A FEMINIST COVEN IN THE UNIVERSITY

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In theory, graduate school fosters intellectual and professional growth. However, it often feels personally and politically stunting. It is a place of competition, scarcity, imperialism, racism, and patriarchy.

Our talk is rooted in our experiments with autonomous feminist spaces both inside and outside the university. Founded with our friends, these groups have different names and manifestations.

They include women's bicycle collectives like Sister Cycles¹ or [Femibici](#)², and the Speeding Vaginas³, which gathered femme students across disciplines at the University of Kentucky for monthly parties.

Always broke and usually without the emotional and financial support of a partner, we dream of living in a spinster commune where we would care for each other as a big chosen family. A gang of us at the University of Kentucky call ourselves the coven.

Coven:
(noun)
A group or gathering of witches who meet regularly

Groups like this help us respond to the difficulties and hostilities of grad school. In them, we find new ways to support each other.

Instead of competing with each other, we collaborate by praising boldness, cultivating norms of trust rather than suspicion, elevating friendship above romance, grounding our relationships within political work and feminist praxis. Our willfulness to love and and resist conjures momentary, inhabitable spaces, where we dream of alternative futures and nurture our energies for revolutionary change.

The autonomous feminist spaces we create -- these groups, our friendships -- give us the strength and the enthusiasm not to settle for the few comforts of professionalization in the university. We know that the success of some comes on the backs of more precarious others. We acknowledge the cruel optimism of holding onto dreams of recognition and respect in the academy. We are in an unhopeful condition, a kind of catastrophe or impasse, and we stay here anyway.

¹ Feminist bicycle collective in Cincinnati

² Feminist bicycle collective in Guadalajara

³ Femme collective at University of Kentucky that was birthed out of reading *A Thousand Plateaus* and finding inspiration in the critique of lack in the following lines: "Physicists say that holes are not the absence of particles but particles traveling faster than the speed of light. Flying anuses, speeding vaginas, there is no castration" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 32).

We laugh as we curse. We rally round each other when one of us is afraid. When something bad happens to a friend, the rest of us go looking for a fight. Our agenda is to stay in academia as long as we last and at least shake things up, but maybe burn it down. We'll leave our handprints on what we can before it kicks us to the wayside.

APPROACH

In the US, women make up just [over 50%](#) of each year's newly minted PhDs, but they are far less likely to get a sweet job in academia. While women make up only 33% of faculty at institutions offering PhDs, they are 58% of the precarious labor force in academia (adjuncts, temp, and contract faculty).

[We'll stop there with the stats, because we're sure you all know them.](#)

In addition, femmes go through shit while they're in grad school. Patriarchy doesn't stop at the door, much as we may purport to understand it, study it, resist it, and reverse it. Femme graduate students report feelings of exclusion, both socially and professionally. These feelings

reflect the sad truth that of any given graduate class, the male students are more likely to be recognized for the same work, more likely to be esteemed as colleagues, and more likely to get a stable academic job at a more prestigious institution upon completing their graduate work.

The situation is abysmal. There's this refrain that change will come eventually through progress like different hiring practices or recognition of different kinds of labor. But it is taking SO LONG. The refrain reassures us in vain: in order to make it we just have to work hard, work fast, if our scholarship is good enough then we will be rewarded ... and then we will land *somewhere*.

LIES.

Here is our response to the catastrophe of the neoliberal university, in the form of a *feminist coven*. For lack of better terminology, [we conducted over 30 online asynchronous interviews](#) and six months of participant observation for this project. With input we have collected from feminist graduate students we will share with you new ideas for making our labor more visible; how texts, hashtags, memes and GIFs help us cope and communicate our rage and love; and how we are envisioning, redefining, and creating new ways of living together that support our radical activism and scholarship.

The *feminist coven* is both a collaborative theoretical space and the real, material relationships between friends who do things together and for each other. It is the difference in what these friend groups do, the uniqueness in how they act, that creates the space for coven theorizing to take place.

We are influenced by Sara Ahmed to do a project that is close to the world we live in, and so connected to our personal lives. In *Living a Feminist Life* she calls for sharing our stories about the academy. Here is how we cope in a terrible situation, but not only that, how we resist, how

we build solidarity when we're met with hostility for resisting, and how we think about **what it will take** to blast through the brick wall.

COMMUNICATION

Throughout this text we show how the feminist coven communicates. When we get heated we turn to the coven to vent our frustrations. Feminist memes, GIFs, hashtags, rantings are how we throw up our hands in exasperation and encourage each other to be unafraid of subverting the norm.

These images will accompany a discussion of labor through the feminist invoice we created, our imaginings for life on a spinster commune, and finally, we'll conclude.

LABOR

In her proposal for a fair trade emotional labor economy, [Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha](#) describes the problem:

“They’re going to ask you to listen, do a favor, do an errand, drop everything ... Manage logistics, answer feelings emails, show up, empathize, build and maintain relationships. Organize the childcare, the access support, the food. Be screamed at, de-escalate, conflict resolute. They’re going to say, “Can I just pick your brain about something?” and then send you a five paragraph email full of pretty goddamn complex questions. It’d be real nice if you could get back to them ASAP. They’re going to ask if you can email them your powerpoint and all your resources. Some of them will be people who are close to you; some of them will be total strangers. Do you have a minute?”

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 her work and the ideas of [Lauren Chief Elk, Yeoshin Lourdes, and Bardot Smith's #giveyourmoneytowomen](#), we began to wonder what it would be like if people (but often times it's men) paid other people (but often times it's women, people of color, black, indigenous, queer, disabled, and otherwise marginalized scholars) for **ALL** of the labor that we give them. In an exercise that explores this notion, [we made a feminist invoice that provides a format for invoicing emotional labor performed](#).

We agree with a colleague who said that the invoice is a “mockery of the calculative logics of capitalism,” and it might be limited as simply a reflection of how terrible things are - but we want to push back on an idea that the invoice is just satire.

When you add it all up, the pay gap between men and women is staggering. It's not just that 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. It is also that we don't receive compensation for the extra things that we do: we mentor, we organize, we laugh at stupid jokes, we remind, we smile to ease awkward moments, we share our knowledge and data, the list

goes on. Even though this work does not directly contribute to our own well-being and financial security, **we are expected to do it**. This work supports men and props up the system around us all the while it is illegible to many that measure our contributions at work and beyond.

And while there may not be a benefit for doing all of this extra labor, **there is a cost for not doing it**. Women and femmes are constantly oiling relationships with emotional labor. When men imagine that they aren't receiving the labor they think they deserve, they act indifferent, they look elsewhere, they cause harm, they get irritable and angry, they take it out in aggressive ways.

One of our research participants said: women "are often asked to give *everything* and then blamed when they can't give any more. And they often receive significantly less in return because men [are] unable to pick up after themselves, get themselves up, engage in emotional conversations, it is seen as 'boys will be boys' ... It's fucking infuriating."

While ideally we do not want a feminism that is ultimately reproducing capitalist relations by quantifying and compensating the emotional labor we perform, we do recognize this is the system of legibility we live in now. We think that if women were paid directly, it would change the way that emotional labor is performed and compensated not in the **future** but in the **now**.

There could be dramatic effects from a change of this sort: Chief Elk, Lourdes, and Smith argue that money is key to helping women leave abusive situations and go to school, to name a couple examples. A lifetime of relationships where women are financially attached to or dependent on men corresponds to having nothing in hand if we leave them. If women were paid directly, maybe they wouldn't be set back so far when they have to start over. They would have options and power that they don't have now, and it would open up new discourses about gender equality. In other words, it would make the difference between staying stuck and breaking free.

IMAGINARIES

Another exercise that we use is that of imaginaries of the *spinster commune*. A few years ago Kelly Gola⁴ remarked that we need a spinster commune. At the time, she was talking to other feminists in grad programs about debt, the bad job market, low pay, the absence of a partner or nuclear family, etc. The spinster commune then spiraled into more imaginings of a home in a hostile world. Participants in our research are asked to submit a description of what the spinster commune might mean to them. Here is what they said.

⁴ Kelly Gola is a friend and PhD who studied developmental psychology at UC Santa Cruz. See her website here: <http://kellygola.com/>

One of our participants says: "I just want a space where I'm not having to talk/perform/whatever."

To survive, and maybe even resist the "intrinsic isolation of academia," (a participant) and the way women are excluded from "the action and the discourse" (Clementine et al., 2012) of school, we need support and strength. The spinster commune is an alternate space for now, and we want to make it into an alternate world in the future.

It's hard to escape though, and the task of remaking the world is daunting. Change will not come overnight, or even, maybe, in our lifetimes. This is a depressing state to find ourselves in. So for now, we'll have to settle in for the night, knowing that it might not get resolved before we close our eyes. In this meantime, we need to pitch a tent and get ourselves through this impasse, digging holes where we can for new realities to plant themselves and take root.

We think that [Clementine and the Infinite Venom Girl Gang](#) are onto something in their essay when they say that new and unknown forms of feminist organizing are the frontier for love and friendship.

In the imagined spinster commune, people are confident and behavior does not require performances. Socializing is invigorating and not exhausting. We sit on the back stoop, pouring cups of tea and shots of whiskey. Conversations turn **into** the trouble rather than **away from it**. We talk about things and then we go back to work.

With a new sense of confidence we act out our bad feminism in front of our colleagues and co-workers. We are less afraid of the push back, the whispers, and the glares.

Drop your arms, Venus de Milo. You don't have to hug. And you might get shit for the interruption you caused in the dominant order, but fuck it, the spinster commune is gonna have your back.

GUY: Where's my hug
ME:

We draw from Harsha Walia's ideas about emotional justice. There is a “praxis of understanding and fully experiencing one another with empathy, and sustaining kinship beyond” ... we share “in the moments of everyday life through eating together and checking in with one another when we experience stress, grief, or illness” (Walia, 2013).

We create “bonds of love, trust, respect, compassion, and mutual aid between self-expressing individuals, [this] in turn, empowers self-determining and decolonizing communities by grounding social relations within political work” (ibid.)

In the spinster commune there is a new conception of emotional exchanges that has no balance sheet. We fall in love with our best friends.

Lauren Hudson
@blactivist

Following

new power pose?

Rather than the gallery of showy protrusions that is social media - in the spinster commune we are voids that invite interaction. We stitch sociality in new ways and “let no single bond stand in the way of friendship” (Clementine et al., 2012).

Conclusion/Provocations

Remarking on her relationships with men in the academy, one of the contributors says: “I gave to you **without expectation** but I’ve had to draw a line, where I’m not doing that anymore.”

We’ve tentatively titled this project “a feminist coven in the university.” Through it we imagine and enact alternatives to the hostility of the neoliberal university. We use the invoice to recognize the invisible labor we perform. We send each other memes, gifs, and hashtags to remind each other to be bold and willful. We wear our wry affect on our sleeves whenever we can get away with it, testing limits, pushing buttons, stretching our small corner of the academy to see new things and *be* differently.

We dream a world where emotional labor is expansive and incomprehensible to the notion of exchange. But for now, we'd like it to be compensated - a supplement to our near poverty level university stipends. We refuse to see each other as competitors, because seeing each other that way is only a cruel psychological manipulation that keeps us holding on for something more than scraps. Any success in this system is on the shoulders of women and minorities whose work is unrecognized. We do all of this to bring the storm upon the academy, recharging ourselves with its potent lightning and thunder. Together, we hold each other up and make each other visible when we aren't seen.

We invite your comments, questions, critiques, and contributions. The feminist coven is a queer project, but it needs more. Many of the participants in our project are dedicated activists on campuses. We want to further entwine the feminist coven with the ideas and resistance of campus anti-racist, anti-fascist, de-colonial, abolitionist activists. We'd love to hear what you think.

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