

Gender, Place & Culture

A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: 0966-369X (Print) 1360-0524 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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To cite this article: Araby Smyth, Jess Linz & Lauren Hudson (2019): A feminist coven in the university, *Gender, Place & Culture*

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1681367>



Published online: 05 Nov 2019.



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A feminist coven in the university

Araby Smyth^a, Jess Linz^a and Lauren Hudson^b

^aGeography, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA; ^bEarth and Environmental Sciences, CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

Inspired by Sara Ahmed's call to study what is near to you, we write about our sometimes-joyful, sometimes-furious, always passionate struggles as graduate students in the academy. As a site of imperialism, racism, and patriarchy, the university grinds especially hard on women, people of color, black, indigenious, queer, disabled, and otherwise oppressed scholars. Out of a desire not just to get by or get ahead in this hostile space of competition and scarcity, we write about a feminist praxis that subverts the academy. Using collaborative auto-ethnography, asynchronous online interviews, and co-theorization, we conjure a network of rebels - what we call *the feminist coven*. We solicited contributions from feminist graduate students in response to three prompts about forms of communication, emotional labor, and imaginaries. Our findings show a vibrant landscape of creativity, love, rage, and longing for academia to be a more hospitable place. We and our contributors, whose voices pepper this article, offer ideas for how to summon new worlds and ways of being through small actions and everyday practices, subverting the violence of the academy by being the storm that blows through it.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 July 2018
Accepted 5 September 2019

KEYWORDS


Feminism; affect; materialism; university; emotional labor; witches

Introduction

I graded and hustled. I wrote, I coordinated, I created, I was challenged, and I defended my work. And when it all came crashing down, when everything broke and I asked for help, there wasn't any. Only more traps, cryptic lectures from administrators about my 'vulnerability' as a young scholar, and more grubby fingers ... Today, I have my PhD [but] my job now is to reclaim my self-worth, face my debt, and heal. My job is also to let you know, dear academic, that you're not crazy, you are not alone, and you will not be bullied or degraded. Say it with me ... – contributor

In theory, graduate school fosters intellectual and professional growth. However, it often feels personally and politically stunting. Some claim that

CONTACT Araby Smyth  arabysmyth@uky.edu  Geography, University of Kentucky, 817 Patterson Office Tower, Lexington, KY 40506

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1681367>.

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academia has become a zombified permutation of the idealized liberal university (Whelan, Walker, and Moore 2013). From destructive reforms to rampant discrimination and epidemics of depression, many have documented, analyzed, and prescribed solutions to the deplorable state of things (Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016; Bianco 2016; Gill 2014; Hanke and Hearn 2012; Mountz et al. 2015; Ovetz 2017). The #metoo movement brought to light even more dark corners of higher education (Kelsky 2017; Chu 2018; Doherty et al., 2018). But you know this. You probably read about the crisis of academia several times in the last week alone.

Nevertheless, the current situation is not new, or rather, it is not new for everybody. The deeper problem is that academia has long been a violent site of imperialism, racism, and patriarchy (Meyerhoff and Noterman 2017; Wilder 2013; Meyerhoff 2019). It was constructed on an uneven playing field meant to exclude. We will not repeat the discoveries in the extensive literature of the patriarchal and colonizing practices of the university beyond the citations above. Rather, this article describes our backlash to the catastrophe of the neoliberal university, in the form of a *feminist coven*. The coven is both a theoretical space and material relationships between graduate students. It is not a formal group or an institutionalized entity that seeks recognition from the university. The feminist coven is a pack, a band, a swarm: something admittedly imperfect itself, which carves spaces out of larger structures for alternative conventions to incubate. Influenced by feminist writer Sara Ahmed (2017) to do a project that is close to the world we inhabit, this article introduces and welcomes you into our experiments with autonomous feminist spaces inside academia. According to Ahmed, who resigned from her position at Goldsmiths, University of London in protest over the university's failure to deal with sexual harassment, 'we need to work on the university when we work at the university,' ('Sara Ahmed,' n.d.). In 2017 she published *Living a Feminist Life*, describing collective feminist strategies to surviving and resisting (ibid; Zetterlund et al. 2019).

We are three cis women graduate students in Geography in the United States. This article pulls together the rebellious experiences of feminist graduate students who support and care for each other as we subvert the norms of the neoliberal university. As a feminist coven, we praise boldness by having each other's backs when one of us speaks out. We stubbornly cultivate norms of trust, ditching competition, sharing material resources, and collaborating on ideas. Our willfulness to love and resist conjures momentary, inhabitable spaces, where we dream of alternative futures and nurture our energies for revolutionary change. We won't settle for the few comforts our professionalization affords us or for promises of respect that may never be fully granted. The success of some of us comes on the backs of our more

precarious colleagues. We will not leave them behind. Our agenda is to shake up academia as long as we can. We imagine others are out there, and we offer this article as an invitation for you to raise your hands. These 9000 words can't tell the whole story or solve the problems and we hope you will start more covens, write articles, and teach us too.

We call ourselves a coven because we are conjuring the caring and threatening energy of witches. During the feudal-era before capitalism, witches in Europe and the Americas held knowledge about health, cared for people, and their spells were a form of extralegal power when marginalized people lacked the right to adjudication (Schlau 2018). Witches were thus perceived as threatening to the emergence of capitalism and patriarchy. Therefore, witch-hunts punished witches and people perceived as witches, disciplined women's bodies, and ultimately confined women to reproductive work under capitalism (Federici 2004). We call ourselves a coven because we fiercely care for our fellow graduate students, we refuse the current terms that dictate how the university functions, and we mobilize on the offensive.

What follows is a tour through the feminist coven's rituals and spaces. First, we describe our methodology, which is rooted in co-theorization and collaborative ethnography. This paper has dozens of authors. The voices of contributors echo through the three empirical sections that follow, illustrating how the feminist coven communicates, works, and imagines. We conclude with a call for feminist graduate students to transform the academy, not by 'leaning in' or being practical, but through subversion.

A word on theory

This article does not have a standard conceptual framework. Rather than front-load it with a discussion of scholarly literatures, we put thinkers in conversation with the voices of graduate students so their ideas intermingle throughout the empirical sections. We pull from a broad range of work across disciplines and outside of academia. This is part of the feminist coven's praxis: intertwining voices to wring new ideas from between their fibers and frazzle the structures that keep them segregated. The section on communications is heavily influenced by queer, feminist, and anarchist theory and activism, while the section on labor draws significantly from activist thought and Black and feminist re-envisionings of Marxism. The section on imaginaries looks toward future possibilities with the help of minor theory and Deleuzian becomings. By writing in this manner, we wish to speak not only to experts in a rigorous dialogue about academia, but also to create a space that invites new voices and readers into this conversation about theory, politics, and the academy.

Conjuring as method

We conjured the feminist coven in spaces of our universities. Araby and Jess are doctoral candidates at the University of Kentucky in the southeastern United States. Lauren is a doctoral candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City, which is part of the largest public urban university system in the United States. The concept of conjuring stems from the view of friendship and gossip as political postures, where theory emerges interstitially from wayward conversations between peers (Federici 2018). What we present is a collaboration of graduate students living in the United States, Mexico, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Between July 2017 and February 2018, we circulated an open-ended online questionnaire via Twitter and Facebook using the hashtags #feministcoven, #femgeog, and #gradstudents, and received responses from 31 people. The majority of the contributors are women (in this text the words woman/women and man/men refer to any and all people who identify as women and men), though the call for contributions stated that we wanted to hear from feminist graduate students, not female graduate students. Since the questionnaire was distributed online, its reach was limited to those in and just beyond our own social networks. The responses represent those who felt comfortable sharing their experiences, as well as those who felt that the concept of a coven was applicable to them. It is for these reasons that conclusions from these responses should not be taken as a survey of academia, but as a valuable window into the ways graduate students strategize to enact care and rebellion.

Although we cannot be certain about why more people didn't participate, we would like to take a moment to consider possible reasons for silences (Gibson-Graham 1994; Faria and Mollett 2016; Kobayashi 1994; Nast 1994). The questionnaire was not anonymous. Responses had to be emailed, thus revealing the sender's identity. Issues of our own representation factor in, given that we are three cis women in the United States, and the call was circulated in English mainly by Araby and Jess who are white. Some of the men wrote in their responses that they initially assumed the project was just for women. We would have loved to receive submissions from more people who are not women, but as a window into one small corner of graduate student life, we also hope that this project sparks more projects, and we invite others to write about their own covens that begin to speak into the admittedly big questions this project leaves unanswered.

The questionnaire circulated online as a public Google doc, a form of asynchronous online interview, which allowed contributors to receive the link and reply via email to the questions on their own time (O'Connor and Madge 2017). First, the questionnaire asked participants for contributions in the form of favorite GIFs, memes, and hashtags. These objects are a window into our affective environments; they show how the coven materializes. The

images from contributors appear throughout the text and are discussed in the section called Communications. Then, we asked participants to write their reactions to a feminist invoice that we created. The invoice and contributors' responses to it are in the section called Labor. Finally, we asked participants to describe their vision for a home in a hostile world. Using these responses, we analyze how contributors think about how they are living now and how they might live in the future in the section called Imaginaries.

Collaborating with peers to reach different networks of graduate students resulted in this project being a piece of collective theory. Contributors could not see each other's content, but as their responses came in, we shared (anonymous) quotes, memes, and GIFs online, and circulated early versions of this article via email. More than 50% of respondents replied with additional contributions. The data collection and writing process were influenced by co-theorization and *pláticas* as methodology. Co-theorization emphasizes collaboration between researchers and participants at every step of the process and is a tool for producing knowledge outside the confines of the academy and across activist networks (Rappaport 2008). While also stressing reciprocity between the researcher and researched, *pláticas* is a Chicana/Latina feminist methodology that emphasizes how the stories shared in everyday talk are a crucial part of knowledge construction that merge experiences in personal and academic spaces (Bejarano, Carmona, and Hamzeh 2017; Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016). In writing this paper, we looked to the Fem-Mentee Collective et al. (2017), who argue for the value of collective biography for analyzing and challenging the individualizing tendencies of neoliberal subject disciplining, as well as Cvetkovich's (2012) call for performative writing in the face of daunting hegemonic structures like capitalism, colonialism, racism, and sexism. The result: in the following three sections on Communication, Labor, and Imaginaries our writing style winds the everyday experiences of graduate students into a chorus, stressing that our experiences in the university are both unique and shared.

Communication

I think that if the coven were here, there would be a way to signal membership ... That's an old feminist and queer tradition isn't it? Handkerchief in the back pocket, flower in the lapel, a badge, a patch, a handshake, a big filthy wink. Maybe we could all wear the same perfume, or grow our moustaches and curl them at the tips with wax. Maybe we could buzz cut 'Join the fucking union' into our scalps, and spray paint it across the fucking oil paintings of male academics that seem to asexually reproduce across the campus' ancient buildings. The coven would be an elaborate everyday performance of secret signs, and the atmosphere of togetherness they create. - contributor

The feminist coven's DMs are wide open (DM is short for Direct Message: private messages sent between users on social media platforms like Twitter,

Instagram, and Facebook). We form groups on WhatsApp, Signal, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We video chat via FaceTime, Skype, Google Hangouts, Instagram, MarcoPolo, and Facebook. These forums play important roles in our daily emotional and political lives by bringing us together when we are physically alone. In the hallways before oral qualifying exams, during the delirious walk home after defending a proposal, from our desks as we write grants, from the bathroom stalls at conference happy hours, and outside the classroom during a break, we use these mediums to send signals of solidarity to each other.

Using autoethnographic methodologies, we analyze data from the digital communications among groups of feminist friends. The content of our messages varies as much as the tone, but something we have noticed is the marked use of affective forms of communication: images and other non-verbal messages (photos, GIFs, emojis), as well as tone-setting messages (memes, songs, videos) bring each other into the immediacy of another's world (Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Stark and Crawford 2015). In the survey that we circulated online, we asked people to submit the media and hashtags that they use for coping. We experience *with* each other as we vent, strategize, and support. This is how we lighten the burden of a heavy day while cultivating emotional bonds and building political subjectivities that turn toward, not away from the struggle - a digitally inflected killjoy survival strategy (Ahmed 2017; McLean, Maalsen, and Prebble 2019).

223 Unread messages

This is what a witch's phone screen looks like (see [Figure 1](#)):

Of importance is the blue app in the center called Signal, an encrypted messaging application. The number of unread messages in the red notification badge on Signal is a temperature gauge on how one particular coven is doing. Twenty-five is a small fire, 40 to 60 means something real is going on: family, professional, or relationship issues, perhaps. But more than that is not normal. This screenshot was taken after we (accidentally) left the messages unread for 24 hours. One witch's neglect of her phone gave way to a helpful piece of quantitative data. So, what is inside the messages? They follow a trajectory. Welcome to the tour.

Vent

Are you fucking kidding me? - contributor

I often feel like an observer of calamities and idiocy. - contributor

The first message touches down, conveying a moment of confusion and confrontation. We can't think. We are frozen. #metoo has highlighted the difficult

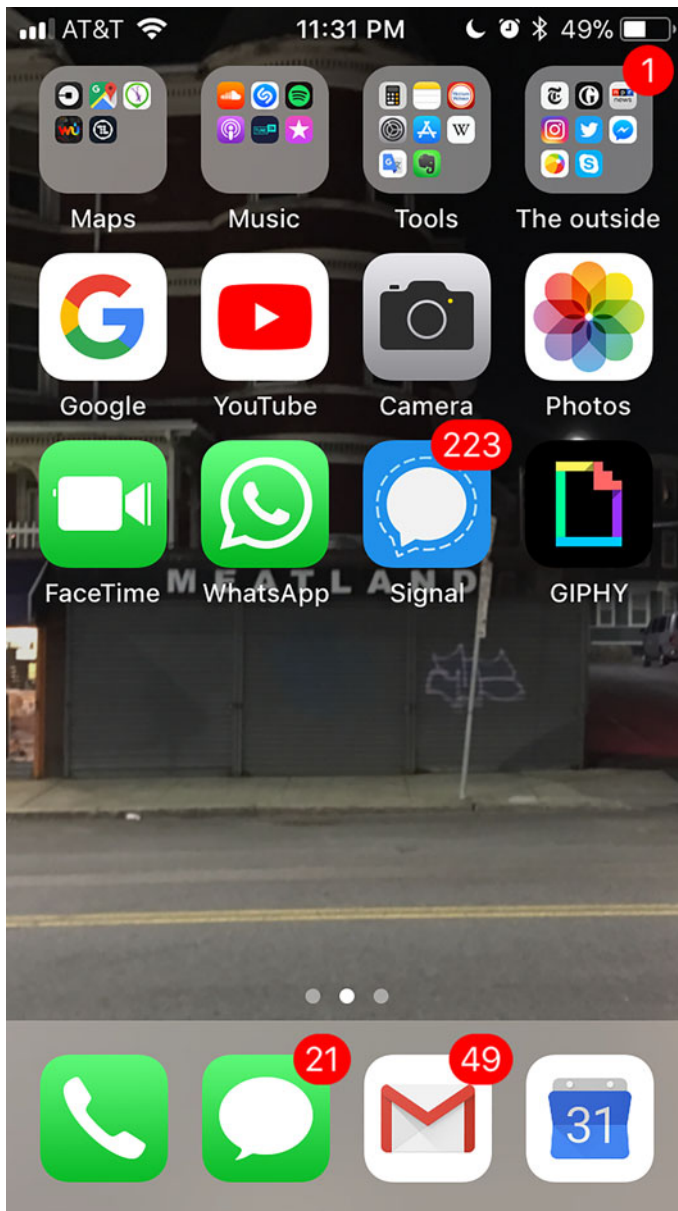


Figure 1. iPhone screenshot – original.

settings in which (mostly) women find themselves without warning and only sometimes with a moment to make a potentially career-changing decision. Confronted with microaggressions and hostility, we throw up our hands and send the problem off to our covens. The witches respond, some within seconds and others later. One of the benefits of the online group chat is that at least one person is always available. While we are spread across campuses, cities, and countries these technologies bring us together. The responses from everywhere help us to get direction when we are disoriented.



Figure 2. Gold trash bag (J3k 2016).



Figure 3. Venus de milo (Chack 2016).

Strategize

[Text messages] help provide affirmation. Sometimes I even forward the shitty, petty, exhausting emails I get from fragile ass white men. - contributor

When I am super-duper pissed, number one is always the video call. I call a close friend (often too far away to see in person) and I tell them how frustrating the world is. - contributor

As the coven responds, notifications light up screens and phones buzz in pockets. Two hundred and twenty-three unread messages. A simple text snowballs into an intervention, a rush of care. Taken together, the responses offer solutions to the situation that one of us has found themselves in, from a passive aggressive email to a violent memory. Nestled between text explanations that offer concrete solutions are various images like the ones in this paper: emojis and memes. These visual objects, or words put in new contexts, are incomplete narratives, but they convey feeling. Each is an



Figure 4. Stay monstrous goddess – original.



Figure 5. Two girls with bunny ears (Woman with bunny ears emoji, n.d.).

'affective parcel' that communicates the mood of the interlocutors, illustrating the tone of the topic being discussed (Hardesty, Linz, and Secor 2019, 2). 'It is from difficult experiences, of being bruised by structures that are not even revealed to others, that we gain the energy to rebel' (Ahmed 2017, 255). Our communications blast us out of our initial frozen state, redistributing our rage. They help us throw down our bags for others to carry while we muster courage and raise our fists again for another blow. They are our resilience.

Support

<3 to show solidarity, camaraderie - contributor

So much of what we offer friends and on social media is a protrusion, when what we really need to offer them is a shaped void that they are welcomed to fill. We need to create a social medium that allows for the affirmative expression of listening/receiving/accommodating. - contributor

Recent work in geography has detailed how intimate relationships are not inconsequential sites for political action (Pain and Staeheli 2014). As Walsh (2007) and Wilkinson (2014) show, friendships are essential sites of intimacy that only grow in importance as jobs require more mobility and people communicate more technologically. According to Bunnell et al. (2012), entering an unknown space is easier when we are with our friends. As we theorize the role of digital communication for the feminist coven, we consider the

way that a friend is *with you* through their virtual presence in difficult moments. This is especially important for marginalized people as they enter the hostile environment of the academy. Within oppressive structures, friendships are important sites for politics: they are the source of energy for survival, and they are full of possibility for changing larger structures. Friends make uncertainty less uncomfortable (Secor and Linz 2017). The texture of our communications builds new orientations for how we act in difficult situations. We consult group threads when we're not sure whether to be bold or play it safe. In academia, resistance and solidarity through friendship feed one another: feminist killjoys find each other through their rebellion and sustain their revolt *through* the relationships they have found *by* rebelling. It is a teleological circle. Two hundred and twenty-three unread messages are not unwieldy because in a time of stress the words of our friends are pleasingly engulfing. Therefore, we consider these communications a new form of feminist organizing that fosters friendship, solidarity, and love (Clementine and Associates from the Infinite Venom Girl Gang 2012; Harris-Perry 2017).

Skeptics might object to our proposal of friendship for subversion. The 'old boys club,' after all, is founded in friendship too. We don't disagree about the potential problems that this poses, and we recommend taking stock of your own power as you consider using these practices in your life. That said, we also envision friendships to work somewhat differently: ones that lovingly challenge us to only use the power of the coven for taking risks that may gain something, not for managing the risks of losing (Finney 2019). In other words, the feminist coven imagines friendships that support taking risks for the strength of the collective, not for maintaining the comforts that hierarchical relationships tend to produce for the individual (Willey 2016; TallBear 2018). The goal is to cultivate bonds of trust and care so that we can hear criticism and confront our more shameful acts with courage and integrity.

Labor

One contributor describes the problem:

Who stuffs their face and who brings and cleans up the food, the dishes, the fridge in the department? Who decides who is invited and who shuttles guests from airports, trains, and hotels? Who shows up for [students] after class, outside the university? ... Which grievances are properly political, and which are rendered merely complaining? Who organizes when abusers of various kinds lash out and who shrugs and walks away? It's not only that this shit 'adds up' (which is part of the performative power of the invoice) but that it also bleeds together in the lives that women, people of color, international, disabled, queer, and indigenous students live and experience and endure in and as the university. - contributor

These demands come at us all the time. Our attention and time is expected to be available right now and forever, and always for free.

Inspired by #giveyourmoneytowomen

From:
 [name]
 [company address]
 [contact phone, email, twitter, website]

To:
 [name]
 [company address]
 [contact phone, email, twitter, website]

INVOICE

INVOICE #

DATE: [Payday]

Services:

Things we do	Things they do
Explaining	Abuse
Support	Catcalling
Advice	Unwanted compliments
Remembering	Ignoring
Being polite	Forgetting
Listening	Absence
Attention	Stalking
Anticipation	Mansplaining
Affirmation	Evasiveness
Affection	Bad texting etiquette
Friendship	Ghosting
Forgiveness	Lying
Tears	Omitting
Guidance	Bad hygiene
Hygiene / "beauty"	Uninvited advice
Depression	Denying
Blinding rage	Interruptions
Feeling crazy	Rape/Assault
Sex	
Housework	
Child care	
Reproduction	

Figure 6. Feminist invoice (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2017).

Inspired by Piepzna-Samarasinha's (2017) call for a fair trade emotional labor economy and the ideas of #giveyourmoneytowomen initiated by Chief Elk-Young Bear, Lourdes, and Smith (2015), we wonder what it would be like if people were compensated for **ALL** of their labor. We created what we call a feminist invoice (see Figure 6), which illustrates different types of unpaid labor and pushes the reader to imagine invoicing and being compensated for it.

While one of our contributors observed that the invoice is a 'mockery of the calculative logics of capitalism', and that it might be limited to being simply a reflection of the world as it stands, we push back on the idea that the invoice can be reduced to satire. The invoice draws attention to important gendered and racialized labor inequalities that go beyond the pay gap in the waged workplace and into unrecognized forms of labor that marginalized people perform for free. It forces the reader to consider how they do this labor or benefit from it. The invoice is a useful tool for reimagining how work is defined and compensated, and for moving towards a future where power is no longer primarily consolidated in the hands of cis-white, heterosexual men.

Every day is pay day

When you add it all up, the pay gap between men and women is staggering. White women's full-time salaries are around 18% lower than men's in the US, and the salaries of women of color and trans women are significantly lower (Selenite 2017). Yet, pay raises and more diverse hires alone won't solve this problem. Unmeasured amounts of emotional labor are performed daily and play crucial invisible roles in workplace geographies (McDowell 2009). We smile and laugh to ease uncomfortable moments in department meetings, we share our work, we ease anxieties of people in less precarious positions. These daily occurrences are expected of us even if they are not quantified in our evaluations for promotion and do not directly contribute to our own well-being. The feminist invoice experiments with making these extra contributions legible to waged exchanges because with or without pay, emotional labor props up the university system around us (Wright 2010).

Women are expected to constantly oil relationships and when men imagine that they aren't receiving the labor they think they deserve, they act indifferent, look elsewhere, cause harm, get irritable and angry, and take it out in aggressive ways. Hochschild (2012) argues the gendered emotion work women do in private becomes a mandatory part of public work life, pointing out that while women may not benefit for doing extra labor, they bear a cost for *not* doing it. Of course there are exceptions to these norms: the 'good men'. However, while not all men demand the labor of women, a common assumption is that all women will provide it automatically. Those who work against the expectation of unrecognized and uncompensated labor intentionally do so in order to undermine it. The unequal division of material and emotional labor is still the referent that we are either working against or in service of.

I absolutely love the idea of a feminist invoice. It acknowledges the burden placed on women like my mother, my sister, my friends. They are often asked to give everything and then blamed when they can't give any more... It's fucking infuriating. - contributor

The amount of emotional and physical labor that women/femmes/female identified people conduct is immediately constructed as altruistic and often detrimental to their status. Whereas if the same ... was conducted by men/male identified people it bolsters their status. Which just fucks me off. - contributor

As women experience burnout, blame, and estrangement for not performing the emotional labor demanded of them, men are mostly excused from this kind of duty. To compound this, the aggressive characteristics of self-promotion in academia serve more masculine traits (Bagilhole and Goode 2001) while they are maligned in the cultural construction of femininity. Salesmanship, careerism, and pushiness look different on bodies that are not cis-white-hetero-male, which makes them less easily classifiable as positive, leaving the Othered in a catch-22 with demands on their shoulders and few avenues for drawing attention to their accomplishments.

Re-envisioning the invoice

In our radical imaginaries for the future, we do not want to reproduce capitalist relations. However, we are not content to wait for change; we want redistribution that goes in multiple directions right now and we see the invoice as a tool for demanding the material wealth that has been denied to so many. While the invoice is useful, it is also flawed. Like the response above, another contributor wrote that the invoice 'reproduces capitalist and masculinist logics and spreads them into new arenas'. However, capitalism is not all-encompassing and the gender binary is false (Gibson-Graham 1996; Butler 1990). Leveraging privilege aids revolutionary change (Selenite 2017), so whether in the form of reparations (Coates 2014; Robinson 2000), returning stolen lands (Finney 2018; Simpson 2014), giving black trans people money (Selenite 2017), men giving up positions of power in academia (Walters 2018), compensating families impacted by the war on drugs (Garza 2019), or something not yet imagined, shifting wealth around would make dramatic material differences in the lives of millions of people right now, and doesn't forestall the possibility for a different future.

I'm concerned that this chart seems to dualize things only according to what each group does. - contributor

Who are 'we'? Who are 'they'? Can we have a nonbinary invoice? - contributor

Every invoice is a binary: services rendered and payment owed. This invoice was written with care to not stress the gender binary and it does not include

feminine and masculine pronouns, as unequal divisions of labor can exist between people of any gender. The focus is meant to be on tasks and remuneration, which is why the invoice is *feminist* not *feminine*. However, it is clear that the 'things we do' section reads as feminized labor and 'things they do' as male beneficiaries. The gendering of labor has historically pushed unpaid and invisible work onto women, and it is a condemnation of our current societies that more men fail to take responsibility: to step up and pay up while simultaneously leaning out and forfeiting power (Federici 2004; Weeks 2011; Walters 2018).

Next project: is there a queerer version of this that could more directly implicate patriarchy and gender binaries in the world's shittiness? That contains both critique and forward motion? - contributor

The labor relations the feminist invoice stages could be both expansive and more specific. - contributor

Several contributors wrote that they want to print the invoice and hang it everywhere - their workplaces, social spaces, and homes. The invoice is our contribution to the above-mentioned movements against the public/private boundary of where and when social reproductive and emotional labors are visible. What is visible is quantifiable, and therefore valuable (Gallant 2019). Acts of emotion management are not private. And we want politics of care and responsibility to be on public display (bergman, Montgomery, and Alluri 2017; Lawson 2007; Raghuram, Madge, and Noxolo 2009; Askins and Blazek 2017) so that the people who extract emotional labor without reciprocity must reckon with their positions of power. 'I want to lay down this work, this burden, and let it be picked up or falter ... to forge something new' writes one contributor.

Resistance to using the invoice in traditional ways is telling: what we actually seek is the circular return on our invested emotional labor, not flat remuneration for the execution of a joyless act. We want to stop feeling like we are emptying ourselves into vacuums that swallow our labor and keep it from flowing back into circulation. Like Nast (2016), we affirm emotional labor as beautiful and life-giving and resist its de-sacralization through quantification. We want to explode the need for invoices someday, and for freely gifted care to go in all directions, appreciated by responsible parties who reciprocate ten-fold. For now, the invoice is one step on the path to a more careful future and we look forward to the possibilities it sparks.

Imaginarities

What kind of utopia can come out of these margins, negations, and obscurities? Who will even recognize it as a utopia? - Le Guin (2017) quoted by a contributor

Another exercise we use is that of imagining a home in a hostile world. Dreaming up and building new worlds is work of endurance, kept alive by

the alchemy of slick slippage between the two ends of that process. It is a persistent act of space-time travel out of and back into the known 'imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy' (hooks 1984, xv) in search of the otherwise. We follow Gloria Anzaldúa, the Combahee River Collective, Silvia Federici, JK Gibson-Graham, Luce Irigaray, Ursula Le Guin, Audre Lorde, Doreen Massey, and others who refuse to believe that this world is the best we've got. Our intention is for the coven to open doors into new imaginaries.

Beginning in the middle

The birth of the feminist coven is by fire. It is coping mechanisms and temporary moments of recharge in an abyss. It starts from a less-than-ideal point, somewhere lost in the middle. It is a call to act in new ways as if the future's already here. Using creative tactics, we engage in politics of the impasse that assume no future, use everything within grasp as tools, make homes in temporary spaces, and redefine our power as well as our powerlessness (Secor and Linz 2017). These impasse politics build orientations toward imaginaries of *being otherwise* (Berlant 2011). Call up from within you the tone you wish existed.

We know that your becoming part of this group was never a personal choice, but we are so glad you're here. This commune is a matter of survival, but it can be a beautiful survival, and besides, it's the only way to change, or, in a manner of speaking, to begin to choose. So let us help one another survive in delightful and tantalizing and loving ways. - contributor

Childless and forty,

I didn't plan it this way.

This is where I am.

- Haiku from a contributor

The imaginaries of the feminist coven are a Deleuzian becoming that begins in the middle (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Mott 2017a). There are so many entrances into the coven - it may even be entered without notice. It might be shocking, cathartic, desperate, full of rage, soaked in tears, or it might happen quietly without fanfare. It's the realization that this world won't work and things have got to change. Dire need is what conjures the coven out of thin air.

Refuge in a hostile world

For some bodies engaging in theory about those (particular) bodies, the learning process is difficult not only because learning theory can be a goddamn chore. There is also the additional work of feeling it (trapping or freeing, depressing or

hopeful) because of one's particular personal connection to the material. My [coven] is a place to unwind. To relax. To release, at least in part, from learning, processing, remembering and reflecting. It's a place to share collective moments of joy and spontaneity ... taking a break from material that affects me. - contributor

Batteries can't recharge on their own. The subversion and rebirth of the academy takes everything we've got and recuperation is necessary, but the temporary home we make to fend off the spikes of the world's hostility is not one of escapism. It is a comforting space for nursing wounds, soothing aches, building each other up, gaining strength to lean into the trouble rather than away from it (Haraway 2016). We sit on the back stoop, pouring cups of tea and shots of whiskey. We talk about things and we go back to work.

Women who have encouraged me to be more outspoken and bold in my feminisms. Women who do brilliant work, but also share their self-doubts. Women who scream at the night sky and venture into fields before dawn to see the moon. Women who dance – not dance like nobody is watching, but dance like EVERYBODY is watching because why the fuck not. Women who make me feel welcome. Women who make me feel not alone. These women, and these ideas of community, are what have propelled me through this last year of graduate school. - contributor

Being the problem

This is a beautiful scene: people being bold, caring, jumping back in the ring like feisty boxers. But what does it mean? In some ways, it's not complicated. From the community norms written by a contributor, rule #5 says, 'If you are handed a baby, please hold it and play with it, it is very normal as child-rearing activities are often shared'. Mothers are often denied access to important adult social and professional spaces (Johnson 2005). We hope to see many more babies being held by our colleagues in department meetings, seminars, and conference rooms because mothers are in academia. They are our friends, teachers, students, and collaborators. But even this simple act may be met with incredible resistance, so how do we bring the force in a hostile world? One contributor shared her practice of literally embodying Ahmed's wall (2017) on the campus sidewalks of her university.

Walking around campus, I began to move straight down my side of the sidewalk without adjusting my body to accommodate anyone walking the opposite direction. This meant that people, mostly men, would physically run into me – most often a side swipe, but sometimes a full on running into ... Occasionally, if it seems like a person is not going to make any room for me, I just stop walking, bend my knees and brace for the hit, so that it is clear to the person that he ran into me. Men usually seem pretty apologetic and confused when this happens, like they actually just didn't see me there, right in front of them. Most of the time, I

don't like being run into, but if I'm in the right mood it can feel great. It makes physical the many frustrations that I often keep either in my head or in stayed, rational critiques. - contributor

Refusal to sidestep the crash takes practice and is mostly unpleasant. Our accommodations of the unaware enables their ways of being in the world. Being a wall is a corporeal manifestation of the conceptual work that the feminist coven does on those long days in the academy. We brace our knees for the hit, and most of the time it sucks, but sometimes it can feel great. The shelter of the feminist coven is what gives us the strength to go back out to the sidewalk and brace our knees another day.


Our minor practices of being walls on the sidewalk translates to not accommodating the abrasive flow in seminar rooms, conferences, and office hallways. We practice squaring our stance in conversations that otherwise sideswipe us. This is not easy; many of us were trained our entire lives to get out of the way. But minor opposition wears on dominant orders, unsettling them, opening new possibility (Faria 2017). You might be thinking this is a dangerous proposition and not everybody has the strength, privilege, and heft to take every blow. We agree fully. It's important to choose your battles wisely, and we don't purport to believe we can all go charging through every obstacle that comes hurdling our way. We do suggest that the feminist coven will have your back if you test to see what bounces off you.

Small moments of spontaneous resistance are very important, but we are also interested in the planned ways that work can be done institutionally to make structural changes.

I want grad student squats. I want grad student unions to force tenured faculty to purchase homes and provide rent-free living. I want grad student unions period. I want to rebuild the monastery as a territorial/academic form that preserves knowledge through economic and ecological collapse. I want intergenerational 'men dealing with our shit' collectives on every campus. - contributor

What if graduate students stopped trying to eke out a living on our near-poverty wages and we moved into abandoned buildings or the buildings under construction on our campuses? What if faculty and administrators donated a percentage of their wages towards purchasing graduate student housing for permanent use? This might seem absurd, but so is living under our current circumstances.

Other structural changes seem easier than getting people to turn over their wallets, but we want to question that notion. As the #metoo movement blasted its way into academia, Mott (2017b) tweeted ideas for beginning to make change (see Figure 7). We wait with bated breath for our colleagues to take up her suggestions.



Carrie Mott @mott_carrie Following

How can this be done? I offer several suggestions:

Carrie Mott @mott_carrie
I would love to see men in Geography take seriously the survey and responses that are being gathered by @ProfessorIsIn. For every response on there (includes some in Geog) there are MANY more. @theAAG

9:55 AM - 10 Dec 2017

5 Retweets 32 Likes

10 5 32

Carrie Mott @mott_carrie · 10 Dec 2017

1. Organize a group for men in your department to sit and read through the spreadsheet together and think about ways that they could address similar situations in the moment.

1 3

Carrie Mott @mott_carrie · 10 Dec 2017

2. Set up a reading group for men in your department where you read feminist basics, learn about patriarchy, learn about your own socialization as men in this world and what you can do to change things.

2 5

Figure 7. Carrie Mott twitter screenshot (Mott 2017b).

Mott's thread suggests beginning by reading Kelsky's spreadsheet (2017), moves on to listening, making reading groups, and doing the work of seeing oppression that does not affect you personally. She shares nine simple ways men can pragmatically take action. This is the other side of bracing for the sidewalk blow: men teaching each other to walk without running into women. Will they do it? They have liked and retweeted Mott's tweet, but have they inaugurated any reading groups? Imagining this kind of traction is much like imagining administrations supporting graduate student squats, therefore we reiterate: this might seem absurd, but so is living under our current circumstances. People with power are increasingly calling for their tenured peers to take the lead in changing higher education, to step out

of line, find the current conditions intolerable themselves, and put their comforts at risk to change them (Mohanty 2017; Oluo 2019; Oswin 2019).

The power of the coven

We're visible. We would cause raucous. - contributor

Our power comes from the ability to cry for others. - contributor

There is the potential to live in badassness everyday. - contributor

My feminist coven involves a world where women run the Nobel Committee (see [Figure 8](#)), so I've photoshopped the faces of women scientists over the men on the 2017 committee. I was angry when I started this project, but now I'm livid with the amount of time it's taken me to do this because there are SO MANY MEN to erase. - contributor

What makes the feminist coven unique is that it is not only powerful, it is emotive. It is fun, sentimental, elegant; it does politics differently. It does the hard work of being a wall, being a killjoy, being angry and unhappy, being sticky and full of energizing friction. In that sense, we really do become the wall. We don't perform wall. A wall walls effortlessly, and this is what the feminist coven gives to the long fight to subvert the university. The coven absorbs and redirects the friction of not fitting in context and alchemizes it into fuel. These are minor tools for minor politics (Katz 1996). Minor theory is a major threat.



Figure 8. Nobel Committee – original.

Conclusion: be there for each other

The feminist coven is a call for people to face the catastrophe of the university together and reject its spurious terms of play. The time for respectability politics, patience, and practicality is over. Be hideous in the face of patriarchy and protect each other when it strikes back. Make unreasonable demands that push past the solutions we are used to. Abandon appropriate behavior: be loud, disruptive, impatient, and impractical.

At the same time that the feminist coven is a cry for fierce and creative new forms of resistance, it is also a call to fall in love with your friends and colleagues. Ferocity requires muster, so make time to feed and comfort one another to banish loneliness and isolation. Back each other up when the guardians of the academy dare to discipline us away from illegible forms of care. The feminist coven is 'redefining, restructuring, and creating new languages... It's falling in love with your best friend and then redefining what that love means and looks like' writes a contributor. Make new spaces where rebels construct the discourse. We must be loud enough to expose the secrets of our departments and institutions, and strong enough to protect the speakers.

If we are going to make it through what universities... are becoming, I think we're going to have to do work around reimagining what relationships mean, and build new ways to support each other. - contributor

Be there for each other because shit is hard enough in grad school. - contributor

Assemble each other in new non-hierarchical relations to subvert the norms of thought and action. Send feminist invoices. Burn your student loan notices, campus parking tickets, and wack peer reviews. Acquire and recognize new public engagement skills for your CV like spray-painting, skateboarding, and wheat pasting. Gather a crew and drive out to a vacant field to watch the full moon fade at dawn. If we wait until the work is done or we've achieved a more secure status, we'll lose half of those on the road with us. Let's live with our beloved friends in the glimpses of a radical future that we create where we are in this very moment.

As we change minor spaces, we transform the major along with them (Katz 2017). As we hand babies to our colleagues in meetings, kiss our friends and brace our knees when it's clear that we are going unseen, we are *becoming* coven, bringing it to the here and now. As both a theoretical space and real, material relationships, the coven cultivates a caring and threatening force powerful enough, we hope, to challenge the dehumanizing practices of the academy.

So when you hang your head on the shoulder of the road where you didn't mean to stop at all, lift your chin, dear academic. The feminist coven

begins exactly where you wouldn't expect *anything* to begin. From this in-between we conjure new imaginaries. Keep your eyes peeled. We out here.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Tad Mutersbaugh, Marianna Pavlovskaya, Sue Roberts, and Anna Secor for their unwavering support. We are grateful to the dozens of people who contributed ideas to the feminist coven and provided encouragement and critique at various stages of the project. To those who live the essence of the feminist coven and who have inspired us to write about these practices, we are indebted. We hope this work invites kindred spirits into the fold. Finally, we thank Katherine Brickell and three anonymous reviewers at *GPC* for their feedback.

Disclosure statement

There are no conflicts of interest involved in this research.

Funding

This research was not supported by any grants or awards.

Supplemental online material

This research includes associated materials that are located online. Please see the following URL:

A call for contributions to the project "A Feminist Coven in the University": <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oPW84LGwi6wEcFYSYk7KRqW9WvKjw7qkG9twiZFPW0g/edit>

Notes on contributors

Araby Smyth (PhD candidate in Geography at University of Kentucky) is a feminist economic geographer broadly interested in the gendered dimensions of economic and political practices. Her dissertation examines the impact of migration and remittances on family networks and women's political participation in Oaxaca, Mexico. Her Master's research on the solidarity practices of remittance sending among Mexican immigrants in New York City was published in *Geoforum* (2017).

Jess Linz (PhD candidate in Geography at University of Kentucky) is an urban geographer studying residential displacement in Mexico City, where gentrification and earthquakes coincide to reduce housing availability. Her research examines displacement on affective terms, with an aim of understanding the orientations and attachments that underpin logics of development and play a role in how activists, developers, and the state negotiate struggles over limited urban space in the wake of the 2017 earthquake.

Lauren Taylor Hudson (PhD candidate in Earth and Environmental Sciences at the CUNY Graduate Center) is an urban geographer who writes about anti-capitalist organizing among women in New York City. Her dissertation research focuses on how collective work between women changes the urban landscape, ultimately creating a sense of

'movement space' for Solidarity Economy practitioners. She is also a collective member of SolidarityNYC, and a co-founder of the Cooperative Economic Alliance of NYC (CEANYC).

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