



## Care conversations

Q Manivannan (they/them/theirs), Dipali Anumol (she/her/hers), Sinduja Raja (she/her/hers), Dipti Tamang (she/her/hers), Khushi Singh Rathore (she/her/hers), Emma Louise Backe (she/her/hers) & Laura J. Shepherd (she/her/hers)

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### Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic, increasing democratic backsliding, and rising precarity have laid bare the need to reimagine and reconstitute the role of academia and public scholarship. For the *IFJP* annual conference in 2022, we created a roundtable to engage with the opportunities for integrating and attending to a feminist ethic (and practice) of care within the academy, and its roles, meanings, and consequences for research, teaching, and learning. Carrying with us, and building on, Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto's assertion that care "crosscuts the antithesis between public and private, rights and duties, love and labour" (1990, 56), we convened to discuss how – and perhaps why – care is now animating deliberations across higher education institutions in diverse contexts. This conversation is a welcome space in which to extend our exploration.

As researchers, we see the importance of a feminist ethic of care (see Fisher and Tronto 1990; Held 1995, 2005; Ruddick 1990; Tronto 1993, 1998) not only in research design and process but also in our modes of engagement and participation across all stakeholders within and outside academia: faculty,

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students, peers, mentors, colleagues, partners, and interlocutors. We also draw on insights from Black, decolonial, and Indigenous feminists who theorize care in ways that are grounded in the particular experiences of the communities in which they are embedded (see García Peña 2022; Mack and Na'puti 2019; Motta 2020; Motta and Bennett 2018), stressing the urgent need for action-oriented and inclusive scholarship in global politics, and potential pathways to reimagine scholarship and the role of academia in the upcoming decade.

But we also have questions – questions to sit with, questions to attempt to answer, and questions to pose. These questions make the personal political, and vice versa. They run the spectrum of our lives and ask how we define and practice care in our relationships, methodologies, theories, and research processes. Through these provocations, we attempt to celebrate spaces and practices of caring resistance, and speculate hopeful futures in the discipline of global politics.

## Conversation

**Laura:** I find it hard to reflect on care from this aching place, in these snatched few minutes at the end of a long day, when my eyes are hot from hours staring at a screen and tension has wormed its way up my arm, traveling from wrist to shoulder, because even though I know better than to spend all day typing on my laptop, it is often easier to care about the demands of my email, my files and folders, my open tabs, than it is to care for my poor body. I am so tired. We are all so tired. I know that I am at my least patient, most volatile, most *careless* when I am exhausted, and this frustrates me in turn because I know that the burdens that exhaust me fall multiply on others: the precariously employed, the scholars of color, and the immigrant scholars who speak their sense of being “perpetually precarious” in the mercurial academy (Haastrup 2021, 119). I have colleagues who I suspect have not exhaled for over two years, friends who are vibrating with the effort of holding everything together. What more can be asked of these people? Can I, we, they, find ways to regenerate, resist, connect in care?

And to whom I am accountable, in care? To whom does it (or should it) *matter* if I practice (with) care? I deliberate and breathe alone and I am brought back to myself by the sense that I am accountable to those with whom I build community, those with whom I “make common cause ... in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish” (Lorde [1979] 2017, 91). Lorgia García Peña describes “community as rebellion” (2022); perhaps care can be rebellion too, in both giving and receiving, in sustaining and nourishing, and also as a means of refusing the oppressive logics of the neoliberal institution. I text a picture of García Peña’s book to a colleague: “Have you read this? You must.” And I am reminded of Sara Ahmed, who

writes of citational practice and reading recommendations as “feminist bricks ... the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings” (Ahmed 2017, 16). García Peña is no more writing for me than Audre Lorde was, of course, but taking care with her words is itself a way of building community, of showing care. These are the dwellings that I choose to build; the time horizon on this act of care is long but I choose to center justice, to center struggle, and to affirm that doing so is an act of care for every body who is looking for a place to be, or a place to fall apart.

**Khushi:** This resonates with me so much, Laura. It is the exhaustion that resonates. I sometimes sit and wonder how it is that we are all exhausted in different ways and yet, when we sit alone all tired and numb, we are together in this fatigue. Is this how we are supposed to be?

**Q:** But is care sufficient? To start with, I am no longer certain about what we mean by “care” in our writing and scholarship. I know what my loved ones and I would like it to mean.

Social science research has come to acknowledge care as political, and as a form of political action (Tronto 1996). What does “political” mean here? Scholarship on care has distinguished and attempted to reconcile care and justice (Gilligan 1995; Held 2005; Noddings 2012). Laura, you noted García Peña’s “community as rebellion,” and that to center struggle and the act of care is to understand care *as* justice; using “as” rather than “and” here is not just to clarify a lexical ambiguity but to assert that care is equal to and indistinguishable from justice. As Virginia Held (2005, 17) articulated, justice without care is not justice, whereas care without justice can and will continue to exist – oftentimes in institutionalized forms, where care holds value primarily as labor. What, then, are these “just” modes of care we are now writing of, and theorizing, and, consequently, are other forms of care “unjust”? Is there a particular way in which we as scholars must responsibly speak of care? Are some forms, vocabularies, tools, and methods more effective for practice-oriented writing about care? If so, then, we must attempt to arrive at a collectively theorized definition of care that can encapsulate its non/anti-institutional modes, without slipping into generalization.

Through our conversations, through the written word, we imbue “care” with an academic (and formalized) meaning beyond its felt, wordless existence in the everyday. Attempts at defining care create permanent fixtures of love, grief, affection, romance, solidarity, resistance, memory, respect, forgetting, and healing within the word. Why, then, do we hold onto “care” as a larger, grander political dream? Would we be better scholars if we did not talk about care? Perhaps scholars must stop writing “care” and instead mention only where/how it is found: place, people, event, act. Every response to

these questions, moreover, tends toward a gatekept scholarship, where we, the caring care scholars, are the gatekeepers.

**Emma:** That care is always already tied to a nexus of power dynamics embedded in neoliberal flows that promote the life of some, while neglecting or abandoning the lives of others (Biehl 2013), is something that feminists have long studied and remarked on. In *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed (2021) further elaborates on how care, particularly in the context of academia, gets weaponized against those who name and attempt to deconstruct such institutions of power. I think that anthropologists and other scholars in the social sciences more generally, in a way, often act as killjoys; when critique is our central mode of engagement, we are best positioned to indicate what is not working, or what is troubling about business as usual. In my Anthropology of Development course, we deconstruct the triumphalist narratives of humanitarian aid and international development, and unpack what kinds of help actually get leveraged in these unequal exchanges between the Global North and the Global South.

Despite the disaffection that often emanates from this kind of critique, especially for those hoping to become practitioners in development or humanitarian aid, I always try to remind students that we can only make better systems – whether that means improving corrupt or broken ones, or cultivating entirely new structures and institutions – by recognizing what is not working in the systems that we already have. So my provocation is: how do we identify the kinds of non-innocent care (Murphy 2015) that stand in opposition to the caring techniques, approaches, moods, and collectives that we hope to cultivate, and how do we make space for the negative emotions that might accompany disaffection, hopelessness, and anger? How do we practice care as feminist killjoys?

**Q:** In India and other parts of the world, every official institution comes with a gatekeeper at the entrance: the watchman. The security guards and watchmen at my past campuses of work and learning were kind to me, but kinder toward power. After graduating from my undergraduate university, I worked there as a staff member; I just needed to wear a scarf, a blazer, and a coat and walk through the gates confidently without ever glancing at the guards (the deliberate, practiced apathy toward surveillance is essential here) to be granted access, unencumbered. My watchmen embodied the conventional stereotypes of being often asleep (owing to difficult working hours), being often missing from their post, never paying great attention, and usually being tardy to the scene of any crime or infraction that occurred. Their foremost function was to be visible, uniformed, and recognizable as security, as living extensions of the borders that they govern(ed).

Theorizing about care, here we are the watchmen: necessarily masculine in our scholarly need to define, categorize, typify, and formalize (Sen 2021);

necessarily complicit in uncaring structures; necessarily exclusivist (in writing work removed from non-academic realities and vocabularies); and necessarily fixated on a function of visibility in that, foremost, we wish to be seen, known, and read. We don uniforms: the citations (Mariner 2022), the indications of scholarly qualification, the PhDs from privileged universities, fellowships, academic language. We are often asleep and missing from the scenes of care, grief, and suffering that we write about.

In the rare instances when we inhabit the “field” wherein we work, we remain protected by our absence; we are guests, we do not often “go back home” to the field (Fujii 2017), and when we do, we often have recourse to an exit, an escape back to the institution whose borders we uphold (through our uniform) and whose borders protect us (from negative consequences of our research). When there is a site of crime or suffering – be it a protest, a point of resistance, a movement, a cause, a community, or a neighborhood – we are always tardy, always late. We must wait until the suffering occurs to theorize the care within it, alongside it, in spite of it. Our conversations on care do not prevent it, or at least do not eliminate its possibility. Scholars too often pay no attention. Scholars too are kinder toward power. And most of all, academics govern the borders of what care is – and what it is not.

Watchmen are essential features of most neighborhoods and houses. In India, they are often precariously hired workers from marginalized backgrounds, castes, and communities, who receive minimal pay for a large variety of jobs, and no associated benefits (Noronha, Chakraborty, and D’Cruz 2020). Watchmen carried me to the classroom when as a child I injured my leg; they prevented a friend from being assaulted; they escorted my inebriated friends and I to our rooms often enough at university; they provided medical aid; they paid attention to more things that most other staff on campus did. But as far as their watching went, their uniforms gave them both authority and care – which drives me to return, once more, to our own scholarly sartoriality.

“Sartorial” is from the Latin *sart*, past participle of *sarcire*, meaning “to patch, mend.” Do we mend, do we repair a broken discipline, a broken world, by simply donning our uniforms? What, really, is this uniform? What are its characteristic features? What signs of belonging do we operate with? Even in the most democratized, unconstitutional, anti-hierarchical forms of organization, there exist criteria for membership that must be met. For scholars to function in denial of such exclusionary standards of “care-based” membership is to permit the injustices performed in the name of care, to forego questioning who gets to write about care.

Who is a scholar of care? Who is a caring scholar? Could the requirement of our membership – our uniform, the symbols of visibility – begin with a promise to attempt to mend the harms that we study, to patch, to repair? How can such repair occur? What more must we do?

**Sinduja:** I love this parallel that you draw with watchmen, Q, but it also struck me that the very same watchmen could become modes of surveillance and wield power in very harmful ways – especially when I think about my own experiences with watchmen over the years, growing up in restricted and conservative environments where they quite literally watched over me. And it is ironic that I can see that very same parallel – the very thin line that I can draw between authority and care for the watchmen – among our peers, colleagues, and superiors in academia. And it is a painful reminder that scholars who *work* on feminist care might not actually *be* caring scholars at all.

**Dipali:** That question of who is a caring scholar and who is a scholar of care is such an interesting provocation. Sara Ahmed says: “Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (Ahmed 2017, 15–16). I owe a lot of my feminist memory to those who came before me: Ahmed, Cynthia Enloe, Anna Tsing, Valarie Kaur. For me, care constitutes four practices: attention, curiosity, tending, and love. Ahmed (2017) taught me that to live a feminist life is to render everything questionable. Enloe (2013) taught me to look at what/who we take seriously and why. Tsing (2015) taught me to notice. Kaur (2020) taught me to center wonder and love, even when it is hard. Hannah McGregor (2022) says that care is tending to and attending to. When I look at care as the combination of the above four practices, I see that it is central to who I am and what I do – in the classroom, in the streets, in the field, and in my words.

**Laura:** Those are certainly words to conjure with, Dipali. I like that you do not shy away from love as a constituent of care, however unusual it might be to consider love in academic work – as a felt state, rather than a represented or intellectualized, somehow abstract, emotion. Like many of us in this conversation, I was inspired – moved, even – by Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz’s recent essay on love and care in international studies, in which they deftly showed that “centering love and care highlights exciting possibilities for understanding the remaking of worlds in the wake of violence” (Krystalli and Schulz 2022, 9). In their examination of love and care, they are careful to disentangle the complex and multifaceted relations that connect each of us to our many others, and it prompted me to think about those caring relations. To whom do I owe, and show, care? I feel intuitively that the way in which I care for people varies depending on context and relationship; the same must be true of the care that I am shown. So perhaps I am differently constituted in relations of care, held and contoured in and by those relations that make up a part of the “me” that I think I am. Maybe that is true for all of us?

**Dipali:** As a PhD candidate and teaching fellow, I occupy a strange place – neither student nor professor. This has meant moments when students and professors have considered me an equal but also moments when they have not valued my input or respected me. In late October, a student questioned (and belittled) my expertise by bringing up my identity as a foreigner and woman of color. I was, understandably, shaken by it, even though it was not the first time (nor will it be the last, unfortunately). It is now February, but I can finally admit that it kicked off a period of deep depression. Will I ever be good enough? Will I always be the outsider?

Over the past few years, I have also been thinking a lot about practices and pedagogies of care. In office hours with students, I have repeatedly said: “I genuinely care.” I would be a hypocrite if I was insistent about centering care in my work but did not practice it with students and in class. At the same time, I have struggled with balance. Does being generous with others have its limits? Should it? Should I feel guilty for drawing boundaries, if any? Can caring for others become a fault if/when it impedes one’s own well-being? It reminds me of Roxani Krystalli’s piece “Of Loss and Light: Teaching in the Time of Grief.” In it, Krystalli (2021, 42) asks: “What are a feminist teacher’s responsibilities towards her own losses?” As Laura rightly asked earlier as well, who are we accountable to? To which I add, what are a feminist’s responsibilities toward joy? Toward practicing care? Maybe boundaries are necessary? Maybe I am a hypocrite if I do not care for myself? Maybe there is no right answer, just right questions. Maybe all that matters is to keep asking questions, to keep trying, and in Mary Oliver’s (2017, 105) words, to “pay attention, be astonished, tell about it.”

**Sinduja:** I love that you bring up “Teaching in the Time of Grief,” Dipali, because grief is something that I have been struggling with extensively since I began this academic journey. What does it mean to care – for myself, for others – amid this utter depletion that grief often brings? I say “depletion” because as I sit down to write this, not only have I faced multiple and sudden personal losses from around the world in a very short period of time but the Climate Clock also informs me that we have only six years, 165 days, seven hours, four minutes, and one second to limit global warming to 1.5°C. And as we deplete the Earth around us, I see all of us who are dependent on it for our survival become depleted too – mentally, emotionally, and physically. As Laura said above, we are all tired and we wonder what it means to bring care to our work, to our relationships, and even to ourselves.

The past few years of the pandemic coupled with escalating and overlapping political and economic crises have taken a toll on all of us, and the discourse on almost all forms of popular media is on how to contend with how tired and trapped we feel in the lives that we have decided to normalize. “How to soft quit your job,” “10 ways to self-care while working at your



desk,” and “Hacks to have a life beyond the 9–5” are some recurring clickbait articles that I encounter as I mindlessly scroll between four different apps on my phone to distract myself from the weight of the world. We are struggling to care for ourselves, let alone care for the people and the world around us. What does it mean to care in this period of depletion?

I turn often to Mariame Kaba at times when I feel unmoored and particularly despondent with all of the depletion – when I feel completely depleted. She says that “hope is a discipline” (Kaba 2018) because we have to think of it as conscious effort – that it is not a fleeting, fuzzy feeling, but rather a conscious decision that we make every day to put one foot in front of another in the search for a better future sans depletion. It is not easy, it is hard work, and we may not be alive to witness the end result. For me, care goes hand in hand with this understanding of hope and helps to speak to some of the questions that you raised, Dipali. Care is a discipline too. Caring about the world, about our academic work on care, about our students, and about our projects and activism toward social justice is hard labor because of how exhausting it is most times, especially in the face of the callousness of the systems that we have decided to partake in – of which academia is one. At the same time, we have to keep reminding ourselves that caring is fundamental to our existence in this world and our commitment to it. We care because it is not just a feeling to *care for* someone or something; it is action and praxis.

However, I often tell myself that practices of care do not just emerge from thin air, nor should they just be static and ever present. And I think about Cynthia Cockburn’s conceptualization of the “continuum of violence” (Cockburn 2004) to speak about a continuum of crisis and the continuum of care always countering it. For example, the pandemic is novel to the century, but it should not be seen as exceptional. Rather, it is a continuum of crises of capital, of caste, of race, of climate, of gender, and of health. At the same time, just as violence and crises are in continuum, so are care and practices of care – maybe a bit more hidden and located within the interstitial spaces of everyday existence under capitalist heteropatriarchy, but the pandemic showed that these practices can be amplified.

Some of the ways in which people sprang into action through mutual aid – forming quarantine bubbles, providing makeshift ambulances, and distributing groceries and medicines to strangers – showed that they were bringing their learnings from other experiences of crisis into the pandemic. I tell myself (and maybe this might help you too, Dipali, as you navigate your caring) that a continuum of care is what we need to focus on as we navigate through our personal lives, through the academy, and through the world. We are constantly in a mutually affirming relationship with the world that we create and participate in – and like all serious and intimate relationships we would like to have in our lives, we have to consciously try to make and remake our relationship with love and care as well.

And maybe, through holding on to a discipline of care and thinking about it as a continuum with ebbs and flows, we will encounter other ways to breathe. In her book, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks us to think about how the scale of breathing is planetary and maybe instead of continuing to try to survive through circumstances that are unbreathable and that make us “undrowned,” we might “try to practice another way to breathe” (Gumbs 2020, 3).

**Laura:** I have been thinking a lot about breath recently. Last year, I was diagnosed with burnout, a condition that I have described flippantly as feeling like someone forgot to charge my batteries overnight. I would go to bed, sleep restlessly, and wake feeling unrefreshed, challenged by the very idea of facing another day. I felt depleted on a cellular level. My tolerance was low; I felt overwhelmed and exhausted all of the time, like I could only cope with a very small world. I was anxious and found it hard to regulate my emotions. My sensory sensitivities were intense. I was struggling to cope. I was struggling to care for myself because I did not know what I needed to nourish me. And so in those disorienting, upsetting moments of unknowing, I came back to my breath. It is not so great a leap for me, then, to connect breathing with care. At times, it has been all I can manage – but I can manage that. The cool or warm air in my nostrils, the catch at the back of my throat, being conscious of chest and belly rising on the inhale, falling on the exhale, and that attentiveness – that wonder that you mentioned, Dipali! – reminding me to be mindful in this moment, of this moment, of this breath. And then another follows, and I am breathing, even through, as Sinduja says, “circumstances that are unbreathable.”

But thinking about breathing, here, now, at the end of summer in Sydney, also brings to mind the literally unbreathable devastation that is somehow bound up for me with my own struggles: the catastrophic bushfires of the 2019/2020 summer that burned more than 24 million hectares – an area approximately the size of Uganda, or the United Kingdom. On January 1, 2020, Australia’s capital city Canberra was determined to have the world’s least breathable air, and while 33 people were killed directly by the fires (Cook et al. 2021), many more – nearly 450 – died from smoke inhalation (ABC News 2020). Even along the metropolitan coastal areas, the air was thick with unbreathable ash; I have heard people joke wryly that we Sydney-siders were wearing face masks before COVID-19 made them cool.

The ecological, environmental, and health effects of the fires – both physical and mental – reverberated across the worst-affected areas and were exacerbated by the genesis of the pandemic when people had barely, in many cases literally, caught their breath after the summer. Breath itself was to be feared; public health announcements insisted on six feet of distance between people whose touch was previously a source of solace, an act of

care – six feet to lessen the risk of airborne particles of the virus infecting the uninfected. Many wealthy countries responded to the pandemic by enforcing stricter border controls, trying to stop the spread of disease by stopping the movement of people.

International travel felt unimaginable; half a world away from my family, that sense of “stuckness” was fraught and frustrating for me. But I was privileged, and remain privileged, and even as I return to my breath to calm my nervous system – triggered by the revisiting of these memories here – I am grateful for these small acts of care that I have learned to show myself, and that I can use to rebuild my energy so I can care better for others. Because in the wake of fires and floods, in the pandemic era, mutual aid and care for community are essential to alleviate the unevenly distributed harms. As Farhana Sultana aptly writes, “While ongoing climate change amplifies, compounds, and creates new forms of injustices and stresses, all of which are interlinked and interconnected, the emergences of the COVID-19 pandemic co-created new challenges, vulnerabilities, and burdens on top, while reinforcing old ones” (Sultana 2021, 448). Attending – and tending, as Dipali suggests – to these challenges, vulnerabilities, and burdens is bound up for me in questions of why, and how, we need to think about care in world politics.

**Dipti:** I am sitting in the terminal of the airport waiting for my flight to New Delhi, the national capital with which those of us from the peripheries share such a difficult relationship, which I would characterize as fragile, anxious, stressful, and alienating. Our histories of being colonized over and over again by different regimes in the past and spilling into the present have ensured that this relationship of fragility persists. How, then, do we as people from the margins find a sense of comfort and a sense of belonging in this complicated space? Why do care and acts of care matter so much?

To put it plainly and simply, because we – and here when I say “we,” I imply a broad homogeneity of an entire community largely comprising the Eastern Himalayan region with extensive experience of being displaced, militarized, alienated, oppressed, and marginalized – are exhausted. Exhausted of being spoken for, of being exoticized, of being represented and “seen” through the colonial gaze that constantly exploits and reproduces hierarchies in myriad forms. Academia and “intellectual spaces” are one such space where boundaries of who belongs, who matters, and whose voices matter are so strongly entrenched in hierarchies defined by class, caste, race, ethnicity, gender, and other markers of privilege. Today when I speak of care, it comes from the sense of alienation that I feel from academia: defined by privilege, power, and exclusion; replicating our geographical, historical, political, and cultural histories, where those of us from the margins will always be peripheral and therefore excluded – the Other who does not belong. Care therefore looks different for us, and I wonder if it can ever be truly inclusive.

I recently attended a three-day workshop organized by the publishing house Zubaan, a feminist organization based in New Delhi. The workshop is part of the larger research grant in collaboration between the Sasakawa Foundation in Japan and Zubaan, which for the past few years has provided a space for younger scholars from the northeast and the neighboring Himalayan region in India that curates knowledge systems and recenters peripheral voices within these otherwise elite, exclusive spaces of knowledge production. Over these three days, I learned and unlearned what a feminist ethic of care can look like – from dialogues and conversations over gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and exclusion all set against the backdrop of a sense of recognition of the reality of unresolved questions of political violence, conflict, and militarization.

All of us were listening with a sense of what Cynthia Enloe (2004) defines as “feminist curiosity.” It is in this sense of feminist curiosity that I have increasingly begun to find solace, hope, and healing as I constantly learn from what exhaustion can or has forced those of us on the margins to do: to constantly find and make our own *safe* spaces of care and healing. My emphasis here is on “safe” and feeling safe because of my own experiences of being scarred, of being hurt, and of the exhaustion of continually pulling myself through pain, disillusionment, exhaustion, and despair. It does not matter if one just goes ahead with a sense of feminist curiosity unless it is also accompanied by a sense of feminist kindness and empathy, the essence of what care – and, more specifically, feminist care – should be built on. Is this possible in the increasingly exclusive and abusive arena that academia has come to be? I do not have an answer, but I still hold on to hope, not only for myself but for all of us dreaming and seeking means of entering the elusive, idealized spaces of academia from which we have always been excluded in myriad ways – some subtle, others not; the violence ranging from epistemic to sexual to emotional and mental, scarring us for life. Will these stories find voice? If so, where? And in what spaces?

Audre Lorde (1980, 43) writes:

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation, and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

I carry with me the constant sense of being exhausted and tired and also knowing that silence will no longer serve me or my friends. I have stayed silent for too long and feel the need to unburden myself, as I learn to be kind to myself and others around me. I know that I must speak and write, for it is in sharing and knowing that I have not been alone; there have

been others before me, and there will be others alongside me and after me to share with me this sense of exhaustion as we move ahead, thinking and reimagining new spaces of care. For me and those of us with a history of being oppressed and excluded, care must be embedded in notions of justice and inclusion, and free from oppression.

As we trace these themes through our conversation, I believe that we are voicing a shared sense of burden and exhaustion, bringing us back to the questions of what care looks like, who we should care for, and how we might care better. To be able to have this conversation in otherwise increasingly polarized, racialized, hierarchical spaces – where power abuse is rampant, where our realities are mired in constant realities of abuse and violence – matters. Sinduja rightly points out that “practices of care do not just emerge from thin air”; it takes constant self-reflection and self-awareness to establish and reaffirm a continuum of care. I am cautious, skeptical, and weary, for my experience in academia despite being among feminists has been disappointing and hurtful, scarring me for life. I also know that the onus has shifted back to those of us with the burdening baggage of historical oppression to once again be kind, to care – but I only wonder if it can be sustained in a system that is inherently hierarchical, exclusive, and oppressive. I can only wonder.

**Sinduja:** I think Dipti points out such an important aspect of thinking about care and love in research and academia – that while, yes, they are the ways in which we have to envision the future of academia and our own disciplines of international relations (IR) and world politics, we also need to make sure that this conversation does not move on too fast or detract from the historical and ongoing violences that many marginalized scholars face. And my work is increasingly showing me that the people who have faced the most harm are often the people who have found the ways to counteract it the best – but often on their own. Maybe this is the time to see how the rest of us can support and be pillars to these counteractions – where moving on with care also includes providing answers to the people who have lost the most? And hopefully through this work of support, of unburdening their burdens, of “pillarhood” and sisterhood, Q’s question of membership might become clearer?

**Khushi:** I come to this conversation with more questions than answers, less than 24 hours after my visit to the eye clinic where the doctor categorically instructed me to cut down on screen time. Of course, I am fine and in my mind this warning was a false alarm; it does not matter that in those hours of stress I was crying uncontrollably because of the pain. Should I even rest? Does this warrant rest? Would I be caring less for my work if I chose to care for myself? We become academics because we care for the things

that we teach and write about. Academia, theory – they help us to make sense of this world. As bell hooks writes, theory can liberate (hooks 1996). It can answer the questions that are forbidden. It can explain our lived experiences, and can heal where the wounds once existed by making sense of the “why” of things. I theorize (or at least try to) because I care. But should this come at the cost of caring for myself? My own body and mind? Dipali speaks of boundaries, and boundaries come with guilt. Is it OK, I ask, to shut that door because you need to sit by yourself and breathe?

During my introduction to the discipline, the lexicon of IR predominantly spoke of power, of norms, of states, and of violence among many other things, but it did not speak of care by itself. In the academy, I first learnt the vocabularies of care through my teachers, who in their own ways extended care, and who caught me every time I inched toward the cliff even though I never told them that I was crumbling. I did not know how to say it. How do you express in a profession that values your mind that it is your mind that you want to quieten? Mental health continues to be a taboo, burnouts are to be “fought,” and a PhD is only supposed to make you “stronger” after the endless bouts of crying and anxiety. In a culture where these thoughts are the norm, I was pleasantly surprised when my advisors warned me of burnout and articulated the necessary yet elusive: “You take care of yourself!”

And I found care in the feminist community. In the writings of bell hooks and Cynthia Enloe, in the warm words of Roxani Krystalli (2021), in the tender wisdom of Q Manivannan (2022), among others, I found ways of embracing my curiosities and my anxieties. Roxani, whom I call my dear friend, sends me pictures of flowers from her garden and I respond with images of light. All of these exchanges, spanning over days and sometimes months, are expressions of care. They are our own way of asking: “Are you OK?”

During our preliminary discussions for this conversation on care last year, I wondered whether only those who engage with feminist theories in their writing should have access to care within the academy because they have access to the feminist community by the virtue of their work (which is how I found my community). What about those young, particularly first-generation scholars who are not familiar with the vocabularies of feminisms and yet are in need of being cared for? What about those who do not engage with feminist theories in their writings on IR but continue to navigate varied sites of caste, gender, race, class, and geography to survive in this academy? Does denying such scholars feminist care not sustain the systemic injustices and hierarchies that we are trying and claiming to dismantle through feminist resistance? I found no answer but I did realize that asking who you leave behind is fundamental to feminist reflexivity.

But then again, it is those of us theorizing feminist care who find ourselves undertaking the labor of care. We care to build a future that we wish existed

but the journey brings exhaustion in a field where care work is not a measure of how good a scholar you may become. In a way, then, it is fair to say that this academy that we are a part of does not incentivize the act of caring. You spend much of yourself when you care, but do you really lose if you do not? How else can one explain the state of our field as it is?!

Those of us engaging with the feminist ethic of care do so voluntarily and not necessarily because our curriculum or training asked us to. How, then, do we institutionalize care? We need to redesign and redefine the academy so that kindness is as important as having that single-author article in a high-impact journal. It will take work, just as it took work for those before us whose shoulders we stand on. The academy belongs to us all. Institutionalizing care, in all of its many facets, also requires paying attention to what we lose and not just what we want to save and build. We have to tend to the parts that get chipped in the process of caring: the triggers, the anxieties, and sometimes even the inability to listen. "Our words are not without meaning. They are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle" (hooks 1996, 16). We have to pay attention to hope, and to the loss of it.

**Dipali:** Khushi, you bring up an interesting point – does IR care? As a whole, perhaps not. But I see these little spaces of hope that we have made a start.

Like one of the first few dominoes in a line, perhaps this is a beginning.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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