through computers and social media. These technologies erode the distance between the physical and the non-physical. Haraway invites feminists to analyse this emerging technoculture which permeates our lives as feminists looking at both the negative dominations but also at the possibilities of progressive politics if we recognize “the machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment” (Haraway, 1991: 180).

Haraway appealed specifically to the Global South and women of colour as leading cyborgs in the new age of heavy technology. Such a direct appeal cut through the dominance of the colonial west was embraced by the WoN project. WoN challenged the assumption that the internet belonged only to the geeky “cowboys” of Silicon Valley and military technology. WoN resonated with Haraway’s suggestion that the internet (ICTs) opened up possibilities for a collective imagination of feminists, particularly from the Global South, and enabled the participants to speak about the internet with its intimate and political dangers and possibilities. Inspired by the cyborg image, WoN debated the imaginative possibilities of the personal and political in a modern technoculture that could connect feminists in different parts of the world. WoN saw the digital world as allowing for greater feminist political engagement, expanding the idea of the material embodied self and of collective feminist communities. The idea of being both human and machine felt like science fiction had arrived in ways that enabled our different voices and experiences to challenge powerful white western male dominated spaces, changing what they looked and felt like (see Fig. 5.2).

Twenty years later, during Covid-19 and as part of a MA research project at ISS, a similarly audacious idea of finding possibilities to exist in



**Fig. 5.2** Cyborg Melodies by Wendy

This picture recalls for me the feelings of wonderment at being connected to others while also being pregnant and being confined to bed, and then later as a mother breast feeding while still connecting to my network in the WoN project

the digital space, to connect, to be political was explored by six Ecuadorean *cuir*s in CC. Like with WoN, in CC digital exchanges generated a place of border crossings: the geographical, the personal, the political, the conventional, the heteronormative, the natural, the artificial, to mention only some, and gave the opportunity to exert a political power through embodying the “machine” and crossing the borders, as Haraway (1991) invites.

The CC project was specifically influenced by feminist theorist Catriona Sandilands’ questions about queer ecologies. By sharing stories and exposing wounds, CC problematized the culture/nature divide and the heteronormative understandings that are abstracted from it. As Sandilands (2005: 3) states, once the culture/nature binary is disrupted, the

constructed meanings and conceptions that are ascribed to bodies can also be unpacked. With this, social inequalities and violence against queer/*cuir* bodies that rest upon the natural/unnatural distinction can be unveiled (Stein, 2010: 286) and resisted through employing Haraway's concept of natureculture<sup>5</sup> (Haraway, 2003). In CC the role of art was essential, as it allowed the Copensantes to explain the forms in which "queernaturecultures" (Bell, 2010: 143), or rather *cuirnaturecultures*, informed injustices but also released the force to reclaim the body and its *cuirness*. The possibility of "masculinity" and "femininity" to coexist in flowers, the difficulty of explaining the role of bees and external agents in flowers' reproduction under heteronormative understandings, the freedom that emanates from a flying dandelion puff that disintegrates in the air, are some of the rebellious *cuirnaturecultures* that Copensantes depicted in artistic forms and that also inspired their desire for denouncing violence and resisting heteronormativity in CC and in their everyday lives.

CC employed art as a medium to explore wounds, memories and experiences (see Fig. 5.3). By crossing the border of the "conventional" methods of research, the digital exchanges acquired a different dimension and allowed the unspeakable not only to be said but to join a collective political intention. As a fluid, diverse and malleable tool, art allowed the Copensantes to feel unrestricted when sharing stories, therefore art contributed to CC's main aim: to resist constraints and limitations.

At the same time, by generating empathy and solidarity, art made CC an emancipatory environment. The power of art allowed the embodied emotions to travel and be embodied by those who witness it. According to Eisner (2008: 11) art can "generate a kind of empathy that makes action possible". In this sense, sharing stories through art and perceiving them through their situatedness allowed CC to produce "difference and equality, at the same time" (Lorenz, 2012: 17). For instance, CC hosted a dance performance where one of the Copensantes was able to express his embodied emotions resulting from the restrictions he experienced as *cuir* during Covid-19. The search for freedom, the despair, the pain, the courage he experienced were unavoidably embodied by its audience (the other Copensantes and the attendees to my RP seminar), and translated

<sup>5</sup> The concept of naturecultures as proposed by Donna Haraway contributes to disrupting the existing "binary opposition and hierarchy of nature and culture" (Harcourt & Bauhardt, 2019: 9–10) and look instead at how these concepts are mutually informed and "co-producing each other" (ibid.).





**Fig. 5.3** *Cuir, digital y floreciendo* (Cuir, digital and flourishing) by Ximena  
 This drawing reflects the isolation and confinement within Zoom squares. But it also depicts the disruptive potential of art as a medium to connect, resist and break boundaries in the cyberspace when also finding the beauty of our diverse histories, identities and subjectivities, together...

into tears and empathy behind a screen from where we observed, feeling profoundly moved.

### FEMINIST ENTANGLEMENTS—ACROSS TIME AND PLACE

In order to create a dialogue between our experiences we now share four moments which we see as pivotal to the two different projects. The first set of moments looks at the different embodiments and confinements we experienced as we wove our safe digital places. The second narrates how the safe place became part of a collaborative and political writing process. The third describes what we felt had changed for us through the process and the fourth is a reflection on our intergenerational conversations across time and place as we wrote this chapter.

*One: Writing from Confinement*

**WoN (Wendy):** In 1997 I had just come back to Rome from a trip to Uganda, tired and on a run of meetings I was organizing, with just two weeks before a trip to Berkeley where I would be meeting other members of the WoN project in a long planned public encounter with Donna Haraway. That trip I never took in person, as I found myself bleeding and in danger of an early miscarriage. I was instead confined to bed-rest, accompanied by my three-year-old, and all the notes for the meeting, which I followed via email. In those days you had to use the modem attached to the telephone line. E-mailing cost, the same as a local phone call, which was timed. I would get out of bed late morning and head to the desk-top computer (there were no laptops then) and put in the modem to download the email message sent from the night before. I would then write back comments, offline, before plugging the modem and sending messages off, and then back to bed until the next day. It was a very strong cyborg moment for me. I felt, for the first time, through this technology connected to a meeting that was very important to me, happening on the other side of the world. There was such a strong sense of care being expressed by the group, who took turns to email me via the WoN listserv. As I was willing the baby to stay within me, I was also connecting digitally to people who cared enough to inform me about the meeting, knowing how much I had wanted to be there. Even as I lay prone on the bed, I was also able to create a place where I could connect and overcome the vulnerability of my body at that moment.

**CC (Ximena):** The project coincides with the uncertain times of Covid-19 during which the measures varied as much as the emotions they evoked in our bodies. The idea of replicating a safe place as a method of research emerged from the reflections of the solitude and distance I experienced while living in student housing. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions I had to engage in online lectures at ISS and avoid physical contact with the other students, who were my (only) home in the Netherlands. I remember being seated on my couch, located in one of the corners of my 20 square metre room, trying to come up with ideas of how to undertake research in such chaotic times, with all the existing restrictions and knowing that the intimacy and sensitivity of the topic required special care. Questions related to the relevance of doing a RP and engaging in academia flooded my mind, leading to a profound sense of demotivation. With the pandemic, all my previous



priorities seemed to dissolve. I was far away from my family, friends and country, feeling worried, scared and lonely, but still having a master's degree to complete. At the same time, outstanding questions and inner conversations about my own sexuality became unavoidable, probably also because the courses I was following—which were readjusted for the online mode—were related to the topic. Seated on the couch, I took the time to reflect about my own body, an unknown terrain I had not had the time and courage to explore. Many conscious and unconscious sensations/thoughts/emotions/memories intersected at that specific time and space: my questions about the relevance of a RP, the search for a topic and method, the process of self-exploration I had started, and the empathy that my *cuir* history has produced in me. This messy combination of sensing and feeling motivated me to create a safe place as a research method, which was met with a positive response by my supervisor. I had not known that something so personal and intimate could be part of academic knowledge! Now that I look back, my surprise indicated how internalized the sense of research needing to be “objective” and “neutral” was for me.

*Reflections (Wendy and Ximena)*

Our stories both share the aim to practice feminist research in embodied ways. We embrace and acknowledge how bodies, emotions and feelings shape our research process. Confinement and its resulting embodiments due to pregnancy, illness, mental instability or asceticism inform our experiences as it is informing our writing of this chapter.

Whether confined to bed-rest or to our houses (during Covid-19), and feeling restricted to express love and feel pleasure in certain ways has informed our need to create safe spaces/places. As feminists, confinement and restrictions have inspired our political action and our search to find possibilities in the unexpected and unconventional, yet very careful, forms of doing research. This speaks to the creativity that underlies feminist methodologies. Researching in a feminist way allows us to think creatively as we intentionally disrupt the normative.

What results from feminist research goes beyond the actual research process. Our experiences speak to relations of care and body politics that emerged in these places. Openly questioning why and for what we are researching is an integral part of the process. Care and love are expressions of how we embody feminism and how our lives as researchers are

part of the web of relations we create with the human and the more-than-humans (animals, plants, sea, lakes, mountains and landscapes) in our surroundings.<sup>6</sup>

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### *Two: Care and Nurturing*

**WoN (Wendy):** Over the months of writing about digital technologies, the fears and hopes for new forms of communication, we began to share more personal stories. I found myself writing about my evolving pregnancy. After my weeks in bed, I returned to work and I then enjoyed a healthy pregnancy. I felt the care and concern about my life continued in WoN discussions. Others shared their own stories of motherhood. In fact, four children were born during the project. These stories of pregnancy and birth created a particular dynamic and we opened the discussion about what it meant to be, or not be, parents. While our sharing was about celebrating the nurturing of life, we also discussed choices around whether to have or not have children, and what was possible. One woman shared the deeply painful story of having 6 still born children before finally her 7th child survived. Another of being resigned to not being able to have children. Several wrote about choosing not to have them. Others shared stories of the difficult decisions around choosing to have abortions. These were conversations I could not have imagined having in person in the usual rushed meeting environment. The disembodiment and stretched sense of connection opened up the possibility to share vulnerability. In speaking about such intimate embodied ways of being, we were forming a safe place at least for that moment, crossing personal and political borders. It became a community where not only theoretical academic and political issues were being debated, but also profoundly personal issues could be shared.

**CC (Ximena):** The phone alarm went off. It was 2.30 a.m. in the Netherlands (7.30 p.m. in Ecuador). I needed to start preparing myself for our safe place session. As every Wednesday and Sunday, the days in

<sup>6</sup> We are including relations of more-than-humans in recognition of how caring for others includes not only humans but the many beings we rely on to live and flourish. We are inspired here by Val Plumwood's notion of Earthothers (1993) and Maria Puig de la Bella Casa's (2017) writing on care and more-than-human worlds. The chapter by Karijn and Leila (Chapter 2) in this book explores this more deeply.

which we met, that night I could not sleep well. I was nervous of not waking up on time. I jumped out of bed to avoid falling asleep again. While I was getting dressed, I reflected on the topic of that session “stories of oppression and discrimination related with the ‘unnatural’ discourse”. One of the Copensantes volunteered to prepare the session with me and proposed the use of poetry as our medium of discussion. She suggested that everyone could come with a poem evoking the feelings and emotions that being called “unnatural” generated in us, that way no one would feel pressured to narrate (painful) stories, if they did not feel comfortable. The Copensantes took turns to lead the sessions and propose artistic expressions to explore together. With this dynamic, my role as the “researcher” started to be less loud. Their ideas and creativity took over. This made it less of a space for constructing an RP and more a place to be together, share and care about each other. When this last thought was crossing my mind, I finished my tea in the silence of 2.50 a.m. and started to turn on the computer, not realizing how much that session would change us. After checking on each other, we shared our poems and stories. We spoke about what had been silenced for a long time, many of the stories were related to our coming-out processes with our families. Tears, smiles, and support travelled over the Internet waves. Once the session was over, I went back to bed around 5.30 a.m., finally finding the beginnings of the answers to my inquiries about the relevance of my RP and my engagement in academia.

*Reflections (Wendy and Ximena)*

Despite 20 years of difference, our experiences both demonstrate that feeling safe is essential for radical acts and expressions to happen. Stories and feelings that were silenced elsewhere could be expressed in these digital places by creating trust, care and respect. These values did not emerge right after agreeing on the creation of these projects, they were rather collectively created, and their co-creation was a fluid and uncertain process that took time, intention and negotiation. In fact, a safe place “needs to be understood as a verb, not a noun” (Argüello, 2020).

During these processes of co-construction, safeness did not imply the absence of uncomfortable feelings. Having a safe place allows for vulnerability to exist, together with all the difficulties that we experience when expressing our uncertainties. By creating safe places, we created places of fluidity where nothing needs to conform to norms. This was how we cuired/queered feminist methodologies. Only malleable and changing

places of experiment would have allowed radical acts of border crossing. Not only the idea of neutrality and objectivity was challenged, but also the ideas of what kind of feelings should we allow to exist. This gave room to the emergence of knowledge from collective processes of (sometimes uncomfortable) questioning, problematizing and deconstruction.

Our stories both speak about safety and trust, although their actual practices differ in each story. Since feminist methodologies pay attention to particularities and aims to produce situated knowledge, safeness is necessarily contextual. It results from the negotiation among particular subjectivities in a particular time and a particular (digital) space, corresponding to a new culture of safeness that pertains to a particular (digital) place.

Coming from our histories as feminists and *cuir/queer*, coinciding in the construction of our safe spaces/places and demonstrating its relevance across time, the need to care guided our digital exchanges. The emergence of empathy and respect were a consequence of caring about each other's stories, lives and emotions. Care motivated the conversations to keep existing despite distance and time. Due to the physical limitations of the digital landscape, care motivated us to think creatively and find ways to express gestures of support. On pixelated and flat screens, limited by text, or allowed by video, we experienced different ways to feel accompanied and heard, sometimes through words and other times through art.

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### *Three: Transitions*

**WoN (Wendy):** As we ended the project, the connections we had made in WoN morphed into another project called women and the politics of place (Harcourt & Escobar, 2005). The WoN conversations had allowed for the possibilities of even deeper conversations. In the project on women and the politics of place, we built on the WoN experience to theorize how digital connectivity was one of the places (cultures) women could create, the body being the first. What had emerged from WoN is how the internet was not confined to specific expert knowledge which required technological knowhow but was something feminists could engage with and shape. I recall when I was writing up my chapter "cyborg melodies" (Harcourt, 1999), I reflected on how connections about our personal and embodied lives were interwoven with stories of how we were using

the technologies materially. One woman described how she was literally putting up the physical infrastructure needed to connect islands in the Pacific. Others shared their advocacy strategies for equity in the ICT policy board rooms. Our deeply felt personal stories were also marked by the darker side of the internet. We discussed how capitalist corporate and military interests were determining the internet. The fears of what sort of world had produced the internet can be seen reflected in the popular (now cult) film “The Matrix” (1999). The film was released with immediate popularity in the same period we were writing. The Wachowskis sisters’ (who are transwomen) sci-fi horror film was released in 1999. In the film technology takes over humanity. Humans are plugged into the Matrix (a computer simulated programme) as a source of electrical and heat energy by the Artificial Intelligence that rules the world. Humans sleep throughout their entire lives in a simulated dream created by the Matrix.

Our WoN project helped us confront these fears, and think through the possibilities of the internet. We found ways to communicate in a place of safety, despite the newness. The moments of email connectivity were used to share intimate and important moments in our lives. At the same time, we were aware that this technology was not innocent, even if not necessarily the Wachowskis’ monstrous vision. We discussed how governments, corporations, technicians and military research set the rules that could constrain our access and use. However, in that moment, and in that community, we felt ICTs had opened up a world where we could be freed from material constraints and let our imagination for a positive feminist world emerge and flourish.

**CC (Ximena):** Several times we discussed the potential of the safe place to generate empathy among us and from that empathy understand our histories in different ways; to be receptive and respectful. Learning from each other became almost our mantra. All this was happening online, a site that I did not trust at the beginning of this research journey. My scepticism towards the online environment was slowly being replaced by my curiosity of all the possibilities it could bring for creating safe places, and for us, as *cuir*s, to exist, interact and speak up. At the same time, in cyberspace everything was different. Feeling, sensing and interacting did not mean the same. It is impossible to allocate this difference to dualisms such as: personal/impersonal or better/worse. The differences were far more complicated than that. Lockdown due to Covid-19 was not only a period to re-learn in-person interactions: distances, lack of contact, when

and how to touch our faces, when and how to cough... It was also a time to re-learn how to interact online. Although the internet existed already before the global outbreak, online interactions changed when they became the norm to replace in-person interactions. In our sessions, when hugging or holding our hands was not possible, tears and pain had to be addressed through other forms, such as singing for each other, dedicating songs, reading poems or simply contemplating the screens, motionless and in silence but with evident facial gestures that emanated love.

*Reflections (Ximena and Wendy)*

Through these safe spaces/places we used technology to create places of hope and change. This feels particularly brave knowing the dangers of technologies that are driven by the worst of capitalist consumerism, invade peoples' privacy and are used for hate and political campaigns, death and destruction (Sassen, 2007; Wyatt, 2008; Youngs, 2006). We know it is almost impossible to avoid those powerful structures that have constructed the social media that are so crucial to our being able to communicate and create safe and trusting places. But power is not all vertical and all invasive, there are small projects that exist and flourish within and despite the evasive patriarchal capitalist system (Gibson-Graham, 2006). While we are part of a capitalist system, and need to be wary and vigilant, our cyborg existence in being openly feminist creates possibilities that empower and create change.

We argue that feminist research is doing politics by adopting a method that pushes against the normative positivist way of understanding knowledge. Our shared fascination for bodies as a place for resistance drove us to find ways to do research that are political. It may seem ironic to speak about body politics when the body seems absent in our digital engagements. But our stories run counter to the idea that we are disembodied in cyberspace. We show how the digital body not only exists but also resists. In our stories, the digital safe places became embodied and intimate (but public) sites to reclaim our material bodies.

As Haraway invited us twenty years ago, in the digital landscape embodiment needs to be rethought. Feeling, sensing and being close are experienced differently online. Digital bodies acquire the size and shape that technologies allow them to take. One becomes text, image or video in one-dimensional and flat screens. For this reason, feminist research has the possibility to shape and change social and cultural norms. In both WoN and CC, the participants learnt together how to reshape their

embodied connections through active listening, building trust and confidentiality, care and love and to invent ways to participate and collaborate in the cyberspace.

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*Four: Intergenerational Conversations Across Time and Place,  
a Dialogue*

Wendy: Our conversations have moved across time and place linking research experiences that are both about the present and the past stretching back 20 years. We began writing this chapter in my living room in The Hague. With its soft leather couches, old carpets, Japanese vases and carved Indo-Chinese furniture, this room is a place where feminists of different generations have met. Whether academics, students or visitors to ISS, we would meet over a glass of wine, in order to converse, read and write together. When writing this chapter, it was just Ximena and I who could meet, carefully social distancing. First, we talked over cups of tea about Ximena's MA research. We then moved beyond the formalities of supervision, to elaborate what we could write about together. We were excited about exploring the connections between Ximena's research on creating digital places and my writings—two decades ago—on creating culture in cyberspace. Over the months as we have continued to write, our room to meet has shifted from the living room in The Hague to a digital place, as Ximena returned to Ecuador and I to Rome.

Ximena: During times of restrictions and uncertainties, the cyberspace became an opportunity for rebellious bodies and provocative methods of research to exist. Our conversations about these exciting possibilities were the point of departure for Wendy and I to connect on different levels. Despite (and probably because) our feminisms are informed by different histories and struggles, we found ways in which they meet not only to work together but to find courage in each other. Our connection crossed the professional and very fast became a relation of sharing ethical concerns, feminist hopes and love for small presents of nature like flowers and sunsets. That connection brings us together in this chapter and motivates our desire to put our experiences in conversation. We reflect on how our feminist lenses allowed us to find possibilities in unexpected and (sometimes) criticized mediums, such as cyberspace and art. Emerging from our common hope in the ability of these spaces/places to contribute to everyday politics, this chapter narrates our exploration of

different technologies and unconventional approaches to them, as means for our research and activism. First, connecting in-person in Wendy's living room and planning together how to later write this chapter through our machine selves. Six hours of difference and thousands of kilometres separate us. Yet, we have found—in a pixelated and flat screen—a way to recall our feminist experiences together.

Wendy: As I write this in lockdown in Rome, Italy, I look forward to speaking to Ximena this evening, late here, afternoon there. It feels like we just continue conversations but in a different space. What is odd is how normal that is, during Covid-19 lockdown, I connect and feel sane pushing down the sense of panic about the rising figures, the difficulties to move from home.

I recall how in the late 1990s “Information and Communication Technologies” also created a sense of global panic. The internet was viewed with fear and concern—would computers take over the world? The uncertainties we are facing with the Covid-19 pandemic are different, as we are now so used to communication technologies and, the debates around data and privacy notwithstanding, the internet is solidly part of our everyday lives. Back then, it was a historical moment when the internet became accessible to ordinary people, and fast cheap ways of communicating, writing and doing research became possible for feminists. While we were using text rather than visual technologies, it appeared revolutionary that we could receive instant responses, share and have conversations that are intimate and where women's lives could be the subject and focus of technological discussions. In my conversations with Ximena, I became struck by the importance of cyberspace in my life as a feminist on both a political and personal level.

Ximena: Twenty years later, we continue to be surprised by technological advances and the fear towards them still remains. Just as Wendy recalled the Matrix film in her third story “Transitions” to reflect on how internet was experienced twenty years ago, I write this as my mother watches the documentary “The Social Dilemma” in the living room. This 90-minute film shows the fears and scepticism that we experience nowadays, particularly towards social media and the scary power they have to manipulate behaviour and social interactions. In fact, surveillance, manipulation of private data and human psychology are some of the more common fears that are ascribed to technology nowadays. Microphones and cameras of our devices appear to be spies in our pockets that accompany us 24/7. During Covid-19 when digital interaction has become the



norm, there is still a general scepticism towards digital communications. It is not only seen as dangerous but also as something that distances, disembodies, and even dehumanizes us.

In this context and without denying these dangers, we come together to queer these perceptions and use this so feared “threat” to find hope for feminist and queer/*cuir* political action and research. A desire that is informed by our curious, audacious and queer/*cuir* feminisms.

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## CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES

Our chapter has shown the disruptive possibilities of doing feminist research that challenge the norms of social science research techniques that aim to “objectively” collect qualitative or quantitative data via surveys, questionnaires, interviews and case studies. Our evidence is our feelings, experiences and emotions. We think about our feminist actions not as subjects of research but as reflections on our actions in using the internet to create feminist and queer safe places. Aware of our privileged positionings, we have used our form of writing as a vehicle of research in order to allow us to discuss our changing relationship with technology from a personal as well as political perspective.

Our main methods are self-reflection and storytelling. We analyse rather than categorize the email messages, the videos and digital photos along with our own memories and conversations as authors who produced the digital places with others. By using dialogue and storytelling, we have not tried to produce case studies that are fixed products of our research. Rather, in a fluid and open way, we have meshed conversations about different moments across time and space. The writing has been part of the doing, part of our own sensing feeling about the need for feminist safe places. We have paid attention to our and others’ emotions, as part of our feminist ethics. We have recognized the importance of acknowledging and embracing emotions as part of the research process. We see such recognition and openness to emotions as particularly important in these troubling Covid-19 times. In this sense we have embraced feminist methodology as having a transformative potential for our sense of well-being and hope.

While exploring the possibilities of digital communication we also had to pay attention to the restrictions of online communication. There is a

sense of loss in communications when you cannot touch, hug, feel the body language when in person. Ironically, the digital places allowed us to speak about embodied realities and tensions which in person we may not have found easy or possible. To return to Haraway's (1991) image of the cyborg, we created a digital embodied natureculture where the digital self could shape the material self. So, while these places were not where people physically met, they were real in feeling and sensing and in memory. The places held care and love and provided support personally and politically as fears and hopes around pregnancy or gender/sexual expression were shared and felt.

In this way, the places we created contributed to a digital exploration of body politics. In the case of WoN these contributions were fourfold. First, it was a space for participants to voice their embodied experience of pregnancy, miscarriage and abortion. To speak about abortion, miscarriage and doubts around pregnancy which were in many places taboo in public was a radical act. Second, WoN contributed to the shift in body politics in development discourse by writing about these concerns in an international project funded and endorsed by a UN body. Third, WoN in discussing technology and body politics from the perspective of different cultures was also challenging western ways of seeing, further politicizing embodied digital interactions. Fourth, WoN conversations raised twenty years before "me too" the spectre of online sexual harassment and the need to prevent online stalking. We were looking at how ICTs connect the private to the public, the local to the would-be global, intimate, face-to-face communications with distant, non-proximate intimacies. They reconfigure our sense of embodiment and understanding of mind-body relationship, and social-ness and our entanglement with the environment (Franklin, 2010: 367) (see Fig. 5.4).

In the case of CC, the way body politics was experienced reflected the borders crossing/disruption intention through which the project was created. First, this place allowed rebellious bodies to speak up and exist, something that was sometimes not even possible in the material places from where they were connected (home). Second, CC was a place for singular voices to meet the collective and become louder. Finding the "we" voice within diversity was not easy, especially when the aim was to also highlight the particular, but it was necessary for collective politics to happen. Third, CC showed the political character that digital art holds, especially related to the body. It allows the unspeakable to be said and travel across time and space navigating internet waves and inspiring



**Fig. 5.4** Feminist socionature entanglements by Wendy

This drawing captures my sense of body is connected to the Earth, in a cycle of ageing, over time, growing, giving, changing, returning. The blues and greens are about the blending of water and growing plants, like the woman's life you see depicted moving as in human form from seed to tree to the soil

other transgressing bodies to resist. And fourth, CC opened conversations about gender, sexuality and pleasure beyond anthropocentric understandings that ascribe sexuality to uniquely the cultural domain. This showed the potential of body politics to be explored beyond the human, to be



**Fig. 5.5** Girasoles: Conexión y Fortaleza Sunflowers: Connection and strength by Ximena

One of the Copensantes shared in CC: “When the sun is not there, sunflowers gather energy from each other... they become the sun for the others. Just as we do in CC!” This drawing represents the strength and connection that travelled online opening possibilities of resistance and transformation

questioned through audacious cuirnaturecultures and become an important political tool for justice for human and more-than-human others (Fig. 5.5).

## EPILOGUE

Writing this chapter was fun. We had planned to complete it in our digital living room while watching *Grace and Frankie* Season 7 (which was sadly postponed due to Covid-19). We discovered early on our love of that Netflix sitcom—and how feminist methodology goes way beyond academe. We see the potential of many different feminist digital places that travel across time and space and are unashamedly part of our everyday lives to express, connect and build loving and caring relations. We know things will change, and we are part of the change, the machine in us will overcome the monsters. We trust our *cuir*/queer and feminist selves to



**Fig. 5.6** Finding Spring Together by Wendy and Ximena  
 These two last drawings we did together watching re-runs of Grace and Frankie, laughing aloud, reunited in Wendy’s living room in The Hague. Unexpectedly we could come back together to finish the chapter in March 2021. Our drawings celebrate spring and how we rediscovered the same care and connection we had also been constructing in the digital space

continue to connect, find safety and flourish in and out of digital spaces (Fig. 5.6).

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## CHAPTER 6

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# *Mulai* Leave—*datang* Arrive—*pulang* Return. Working the Field Together: A Feminist Mother–Son Journey in Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Martina Padmanabhan*

### PRECEDING THE BEGINNING

When did my journey to the field in Indonesia accompanied by a child really start? Did it begin when I found myself a single mother or with getting the research proposal granted in 2016? Or was it even earlier? When I applied for a professorial position with a focus on Southeast Asia, even if my roots rested in South India? Was the end of my marriage and the need to be accompanied by a child if I were to do field work a result of my earlier decision to move to Passau in the lower Bavarian hills? It is hard to disentangle the personal from the political in such events that led to me taking a year in Indonesia with Jacob, my then five-year old son.

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I remember sitting in a little café on the riverside, which the Dean (with whom I was preparing for the negotiations over tenure) had advised me to visit in order to enjoy a beautiful view of the bell tower of the baroque cathedral. Two years later I took refuge at the same spot to work on the final touches on a project on how to transform Indonesian farming into organic agriculture with an interdisciplinary consortium of anthropologists, sociologists and economists. Meanwhile my marriage had ended, and I was organising university life around my son Jacob, then still in kindergarten. Working late nights and in a constant hurry to ferry Jacob to and fro via bicycle marked my day, not to speak of mixed feelings of anger, sorrow and relief after a 19-year relationship with a now distant father, helicoptering in every second weekend.

In this state of mind, I polished the proposal prose. I threw in my long-standing interest and entanglement with organic farming, along with my newly established and rediscovered connections to Indonesia and my passion for fieldwork. I added one sentence. Just squeezing it to the bottom of the research design, I asked for the funding of a 1-year guest-professorship so that I could go to Yogyakarta myself while an interim takes over my tasks in Germany. This year off seemed to promise everything: warm feet, adventure, intellectual stimulus, freedom and more than once a place in a hammock. As Stolz et al. (2020) point out, the construction of the field starts with the preparation of a certain research topic. I envisaged the company of my son as a cheerful, curious, hand-holding little fellow.

### THEORY: ACCOMPANIED BY CHILDREN IN FIELD RESEARCH

The impact of children on fieldwork and the challenges of being accompanied in the field have been discussed widely (Brown & Dreby, 2013; Cupples & Kindon, 2003; Flinn et al., 1998; Frohlick, 2002; Levey, 2009; Scheyvens, 2014; Sutton, 1998; Starrs et al., 2001). They consider the balance between work and family for field researchers and the need to think through logistics in a different light. The mutual influence of children on researching parents and vice versa is central to a change of positionality and destabilising of professional identities (Cornet & Blumenfeld, 2016). The research process might become more complex and multi-faceted due to parenting while in the field, but all research encounters are mediated by more experiences than just being in the field.

With this paper I aim to reconstruct the effect of caring for a child during fieldwork, data collection and analysis and reflect on how I navigated bringing Jacob's presence into academic writing and reasoning.

The implications and challenges of accompanied fieldwork with a child is not very straightforward. Braukmann et al. (2020) direct their attention and efforts to analyse what it means to be a parent in the field. They specifically investigate, how caring for dependent young ones influences a researcher's positionality and the production of ethnographic knowledge. They explore the methodological, theoretical, and ethical dimensions of accompanied fieldwork. Interestingly enough their edited volume sprang out of informal hallway conversations and did not receive major funding, as parenting in academia mostly disappears into the invisible circumstance and thus forgoes epistemic gains such as creating other encounters, readings and affects. In this chapter, I would argue that reviewing such hidden care work with a feminist lens can enrich and demystify the concept of the "lonely genius" out in the field collecting data, and move towards a coproduction of knowledge (Millora et al., 2020). This applies not (only) in the sense of insights through the offspring themselves, but rather because of the magnifying/looking-glass effect their presence induces. Instead of revealing the "truth" we investigate, the staged character of the research enterprise becomes much more obvious by the ambivalent enacting of "family" and "academy". Thus, the notion of coproduction of knowledge encompasses not only lay experts, but everyday encounters.

Stolz et al. (2020) claim that such invisible family conditions are the stuff that rich and thick descriptions are made of. While studies of family lives tell us something about the engendered ways, stages and constellations of raising children, the (mis)fit of offspring into data collection further illuminates gendered positions within academia. Though literature provides insights into the field and its boundaries, accompanied fieldwork is rarely addressed as a methodological, counselling or institutional issue. Interestingly, multinational companies and development agencies run large human resource departments to organise and cushion intercultural translocations of accompanying families, while the equivalent family transitions for the purpose of research are less institutionalised or perceived in relation to a generalised notion of "rite de passage".

Just as academic procedures on the surface resemble each other at the German home university and at the hosting one in Indonesia, parenting seems a universal practice, but the field puts cherished cultural relativistic attitudes to test (Haug, 2020) and questions the idea of proper cultural

(and parental) behaviour. Acknowledging the presence of a son in the field and the ways in which he is (in)directly linked to the making of the field turns the tale of “social isolation” into one of a “social experience”. The solitary fieldworker and the single mother, the tension between sanitised data collection and the unspoken converge. There is the sense of a shared adventure, but also the risk involved when plunging into fieldwork with a minor is highlighted by uncertainty and more caution is felt when one considers which places to enter with a young dependant to trawl along.

Being accompanied by a child showcases in a straightforward way how multiple identities intersect in the process of field research (Cupples & Kindon, 2003). The question arises of who are we in the eyes of whom? And it seems that the identities of mother, ex-wife, scholar and woman are much more interwoven (Hansen, 2016: 19) and less under control than we assume in routines of managing others impressions of self (or impression management). As Cupples and Kindon (2003: 223) highlight, “the instability of the self is brought home to us in an immediate way” when we take a child along, allowing faster, but possibly more painful access to the fragility of subjectivity. Bringing children to the field work challenges us to leave the restricted repertoire of the professional observer, when having to react and interact as the emotional, concerned and deeply involved participating parent. The “reposited other” as Gilmore (1998: 35) puts it can be observed differently when a child is around. Our role as parent, care-giver, discipliner, teacher and comforter sometimes obscures our professional/ researcher role. Impression management undergoes a severe destabilisation (Linnekin, 1998: 71), at the same time being with a child allows us to appear as this more human version of an academic. On the one hand there is “safety in motherhood” as a presumed universalism, but this is mediated by global inequalities and relations of power.

At close scrutiny, it matters how being accompanied by a boy reinforced my particular gendered, classed and ethnic subject positions in particular ways. It enabled my specific insights into the understanding of gender in contemporary urban Java, the concept of family and its centrality as the social centre, emphasised by large gatherings each Sunday. In this context single motherhood, though with a distant father in the background stands out oddly, mediated by the status of a *bule* white foreign academic. Ethnicity is blurred with class and erased by profession. All these reactions towards the mother and son pair provide a constant source of insights through the responses by him, by me and our community (Stolz et al., 2020: 23).

What might turn into knowledge are in the very first place emotionally charged affects, which eventually provide epistemological insights (Studoka, 2019). But they come at a price. Accompanied fieldwork is “undoubtedly hard, frustrating and anxiety provoking” (Cupples & Kinson, 2003: 217). More than the rather intellectual “labour of deriving a hypothesis” (Kunze & Padmanabhan, 2014), affects heighten conflicts and provide insights disguised in pain. As no fieldwork is without affects, those caused by the intimate emotional relationship with a dependent minor pose a challenge in an academically induced framing exactly because the scholarly world derives from the tradition of unworldly, celibate and cerebral male monks (Lauggass, 2021). These tensions arise because of the ideas of the professional and the personal selves, between child and parent and are visible in the frictions that surrounds the field. As already indicated in the binary concepts of professional/private and grown-ups/minors, by ignoring the company of children we compartmentalise our research and ourselves. As Kleis (1987 in Shea 2016) argues, single parenting researchers have to adapt more than a lone researcher or a married pair as the needs are more diverse, but there are less hands to accommodate and ultimately cater to them. This multiplies the impact of cultural and environmental shock. The demands on the comforting and cushioning parent are much more felt and drastic.

My son caused me to be seen specifically as a mother and ex-wife, and not just as a visiting foreigner. Especially male researchers report how accompanying family made them more human to the community (Lozada & Lozada, 2016: 116). Frohlick (2002) observes that women as professional researchers in the field continue to be more anomalous than footloose men because of wider continuing gendered conceptions of work and family. The critique of masculinist, disembodied models of fieldwork displays the double standards, where the double burden born by women professionals with family have to face disapproval, while the male version gains “street credibility” (Lozada & Lozada, 2016: 116). Unsurprisingly, it is mostly women who write about accompanied fieldwork and the double challenge to be both a good professional social scientist and a good mother. In the background lurks the unspoken norm, that children should not be plucked from their safe home environment predictable routines and take them to unknown places away from their father (Tripp, 2002: 802).

The review of literature on doing fieldwork with a child by one’s side reveals a number of feminist issues. Bringing the hidden care work in

family life immersed in the research field to the limelight opens up the possibility of theorising this constellation as one among others in the field. Further, it helps to disenchant the aura of the lone male explorer to embrace an entangled coproduction of knowledge. The feminist lens rather emphasises the anyway staged character of the research enterprise and its simultaneous prosaicness. Nevertheless, there is no escape into the observer position, when participating as a concerned parent. Furthermore, the standing out of children in the field illustrates continuous gendered experiences within academia and as a deviation from the supposedly universal norm. The critique of masculinist, disembodied models of fieldwork displays the double standards, where women professionals face disapproval, while men go for glory. A feminist idea of fieldwork is not one despite of company, but because of being accompanied by children.

### CREATING THE FIELD TOGETHER

Being accompanied impacts positionality and the power relations between the research and the researched. It reveals the field as something obviously constructed, as the connections to everyday life mean that we are always in the field, where professional and personal roles and relationships converge (Kartz, 1994). While Stolz et al. (2020: 23) counts the benefit of shared experience and memories, I was inspired to write a paper while navigating through the city together with Jacob on the scooter and his constant comments on the rural–urban landscape (Padmanabhan, 2020). I traced our journey in chronological and spatial order, starting from our house and ending at Jacob’s school. At each of the places described along the way, I reflected on what they reveal about societal relations to nature in this rapidly growing metropolis. Only the constant transects due to school obligations allowed me for this series of observations. This example illustrated the politics of writing by deciding what belongs to the depiction of the field (Stolz et al., 2020: 22). Here the boundary work to maintain or rather construct the field becomes tangible.

The handsome (Indonesian looking) boy, who effortlessly blended into any Indonesian crowd phenotypically, was attracting some, but not too much attention. His entertaining qualities had a humanising effect on me, emphasising our vulnerability and dependency. As a daughter of an Indian father and a German mother, my skin colour is brown but I am too tall and thus stick out. Still my family heritage provided a surprising entry point into Yogyakarta. My father Padmanabhan—turned into family

name under German family law in the 60s—shares his name with the oldest grammar school in our host city of Yogyakarta.<sup>1</sup> What appears as a pleasant coincidence that opened doors within the academic strata of Yogyakarta, points to my positionality as a bicultural/intercultural person, embedded in century old privileges and to the syncretic nature of Javanese culture despite contemporary emphasis on an Islamic identity.

The personal and the professional self are hopelessly entangled and create intersecting identities. Simultaneously, we enact hybridity (Narayan, 1993) as those identities are mutually constitutive. We thus created this mother-and-son-package to be observed, related to and compared. As we behave differently when accompanied, interacting and sometimes breaking local norms of behaviour, we reveal ourselves, thus company makes differences more salient. The possible epistemological advantage of this often-shameful loss of control when impression management fails, is the chance to make us and the research situation more egalitarian, like emotional fits over mundane issues compelling me to let the mask of the self-controlled adult slip. Cupples and Kinson (2003: 212) state that the epistemological bearing of being accompanied by less self-controlled relatives lies precisely in this. The norm violating reaction to a child's transgression in return provokes in the very sense feedback and interaction, that allows insights into the rather controlled and hierarchical Javanese culture. If data is constructed through the research process itself, the multiple blurring between personal and professional identities affect the knowledge produced. But they also wonder whether the company of children prohibit necessary introspection for reflexivity? I would argue the contrary, but in unexpected ways. Inevitable homesickness, aggression and even boredom in the child (and the mother) as expressions of lost connectivity, frustration and loss of agency are common in cultural shock. These strong emotions tell us something about frames of meaning, emotional need and connectedness.

The embodiment of these feelings and reactions are of epistemological and theoretical importance, when we consider with Okely (1992: 2) that

<sup>1</sup> Padmanabhan signifies in my case a South-Indian Brahmin pedigree, while the educational institution's name points to the Hindu and Buddhist heritage of/in Javanese culture. Founded in 1918 by the Dutch colonisers to educate the aristocratic Indigenes elite, it was renamed in 1942 under the Japanese occupation to Negeri Padmanaba (SMA\_Negeri\_3\_Yogyakarta, 2020). The red lotus flower *padma* in Sanskrit, derived from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, represents the possibility of personal and spiritual development under any conditions.

“the personal is the theoretical!” or with Moss (2001) that our autobiographical selves are a source of information. Especially forms of embodied knowledge are as telling for developing understanding as conventional data collection, when combining cultural analysis and interpretation with narrative details as in auto-ethnography (Heewon, 2008: 46). I would even go as far as to state a need to write through these 10 months of fieldwork and the preparatory time as well as the necessary recovery or reconciliation to arrive at my ability to analyse the core interest, the data concerned with organic farming itself. Writing through goes beyond the constant keeping of a diary and revealing WhatsApp notes throughout. Further it encapsulates the working through and reconstruction of the emotional and practical conditions of data creation. I dug out the circumstances of muddling through by analysing the inherent cognitive tensions with a feminist lens. What is constitutive for the resulting insights might resemble the data cleaning exercises required in surveys. While the latter terminates deviations, the feminist methodology exactly looks for these as a source of knowledge.

When recollecting my hopes, aspirations and expectations that motivated my pursuit of a long field stay, I cannot help but refer to Barack Obama’s narration of his childhood in Indonesia (Obama, 1995). I read his memoirs in 2009 when I became the mother of Jacob and at that time did not imagine I would undertake field work in Southeast Asia. However, the story of in between, of biculturality and biracial origins in a third tropical country resonated with me and certain episodes stuck with me. In retrospect they inspired and shaped my idea of doing accompanied fieldwork in an indirect way. Revisiting our own experience, I recollect images from the autobiography that subconsciously turned into iconic emblems (like the plastic sandals see below), fuelling my determination. Only now, when rereading Obama’s autobiography, it occurs to me, that his mother Ann Dunham engaged in anthropological field research close to Yogyakarta years later when her son was no longer living with her, but she was engaged in care work of his sister (Scott, 2012). Nevertheless, certain remarks acted as benchmarks and thus turn snapshots of Obama’s childhood memories into a reoccurring theme. Interestingly, the anthropologists Dewey and Cooper (Dunham et al., 2009) as editors of Dunham’s dissertation keep quiet about her fieldwork, obviously conducted while her daughter was around. Hefner (2009) remarks in passing that the reflexive turn had then not yet occurred as evident in the writing, while himself avoiding any methodological

reassessment/reinterpretation. In fact, Dunham was a working and mostly a single mother bringing up two biracial children (Scott, 2012).

Feminist fieldwork accompanied by a child from the vantage point of creating the field together underlines the inherent politics of writing by deciding where the field boundary runs and whether it embraces the presence of a child. Cleansing the account of everyday facts upholds the myth of the detached observer and obscures intersectional settings. Children alter positionality and the power relations between the research and the researched. The transgressions of local norms by mother and child equally provoke reactions, irritate and at best entertain. The resulting feelings are of epistemological and theoretical importance. Through a feminist lens these cognitive tensions turn into an embodied source of knowledge.

### MULAI: LEAVING BEHIND

Obama recounts in “the story of his family”<sup>2</sup> how his mother forced him to study English early in the morning before regular classes (Obama, 1995: 47), serving me as the ideal role model to reconcile the mother and the researcher. We will later find her dissertation on the shelves at our favourite *loka-loka* restaurant in walking distance up the street (Dunham et al., 2009). At that point I had long given up German home-tuitions as Jacob was single-mindedly embracing English with the desperate urge to communicate and make friends. In the end I did not advance in the accomplishment of Bahasa Indonesia as Jacob did in English. Only the working through our shared lifeworld in an all-encompassing sense, demanded by the topic of inquiry at hand I realised our simultaneous being in the field in an almost constant way. In several ways we depended emotionally on speaking German among ourselves, while we both struggled with new, but different languages.

When it finally dawned on me that I would be granted a year of replacement as professor to allow me to go to Indonesia, a whole range of preparations had to be set in motion. On the one hand, an exploratory study with the team to officially start the research project at the hosting Atma Jaya University in Yogyakarta had to be prepared content wise along with the contracts. Staff recruitment in Germany and Indonesia brought a new group of people together; all concerned about the prospects of

<sup>2</sup> Subtitle of the German translation reads “*Die Geschichte meiner Familie*” (Obama, 2009).



organic farming and the transformative pathways towards it. Similarly, I had to negotiate terms and conditions with the newly divorced father of Jacob for taking him along with me and placing 10,000 km instead of 700 km between us. What would the intervals of them seeing each other be, how to keep in touch?

During the exploratory study—presenting itself as a generic business trip, accommodated at the nearby “coffin” Suharto style hotel, full of high ranked military—we held official meetings. Jacob had already been present at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding when we stayed for the first time for a month, and I took a language course and knitted together the necessary academic network. In between, I snuck away with an Indonesian colleague in order to have a look at the international school, recommended by the academic mother-cum-researcher network back in Germany. My heart jumped to see the recently founded Jogjakarta Community School with its green spacious lawns, beautiful classrooms full of artwork and a British curriculum. Jacob would have to learn English from scratch. On the way out I happened to inquire whether by chance anybody knew about vacant housing. And there we were: a teacher had just moved out (as we later learned because of the too close mosque and its very audible call to prayer in the early morning) and we drove by to have a look at the townhouse. There it transpired that my colleague assumed I would need to reside in a gated community. After visiting the two-storied, three-bedroom house with a spacious study, I instantly prepared a down payment with the nearby landlady on her beautiful wooden Javanese bed. The house, with access to internet, shopping and amenities of urban life, underscores the middleclass-ness of the whole research enterprise. The integration via a town house and the support by Indonesian colleagues reflects the class setting, along with the prospect of domestic help (see Padmanabhan, 2020).

The episode further shows, how the presence of a child shapes the considerations of a suitable living space. The closeness of the International School with a European curriculum to maintain educational continuity as well as family routines within our own walls were decisive (Cassell, 1987: 8). Stolz et al. (2020: 22) puts it as a promise of comfort and safety to keep a private “family” sphere apart from the field. This implied a certain way of isolation as well as socialisation and determined our integration into the Indonesian neighbourhood and the cosmopolitan school community. During our first joint trip we stayed at a guest house to test the waters, learn Bahasa and develop friendly working relations. This time,

we came to establish ourselves for ten months, allowing Jacob to join a full year at school, taking into account the emotional and logistic cost of un- and resettling as advised by single mother researcher (Binder personal communication). A sabbatical plus teaching relief helped to synchronise our schedules and considered the needs of both of us involved. This meant cutting Jacob's summer holidays short though. This was the beginning of compromises and "satisficing" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012: 43 in Blumenfeld, 2016), looking beyond the overall satisfactory solution to cater for both needs of the professional and the personal, but rather for the viable. The tension from making decisions that are not optimal though perhaps good enough was a constant in this process, pointing to the lonely cowboy researcher as prototype in the background.

By shuttling in and out to check housing and schooling and indirectly the commute to the university, I realised I would have to get a motorbike myself, though I could not imagine how I could ever find my way through the small alleys and across the prohibitive highways. Nevertheless, my heart was full of hope and desire for adventure and getting to know the people of Java better. Obviously, though not officially in the limelight, fieldwork is no longer just about me as the researcher and the access to Indonesian academic institutions as host, employer of field staff and reference for important contacts and organisations, but about logistics that become far more complex as they have to consider the well-being of a child (Starrs et al., 2001).

Back home, we bought helmets and, at our grand farewell party, a concerned friend gifted me a voucher to use their scooter to practise driving a two-wheeler with a boy behind me as a pillion rider. Jacob and I mounted the orange two-wheeler, to find us within seconds of starting the engine on the gravelled street, not knowing what hurt or exactly happened—an immediate acceleration and there we laid. I had severely cut my left ankle above the bone. Jacob immediately proclaimed that we will not suffer any dreaded traffic accident in Indonesia as we already fulfilled our deed back home. And so it went. The open wound immobilised me and prohibited my attendance of a conference in Oxford and kept leaking and seeping during the long flight to Southeast Asia. Only the ready-made antibiotic cream available in Indonesia and the advice of a doctor-cum-co-mother from school made it heal.

My own cultural understanding of taking a child to a tropical country bears the imprint of a childhood dream long harboured. At the same time, it also presented itself as an escape route from routine. Simultaneously a

research-stay in Indonesia proved to be an initiation period for claiming the Chair with a focus on Southeast Asia my own, a rite of passage in advanced age. Furthermore, the ability to take my child along reflects my financial and legal situation concerning shared custody. Last but not least, it represented a rite de passage affirming the new status from married to divorced woman. When the familiar world is exchanged for the field and left behind, almost all aspects from the choice of topic to places and logistics bear the imprint of a gendered if not intersectional consideration of the child's well-being and trades-off against the demands of work. Through a feminist perspective this complexity reveals the conditions for single academic mothers in the home and the host country.

### *DATANG: ARRIVING IN YOGYAKARTA*

Obama recounts his arrival in warm and humid Indonesia and his encounters with animals as sensory overload and recalls thinking on his first night: "I could barely believe my good fortune" (1995: 35). He further describes slipping in the rain and happily sliding in the mud (Obama, 1995: 84). Jacob equally enjoyed working in permaculture garden as a way of place making along with the young men and roaming around in Bumi Langit, the organic estate run by the son of one of Ann Durnham's woman friends, visited by Barack Obama when returning to Indonesia. This juxtaposing of a strong picture that stayed in my mind and the happy hours of indulging in the new environment focuses on the heading into a shared adventure, at the expense of the possibility of physical and emotional threats (Stolz et al., 2020: 23).

There are positive and negative consequences of doing fieldwork with children. They provide emotional support to parents, reduce parents' loneliness, provide a way to maintain identity and provide a refuge while at the same time "drive parents crazy" and make them worry (Cornet & Blumenfeld, 2016: 9). This is a truism and applies to parents back home as well. However, we could ask whether children perform an unwitting form of labour and have their rights violated, when acting as a research strategy and instrument for accessibility and a tool to humanise relationships. Making the children's contributions to research explicit is an important methodological and conceptual reframing (Blumenfeld, 2016) and opens up a new dimension of research ethics. While the focus on power relations in data production is largely focused on those between

researcher and researched, the potentially exploitative aspects of accompanying children are still to be captured in the dynamics and dilemmas. These special power relations within knowledge production touch upon emotional, bodily, and spiritual maintenance in place making.

### *Emotional Maintenance*

The arrival to Yogyakarta was marked for Jacob by school attendance from almost the very first day onwards, with exiting encounters, followed by desperate claims to “I want to go back to Germany—immediately” while hiding behind mountains of pillows in his bed equipped with an mp3 player, featuring German radio dramas. Soon we were invited by Indonesian friends, acting as our adopted family to attend a huge wedding with 1000 guests in Surabaya. Here, Jacob intensively and silently observed the massive make-up application and my transformation through Javanese hairdos, thereby embracing cultural codes, thus oscillating between resistance and accommodation.

Shea (2016) describes the entering of the field with her daughter as no model rite of passage, but rather as loud and raw when she was struck with the sense that she was stuck in a strange place, unable to escape. The culture shock at young age is equally a culture shock and makes fieldwork with children “very messy indeed” (Shea, 2016: 50). Given the tremendous emotional work children have to go through themselves, it seems odd to read about their importance in place making. As Lozada and Lozada (2016) point out, children can provide not only a speedy introduction to neighbours in an unfamiliar field site, but also help develop future research relationships. They may further allay the anxieties of the researcher-parent by providing the pretext for a familiar routine (Blumenfield, 2016). It is comforting that exactly these cultural biases make us fully human (Glover, 2016) and enlarge the likeliness of insightful encounters. Children express their emotional needs. As adults we entertain different culturally determined strategies to cater for these needs, but the shared humanity is seen in the dependent children. The adult has voluntarily left the familiar herd to learn other ways of being. The child demonstrates the will to belong to a group and is less inhibited and self-censoring to express discomfort. A feminist claim is that of emotions as an entry point to emic understanding beyond the etic rational individualistic framework.

### *Bodily Maintenance*

Place making in a very fundamental sense is to familiarise ourselves and get accustomed with the chain of care, or rather the network of needs. We had to first explore the material and practical care. My language course notes focus on everything that enables us for shopping: gas cylinder, electricity, internet, food, water and vegetables, getting laundry done and buying fresh fruit juice. When the landlord helped us to get a new gas cylinder, he asked Jacob to accompany him in the car. Jacob enthusiastically reported back that at one point he was able to talk English: “I could talk just like magic”. Via inquiries about stationary shops, postal services and home-made snacks sold on the street, we wove a fabric of social relations, which grounded us in routine, place and mutual recognition. Through the organisation of bodily needs, we connected to families and made friends, though the central vocabulary of the arrival period reads *sulit* difficult. The sounds of the neighbours also structured our day. The nearby Yoga school inserted me into a wild mix from hijabi housewives to beauty queen yogis, a seamless transition to spiritual maintenance.

Thus, the repetitive task of reproducing our working and learning capacity by eating and drinking, cooking and washing—the basic care for our bodies entangles us with the geography of our neighbourhood. These daily encounters create a fabric of the everyday out of which feminist insights are made when we take the whole of life worth considering as an expression of the larger picture of the economy and of provisioning.

### *Spiritual Maintenance*

While the early morning sweeping of the street marked the start of the day in a mundane way of female routines, the call for prayer five times a day from a very close-by local mosque punctured the air with a constant reminder of the obvious spiritual dimensions of Java. Not only did the prayer times structure workshops and meetings, they also underlined the Indonesian concern with the religious dimension of human existence. Surrounded by fancy headscarf wearing students and the obvious pious fashion options, there was no escape. The religious dimension as perceived as a fundamental human trait is visible and audible in our surroundings. Recent Wahabitic Islamic traditions compete with old Javanese syncretic versions deeply influenced by Hindu and Buddhist heritage,

while different Christian faiths are clearly visible in the academic landscape. The mosque next door allows us to observe the neighbour going for evening prayer. Jacob is invited by the landlord to join him and his sons and to learn about the religious and social centre, as a kindergarten is attached.

Being attached to a private catholic university, the presence of spirituality in higher education is visible in its representation (Chang & Boyd, 2011) and among staff. Co-parents at Jacob's school teach at other Christian Universities and act as student ministers and invite us to Sunday services; our sons become best friends. Nevertheless, faith-based education institutions embrace other religions and enter into fruitful dialogues, crossing the narrow path of method and arts. At the former Jesuit seminar Sanata Dharma University I experience a deeply satisfying and very personal debate on transdisciplinary methods (Padmanabhan, 2018) motivated and framed by spiritual and social concerns. Just as affects and accompanying children as a human constant slowly enter the debate on knowledge production via feminist concerns for methodology, so does the spiritual aspects remain a well-guarded taboo as a source for insights in western academic thinking (Chang & Boyd, 2011).

Much of the writing on accompanied fieldwork focuses on the advantages when settling in. A feminist research ethic will ask for the involuntary child labour kids are supposed to do, when turned into an instrument for accessibility and as the human factor—just as wives are often used/employed. Therefore, a feminist knowledge production is concerned with emotional, bodily, and spiritual maintenance in place making. The effect of multiple standards applied to working mothers on top of that in a new social environment can feel emotionally overpowering. The virtue of feminist methodology is not to swallow the overload, but to analyse and unpack these dissonances for knowledge production beyond the hegemonic. Similarly, bodily maintenance in everyday reproduction is the stuff feminist insights are made of, taking the mundane as an expression of the power structures in provisioning. Spiritual maintenance as well as childcare have remained understudied in field methodology. A feminist concern may bring both under-researched aspects into the heart of knowledge production.

## PULANG: RETURNING AND INTERCULTURAL RESONANCE

Settling into university and school, becoming acquainted with colleagues and friends, we indulged in affective care and co-working as means to maintain our presence in Yogyakarta in the light of returning to Germany.

Indonesian staff in the project and the larger sociology department become important for the thin line between personal and academic resonance. Sharing long drives to interviews, hypothesising over interviews, planning workshops and strategies induces—like in every team lifecycle—a sense of shared accomplishment and trust (Werner et al., 2013). An important part in this was played by two Indonesian researchers, who themselves had spent decisive years of their childhood abroad in Australia and Bangladesh, and thus were sensitised as persons able to consider insider and outsider perspectives. These deeply felt experiences as dependent children enabled them to act as translators of culture and as compassionate towards mother and child in a foreign academic setting.

One a different level, Indonesian colleagues entrenched in a Javanese identity attained a new quality beyond institutional counterparts when socialising with their families. Local staff, counterparts and their wives and children became an important social anchor, overriding the mere professional relation. They worked as a counter-medicine to the stand-alone project leader and solitary of a single mother and only child. This mingling told me indirectly, but also via shared interpretation about intercultural dissonances and thus ethics. The Javanese politeness and indirect way of expression sits in opposition to the comparatively loud and wild western children with their not strict enough parents.

At the beginning, the Indonesian *Ersatzfamilie* of the retired Bahasa Indonesia teacher as grandmother was central to making kin. They compensated for elder and experienced family members and active uncles, who were greatly missed and provided identity and belonging. With advancing time, those, who anchor the mother-son-duo as relational beings do change their WhatsApp connectivity with bodily presence. The visiting father/ex-husband bears witness to a streetwise boy, the brother/uncle and his wife explore neighbourhood food stalls and the grand/parents celebrate their grandsons ninth birthday, turning the locality through their visit into a shared place.

## EXPANDING MOBILITY AND TRUST

Upward mobility in academia often means moving in the very sense; the willingness to go for fieldwork or research stays abroad implies relocation and social uprooting. While this holds true in the whole of academia, it is even more so seen as a given in development research.<sup>3</sup> For many women at universities this poses the question of how to reconcile family obligations and career aspirations—or is it family aspirations and career obligations?—even more pronounced. When finally staying in Indonesia and leading a research team, the proposal for the EU funded Innovative Training Network WEGO was granted. The coordinator Wendy Harcourt invited me for a kick-off meeting in The Hague to celebrate International Women's day, get the consortium together and draft the list of applicants for PhD positions. While a video conference would have been an option, I decided to join the founding meeting for this international feminist political ecology network aiming at training the next generation of scholars. Meanwhile Jacob had developed a deep friendship with one of his classmates, who helped him to learn English, not feel lonely and play, as he expressed in an assignment on friendship in school. Based on his ability to form meaningful connections and socialise and my interest to widen the European academic circles, he stayed for a week with his friends' family. I took along a bamboo birdcage, painted red, and deposited it at the office of a puzzled Wendy. I preselected young researchers for fieldwork in Indonesia and India, started to get to know this wonderful crowd of feminist researcher activists and enjoyed the crisp air of The Hague. While this move speaks of trust in newly established bonds, it also reflects the logistical and financial ability to make this business trip happen. Back in Yogyakarta I could interview the Indonesian candidates.

Academic mobility appears as a fetish of speed and motion, disregarding the local, connected and long-term perspective. It seems paradoxical to sacrifice social relations for knowledge gains respectively to build social relations for the purpose of knowledge gains, posing relevant feminist questions towards an instrumental perspective on research encounters.

<sup>3</sup> Only Covid-19 has managed to question the mandatory hypermobility as accepted wisdom.



## BIDDING FAREWELL

With the school term coming to an end, I conducted the last interviews and we prepared for resettling by downsizing our household to luggage size. We conducted farewell visits, attended official closing dinners and threw a farewell party at Filosofi Kopi at the edge of a paddy field under large trees illuminated by lampoons. All the persons that had made Yogyakarta a place for us gathered to share food and coffee in the wonderful Javanese mix between formal speeches and informal chattering. The children roam around, exploring the terrain in the ultimate moment of most familiarity at the verge of leaving. In their chasing games, Jacob slips and falls into the rice field, showing up muddy, wet and happy to change into a dress to continue his chases. Soon we are seen off by Jacob's family friends as "his fifth best friend in a row", pointing to the transitory nature of expatriate communities and the challenge to transform newly formed relations.

The long-envisaged return meant entering the ongoing school and teaching term in Passau. While I met with the compassionate/understanding environment of the Chair focusing on Southeast Asia and a visit of the Indonesian Consul, Jacob was confronted with the hard task of resocialisation into a provincial school. Obama remembers the shift in value systems and categories when arriving in Hawaii vividly epitomised in the sandals that served him well in Jakarta, but were no longer good enough, thus experiencing a devaluation of his reference system.<sup>4</sup> Though socially welcomed into the old and seemingly familiar class and neighbourhood, Jacob was not able to catch up with the German curriculum while his effective learning journey was totally ignored, if not denied. The multiple challenges of being unable to cope with the expectation in his mother tongue German in class and the non-existent mattering of his achievement made him fidgety. The reprimand of his Bavarian teacher "You are not any longer in Bali!" illustrates the humiliating mix of assuming unruly behaviour as the norm in the far away oriental place, while exchanging one Indonesian island for the other to underscore the irrelevance of it in an offhand way. This hard time coming back was totally unexpected for both of us, as home was supposed to be a comforting place (Christofi & Thompson, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> "The Indonesian sandals that had served me well in Jakarta were dowdy" (Obama, 1995: 60).

The topic of home had gained a preserved, idealised quality as an outcome of homesickness. This static account did not allow us to comprehend and accommodate our inner change as well as the developments in our home base. While I had created a sketch book-cum-photo album during our first month long trip to Indonesia in 2015, only now I am able to produce a picture book for the sake of remembrance. I totally underestimated the emotional and intellectual energy necessary to return and reintegrate. Educators recognise that re-entry represents a crucial point, though it is often overlooked in programmes let alone by the lone researcher. Reflective practice might smoothen re-integration and navigate this often-overlooked transition. There is a need, but also an opportunity to integrate what has been learnt while away with previously held knowledge. A necessary methodological advance would be to institute a reflective practice. Blumenfield (2016: 78) suggests strategies for sharing the experience after leaving the fieldwork setting in a more conscious way. Having had family visiting and thus been able to reconnect to shared memories and create this continent spanning knowledge was an important part of calibrating the transition.

While working on the slight hubris of transforming Indonesian agriculture into organic, I was not able to envisage the necessary cushioning or actively shaping of transitioning back to the provincial town. Writing this chapter is still part of my returning process. As Blumenfield (2016: 78) puts it, including the messy, terrible moments of shared research as well as the joyful and fulfilling ones—in emotional and intellectual terms—helps to arrive as an honest assessment and simultaneously reassessment of the fieldwork process. From a feminist position, the awkward moments reveal not only analytic potential, but also the need to embrace the embodied experience of real women and real children.

Right now, I am full of warmth towards this energetic and enthusiastic young professor I was at that time, ready to conquer the world and make it “a world of my own” (Borzello 2000). Only through working through this embodied reality of my and Jacob’s life of learning and researching Yogyakarta with a compassionate perspective I arrive at a point of coming to terms with this adventure. Seeing and analysing my data on organic farming is now possible in a light and relieved way, as I have revisited its coming about in a careful way, taking into account and actively embracing the care situation I was in, instead of harbouring a perspective highlighting the deficit. I am looking forward to turning the red bamboo bird cage, brought back to me by the Ph.D. students from The Hague to

Passau, into the art installation of Yogyakarta I envisaged the moment I felt the urge to buy it.

Returning from doing fieldwork with a child and re-entering into cultural resonance from a feminist vantage point underscores the transitory nature of the whole endeavour. Just as the central research partners with childhood memories of moving between the emic and the etic acted as compassionate translators of culture, a care-full and embodied feminist research ethic requires entering into personal relations, as the children demonstrate. This leaves all of us vulnerable, highlighted in the awkwardness of homecoming. From a feminist position, a reflexive practice will bear analytic potential, when acknowledging the embodied experience of real women and real children.

### CONCLUSION: COMING TO TERMS OTHERWISE

These interpretations of the cycle of departure—arrival—departure—arrival reveal some emerging topics. The well-known stages of culture shock (Woesler, 2009) begin with honeymoon, the actual shock accompanied by doubt and uncertainty, followed by adaption and acceptance to be mirrored in the reverse culture shock upon return. However, only working through them while reflecting the solitary fieldworker and the single mother allows me to lay a finger on the tension between claims of sanitised data collection and the unspoken.

As Lozada and Lozada (2016: 116) state when recounting the work on accompanied fieldwork, “women’s double-burden is alive and well” after 25 years of academic reflections on the implications of bringing children to the field. Though informed by sophisticated methodological and feminist thinking, deeply entrenched gendered expectations of parenthood and professionalism continue to inflect the experiences in the field and the knowledge produced from fieldwork. The child’s presence contributes to a peculiar/idiosyncratic, not a distorted way of approaching organic and human transition in the (agricultural) field. By rather expanding the scope of the encounters co-producing knowledge, the objectives of these 10 months in Yogyakarta can be interpreted more expansively, as Blumenfeld (2016) suggests. Binder (2020) highlights the emotional qualities of patience in her accompanying son, his ability to keep her firmly rooted in the reality of everyday life as place making and the co-production in sharing the adventure.

Having arrived at this winter night in Covid-19 lockdown, I have moved from assessing the practical, ethical and emotional reality of fieldwork as complicated to rather being simply different by bringing a boy along. Embracing the everyday navigations as part and parcel of situated life and knowledge production promotes the relationship from one of deviation to that of a fuller feminist picture. The aim of the chapter was to deliberate over mistakes, detours and fear—only in retrospect to be revealed not as mishaps or fortunes, but rather as manifestations of necessary intellectual and emotional enquiry. Only by working through these enquiries could I actively bring Jacob's presence into academic writing and reasoning.

Concluding, I advocate the need for a mental reversal by conceptualising the researcher as an entangled, dependant and caring human, with emotional, intellectual and social abilities significant for knowledge production. Instead of posing the benchmarking hypothesis of the researcher as the independence claiming individual due to class, gender and other privileges, we might begin to ask precisely for the strings of networks attached to newly produced knowledge. Overcoming the guilt of not being a 24 h/7 d researcher allows for channelling this energy into stimulating insights, thus being creative with family and research work.

Last but not least, what is feminist in doing fieldwork with a child at one's side? The minor keeps the feminist researcher grounded in everyday life as simultaneously place making and co-production of knowledge by sharing the adventure in an emotional, bodily and spiritual sense. Involuntary or not we are forced into reflexivity concerning identity, power relations and the creation of the field. Using these encounters head-on is a timely addition to the methodological repertoire. Similarly, the co-production of knowledge through the conversations with the child—fostered by the single parent, single child constellation—should move from the fringe into the limelight without overambitious expectations. Listening with care to affects and emotions, power relationships of ethico-political significance and practical material actions (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) in the everyday life with children in the field is a healing process to overcome inhibiting and forbidding binaries of either or. Through a tough thought process of reconciliation, we may turn the fiction of production and reproduction (Biesecker & Hofmeister, 2010) into an enabling recognition of being in the world.

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# Methodologies for Collaborative, Respectful and Caring Research: Conversations with Professional Indigenous Women from Mexico

*Marina Cadaval Narezo*

## SETTING COMMON GROUND

In this chapter I share the methodological process that I have followed throughout my doctoral research. It focuses on learning about and reflecting on the expectations related to graduate education and the consequent professional and community journeys of a group of Indigenous women from Mexico.<sup>1</sup> I met them several years ago, when they obtained a scholarship to carry out master's and doctoral studies in

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<sup>1</sup>My Ph.D. research is done from the International Institute of Social Studies of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (ISS-EUR), The Netherlands.

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the first initiative to allow original peoples<sup>2</sup> to pursue graduate degrees. Financially supported from 2001 to 2012 by the Ford Foundation as the International Fellowships Program (IFP), and from 2013 onwards by the federal government as the Graduate Scholarship Program for Indigenous People (Probepi),<sup>3</sup> I worked for both along more than 10 years. Although the grants were for both men and women, my interest has focused on the stories and experiences of the latter because of the deeper exclusions they undergo due to the intersections of race, gender and class.

At IFP-Probepi, my responsibilities—first as a program officer and later as an executive coordinator—required becoming involved in the entire operational process, interacting with candidates who became selected fellows, degree students and alumni. The small work team was made up of five members. As most of us worked there from the beginning to the end of IFP and some changes were made from 2013, we were all familiar with the whole implementation. This process included designing dissemination campaigns, organizing selection committees, setting up pre-academic courses. We worked together with the fellows to find M.A. and Ph.D. programs and universities that suited their professional interest, monitoring student's performances and organizing alumni workshops and activities. It was during that decade of interacting with hundreds of Indigenous women that a series of concerns—discomforts—arose in me, resulting from first-hand knowledge of the stories of those who applied for a scholarship. These were stories from women who had been the first in their families or in their communities to go to university; women who as girls had to attend primary schools in boarding schools far from home, in other regions, in other states. Women whose stories were sometimes products of collective efforts, sometimes solitary struggles, generally painful, complex processes.

For them, the dream of completing a degree meant an opportunity, but also a multi-pronged challenge. On the one hand, the academic world presented them with the difficulty of meeting standards higher than the educational system had offered them throughout their schooling. Challenges continued with discrimination by virtue of taking up room, or

<sup>2</sup> I will use the term “Indigenous” or “original peoples” interchangeably as both are equally used by the research participants.

<sup>3</sup> Probepi has been sponsored by the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT). Both programs have been administered and executed by the Centre for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology (CIESAS).

“invading” according to Puwar (2004), university spaces unaccustomed to Indigenous bodies, knowledges and methodologies. On the other hand, pursuing education also meant breaking with “obligations” of their communities—marrying, having children, making tortillas.<sup>4</sup> What would happen to them when they returned from their masters and doctorates? In a country like Mexico, wounded by its colonial history (Mignolo, 2011), inherently racist, sexist and classist, would having a solid academic career make a difference? Would they be accepted in their communities—women breaking stereotypes? Would they find more or better opportunities for professional development—women historically excluded from the system?

To answer these questions, as a feminist researcher, I thought that the most appropriate thing to do was to ask them directly. Talk it over. I had met them at an important stage in their lives. I got to know them perhaps in one of the program’s dissemination talks, or in the workshops to apply for the IFP-Probepi scholarships, or during the interview processes. Surely I met them through the course of their three or four year journey as students, as alumni and some of them as members of the program’s selection committees.<sup>5</sup> Surveys and interviews would not be enough or even adequate. I believe in methodological approaches that are anti-oppressive (Brown & Strega, 2005), based on “other practices” that challenge Western knowledge production (Smith, 2012), and that seek to promote relationships of reciprocity, collaboration and mutual recognition (Wilson, 2008). Therefore, using only conventional methods (surveys, interviews) would be incongruous, even disrespectful with what I understand as feminist’s ways of knowledge production. By this I mean

<sup>4</sup> According to many of the stories shared by IFP-Probepi fellows, knowing how to make them is a symbol of femininity and family bonding as corn tortillas are the main product in a Mexican households’ meal.

<sup>5</sup> IFP-Probepi offers a series of supports and activities that involve a long and consistent collaboration between fellows and administrative staff. In addition to financial resources to cover university fees and living expenses, it considers up to one year of academic courses prior to the start of the graduate programs. It also provides advice and management to identify and apply to universities and programs related to the interests of the selected fellows. During the studies, a close, individualized monitoring is done to accompany them until they obtain their degrees. Follow-up activities, professional reintegration workshops and academic fora have been organized for graduates. Several alumni have been part of the program’s selection committees. All these processes imply a close and long-term relationship between all the parties involved, from administrative and executive staff, to the students and alumni themselves.

positioned practices that recognize and assume the individual and collective responsibilities implied. Practices—reflective and narrative—that are not exempt from inconsistencies in the representations produced, but which, when assumed, locate the arguments from that imperfection, depicting complex realities and intricate power relations in the production of knowledge.

To talk about feminist methodologies is, for me, to recognize that thought is collective and contextual, in time, in space, in circumstances. It is also about sharing. It is about time. Time to dialogue—with the participants and collaborators, with oneself—to digest, to marinate the ideas and perspectives from where to reflect, question and transform the social problem we are looking at. My methodological journey, hence, has entailed a constant exercise of reflection—confrontational and questioning—on the implications that producing knowledge implies. It has required paying attention to the forms, to the substance, the background, the contexts, the personal and collective interests, to temporalities—the ephemerality of an encounter and the permanency of a memory; to the vulnerability of shared emotions. It required fluency. It required care. Caring not as frailty, but quite the opposite. Caring to generate partial and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991), which contributes with the strength, conviction and clarity to the methodological and epistemic mosaic that intersectional feminist proposals (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000; Hooks, 2015), as well as Indigenous and decolonial (Brown & Strega, 2005; Smith, 2012; Walsh et al., 2002; Wilson, 2008) have inspired.

That is why, looking to find a common ground with the participants of the research, I used what I have called “reflective conversations”<sup>6</sup>: discussions, encounters that depart from common and mutual understandings—the IFP-Probepi but also the graduate studies or our diverse feminisms—through which we find and examine ourselves in multiple times and spaces. Through conversation I was looking for a link beyond obtaining information, systematizing it and presenting it as a final and individual product. I wanted us to look at each other, to recognize who

<sup>6</sup> I have not found much literature that deepens or describes this method. Morgan’s work *Beyond Method* (1983) mentions the importance of conducting critical conversations between researchers and participants as an epistemic and methodological basis for the “scientific method”, from which plural perspectives are promoted.

we were and who we are; that they knew me not only as the program officer and the executive coordinator of IFP-Probepi with whom they worked on logistical issues, but the researcher interested in understanding and shedding light on their struggles and resistances.

The research was the initial motivation to contact them again. The process itself required several meeting points: first by e-mail and other electronic means to share my objectives; later, in personal encounters in their communities or places of residence. Afterwards, in group virtual meetings, in which I shared the preliminary findings from those face-to-face conversations: individual talks that resulted in some—unexpected—coincidences that I thought worthy to be discussed in groups. And finally, an ongoing, permanent process of sharing texts produced with the protagonists involved. This last process has implied that I write in Spanish (our common language), receive feedback, adjust their suggestions, have their approval to publish, etc. It has been a feminist, collaborative approach that has required time, trust and care.

After considering an initial framing to develop my research, I contacted 36 IFP-Probepi alumni who completed their graduate studies between 2002 and 2014 (out of a total of 71 until 2015), explaining the objectives, scope and implications of my Ph.D. project. With the intention of having a diverse group, I invited women from different Indigenous groups and states, as well as with diverse academic interests and understandings of community belonging. Such understandings vary depending on multiple circumstances, such as if they had to migrate from their villages, towns or regions of origin; or those whose parents are from two different Indigenous groups, etc. The final group was made up of 17 of them: three Maya women from Yucatan; one Nu Savi woman (Mixteca), six Zapotec women and one Huave woman from Oaxaca; two Nahua women from Veracruz; one Chol woman, one Tseltal woman and one Tsotsil woman from Chiapas; and one Rarámuri woman from Chihuahua. Their areas of specialization are Sociology, Gender, Law, Anthropology, Education, Agronomy and Rural Development, among others. Some completed their degrees more than ten years ago and the most recent one did so in 2014. Their current age ranges vary between 25 and 57 years, and the age range when they completed their degrees was between 24 and 40 years; two of them were mothers then and four others had children later on (in total 6

of the 17 are currently mothers).<sup>7</sup> Two did Ph.D.s' and fifteen of them pursued master's degrees. The majority studied outside of Mexico and those that stayed in the country, moved outside their states or regions of origin. Three did not complete their (master's) degrees. Their inclusion in the group was deliberate in order to know and understand their motives, as well as the implications on a personal and professional level. They are fundamental stories to look at and to disentangle the intersections between race, gender and class that should inform educational policies directed at racialized women.

While working at IFP-Probepi, I was closer with some than with others. I would dare to say that in general there was mutual respect and, in some cases, mutual affection and care. Therefore, the methodological process of the research started from those bonds of respect, affection and care. In this chapter I will describe how respect, caring and collaboration played a valuable methodological role. They allowed me not only to understand in a much clearer way their paths, the importance of the IFP-Probepi in their journey and to address my research questions, but also to build knowledge that goes beyond the very objective of writing a doctoral thesis, and is more closely linked to the reality we want to transform.

I present two encounters that, on the one hand, reflect these three elements—respect, affection and caring—in the process to build my research, and on the other, they are a sample of diverse narratives or “texts-in-context” (Willemse, 2014) resulting from the same methodological process. They are narratives that represent and happen at a certain time and in a certain space. They imply changing positions, not only due to the political, social, economic, religious variations of a place that are modified and modify us (Willemse, 2014), but also due to our own individual journeys that lead us to reflect or see differently. The two encounters took place in the cities of residence of each participant. One in Oaxaca city and the other in Valladolid, in the state of Yucatan. Meeting in the cities was important to talk in spaces that are familiar to them and

<sup>7</sup> Motherhood and/or the formation of a family is an important aspect to mention, since it is part of the tensions that several participants mentioned. The dynamics of professional development, the expectations that their communities and families have about them as women, and “*the lack of candidates [potential partners] who are not afraid of me*” as one of them said, is an equation not easy to solve for most women in Mexico.

in which they felt confident, as well as for me to understand and contextualize some of their professional and personal dynamics. Although neither live directly in their communities of origin, they reside in the same state and in the same region. The meaning, the sense of belonging travels, is not fixed, is wide but concrete (Aguilar Gil, 2020).

Before going into the stories, I would like to pinpoint something about my narrative inspired by the recognition that Wilson (2008) makes of the relationship between his own research as a Canadian Indigenous person and his readers. He speaks of the difficulty of finding a middle ground between those who do not know the contexts, the meanings or the backgrounds portrayed—for which it is necessary to dedicate more time and describe in greater detail what is intended to transmit—and those for whom too many explanations or details could be seen as a lack of respect to their intelligence (Wilson, 2008: 7). My own writing process in these pages has straddled these same tensions. When I write, I think of the participants with whom I have shared the drafts and for whom so much contextual clarification is unnecessary. I also think of international readers who do not know the reality that I seek to describe. I apologize for the inconsistencies that this entails. I hope the balance is respectful to everyone.

The texts I am sharing are brief and different in terms of what they narrate, but also in their rhythms, their contents, their extensions, the analytical elements they offer, and even of the times they were written. Their form is an example and a reflection of our conversations and of my own process of critical reflexivity (Rose, 1997), from which I assume the uncontrollable effect of the incongruences, absences and failures implied. At the beginning of each one, I explain how and when I wrote them as well as reflecting on my own motivation for writing. At the end of the two stories, I try to weave some of those elements together that are valuable in a methodological process that seeks care and respect as central to the production of knowledge. The reflections are shared and collective, the narrative is mine.



## THE NARRATIVES

*Marcela. The Food and the Microbus*<sup>8</sup>

After having lunch at a restaurant near Marcela's work in Oaxaca city where we began our conversation, we went together by micro<sup>9</sup> to our respective destinations. She went home to prepare for the next day's trip to the neighbouring state of Chiapas in her role as inspector of organic products in rural communities. I at the hotel where I had come to meet other IFP-Probepi alumni to discuss my research. Our route, up to a point, was the same. We accompany each other. We take care of each other. The food was as a preamble to talk a little about everything and nothing, about our health, about food, about sexism in Mexico. Despite the differences that separate us, the dissimilar stories that have forged us, we also have coincidences and empathies that unite us: the difficult journey of graduate studies, our diverse feminisms, our anti-racist positions. And it is from there that our conversation was built.

The restaurant where we met turned out to be close to Marcela's work. I suggested it but she knew it well. A simple *fonda*<sup>10</sup> run by Doña Luz,<sup>11</sup> a Tehuana woman<sup>12</sup> who, while cooking, served us, and continuously interrupted our conversation—in a very casual, friendly way—to tell a little about each dish, about her colourful clothing, about her personal history. At one point she sat down with us and joined our reflections. We were commenting on some of the problems in Marcela's community when Doña Luz referred to the Indigenous people of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec with distance and with a certain condescension and a patronizing tone. Marcela and I looked at each other with complicity, not saying anything, we silently understood the complexities of the sense of identity.

<sup>8</sup> The quotes in this narrative correspond to the reflective conversation with Marcela Avella. Oaxaca, Mexico, November 19, 2019 (audio).

<sup>9</sup> *Microbuses, peseros* or *colectivos* in Mexico are the most used public transport, generally characterized by their poor condition, and the careless driving of the drivers. They cost between \$3 and \$10 pesos (\$0.15–\$0.50 USD) depending on the region and the distance travelled.

<sup>10</sup> *Fondas* are local restaurants characterized by homemade food, normally prepared by the same owners, who also attend the costumers.

<sup>11</sup> I use a pseudonym to respect the anonymity of the women involved in the narrative.

<sup>12</sup> Originally from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a Zapotec region known, among other things, for the strong presence of merchant women, who proudly wear beautiful petticoats and colourful *huipiles* (embellished blouses or dresses).

Tehuana like Doña Luz are Zapotec, “Indigenous” if we use one of the official terms to name and group the original peoples.<sup>13</sup> However, she did not identify as such. That moment, that comment, our crossed gazes led Marcela and me to reflect on the subject later. The place mattered, the physical space of our encounter helped to contextualize the conversation, for the ideas to flow and for us to find various references from which to bridge and connect our ideas.

During the trip in the *pesero*, having already addressed all the issues related to my research, the recorder turned off,<sup>14</sup> our hearts met in memories that were also part of that present, and other reflections arose. In the brief story that I share below, that transition between ideas and spaces that allowed us to talk in a loose, deep and respectful way is reflected. The text weaves my narrative with Marcela’s stories and words. It provides some analytical elements around topics such as the relevance of graduate education and identity tensions that are valuable for discussing the intersections between gender, race and class in higher education, but which are not the reason for this chapter. I wrote the text immediately after meeting Marcela, inspired and excited to have spent a warm afternoon with her (physically and emotionally speaking). It was a reunion that has kept us close.

### *Oaxaca, November 19, 2019*

#### *Microbus Conversations*

At age 11, Marcela was looking for the moon from the window of the room she shared with many other girls at the boarding school she went to in Puebla, 460 kms away from Tanetze de Zaragoza, her hometown in Oaxaca. She asked for, or got the farthest bed, the one in the corner, the one that overlooked that window that allowed her to look at her

<sup>13</sup> Mexico has 68 groups that represent 20% of the total population (more than 25 million people). Although they live throughout the country, the Southeast region has the highest concentration. Only between Oaxaca and Chiapas live almost 30% of the total of the Indigenous persons. Oaxaca is the state with more groups, 16 different groups representing 14.4% of the total of the Indigenous population of the country (El Economista, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of each of the 17 conversations carried on, I asked for authorization to record them, justifying the importance for my reflective process. To do so, I followed the ISS-EUR ethical protocols (<https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-excellence/research-ethics>).

parents through the moon. Every night she looked at it for a long time, whether full, waning or new. For her, the moon was a convex reflector that transported her to her village, where she imagined her parents also looking up at it. She portrayed them mirroring her lying on the bed, scared, and they comforted her by talking in silence. It was not a cliché. Neither she nor her parents, as in a novel, had agreed to meet on the moon to close the distance. For Marcela this was a concrete fact, a practice that ran in her Zapotec blood, and at that moment she used it to find love and care. It was a way of feeling accompanied and making sense of the need to study so far away from home.

When she was interviewed for the IFP scholarship in 2002 to do graduate studies in Rural Development, the selection committee members asked her if she thought she had leadership skills. Marce said that she would be the first woman in her town to do a master's degree if she got the scholarship. She didn't know if they would understand and translate what that meant, if they would have the faintest idea about her academic trajectory. She also wasn't sure if that was a good answer, but that was the only thing that passed through her mind.

With the first sip of coffee that Doña Luz served us, Marcela immediately recognized: *it has cardamom*. "How can you tell?" I asked surprised and embarrassed by my lack of palate.

*I am a producer and coffee taster. It's my personal project with my mom and dad. We even have our own strain! Coffee allowed us to become commoners with hearts of small landowners—she laughed—although our family project has influenced the community. Several families have resumed planting and selling coffee that had been lost due to lack of resources. I have helped them manage support from the government and other institutions to get grain and machinery. (Avella, 2019)*

Although she lives in Oaxaca city, where she works as an inspector of organic products, her family-personal-community project is in Tanetze, with her coffee plantations: "*I dream of selling coffee in my town and that tourists go there, get to know the region and learn from the people. That they enjoy our coffee*" (Avella, 2019).

While the micro took us from the Yunenisa restaurant, where Doña Luz's food triggered contextualized reflective discussions to the centre of Oaxaca city, Marce delved into what could be interpreted as leadership. She wondered, what it meant for an 11-year-old girl to agree to go

to a boarding school in another state, 460 kms away, to continue with secondary school. I think she had not seen it so clearly until then. There we were, sharing memories in the old and dilapidated micro with broken and open windows allowing the air to reduce the heat; with reggaeton at full volume, a ventriloquist doing his act looking to get some pesos, and the potholes that shook us in all directions. It was there where she realized and accepted that since she was a child, she has had a fierce spirit.

*“I was always like that, decisive”* (Avella, 2019). She laughs. We laugh. I recognized myself as decisive too and shared with her personal experiences that led us to discuss how, in a patriarchal society like Mexico, to be determined is not a very feminine characteristic. Quite the opposite. We laughed, I think, recognizing our transgression. Proud of it, acknowledging the implied tensions. Although her parents went to visit her three months after she left, a little because she had chickenpox, and a lot because they wanted her back, it was she who decided to stay. Her heart broke too, but she imagined some members of the family saying “obviously, you couldn’t make it,” and her pride gave her the strength to send her parents back, confused and devastated. That was, she realized while we were conversing, the beginning of her strong and decisive spirit. The one that has always accompanied her, the one that the members of the selection committee probably saw and with which she takes advantage of the opportunities she finds, and the ones that she also creates.

She smiles complicitly when she tells me how men—and women—are amazed when they see her driving. She knows well that by taking the steering wheel of the *vocho*<sup>15</sup> that she bought with the earnings from her job she breaks with all the stereotypes imposed on her: those of her people and other communities in the region and according to whom she should be at home with her husband and children; and those that come out of mestizo and white people’s looks, for whom, in addition to being at home surrounded by children, it is assumed it would be difficult for her to have finished primary school—therefore being able to know how to drive or to have the economic means to buy a car. *“I have a vehicle, degrees and I participate in the assembly, and with those three I have enough so that they do not accept me”* (Avella, 2019). The laughter intensifies—hers, mine. Our connection continues to grow. In my own trajectory as a middle class, urban woman—I feel—the sexism is the same. The details are different.

<sup>15</sup> This is how the Volkswagen sedan model is called and that was the most accessible vehicle in Mexico until 2003, when it was discontinued.

We said goodbye in the *pesero*. She got off before me. I stayed with the reggaeton, the shaking and the immense satisfaction of having met her again, of having shared valuable reflections to understand the complexities and tensions that being a professional Indigenous woman means. But above all I was pleased for having confirmed that we are women looking to promote dynamics and spaces of inclusion, respect and equality. In some way we agreed, even without naming it as such, that we live what writer Sarah Ahmed calls “a feminist life” (2017). That is, in our daily actions, in the way we understand and relate with others and within our own surroundings, we challenge and discuss the structural sexism that still oppresses.

How do I link this narrative to my understanding of a feminist methodology? I think that, in one way it was an encounter of sharing, caring, bonding, thinking together. A space, a moment where we coincided and reflected on topics that I was interested in for my research, but that Marcela said she thinks about all the time. She told me she was happy to find someone with whom to discuss, lean on, complain, laugh about those thoughts, her experiences. To remember part of who she is and recognize the value of her professional trajectory: important reflections for the self-esteem. On the other hand, the narrative itself and the possibility of publishing a chapter that includes our encounter became an excuse to continue discussing the text in distance, as I am back in The Netherlands. Some of the writing has been done while drinking Marcela’s coffee *BI’AVELLA* that I brought from my last trip to Mexico at the end of 2020. Academic processes that go beyond doing a research and are more connected to the reality we live in, that we question and want to transform. Relationships, processes built from and with care.

*Miriam. The Market and the Cenote*<sup>16</sup>

I am writing this text in April 2020, six months after having seen Miriam. We are in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis that spilled over several weeks ago. I am in The Hague, in The Netherlands, locked up at home, working. The most fluid and inspiring way to review the conversations with the participants of my research is to listen to them while walking in the woods that are close to where I live. I review the audios recorded while conversing, and I go back to the exact moment of our encounter.

<sup>16</sup> The quotes in this narrative correspond to the reflective conversation with Miriam Uitz. Valladolid, Yucatan, Mexico, October 9, 2019 (audio).

I think about the value of alternative methodologies—feminists, intersectional, Indigenous, decolonial, anti-oppressive—as helpful to situate not only multiple representations that qualitative research requires, but also for promoting innovative dynamics to interact with the different actors involved—including our own reflectivity—along the process to produce knowledge.

As I walk, I listen, remember, feel and look at the space in which each meeting took place, the emotions triggered, the discussions opened. I listen and confirm the importance of exposing widely the stories of the Indigenous women that I talked to. Our encounters, our differences and commonalities. They must be known. I listen to the deep reflections that emerge from casual conversations, dialogued from similar understandings that somehow weave us together. I recognize also how malleable our perceptions could be, making sense of the changing and fluid positions Willemsen talks about (Willemsen, 2014).

I listen to the conversation with Miriam. It took place in Valladolid, Merida while we were eating in the market and then walking through the city, in a kind of a spontaneous and unforeseen “walkshop” (Leach, 2014; Wickson et al., 2015). It was a walk that allowed us to interact, to get inspired, to let ideas flow more freely, to diminish hierarchies (Leach, 2014). The walk extended the time we spent together, contextualized and stimulated our reflections. It gave meaning to Miriam’s arguments about the complexities of the Mayan identity: so present and so denied. Her struggle and contributions seek to reposition her mother tongue and culture (Maya) within the university space, where she started working 10 years ago because it is in academia, she said, where *graduate studies really count* (Uitz, 2019). The master’s degree gave her a contract as a full-time teacher at the Universidad de Occidente (UNO), a job that, as she will narrate, she never thought she would be doing.

Valladolid is a small city of little more than 1000 km<sup>2</sup> inhabited by about 75,000 people, of which more than 55,000 speak Maya (INEGI, 2020). The Mexican syncretism, characterized by the cultural mix of the original peoples and the Spanish colony, has the shape of cenotes, a central plaza with a church and an archaeological zone, summarizing the historical condensation of an Indigenous region on which the colonial structure was imposed. It is an overlap that is noticeable in its streets, in the urban layout, in the denial of its inhabitants by their origin; but it is the power of that denied culture that is imposed on the faces and bodies that walked through it—their clothing, the food that is consumed—which defines it.

The materiality of the landscape was a reference that facilitated the reflection (Wickson et al., 2015: 245). Walking it, feeling it and knowing it by the hand of Miriam, allowed me to contextualize her frustrations and the dimensions of her struggles.

*Valladolid, October 9, 2019*

*Walking Conversation*

I arrived in Valladolid with another participant in my research with whom I had spent most of the previous day in Merida—breakfast turned into lunch and between our talks I told her that I would go see Miriam. As they knew each other from IFP-Probepi, she proposed to come with me and convinced a friend of hers to take us. The journey from Merida was around 1.5 h, during which we continued the conversation that extended our meeting: the topic was racism within the higher education system. Along the trip we couldn't talk much because it was better to have the windows open and let our voices disappear with the air, than to be suffocated with the humidity of the Yucatecan tropics. The car was old and the air conditioning didn't work.

We met Miriam on a corner at the outskirts of the city. She parked her car and when she got out, we hugged each other fondly. Since she applied for a scholarship in 2004 to study visual communication, we have had a good connection. Miriam drives and owns a car, just like Marcela. Perhaps in her case she breaks less with the imaginary of what being Indigenous Mayan means. We didn't talk about it, but in addition to being originally from a more urban community, she is now a professor at a university. Different contexts, different circumstances. Similar exclusions and discriminations, like the racism and the sexism they experience. We went to the market to have lunch. A solid and roofed warehouse opened at its ends, which prevented a greenhouse effect. Miriam and I sat at a separate table from the other two companions so we could talk calmly.

The place was less than suitable. Not only did the opening of the warehouse and the naturally noisy movement of a market prevent us from being able to speak with that expected calm, but, as soon as we sat down, the *tambora*<sup>17</sup> started. I turned on my cell phone recorder. Miriam took it and placed it next to her, a gesture that demonstrated her experience

<sup>17</sup> The *tambora* is an instrument (drum and cymbals) and a type of music from the North of the country characterized by its percussion sound.

as a communicator. While we ate, we talked a bit about her experience finishing her master's degree at the University of Deusto, in Spain. Since we had to shout and get close to each other, we decided to get out of there. We went for a walk.

We went to the cenote that is in the middle of the city. It is a majestic expression of nature and of the sacred power of the Indigenous cosmogony: holistic and rooted in the earth; but also, an expression of the privatization projects that manipulate symbols and traditions for the commercialization of tourism. We talked while we walked, we had a sustained intellectual discussion grounded in context (Wickson et al., 2015). The words were connected with the surroundings, with other passers, by the buildings, with the humid, "fresh" air—according to Miriam and the other two companions. The noise and urban movement, the cars, the pedestrians and the irregular sidewalks interrupted the rhythm of our ideas. Cut out and in pieces, they still became deep and solid reflections on the troubles of her professional trajectory.

On the one hand, pursuing her graduate studies meant leaving Yucatan and learning about other realities and other struggles that helped her to reference her own. She learned from the Basques to defend her identity on a daily basis: by using the language, eating the food, by taking care of her territory. However, her professional development after the master's degree took her into a different direction. She couldn't go back to the work where she had been promised a place. She was hired for a time in the same organization but *as part of the institution's language catalogue* (Uitz, 2019). She speaks with anger and disappointment:

*They did not recognize my knowledge and skills as an audio-visual producer or as a communicator, but only as a Mayan-speaking woman. Institutions that call themselves intercultural or inclusive value only the Indigenous belonging not the Indigenous professional.* (Uitz, 2019)

She told me that her dreams fell apart because she didn't have the right networks and because, she said, "*I was nobody's daughter*" "*There is no graduate degree that compares with networks. Neither the title, nor the experience, or the social commitment could face the institutional interests and favouritism*" (Uitz, 2019). She moved to the academy. A foreign world that she never thought to work in but that has allowed her to do what she loves most: audio-visual and radio production in Mayan, by and



for Mayan people. It was the academic environment that recognized her capacities and gave value to her studies. It seems that universities are a business that produces and feeds on itself, we both concluded.

After the walk, in which we stopped to buy pastries and local products, Miriam invited us to her home to meet her family, consisting of her husband and two little ones. She seemed proud of her family project, but also of the physical space that she and her husband built. We had a glass of water and headed back to Merida, it was already dark and we still had almost two hours of driving. Opening the doors of her home was a caress to the heart, a bridge of affection that has no return.

A year later, while walking through the woods in The Netherlands, I was again thinking about the complexities of a highly educated Mayan (Indigenous) woman like Miriam. Successful and with some professional and economic stability, her journey has been painful due to the structural discriminations of a racist system that, despite its discourses of inclusion and diversity, deepens inequalities. Nonetheless, the strategies she uses to strengthen her language and culture begin at home with her children and are extended to her students and to the university where she teaches. The effect is manifold. It does not erase, however, the pain and the frustration due the racism and tokenism<sup>18</sup> rooted in many “intercultural” institutions in Mexico. Her shared experience has made me question the expectations about graduate education to overcome certain exclusions Indigenous women face at the core of my Ph.D. research.

Only by having a face-to-face reflective conversation, with a contextual walk, and honestly trying to bridge those who we were in 2004 when we first met, and those who we are now, the story could go the way it went. Only because of sharing, caring and connecting we continue developing projects together.<sup>19</sup> Thanks to getting inspired by our walking

<sup>18</sup> Making superficial or symbolic efforts to represent people from under-represented groups in certain spaces, policies, etc., in order to give the impression of sexual or racial inclusion and equality.

<sup>19</sup> At the end of 2020, we participated, together with other women who have collaborated in my Ph.D. research, in a Campaign of Actions in Internet against Racism, sponsored by Cátedra UNESCO in Higher Education and Indigenous and Afro- descendant Peoples in Latin America. As a result of that coalition and with the help of the Associate Professor Dr. Rosalba Icaza, ISS-EUR granted us funds to create a blog and write a book about racism and sexism in higher education. The blog was launched in March 2021 (<http://racismo2021.wixsite.com/mujeres-indigenas>) and the book will be released in 2022.

in Valladolid, I decided to do a similar exercise to think about all those encounters that happened as part of my research, which, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, seemed so far away. I realized then, also walking, that I have been using, developing what in academia would be considered an alternative methodology, which I consider as grounded in my feminist perspective of life.

### ADJUSTING THE RESEARCH, PLACING CARE AT THE CENTRE

I hope these narratives were inspiring enough to see some aspects that I would like to discuss further. They are different in their extension, in the analytical elements offered, in the times and emotions with which they were written. Selecting them to be included in this chapter—among the 17 narratives—implied thinking about why these and not others. What have I wanted to convey? I chose them for two main reasons and an extra consideration. First, they are the most evocative for the purpose of this chapter, which is about sharing what I consider a feminist methodology centred in caring. Secondly, because they represent the mentioned changing and fluid positions in/of the research process. The former leans on descriptive details of the encounters—the contexts, the gazes, the food, the decisions taken, the emotions triggered—as key elements to frame a thoughtful process of knowledge production. The latter reflects my own inspirations stimulated differently—one immediately after a gathering, the other months later, in different setting, moved by other emotions. Not all the 17 encounters and the related reflections, I must admit, were so evocative, so inspirational. The third consideration that was important to take into account, was the closeness, the trust, and the availability/willingness of the protagonists to read, comment and give feedback to the text. They were interested in discussing the chapter. They wanted to collaborate. Without their approval I would not have included them here; because my understanding of feminist and Indigenous approaches, as shared here, considers reciprocal, ethical, relational responsibility and respect (Wilson, 2008).

Marcela and Miriam allowed me to use their stories. We agreed that they would be recognized, without pseudonyms, as part of the relational responsibility of collaborative knowledge production and also in order to position them as the protagonists of those stories (Wilson, 2008: 10). As a mestizo/white woman in coalition with Indigenous women we

are revealing together exclusions, inequalities, injustices. We are exposing resistances and resignifications. They, as Indigenous women professionals are using this (international) space to expose those exclusions, inequalities and injustices in order to position themselves and share their critical perspectives.

Before writing the first draft of this chapter, I sent them, separately, the texts I wrote about our encounters. I wanted them to know how I felt, what our conversations triggered in me and the relevance of our discussions for my research—not for the methodology but as food for thought. I asked them afterwards if I could use them to write this chapter. They both agreed. The texts were in Spanish, that besides being our common language is the one in which I think feel and dream. The need to share the following drafts with them was an excuse, and has become an opportunity to keep writing in my mother tongue.<sup>20</sup> I have discovered how comfortable the writing process could be, how meaningful the words are when coming from the heart. This exercise has been crucial to develop a collective text, but also to find my own voice as a researcher. The processes of critical reflexivity (Rose, 1997) from which to position ourselves, are constant, permanent, collective and individual. My own reflective exercise, I realize now, started in 2001 but it has been over time, with the Ph.D. journey specifically, that I have found words to name and express my concerns, to set and contextualize the problem.

As I have said at the beginning of this chapter, the initial objective of my research was to know the stories and perspectives on graduate education of a group of professional Indigenous women, and to expose the structural barriers (racism, sexism and classism) they have faced despite their academic education. Situated, contextual, intersectional research based on feminist methodologies of care and collaboration has been key to framing, developing and to being coherent in the representations that I seek to make. Undoubtedly, it is the women's experiences, ideas, indignations, resistances, struggles and resignifications that have been the substance of my work. It was with them that I have spoken; it was from their gazes that I built the central arguments. It was the need to show the exclusions of the colonial and patriarchal system that persists in Mexico that inspired me to do this work. This research is about them because

<sup>20</sup> The Ph.D. is in English thus the language in which I am writing my doctoral dissertation.

it is them—their voices and trajectories—who must be recognized as producers of debates, actions and social changes.

However, this initial objective—product of my personal intentions—has been adjusted and complemented as part of the methodology used, that of which knowledge is produced from within, from shared concerns. The centre has moved from exclusively addressing the difficulties they have faced (exclusions, oppressions), to looking into their resistances. “We don’t want to be the victims of our own stories” several agreed. On the contrary. As coalition, we would like to challenge what, according to Wilson (2018), Western academia tends to replicate: research focused on the problems of Indigenous populations [on disease rather than health] that serve to impose external solutions and reproduce negative stereotypes (Wilson, 2018: 16).

Therefore, and as part of the collaborative, respectful and caring methodological processes that I believe in and that I have developed, I have adjusted my centre to their centre and created also a common one. One that, while exposing the inequalities and structural exclusions of Mexico, makes visible the roles of the Indigenous women as political and social actors in the new narratives about women. It is their path that holds resistances, transformations and repositions as women, as Indigenous people and as professionals. While promoting their own, they question it. While resisting “the normative”, the Western, the patriarchy, the oppressive, they use it to rethink the local, the community. In my experience, then, to be able to shift the centre of a study is necessary to be flexible and humble about our limitations as researchers. It is necessary as well to listen, to pay attention, to care, not only about our individual academic objective, but about the people involved, the processes triggered.

But what does it mean in academia, a world where knowledge is generally produced from the “objective”—meaning “exclusive” and “superior”—view of the researcher, to talk about collaboration and caring? Caring was part of looking at my research as a “ceremony” (Wilson, 2008) which is part of a collective dynamic that, as in a ceremony, seeks to produce and bond relationships responsible of themselves and among themselves (Wilson, 2008: 7–8). In its attempt to be honest and attached as much as possible to the multiple representation that entails, the research was not free from inconsistencies and errors. It was also that

intention which led me to validate each text, each story, each representation with the protagonists and produce something that, even though it is my responsibility, was shaped by the participants.

Along my methodological reflections about caring, I also came across with a nuance that I consider important to differentiate here. One has to do with the forms of producing knowledge as well as its translation into academic language; and the other has to do with the substance, with those concerns—discomforts—that drive us to look more deeply at a social problem. Caring in terms of forms refers, I consider, to the written production and the process that it entails: the importance of respecting the ideas of the collaborators, as well as recognizing—naming—the bodies, the stories, the contexts that build them. The forms consider paying attention to ethical aspects of confidentiality and security of each participant and follow institutional regulations to guarantee the proper use of the information generated.<sup>21</sup>

As for caring in terms of substance, I mean the foundation, the origin that leads us to carry out an investigation and that has to do with that social problem we are interested in exposing, questioning, solving. It is this ground that must be linked or shared with those who are part of the research and from where to seek a meeting point to reflect together. In other words, what is important in the research process is what motivates it, and how that curiosity, that discomfort, that dissatisfaction or that social concern arises and is echoed among researchers and (potential) collaborators or participants.

Although my research began with a specific personal objective, the methodological process has taken me much further. I think that on the one hand it has been a valuable contribution to, among other things, promoting what Hooks (2015) calls “talk [about] race”. That is to say, a political struggle to expose and position the own perspectives and voices of Indigenous women, as a contribution to a still missing body—under construction, I would say—of social and political criticism of racialized women on racism (Hooks, 2015) and other exclusions. But on the other hand, and more important methodologically speaking, to try to build collectively, recognizing our individualities within the set of voices that

<sup>21</sup> As an example, after having systematized the conversations with the 17 participants, I organized three online conversations to present preliminary results and reflections. Their suggestions, comments and opinions were useful to rethink and adjust some of the ideas or concepts raised.

we are and openly share the reflective processes that we deal with. It is about constructing knowledge that roots and shapes us as conscious social beings, critical of a reality that we must transform so that we all have a worthy place in it.

To talk about collaboration, care and respect as the backbone of my research has been talking about everybody, about them, about me, about us. It has been about sharing, about taking individual and collective decisions; about interpreting silences, complicities. It has been about putting ourselves as women at the centre: various, diverse, opposed, partisan, in coalition. It has been an exercise of imbalances and inconsistencies, but by identifying and naming them I have tried assume them. Thinking about the possibility of producing knowledge based on these three principles has been encouraging. They are values that emerge from feminist approaches in manifold ways. Approaches that are teaching us to look at and recognize privileges, work with them; to look at the pains and take care of them; to look at ourselves, value our contributions. I am learning to think from all of these. From there, I am sharing my experience, hoping to continue challenging, transforming conventional methodologies and the exclusions they entail.

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# Immersion, Diversion, Subversion: Living a Feminist Methodology

*C. Sathyamala*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter tells the story of my fifteen-month ethnographic study in a village in Tamil Nadu, India, for a doctoral degree. When I set out for my Ph.D. “fieldwork”,<sup>1</sup> even if inexperienced in ethnography, I carried to the “field” a certain worldview shaped by Marxist and feminist theories along with critical readings of other axes of oppression such as caste and race. In addition, irrespective of whether it was for the purposes of research or not, there were certain ethical values that I considered indispensable while working with people. These were to respect people, not practice discrimination and above all to do no harm. I would term these universal

<sup>1</sup>I place the word fieldwork within quotation marks as I am not comfortable using this word to describe interactions with people particularly after I found out that it is also a military terminology (Asher, 2019).

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values as foundational for good research not because of their instrumental utility in accessing good quality data but as central to the ethics of care and ethics of being (Krause & Boldt, 2017). In this chapter, I begin by tracing my journey from the time I, as a physician, took one of the first decisive steps in my life to opt out of tertiary level clinical medicine to work at the primary care level in rural India. I look at how in this process I gathered theory, methods, politics and found a way of being. This is followed by a narration of my experiences in the village where I conducted my “fieldwork”. I observed the village people’s everyday lives, as reflected and refracted through multi-layered class, caste and gender lenses even as I negotiated my everyday life in the village. Although I did not begin my research with the explicit intention of applying feminist methodology, my research has all the important elements that underscore a feminist approach. Reflecting on the methodology I adopted, I conclude that methodologies need to be lived rather than applied.

### JOURNEYING FROM NATURAL SCIENCE TO SOCIAL SCIENCES

As a public health physician, with a background in natural sciences, my decision to do a Ph.D. in social sciences reflected a desire to engage in a trans-disciplinary approach.<sup>2</sup> Tentatively entitled, “Food, work, and health: class, caste, and gender perspectives”, my research was to focus on the impact of a flagship poverty alleviation programme in India, the “National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme”, on the nutritional health and well-being of its beneficiaries. Until then, as an epidemiologist for me to study “causal” associations meant carrying out large quantitative surveys. Knowing that for every study that “proved” an association, there could be an equal number disproving it, I was increasingly convinced that yet another population-based quantitative study would not necessarily provide new answers to my research question. The methodological challenge was three-fold: (i) how to move away from reductionist bio-medical models which de-contextualized ‘dis-ease’ causations by dismissing the complexity of people’s lived experiences as subjective and therefore of little relevance; (ii) how to listen and incorporate the voices of people,

<sup>2</sup> The intention was to go beyond just combining academic disciplines in order to break disciplinary boundaries and move towards a new holistic approach.

particularly the marginalized; and (iii) how to counter-pose these realities to the one-truth of logical positivists. Without wanting to minimize the importance of quantitative data, my respect for qualitative data grew as I began to view these methods as not in opposition but as complementary in the task of unravelling the connections between complex social realities and people's stories.

My central research question evolved from assessing a specific poverty alleviation programme to a broader issue of the persistence of the problem of nutrition in India. The theoretical framework for my study combined Foucauldian genealogy, and eco-social theory with explicit political economy, political ecology, and psychosocial perspectives (Sathyamala, 2016). I found ethnography, with participant observation of everyday lives, "eminently suitable to understand both how the discourse and interventions in nutrition operate at the micro level and why they do not succeed in their avowed purposes, in a milieu where the natural environment comingles with the social to produce the pattern of the problem of nutrition" (Sathyamala, 2016: 20). My thought transformation did not occur all at once or particularly smoothly because I had to first come to terms with my past and unlearn much.<sup>3</sup> My choice of ethnography indicated a definitive shift in my ontology and epistemology.<sup>4</sup> I chose the extended case method which "applies reflexive science to ethnography" where the "individual participant observer carries out all the tasks of the research process in collaboration with her subjects" (Burawoy, 1998: 5, 28).

During the formal presentation of my research design that was required before commencing data collection, questions were raised about my inexperience in qualitative methods, particularly ethnography. I was able to convince the committee that I was capable of carrying out high quality data collection drawing upon my considerable experience of working with economically poor and socially marginalized people, in both urban and rural India. My engagement with this sector of Indian society can be

<sup>3</sup> My first major struggle was to accept "social" sciences as "science" because from school days "social studies", as it was known, were allocated for students who could not make it to the natural science grades.

<sup>4</sup> Though I received help from many, for their guidance during this period, I am particularly grateful to my promoter Ashwani Saith, co-promoter Amrita Chhachhi, John Cameron and Shanti George. Special acknowledgements are due to the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) for opening the door of opportunity, and to the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP) for financial support through much of my Ph.D. years.

traced to when I dropped-out midway in my post-graduate training in clinical medicine and moved from an urban tertiary teaching-hospital facility to work in rural areas at the primary care level. I tried to live with the ethos of an ancient Chinese poem (attributed to Lao Tzu—sixth century BCE) which had become a sort of an anthem for those working in community health:

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Love them. Start with what they know. Build with what they have. But with the best leaders, when the work is done, the task accomplished, the people will say “We have done this ourselves”.<sup>5</sup>

While my initial decision to work with the people was impulsive and emotional as I was moved by their suffering, it later drew its inspiration from Marxist and left-wing literature. Though an instinctive feminist from the age of five (Sathyamala, 1998: 7), I discovered feminism by being part of the autonomous women’s movement in India<sup>6</sup> and together with others spearheaded some of the important campaigns in reproductive health rights.<sup>7</sup> I learned to listen to the wisdom of the “have-nots” as they negotiated their lives against unimaginable odds,<sup>8</sup> and in the process I learned social theory from them. For instance, in a training programme

<sup>5</sup> This saying by Lao Tsu is well quoted on the web but it is difficult to find exactly which writing it was included in. For more on Lao Tsu see Wei-bin (2001).

<sup>6</sup> In India, the autonomous women’s groups emerged in the late 1970s, comprising mostly middle class educated women, many of whom were from the left tradition, but who had become disenchanted with patriarchy and sexism experienced there (Sathyamala, 2005). These groups were non-party affiliated and refrained from taking external funds to support their work. For a critique of the autonomous women’s groups in relation to the caste question, see Rege (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Notable among these are the campaigns against the E-P drugs (high fixed dose estrogen-progesterone combination drugs), sex-determination tests and sex-selective abortions, and the hazardous long-term contraceptives such as the injectable Net-En and Depo-Provera.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, it was by listening to the survivors of the Bhopal gas leak tragedy of 1984, in Bhopal, India, that I and my two male colleagues could design a study in 1989 that challenged the faulty categorization of injuries by the medical establishment. This later formed the basis of interim relief for the survivors (see Sathyamala et al., 1989).

for women village development workers in Uttar Pradesh, India, during a discussion on gender equality, a young woman<sup>9</sup> challenged me:

*Behanji* (sister) when you talk of equality, are you talking of equality with my husband who is a landless labourer, or of equality with my landlord who owns 60 acres of land, or of equality with you who earns about fifty times my wages? (Sathyamala, 1995: 15)

It was when I began to read theory after joining the Ph.D. programme, that I learned that the multiple, multi-layered inequalities had been conceptualized as intersectionality by Crenshaw (1989).<sup>10</sup> Without any formal grounding in the social sciences, coming from a country where inequalities of every sort are present in every walk of life, and are clearly visible to the naked eye, I had positioned myself as a Marxist-feminist,<sup>11</sup> conscious of other intersecting inequalities due to caste and religious identities. I concluded that public health required “taking sides”, a positioning which I explored in a co-authored book, with the same title, on the political economy of health (Sathyamala et al., 1986). Training in a care-giving profession,<sup>12</sup> gave me the ability to observe, to listen with the eyes and empathize, as I tried to live up to the German physician Rudolf Virchow’s (1821–1902) maxim, that “a physician is a natural attorney of the poor” (Brown & Fee, 2006: 2104).

For my Ph.D. “fieldwork”, although I have never lived in Tamil Nadu, I chose a village from this state as Tamil is my mother tongue and I am well-versed in it. I went through an elaborate process for selecting the study village: two major considerations were, one, that it should be of mixed caste groups and two, be large enough to provide adequate

<sup>9</sup> She tragically died later of a non-pregnancy related cause for want of timely medical help.

<sup>10</sup> Although bell hooks had talked about sexism and racism in 1981, the concept intersectionality is attributed to the American black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). See Davis (2020) about contestations over who owns intersectionality.

<sup>11</sup> “Marxist feminism explores how gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity structure production in capitalism” (Armstrong, 2020: NP).

<sup>12</sup> Here I would like to acknowledge the faculty at the Christian Medical College, Ludhiana, Punjab, India, where I trained as a physician for inculcating in us a strong sense of the ethics of care.

numbers for statistical purposes but not too large to make participant observation impossible. As I describe below, the final village selection was based on intuition and emotion both of which are valued in feminist methodological approaches.<sup>13</sup>

### CHAPTEENGALA? (HAVE YOU EATEN?)

During my preliminary visit to the village, the first person I wanted to meet was the panchayat president, the elected leader of the village council, and was pleasantly surprised to find that the president was a woman.<sup>14</sup> I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit which was to do a research (*aaraiichi*) about food and its impact on health and well-being.<sup>15</sup> She was a woman with a kindly face in her late forties and the first question she asked after this exchange was “*chapteengala* (have you eaten)?” When I told her that I had left home at 7.30 am, she became concerned that I had had nothing to eat since then and that it was already 3 pm, way past lunch time. She said that it was not possible to buy food in the village at that time and that it would be another two or three hours before I reached home. Although I said that it was alright, she conferred with the other three village women in the room (two of them had accompanied me) as to which household in the village would have food to spare at that time. Soon a medium-sized stainless-steel tiffin box containing *sambar-sadam* (rice mixed with a spicy lentil-based curry) was brought for me to eat. I felt uncomfortable eating alone without sharing it, so I ate a little to satisfy them and the rest of the food I offered the women who had accompanied me. I took these women’s kindness to a total stranger as a positive sign and given my research topic the offer of food seemed almost like a propitious omen!

<sup>13</sup> My research was based on multiple sources of data ranging from direct observations (with regular journaling), interviews, discussions, documents, village records, newspapers as well as two quantitative surveys.

<sup>14</sup> The *gram panchayat* (village council) is a democratic body at the village level with the council members elected by the village people. To encourage women to be elected as presidents of the village council, a specified number of villages in a state are reserved for women Panchayat presidents.

<sup>15</sup> The word *aaraiichi* appeared to be well understood as “finding out”.

Later, living in the village, depending upon the time of the day (morning, noon, or evening), the query “*chaapteengala*”<sup>16</sup> inevitably followed a greeting when I met someone (both men and women) who knew me well. This way of greeting was mostly rhetorical but was also meant to convey concern and care. The hospitality of the Indian people, particularly in rural areas, has been noted by others. Gold (2015) writes about her experience in a North Indian village,

[u]ttered at appropriate times of a day, ‘Have you eaten?’ often seemed to me to be more or less a meaningless interrogative greeting equivalent to ‘how are you?’, or ‘How’s it going?’ ... I saw the perpetual offers of food as an almost bothersome aspect of traditional village hospitality. However, a reconsideration of this everyday exchange shows the ways food is used to express solidarity and enact morality. (Gold, 2015: 548–549)

I visited the village again in 2010 and my initial feeling of ease was confirmed, and, after my design seminar presentation at the end of my first year of doctoral studies, I “entered” the village to live and formally do my research from January 2011 to March 2012.

## THE PROCESS OF PRODUCING “DATA”

To her interaction with the participants, the researcher brings her location, culture, motivations, limitations, ignorances, skills, education, sources, familiarity with theory and methodology, the trained incapacities of socialization in dominant institutions, and an outside perspective that may be useful as well as troublesome. (Gorelick, 1991: 469)

<sup>16</sup> This intonation is different among urbanized upper caste people which is “*saapteengala*”.

I lived in the village, which I anonymize as “Oru-oor”,<sup>17</sup> for a period of fifteen months covering an entire agricultural cycle from harvest to harvest. The first three months were spent on getting familiar with the village and, more importantly, for the village people to get to know me. The first draft of my ethnographic experience was written midway through my “fieldwork” when I returned to The Hague. This was important because it provided me with a necessary break from the arduousness of work and the necessary distance from the “field” to write a reflexive piece. Moreover, I could perceive gaps that needed to be filled when I returned to Oru-oor. Until I completed my “fieldwork”, I did not read any “fieldwork” accounts by other anthropologists, whether from India or elsewhere as I wanted to negotiate my everyday life in the village unencumbered by the experiences of others. It was only when I was finalizing the chapter and needed to embed it in literature that I read other scholars.

The final chapter in my thesis describing my “fieldwork” was approximately 21,000 words.<sup>18</sup> It described how my identity as an upper class (relatively speaking), upper caste (relatively speaking), urbanized, unmarried woman, highly educated qualified physician, belonging to a “minority” religion,<sup>19</sup> and who has lived in the north of India almost all her life, was perceived by the Oru-oor people.

<sup>17</sup> I have given the pseudonym “Oru-oor” to the study village, words which mean, literally, one village/city/town. In Tamil Nadu, the administrative word for a village is the sanskritized word, *kiramam*, but village people refer to their village as *oor*. However, in practice, this word denotes only that part of the village where the upper castes reside. The area where the former “untouchable” groups reside is called *cheri* or colony. By naming it Oru-oor, I reclaim the word to denote the *entire* village comprising both the upper caste and lower caste localities. Moreover, it is a Tamil word which has no religious connotations. I thank S. Gopalakrishnan IAS, for brainstorming a pseudonym for the study village and for suggesting the categorization of caste groups as given in footnote 22.

<sup>18</sup> I had more than 1000 pages hand-written “field notes”. In the final submission of my thesis, I excluded or glossed over incidents which could cause harm were it to be placed in the public domain and also those that did not add to the substance of the chapter.

<sup>19</sup> I was born in a family practising Catholicism, but I gave up organized religion during my teen years. It is since the early 1990s, that with the rise of Hindutva forces in my country, I have had to grapple with my ‘minority’ status and the meaning of my religious identity at birth; Christians of all denominations form approximately 2% of the Indian population. See Sathyamala (2017) for a discussion on the dilemma it poses in contemporary India.



In the following sections, I provide brief excerpts from this chapter on how my identity as a researcher and how my gender, caste and class location played out in the Oru-oor context. This is to illustrate the interpretive approach I followed in my research and how, as Hennink et al. (2011: 19) put it, my “background, position, or emotions [were] an integral part of the process of producing data”.

### MY IDENTITY AS A RESEARCHER

As I began my Ph.D. “fieldwork”, I was faced with a serious ethical dilemma. During my Design seminar, I had stated that I was,

...entering the village with the knowledge that this study is not being conducted because of the village people’s expressed need. Doing so will be a first time for me as my other research work, where I have been personally involved in data collection, have been on issues which emerged directly from people’s expressed needs. (Sathyamala, 2010: 48)<sup>20</sup>

To resolve my dilemma, I decided to be as transparent as I could be about my intentions in carrying out the research in the selected village. I did what Bernard (1994) advises,

The key is to take the role of a researcher immediately when you arrive at your field site... Let people know from the first day you arrive that you are there to study their way of life. Don’t try to become an inconspicuous participant rather than what you really are: an observer who wants to participate as much as possible. (Bernard, 1994: 182)

Right from day one, when I spoke to anyone who asked me what I was doing in the village I said that I was doing *aaraichi*. Initially, I carried a notebook openly but when I began writing, I realized it made people very nervous because I was writing in English. Therefore, I stopped taking out my notebook to write immediately after a conversation or when I was with people who were not familiar with me. It also made me realize the importance of writing in Tamil so that it could be read by others if they felt curious and the process would make them feel less anxious and

<sup>20</sup> The reason why I had refrained from choosing for my Ph.D. research any of the issues that I had been actively associated with in the past as an activist was due to reluctance to capitalize for personal benefits the trust I had gained through my activism.

threatened. So, while I continued to write in English in my diary<sup>21</sup> my survey instruments were almost all in Tamil. Soon people became aware of my “English writing” as anyone who paid me a visit in the morning could see me writing in my diary. There would be friendly jokes and leg-pulling about what I was writing about “them”, but I sensed little anxiety.

That the research was for a study leading to a Ph.D. degree was understood by a few better educated people and my use of the Tamil word *veli naadu* (outside country) to refer to where my university was, was varyingly understood as Delhi or a foreign country. At times it was difficult to dissuade people from the belief that my survey would lead to their material betterment, but over the period of my stay, people accepted my word that my research was just what I explained it was and that it would not bring any monetary benefits to them.

### MY CASTE LOCATION

Choosing a place of residence in an Indian village is a critical decision as there are no neutral spaces. I found out that the place of residence of an ethnographer locates their identity in the village people’s perception and colours their interactions in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Oru-oor village had three major settlements, a central part where the upper castes resided known as *male-oor* (high village), flanked on the East and West by settlements of the lower caste groups.<sup>22</sup> I took a considered decision to reside in that part of the village where the lower caste people resided as I felt that my acceptance by them was critical for my research and this could be facilitated only if I lived among them. I found *keezh-oor* (low village) on the east better suited as the larger proportion of the lower

<sup>21</sup> This was both because I am more fluent in English and because I did not want anyone to read my unedited and un-anonymized account of everyday lives, containing personal stories, conversations, often of confidential nature. When I was in the village, I carried my notebook with me all the time, even sleeping with it under my pillow.

<sup>22</sup> The groups I categorize as “upper castes” were almost all belonging to the “Other Backward Classes” or “Most Backward Classes” as per classification by the Tamil Nadu government. Those I categorize as “lower castes” belonged to the former “untouchable” caste groups. Untouchability was abolished legally in post-independence India and the “untouchable” caste groups were categorized as “Scheduled Castes”. The term *Dalit*, (oppressed) has been adopted by some of these groups particularly in the western and northern parts of India, as an emancipatory term. Caste is a hereditary system of inequality legitimized by the Hindu religious texts and maintained by strict endogamy.

caste residences was located there and the approach road to the land on the east side of the village passed through this (see Fig. 8.1).

I found that at an everyday social level, more than class or economic status, caste was often the defining identity in the village. I should have realized that this would be a sensitive issue because in Tamil Nadu the lower caste people have had a long history of emancipatory struggles. This was brought home to me during my preliminary visit when I was searching for the house of the woman I had met during an earlier visit. I knew she lived in the lower caste part of the village and not being familiar with the village, I asked some people the *jaadhi* (caste) that lived there. One of them responded that they were all the same *jaadhi*, *manusha jaadhi* (human caste). I had not thought that my question would give offence. Because of this experience, in the first quantitative baseline survey (carried out in the fourth month of my stay in the village) I did not include the caste question. Later, I learnt the word *aatkal* (people) was an inoffensive way of enquiring about caste and would produce the caste name without much hesitation.

### Choosing a residence

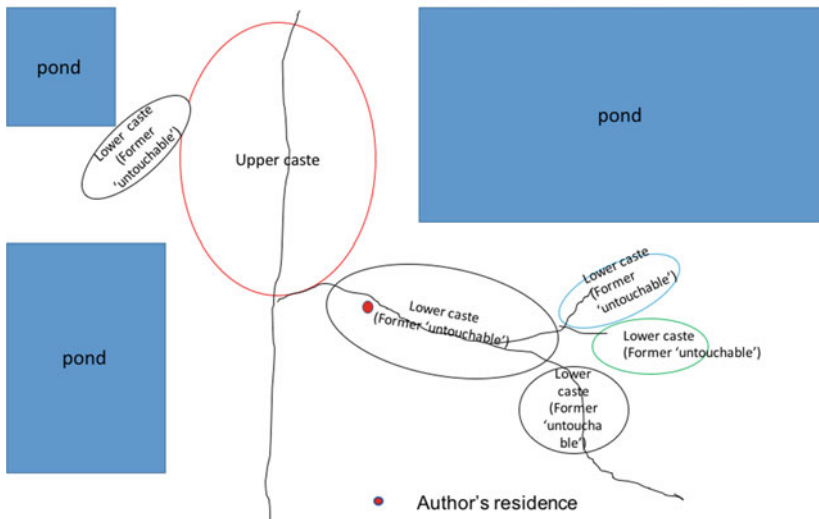


Fig. 8.1 Map of the village (graphic representation)

Such reticence was not exhibited when it came to enquiring about my caste status. I have always maintained that I do not subscribe to any caste or religious identity, but I realized that in Oru-oor I could not evade this issue because I was Tamil. My lighter skin, relatively speaking, when I first arrived in the village, having spent more than a year in the sunless Netherlands (!), made people, including my house owner, think I was a Brahmin, the top caste. I wanted to avoid a sense of uneasiness and suspicion that my “no-caste” identity might evoke and be perceived as an evasion, as everyone I interacted with at some point in the conversation asked me my caste. I had known vaguely that I belonged to a family which would fall in the upper caste category but had to find out from my parents the precise caste name. After that, when I was asked for my caste, my first response would still be that I did not believe in caste but if the person insisted, I would give the caste name. My answer worked mostly to my advantage as the discourse it created provided me with important insights. For instance, when I first began looking for a residence in the lower caste area, many from the upper caste, directly and indirectly, tried to dissuade me from it. They were then confused about my caste status when I said that I wanted to reside with the lower caste groups.

While the obvious forms of untouchability are practised only rarely, it is still mediated through the sharing of food and water and through marriage. Although my choosing to stay in the lower caste area was viewed as a way of demonstrating that I did not discriminate, it was only when I went to the puberty feast of a young girl and sat down in the *pandi* (seating arrangement in long rows) and ate the cooked food, that people realized that I did not practice the all-pervasive caste taboo. It was there that I learnt that while the upper caste people from male-oor attended the ceremony (as this family was wealthy) and brought gifts, they would not eat food cooked in lower caste households, but fruits and bottled soft drinks could be consumed as these were not “polluted” by “untouchable” hands.

However, some months into my village stay, when I was asked to shift as my house owner needed the rented room, I decided to look for accommodation in the upper caste area (because I felt it was time I observed that part of the village by living there). I was surprised that it was no longer easy for me to find a room, unlike my initial days when I was being offered homes there. There was a vacant house belonging to a family that was away in Mumbai, but the relatives in whose care it had been left did not want to rent it to me because they were unsure of my caste status

because now I resided in the lower caste *keezh-oor*. The irony was that the caste my family was said to belong to is supposed to be higher than the owners of the potential rental house. It appeared that my prolonged residence in the lower caste area rubbed off on me and “polluted” my caste identity and made me also “untouchable” in the upper caste view.

### MY CLASS BACKGROUND

In Tamil Nadu, one way the wealth of a family is assessed is by how much gold jewellery the women of the family wear. I generally wear very little gold on my person, and it was in the second month of my stay in the village that I learnt that my lack of gold jewellery had been discussed among the women. One day, in the course of a conversation, a woman burst out in anger against me, saying I was play-acting at being poor. This woman was well-known for being abrasive and outspoken. It was alleged that she had once slapped her son-in-law for beating her daughter, his wife. Still, I was taken aback both by her charge and by her venom. When asked to explain, she said I must have lakhs of rupees<sup>23</sup> worth of gold ornaments at home and here I was pretending to be poor by wearing brass earrings, a gold-plated chain around my neck and no gold bangles. She said I behaved just like the upper caste women in the village (she was from the lower caste group), pretending to be poor when they had a lot of gold ornaments which they brought out to wear only during festival days. I told her that my small earrings and the chain around my neck were made of gold (but gold ornaments made in north India have a different hue than that in the south because of the proportion in the alloy) and that I had always been averse to wearing heavy gold. She was not convinced because I had also once worn costume jewellery which I had not known then that it was worn only by those who did not possess gold ornaments.

There was another reason why women thought I was play-acting at being poor. Initially, I chose to wear synthetic saris. This was because the cloth did not crease, and one could sit anywhere, even on the dirt floor (all it required was a pat to get rid of the dust when one got up), were easy to wash, drying within minutes under the hot sun. But it was unbearably hot to wear them as synthetics do not absorb sweat and retain heat. I soon discovered that the cotton saris that the Tamil Nadu government

<sup>23</sup> One lakh = 100,000.

supplies were very suitable for the heat. These are made of cotton, hand-woven, and given as free gifts for the harvest festival *pongal* through the ration shops (they are called *elavasa pudavai*—free sari; later the term changed to *villai-illa pudavai*—unpriced sari); old age pensioners also get an additional sari during the year. They are light, easy to wash, and I thought were pretty with contrast-coloured borders. I bought about six, at an extremely nominal rate ranging from Rs. 25/- to Rs. 50/- (25 to 60 euro cents) each. Only old women wear them, but other women sell them as they prefer to wear synthetic saris. When I wore these saris, it evoked unexpected reactions. Many marvelled that I wore them at all as they are easily recognizable. I received mixed reactions; some felt that it was not worthy of my status given my level of education and position; others said that these saris looked much nicer on me than on them. However, the women found it difficult to reconcile to the fact that I liked wearing them. Occasionally, when I was invited to a wedding, I wore a silk sari. Again, these were found wanting by some of the women, since they were simple and did not have heavy gold borders. After a while, as I continued wearing the *elavasa pudavai* on and off, these kinds of comments stopped as women got used to my “differentness”.

In the later months I found out that wealthy upper caste women indeed kept their economic status hidden. During festivals I found many women from the upper caste who looked not-well-off during ordinary times, wear a lot of gold on their person. Later I wore some moderately heavy gold bangles to show that I did indeed possess them but that I chose not to wear them every day. The days when I wore my gold bangles, every woman who met me (on the lanes, at the bus stop) would pull at my arm to take a closer look at the bangles and make an estimate of how many *pavuns* they were and its value in the then gold price.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of my stay, there was general agreement in the village that although I came from a very rich family I chose to live without any outward show of wealth. This fitted with their worldview that it was not the traditional rich but the nouveau riche who flaunted their money.

<sup>24</sup> One *pavun* is equal to 8 gm of 22-carat gold. While I could not make out the difference between gold ornaments and gold imitation jewellery, the women were very apt at seeing the difference.

## GENDERED LIVES

As part of my feminist consciousness, I have made it a practice in my life to perform most of the household chores myself in a country where, in middle class homes, it is the norm to employ other women for house-work.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it was natural that in the village too, I had decided to perform all the household chores myself although I knew it would absorb considerable amount of time from my “research”. I also wanted to send out a signal that I was quite capable of carrying out these daily tasks of living in the same way as the other women in the village. The only task I was prevented from doing was to fetch water from a public tap a few yards in front of the house. An elderly woman, past her seventies, who lived in a broken-down part of the house where I resided, insisted on carrying out this task for me. This was as a mark of affection and was genuinely affronted when I offered her cash for the service. During my stay in the village, she became a close companion and her photograph is no longer at the end of this chapter (Fig. 8.2).

Since in India marriage is the norm for both men and women, my status as an unmarried woman was a major source of astonishment and concern. In the initial period of my stay, when someone struck up a conversation with me, the conversation would go like this:

Woman/man: And ... (a pause), where are your children?

Me: I have no children

Woman/man: No children?

Me: No, I am not married

Woman/man: Not married?

Woman (looking at me pityingly): tsk, tsk, *Aiyo paavum* (you poor thing!)

Some of the older women would ask in a lowered voice if I had any “body problem” (*udal prachinai*); this was because in their experience, women who remained unmarried had a problem with their reproductive system (for example, they did not “come of age” by menstruating). When I assured them that there was nothing wrong with my reproductive organs they would look bemused. My unmarried state was generally viewed as a tragedy, but the fact that I had parents still alive as well as a brother, meant I was not that pitiable creature, a destitute woman. This attitude

<sup>25</sup> This was a hotly debated topic in the early period of the Indian autonomous women’s movement.



**Fig. 8.2** My elderly woman companion whom I called *Paati* (grandmother) holding my thesis (permission to use photo granted)

surprised me because it signalled that for them it did not matter that I was educated, had an independent income and had been living alone and making independent decisions for most of my adult life.

Sometimes I was a bit facetious in answering the question why I did not marry. Once, when I was asked this question by a group of women at a work site, I responded: “What is in a marriage? If you get married, he will drink, beat you up, steal your jewellery and so why this headache! (*avan kudippan, adippaan, nagai thiruduvan, yenn inda thali vali*)”. This was greeted with laughter because this was the reality in most of their lives. After the women dispersed as I went around chatting with them, I saw two women sitting alone, weeping. When I asked them what the matter was, they said that what I had said described the reality of their lives. They were siblings and both had experienced domestic violence in their married lives. I felt terrible that my remark had hurt them. They assured me that it was not my remarks that they were hurt by; I had only



stated the reality. But it had set them thinking about their own unhappy married lives and how their father had died because his heart was broken when both his daughters returned to their maternal home driven out by their husbands.

The men, depending on their age, reacted differently to my unmarried state. Two men, both educated and outsiders who came daily for work in the village commented on separate occasions that I must have had a “jolly” life (jolly was the word used, *appo jolly daan ponga*) and looked at me meaningfully, broadly hinting at a life of promiscuity. I was taken aback at this comment dripping with sexual innuendo that they would not have made (dare to make) to a married woman living with a husband. One 80-year-old man was so troubled that my parents had not done their duty by me that he declared that he would visit my parents and persuade them to find me a groom or else he himself would search for a groom for me. But the question “why did I not marry” persisted. I do not know how much of my explanation that I became too focused on my work to think of marriage, or that I valued my autonomy too much to want to exchange it for the protection a marriage offered, were accepted as good enough reasons.

### EMBODYING A DIFFERENT LIVING

I went through severe physical discomfort and mental anguish during the stay in the village. The village was spread over a large area and walking under the blazing sun day in and day out, I developed sunstroke during the month of May. Eating food and drinking water wherever and whenever I was offered to show that I did not subscribe to the caste taboo, led to recurrent attacks of diarrhoea. Although I tried to be extremely careful, I became infested with head lice. I developed a chest infection because of living in a house with damp walls and a leaking roof. Once, I was bitten by a dog, which had stealthily crept behind me when I was talking to some women. It was not a stray, but dogs were rarely chained and all of them somehow sensed that I did not belong to the village. Fortunately for me it could catch only a mouthful of my sari; perhaps it too was play-acting.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Behaviour modifications, also known as observer effects, have been shown to be self-revealing about social order (Monahan & Fisher, 2010). We were all in some sense play-acting although it was difficult to maintain the façade for long.

But the worst times were when there were needless tragedies in the village. For instance, a young woman committed suicide by setting herself on fire when I was in the village. The death of another young woman, who I had diagnosed with tuberculosis and had helped to initiate treatment from the government Health Centre, left me with a sense of utter helplessness. When she lay dying, I ran from pillar to post trying to get support for her from various individuals in the village. Once again, I was faced with the inability of modern medicine to deal with diseases of poverty and deprivation, the reason I had opted for public health in the first place.

Many began to commiserate that, living in the village, I had become thin and dark like a dry fish (*karuvaadu*). Gone was the rosy bloom of my Den Haag days. When a young woman spontaneously burst out that my feet had begun to resemble theirs—dark, dusty, and dirty—I realized that I had indeed “de-classed” myself without intentionally setting out to do so. She, of course, did not mean this observation as a compliment.

### *Poivittu Varuhiren*: GOODBYE, FOR THE TIME BEING<sup>27</sup>

The day I left the village was charged with emotions. I did not want to say goodbye formally to anyone although over the week I had told everyone I met that I was leaving. Some said that I should come live in the village and that they would arrange for a ration card that would signify my permanent resident status, while others felt that it may not be a good idea because then people would lose their respect for me and that I should keep my distance by maintaining my non-resident status. My old woman companion was inconsolable and refused to say goodbye and kept repeating that this was why one should never get close to another person. As I left, she forced me to accept a note of Rs. 100 (worth a little more than a euro but was one tenth of her meagre monthly pension). This remains as one of the most treasured mementoes of my life in Oru-oor.

It was when my father died two months after my “fieldwork” was over and I had returned to The Hague that I realized that I had been accepted.

<sup>27</sup> In Tamil culture one does not say a definitive goodbye when leaving. It is always *poivittu varuhiren* (translated as ‘I will go and come back’ and pronounced *poittu vaaren*) and the response would be *vaanga* (come back). Only when paying a visit for commiserating a death (*thukkam visarippu*) does one say *pohiren* (am going).

On the day of the funeral, eleven persons from the village, belonging to different caste groups, came to pay respects to the departed as is done for close relatives and neighbours. They had hired an auto-rickshaw, and had come in the morning, foregoing that day's wages, and waited till I arrived at 2 P.M. from The Netherlands. I was surprised to see that four of them were men as they did not interact with me as closely as the women did. My offer of auto fare was refused. Others came on the fourth day as per custom to offer condolences to the family. When I said that I was moved by their visit and concern, their response was that I was now a part of their family. I felt that I must have done some things right to have overcome the caste/class/gender barriers.

### POSTSCRIPT

Since the time of my "fieldwork" I have continued to maintain contact with several of the Oru-oor village people on a regular basis. When I am in The Netherlands, I speak to them via telephone conversations, and during important festivals to exchange greetings.<sup>28</sup> Except for 2020, due to Covid-19, I have visited Oru-oor every year. When I visit the village, I am generally dragged by the hand to someone's home to share a meal or have tea. That people of all walks were keen to know the results of my *aaraichi* was brought home to me when a bus conductor who had earlier worked on the study village route but was now working on a different route asked me, as he punched my ticket, if I had completed my thesis. In 2017, a few months after my defence, I visited the village to show the photographs and my newly minted thesis. Although almost none could read English, my book was held tenderly, flipped through, as each one tried to guess who the woman was on the cover (as I had blurred her face). With a general delight in my accomplishment, they felt that they owned it because it was, after all, their stories between the covers.<sup>28</sup>

### REFLECTING ON MY METHODOLOGY

In this research, although I did not enter the "field" with the explicit intention of applying feminist methodology(ies) to my study, my research has all the important elements that underscore feminist research: It

<sup>28</sup> While I have tried to share the broad findings of the research at every opportunity, the promised summary and Tamil translation is yet to be made for wider circulation.

focused on gender as an analytic category, on women's experiences as a scientific resource, and used a "gender-sensitive reflexive practice" (Harding, 1987: 31).

The account provided in this chapter demonstrates the reflexive practice I followed as I observed the village people's everyday lives, as reflected, and refracted through a multi-layered class, gender, and caste lenses as I negotiated my everyday life in the village. A Thirukkural (sacred couplet) by the poet saint Thiruvalluvar (?300 BCE—sixth century CE), that was transcribed inside the bus<sup>29</sup> that I routinely travelled in to Oruoor was a regular reminder of power dynamics and the need to interrogate the one who speaks:

எப்பொருள் யார்யார் வாய்க் கேட்பினும் அப்பொருள்  
மெய்ப்பொருள் காண்பதறிவு. (Thirukkural, n.d. No. 423)<sup>30</sup>

[Explanation] Thiruvalluvar says no knowledge can be built based on authority... He suggests a person in search of truth should get out of his [sic] past wisdom in order to build new perspectives. (Venkatachalam, 2015: NP)

Schooled in positivist science, I found the problematization of the notion of value-free science and research liberating. Harding and Norberg (2005: 2011) identify feminist methodology and epistemology as part of the post-positivist movement that prioritizes "studying up"—studying the powerful, their institutions, policies, and practices instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern". In the past, Indian ethnographers have, in general, chosen to reside in the upper caste residential area of their study villages.<sup>31</sup> My decision to reside with people who are still viewed as "untouchables" allowed me to "study up" the upper caste

<sup>29</sup> All buses under the public Tamil Nadu State Transport system have one of the Thirukkural couplets transcribed inside the bus.

<sup>30</sup> Translation by the author: To discern truth, wisdom lies in enquiring into what is said and what is heard, irrespective of who has said it.

<sup>31</sup> Kumar (2016: 36, 37) comments that 'none of the researchers and founder members of Indian Sociology [M.N. Srinivas, Andre Beteille, A.M. Shah] stayed in Dalit localities', because of which their studies could not 'portray a reality of the social structures ... they were studying'. Mangubhai (2014) and Priya (2001), stayed with the *dalit* community during their respective fieldwork period because their study focused on these communities. I could say that I am perhaps the only one, so far, who chose to stay with the former 'untouchable' caste groups to study the entire village.

groups from the vantage point of the lower caste people. Taking residence among the economically and socially marginalized community became not only a strategy to gain a deeper appreciation of their worlds, but a political act of reversing the gaze from top-down to bottom-up.

Feminist researchers have grappled with the power relations between the researcher and the researched and the dilemmas around “knowing, representing, and advocating for others” (Doucet & Mauthner, 2007: 41). Carastathis (2008: 30) argues that.

a feminist politics of solidarity distinguishes between being positioned or *situated* in relations of oppression and privilege—an ineluctable fact of life under prevailing conditions—and positioning or situating oneself in relations of solidarity with “communities in struggle” [and that] one must actionally confront ... one’s *complicity*—in structures of domination’ [italics as in original].

This position is underscored by Sharmila Rege (1998: WS39, WS40) as she argues that within the framework of “difference”, issues of caste become the sole responsibility of the dalit women’s organizations, and that the focus should shift from “‘difference’ [...] to the social relations which convert difference into oppression”.

The several acts of non-discrimination I practised throughout my stay in Oru-oor, reflected a “conscious partiality” as advocated by Maria Mies (quoted in Gorelick, 1991: 461). Living in the village as an individual researcher, as an unmarried woman, without any protection (individual or organization) also meant being in a situation of extreme vulnerability. It was a considered choice I had made. To gain the trust of people I felt it necessary to shift the balance of power by putting myself at the receiving end of unequal conditions. By choosing a lifestyle similar to that of the village people I hoped to demonstrate the seriousness with which I wished to understand their lives and struggles. Relationships thus built led me to be invited into people’s lives in a meaningful way. Although, until I left, my stated intentions of *aaraiichi* continued to be under scrutiny, I think people sensed my sincerity and reciprocated it to the extent possible by being as informative about their lives as possible. Their respect also grew when they realized that I was not a push-over who was easy to fool.

One of the major challenges throughout this process of “participant observation” was how not to be perceived as the surveilling eye of the state. The irony was that during my stay in the village, it was I who was

under constant surveillance by the people. Every move I made was noted and commented upon, in a role reversal of the observer being observed. But despite trying to act as equals, the reality was that power differentials existed albeit operating both ways. While the control on how they were to be represented lay in my hands, I was only too aware that my life in the village completely depended upon their good will. Throughout my stay, I was constantly stressed and on tenterhooks, afraid of making some serious mistake which would impact adversely on my well-being. That I would not be able to complete my research was not my most abiding fear or concern. I sensed the presence of an undercurrent of violence which was ready to erupt into physical violence at a moment's notice.

My research was sensitive to not only gender but paid attention to the complex interplay of class, caste and religion in the everyday lives of the Oru-oor people. I continued to position myself as a Marxist-feminist which makes a critical distinction between the concepts of oppression and exploitation (Foley, 2019: 11). Using class not “as an identity or an experiential category, but class analysis as a mode of structural explanation” (ibid: 11; Mojab & Carpenter, 2019; Wallis, 2015) and by applying gender and caste sensitive lenses to the entire population of Oru-oor, allowed me to conclude that:

Given that undernourishment and undernutrition affected almost the entire population [in the study village Oru-oor] it calls for universal remedies and care needs to be expanded to all individuals which is appropriate for their age, gender, work output and special nutritional needs in the context of their caste and class location. Finally, only when all bodies assume equal importance in the biopolitics of a nation-state and unambiguous life-affirming changes coalesce in a collective action towards structural transformation will the depletion of the individual and social body begin to cease. (Sathyamala, 2016: xxiii)

One of the goals of feminist research is to design research “that actively intervenes in social relations and power structures” (Tandon, 2018: 13). The conclusion of my research resonates with the goal of social justice through “recognition and redistribution” as argued by Nancy Fraser (2007) which encompasses all oppressed and exploited peoples.

Gorelick (1991: 469) points out that the “researcher is transformed in the process of research—influenced and taught by her respondent-participants as she influences them”. For me, the experience of living in

Oru-oor was transformative in several ways, not the least of which being the further clarity of purpose that I gained about my own life. I could also say that perhaps for those I closely interacted with in Oru-oor, my presence was transformative. The values my everyday living exemplified, and the stereotypes which I sought to break down, demonstrated other possibilities and a different world to the village people. I am left wondering if feminist methodologies can be applied, rather, I think they may need to be lived.

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# Embodied Urban Cartographies: Women's Daily Trajectories on Public Transportation in Guadalajara, Mexico

*Azucena Gollaz Morán*

## INTRODUCTION

For many years, I had to take long trips by public transportation in Guadalajara, Mexico. I spent about three hours every day riding buses, waiting at bus stops, taking the metro and walking the streets. In those trajectories, I often witnessed and experienced gender-based violence. I perceived the spatial dichotomy between public and private spaces and observed that the urban infrastructure was mostly set up to fulfil working conditions with a focus on the productive needs to get to work, rather than reproductive work which particularly impacts women. Those experiences led me to realize that my urban experience was gendered and embodied. My body was constantly (sexually) attacked because I was a

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woman. It was also clear to me, that it was through my body that I experienced the city. I felt on my skin every unwanted touch I got on the bus. I felt the fear in my chest every time I had to walk down a dark and empty street while being followed by a man. Adding to that, I became aware of how other axes of my identity, like my social class, ethnic/racial markings and age, were part of that gendered and embodied experience. And I began to wonder: how do other women experience the urban geography, its divisions and the structural inequities? What are their embodied experiences of their daily trajectories in a public transportation system that mostly responds to productive needs?

I decided to put these reflections and questions at the centre of my Ph.D. research. My aim was to shed light on how the intersection of certain power structures and identity axes shape women's urban embodied experience and on how women transform urban spaces through their daily practices. To perform this analysis, I mapped women's daily trajectories to work by public transportation. The cartographies I made, aimed to problematize the urban experience in relation to the identity axis and power structures of gender, age, social class, ethnicity/skin colour, corporality, religion, sexual orientation and disability because those are the most important assemblages of privilege and oppression that operate both socially and spatially in Guadalajara.

I used mapping methods and reclaimed them as a feminist tool to graphically portray the intersectional geography of exclusion that operates within urban spaces and the ways it shapes women's embodied urban lives. I used feminist cartography to chart the ways in which women transform the urban every day through their daily trajectories. Feminist cartography places the subject, their embodiment and their experience at the centre of producing cartographic media; contrary to the patriarchal tradition of creating maps in a disembodied manner, claiming the neutrality of the territories (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2020; Pirani et al., 2020). In this way feminist cartography helps to shift the ways spaces are imagined, created and recreated.

From October 2019 to March 2020, I worked with ten women who worked outside their homes from the ages of 23–50 and together navigated Guadalajara<sup>1</sup> (Mexico). I mapped their daily trajectories to work

<sup>1</sup> Guadalajara is the second biggest metropolis in Mexico and among the ten largest cities in Latin America (LA). It is inhabited by 5 million people (IIEG, 2017). Metropolis all over the world are part of a global dynamic in which urban spaces are highly contested

by public transportation. As they travel to work these women face the multiple geographical, economic and cultural constraints that the city entails for women daily. I draw their daily geographies by mapping how their travels are differently marked by structural constraints. I took into consideration the identity axes and power structures of gender, age, social class, skin colour, corporality,<sup>2</sup> religion, sexual orientation and disability. I used the following set of mapping methods:

- **Emotional and trajectory mapping:** I mapped women's geographical daily trajectories to work and the most frequent emotions they experienced in the different spaces they go through.
- **Relief Maps:** I mapped their experiences of comfort and discomfort related to specific identity axes and power structures in the different spaces they go through in their daily trajectories.
- **Accompanied Trajectories and Walking Interviews:** I accompanied the women in their trajectories from work to home and talked with them about their experiences in the different spaces they go through daily.

This chapter reflects on the methodology I created in this research process which I call “women’s comprehensive embodied urban cartographies”. Before explaining how I created the maps, I will discuss the relevance of mapping women’s urban experience from an embodied and intersectional perspective through this focus on their daily trajectories. I then examine how I met the women in order to create the cartographies. After that, I show how these maps help us to understand the mutual constitution of gender and urban spaces. Finally, I reflect on the work’s challenges and limitations.

as cities have become the centres of political decision-making and where most of the population live. Latin American cities are considered the most unequal in the world based on their high rates of spatial and social segregation and divisions. Latin America is also the most urbanized, with 80% of its population living in cities (UN-Habitat, 2012: 167).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term corporality to conceptualize women’s physical complexion. The women I worked with highlight the relevance of their body shape and size in their urban experience which I theorize as a power structure and identity axis.

## THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

In the past few years, feminist urban geographers have created gendered and intersectional understandings of urban spaces. Theorists in the field have pointed out how the city dynamics of, for instance, exclusion or oppression operate through regimes of difference, which are geographical (Bondi & Rose, 2003). However, the incorporation of the subject in spatial theories has lacked a profound understanding of the embodiment dimension. In contrast, research in the arena of body politics has extensively researched bodies, embodiment and emotions, but has very often forgotten the spatial dimension (Lidón, 2013: 702). I decided to bring together theories of body politics together with feminist urban geography in order to understand more deeply the relationship among gender and other axes of embodiment in urban dynamics.

My starting point was that women's daily trajectories are a window to analyse women's embodied experience of the city and the ways in which they socially and spatially construct the city space. The daily experience of travelling in the city configures women's subjectivity and embodiment (Lidón, 2013). The nature and forms of women's trajectories expose diverse aspects of power relations in urban spaces. In this approach, the public space is a key element in the configuration of any city because it is subject to appropriation by different institutions and people and as such, it is both a physical and symbolic expression of the societal power relations in specific urban geographies.

Although feminist theorists have questioned and challenged the western dichotomous understanding of space and gender that divides the spheres relating the "private" to the feminine and the "public" to the masculine, there are still powerful notions that matter in the configuration of spatiality of social relations. Notions of private and public spheres operate at different scales and have distinctive implications according to the geographic, social and cultural context (Bondi, 1998). In my research, I examined the way the private–public dichotomy continues (or not) to configure the material urban geography of the dynamics shaping Guadalajara. In mapping the women's trajectories, I traced how the city is lived by women working outside the home in order to examine if the traditional connotations of public/private are breaking down.

## THE INTERSECTIONAL AND EMBODIED URBAN EXPERIENCE

In this section I go further into the spatial and social public–private dichotomy operating in Guadalajara. I look at the multiple implications for the intersections of gender, social class and ethnicity/skin colour power structures, and thus for the intersectional urban experience of women.

In the case of Guadalajara, the spatial dichotomy between public and private spheres creates a labour geography dynamic based on the sexual division of work and contributes to establish binary and rigid normative gender roles. The productive zones are mainly in the central areas, while the housing sectors are mostly concentrated in the peripheries (Cuadra Urbanismo, 2016). The urban growth pattern marked by developing large neighbourhoods far away from the central zones—isolated from formal jobs, services and public transit—promotes the full-time gender role of the household caretaker, making it very hard for women to access the formal job market. To commute from the peripheries to the central areas requires time and resources, but recently, living in the peripheries was the only option for most of the population in need of a house due to the high housing prices in the central areas and the growth patterns of the metropolis (Cuadra Urbanismo, 2016). Because women in Guadalajara are still the main caregivers and dedicate more time to household activities than men, they have less time and more spatial constraints when it comes to seeking remunerated jobs. In recent years, there has been a massive incorporation of women into the paid labour force (Calonge Reillo, 2014; Ramírez Saíz & Safa Barraza, 2009). They have taken the jobs which are more precarious, flexible and less well remunerated, under the heteronormative ideology that their earnings only complement the main household income earned by men (Calonge Reillo, 2014; Jalisco Cómo Vamos, 2018).

In the metropolis, there is another division that intersects with the gendered dynamic of centre–periphery, which is the one between the East and the West. It responds to a segregation of the population based on ethnicity and class when the city was founded by the Spanish colonizers in 1542 (De la Torre, 1998: 46). The first settlements created by the Spanish colonizers are in Guadalajara’s downtown, around the central square, the cathedral and the royal and administrative buildings, on the East side. Then, on the West side, popular *barrios* (neighbourhoods) were

developed, “where the indigenous and poor Guadalajara were confined: the poor class that provided to the Spanish”<sup>3</sup> (Aceves et al., 2004: 286). The relation between the two sides of the city was also spatialized and suffered multiple transformations as the city’s divide grew.

There is a disparity among the different areas regarding the quality and availability of urban infrastructure and resources that shows a relation between the two spatial divisions with women’s access to the city’s goods and services. The urban marginalization index by neighbourhood (IIEG, 2010) that measures access to basic educational and health services, housing quality and child mortality rates, shows that the people living in conditions of “high or very high marginalization” are spatially concentrated in the outskirts of the metropolis, especially in the East and the South (Limberopulos Fernández & Cervantes García Rulfo, 2017). Consequently, women who live in the peripheries and in the East, not only have more spatial constraints to have remunerated jobs, but also have less access to health, education and public services.

In this context, a woman who decides to take a remunerated job outside the household must navigate these urban-gendered dynamics. In their trajectories to work, they deal with an oppressive-gendered labour geography as well as gendered spatial urban divisions. Women who use public transportation to go to work must face a gendered transit system, which is principally designed to meet men’s needs. It assumes linear trips at peak hours: from home to work and vice versa. Research points out that women have multi-layered and complex travel trajectories because women’s purposes for using public transportation are usually a combination of productive and reproductive work (Godinez et al., 2020). Due to unequal care work distribution, in one day, a woman may need to go to her place of work, but only after taking her children to school. Then, on her way back home, she first may need to buy groceries and pick the children up. So, they often make different stops within one trip or make various trips.

Very often, women travel accompanied by children or other people for whom they care. Public transit vehicles are usually crowded, making it very hard to travel accompanied by children or people facing mobility challenges (the elderly, people with disabilities, etc.). Also, they tend to

<sup>3</sup> Translated by author.



carry bags to transport groceries, children's backpacks, etc. The transportation system is not designed for these kinds of needs (Godinez et al., 2020). There is no space to accommodate grocery bags or baby strollers. Additionally, women usually travel at non-peak hours, when there is less frequency of transportation. As a result, their journey is more time consuming as well as more expensive. The transit system charges per trip, so one journey with several stops costs more. They also pay for the people with whom they travel. Many times, the routes don't accommodate their needs, so they pay for taxis or they walk. They choose these options also when they feel their safety on the transport system is threatened (Godinez et al., 2020).

In a metropolis that is car-oriented, the use of public transportation is segmented by social class. The public transportation system is deficient, dangerous and expensive. It is a marker of social class and a cultural aspiration to own a car. There is a substantial income difference between women who use public transportation and women who use private transportation as their main form of transport. The 58.8% of women who use public transit have an income of 5 thousand pesos monthly. The same percentage of women who use private transportation has an income of 5–10 thousand (Godinez et al., 2020: 57).

In addition, the violence and fear of the public space are among the main markers of women's urban experience. The fear of the public space becomes central when understanding women's daily trajectories because it influences women's possibilities to appropriate and transform urban spaces. Gender-based violence and sexual violence in public spaces is one of the main problems for women in Latin American cities. In Guadalajara, eight out of ten women have been sexually harassed in public transport at least once in their lives (El Informador, 2014: NP; Jalisco Cómo Vamos, 2018: 50). In addition, women's identities intersect with other power structures operating in the city such age, religion, sexual preference, corporality and physical abilities. These different structures inform the exercise of power and the constitution of gendered identities and spaces (Rodó-de-Zárate & Baylina, 2018).

## COMPREHENSIVE EMBODIED URBAN CARTOGRAPHIES

In this section I look at the embodied cartographies of women's daily trajectories to work by public transportation in order to understand how power structures shape women's urban experience and the ways women

transform urban spaces. From October 2019 to February 2020, I navigated Guadalajara metropolis with ten working women living in the peripheries and the East Side of the metropolis. I worked with them to elaborate comprehensive cartographies of their embodied urban experience and (re-)making strategies of the urban. The process of contacting the women was through my network. I asked friends and contacts if they knew women who made long commutes to their workplace across the city. Through them I met different women who brought me in contact with other women. I began my research by engaging with ten women who make the journey “centre–periphery” and “the East–West” and use public transportation as their main form of transport. They differ in relation to age, religion, sexual orientation, social class, skin colour, corporality and physical abilities. I asked each of the women to identify themselves in relation to these identity axes and power structures. These intersectional differences are expressed in their embodied experiences of their urban lives.

My relationship with the women was built from encounter to encounter. I was acutely aware of the question of how to build trust and to avoid being oppressive and extractive to the women’s lives while still meeting my research objectives. I kept a journal in order to reflect on the many ways we were related through multiple positions that could not be fitted neatly into the box researcher-researched. I tried to ensure that my relationship and every interaction with them was one of empathy and respect. In general terms, I had a smooth relationship with all of them. They were keen to collaborate and mostly saw the experience as way to help my studies and as an opportunity to talk about issues they recognize affect their daily lives but have rarely spoken about. I am conscious that I am the researcher and the one writing about their experiences and lives in a different language than the one they speak and continue to be mindful through reflexivity and adherence to feminist principles.

### MAPPING WOMEN’S DAILY TRAJECTORIES TO WORK

My process of selecting the specific mapping methods was guided by two premises of feminist epistemology. First, it was important that the mapping techniques offered me the possibility to put women’s voices of their experiences at the centre. This fits my aim to do anti-oppressive research (Brown & Strega, 2005), and research that promotes women’s

right to self-representation. It is a standpoint against a western traditional research knowledge which is based on the knowledge that claims disembodiment, neutrality, universality and objectivity. Following feminist theories, my research acknowledges the subjectivity of the experience as a way to bring to academia what women feel and think about their own reality (Kimpson, 2005). I recognize the partiality of knowledge and its multiple perspectives (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Hiemstra & Billo, 2017; Moss, 2002). Second, I looked for mapping methods that would allow me to bring together embodiment and space from an intersectional perspective. I wanted to explore how the women feel and live the materiality and subjectivity of public spaces.

I chose the guiding method of trajectory mapping because it allowed me to show how women's trajectories are composed of several moments in time that intersect with specific spaces. It also allowed me to demonstrate the difficulties and constraints they encounter in terms of urban dynamics, urban infrastructure and services in each of those moments. I faced the challenge of paying attention to intersectionality informing those trajectories and the urban experience of women. I found a way forward in the method of "Relief Maps" developed by Dr. María Rodó-de-Zárate (2014). Rodó de Zárate has developed a way to analyse the intersectionality of the experience in public spaces and how to portray it graphically. Trajectory methods and relief maps in combination, helped me to map the emotions women experience in those different moments and spaces. In addition, I chose to do accompanied trajectories and walking interviews with the women, which helped me to deepen the understanding of their experiences and context.

I always used the methods in combination. Every time I met one of the women either to have a chat, to accompany her in her trajectory or to have a walking interview, I gathered information that was complementary for the set of methods. Then I systematized the information according to the method.

### SUBJECTIVE TRAJECTORY MAPPING

I started mapping women's daily trajectories to work by talking with them about their daily routines. This process helped me to identify that their trajectories are made of specific moments in which they traverse different urban spaces. I used two specific techniques: (1) The mapping of emotions, which consists of representing in maps the emotions people

face in different spaces based on their subjective experience, and (2) the use of maps to collect emotional data, which consists of the use of maps to ask for the emotions and memories that people have lived in a place (Griffin & Mcquoid, 2012: 292–295). Following these two ways of data collection, I gathered the following information:

- general data of the trajectories: e.g. starting point and destination point; time spent by mode and type of trajectory;
- gendered and embodied feelings: emotions and constraints faced in the different moments and spaces they go through in their trajectory (in relation to the gendered dynamics, infrastructure and violence);
- strategies (personal and/or collective) they use (at different moments in time) to overcome the constraints and to transform the urban spaces they navigate in.

The first main challenge I faced was to identify the moments and spaces of the women's trajectories. I first had long conversations with three of the women (M.A., R.O. and M.I.) and systematized the narratives of their journeys in order to identify the most important spaces they go through daily and the differences in terms of time (day and night) and season of the year (rainy season, Christmas season). Another challenge was to decide how to do the mapping. I grappled with the decision of whether to use only questionnaires or to also use Geographical Information System (GIS)<sup>4</sup> tools. I had thought of giving them a cell phone with an app. After these first meetings, I realized that using GIS tools would represent danger for the women in terms of safety because of the very high rates of robbery in public transportation or in the streets. One of the strategies that the women use is to not use their cell phones in public or even to carry a very cheap one not to put themselves at risk. I decided to gather the information by notes, questionnaires and voice recording and analysed this data using GIS, which allowed me to represent the results in the form of a map (Fig. 9.1).

To deepen the understanding of the information, I used two complementary methods: relief maps and walking interviews.

<sup>4</sup> A geographic information system (GIS) is a scheme for gathering, managing, analysing and representing geographical data.

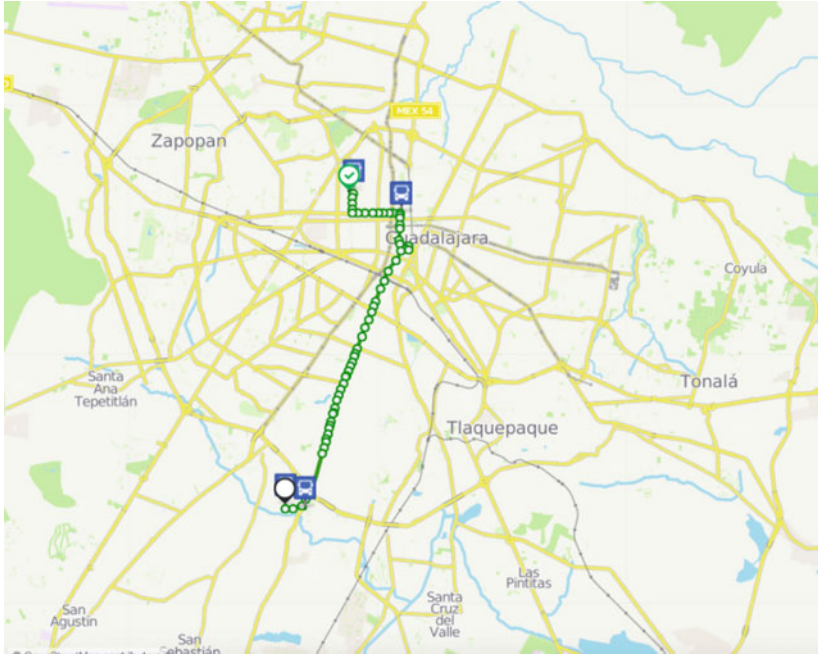


Fig. 9.1 M. A.'s Trajectory map. Author's data. Moovit App (2019)

## RELIEF MAPS

As explained above, in order to gain insight into the embodied and intersectional experiences of the urban spaces in women's daily trajectories, I used the method of Relief Maps developed by Rodó-de-Zárate (2014). This technique was helpful to think through the lived experience intersectionally and in relation to different spaces, in a way that can be systematized. To collect the data, I used a set of matrixes based on emotions of comfort and discomfort and asked women to describe how they feel in different places according to different intersections (gender, ethnicity/skin colour, class, etc.). The chosen places were decided on by first mapping their trajectories and identifying the different moments of their journeys. Then, the information was represented in a graphic way through the online software also developed by Rodó de Zárate.

The relief maps were a tool to understand how women's subjectivity was constructed in different spaces as they move across the city and as they revealed how the power relations operate socially and spatially. As Rodó-de-Zárate and Estivill i Castany (2016: 29) commented: "In this sense, the maps allow us to analyse the narratives of the lived experience based on the intersectional discomfort and situated experience, putting emphasis on the daily (im)mobilities and the strategies used".<sup>5</sup>

Making the relief maps was logistically quite complicated. The information to make the maps can be gathered and systematized immediately through the online software developed by Rodó de Zárate (2014), but you need an internet connection. Many times, I met the women in places where no internet connection was available or they had very limited time. So, I decided to record the information by printing the questionnaires available in the online software. Similarly, the other difficulty to make them right away was that the conversations evolved, which led me to incorporate more power structures and places, which is why I decided to make the maps at the end.

## ACCOMPANIED TRAJECTORIES AND WALKING INTERVIEWS

As explained above, in order to deepen the understanding of the data collected by the trajectory emotional mapping and the relief maps, I conducted walking interviews. A walking interview is a spatial experience itself that can provide immediate narratives of a place but also stimulates the recall of memories and feelings. It is an embodied method that brings together active connections among body and spaces. The method helped me to engage more with the women and their experiences while walking and talking together in different places that are important in their daily trajectories (King & Woordroffe, 2019: 1273–1275). The walking interviews followed a semi-structured interview approach and were useful to explore the most important details that come out of the reliefs and emotional maps.

One of the biggest difficulties to execute the walking interviews was to pay attention to the conversation, the space and our safety at the same time. Women expressed several concerns especially about my safety. They said they were used to taking care of themselves but that they were

<sup>5</sup> Translated from Spanish by author.

worried about me, especially when I had to go back home, which usually was late at night. Most of them checked via WhatsApp that I arrived home safe. That is one of the strategies women normally use to take care of their daughters, mothers or female friends.

## CARTOGRAPHIES, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE URBAN SPACES AND NORMATIVE BODIES

In this section I briefly examine some of the main findings of the comprehensive cartographies I made of women's trajectories to work by public transportation. I have made a selection of those that shed light on the type of analyses that feminist mapping methods provide in relation to women's urban lives and to the more relevant debates about urban spaces and embodiment. By doing so, I argue that feminist mapping is a strong feminist tool to understand gendered urban identities and thus the mutual constitution of embodiment and space.

In their movement across the metropolis, women go through different places and spaces: the streets of their neighbourhoods, the bus, the metro, the park, etc. In those intersections of encounter and interaction, multiple meanings are inscribed in women's embodiment. Safety is one of the main issues that affects their embodied urban experience. Women's daily trajectories to work are inserted in a context of increasing narco-related violence, high rates of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in public spaces. At the national level, in the last ten years, the number of feminicides committed in public spaces quadrupled (Data Civica, 2020: 27). Here are some examples of the ways women face such safety issues. Women prioritize safety and in order to do so can change their routes even when that means taking more transport units—which is also more expensive—or having longer trajectories. For example, M.I. changed her route because she felt the bus 380, that would be a faster way to go to work, was making her feel unsafe. Also, women choose their way of dressing according to the trajectory. For example, M.I. knows she will fall asleep in the bus, so she wears blouses that cover her enough as a way of preventing sexual harassment. Women who have daughters prioritize the safety of their daughters, at the expense of exposing themselves. For example, M.A. and M.R. accompanied their daughters to work in the early morning even when that meant waiting in the darkness before their workplaces opened. All this means that women pay for their safety: to take more transport units or private taxis to have safer trajectories. Every

woman deals with this in a personal way even if it is (invisible to the authorities) a structural gender issue.

Safety issues are interrelated with the emotions women most frequently feel on their journey. The relevance of emotions for the material urban experience is a key element for feminist cartographies because they recognize emotions as a legitimate form of knowledge and fundamental for the understanding of spaces (Pirani et al., 2020). In my cartographies, fear is the most frequent emotion women feel in public spaces. Fear and gender-based violence in public spaces constitute an expression of exclusion. It puts limits to women's access and enjoyment of public spaces.

In relation to the public–private dichotomy, women's mobility is inherent to both the individual and private and to the social and public dimension of the body (Butler, 2004; Petchesky, 2015). Through analysing women's daily trajectories to work, I saw how the public and private transcend and intersect with each other. The cartographies show that the dichotomy is not only inherent to the public spaces or the public dimension of their embodiment, but it also inscribes meaning to their private spaces and to the private dimension of their own bodies. In public spaces, women's bodies become much more public than in any other place. There they are subject to public scrutiny under the social and cultural normative (of age, class, gender, ethnicity, skin colour and ability) power structures, which plays a major role in shaping their urban experience. The cartographies show that when a female body doesn't comply with what is considered the norm, her embodied urban experience is marked by oppressing forces.

From my research gender is the most problematic power structure and axis of identity for all women in all the places. When other power structures of identity are relevant for a woman, they intersect with gender. For example, the most relevant axis of identity for M.A. are gender, social class and corporality (see Fig. 9.2). She feels her social class status is related to her situation as a single mother. At her home, the only axis that causes her discomfort is gender. She says this is because of her role as a woman and as a single mother. The public places where she experiences relief because of her gender identity are upper class and middle-class neighbourhoods. In those places, she feels less threatened because of her gender. But at the same time, in those places she feels discriminated due to her social class. A lower-class neighbourhood is where the three most relevant axes of M.A.'s identity combine to bring discomfort. M.A. feels threatened because of gender, corporality and social class. In her body these three



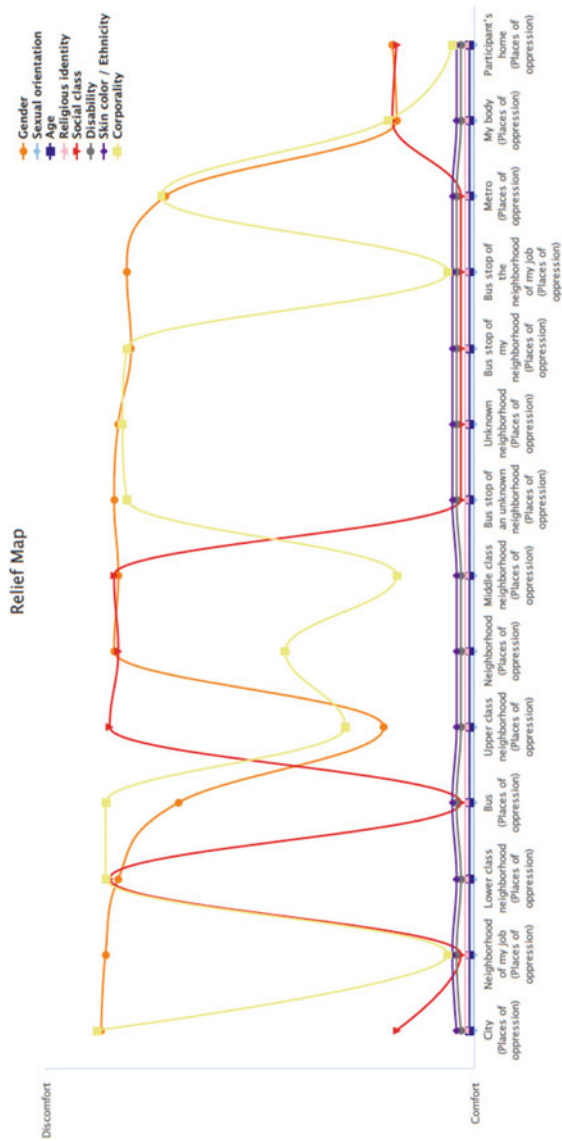


Fig. 9.2 M.A.'s Relief Map. Author's data. Relief Map (2020)

axes intersect. She explained that it is related to the frustration of not being able to earn more money, not having enough time to exercise to have a healthier body and because of the pressure of being a woman and her role as a single mother.

Skin colour is a highly relevant power structure that negatively affects women with racialized brown skin colour. They experience negative emotions regarding the way they are seen and treated in many public spaces. In M.O.'s experience "I got used to live with it, but obviously, I have felt I'm looked down, what else for? For being black and talking about colour, I am not even black..." (M.O., 2020).

The gendered stereotypes and normative aspects of corporality are another power structure that deeply affects women's urban experience. Women's corporality, whether defined as skinny or fat, plays a major role in how they feel and experience different public urban spaces. The logic that operates behind this is the sexualization of the female body and the gendered stereotypes in which women are supposed to be skinny in order for their bodies to be "desirable" for the men's gaze. So, women who are considered skinny are harassed due to this "desirability". Women who are considered fat are often insulted and harassed with negative comments about their bodies.

Age is another power structure that affects women in the city, predominantly in two ways. Young women (18–25) are more often sexually harassed in public spaces than older women (Rozas & Salazar Arredondo, 2015: 7). Also, they are the ones most likely to use public transit as their main form of transportation. The average age of women who use public transportation is 35 years old, when women have more income needs and people (mostly children) depend on them (Godinez et al., 2020: 54). On the other hand, old women have a hard time dealing with the urban infrastructure. The time given by traffic lights to cross a street does not allow for their slow pace. The buses usually travel at such a high speed which demands plenty of strength to hold yourself steady or to climb the stairs. Only 9.7% of the female users of the public transportation system are 65 years old or older (Godinez et al., 2020: 54).

The able body is a power structure that makes it very difficult for women to navigate the city. The city's logic, rhythms and infrastructure are designed for the able-bodied. This affects the urban experiences of old women and women living with physical and mental disabilities. There are not enough ramps, accessible signage is deficient and in general the urban infrastructure is not inclusive of different physical needs.

In addition, their sexual orientation or non-normative gender expression puts queer people at risk of being attacked. Between 2007 and 2019, 100 hate crimes were committed in Jalisco state. All of them are against LGBTTIQ+<sup>6</sup> people because of their sexual orientation and/or gender expression (Zona Docs, 2020). In Z.I.'s experience: "I have felt the social rejection when walking in the streets hanging out with another woman. It makes me frustrated, because I felt nervous of kissing a girl in the street. I feel we may be hit"<sup>7</sup> (Z.I., 2020).

Finally, religion is a power structure which might be subtler to note in the urban dynamics, but in a profoundly catholic country, not being religious or professing a different religion puts many women in uncomfortable situations.

Women negotiate and re-signify in their embodiments and place experiences of oppression and exclusion. But also, I found that some meanings inscribed in the home which are re-signified and negotiated in the public space. This is another example of the way in which the public and the private transcend each other and opens up the question of whether traditional connotations of private–public are breaking down. I found that women were still very constrained by the dichotomy of private/public and feel they are subjects of violence when they trespass the boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Mapping women's daily trajectories from an intersectional and embodied perspective sheds light on the ways in which power structures shape women's urban experiences. It leads to a deeper understanding of the mutual constitution of embodiment and space and how such interplay is mediated by the intersection of certain power structures. In my research, I problematized the power structures and identity axes of gender, age, social class, skin colour, corporality, religion, sexual orientation and disability through the methods of emotional mapping, relief maps and walking interviews. These methods helped me to analyse the ways in which specific power structures (which are always geographically and historically contingent) shape women's urban lives.

<sup>6</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and queer.

<sup>7</sup> Translated by author.

Feminist cartographies provide mapping methods which bring together the materiality and subjectivity of women's urban experience from an intersectional perspective. The methods put women's experiences at the centre and bring in their own voices and subjectivities about how they live in the urban environment to academia. Mapping becomes a tool to claim women's right to create and recreate urban geographies. Regarding the specific mapping methods used, it is important to choose the appropriate tools according to specific objectives. What I have called comprehensive women's embodied urban cartographies are a combination of mapping methods that respond to my research objectives and feminist epistemologies. However, I hope they can be useful for other feminist researchers to think, reflect and research about gender and spaces in a way that addresses the symbolic and material lived experience of today's urban spaces.

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# Interconnected Experiences: Embodying Feminist Research with Social Movements

*Daniela Flores Golfín, Tamara Rusansky,  
and Fleur Zantvoort*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter is the result of a journey of three feminist researchers threading their way through academia and feminist socio-ecological struggles. While we come from three different countries and backgrounds, our own histories converge in The Hague, The Netherlands during our MA in Development Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in 2018–2019. We were part of a common friend group where, because of our interests and research topics, we would often find ourselves

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asking each other questions related to our research, sharing material and giving each other suggestions. Writing this chapter has allowed us to reflect on the interconnectedness of our MA research experiences and the ways in which we value feminist research. We have written this chapter together, seeing it as an exciting process of thinking and working together as friends.

When we began writing we were all living in The Hague and seeing each other regularly. After the MA however, we moved to different countries, time zones and making decisions on our next steps, while facing a pandemic. We continued “meeting” each other online; mixing work and fun in our conversations. We adjusted to this new reality, worked online and most importantly, checked on each other in this difficult context. As a result, our chapter is highly informed by our knowledge of each other, our strengths and our perspectives. It gave us a welcome excuse to meet frequently in circumstances where the importance of friendship was felt by all of us.

In this chapter we take the reader through our own personal grappling, with critical feminist research and struggles for social justice, as well as of our friendship and thinking through of what it means to do research with social movements using feminist research methodologies. It explores the challenges, ethics and possibilities this entails in relation to the three movements that we have aligned ourselves within the context of our MA theses research—Extinction Rebellion in the Netherlands, the Movement of People Affected by Dams in Brazil and the Abortion Rights Movement in Costa Rica.<sup>1</sup> The three movements span different struggles and continents, yet in our research we encountered similar methodological questions, concerns and challenges. Reflecting from these different but related experiences, we explore the role of critical feminist research and knowledge generation in contributing to these specific social struggles.

First, we explore what feminist research methodology means to us, based on feminist epistemologies as well as social movement research that understands social movements as creating other ways of knowing and being (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Escobar, 2016; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1987; Icaza & Vazquez, 2013; Motta & Esteves, 2014). Second, we delve further into how we related to movements throughout our research. We reflect on how our methodological approaches varied

<sup>1</sup> For the original MA theses see Flores (2019), Rusansky (2019), Zantvoort (2019).

according to our different positionalities as researchers, from actively participating in the movement, to engaging in more short-term collaborations. Finally, we reflect on the role of critical feminist research in contributing to struggles for social justice, revisiting the question: for whom is knowledge being produced, and for what purpose (Leyva & Speed, 2008: 47)?

**Tamara:** My research journey with the Movement of People Affected by Dams in Brazil (*Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens*—MAB), particularly with women in the movement, emerged from my fascination with one of the resistance tools they use—*arpilleras*, a textile art technique from Chile. The technique was adopted by women organised in the MAB as a tool to narrate their stories and make political statements. The MAB is a national social movement organising the struggle of those affected by dams in different regions in Brazil. My research examined the embodied, emotional and daily resistance of women whose lives were flooded by one hydropower dam—the Baixo Iguaçu dam in the Iguaçu River Basin (South Brazil)—and reflected on the transformative potential of *arpilleras* as a resistance tool. Writing this chapter is part of the path of learning and unlearning that doing research alongside a social movement allowed me to traverse. This is a process of constantly questioning myself about my engagement with the political subjects of a social movement and their resistance to a neoliberal, patriarchal, colonial and racist energy development model, and their struggle for social justice.

**Daniela:** My research was centred around the experiences of abortion rights activists from several collectives in San José, Costa Rica. Initially my research was an exploration of individual self-care practices and tools to improve the experience of getting involved in this type of activism, but it transformed into a research on care within the movement. The research explored the care dynamics implemented by activists to care for themselves, other collectives and women in general, as well as the struggles and obstacles they encountered when doing so. I explored these dynamics, and how the women at the forefront of this movement perceive care and self-care as a resistance tool and as a standpoint for creating new ways of relating and fighting against oppression.

**Fleur:** When I started my graduate research project alongside Extinction Rebellion Netherlands, I was not intending to do feminist activist research. However, I was from the start guided by a commitment to social change and making explicit the power relations inherent in knowledge generation. In addition to conducting interviews, participating in

direct actions and organising were important in informing my research. I departed from the notion that social movements are important spaces for learning and unlearning involved in the “co-construction of becoming otherwise” of communities and subjects (Motta & Esteves, 2014: 5). Through the lens of belonging,<sup>2</sup> I looked to shed light on the knowledges and ways of being cultivated by the movement, and the ways in which they resist and/or reinforce dominant knowledges and subjectivities in the context of the Dutch climate movement. I discussed how an embodied, emotional understanding of the climate crisis and knowledge practices of care, vulnerability and mourning can unsettle dominant discourses of human control over “nature” and presumed innocence in relation to intertwined ecological, racialised and gendered violence.

### WHAT DOES FEMINIST RESEARCH METHODOLOGY MEAN TO US?

We see one of the main contributions of feminist approaches to research is its critical interrogation of power relations and dedication to understanding and transforming intersecting systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Philip & Bell, 2017). Rather than referring to a particular set of methods, we understand feminist methodology as a way of relating to our research; not as detached, objective researchers practising the “god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988: 581), but instead understanding ourselves as entangled in the co-creation of knowledge. Self-reflexivity and making explicit the ways in which power runs through us as researchers and our research relations form an important part of our methodology. We also situate ourselves within a history of feminist theories and we make sense of our “data” using feminist political ecology as well as decolonial and postcolonial feminisms.

Throughout our research, we sought to build reciprocal and caring relations with the people involved in our inquiries. We all, to a certain extent, sought to blur the boundaries between the subjects and objects of research (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008). Within the context of social movement research, this means we position ourselves as doing research rather

<sup>2</sup> I use the concept of belonging mainly as elaborated by Carrillo Rowe (2005) and Wright (2015) as “being and longing, as subjects and their belongings desire to connect and reconnect differently” (Wright, 2015: 399), as a way of thinking of subjectivities and power relations as relational.

than on movements (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Escobar, 2008), which in practice translated into distinct ways of positioning ourselves, as we will discuss further. At the same time, we acknowledge that claims to “blur the boundaries” from the standpoint of academia are themselves infused with power. We assert with Chesters (2012: 155) that “the academy has no a priori reason or justification for making demands upon those it seeks knowledge of”. Therefore, we see devoting time and energy to a wide range of movement activities not necessarily related to our research, and continuing our engagement with the movements after the research itself has ended as essential to an ethical praxis that nevertheless cannot fully resolve the tensions between academic and activist priorities. While collaboration and participation can be important elements of critical feminist research, we also recognise the limitations of these, considering that in the end, the researcher often maintains final authority over meaning-making and representation (Preissle & Han, 2012). Thus, we seek to align ourselves actively with social movement struggles and their prefigurative politics as they reimagine social, political and economic systems (Dinerstein, 2016; Maeckelbergh, 2016).

Another question that animates us as feminist researchers revolves around who should be the subjects of our research or perhaps rather, with whom do we choose to align ourselves? For Tamara and Daniela, departing from women’s experiences (Harding, 1987) formed a key part of their research methodology. They adopted a research practice that pays attention to the effects of power on women’s understandings, emotions and lived experiences of resistance, finding in those understandings, emotions and experiences “a legitimate form of knowledge that can lead to new practices and create possibilities for social change” (Harcourt, 2017: 276). While Fleur similarly prioritised an “activist standpoint” (Maddison & Shaw, 2012) and approached the movement as cultivating knowledges and ways of being that are inherently valuable (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Icaza & Vazquez, 2013), it included people of multiple genders. The three of us acknowledge that the subjects of feminist research are not limited to “women” and their experiences, as is sometimes considered central to feminist research (Raghuram et al., 1998; Taylor, 1998). Instead, we are concerned with bringing “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1994) that challenge the dominant heteropatriarchal-colonial-capitalist system to the centre of analysis.

In addition, reflexivity forms an important part of our feminist research practice, as we seek to acknowledge our own role in the co-elaboration

of knowledge with social movements, “not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual[s] with concrete, specific desires and interests” (Harding, 1987: 9). This requires a constant acknowledgement that we write from our partial, rooted, subjective and embodied epistemological gazes, shaped by our positionalities, experiences and political and ethical commitments. Instead of hiding our partialities, anxieties, discomforts and contradictions, we actively embrace them and “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2016) as a way of deepening our understandings. For all of us, this meant that we were keeping a research journal to reflect on our own experience specifically directed at the aim of practising reflexivity. As we were building new relations and moving through the research, our own understandings and subjectivities also shifted. This demonstrates how feminist research can be understood through the metaphor of the traveller, as a journey that changes the researcher in the process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

This reflexivity extends to the process of analysis and writing up of the research, making space for diversity and tensions, resisting the notion of writing an objective reality (Raghuram et al., 1998; Tsing, 2005). In order to do so we also became a part of a collective feminist writing group in which multiple women gathered, not only to discuss our research but how that research made us feel, the conflicts we experienced and how our positionalities affected the research and were affected by it. By doing this and writing ourselves into the research, we open up space for our emotions and learning processes. We do this as a way to make clear the situatedness and relational nature of knowledge cultivation, and to attend to the embodied knowledges and the affects that informed our research with social movements.

## RELATING TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS FEMINIST RESEARCHERS

In this section, we reflect on how each of us grappled with the tensions we encountered when building relationships as feminist academic activists with social movements. The relations of power between us as researchers and the subjects of our research is an important question in feminist research (Rose, 1997). Feminist researchers have emphasised the importance of “non-hierarchical interactions, understanding, and mutual learning” (Sultana, 2007: 375), yet unequal power relations will always persist within the context of academia. Negotiating these

power relations was a recurring struggle in our research. Our positionalities, especially as outsiders/insiders, affected how we interacted with the movements and activists, and how those shifted during the research (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020). We see our positionality as never fully as an insider/outsider, but always partial and shifting (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Our positionalities and subjectivities (Whitson, 2017) matter because they not only affect the access we have to the movements and the relationships with the people participating in our research, but also the questions we ask and the meaning we make out of our encounters (Berger, 2015).

In thinking through the power relations that structure our research, we are inspired by approaches that propose strategies for decolonising social science methodologies and research practices with social movements, and those that advocate for constructing collaborative research practices (Escobar, 2008; Espinosa, 2014; Icaza, 2018; Leyva & Speed, 2008; Ziai et al., 2020). An important element of this is questioning what counts as valid knowledge and who has the power to know. We understand social movements as important spaces of knowledge generation rather than just objects of knowledge for social movement scholars (Chesters, 2012; Escobar, 2008). In their movements, activists are building the ways of knowing and being needed to transform the colonial, heteropatriarchal capitalist system.

At the same time, we recognise that movements in themselves are fractured, contested spaces that participate in the politics of knowledge (Flórez, 2014; Motta, 2016). One of our main concerns was with whom it would be responsible to align ourselves given the confines of MA research—time constraints, the individuality of the exercise, lack of resources, the need to produce a thesis. Being part of the dominant racial groups in each of our contexts, we particularly felt we lacked the relations to responsibly carry out research “across the colonial divide” (Escobar, 2016). One of the consequences of choosing to depart from where we are situated and trying to avoid the reproduction of colonial knowledge practices is that our research centred on communities that were similarly located (mostly) within the dominant racial groups (although also traversed by other relations of power). At the same time, we are conscious about the possible silencing effects this may have created (particularly due to the logic of academia within which we operate).

*Tamara: Embroidering Feminist Activist Research with Women of the MAB*

My research process was built through a series of encounters with activists of the MAB, initially virtual and subsequently on-site. First, I engaged with activists of the movement's national collective of women in online conversations to introduce myself, share my interest in the movement and discuss the possibilities of doing my research with them. These initial dialogues enabled me to begin to get to know the movement and to hear from the activists what they thought was interesting and important to "be researched" and why, as well as where to geographically ground my research. I thought it was fundamental to consider not only the movement's interest but also to take into account who I am and where I come from (white woman from south Brazil, studying in Europe) and the time constraints of my MA research. Progressively, the movement opened paths for me to get closer to its complex, multi-scale struggle. Together, we decided to situate my research in the region affected by the Baixo Iguaçu dam, in south Brazil.

The way I approached the MAB, trying to build a collaborative research practice, was inspired by decolonial research with social movements (Escobar, 2008; Lozano, 2016). One relevant aspect of such an approach was the valuation of the *arpilleras* as a valid source of knowledge. As Fleur reflects later on, centring marginalised knowledges is a concern of critical feminist research. Another aspect was the effort I made in my engagement with the movement's activists to create possibilities of thinking together, positioning myself as someone that was there to learn with them and trying to let the conversations flow naturally rather than making interviews or asking a predefined list of closed questions. Also, I constantly shared my own reflections and interpretations and invited the research participants to openly discuss them with me. This was especially possible to practise with those activists that hosted me during my visit to the region affected by a dam in Paraná, south Brazil, with whom I shared more time during meals, car rides and evening *chimmarrão*<sup>3</sup> circles. Thinking with others (Escobar, 2018: 9) as a research practice is a process of breaking the hierarchy between researcher/researched and the dualist notion of knower/known, subject/object and academic/activist.

<sup>3</sup> Traditional South-American infused drink of yerba mate leaves.

I faced multiple limitations when undertaking collaborative research with the MAB. One of them was marked by my position as an outsider, characterised by my urban background and the fact that the activists did not know me, that I was not part of the movement or of any of the movements that integrate networks with the MAB or that identify as part of the organised working-class. Also, that I am not a woman affected by a dam or have experienced socio-environmental conflicts, that even though I am Brazilian I was coming from an academic institution in the global North, among others. Being an outsider required a lot of effort to build trust and to demonstrate that I was a supporter of the movement and was politically aligned with the activists. I believe that my political position, my own fascination with the movement and my indignation in face of the injustices that people affected by the dam were suffering shined through, evidencing my alignment with the struggle. Also, much like Daniela, the fact that I had mutual friends with some of the activists helped in building trust.

Being guided by a movement I was an outsider to also meant acknowledging that I only saw snapshots of the struggle and could only access the spaces that the movement opened for me, gaining a partial and limited view. There were also benefits of being an outsider when doing research with a social movement. I perceived that people were more open to share their thoughts and experiences with me because I was not part of the movement, thus sharing critical opinions about it was not conflictive, for instance. My positionality slightly shifted during the research process, especially in relation to the activists that were hosting me, given that as days passed more trust was built between us and the spaces they opened for me widened; even invites to join the movement arose. The way I relate with the movement continues to shift given that after finishing the research for my MA thesis and back in Brazil I continued to engage with the movement. I spent a week in another region affected by a dam learning about the local resistance, participated in a regional planning meeting, took part in popular education online encounters, engaged in their digital campaigns and began to work for a local association that collaborates with the MAB in a region affected by a mining dam.

A relevant challenge of relating with a social movement as a feminist researcher was to unpack my positionality and to deal with contradictions that emerge (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015). The place from where I embarked on this research practice is marked by my political commitments as a feminist and as a supporter of the MAB and the struggles



embodied by women in the movement, but also by my entanglement with power relations. Constantly reflecting on my privileges as an educated, white, middle-class woman in a country so deeply marked by structural racism and social inequalities, and particularly through a dialogue about it with Fleur, I realised how implicated I am in the energy model that the movement is fighting and that causes harm and suffering to people affected by dams, given my socioeconomic privilege, urban way of living and my patterns of consumption. As a woman affected by a dam said to me: “people that live in cities can’t see that for them to have their electricity, a lot of violence against peasants and riverine populations and against nature occur”.

From this at times uncomfortable position, I constantly tried to maintain my ethical commitments through being reflexive (Sultana, 2007). I was especially concerned about the danger of romanticising women’s experiences and appropriating their knowledges, and aware of the privilege of being the one who decides how the story is told, which translates into an ethical responsibility. One way of dealing with this responsibility from a feminist’s perspective was to never claim to “see” from their position (Haraway, 1988: 584), making the situated place from where I was researching and writing visible (Sultana, 2007).

Also, in terms of the ethics of building relations with a social movement as a researcher, I assumed a posture of openness and made an effort to practise an active and sensitive listening in every dialogue, allowing closeness and emotional involvement, which was an exercise of attending to what is present but not enunciated and to relate and write from a place of affection. Part of this ethics was my conscious decision of using the terms fieldwork and field very carefully, because of the extractive rationality of these terms, grounded on the notion that the researcher goes to the field, collects raw material and then back at the academic setting produces knowledge (Barbosa da Costa et al., 2015: 270, 279). As my research process involved dealing with people’s daily lives and embodied experiences, I opted for terms such as journey and encounters, keeping in mind that words matter and that choosing words has political implications.

### *Daniela: Self-Care as a Pleasurable Form of Resistance*

Like Tamara and Fleur, I think that as researchers, our way of relating to movements sometimes arises from personal interests and politics. The way we see the world, the issues that “pass through our bodies”, the struggles

that represent us can facilitate our approach to social movements, and that is precisely how my approach came into being. In the past, I built relationships with other feminists in my city and created links with women who are at the forefront of abortion rights activism groups. I observed and heard about the self-care dynamics they have and those I felt were missing, and as a psychologist, I questioned the repercussions of these dynamics.

In conversations prior to my research, I heard the demand of some activists to find a way to work on self-care and burnout (even when human and time resources were lacking) and I saw an opportunity to contribute to the movement from my position. My first concern was how to contribute to a movement I was an outsider to and being in another country I felt that I could not contribute as I wished to. For a while I only valued the activism that took me to the streets, but I realised later that by questioning the value of the type of activism I could do, I was not doing any of it. Due to this, I decided to start by incorporating it into what I was doing at the moment, which was research for my MA.

In terms of positionality, I believe that my particular situation made it easier for me to approach the topic of self-care with the activists. I was an outsider to the movement, therefore it was simpler to discuss the internal dynamics that caused conflict within it and affected their mental health. As Tamara, I was not part of any group or perceived as loyal to anyone specific and that allowed everyone to feel more comfortable during the interviews. We were then able to discuss internal conflicts that have an impact on their self-care and the history of the movement that sometimes adds to those conflicts and hinders the efforts to communicate assertively with other activists. At the same time, though, I am a young, feminist, Costa Rican woman who has shared spaces with a lot of these women, such as protests, human rights events and discussion groups. Some of them know me or of me through mutual friends and because of that, they felt comfortable and keen to help me with my research. That was also my entry point into the movement when I started my research, as I was in contact with different actors inside the movement and was able to create a call out for interviews that reached the different groups involved.

Part of doing feminist research, though, was acknowledging that choosing this topic was my desire, and not a demand from the activists. I believed that the issue of self-care was interesting and that I could contribute in some way to improving their conditions, but it was me coming to them to suggest a topic, and to ask for their collaboration.

I struggled, because I recognised that I did not have enough time to take on a participatory approach, therefore I knew that I had to be reflexive and adapt myself, and the methodologies, to the possibilities of the participants and not the other way around. Especially when discussing care, my focus was to be caring in my interactions with the activists. I initially wanted to conduct focus groups, to not only talk about individual self-care, but collective care. I wanted to facilitate self-care workshops to provide a space they were struggling to create for themselves and, in my mind, to contribute in some way during my research. Nonetheless, this proved difficult for them for several reasons (such as time and internal conflicts) and I found myself reflecting if this was an actual demand or a reflection of my own perception of their needs.

The participants' time constraints and concerns with the group methodologies were a limitation throughout the research, but also a reflective practice that allowed me to adapt to, and prioritise the possibilities of the participants, as well as remain critical to my own ideas and practices. After several adjustments, I decided to have individual interviews and within those conversations I received more input as to why the group methodologies did not work for this specific research. I got an inside look into the movement and realised that some of the dynamics that were creating pressure for the activists were related to the relationships between them and their communication. Infighting as an obstacle for care was eventually one of the findings of my research and an additional reason to uphold individual experiences and not only the commonalities between them.

Furthermore, I made efforts to nurture my bonds with the activists and to stray from the idea of "objectivity" using my feelings and thoughts as material that informed those relations, instead of tarnishing them. This was something the three of us did (in different ways) that resulted in enriching discussions and the formation of bonds that went beyond that of researcher and participants. Eventually, after the research was done I continued to have conversations with the activists and was contacted to facilitate self-care workshops for some of the groups, which confirmed to me how much more fruitful conversations can be when started by the communities and not the other way around.

Finally, as a psychologist I could not ignore the fact that mental health was always a concern for me when getting involved in activism and a topic that kept recurring every time I had discussions with friends that were more involved than me. It was a priority and it is part of my positionality

as a researcher that I considered it an important issue to explore. It was also key for me, as a psychologist, to have that self-care that I sought to underline through my research. In an academic context where objectivity is highly valued and being professional is often related to being “emotionless”, talking about my research, how it made me feel and the limitations I had was vital for me to oppose this traditional view. As in my psychological practice, I realised that having regular meetings with colleagues gave me ideas, knowledge and feedback to make sure that my research was first and foremost, respectful. As well as creative and fun. Not only for the participants but for myself as well. One of the participants from the research I conducted mentioned that part of self-care is making sure to remember that there is no resistance without pleasure, and I believe part of doing feminist research is embodying that belief in your process as well.

### *Fleur: Blurring the Boundaries Through Activist Research*

Like Daniela and Tamara, my research also evolved out of my previous experiences and interests, in my case with the Dutch climate movement. I had been involved with green youth politics for several years and had been questioning some of the exclusions I experienced. In addition, my concerns and fears of climate change and hope for a more just world meant that I was looking to get more involved in climate justice activism. I wanted to conduct research within The Netherlands, as it was important for me to be aware of where I was situated, and more closely examine the possibilities of systemic change within the Global North. Nevertheless, I was relatively new to the climate justice movement, to Extinction Rebellion and to activism in general, thus making me a relative “outsider”. Still, I had the advantage of doing research within the city and country that I was living in at the time, which provided me with more time and opportunities to form deep relationships. Additionally, the movement I was researching was only just emerging, which allowed me to quickly establish relations with many organisers and contribute to the process of building the movement from the ground up, while Tamara and Daniela had to weave their way through movements that had been active for a long time, with many of the relations already established.

From an early stage, I was concerned with the issue of whom and for what we, as social scientific researchers, are producing knowledge (Leyva & Speed, 2008: 47). I hoped to identify research questions that

would be useful to XR, by collaborating with other activists to shape my research. I considered a participatory approach, in which the researcher works together with the “participants” to answer these questions the “ideal” way of mitigating power relations. However, I struggled to implement this. I attributed some of these difficulties to constraints inherent to academic research, including limited time and resources (Leyva & Speed, 2008) and the fact that activism has its own temporality. In hindsight however, I am also able to appreciate how my positionality determined what questions were possible to ask. From my “outsider” position, I did not have access to the questions relevant to other movement actors due to my limited relation to them. It is through organising and resisting together with the movement for a longer period of time that I have developed an understanding of the questions that are relevant to ask. I also experienced my researcher positionality as a barrier to collective knowledge creation as I felt that the need to write a thesis meant there was always an “ulterior motive”.

I was also committed to feminist concerns to centre marginalised or subjugated knowledges in my research. Within the context of the climate movement, I interpreted this as the need to centre non-white, non-university educated and working-class voices, as I was concerned with absences along the lines of race and class. This made me hesitant to focus my research on XRNL, which I perceive as hegemonically situated in the context of the climate movement. Through conversations with Tamara about the ways in which we are implicated in the oppressions we were trying to address (related to the energy model in Brazil and “whitestream” environmentalism in The Netherlands, respectively) I was able to appreciate the importance of departing from where I am situated. As I was myself departing from a dominant position within the climate movement being white and university educated, I did not want to pretend I could speak to the perspectives of people marginalised or ignored by the movement better than they could speak for themselves (hooks, 1990: 241–243). I have however come to understand my positionality not just in terms of a politics of location (Rich, 1984), but also as a politics of relation (Carrillo Rowe, 2005) that formed the point of departure for my research analysis. It was not necessarily my social location that limited my research in terms of what I considered to be ethical, but the fact that I lacked the relations to meaningfully engage across difference—and that it would not be possible to build these relations within the time constraints of my MA research.

Zavos and Biglia (2009) highlight how activist research is distinct from ethnography because the object of study is partially shaped by the researcher/activist's presence. Within XRNL, I ended up participating intensively in the process of knowledge and subjectivity formation, subverting the subject-object divide in research. My positionality and subjectivity shifted considerably during the research, affecting the way in which I made sense of the "data". For instance, being involved in XR made me increasingly relate to the climate and ecological crisis through emotions. This led me to unpack how I had internalised dominant rational, scientific approaches in relation to climate change and caused me to shift my understanding of the way XR relates to these subjectivities. Noting down my own emotions, tensions and changing perspectives during the research through journaling became an important part of my research practice. My research methodology became an embodiment of the resistance of dominant knowledges and subjectivities by giving primacy to subjugated knowledges that emanate from experience and emotions.

My intimate researcher positionality also created new ethical and practical dilemmas (Preissle & Han, 2012). There often existed ambiguity around my role as a researcher vs. activist. As opposed to Tamara and Daniela, I was less concerned with building trust, and more with the responsibility placed into my hands as a researcher by the trust that emanated from "being a fellow rebel", that I would not harm the movement and make the right ethical choices. It would have been useful to set up certain boundaries around my researcher and activist identity following Biglia's adoption of a "complex borderline position" (Zavos & Biglia, 2009), for instance by deciding that not all of my activist work needed to inform the research, and bounding research practices to more formal events like interviews or specific conversations. Eventually, most of my research did come to rely on interviews as a result of my own negotiation of ethical and practical concerns. This illustrates that while in some cases, feminist methodologies may lead us to reject the interview as a method that does not allow for co-creation of knowledge (as in Tamara's case), in others it may lead us to see interviews as essential to maintaining some of the boundary-work between activism and research that may be ethically necessary after all.

## HOW CAN FEMINIST ACTIVIST RESEARCH CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT STRUGGLES?

Throughout the research process, all of us were concerned about the question of who and for what we are producing knowledge. We engaged in continued reflection about the relationships between academia and activism, and the contributions that we could make towards social change. We wondered if what we were bringing to the table was enough, if it was helpful, and if it was relevant and politically useful for the social movements we were working with (Leinius, 2020). By discussing these questions with each other, we realised that we had a common understanding that our research carried “the potential for transformative dialogue” (Chatterton et al., 2007: 219) that is in itself a way of contributing to social change.

### *Tamara: Connecting Academic Feminist Research with the Movement’s Popular Education Feminist Methodology*

Several activists of the Movement of People Affected by Dams shared with me that they were quite used to being contacted by academics interested in the movement, and I constantly feared being another extractive researcher: one that goes to “the field” with closed and defined ideas, collects information and goes back to academia to “produce knowledge”, never returning again (Barbosa da Costa et al., 2015; Leyva, 2015). My way of negotiating this risk involved letting the movement guide me, being open to what they wanted to show me and sometimes accepting to let go of my interests and priorities, questioning them on how academic feminist research could be useful for them and contribute to their struggle. Instead of a relation of extraction, I aimed to engage in a horizontal relationship, interacting, discussing, reflecting and collaborating, bringing different knowledges together (Lozano, 2016: 20; Motta, 2011: 196). I certainly faced several limitations and had to deal with the frustration of realising that it was really hard to put most of these ideas into practice, especially considering that I had very limited time for research, that the writing process took place geographically far away from the movement, that I was writing in English and not in Portuguese, and that in the end I was the one with the final authority over the research and its results (Leinius, 2020: 74).

Furthermore, I had to deal with the fact that not all the activists were interested or thought it was relevant to discuss how academic research could be useful to the movement. Some of them showed excitement and openness in talking to me about their experiences of struggle, but not necessarily interest in discussing what I was going to write based on those conversations, while others were keen to know more about my theoretical framework, for instance. Asking the activists how academic research could be useful for them also involved receiving sincere (and sometimes ironic) answers, such as invitations for me to join the movement, implying that I would contribute more by moving to the territory affected by the dam and building the resistance on the ground with them.

An important aspect of my experience of mobilising a feminist methodological approach to come close to the MAB that I want to reflect on is related to the *arpilleras*, my guides in this process. Metaphorically, my research was guided by the *arpilleras*, through which the stories of women affected by dams resisting in different parts of Brazil initially reached me. Approaching women affected by dams through their embroideries was also a process of collectively giving value to alternative forms of knowledge and tools of resistance. The *arpillera* is a form of knowledge and a tool that is frequently diminished because it is not considered really political, especially by men who see *arpilleras* as something secondary that women do. I share with Daniela the conviction that the valuation of what is frequently side-lined in political practice or not considered political—self-care and art—is extremely relevant. Bringing artistic expressions of women affected by dams to the centre with the activists that have been claiming its meaning as a political tool was an important choice of my practice of relating with the movement and contributing as a researcher-activist.

With their art-based resistance, women in the MAB have been constructing their own “popular education feminist methodology” (MAB, 2015)—in which *arpilleras* work as a tool for creating spaces for women to debate about power relations within the movement and to reflect on and translate their experiences of struggle and resistance, enunciating what has systematically been silenced, both individually and collectively, through the act of embroidering. The feminist activist research practice I aimed to build relates with the popular education feminist methodology of *arpilleras* in the sense that it materialises through encounters, collaborative work, moments of listening and sharing emotions and letting stories come together and blend into one another.



Bringing *arpilleras* to the centre speaks about listening to women's voices and reaffirming with them the political meaning of *arpilleras* as counter-hegemonic purposes that rise up to contest dominant narratives of the energy development model in Brazil.

*Daniela: Self-Care as a Dialogue for Transformation*

One of the concerns that kept me reflective during the research was the importance of focusing on the activists' stories and experiences. I believed in the power of highlighting their voices and the way they wanted to be portrayed, and I later on reflected on the relation that this had with the focus of my research. I consider their efforts to focus on the social burdens and benefits of care, and using them as a way to contribute to social change, as remarkable. In an attempt to mirror this in my research I focused on the burdens that affect them as activists, and the lack of information about their experiences. Bringing the topic of self-care to the centre of a conversation that is often focused on the outcomes of the movement and its methodologies, and not the activists themselves, became an attempt to reflect their beliefs around care and their effort to bring it to the forefront of their activism, as a counter-hegemonic practice.

Initially, I had specific intentions with my research, I believed that the only way to contribute was to act based on the information I received. I thought I had to contribute with practical tools regarding self-care and had thought of conducting workshops with those interested, but I had to come to terms with the fact that at the moment, this would have only added to the workload these women had. As one of them told me: "You have to be careful not to turn your self-care into another task on your to-do list".

During the process, similarly to Fleur, I realised that another way of striving for social change was to contribute to ongoing conversations of resistance and to the development of critiques that are used to empower and inform the movement (Chatterton et al., 2007: 219). The research we created motivated reflection about their mental health and the weight that the work has on these women. As well as how the dynamics of power within the movement affect their efforts to achieve social change. "[C]hange, therefore, is about movement in which the journey is more important than a hoped-for utopia" (Chatterton et al., 2007: 221) and I would add, change is about focusing on the possible dialogues for transformation and how they could take us one step closer to that utopia.

*Fleur: Building and Sustaining Relations as Social Change*

I departed from the hope that my research would contribute to addressing some of the silences and exclusions in XRNL that reinforce dominant understandings of climate change as a technical-environmental problem and centre whiteness and masculinity. I was guided by Casas-Cortés et al. (2008) approach to social movement research of translation and description of movement knowledges, but I continuously wondered how this was useful to the movement, considering its members already had a deep understanding of these knowledges. Thus, I shared Tamara's fear of exacerbating the extractive dynamic of the research practice (Leyva & Speed, 2008). I was also relatively inexperienced in both activism and academia, meaning that I had limited understanding of different research tools that could support a feminist methodology, as well as limited skills to facilitate knowledge co-creation. Observing how their graduate students encountered similar problems, Maddison and Shaw (2012) suggest that feminists may need to reconceptualise the meaning of activism in research. Perhaps there are other ways of conducting feminist research that do not necessarily emphasise participation, but are able to leverage better what graduate research has to offer social movements, while limiting the demands of time and energy that the researcher makes on others. I think that the most important contribution of graduate research can be simply having the time and space to engage in-depth with certain topics, which is a scarce resource in action-oriented movements. This can be leveraged in many ways, including conducting interviews to make activist stories more accessible (Zavos & Biglia, 2009), or using discourse analysis to better understand the narratives of the movement (Moss, 2009).

This led me to reconceptualise co-creation of knowledge. As Daniela also suggested, I came to understand that I was engaging in collaborative knowledge cultivation through continuous involvement in movement conversations. Perhaps it does not make sense to think of research and activism as separate, but as Maxey (1999) suggests seeing research as another possible way of practising activism, recognising research and social movement praxis as complementary practices aimed at making sense of the world, creating meaning, knowledge and building relations. Thought this way, the contributions that I was able to make emerge more clearly. I established many invaluable relations: this includes the building of a working group and community of practice to address issues of power

and oppression within XRNL, as well as an ongoing relation with decolonial and Indigenous climate justice activists that I initiated in the context of my research. In addition, the combination of both using and questioning the discourses and practices of XRNL as an activist researcher opened up important spaces for reflection and new questions to ask (Zavos & Biglia, 2009). I concur with Zavos' (Zavos & Biglia, 2009) observation that it is important to offer my insights as one, but not the only possible interpretation of activist practices and narratives, which has thankfully resonated with many of the people in XRNL with whom I have shared my research.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

All three of us have been guided by a commitment to make the social movements we have been working with not merely the objects of our investigation, but to build a collaborative approach that prioritises the questions that are relevant to ask for the movement, building long-term relationships and offering up our insights to support and strengthen the movements. This however demands deep involvement, which is very hard to achieve within the limited scope and time of a MA thesis process (Trzeciak, 2020). We felt that the restrictions imposed on graduate research conflicted with what we perceive to be important for feminist research: participatory, collaborative, action-oriented, reciprocal and relational rather than extractive, contributing to transformative change. This led us to frequently question the value of doing research within this framework, and in what way it is complementary to or, as put by Leyva (2015), in tension with political activism. Together with our co-feminist researchers we often lamented what we perceived as the insignificance of our research, questioning the relevance of the many hours spent behind the screen while the activists we worked with were busy organising.

Although we were inspired by feminist research approaches seeking to collapse the divide between academia and activism (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008), we have come to feel that this is neither always possible nor always desirable. We do find the idea of moving between these terrains as complementary (and sometimes conflicting) ways of making sense of the world (Moss, 2009) or perceiving research as possibly residing within the sphere of activism more useful (Maxey, 1999). Rethinking the academia-activism dichotomy (Leyva, 2015) can help us redefine what academia is, what activism is, and challenge a hierarchy of what counts as “real”

activism and as “valid” knowledge. Importantly though, our experiences of researching with social movements using feminist methodologies went way beyond writing and submitting an academic piece, in different but related ways. It translated into a continuous involvement through which the spaces for dialoguing and building knowledge and relations multiply. The activist-academic learning and the relations built through the research were probably its most important “outcomes”. As our insider/outsider positionality shifted, it also opened up new perspectives and new questions to ask.

Finally, and as reflected upon earlier, part of the practice of feminist research for us existed in the collective effort and creation of spaces for co-learning and reflecting with fellow researchers. Throughout the process, we regularly convened with friends and colleagues to provide much-needed emotional support, critical feedback and thinking through each other’s problems. In this way, we were exploring ways of doing research relationally and co-creatively, not just between researchers and participants, but also between researchers working on different projects, giving shape to our feminist research practice and informing our friendships.

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# Feminist Storytellers Imagining New Stories to Tell

*Rosa de Nooijer and Lillian Sol Cueva*

## INTRODUCTION

Feminists use a variety of methodologies<sup>1</sup> to make women's lives and experiences epistemologically, socially and politically relevant. One of these methodologies is storytelling, which allows for the inclusion of life histories and personal accounts in research, giving academics the chance to experiment with different ways of gathering and communicating data. Storytelling is a customary practice of transmitting histories, knowledges and cosmologies and has historically been done in various ways. Stories can be told through dance, drawn on rocks with different colored stones, told around a fire, written down in books, recorded in podcasts, shown

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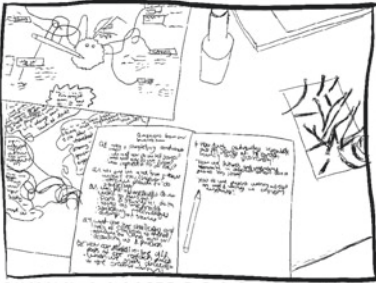
in film or shared in comics where text and drawings tend to accompany each other (Pikola Estés, 2001: 31–39).

For feminist researchers, storytelling is a way to challenge dominant narratives which erase, oversimplify and universalize women’s voices and experiences. It is an unconventional way to explore women’s stories and to expand their possibilities as women tell their own stories in their own words (Woodiwiss et al., 2017).

It is our purpose to contribute to the discussion about the use of feminist storytelling. This chapter will take us, its writers and readers, to a dinner, inspired by the creative writing of Lillian, Rosa and other feminist authors who tell stories. It involves reading, quoting, conspiring, studying and supporting each other while summoning other feminists to do the same (Toupin & Spideralex, 2018).

To do this we use creative writing and drawing, which help us to “speak and inquire differently, [to] provide a different set of data and voices, and [to] let go of some rigid notions of truth” (Moezzi et al., 2017: 7). For this chapter, we have chosen the devices of stories and storytelling, not just because of their scientific value but also because of their artistic, political and activist capacity to connect people through their tales. The chapter starts by guiding you through our methodological process, in which we elaborate how we first envisioned this chapter and its contents, as well as locating ourselves and sharing from where we write. Then the chapter continues in the shape of an illustrated story, in an attempt to search for different intellectual and emotional frameworks. In “Appetite for Change” we will show you around the dinner and define how we understand stories. We will also discuss feminist storytelling and its potential in research and in practice. In “Ultraviolet Woman-Bee”, we will attempt to see the world we live in and how it is organized from another perspective. In the conclusion, we will finish the chapter by reflecting on the characteristics of feminist storytelling and by asking some questions to keep exploring this methodology in the future.

We hope that this chapter will inspire you to dream of bees dancing in the sky and sea turtles called by the moon; to imagine worlds in which women are as free as flying birds. Also, we hope this chapter will trigger a desire to meet with friends and find connections with strangers, to write creatively and think of other ways to do “academic work”. Finally, while doing this we hope you have fun—a lot of fun—and feel excited to stay with the trouble because *¡Se va a caer, porque lo vamos a tirar!* (“It is going to fall because we are going to tear it down!”).



## METHODOLOGY: IMAGINING

Imagining a chapter together about feminist storytelling started next to a lake in Italy, in a small village called Bolsena. Here, we were part of a feminist methodologies summer school in which this book was first envisioned. We were staying at a convent surrounded by nature where we enjoyed communal spaces, told each other stories, shared food and participated in a variety of workshops. Its spirit has not changed, however, the space in which we have been creating this chapter has been quite different from where it originally sprouted. We are now in the middle of a worldwide pandemic which requires us to stay inside our homes as much as possible.

### *The Steps*

We took different steps to agree on the content of this chapter. First, we met three times in which we came together to draw, craft, talk, be in silence and to connect our ideas. We trusted each other to organize the meetings, their location and the activities that would help us to develop our ideas and working schedule. We explored what we understand as stories and storytelling from a feminist perspective. Doing this, we documented our work and archived it as a way to inform the final writing stage of crafting this chapter.

During our meetings we agreed that we wanted to write this chapter together, to prioritize women authors' voices and to do feminist storytelling by using a combination of words and more than words. We committed to take care of each other during the working process, meaning that we shared and contributed equally, based on the activities we enjoyed the most. Also, we acknowledged that we are different in various ways, but just like nature needs biodiversity for the ecosystem to be healthy, we needed to nurture our differences to work and learn together.

We soon learned that both of us have been interested in storytelling, from a young age as a way of getting to know the world and as art form, additionally we were both using it as research methodology. Moreover, we realized that we were at different stages of our research, which allowed us to learn from each other by engaging in a dialogue about our knowledges and experiences of using storytelling as a methodology. Rosa already used

storytelling in “The Dinner of Relations”<sup>2</sup> and Lillian is currently creating stories with vendors at traditional marketplaces in Mexico City.

### *The Writing and the Drawing*

This chapter is written based on creative writing, real-life dialogues between us, the authors, as well as the work of feminist thinkers, activists and artists. It is co-written and co-edited which implied close listening to one another, to voice our own opinions and to show mutual respect and understanding. We decided to use this approach inspired by Ursula K. Le Guin who said “that every story must make its own rules and obey them” (Books aren’t just commodities 2018: min. 02:32–02:52). We applied her advice, not just to the content of our work but also to our collaboration while making this chapter.

Additionally, this chapter uses drawings. They are not tools to visualize what we are writing but to complement it, they are stories in and of themselves. We do not intend to attach more value to one or the other; both are equally important for communicating our thoughts and processes, for making art as well as science and for expressing creatively what words are unable to express. Illustrations create dimensions and movement, provide an atmosphere and give a face and emotions to the characters. Through this graphic form, we hope to offer a creative experience, to trigger different stimuli and therefore to open up your imagination and to attract your attention (Sandoval, 2020).

### *The Positioning*

Finally, we write this chapter from a place which cannot be pinpointed on a map as it is informed by and connected to a variety of places, spaces, territories and lands in which we are rooted: The Netherlands, Mexico,

<sup>2</sup> “The Dinner of Relations” is the inspiration for the dinner in this chapter. It was an imaginary setting created by Rosa for her master’s research. At this dinner, farmers, loved ones, writers and academics were invited to have a dialogue about food, eating and relationality at a Dutch farm in a province called de Flevopolder. We (Lillian and Rosa) were dining there and having a conversation. For this chapter we imagined a similar setting in which we could share food and our thoughts with each other. We imagine that, as we nourish ourselves with food, our words and minds are also nourished by the company and dialogues, making eating together into something that connects us with each other and our surroundings.

our bodies and our imagination. We want to occupy the specific geographies of the imaginary to have a dinner and tell stories together, while refusing the fortification of the rational ground, the certitude of already “knowing” where to go with our narratives and the practice of silencing our voices to hear the “wise” man that rules in Patriarchyland.

Similar to the impossibility to pinpoint one location from which we write, our thinking is not singular either but the result of many women’s thoughts (Rowe, 2005: 15). Who we are and what we do is shaped by women who we love, respect and admire. It is also shaped by the women whose books, poetry and stories we have read, movies we have watched and art we have seen. As Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2005) argues, “[t]he meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflection” (3). In this piece in particular, we are shedding light upon our connection to the words and work of Octavia E. Butler, Brenda Navarro, Donna Haraway, Ursula K. Le Guin, Gabriela Cabezón, Gloria Anzaldúa, women farmers’ voices, the women in our families, our *ancestras*, *compañeras* and friends, who root us and teach us. You can see some of them sitting with us at our imaginary dinner table in one of our drawings.

We know that storytelling is not particular or exclusive to feminism, rather it is one of the many ways in which phenomena and theories about the world are described. However, we focus on the work of feminists because we find ourselves in it. It welds us together in alliances “to transform and narrate [us] who go unrecognized and whose existence is considered impossible” (Toupin & Spideralex, 2018).

### *Appetite for Change*

Below, we will shift to storytelling to present our own short story. We will explore what feminist storytelling means to us and illustrate what it might look like. Now, dear reader, we invite you to come with us to have dinner and to be part of the conversation. We hope this will be a space to open the scope of imagination when it comes to seeing possibilities, of actively engaging with each other in the struggle of challenging the systems we are all entangled in. *Eet smakelijk!* (“enjoy your meal!”).

ROSA AND LILLIAN ARRIVE TO THE DINNER APPETITE FOR CHANGE. THEY WALK TO ONE OF THE STORAGE TABLES AND START CONTRIBUTING TO THE PINNER BY GATHERING BRIGHTLY COLOURED TABLECLOTHS, GLASSES, PLATES AND CUTLERY TO SET THE TABLES. THE GLASSES, PLATES AND CUPS SEEM HANDMADE BECAUSE NOT TWO OF THEM ARE EXACTLY THE SAME. THEN THEY TAKE A SEAT AT ONE OF THE TABLES, TAKE OFF THEIR FACEMASKS AND SMILE AT EACH OTHER; THE PLACE IS RELAXING AND THERE IS A WARM BREEZE WHICH MOVES THE PLANTS THAT SURROUND THE TABLE. SOME HAVE FLOWERS, WHICH ARE BEING VISITED BY BUMBLEBEES AND A BIRD SITS DOWN BRIEFLY ON ONE OF THE BRANCHES ABOVE THEIR HEAD, SINGING ITS SONG BEFORE IT FLIES OFF TO SEARCH THE SOIL FOR WORMS.

IT IS THE END OF THE DAY AND THE SUN IS APPROACHING THE HORIZON, COLOURING THE SKY INTO DIFFERENT SHAPES OF ORANGE, PINK AND YELLOW. A FEW SMALL CLOUDS FLOAT HIGH ABOVE THEM AND REFLECT BITS OF PINK, MAKING THEM LOOK LIKE COTTON CANDY. THE SCENT OF FRESH VEGETABLES THAT ARE BEING COOKED BY THE ONES WHO ARE IN CHARGE OF THIS WEEK'S FOOD MAKES LILLIAN AND ROSA LOOK AT EACH OTHER, EXCITED, BECAUSE ALL THE FOOD IS LOCALLY GROWN. THEN THEY HEAR VOICES; A GROUP OF WOMEN ARE APPROACHING THE NEXT TABLE AND SIT DOWN 1.5 METERS AWAY FROM EACH OTHER, AFTER WHICH THEY TAKE OFF THEIR FACEMASKS AND SMILE WHILE LOOKING AROUND. MORE PEOPLE ARE ARRIVING, LOOKING HAPPY BUT ALSO A LITTLE NERVOUS BECAUSE THE COVID19 PANDEMIC IS STILL LINGERING WORLDWIDE. A CHATTER STARTS TO FILL THE ROOM AND ROSA AND LILLIAN KNOW THAT THIS WILL NOT BE A REGULAR DINNER.









LILLIAN NODS AND AFTER TAKING A SIP OF MEZCAL, SHE CONTINUES.



IT IS TRUE THAT RESISTANCE AND CHANGE OFTEN BEGIN IN THE ART OF WORDS, FOR EXAMPLE BY TELLING STORIES. HOWEVER, NOW THAT I AM WORKING WITH STORIES FOR MY PHD, ONE OF THE FIRST CHALLENGES THAT I FACE IS THAT "STORYTELLING IN ACADEMIC WRITING IS LARGELY UNCONVENTIONAL AND CONFINED TO CERTAIN DISCIPLINES" (DICKINSON 2012: 60) WHICH MAKES IT HARD FOR ME TO KNOW WHAT IS AND WHAT IS NOT A STORY. FOR EXAMPLE, "[I]N COLLOQUIAL USAGE, 'STORY' CAN MEAN FANTASY, TRUTH, LIE, OR ALMOST ANYTHING IN BETWEEN" (HILFINGER MESSIAS AND DEJOSEPH 2004: 43).

YES, TRADITIONAL ACADEMIC RESEARCH IS USUALLY POSITIONED "WITHIN EMPIRICAL, OBJECTIVE, RATIONAL, AND EUROCENTRIC FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION" (DICKINSON 2012: 60). MAYBE IT WILL HELP IF YOU DEVELOP A WORKING DEFINITION OF STORY, BECAUSE HOW WE DEFINE STORY IS KEY TO THE WAY IN WHICH WE APPROACH BOTH THE COLLECTION AND INTERPRETATION OF STORIES AS DATA (HILFINGER MESSIAS AND DEJOSEPH 2004: 43).



MOEZZI ET AL. (2017) AFFIRMS THAT "[O]NE OF THE MOST COMMON DEFINITIONS OF STORY IS SOMETHING WITH A BEGINNING, A MIDDLE, AND END, [...]. DRAWING FROM THE FIELD OF FOLKLORISTS, IN TRADITIONAL ORAL STORIES, THERE IS GENERALLY ALSO A PROTAGONIST, USUALLY A HUMAN BUT POSSIBLY ANOTHER ANIMATE ACTOR, AND OBJECT, A PRACTICE, OR AN IDEA. THEN SOMETHING HAPPENS, SUCH AS A CONFLICT BETWEEN PROTAGONISTS AND ANTAGONISTS, OR A TRANSFORMATION [...]" (2).

YES, I HAVE ALSO READ HER WORK BUT I WOULD LIKE TO CHALLENGE HER UNDERSTANDING OF STORIES HAVING A BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END. FOR EXAMPLE, THE END OF KINDREP (2004 EP), OCTAVIA BUTLER'S SCI-FI BOOK, HAS NO REAL END; WELL IT DOES, BUT THE END IS A JUMP IN TIME, LEAVING OPEN POSSIBILITIES FOR THE STORY TO CONTINUE.



I AGREE WITH YOU THAT NOT ALL STORIES ARE LINEAR, BUT SOMETHING THAT ALL STORIES HAVE IN COMMON IS THAT THEY "EVOLVE OUT OF THE ADJECTIVES, VERBS, AND ORDERING USED TO DESCRIBE PHENOMENA AT MANY LEVELS AND IN DIFFERENT FIELDS [...]" AS MOEZZI (2017: 3) AFFIRMS.



LIKING WHERE THE CONVERSATION IS GOING LILLIAN PUSHES THE DISCUSSION FURTHER.

I GET WHAT YOU MEAN, BUT DON'T YOU THINK THAT WHEN WE ARE TALKING ABOUT STORIES AND FOCUSING SO MUCH ON THEIR SHAPE AND STYLE, WE OBJECTIFY THEM AND MAKE THEM INTO THINGS?



YES, WHEN WE WORK WITH STORIES, I THINK WE ALSO NEED TO APPROACH THEM BY LOOKING AT THEIR CONTENT, WHETHER THAT IS WRITTEN OR UNWRITTEN. STORIES CAN BE MUCH MORE THAN JUST VERBAL OR WRITTEN. THEY CAN ALSO BE IMAGES, ART, THINGS AND SPACES; STORIES CAN BE FOUND IN MANY SHAPES AND FORMS IF YOU ASK ME (MOEZZI ET AL. 2017: 5)



OF COURSE! THAT IS BECAUSE STORIES ARE "[...] SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED TAPESTRIES THAT WEAVE TOGETHER UNIQUE THREADS OF PERSONAL, RELATIONAL, AND CULTURAL REALITIES, PERCEPTIONS, AND EXPERIENCES, IN THE PROCESS OF FACILITATING THE CREATION OF FLUID MEANING" (HILFINGER MESSIAS AND DEJOSEPH 2004: 44).

THE FIRST COURSE IS ALMOST SERVED, SO LILLIAN AND ROSA SIT BACK AND ENJOY THE CALM SURROUNDINGS BEFORE THE DINNER STARTS. THEN, THE ORGANISERS OF THE DINNER ASK THE DINERS FOR THEIR ATTENTION AND WELCOME EVERYBODY. THEY TELL THEM ABOUT THE DIFFERENT COURSES THAT THEY WILL ENJOY, WHO GREW THE FOOD AND WHO PREPARED IT. THE DINNER IS A COLLECTIVE EFFORT, WHICH MEANS THAT ALL ARE EXPECTED TO HELP WITH DIFFERENT TASKS AND CAN SIGN UP TO ORGANISE THE NEXT DINNER. THIS WAY IT IS ASSURED THAT EVERYBODY TAKES UP A NEW ROLE EVERY TIME THEY ARE HERE, ALSO GIVING THE ONES WHO PLANNED THIS DINNER A CHANCE TO TAKE A BREAK, SINCE THEIR LIVES ARE ESSENTIAL, NOT JUST THEIR WORK.

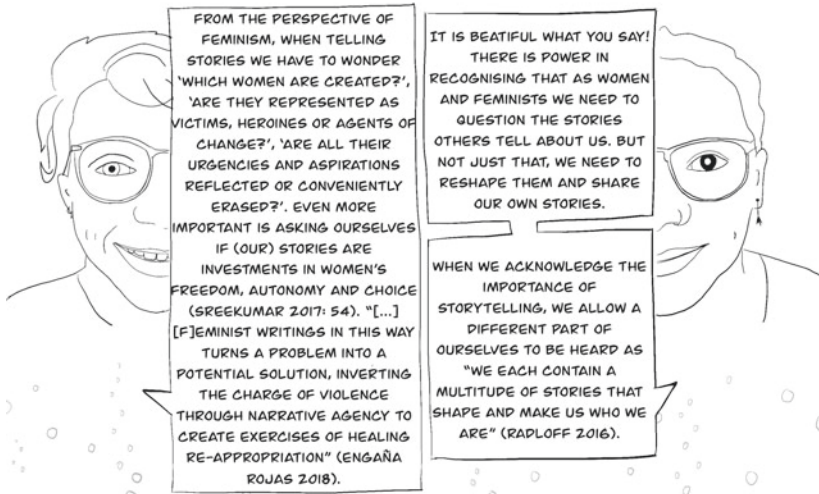
WHILE ROSA AND LILLIAN ARE EATING AND THINKING OF WHAT THE ORGANISERS HAVE TOLD THEM ABOUT THE WAY THIS DINNER WORKS, THEY REALISE THAT A DINNER IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE FOOD ONE EATS. A MEAL WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT THE ONES GROWING THE CROPS, THOSE COOKING THE FOOD AND THE PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO CONTRIBUTE IN A VARIETY OF OTHER WAYS, FOR EXAMPLE BY DOING LOGISTICS, CLEANING AND MORE. SOON, BOTH CONCLUDE THAT, IF A DINNER IS MORE THAN JUST THE FOOD, A STORY MUST ALSO DEPEND ON ITS CONTEXT, AUDIENCE, PURPOSE, AND LOCATION. THEN, THEY CONTINUE THEIR CONVERSATION.





Source: Background drawing inspired by Mimitasle (Instagram), August 5th 2020

ROSA AND LILLIAN REALISED THAT IN MANY OF THE STORIES ACCESSIBLE IN LITERATURE AND FILM, THE 'WE' AND THE 'US' ARE PORTRAYED AS TWO OPPOSITE TYPES OF WOMEN; WOMEN ARE VICTIMS OR VICTIMIZERS. THEN LILLIAN AND ROSA WONDER ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES THAT FEMINIST STORYTELLING PRESENTS IN THIS REGARD.



FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINISM, WHEN TELLING STORIES WE HAVE TO WONDER 'WHICH WOMEN ARE CREATED?', 'ARE THEY REPRESENTED AS VICTIMS, HEROINES OR AGENTS OF CHANGE?', 'ARE ALL THEIR URGENCIES AND ASPIRATIONS REFLECTED OR CONVENIENTLY ERASED?'. EVEN MORE IMPORTANT IS ASKING OURSELVES IF (OUR) STORIES ARE INVESTMENTS IN WOMEN'S FREEDOM, AUTONOMY AND CHOICE (SREEKUMAR 2017: 54). "[...] [F]EMINIST WRITINGS IN THIS WAY TURNS A PROBLEM INTO A POTENTIAL SOLUTION, INVERTING THE CHARGE OF VIOLENCE THROUGH NARRATIVE AGENCY TO CREATE EXERCISES OF HEALING RE-APPROPRIATION" (ENGAÑA ROJAS 2018).

IT IS BEAUTIFUL WHAT YOU SAY! THERE IS POWER IN RECOGNISING THAT AS WOMEN AND FEMINISTS WE NEED TO QUESTION THE STORIES OTHERS TELL ABOUT US. BUT NOT JUST THAT, WE NEED TO RESHAPE THEM AND SHARE OUR OWN STORIES.

WHEN WE ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING, WE ALLOW A DIFFERENT PART OF OURSELVES TO BE HEARD AS "WE EACH CONTAIN A MULTITUDE OF STORIES THAT SHAPE AND MAKE US WHO WE ARE" (RADLOFF 2016).

WHAT YOU SAID RESONATES WITH ME. WE CAN CREATE AND SHARE STORIES ABOUT OUR DREAMS OR VISIONS OF HOW WE IMAGINE A BETTER WORLD FOR OURSELVES, COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES. WE CAN SHARE "[...] OUR STORIES OF VIOLENCE, RESISTANCE, PAIN BUT ALSO OF OVERCOMING, SURVIVING, OF LOVE, OF FRIENDSHIP" (RADLOFF 2016). THIS MAKES THE TELLING OF STORIES A POLITICAL ACT THAT ALTERS THE MEANING AND VALUE OF OUR DIVERSE EXPERIENCES.

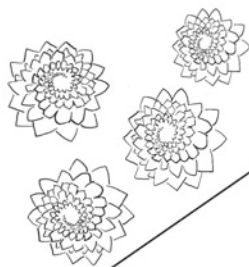
HOW POWERFUL! I IMAGINE US GATHERING "[...] IN SMALL AND LARGE GROUPS TO WITNESS, LISTEN, CELEBRATE, HOLD AND HONOUR EACH OTHER THROUGH OUR STORIES. AS WE LISTEN, WE TRY AND FIT OURSELVES INTO THE SKIN OF THE OTHER TO UNDERSTAND THE PLEASURE, PAIN AND THE JOURNEY OF ANOTHER" (RADLOFF 2016). SO, DEFINITELY THE RESHAPING AND TELLING OF OUR OWN STORIES AND LISTENING TO THE STORIES OF OTHER WOMEN ARE ESSENTIAL PARTS OF FEMINIST STORYTELLING.



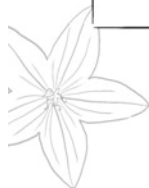
AS LILLIAN AND ROSA PROCEED WITH THE DINNER, THEY TASTE A COMBINATION OF FLAVOURS PRIOR UNKNOWN TO THEM. ONE OF THE DISHES IS ROMANESCO FROM THE OVEN, MARINATED IN GREEK OLIVE OIL WITH FRESH ROSEMARY AND SEA-SALT. IT IS DELICIOUS! LILLIAN IS SURPRISED BY ITS GEOMETRICAL SHAPE; SHE CANNOT STOP THINKING THAT THIS BEAUTIFUL VEGETABLE MUST BE FROM OUTER SPACE.

SUPPENLY, ROSA SPOTS A BEE. THE INSECT REMINDS HER OF A DREAM THAT LILLIAN HAD. IN HER DREAM, SHE WAS A HONEY BEE AND COULD SEE THE WORLD IN COLORS THAT ARE INVISIBLE TO THE HUMAN EYE. UNLIKE US, BEES ARE ABLE TO SEE IN THE ULTRA VIOLET SPECTRUM, WHICH MAKES FLOWERS LOOK VIBRANT AND ATTRACTIVE FOR THEM. FOR LILLIAN, FEMINISM ALLOWS WOMEN TO SEE A BIGGER COLOUR PALLET, MAKING THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN INVISIBLE, VISIBLE AND RADIANT FOR THE FEMINIST EYE.

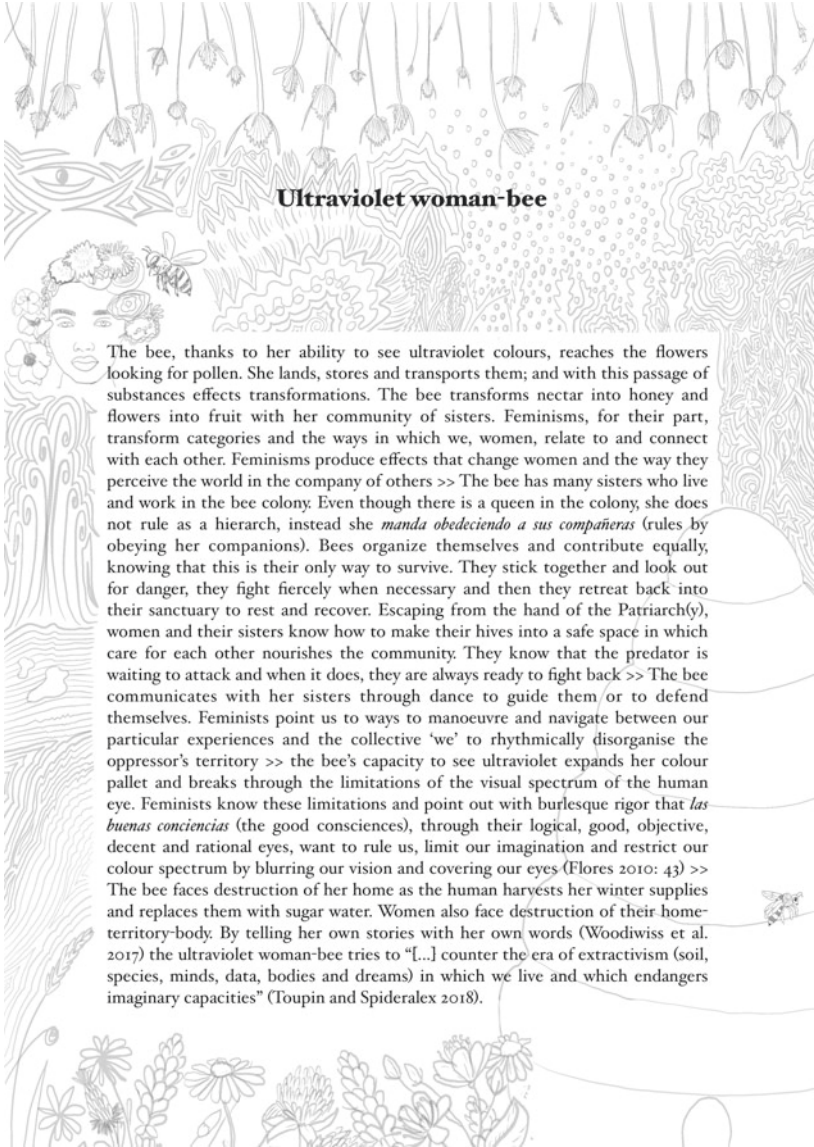
ROSA SHARES HER MEMORY WITH LILLIAN, AND TOGETHER THEY WONDER WHAT SHAPES AND COLOURS THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO SEE IF THEY HAD THE EYES OF BEES.



THEN, THE FOLLOWING STORY GERMINATED IN THEIR MINDS (KURTZ 2009: 95).







### Ultraviolet woman-bee

The bee, thanks to her ability to see ultraviolet colours, reaches the flowers looking for pollen. She lands, stores and transports them; and with this passage of substances effects transformations. The bee transforms nectar into honey and flowers into fruit with her community of sisters. Feminisms, for their part, transform categories and the ways in which we, women, relate to and connect with each other. Feminisms produce effects that change women and the way they perceive the world in the company of others >> The bee has many sisters who live and work in the bee colony. Even though there is a queen in the colony, she does not rule as a hierarch, instead she *manda obedeciendo a sus compañeras* (rules by obeying her companions). Bees organize themselves and contribute equally, knowing that this is their only way to survive. They stick together and look out for danger, they fight fiercely when necessary and then they retreat back into their sanctuary to rest and recover. Escaping from the hand of the Patriarchy(y), women and their sisters know how to make their hives into a safe space in which care for each other nourishes the community. They know that the predator is waiting to attack and when it does, they are always ready to fight back >> The bee communicates with her sisters through dance to guide them /or to defend themselves. Feminists point us to ways to manoeuvre and navigate between our particular experiences and the collective 'we' to rhythmically disorganise the oppressor's territory >> the bee's capacity to see ultraviolet expands her colour pallet and breaks through the limitations of the visual spectrum of the human eye. Feminists know these limitations and point out with burlesque rigor that *las buenas conciencias* (the good consciences), through their logical, good, objective, decent and rational eyes, want to rule us, limit our imagination and restrict our colour spectrum by blurring our vision and covering our eyes (Flores 2010: 43) >> The bee faces destruction of her home as the human harvests her winter supplies and replaces them with sugar water. Women also face destruction of their home-territory-body. By telling her own stories with her own words (Woodiwiss et al. 2017) the ultraviolet woman-bee tries to "[...] counter the era of extractivism (soil, species, minds, data, bodies and dreams) in which we live and which endangers imaginary capacities" (Toupin and Spideralex 2018).

THE DINNER COMES TO AN END, BUT NOT THE DAYDREAMING OF ROSA AND LILLIAN. THEY LEAVE THE PLACE NOURISHED BY THE FOOD, THE CONVERSATIONS AND THE SHARED IMAGINATIONS. THEY HAVE CREATED THE ULTRAVIOLET WOMAN-BEE TOGETHER, NOT AS AN ATTEMPT TO HUMANISE THE INSECT, TO PICTURE THE HUMAN AS OTHER-THAN-HUMAN, OR TO SAY 'THEY ARE' AND 'WE ARE'. RATHER, THE WOMAN-BEE IS A FIGURATION, A PROVOCATION AND AN ALLEGORY TO SEE THE WORLD WE LIVE IN AND HOW IT IS ORGANIZED FROM ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE. LILLIAN AND ROSA WISH THAT THE USE OF NEW WORDS CAN HELP THEM TO CREATE NEW WORLDS, BOTH REAL AND IMAGINARY, IN WHICH THEY CAN LEARN FROM OTHER HUMANS AND OTHER-THAN-HUMANS.

LOOKING BACK AT THEIR ADVENTURE, THEY KNOW THAT THE USE OF THEIR CREATIVITY IN THEIR REFLECTIONS WAS ESSENTIAL. HOWEVER, THEY ALSO KNOW THAT NOT ALL FEMINISTS WOULD HAVE WORKED IN THE SAME WAY TO ACHIEVE THE SAME GOAL. FEMINIST METHODOLOGIES ARE NOT LIKE A SMALL BOX WITHOUT ROOM TO MOVE, RATHER, THERE ARE ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES. ONE OF THESE IS FEMINIST STORYTELLING, WHICH CAN OPEN OUR SCOPE OF IMAGINATION TO DO RESEARCH.

BUT... WE ARE AWARE DEAR READER THAT, WHEN DOING STORYTELLING, YOU HAVE TO BE CAUTIOUS OF MAKING YOUR TALE INTO SOMETHING STABLE, UNWILLING TO BE REVISED AND REVISITED. FEMINIST STORYTELLING CONTINUOUSLY NEEDS TO SHED LIGHT ON THE COMPLEXITIES THAT WE CHERISH IN ORDER NOT TO BECOME THE DOMINANT OR THE SINGLE STORY OF WOMEN'S LIVES AND HISTORIES (ILMONEN 2020: 356). KEEPING THIS IN MIND, THE AUTHORS UNDERSTAND STORIES AS PARTIAL TRUTHS THAT OFFER VISIONS OF AND INSIGHTS INTO THE SITUATED MOMENTS IN WHICH THEY WERE CRAFTED AND ABOUT WHAT THEY WERE TOLD (RICE ET AL. 2020: 2019). THEREFORE, AS FEMINISTS INTERESTED IN STORYTELLING WE HAVE TO KEEP ASKING; 'HOW CAN WE DO STORYTELLING WHILE PREVENTING TO CREATE JUST ONE ALTERNATIVE STORY OR COUNTER-NARRATIVE?' AND 'HOW CAN WE MULTIPLY VOICES AND MAKE SPACE FOR NUMEROUS WOMEN TO BE PRESENT IN STORIES?'. MAYBE WE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS EASILY, BUT WITH OUR STORIES WE CAN START A CONVERSATION AND GIVE SOME HINTS OF WHAT IT IMPLIES TO CENTRE AND PROLIFERATE WOMEN'S VOICES IN STORYTELLING.

TO BE CONTINUED...



## CONCLUSION

As we see how storytelling is increasingly used as a methodology in social sciences research, it is important to deepen the discussion about what storytelling entails and how it can be done. In this chapter, we have attempted to reflect on feminist storytelling by looking into what it means but more importantly by exploring how we can put this methodology into practice. By attending dinner together, being in dialogue with each other and drawing, we discussed essential elements of feminist storytelling, how it can be a useful research tool for feminists to write differently, and which other ways of listening to and sharing of stories we can use in research. We also reflected on storytelling as a way to challenge hegemonic narratives which are written based on the idea of objectivity and universality in science. More so, we pointed out that feminist storytelling might help feminists to achieve change.

We conclude that storytelling, from a feminist perspective, is necessarily an active and interactive practice that usually includes diverse women being together. We also established that an essential element while writing stories, is leaving space for the imagination, which can result in the creation of new words and therefore new worlds. We found that interweaving a plurality of voices and knowledges can allow us to write our own stories based on our own terms and rules. In this process of creation, there are endless possibilities, which we have tried to illustrate in various ways in this chapter.

Due to its experimental nature, the chapter has put new questions on the table and opened new doors to keep exploring feminist storytelling. We wonder “why visuals are important in academic writing, especially now that we are constantly surrounded by images?” and “how we can prevent the over exposition of readers to visuals?”. Simultaneously, we invite researchers who want to use visual arts not to fall into the trap of treating readers as “incapable of understanding complex thoughts”. Rather, we hope that they are used to enhance the reflective process and communication of research findings.

In addition to the already mentioned questions, we would like to know “how feminist storytelling can be used as a methodology when working in larger groups?” and “how feminist storytelling can be done when we are unable to meet people in person?”. These questions are specifically informed by the current context in which Covid-19 is making it difficult to meet in person.



Finally, and needless to say, this chapter has been a learning process for its authors. What you, as a reader, see in this chapter is only a snapshot of all the conversations we have had while working on it. We wholeheartedly enjoyed the process of writing/drawing this chapter together. During this work, we asked questions, imagined, drew and challenged each other. While doing all of this, we learned about the complexities of feminist storytelling as a methodology and we explored how to use visual arts in research. In our experience, feminist storytelling entails more than just the act of creating stories and writing them down, it is an interactive, reflexive and deep process that requires creativity, vulnerability and a will to maintain a critical and collaborative praxis.

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## A Fieldwork Story Told Through Knitting

*Mahardhika Sjamsoe'oad Sadjad*

### CASTING ON—AN INTRODUCTION

The Hague, 7 February 2019

I'm all packed up and ready to go. Last night while packing I felt really down. I'm exhausted of moving. I'm also scared of leaving ISS, which has become the only constant “home” in my life these past five years. I thought about the knitting circle I will be leaving behind and I really do not want to go. I'm too afraid to go again.

I wrote the above text in my fieldwork diary as I prepared to leave The Hague for the second phase of my fourteen-month multi-sited fieldwork. I had completed the first seven months of fieldwork for my Ph.D. research project on encounters between refugees and host societies in Indonesia and returned temporarily to The Hague in October 2018. I returned from the first phase of my fieldwork feeling disoriented, my emotions as

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dark as the Dutch skies that greeted me at Schiphol Airport. I spent my time in between fieldwork phases, from October 2018 to February 2019, in The Hague to recuperate from the anxieties, insecurities, and insomnia that I had accumulated during my Ph.D. thus far. A mixture of therapy, vitamin D, and a newly found interest in knitting helped me reobtain a sense of balance that I felt I lost during the first phase of fieldwork. I started a knitting and crochet circle every Wednesday evening at my institute and it became a refuge for me. It offered a warm space where a group of women kept their fingers busy with hooks, needles, and yarn; exchanging stories and sometimes snacks. Preparing for the second phase of my multi-sited research brought back with it a deep anxiety towards packing, uprooting, and establishing myself in new cities and new research sites. Leaving for fieldwork again meant leaving my place of refuge.

This chapter will tell the story of my second phase of fieldwork, from February 2019 to August 2019, during which I started a side project of documenting my experiences through the knitting of coloured yarn. My Ph.D. research focuses on discourses of identities in encounters between Indonesian local hosts and refugees. To do this, I combined text analysis and multi-sited ethnography located in five cities in order to understand different reactions and responses of host societies in different contexts in Indonesia. While knitting was not integrated into my research design, it helped me make sense of my Ph.D. research experience. Thus, echoing examples set by many feminist scholars' emphasis on reflexivity and positionality, particularly regarding their intersecting identities and positionalities during fieldwork (Crossa, 2012; Lewis, 2017; Ng, 2017). As researchers go through different life phases our positionality in relation to our research participants can change, along with our approach to the work that we do and access to different groups and information. Ng (2017), for example, chronicles how her life trajectories as a divorced woman to a woman in a relationship with a younger man during her fieldwork, influenced the conversations she had with village women. Reflecting on intersecting and often changing identities that a researcher carries along during the course of our research can help us understand and make sense of what we find.

This chapter will particularly focus on my emotional dynamics during fieldwork, which were triggered by the conditions of my mental and physical health, the need to constantly be on the move to conduct my multi-sited research while simultaneously feeling “stuck” in my current life phase as a Ph.D. researcher. I documented these emotional dynamics

by knitting coloured yarns that represented the different emotions I was feeling and writing in my fieldwork diary, which resulted in the multi-coloured, striped “scarf” depicted in the beginning of the chapter (Fig. 12.1). I will start by discussing the knitting methods I chose to document my emotions. In doing so, I join many feminist scholars (Cotteril & Letherby, 1993; Seidel & Jubas, 2016; Mendez, 2019) who believe in the wealth of knowledge that is offered in the richness of the fibre arts. Then I will discuss the emotional labour that went into fieldwork and the value knitting and other fibre arts play as catalyst for these emotions. I will do this by sharing and thinking through my diary



**Fig. 12.1** The multi-coloured scarf I knitted during fieldwork

excerpts and the yarn colours that I associate with them. Finally, I will reflect on what my knitting can say about my fieldwork experience. What I offer through these reflections are further explorations on the potential contributions of fibre arts in informing feminist methodologies.

### MY SEED STITCHES—KNITTING, MENTAL HEALTH, AND FIELDWORK

During the first phase of my fieldwork, five people I knew (some closely while others at a distance) had passed away; including an uncle, a good friend, and a former colleague. I did not really understand my own sense of loss. I only was aware of a constant presence of darkness in my thoughts and mood. One day, after my return to The Hague, I had run out of food after staying in my room for almost a week and was forced to go out to do groceries. It was during this walk out that I happened to bump into an ISS colleague who casually asked me how I was doing. I tried to respond, but the standard answer, “I’m fine”, was stuck in my throat and instead I just started crying on the sidewalk. I was obviously “not fine”. This colleague kindly invited me to her home and over a warm cup of tea gently suggested that I might need to seek therapy to unpack the emotions I was feeling. I took this advice.

During a session with my therapist, I happened to mention that I had recently learned how to knit. My therapist advised me to use it as a means to practice mindfulness and to manage the anxieties and insecurities I was feeling. Her suggestion echoed studies that discuss the benefits of knitting to people’s mental health and well-being (Brooks et al., 2019; Potter, 2017; Riley et al., 2013). Using my hands for an activity other than typing and producing usable knitted goods at *far* greater speed than my dissertation gave me a much-needed sense of accomplishment. Until this day I still remember the strong feeling of satisfaction I felt when I finished knitting my first winter hat. This is where I got the idea to start documenting my fieldwork experiences through my knitting.

Before going back to Indonesia, I bought enough yarn that could keep my fingers busy during the next 6 months of fieldwork. Among my knitting loot were ten balls of cotton hand-dyed yarn of five colours: grey, blue, purple, tan, and a subtle orange that came close to light brown. I chose cotton yarn instead of wool because cotton would be better suited for the tropical Indonesian climate. My plan was to associate these different colours with certain emotions and every Friday afternoon to

choose the colours that best described my week to knit into the project. I wrote the emotions I associated with each colour in my diary:

Purple: Happy days, something sweet, fun, or exciting happened

Blue: Anxious and worried, feeling that “they’re out to get me”

Orange: Productive, feeling that “I’ve got my shit together”

Gray: Really bad week, anger, resentment, feeling like the ‘rain’ just never stops pouring

Tan: “Meh...” Boring, uneventful week.

Since the complexity of emotions could barely be captured by any single colour, I could choose more than one colour a week. To accompany my knitting, I also wrote in my fieldwork diary about my colour choices and the reasons behind them. I decided to knit as if I were making a striped scarf even though the length produced during fieldwork would not be long enough to become one. In making the “scarf” I chose to apply the seed stitch pattern. I decided on this pattern because, unlike other patterns that I could practically do with my eyes closed, the seed stitch requires me to be present and mindful. It required me to pay close attention to each stitch since I had to alternate horizontally and vertically between purl and knit stitches. Seed stitch is also visually pleasing since it produces a pattern that looks like scattered seeds and, unlike some other patterns, does not curl up at the edges.

I returned to Indonesia on 11 February 2019 but did not start implementing my knitting project until 1 March 2019 and did so every Friday until 9 August 2019, which amounted to 23 weeks projected on a striped “scarf”. These Friday afternoon rituals were cathartic for me, the knitting project became an outlet to manage the emotions that were partial to fieldwork but often excluded from its retelling. I did this without any intention of sharing what I had made in my dissertation or other forms of publications. However, when I looked at the finished product at the end of the second phase of fieldwork, I felt there was a story to tell in the yarn I had knitted.

Storytelling is at the heart of feminist politics and methods, through which emotions that are often fleeting and abstract can be given centre stage (Harcourt et al., 2015: 164). Feminist methodologies offer space to explore creative avenues to approaching and understanding knowledge beyond the rigidity of the academic voice many of us have been trained in. Reflecting and analysing fieldwork experiences is also essentially a telling



and/or retelling of stories through which researchers engage actively with a triad of memory, imagination, and emotions (Tonkin, 2005: 64). In the retelling of stories, emotions that are sensed in our bodies go through the cognitive process of being assigned with meaning through written words with the hopes that readers can relate with what we were feeling. By knitting my emotions using coloured yarn, I go through the process of feeling emotions in my body, cognitively assigning them colour and meaning, and mindfully grounding myself through the experience of crossing my knitting needles and carrying my yarn along my rows of seed stitches. The striped “scarf” I produced, therefore, is a reification of my fieldwork emotions.

### CROSSING NEEDLES, CARRYING YARN—MY FIELDWORK STORY

Despite my fears and anxieties of leaving the safe spaces I cultivated during my time in The Hague, I started my fieldwork with high spirits. I went back to rent the room in Cisarua, Bogor, and took up again the position as a volunteer teacher at the Refugee Learning Centre (RLC) that I did during the first phase of fieldwork. It was as if I was picking up where I had left off but with new energy. I wrote in my diary:

Week 1 (1-7 March 2019) – Purple and Orange

The week started with moving back into and teaching at Cisarua, Bogor. It felt SO GOOD to be back at RLC and seeing my class. We have a total of fifteen participants. We are using a new book which is so much fun because it allowed more meaningful discussions in comprehending the text.

This week I also started a more structured interview process, walking to two of the nearest village head offices. I was very happy that the officials at Batulayang and Cibereum were open to be interviewed by me. Sometimes I just need to put myself out there more and speak up to get results.

By the end of my fieldwork, it became clear purple and orange were two colours that often went together. My emotions were highly dependent on my sense of accomplishment. A repeated theme in my fieldwork diaries was the awkwardness of interviews and my successes and failures in getting over my own timidity in approaching strangers to request one. Taking the

time to knit and write about my emotions allowed me to take awareness to celebrate my small successes.

Meanwhile, blue, grey, and tan were colours that also often came together. In stark contrast to my first week, I wrote about my second:

Week 2 (8-15 March 2019) – Blue, Grey, and Tan

This week felt quite meh... I wasn't very productive. During the weekend my parents came to Bogor. I mainly spent time with my mom and even though I had a good time with her, this always stirs a mixture of emotions especially considering the upcoming elections and our different political views. I think we all tried our best to avoid this topic of conversation.

Overall, this second week is going fine. However, if I were to be honest, I'm procrastinating going to Medan. Packing and moving again scares me.

It is common especially in ethnographic research to have stretches of time when there aren't any interviews scheduled or activities to observe and participate in. Moreover, doing research in my own country meant that I wanted to make sure to balance my time with my family and friends, despite the backdrop of the polarising 2019 elections in Indonesia. These moments were triggering for me, as a lot of my anxieties are rooted in the constant feeling that I am never doing enough: not working enough hours, not engaging enough people, not recording enough interviews, not writing enough. Even though a part of me knew I was gathering the data I needed, there was constantly the feeling that it was not enough—that *I* was not *doing* enough and therefore *I* was not enough.

For me, it is difficult to stop these loops of intrusive thoughts and insecurities. It became worse when I was also not feeling physically fit and could not be as productive as I wished to be:

Week 9 (27 April – 3 May 2019) – Tan and Blue

I've been sick for most of this week. I have splitting headaches and coughs. It has been awful. Nothing can be done. I hate this week and I feel awful. I don't even want to write about it.

During these moments I could not find enough motivation to write, but I still found refuge in my knitting. In fact, I started to knit more rows per week than I had originally planned. I started my knitting project by doing a total of six rows a week. However, by week 6 I felt I wanted to do more. This was partially for visual reasons: the “scarf” was not getting as long as I wanted it to be and I realised by week 4 that I needed to always end

with an even number of rows so the excess yarn for each colour would end on the same side of the scarf. The main reason though was that I just wanted to keep on knitting. While doing research in Cisarua, my Friday afternoon journal-writing and knitting sessions gave me some structure to my otherwise unstructured research process. While sipping a hot cup of tea, sitting outside on my balcony overlooking an informal school set up by a non-profit organisation for refugees in my landlord's bungalows, I would write, think, reflect, and knit. Overtime I wanted to sit and knit a little longer and so my rows increased to become a total of 16 rows a week.

Without me realising it, my weekly presence knitting on my balcony attracted some attention. One refugee from Afghanistan, who later became a good friend of mine, came by my rented room one afternoon when I was knitting on my balcony. She showed interest in my knitting and started to talk about her own hobby of weaving bracelets and writing poetry. She showed me photos of some bracelets she made and poetry she wrote and posted on Instagram and her personal blog. Our conversation about our hobbies evolved to discussions about her experience living in Indonesia, where she had been living for about five years. Without any opportunity to access education nor employment her life felt like a slow and silent torment where she had close to no influence over the direction of her future as long as she was stuck in "transit".

The next morning, as I was heading out for the day, my landlord's wife started a conversation. I was surprised. The year before, during the first phase of my fieldwork, I had tried to interview my landlord and his wife about their experiences renting bungalows to refugees and to the non-profit organisation that had started an informal school there. They agreed to be interviewed but would offer only very short answers without much elaboration. While living in their rented room, our interactions were limited to polite smiles and nodding of heads. That morning, however, she started to chat about knitting.

She went inside her house and came back with a huge plastic bag filled with balls of yarn. It turned out that she enjoyed crocheting. Seeing my refugee friend visit me and try out knitting on my balcony the day before sparked her own interest. She talked about how every week a group of refugee women would come to a gathering organised by the non-profit and did embroidery.

"Did you ever join them?" I asked.

She shrugged, "No. I crochet not make embroidery".

Refugees lived in my landlord's rented rooms and bungalows, their children went to an informal school set up in her yard, and a group of refugee women shared an interest in making handicrafts. However, the spaces occupied by refugees were not spaces that Cisarua locals entered and vice versa. By knitting quietly on my balcony, I offered a side of myself beyond the roles of being a "researcher" or the "volunteer teacher". For people, mostly women, who shared an interest in fibre arts, my knitting created an opening into insightful conversations that were not limited and burdened by the structure and power dynamics of interviews.

Despite what I learned during my therapy sessions in The Hague, as the weeks of fieldwork passed, I returned to the bad habit of entertaining intrusive negative thoughts that often led me down a spiral of insecurities. However, dedicating time to knit and reflect meant that this time around I was quicker to become aware of what I was feeling. I wrote in my fieldwork diary:

Week 11 (11-17 May 2019) – Grey and Blue

I've been having a lot of complex emotions – a lot of internal frustrations. I notice that it comes out as lashing out to people for trivial things. I spent the weekend reflecting on this and realising that actually I needed a new colour yarn: green. I've been having a hard time being happy for other people's successes and happiness. There's a green monster deep inside me whispering suggestions of negativity and the whispering has gotten louder. I've been feeling a lot of insecurities that have been there but growing stronger, especially now that I'm back in Indonesia and can see my peers thrive in their careers. Meanwhile I feel so stuck in this Ph.D. I'm not earning enough, not being productive enough, not having much success in my personal life. Everyone is moving forward, building careers and families, while I'm just floating between my research sites not able to set roots anywhere. I'm scared, so scared, of my future. I can't help but think that maybe if I didn't do this Ph.D. I would have achieved what others have.

Many studies have highlighted the precarious positions that many graduate students find themselves in, as the number of people pursuing doctoral degrees have increased over the years while the number of academic positions decline in intensively competitive neoliberal academic environments and polarising political landscapes (Loher et al., 2019; Nature, 2019; Siegel & Keeler, 2020). Based on a survey of 2279 graduate students (90% Ph.D. and 10% Master's students) from 26 countries Evans et al. (2018: 282) found that graduate students were six times more

likely to experience anxiety and depression than the general population. More and more junior academics and early career researchers are forced to compromise and take up low-paying jobs without long-term security, while navigating power dynamics within and beyond academia. Even with a bursary that funded my research, living, and travel costs, that gave me some financial stability, I struggled to cope with the pressure to collect data, publish or perish, and obtain teaching experience before graduating.

The turbulent emotions between hope and despair when thinking about present and future success and failures were constantly present during my fieldwork and continue afterwards. On my fourteenth week, I felt so horrible that I reached out to my therapist in The Hague who reminded me of the basics of mental health; healthier food, exercise, and meditation. The next day, I woke up feeling better having reflected on areas of my life I felt grateful for. Contradicting emotions between anxiety and sadness would often fluctuate with sudden emotions of joy and gratitude. The colours I chose for the “scarf” and my weekly diary entries bore witness to these emotional fluctuations.

Week 14 (1-7 June 2019) – Blue and Purple

This week started out rough. I felt really blue to the point I needed to reach out to K [my therapist in The Hague]. I feel like a failure. My future is unclear, my relationship of three years has gone down the drain, I feel like I failed to take care of my body.

This morning I woke up with a thought that I'm healthy and happy and I mustn't dwell on what I don't have. Maybe I will indeed fail but then again maybe I won't and isn't a 50-50 chance still something worth hanging onto?

Week 16 (15-21 June 2019) – Orange and Blue

Moved to Medan. Another fucking move. Another fucking city. I hate moving. I hate it.

On the other hand, Medan has been kind.

On one hand, these emotional fluctuations can be attributed to the challenges I faced regarding my own mental health. However, one can also attribute it to the emotional labour that goes into doing research. The need to build rapport and gain trust from research participants, stakeholders, gatekeepers, supervisors, and colleagues often require both conscious and subconscious efforts in managing our emotions. Hochschild (1979: 561) refers to these practices of evoking and suppressing emotions as “emotion work”. She (Ibid.: 563) wrote: “We

feel. We try to feel. We want to try to feel. The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules". She calls these social guidelines to reduce the emotive dissonance between the "want" and the "ought" as "feeling rules", which often reflect patterns of social membership. This emotion work is constantly present during and beyond the various stages of doing research but is not often made visible in the work that we publish. Perhaps, this is partially due to the institutional silences and stigmatisation of mental health struggles that permeate academia, particularly as experienced by graduate students (Siegel & Keeler, 2020). Furthermore, emotions are often left out in the reporting of research findings as we worry that it will be taken as signs that a researcher lacks objectivity and mental strength to "make it" as a serious scholar.

These emotions, however, were constantly present in every page of my diary and every row that I knitted. How could it not be, as I accompanied a refugee friend to visit a psychiatrist due to her own mental health struggles, or when another refugee I interviewed talked about his friend who committed suicide a few months after mine did the same, or when crossing the street in Kalideres, West Jakarta, I coincidentally came across a refugee child that I used to teach and finding out that he was now living on the streets with his family? "Where are these emotions meant to go?" I asked myself as I knitted rows of blue or grey seed stitches.

Sometimes these emotions found relief through the connections I made along the way. While my sense of loss and anxiety during fieldwork cannot be compared to the experiences that refugees endured during their journeys, especially considering my relative privilege as an Indonesian citizen and Ph.D. researcher who travelled transnationally, it inevitably informed and framed my research and the relationships I cultivated. As academic research has become increasingly transnational, researchers' may develop a propensity to emotional identification to groups that become the subject of their study, thus contributing to growing interest in transnational migration, albeit at the cost of omitting other forms of sub-national migration from international research agendas (Elmhirst, 2012). While my research focused more on Indonesians' responses and reaction towards the presence of refugees and I maintained relationships with volunteers and advocates working to support refugees obtaining

rights during their indefinite “transit” in Indonesia,<sup>1</sup> I could not help but identify with refugees I encountered during my fieldwork.

Week 18 (29 June – 5 July 2019) – Blue and Purple

My third week in Medan was a confusing week of emotions. I had just met the family of refugees living in [address of one refugee accommodation] and it was heart-breaking how little help these families were receiving. The non-profit organisations I talked to seem to think that this family only have themselves to blame since they were picky and demanding when local organisations tried to help them. The house where they are living now no longer has electricity and gas. The two sisters showed me how they did crochet work to earn some money. We bonded over knitting and crochet. I decided to order a few crocheted pencil cases from the sisters to bring back to Jakarta. They hugged me as I left.

These positive connections helped balanced the pain I witnessed and felt along the way. Unfortunately, the problem with anxiety and intrusive thoughts is that it does not really matter when good things happen because our minds keep the negative at the forefront of our emotions, eclipsing everything else. Despite these episodes of anxieties, looking at the “scarf” I became aware that there was a lot of purple and orange that were knitted into my fieldwork experience. As the “scarf” grew longer with the waves of emotions woven into it, I would focus on the rows of purple and orange and hold onto them to put my anxieties into perspective. Even now after fieldwork, when I feel stuck in my writing and lost in my own insecurities, I will look at these rows and remember that there is always purple intertwined with the blue.

## CASTING OFF—CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Writing on the importance of emotions and reflexivity particularly in researching migration, Breda Gray (2008: 947) wrote: “Research is simultaneously an embodied, emotional, mindful and political activity, and emotions, precisely because they overflow with culture and society (Illouz, 2007), can energize action in the world and are central to knowledge

<sup>1</sup> Indonesia does not offer any legal pathway to become a permanent resident or citizen of the country, meanwhile refugees’ opportunities to be resettled to a third country has declines leaving them in a state of limbo (for more about this, see Missbach, 2015).

production”. Feminist methodologies have traditionally engaged in practices that can bring emotions into the forefront of research. My fieldwork was challenging as I struggled to cope with my own emotions and how it influenced my mental health. Knitting became an important outlet to ground myself and avoid getting carried away by my anxieties. It also became a topic for conversation that broke the ice on some occasions, particularly with women who share an interest in fibre arts. More importantly, it became a representation of the emotional labour that goes into doing research. The different rows of colour brought into view the precarity that researchers, particularly early career researchers, experience during and beyond fieldwork. Having returned to The Hague and struggling to finish my dissertation without any promised work security after graduation, this “scarf” continues to be a source of comfort for me.

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# Scarheart: Research as Healing

*Emily R. O'Hara*

## INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student writing about intimate partner violence (IPV) programming at an academic institute<sup>1</sup> I was encouraged to find hard evidence and data that could substantiate my claims. I read the reports, I talked to stakeholders and I analysed statistics. The consensus from the global agenda is that IPV is a pandemic which derives from one partner's desire for power and control over the other partner (UNODC, 2018). The majority of these cases are perpetrated (per my access to current data

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<sup>1</sup>The Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, in Brighton, England, United Kingdom.

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The words in this chapter were written on Native Land belonging to: Duwamish + Coast Salish people, Ho-de-no-sau-nee-ga (Haudenosaunee), Mohican + Mohawk people, and the Nacotchtank (Anacostan) + Piscataway people.

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E. R. O'Hara (✉)  
Washington, DC, USA

from actual incidences reported) by heterosexual cisgender men against heterosexual cisgender women.

In undertaking my Master's thesis in 2019, I was given the choice of traditional research methodologies such as a case study comparison, a longitudinal study, or data analysis. I found these were limited methodological approaches because of the nuances in IPV. Such traditional research practices come from a scientific approach developed by a predominantly male-dominated gaze where objects are studied as if placed under a microscope in a lab. If things could not be quantified or counted it was dismissed, unworthy of study and seen as not scientific. This is not to say that feminist research is never quantified. But here I want to ask, what does it mean to be a feminist researcher that looks at emotions and feelings as part of the research? How can we value the power of a single story, a sentence, a song? The chapter belongs in a book which is a collection and a celebration of feminist methodologies (Harding, S. 1987)—defined by the authors as a collaborative, collective process. Our chapters explore embodied, personal and situated ways of research (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008). Because I share an experience with the subject matter that I am researching, this “closeness” made me more aware of where the proposed methodologies for researching the subject fell short.

In this chapter I explore how these feminist ways of doing research can also be forms of healing as we explore “difficult” objects of research. I argue that this approach is a valid one for IPV rather than the predominant “distant” ways of doing research, and show how feminist and collectively personal approaches are able to tell us more, and help us to get closer to what IPV “is about” or “looks like”. Let me rephrase:

### METHOD SCIENTIFIC THE

Experiment first. Ask questions later. When you transcribe and tally, when you collate and count, you flatten any real truth of an experience—turning multi-faceted human existence into two-dimensional representations. Data is representative. Similar to how Haraway writes about genetic expression (Haraway, D.J. 1988; Haraway, D.J. & Goodeve, T.N. 2000), it is important to understand that data is merely representative. It is not the thing(s) it(/them)self(/selves).

And so we must stand up in three-dimensional form and say, “Listen to me. Here is what happened.” Without a pen in hand or a camera lens separating the membrane of shared experience. We must sit. With each other. With—and within—ourselves. And listen. Or rather, just “be”,

until we hear that which is the thing itself/are the things themselves: that jellied nothingness that is everything. That spontaneous combustion of random interaction stolen from us during this pandemic. Raw, unadulterated story. There is no survey design. No prefabricated parameters corraling any potential outcomes. No inputs, only out. Except for that internal work which is necessary to arrive fully present in the work of “looking for”. *Rechercher* in French is to search and it seems that the dilemma lies within the word itself: research. Resurface. Resurrection. Perhaps our work now should be less excavation-oriented and more about putting back from whence we took. Perhaps I am not a researcher at all. (Yes, I think that’s it.) No more pioneers in their fields. No more colonialist extraction of “pulling stories from the data” or positing of “what the data is trying to tell us”. Expeditionary, nay. I am a healer. I don’t seek to understand. I understand to seek. My only expectation is that I expect to be surprised. No more “unearthing” of knowledge. Let’s put it back. A call for restorative methods. Answer me that.

In this chapter, I will discuss how reflective practice—specifically reflective and reflexive writing—helped me heal from the experience that was also the subject of my dissertation, i.e. preventative IPV programming. I will share snippets of poetry and musings that helped me process my own trauma as well as organize and inform my research. I often threw what I thought was my whole Self into writing or working as a survival mechanism, but I realized that I actually only threw part of myself into the work as a distraction (or as a survival mechanism during abusive relationships). If I truly threw my whole Self into my work, then I would be bringing my emotion and my pain. Instead, I was sublimating. I was screening and editing out a lot of my Self in my papers so as to make it fit the acceptable shape or rubric as demanded by western, colonial academic standards/norms/expectations as reinforced by the institute. A certain number of words per paragraph. A certain number of paragraphs per section. A certain order of sections in each paper. Then, when it came time to write my most significant piece of graduate work, i.e. the one with the most words and pages (quantity; counts; numerical figures), I thought: if, “We... write to become what and who we are” (Hwu, 1998), what about actually throwing your whole Self into your work as a feminist research methodology, Emily? As one of the editors of this book put it, mine is

an exercise in “centralizing the affective—‘affective mediums’—and the power of the personal”.<sup>2</sup>

## THEN

That is what I tried to do in my dissertation by writing as a feminist researcher, a feminist political ecologist: I planted my Self in the work. I attempted to ground my personal experience as the roots of my research in expanding upon Heise’s “Ecological Model” (1998: 265). Lori L. Heise first used an ecological framework “to establish what factors emerge as predictive of abuse at each level of the social ecology” (Heise, 1998: 262). She built upon an existing conceptual framework to create a deeper understanding of gender-based violence (GBV). Heise addresses reasons for why men hurt women in her overview of pre-existing “individual explanations for violence [...]” or “social/political explanations” (Heise, 1998: 262). Due to work from theorists like Heise, it is widely understood that GBV does not occur for one specific reason. Rather, multiple factors are responsible. However, multiple factors extend from the focal points of the patriarchy, power and control (UNODC, 2018: 24, 30). It is important to understand the differences in definitions of VAW, GBV and IPV (see Table 13.1). While Heise’s “Ecological Model” concept from 1998 uses GBV as a form of violence between a woman and her male partner, when referring to this specific form of violence, the more common term is now IPV. This distinction is necessary as I move ahead and distinguish IPV from other types of VAW programming abroad.

The literature outlines the complexity of the issue and the need for a multi prong approach to address IPV. This same sentiment is echoed by those I spoke with for my qualitative interviews. For instance, as outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO), there are several overlapping “causes and risk factors found to be associated with intimate-partner violence and sexual violence at the different levels of the ecological model” (Harvey et al., 2007: 9). There is ample evidence about what is missing. However, which type of current environment exists and how can it be leveraged? Which lessons can be learned from other countries where ecological conditions are developed to ensure programmatic success? This

<sup>2</sup> Fellow Bolsena retreator and co-editor of this book.

**Table 13.1** Definitions of different types of violence based on my review of the current literature (O’Hara, E.R. 2019: 20–21)

<i>Type of violence</i>	<i>Acronym</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Gender-based violence	GBV	The new umbrella term to capture all forms of violence based on gender discrimination
Violence against women and girls	VAW/G	All forms of violence specifically targeted at women and girls
Domestic violence/abuse	DV/A	This is a form of violence/abuse that is perpetrated by relatives or partners
Sexual violence	SV	A form of violence that involves a sexual act; it can be a form of GBV, VAW/G and/or DV/A, including IPV
Intimate partner violence	IPV	This is the focal point of my research. It is a type of violence that occurs between two intimate partners. All cases of IPV are a form of DV/A because IPV is violence perpetrated by one partner to another. Similar to DV/A, not all cases of IPV are SV because violence can take many forms

is the gap that I address in my research. This was seen by the examiners at IDS as using mixed language, which they defined as switching between academic and activist language. We were told: pick one thing and be specific, then stick to it and stitch every sentence back to that idea. But I didn’t want to do that, so I screeched off in my own direction. After all, “Good critical/feminist theory emerges from placing ourselves in community with visions of social justice” (Carrillo Rowe, 2005: 35). As I progressed in my studies at IDS, taking such courses as Reflective and Creative Practice for Social Change, I realized that the “hard evidence” could not be the only story. And so I wrote from a hard place: from the scars of my heart. Through my writing, I wanted to demonstrate how there is more to the story than what “the numbers” represent. There are a number of faces behind formalised figures. I tried to show my face in my research to illustrate the richness of those innumerable faces that cannot be captured by counting. My thesis was marked down for being “too ambitious” and because my language was both “activist and academic”.

I did not see why I needed to choose between academic or activist language. And to the examiners, who may not engage with the wider feminist collective, my thesis mixed up recounting. But what I wanted to do was write in a new language, so how could they read or understand this new language? This is what I wrote in my notebook during our feminist retreat in Bolsena in August 2019 which led to this edited book. Is feminism a language and if so, how do you speak it? For whom? Who speaks it? I pondered these questions further during my research in the summer of 2019 with stakeholders in the domestic violence (DV) and IPV sectors in the United Kingdom (UK). I had just finished an interview with a subject, a stakeholder. They worked in the UK DV sector and had generously carved out time in their day to speak with me—a researcher, a rover, a rambler—and in this instance, a survivor whose past hurts had come right up to the present. Tears rolled down my face as I hung up the phone. It all seemed so obvious. Prevention is key yet budgetary constraints, political will and priorities cause stagnation in funding preventative measures.

In this hyper digitized data driven time when mega sets of quantifiable results abound and a matrix of information exists, there is clarity in the seeming simplicity of a story. A tale. Raw unadulterated oral exchange. Written words. Story. “There is power in numbers”. This is what we are sold. As constructed out of thin air by numerate analysts and repackaged as *The Future*. Numbers, numbers, numbers. Digital digits. Ones and zeros. Coding, tallying, sequencing. Order. But wherein lies the substance?

There is a proportion often referenced and circulated when discussing gender-based violence (GBV): one in three. “1 in 3 women and girls experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, most frequently by an intimate partner” (UNODC, 2018). “More than one third (34 per cent) of all women and girls<sup>3</sup> intentionally killed worldwide, or 82 every day, are killed by someone whom they would normally trust and expect to care for them” (UNODC, 2018: 13).

I understand that the number of women hurt and/or killed is a way to communicate the severity of the situation, but is not one life lost to such violence enough to spark action and invest in prevention?

Must everything be counted and quantified?

<sup>3</sup> In this instance, “women and girls” are people who identify as women since the data that informed this finding neither separates out nor accounts for those outside of other identifying characteristics.



Is there value in the power of a memory; a sentence; a dance?

## Now

I can only share my story. My experience is an “ethnography of one” as a colleague and friend wisely gave name to my experience (Behar, R. 1999). Her story was actually quite similar to mine. And over time, that is what I continue to find: a decrypted code, a shared rallying cry, a sequenced crucible. A sample so large that it can be neither counted nor compared. How do you measure the insidious injustice that is domestic violence? How does one measure violence that has not yet occurred or may, in fact, never happen?

A reduced number of incidences reported qualifies as success for some organizations that are working to combat IPV. Yet if it is not reported, does this mean that it does not occur? This seems to imply that IPV only occurs if it is reported. Captured. Qualified. Activists, researchers and survivors know this is not the reality. In this chapter, I am inviting you into a story about the use of artistic mediums as research and as a form of healing when writing about the very thing that has caused you so much personal hardship. In my case, it was a battle of deciding where to weave in my own experience with IPV as a survivor’s solo “ethnography of one” and when to instead use traditional more “distant” research methodologies in the form of interview accounts from stakeholders who work on IPV.

“We also ‘do structure’ when we write” (Irwin, 2006: 171). I had lofty goals of hoping that by writing my dissertation, I could humbly attempt to, “decolonize the power relations inherent in the representation of the Other” (Behar & Gordan, 1995: 4). In other words, by choosing to expose myself in my research, I thought I could somehow bring some more meaning to the numbers.

Meaning, imagination, and hope are as central to the human story as are bones, genes, and ecologies. Neither selfish aggression nor peaceful altruism dominates human behaviour as a whole. We are a species distinguished by our extraordinary capacity for creative cooperation, our ability to imagine possibilities and to make them material, and our powerful aptitudes for belief, hope, and cruelty. (Fuentes, 2017: NP)

Instead of looking at life through a microscope, I look with my own eyes. In my humble opinion, the study of gender is more scientific than any lab-based simulation.

It is more precise than those projected graphs based on political economy and subsequent theory formulations that did not even account for women or other genders/gender non-conforming people and their experiences.

Irrational economics.

Because gender is the study of life; it is real life—life's specimens of people and “greater” than that, it's the relationship between each other that is the essence of feminist research methodology where  $R = \text{Relations}$  and the square root of that is love.:  $R = \sqrt{< 3 // R > \text{Self}}$ .

While simultaneously realizing that there is no formula for feminism.

Your feminism may not be my feminism.

## NEXT

One funder can see a program as effective while another funder can see the same program as wasteful. Agencies like the UK Department for International Development (DFID) allocate funding and inject programming into regions of the world like Sub-Saharan Africa yet do not take lessons back to its respective biospheres. A colleague of mine from Zimbabwe told me that in their country, when someone rapes someone else, the rapist has to apologize to the entire community, not only the person whom they raped.

I realize that the pandemic of IPV is measured to speak to funders for global health gains (WHO, 2013). I provided some facts and figures about this public health epidemic in my dissertation so that it would hold clout and receive a passable mark. Calculations on the impact of violence by United Nations agencies like the WHO have been one way of communicating the issue. That is what must be done to “make the case” to those in charge of funding. I understand this; I repeat: I get it. I am not here to shame the work or the current approach to the work as necessitated by funders. The catch here, to me, seems to be at what point are “enough” reported incidences of violence, enough to take widespread immediate action through intensive preventative treatment? In the UK context specifically, more money is spent on the acute so-called response piece of the “Life Course Approach”, i.e. reactionary spending

after violence occurs, than on “Anticipation”, i.e. preventative spending before violence potentially occurs (UKFPH, 2016: 7) (Table 13.2).

Violence is carried out. Women die. We count the instances and track the patterns. But how many times? 1 in 3. That’s our current ratio. 1 in 3 women experience violence in their lifetimes. I am one of those women. Who is telling their story? Pleading my case. What if she can’t make her court date because he has taken the car? There are cracks and crevices in the story of IPV that can never be traced with a traditional magnifying glass or from behind the computer. (She writes from her laptop.) Ask the people in your life if they know someone who has experienced this epidemic which has worsened during the current pandemic of Covid-19. Where is “Operation Warp Speed” for a vaccine to treat those who perpetuate and survive this intimate violence among partners? If only hundreds of thousands would die. Then maybe the funders would take notice, bars would shut down and people’s health would be prioritized. But it’s a “private matter” of the heart, doomed from the start.

—  
Scarheart. That is what I am. I am more than my exes. I am more than my orgasms. You are more than your organisms. We are more than our microcosm. You are all of the invisible interactions between the people in your community. And you are more than that place where you are. A heart

**Table 13.2** Sequential diagram of the “Life Course Approach” (O’Hara, 2019: 18)

	<i>Anticipation</i>	<i>Consequence</i>	<i>Response</i>
Definition	“expenditure on protective and preventative measures” (Oliver et al., 2019: 5)	costs incurred by “individual victims and the harms they will suffer during their period of abuse and the costs as a consequence...” (Oliver et al., 2019: 5)	costs incurred by “individual victims and the harms they will suffer during their period of abuse and the costs... in response to victims” (Oliver et al., 2019: 5)
Examples	primary education, secondary education, community-based asset development (UK Faculty of Public Health, 2016)	“property damage, physical and emotional harms, lost output, health and victim services” (Oliver et al., 2019: 5)	“police and criminal justice system” (Oliver et al., 2019: 5)
Total cost	£6m	£787,718m	£488,257m

with a scar. A story to tell. You are a warrior. A survivor. You have been to hell and back. Now, go forth, and use that: only look back to learn, then bring the good to the present and leave the rest back there so that you can be here now. How? Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Hold your stomach and your heart. Read this map. This is how you navigate the heart's chambers and the brain's neurons. This is where we start: the future.

I was constantly triaging. Haemorrhaging in silence. No one knew what I had been through—how I had survived; how far I had come; how this year was actually three years in the making. “You shouldn't make funny faces”. “I remember when you used to fill out those pants nicely”. “If your butt gets any bigger, we're breaking up”. “What's up Skeletor?” Ex. 2017 would ask first thing in the morning. “Wow, you are so massive”, said Ex. 2019.

It is utterly astounding to me how one man can view your body as too skinny and another as too fat.

For Ex. 2017 and Ex. 2019 and any other ex that I have had: if I just held 2019 while he had a panic attack, if I just gave myself to 2017 after he refused to look at me, if I just tried a little harder, loved a little more, died another bit. Scarheart. That is what I am. It might be who you are. Although, I will never know for certain or be an “expert” for who am I to analyse another's experience? Our research proposals at IDS had to undergo vetting to be deemed ethical yet I feel that it would have been unethical for me to leave my own experience out of the research. Where was that on the University of Sussex's questionnaire?

“It sounds like he didn't *want* to hurt you. It sounds like he cares about you so much and he told you that he was afraid he *might* hurt you.” These words came out of the British white cisgender heterosexual male police officer's mouth as he sat next to his identical haircut of a counterpart who asked: “Do you think this was coercive control?” I had explained to them both how my partner had told me he thought he might be gay; then said he would kill himself if I left him. So, I stayed. A couple of days later, he pointed to a knife in the kitchen drawer and said, “I keep seeing images of me stabbing you. I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you”. His hand was clenched into a fist as though gripping a knife and he motioned it up and down, stabbing the air. “I don't know”. I told the officers. “I'd like to think he wasn't trying to manipulate me into staying, but as I speak the events aloud to you, I don't know”. The stakeholders with whom I spoke as part of my research after this incident had occurred told me that many

police officers aren't trained on how to handle these sorts of "domestic" issues. The mental health hotline responder with whom I spoke once my partner had finally fallen asleep after the incident told me that since he was not "standing in front of a train" or "brandishing a weapon"—and due to the fact that the Mental Health Act in England only applies to couples who reside together or are married—"There's nothing we can do." ...there was "nothing" *they*. could. do.

Speaking events aloud is not enough for me sometimes: I have to write them down. It was not until I had finally managed to safely convince my partner that I was going to come back and just needed some space and escaped a violent situation that I had a moment to reflect. It was not until I was home in my room crying and writing in my journal that I realized I had to call the police. Again, "We write to become who we are" (Hwu, 1998). And I am not just "a survivor". I had endured an abusive relationship with a sociopath from 2015 to 2017 before leaving for the final time and maintaining zero contact only to enter a similar situation with a psychopath. What does that make me? Am I crazy? Wounded? Cursed? No, it makes me a two-time survivor. A hyper-vigilant ultra-warrior. Always on edge for a while and still learning how to trust, how to "be". Now, I will tell you through writing how I heal my Self. A heart with a scar.

#### Scarheart<sup>4</sup>

I'm not telling you I know how you feel  
 because I can't possibly; nor is it my place to know.  
 I am here to tell you that I have survived. Surely, at one point in  
 time, when I  
 sat by the water, I thought I could not: I only felt grief and  
 terrible pain.  
 For I had lost a lover, and a labor of my love. (That's the piece that  
 few talk of,  
 the feeling of failure and shame for loving someone who hurts  
 you.)  
 Your experiences are your own. I can listen  
 to your stories, your truths. I can share  
 some of my own or sit with yours

in sacred silence while you share yours.  
 Either way, please know that you are not alone.  
 Quite the contrary, you belong to an army now: for you have been  
 to war. And  
     don't let anyone tell you otherwise. A war without sides aside  
 from the lines  
     within yourself which outline the need to protect and leave with  
 the desire to  
     stay and "just be better" to "make it work".  
 You fought for your life. And you survived.  
 Similar to soldiers returning home from combat, there will be  
 labels thrown  
     onto you—some of your own making because you need an  
 identity and some  
     from others because they need a category, a frame of reference.  
 For they, like  
     mere civilians, have never entered the land of nuclear destruction  
 that was your  
     former battle.  
 But whatever you choose, choose it on your own accord, your  
 own timeline.  
 This I can tell you: it will take time; a mere year for some or less  
 and many,  
     many moons for others. In fact, the cartography of your heart  
 and your mind,  
     your body and your soul, your spirit and your dreams, will be  
 forever altered.  
     New boundaries; a different topography; caverns unexplored.  
 But you are safe here. Here in your heart. Drop down a ladder  
 with your broom  
     and gather your baskets. Wipe down the cobwebs or let them  
 hang; open the  
     curtains so sunshine floods the ventricles.  
 Get to know your new home. Cultivate fertile heart space. Take  
 down a book  
     from the shelves as you delve inside of this blood-filled, bearing  
 place where

memories become intuition in your arsenal for self-love;  
 flashbacks disguised as opportunities to rewrite your narrative;  
 thoughts transfer energy into your hands for the capacity to care;  
 connections shift your neurons as the brain undergoes rewiring.  
 Let the Warrior in Training commence, dear scarred hearts.

—

As my Master's thesis writing came to a close and the submission date drew closer, I realized that I had spoken to people "on the ground" and "experts in the field" yet I also went "into the field" *of my heart*. I thought the M.A., Gender and Development degree would bring with it the title of becoming a "gender specialist" yet the more I dug deeper, the more I realized that it really meant I was *becoming*.

I know others in my program are becoming in their own right as well. See how a colleague, my friend Deeksha, says poetry is a form of observation and healing: "I believe that each poem that I write is a way to give words to an emotion that accumulates within me, owing to anything I see, hear, or feel. While some poems or writings are more helpful towards healing me, others are written to acknowledge the pain or the discomfort of an event or thoughts".

The inclusion of their poem in this chapter is to show how alternatives to traditional research using feminist research methodologies, can illuminate issues like IPV or, in the case of the poem, what has been termed "menstrual health management" (MHM) in the development sector. Let the experience of reading the poem soak in. Maybe read it again. Then, read a report issued by a funder or policymaking institution. Are there overlaps? What is missing? Whether IPV or MHM or any development issue, the reliance on a numerate perspective is a form of violence for the development discipline itself. My suggestion is that there is more tactile content in a few staggered stanzas of tacit recounting than can be produced in a publication of dense pages. Through story, a deeper truth appears, and a new belief can be held.

<sup>4</sup> Poem written on 23 February 2020 by Emily R. O'Hara.

### **My Stained Skirt**

by Deeksha Sharma (Sharma, D. [2020](#))

I wore a skirt today morning  
    Pretty light-grey skirt, flowing merrily  
    Like breeze flowing on a cloudy day, expecting  
    Some rain showers today, heavily

I got my period a day before  
    My period date, but that's normal  
    And I quickly wore a sanitary pad  
    Adjusting it neatly and proper

But I was so much in love  
    With my new skirt- light grey  
    That I was so determined to wear it  
    And not wear something dark during the day

I went outside to buy some groceries and then  
    Walked through the park in my view  
    The breeze was flowing like my skirt  
    And, there were some showers too

Showers! from my vagina  
    Not from the rain  
    Not its soothing water droplets  
    But painful red blood, this month again

I could feel the green grass around me dancing  
    Noticing my uterus bounce and shake  
    So, I sat on a bench for a while  
    Feeling my blood vessels break

I pressed my belly and wished I could  
    Teleport myself back home  
    Oh! this slimy-thick blood  
    Moving gently like an earthworm

I stood up and glanced at my skirt behind  
    Damn, a red stain on my skirt  
    Conscious and insecure I felt



Hoping no one sees this, but there's no dearth  
 No dearth of people staring my skirt  
 Like something they've never seen  
 What's the matter if there's a stain?  
 I'll go home and clean  
  
 I kept walking swiftly like a car  
 That lost its brakes in muddy dirt  
 And I can notice people  
 Noticing me, my stained skirt  
  
 If I close my eyes to the world  
 The world can still see me  
 Oh! I need to rush home  
 I need to pee  
  
 And I reached home  
 My light grey skirt has a new design  
 Of two big red polka dots  
 Imprinted so fine  
  
 I washed myself, and  
 Changed my stained skirt  
 Walking across the room  
 I opened my cupboard  
  
 Thinking now what I should wear, maybe  
 Something dark to hide any stain  
 Smiling at myself, I blinked an eye  
 I took out a pant, it was white again

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The healing, for me, is in the writing of the words and not so much the words themselves. This is similar to how it is the *relational process* of feminist research that is transformative. More traditional, scientific ways of “knowing” see a certain side of things; they only tell part of the story. Feminist ways of knowing, such as writing, situate us in place; they shift us into “being”. Reading reports, talking to stakeholders and analysing statistics was re-traumatising as a survivor. My writing brought me back

to centre and alleviated my suffering. By digging deeper through reflexive and creative writing, I stitched together the scar tissue and lived the ecological model of myself. As my chapter comes to a close with a final poem of my own, I hope it encourages you to reflect on how you look at policy issues that deal with such intimate experiences and need other ways of seeing. As I share with you how writing has provided healing by helping me come home to myself, I hope I leave you wanting to explore personal, political issues by looking at how they are embodied and felt, not just measured and observed. There is so much more to be said and read, and heard and seen and touched and shared. Let us go forth in a collective healing; towards a more situated, collaborative approach to researching.

**A poem for my daughter or son, or they who shall be of gender-none<sup>5</sup>**

And this is how life goes  
 It hurts and then it doesn't  
 (Hurts then doesn't)  
 You're in love and then you're not  
 (In love then not)  
 But you always have your self  
 (Always have self)  
 Your Self, do you have?  
 (All ways.)  
 You always have your strength.  
 Your self is a home you come back to  
 To curl up inside  
 Your self is a home.  
 To come back to,  
 yourself.  
 To nip at your wounds and hide  
 To let go of life and cry.  
 To throw down your bags, and lie  
 Down on the grass,  
 all green from your tears.  
 Of growth and pruning  
 Your heart took an oath:

I, too will always love you.  
 You at home; at home in yourself.  
 Your self is a home to come back to.  
 And that is how life grows.

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<sup>5</sup> Poem written on 28 June 2019 by Emily R. O’Hara.

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## Epilogue: Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning

*Karijn van den Berg, Constance Dupuis, Jacqueline Gaybor,  
and Wendy Harcourt*

The process of engaging with and learning from each other that culminated in this book has been a beautiful experiment in community building. We are grateful for the time and care that each contributor has put into this—beginning with shared laughter and good food in an idyllic

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setting in Bolsena, Italy, and continuing with the unhurried reading of and commenting on each other's draft chapters. By way of bringing the collection to a close, we, the editors, offer a few reflections on how to do feminist research. We open up questions around: what it means to trouble and be troubled by; how to learn and unlearn together; and in what ways our methodologies take us beyond academic knowledge production.

As we wrote at the beginning of this book, as feminists we are making explicit the importance of "troubling" and "being troubled by" feminist research and feminist methodologies. The different reflections offered throughout the book reveal how "doing" feminist methodologies is in itself an act of troubling and being troubled by. The status quo of Western, rational knowledges is being challenged, as feminists raise questions that may throw us off balance. The book intentionally asks:

- Whose work are we reading and citing? With whose thoughts are we thinking through our research questions?
- Which stories do we centralize and how do we tell those stories?
- How do we reflexively work through our privileges and multi-fold positionalities and how they affect our research and relationships?

Such questions are not only part and parcel of engaging with feminist methodologies and doing research as feminists, they are also critical to understanding what we can and what we cannot "produce" as knowledge.

Being "troubled" by questions around our responsibilities, feminist ethics and our research practices means that we need both to learn and unlearn. Unlearning entails an undoing of the normative frameworks and paradigms in which we find ourselves. It also means we can end up with more questions than answers. A practice of unlearning, of not knowing, requires the sort of openness that is central to a feminist ethics and practice of care. So, while many of the chapters seek to learn and to share experiences of self-learning, this collection may leave the reader with new openings and questions rather than necessarily new empirical knowledge. The different authors are honest in the challenges of doing feminist research. These are challenges that will continue, reflective of feminist methodologies as being confrontational and uncomfortable.

The threads of learning to unlearn that run throughout the book are not only challenging but also inspiring as they give space and importance to the "in between" parts of research, the quiet moments of insight and

connection. As was briefly touched upon in the introduction, feminist ethics asks us to make visible the sometimes messy but necessary aspects of the research process. There is always something troubling about being explicit about the “in between” of research—is research what is actually needed? We think here of Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang’s work on refusal in research.<sup>1</sup> As the book shows, feminist approaches take time, require flexibility, and demand that we put more of our whole selves into our work. We bring feminist methodologies to our work because we care. There is a continual tension around why we do academic research, paying attention to what impact our research can make beyond the academic realm. We continue to be challenged to ensure that academic outputs are not the main focus of our research relations.

By paying attention to research relations, the authors have also embraced an examination of the connections among emotional, bodily and thought processes which make up feminist knowledge production. This focus has unveiled the diversity in gendered lived experiences, inequalities and injustices. Such explorations are an invitation to question how we move across the porous boundaries of our individual lives and experiences and our research projects and connect to others, including the more than human. The chapters look at the quality of our research relationships with humans and more-than-humans and how our engaging in feminist research requires awareness and sensitivity to what change we are bringing. Our passage through certain places leaves traces, sometimes invisible to our senses, but very persistent for others. How do we gain the sensitivity to navigate these waters with care? Who and what is this research for? We acknowledge that these questions are not easy to resolve. Rather, they are opportunities to be open and engage in productive discussions and listen to each other.

Even as the book opens up more questions, inviting readers to learn, unlearn and relearn through our research, navigating dominant structures of knowledge production as troubled and troubling feminists, we also invite celebration. This book has been a creative, evolving process of doing feminist research that has been explicitly experimental as we have learnt together. The process of putting together the book has been such a vital, exciting collaboration. We questioned ourselves as researchers,

<sup>1</sup> Tuck, E., & K.W. Yang. (2014). R-Words: Refusing Research. In D. Paris & M.T. Winn (eds.) *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, pp. 223–47. Los Angeles: Sage.



asking each of us to be explicit about our engagement as feminists, and of our relations with others as we wrote our contributions. We asked what being a feminist meant in relation to: the questions that inspired us; who and what accompanied us in our research; and what we meant to each other as co-authors and editors. We troubled each other in gentle ways, probing carefully as we gave each other permission to speak about the difficulties of doing feminist research. We asked ourselves to be open not only to the challenges but also to the pain. We wrote of what we wanted to do as well as what could not be done. As we reflected together (mostly online) we would often remark how much we enjoyed reading and learning from each other as we found the courage to acknowledge and write about the emotions, fears, and possibilities of doing feminist research. It was a positive, reaffirming, if troubling, experience.

We thank the reader for joining us in our journey.

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