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Against Rehabilitated Killjoys: Crippling Feminist Geographies of Academic Care

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Abstract

Autoethnographic scholarship helps account for the conditions of harm, care, and resistance in academic spaces within the 'neoliberal university', yet interventions can be limited by normative care frameworks that reinscribe ableist logics. This paper focuses on this genre of scholarship in feminist geography, here referred to as feminist geographies of academic care, and the ways attempts at resolving the academic "care crisis" get diverted and (re)oriented toward institutional ends. I use "disability as methodology" to read if, and how the system of (dis)ability structures and enmeshes the university's imperative of rationality with ambivalent feminist desires for belonging and *something else*. In turn, a clear rehabilitative narrative arc emerges in this literature that indexes better futures through social cohesion and the (implicit) absence of mental disability and neurodivergence. I argue that this narrative prioritizes attachment to the university over those most harmed by it, but which can be disrupted through trans/crip and neuroqueer dispositions.

Keywords

academia, care, disability, neuroqueer, Madness, social reproduction

By definition if social reproduction is in crisis so too is capitalism –Jack Norton and Cindi Katz

What shall we do with pain? –Margaret Price

Introduction

A few years ago, I attended one of a feminist geography discussion series on “work-life balance.” There was a mix of tenured faculty, adjuncts, assistant professors, and graduate students present. I was, and still am, a graduate student who is white, queer, and chronically ill. Tenured faculty assumed the role of giving advice, much of which was reflective of their then high positions and job security. One tenured professor said that once she decided to “choose happiness,” her life became more balanced. She admitted, the costs of academia can be too high, and we must each figure out if we could stay in it. The comment on high cost is certainly true, yet the individualized advice deflected the chance for feminist collaboration to build support and care for one another or reflect on the room’s power dynamics.

The discussion continued to bother me. It felt ableist¹ and unsettled my knowledge of the feminist killjoy, a quotidian political position nominally central to academic feminist projects for at least the past six years (Ahmed 2017). How can we *choose* happiness, when the killjoy renounces the assumption of happiness as a desired goal as often premised on others’ suffering (Ahmed 2010)? Such an announcement of choosing happiness turns away from those “stuck” with chronic bad feelings contingent upon embodyminded², structural, and historical reasons. Effectively, the encounter reproduced the university’s enforcement of compulsory ablebodymindedness, wherein being chronically *unhappy* is pathologized, or partially results from *having already been* pathologized. To be clear, the stakes of resisting such reinforcement are quite high. We are currently witnessing (re)pathologization via institutionalized transphobia and criminalization of trans (health)care (Rosenberg 2023; Gill-Peterson 2022); the expansion of justifiable grounds to involuntarily psychiatrically incarcerate Mad³ and unhoused people (Sy and Jackson 2023); backlash to student protest against universities’ complicity in genocide (Thier 2024); and hysterization/gaslighting of those continuing COVID precautions amidst the public fantasy of the pandemic’s end (Adler-Bolton et al. 2022; Doubleday 2024). Such pathologization enables institutional strategies of rehabilitating some into the neoliberal academic project while also expelling from, increasing surveillance, and confining the ‘incurable’ in institutions.

The person likely didn’t intend malice and, as all experience, it was an interpretation from my position. Still, it compelled further research on what might be creeping into logics of feminist geography’s spaces. I understand the above discussion series as situated in the

¹ Ableism generally signifies “a system of assigning value to people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness” (Lewis 2022, n.p.).

² This neologism from J. Logan Smilges (2023) builds on the materialist feminist disability studies concept of the “bodymind”, coined by Price (2015, 270) and refers to “the imbrication (not just the combination) of the entities usually called “body” and “mind”.” I use variations of this concept throughout, including “ablebodyminded”, signaling someone who is not physically or mentally disabled.

³ Mad identity and Madness are complex and not fully explainable (here, or at all). Individuals and groups who claim Madness are often survivors of the psychiatric system who reject the biology reductionism of psychiatric epistemologies and their racialized, gendered logics. While Madness thus does often express rage at violent institutions and stigmas against those deemed crazy, there is not a reduction to social constructionism that would explain away forms of cognitive and psychic difference (see LeFrançois et al. 2014; Bruce 2021).

broader feminist geographic project of cultivating caring and care-full academic cultures, so I focus on commonsense embedded in what I call *feminist geographies of academic care*. I analyze autoethnographic and reflexive accounts of lived experiences of being a feminist scholar and the state of culture and care within academic Geography and neoliberal university. When the critical lens is turned onto our own spaces and stories, theories of care butt up against physical and metaphorical academic “steep steps” (Dolmage 2017).

I argue feminist geographies of academic care unintentionally reproduce rehabilitative and sanist commonsense in envisioning feminist academic futures. I suggest that this literature traffics in the blurry spaces of academia’s social re/production, rendering inextricable the twinning crises of academic care and neoliberal higher education. We thus must be wary of how social reproduction in feminist geographies of academic care ameliorates the neoliberal university’s crisis of capital, enabling its far-reaching scope of violence and harm. While the focus and intended audience for this piece is primarily feminist geographers, the lessons are more broadly applicable to those entangled in non-innocent interdependencies of higher education.

The articles examined here respond in some capacity to the metric-ization, managerialism, and individualism of the neoliberal university, and thus of academic Geography—along with its white patriarchal and heteronormative roots. Their stories start from a moment of feeling *really bad*, a ‘I might not survive this’ kind of bad. In turn, narrators articulate ways of remedying this pain, arguing that caring relationships, friendships, and collective reflexivity can challenge academic hierarchies and boundaries between the personal/professional and public/private. Yet many end up being more complicit with the “managerial” logics of universities, risking reproduction of academic ableism and exclusionary care networks (Meyerhoff and Noterman 2019; Bartos 2022). Accordingly, this paper focuses on rehabilitative commonsense embedded in these reflections, integrating disability studies into feminist geographies of academic care to surface and unsettle said logics. It favors the negative affective states that the sick, crip, Mad, disabled, debilitated, and pathologized live in the world with, which are traditionally devalued and displaced for positive feelings, such as happiness, belonging, and comfort (Smilges 2023).

The paper unfolds in the following way. I first contextualize a disability methodology and reflect on crip possibilities of feeling bad, which can offer a horizon beyond reforming academic culture. Then, I elucidate how compulsory rehabilitation subtends mismatched problems and resolutions via discussion of collegiality and normative social formations. This grounds the following section, which argues for unhinging our critiques of uneven academic labor and violence from a binarized feminized/masculinist frame and adjoin it to one of ableism. I conclude with reflections on other present and possible crip care disruptions amidst the interrelated care and higher education crises.

Conceptual Orientations

Geographies of Academic Ableism

“Disability as methodology” rejects exclusionary rights-based or integrative access frameworks (Minich 2016; Schalk 2017). By integrative access, I refer to “prioritizing the realignment of disabled people with existing institutional and economic norms over challenging the society that created them” (Smilges 2023, 15). This approach brings together

wide-ranging feminist struggles, asking who our work enables at whose sake (Minich 2016). This methodology studies the *system* of (dis)ability, which materially produces and/or discursively imposes disability upon certain populations and bodyminds, regardless of current medico-legal parameters (Kim 2017; Schalk 2017). This move allows me to read how the system of (dis)ability shapes experiences in Geography and is sometimes reproduced in trying to address the harm experienced.

Joining this methodological approach to the university further illuminates the necessity of this analysis. The university has always functioned on eugenic logic and bifurcated efforts of elimination and (re)habilitation via accumulation of Indigenous land, experimentation on asylum subjects, and reification of hierarchies of being based on principles of speech, sense, rationality, productivity, and intelligence (Dolmage 2017; Hatrick 2020). These thresholds (re)produce boundaries of personhood through the exclusion, objectification, and punishment of those whose rhetoric fails to meet these humanistic standards (Price 2011; Taylor 2017; Chen 2012).⁴ Disabled academics who *are* included inhabit “crip spacetimes” that harm through the “accommodations loop’s” slowness that fail to respond to time-sensitive needs, causing great emotional distress, self-financed accommodations, forced departures from jobs or enrollment, and reinforcement of the slow system (Price 2021, 264); this harm tends to be intensified for queer, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (Cepeda 2021; Bailey 2021). When accommodations are met, they mostly apply assimilative logics aimed at producing independent, productive workers (Simard-Gagnon 2016).

This University logic rehabilitates some for its re/productive work while abjecting others. Rehabilitation, like cure, is a process of returning from a state of damage to a prior, albeit often imagined, state that emerges out of “some definition of *normal* and *natural*” (Clare 2017, 15). This imaginary pervades feminist geographies of academic care. For example, it’s been suggested that today’s stifled capacities of collegiality and exponential growth of academic mental distress are fomented by the neoliberal university’s “dissipation of collegial communities within universities” (Peake and Mullings 2016, 275). This statement implies that *before* the entrenchment of neoliberalism, it was easier to stay well (and) in community. Yet junior scholars are told things are “better than before”, offering a progressive narrative that renders difficult addressment of ongoing gendered, racialized, and ableist violence (Al-Saleh and Noterman 2021). These discourses simultaneously damn the (more) masculinist past and decry the neoliberal present while holding out hope for better academic futures.

Rehabilitation is part of social reproduction. It is popularly understood through an economic lens to recapacitate (potential) workers and end their supposed institutional dependency (Adler-Bolton and Vierkant 2022). Rehabilitation intervenes at the level of the medical (restoring the bodymind to maximal functioning) and the social (repair social functioning to reproduce sexual and gendered norms), blurring distinctions between them. In this way, social cohesion and stable relationships become fantasized “cures” for pain and impairment (Patasavas 2023). The term signals both acquisition of skills and abilities via “habilitation” and reacquisition of lost abilities via “rehabilitation” (Kim 2017). This (re)acquisition further reflects how “the political-economic aspect of social reproduction encompasses *the reproduction of work knowledge and skills*, the practices that maintain and

⁴ Here rhetoric is “the circulation of power through communication” and “the circulation of discourse through the body” (Dolmage 2017, 8).

reinforce class and other categories of difference, and the learning that inculcates...the habitus" (Katz 2001, 712, emphasis added).

This framing sites feminist geographies of academic care in porous spaces of productive and reproductive work within academic departments (Rodríguez-Rocha 2021). The literature illuminates the blurred distinctions between these spheres via mentoring, care, and survival work that enables *more* care and survival work, reproduction of academic departments, and, accordingly, capacities for creating more "deliverables" that count towards production. The entangled mess of re/production in the university makes it difficult to offer transformative models of academic care that do not rest to some extent on also recapacitating the university as a social good (see Boggs et al. 2019). Cripplly reading this body of work elucidates ableist assumptions that uphold investments in the university and its values to avoid reproducing them and instead to spur modes of crippled out academic care.

Staying with Bad Feelings

Projects centering the political potential of feeling bad and upending their containment in pathological frames of meaning are precedented in both queer studies and disability studies. I situate this paper in the more recent (re)turn to jostling negativity in neuroqueer feminism and trans/crip scholarship, in which scholars reflexively critique political and intellectual communities that raised them, cultivated their thinking, and ultimately let them down (Smilges 2023; Awkward-Rich 2022). These are not disavowals of intellectual or political homes but expressions of continuing attachment to them despite the harm they may have caused. I follow Max Liboiron (2021, 115) and understand these obligations as *care*: "an affective relation whose leading ethic is to create attachments within infrastructures of inequality," that are "best described as obligations." This definition also helps frame the parameters of the body of work I analyze, discussed below. Here I turn to recent literature that reconsiders starting points for care, which can help shift how we practice care in relation to intensifying modes of uneven disablement and debilitation.

Neuroqueerness offers one such opening. The term escapes easy or fixable definition, and functions multiply as a verb/adjective/identity that disrupts "neuronormativity and heteronormativity simultaneously" (Walker 2021). Neuroqueering does not require being neurodiverse but does necessitate enactment of practices that subvert, disrupt, or challenge habits of neurotypicality. Because of the way neurodiverse people are denied rhetoricity and intentionality (Yergeau 2021), neuroqueerness also calls for reevaluating how we imagine and practice caring in relation. Like with Madness, authority over one's own bodymind, actions, and thoughts are dismissed as lacking *sense* or *reason*, undermining reliability of our experiences and narratives. Playing with neuroqueer's multivalence, Johnson (2021) articulates a neuroqueer feminism that upends the typically unnamed sanist, ableist, and/or neurotypical structuring logics of feminist projects, adjoining critiques of sexism to those of ableism. Contributing to the ambiguity of the term, I implicate neuroqueer/ness/ing in the wide range of people in academia who chronically feel bad for a wide set of historical, structural, and embodied reasons, and who fail to pass as normal or healthy.

This application joins trans/crip and crip negativity scholarship that engages historical and affective entanglements of disability, Madness, transness, and queerness to transformative ends. As with neuroqueer feminism, this work highlights the political potentials of leaning into these associations and of dwelling in the bad feelings produced through

occupying such relational subjective positions (Smilges 2023; Awkward-Rich 2022; Malatino 2020). These bad feelings are inextricable from demands of care that reject liberal progressive notions of life “getting better” (Malatino 2022; Ahmed 2010). In staying with the negative we can “feel the weight of our demands” (Smilges 2023, 36) while rejecting the university’s superficial inclusion of “friendlier faces” that meet diversity requirements without necessitating significant change (Gill-Peterson 2022, 133).

Narrating Feminist Geographies of Academic Care

In my analysis, I read articles that are stated to be autoethnographic or share the genre’s main impulse of centering “researchers’ own stories in order to bridge their personal experience and/with theory” (Lopez and Gillespie 2016, 1691), using experience in the discipline to implicate unjust systems and non-innocent relations in our academic spaces. Here I outline my method for identifying this mode of academic narration and its limits. The analyzed works exemplify the genre’s tendencies but are not just objects of analysis; they are texts I theorize with—building off lessons they impart and rereading them from a Mad, crip position.

I searched across six feminist, critical, and high-ranking journals between the years 2016-2023.⁵ This search involved cross-referencing several keywords, including “care”, “university”/ “academia”, “feminist”, “killjoy” and “mental health”/ “wellness.” It also involved following citation trails and falling into the dialogic space of special issues, which allowed me to locate relevant articles that otherwise fell outside these search parameters and to better grasp the broader discussion at hand. I narrowed the selection to those that employed an autoethnographic, biographic (individual or collective) approach that “serve to link emotion, embodiment, spirituality, morality, action, culture, and history” through the narration of one’s own, or a small group of people’s, lived experiences as research data (Jackson and Mazzei 2008, 300).

In the context of the neoliberal university, this work tends to focus on the effects of audit culture, the devaluation of emotional labor, and the white masculinist norms that produce states of unwellness. In turn, feminist practices within friendships, mentorships, reflexivity, and formations of collegiality are framed as having the potential of challenging or even transforming the university. The stories are thus also often didactic, modeling an ethic of survival and success, offering recommendations at interpersonal, policy and institutional levels: formalizing carework (Lopez and Gillespie 2016), reclaiming professionalism and collegiality (Kaufman 2021; Askins and Blazek 2016), cultivating departments based on principles of sociality and community (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019; Sotiropolou and Cranston 2022), and developing accountability and reflexivity (Kinkaid, Parikh, and Ranjbar 2022) or feminist collectives (Al-Saleh and Noterman 2021; Faria et al. 2019; Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019).

In centering the feminist autoethnographic, we can identify the limits of imagination regarding transformative possibilities of feminist carework in academia, which may be partly

⁵ 2016 is when a wave of feminist geographic literature on the neoliberalization of the university and its effects on relationships, care, and mental health appear to be published. It also the moment after which “slow scholarship” (Mountz et al. 2015) entered and shaped this discursive space.

imposed by the genre's norms. Many of the shared stories are beautiful, tender, and heartbreaking. Others, ambivalent or distraught. They reflect the urgency of needing to re-evaluate the history and power dynamics of the field. Not all the pieces were *explicitly* about care but were certainly suffused with it: expressing obligations to the discipline, feminist values of reflexivity and collaboration, and collectively transforming academic care by/for those devalued in/by academia. At the same time, there are tendencies to a) abstractly evoke the neoliberal university such that the focus at times over relies on individual interactions b) relay experience as a transparent and "stable source of knowledge" rather than itself an interpretation that shapes "*what they can know and how they represent...their own social worlds*" (Jackson and Mazzei 2008, 305-306; Scott 1991). In other words, in the urgency of transparently communicating and evoking affective responses to the harm experienced, there can end up being a lack of reflexivity regarding the grounds on which authority of experience is claimed, namely through the tacit distancing from the unreliability of Madness and stigmas of disability. This claim is not an outright rejection of autoethnography (I relay a few of my own experiences throughout); it's a questioning of how re-centering an authoritative "I" or "we" narrative potentially reproduces academic ableism's commonsense and logics of care.

Rehabilitating Collegiality

In feminist geographies of academic care, stress, burnout, depression, anxiety, grief, and isolation are typically read as *symptoms* of the debilitating environments of the university that could be cured, *if only* we could slow down, (formally) value care, and change the mechanisms for measuring academic success. This trajectory encapsulates a rehabilitative frame that charts a(n imaginary) journey from driven-mad-by-the-university (MacLean 2016) to better-adjusted social beings, which buys into curative ideologies that position rehabilitation as an unchallenged good. In this section, I work through this rehabilitation as it functions through feminist geographies of academic care via discussions of collegiality, in turn signaling prioritized obligations to the university.

The rehabilitative narrative arc present in the work at hand here begins with recognition of how awful we⁶ are feeling, of how bad things are getting. This badness is evinced through statistics on increasing rates of mental health crises for students and the lack of institutional response to them, and through autobiographical stories of violent encounters in classrooms, committee meetings, departments, conferences, emails, etc. Then, there is a grappling with the question so *what do we do?* At this moment there tends to be a lapse back into institutional rehabilitative logics. Here I focus on how discussions of collegiality exemplify the progressive, rehabilitative solutions that function as "technologies of...belonging" and improvement that elide experiences of academic ableism, instead privileging the cultivation of positive feminist spaces and subjects (Todd 2016, 22; Al-Saleh and Noterman 2021).

Collegiality is the ground on which personal, emotional academic relationships become situated as resistance. It is formally expressed most often as, or as a measure of, productivity (Price 2011). Collegiality can gloss departmental harms and discriminatory practices by demanding performances of sociality and engagement that are undesirable or unactionable for those who don't embody certain norms (Price 2011; Kaufman 2021).

⁶ Movement between first person and third person, or simultaneous use of different positional pronouns, follows Kafer (2013) in recognizing the relational, temporal, and political nature of identification.

These norms are in part formed and reproduced through medical and eugenic standards of fitness and hygiene that establish the boundaries of academic suitability and of personhood more broadly (Siebers 2014). To accept collegiality at face-value thus shores up ableist and sanist values, which bristle with racist and sexist logics (Samuels 2014). Accordingly, uncritical calls for collegiality hinge upon a rehabilitative frame that incorporates only those who can habituate certain skills and performances. Collegiality is in the water of academia, drowning some and buoying others.

The insidious normalizing and exclusionary effects of collegiality jostle with its promise of emergent care. Feminist geographers are often wary of collegiality's promises but remain attached to visions of it due to entanglements with more positive components of life like friendship, joy, and community (Kaufman 2021). In this framing, collegiality is most often associated with participation, critical reflexivity enabled through group conversations, collaboration, generosity, and sociability (Sotiropoulou and Cranston 2022; Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019; Askins and Blazek 2016); each of which tends to be accepted as *a priori* goods within the increasingly distressing university. Collegiality in these examples is reasserted as an academic social good that can facilitate, or be facilitated by, these other "happy objects" (Ahmed 2010) and transform our departments and shared discipline. In positively reinforcing collegiality's entanglement with such things, it reproduces the obscuration of collegiality's exclusions and violence as structured by the system of (dis)ability, along with attendant power dynamics.

In this context, collegiality is maintained through feminist attempts to overcome via undermining masculinist dichotomies of the private/public, personal/professional, or individual/collective baked into academic structures. Indeed, these dichotomies structure many discussions of the (neoliberal) university's persistent issues: certifications of individualistic knowledge production and formal evaluation of productivity sideline collective thought, action, and care. For example, Askins and Blazek (2016, 1101) "envisage a politics of care that help us view and practice an academia centered around values of generosity, collegiality, and the communal." They argue for "a conscious political stance enveloping practices of caring-*for* and -*about* collectively as a cornerstone of our academic identities, presents and futures" through which we can also "develop such reflexivity from reciprocal collaboration and social critique rather than individual introspection" (1098). Dichotomizing "reciprocal" and "individual" here advances a situated, relational feminist subject over a universal, bounded Euclidean one, in turn envisioning futures in which we overcome academia's masculinism.

But what other work does this writing do? The "rather than" and rhetorical conflation of individual introspection with individualism here are key. While perhaps simply poor wording, the positioning of "individual introspection" in the sentence structure effectively rejects the value of introspection; it jettisons from this political vision of feminist academic care those whose bodyminds "misfit" in such collegial spaces or get misrecognized as masculinist (Garland-Thomson 2011). Individual introspection in the ivory tower context is commonsensically legible as elitist, disconnected from the realities of the "real" world, as the idealized "heads on a stick" type of intellectual (Manzi, Ojeda, and Hawkins 2019). Introspective scholars *fit* in this traditional academic schematic but *misfit* in transformed feminist ones. However, this maneuver misrecognizes the introspective texture of much neurodivergent life, which cannot be reduced *de facto* to intellectual masculinism, and which

can offer radically different notions of relationality and sociality (Yergeau 2021; Walker 2021). This misrecognition via reduction to masculinism is not uncommon, and I analyze a related example below. Suffice to say for now, painting a picture of individual introspection as *superseded* by social cohesion rearticulates a rehabilitative frame that implicitly advances a cure (of our departments) at the sake of elimination of most neurodivergent and mentally disabled people.

Even when retreats into interiority are not considered oppositional to feminist academic care and community, presence and sociability are still asserted at face value to be unquestioned goods, re-enforcing academic rehabilitation. Sotiropoulou and Cranston (2022, 9) argue for a “critical friendship” that leads to “improving oneself as well as rethinking university practices” along with “increased confidence, identification of good practices and a sense of belonging to a collegial community.” Self-improvement is situated as personal and professional development, with academic friendship being social reproductive work that helps us play *and* challenge the game of academia. These geographers are not alone in claiming friendship as a key relational formation of care-as-resistance, as it facilitates the undermining of the personal/professional, hierarchical rank, and rigidly enforced metrics of valuation (e.g., Lopez and Gillepsie 2016; Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019; Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019). In this instance, the authors state that the work and outcomes of critical friendship fall outside the “quantifiable metrics of academic performance” (Sotiropoulou and Cranston 2022, 4) in such a way that becoming more confident, healthy individuals almost incidentally also improves academic performance. This positioning advances a model of chipping away at the surveillance culture of academia through friendship that also enables upward career mobility within it. Care here slides into assimilation marked by belonging in an imagined and vague “collegial community” that occurs after the work of (self-)improvement.

Meanwhile, Peake and Mullings (2016, 275) mobilize the potential of slow scholarship to suggest the possibility of “recover[ing] the culture of sociability that was once considered essential to effective scholarship because of opportunities for innovation, collaboration, teamwork and mutual support, that taking time to socialize, presented.” Here we see the ripple effect of neoliberal impingement on the social and intellectual goods of collegiality: moving at a slower pace enabled more time for an intellectual community that in turn allowed the production of antiracist, feminist work that did what we wanted it to do. Yet the earnestness of restoring these aspects slips into nostalgia for the university that obfuscates the exclusionary effects of this “culture of sociability” (Meyerhoff and Noterman 2019). Centering these idealized visions reinscribes boundaries that exclude those who, for example, have social anxiety, mobility disabilities, or are a caretaker—which restricts time spent in departmental spaces—as well as those who retreat because “they have trouble navigating the dominant world of other people, trouble produced by inaccessible architectures, persistent misreading, lack of regard, epistemological and physical violence, and so on” (Awkward-Rich 2022, 118).

Feminist geographers have had a strong voice in articulating these forms of “misfitting” in Geography related to racialized and gendered violence, ableism, and queerphobia (Faria et al. 2019; Chouinard and Grant 1995; Kinkaid, Parikh, and Ranjbar 2022). The harms of misfitting colors anecdotes shared in feminist geographies of academic care, which makes recommendations and desires for inclusion, belonging, and cohesion have a certain commonsense, albeit a dangerous one. When situated in discussions of crafting more “care-

full” departments and discipline, these pains of being out of place seem to be imagined away via proposed departmental and interpersonal fixes that fail to address the scope of harm experienced. This curative imaginary and problem-solution mismatch can have chilling implications for how recommendations of care play out, specifically in relation to power dynamics structured by the system of (dis)ability. For example, Kaufman (2021) offers remedies for the failures of care regarding pregnancy and childrearing in Geography. They offer a concrete example of what other articles gesture toward in their references of collegiality, collaboration, and care:

Just as...care must be reclaimed, so too may collegiality and professionalism...To reclaim professionalism, collegiality, and care in ways that respond to intersectionality and hold space for productive tensions, departments can collaboratively work through these terms’ meanings... Once collaboratively and inclusively defined, we can “infuse radical care”—and if we see fit, radical collegiality and professionalism as well—not only into our departmental, institutional, and disciplinary policies and practices but “into our everyday interpersonal interactions” (Kaufman 2021, 1750-51).

Yet what would it mean to *respond* to intersectionality, particularly in a field that continues to be abysmally white and extract from Black feminists (Faria et al. 2019; Cahuas 2023)? And what does a “radical collegiality” entail? Kaufman (2021, 1741) provides possible answers to the latter question in vignettes offered throughout the piece, such as graduate student use of the departmental listserv to push back on professional development and instead use the space to organize mutual aid. This is a fine example of graduate student solidarity and dissent. However, in using it to recoup collegiality, it uplifts individuals’ (inter)actions while obscuring the thresholds of personhood that collegiality demands and maintains. In other words, the example and above-quoted recommendations gloss the violence of collegial care in the name of including and promoting academic subjectivities that can be disruptive and enact various “hacks” to move more comfortably through the university (McGee 2020) without responsibility for the work of reproducing of academic ableism.

One interpersonal practice they offer is for those who are “not already overburdened with care work” to “open space for requests for care” such as by “asking, ‘how are you?’ in ways that invite in the unspeakable” (Kaufman 2021, 1752). Yet, the unspeakable often remains unspoken as a crip rhetorical strategy of self-protection (Price 2011). I think of the times different academic actors have asked me how I am, from well-intentioned male professors to feminist graduate students alike, and the shame and isolation that emerged from those encounters: the difficulty of explaining the struggle to get a diagnosis and the subsequent lack of access to care to address it; assumptions that your chronic illness is not lifelong but simply require acute, “punctual” accommodation and care (Simard-Gagnon 2016; Hawkins 2019); the simple fact that many people are not ready for our disabled realities and their awkward mumbling, apology, and change of subject when you honestly answer the dreaded “how are you?” for once. These are bad crip feelings (Smilges 2023) produced through flailing normative care efforts that seem to *want* to care with the crips, sick, Mad, and so on, but haven’t yet confronted ableist assumptions that stem such carework. In other words, these types of recommendations elide the power dynamics between those devalued by the system of (dis)ability and those who don’t do the social reproductive work of care.

At risk for many in answering this question is not simply appearing unprofessional, but freedom and survival. Disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018, 39) reminds us, "People's fear of accessing care didn't come out of nowhere. It came out of generations and centuries where needed care meant being locked up, losing your human and civil rights, and being subject to abuse"; working through questions of what makes receiving care and being vulnerable even imaginable are thus crucial before something like a "how are you?" can be trusted, let alone granted the expansiveness to transform caring relations (56). Imagine a scenario in which a graduate student tells their advisor or committee member or professor that they are dealing with a mental health crisis. This may lead to the support needed (see England 2016), but this is rare and tends to occur for those who already somehow visibly "fit" in academic communities (e.g., white, no visible use of assistive technology, middle-class, cisgender). More common are mobilizations of the disclosure against the person in crisis (MacLean 2016; Wayne and Yao 2020) or referrals to campus mental health services that have months-long waitlists (Champlin 2019) or risk subjecting the person to further psychiatric surveillance, even institutionalization (Washuta 2014; Wang 2019). To align asking after each other's wellbeing more closely with radical care would not be positing the question itself, but in creating the conditions under which disabled people, queer people, and people of color can be unashamed and safe in answering.

None of this is to suggest that we shouldn't ask how the other is and genuinely mean it. Rather, it is to identify how starting from a Mad, crip position forces us to reckon with how certain care practices reflect attachments to the university that take priority over obligation to those most deeply affected by its carceral, professionalized care. In the next section, I move from reading the rehabilitative arc of these works into their explicit discussion of dichotomies of masculinist and feminized labor and emotion.

Crippling Masculinist Rational/Feminized Irrational Dichotomies

Feminist geographies of academic care agree that the damaging effects of academia are fomented by unevenly distributed and valued labor based on feminized/masculine divisions. Such feminized labor cited includes formal and informal mentoring, service work, diversity, equity, and inclusion work, and other forms of social reproduction that fall within and beyond the spaces of our professional lives. The necessary time to carefully undertake this work is continually pinched by demands of the neoliberal university, an austerity that spurs deeply affected states of depletion, guilt, anger, and desire for something else (Hawkins 2019). These critiques exemplify how feminized academic subjects bear the brunt of the neoliberal university in their/our bodyminds, and how these effects tend to be more intensive for those racialized as non-white (Hawkins, Manzi, and Ojeda 2014). These realities are contrasted to the rationalist, self-promoting, and predatory practices of masculinist academic embodiment that result in more quantifiable, recognizable (knowledge) production. This section focuses on how academic masculinist operations of violence and rationalism, the latter of which naturalizes and/or obscures the former, are confronted in relation to projects of feminist geographies of academic care. I reread examples through a (dis)ability frame and argue to unhinge our critiques from masculinist/feminized divisions of labor to one of ableism and disablement.

Amidst the refrain of things still having "gotten better" culturally in Geography (Al-Saleh and Noterman 2021), there is the persistence of gender violence that receives

surprisingly little sustained attention in this literature.⁷ Pieces that do grapple with this violence contextualize it in relation to the apparent and nonapparent labor that either maintains or is created by predators. Such reproductive labor of these individuals' careers and of patriarchal, capitalist university systems include the unpaid work of propping up their research through citation, award nomination, lecture invitations, and syllabus development (Mansfield et al. 2019) and the devalued work of listening, supporting, coping, and forgiving (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019). These examples point to violence emergent from capital's reliance on social reproduction (Hall 2023). Here, I am interested in how harm emerges in critiquing the uneven and ideological divide of valued and unvalued labor.

In their exciting piece on a feminist coven in the university, Smyth, Linz, and Hudson (2019) sourced contributions from majority women graduate students on surviving within–without wholesale reproduction of–the neoliberal university. In their section on labor, they discuss a “Feminist invoice”, which lists the “services” we undertake in columns of “Things we do” and “Things they do.” Listed unpaid labor “we” do includes explaining, remembering, being polite, affirmation, affection, tears, guidance, hygiene/“beauty”, depression, and reproduction; under the list of things “they” do there is abuse, catcalling, ignoring, forgetting, absence, evasiveness, bad texting etiquette, bad hygiene, interruptions, and rape/assault (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019, 865). They argue that it “draws attention to important gendered and racialized labor inequalities that go beyond the pay gap in the waged workplace...[and] forces the reader to consider how they do this labor or benefit from it” (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019, 866).

The dichotomized list of “Things we do”/“Things they do” can also be read to elucidate ableist logics not just in the divisions of expected gendered labor but in feminist geographic responses to them. Reading the invoice through disability as methodology, the left column effectively illustrates the ways uneven and nonapparent labor can disable our bodyminds and delay work that is important to us. Their accounting advances an understanding how masculinist violence impinges our bodyminds; it visualizes how these debilitating effects create intensive affective states (“blinding rage”, “feeling crazy”⁸) that should be understood as work *and* as life-sucking intensities that compound the difficulty of working; it helps show how gender violence itself creates *more* work for us (Mansfield et al. 2019). Meanwhile, the “they do” column effectively lists many forms of “work” that at times directly inform these intense affective states. Yet unlike the “we do” column, this column risks slipping into more reductive logics that collapses disability into immorality. What work does it do to list tendencies to forget, interrupt, or be a bad texter, which are pretty basic aspects of neurodiverse life, next to abuse and rape/assault? What are the implications of citing bad hygiene, which has historically shaped imaginaries of disability through a medico-legal frame of fitness and citizenship (Schweik 2009; Siebers 2003), in conjunction with something like stalking?⁹

⁷ I use Rebecca Hall's (2023, 323) framing of gender violence as focused “on social relations rather than women as the victims or subjects of gender violence.”

⁸ See Schalk 2013 on ableist metaphors in feminist work.

⁹ Originally developed in 19th century United States, the trope's persistence is clear in Samuels' (2003, 247) example of a friend's colleague accusing someone of disability fraud (i.e., someone pretending to be disabled

One way to read this side of the list is to decry what “they” get to do: *they get to be messy, sloppy, oblivious, and so on while we must be pretty, clean, attentive, and polite*; it reflects the uneven gendered, racialized thresholds of academic (re)habilitation. Still, the descriptors that comprise the “things they do” in this invoice implies a subsumption of traits like bad hygiene and forgetfulness into categorically negative and masculinist ones, which, like rape and stalking, should be eliminated to make (university) life safer and more equitable. In attempting to account for “ALL labor” (Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019, 865) that we do, the invoice falls into epistemological murkiness regarding violence. This murkiness diverts attention away from the medical-cultural histories productive of these stigmas that situate Madness as violent and disability as needing curative intervention, instead risking their reproduction (see Aho, Ben-Moshe and Hilton 2017).

I am not suggesting that quotidian harm is less important to address than spectacularized violence, but I am suggesting that the list itself might cause its own unintentional harm. Arguably, it exemplifies how feminist critiques can accidentally rearticulate old (white) feminist moralizations that bar those most affected by (dis)ability from accessing pathways to care. For example, the persistence and neoliberal intensification of the moralized hygiene trope can engender shame, guilt, and embarrassment for those of us who have chronic conditions or lack access to amenities that can impair our ability to meet standards of ablebodied cleanliness, which exacerbates the already existing reluctance to open up about how we are and what we need (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). An issue with the invoice as it hinges upon the division of feminized and masculinized labor—a limit the authors themselves recognize more generally—is that it thus reinforces such stigmas in ways that unintentionally disavow disability in the name of critiquing masculinist violence. This disavowal is harmful not just because it excludes wide swaths of disabled people but can also result in a reproduction of masculinist logic that materially and psychically harms disabled people writ large.

This reproduction is perhaps more clearly legible in rationalism—if rationalism is understood as a mechanism that reinforces boundaries of humanness that contour practices of segregation (special education), incarceration (psychiatric hospitals), and silencing those who experience gender violence. Rationalism and gender violence intertwine in reported cases of sexual harassment and assault in academia, which get shut down through discounting the victims’ claims via assertions of unreliable narrators (“hysterical” “witch hunt”) and of the perpetrator’s respectable character. A recent litigious example came in 2021 with Al-Jazeera’s reports on “Degrees of Abuse”, in which six women accused a male Geography faculty member of inappropriate behavior. His response is rife with language that positions these claims as beyond the realm of sense (e.g., “flabbergasted”, “deeply appalling” to be accused), rendering the women as hysterical and violent (via “bullying”) and bolstering his counter-case against them (Howlett and Davies 2021).

These obvious mobilizations of rationality to maintain the status quo also takes on other insidious forms in academia, leading feminist geographies of academic care to keep rationalism in its crosshairs (Bartos 2022; Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019; Askins and Blazek 2016; Lopez and Gillespie 2016; MacLean 2016; Simard-Gagnon 2016). The literature

to reap the “benefits”—a harmful fallacy that rarely occurs) because she was “young and “well-groomed” and had no sign of a limp.”

situates rationalism as antithetical to embodied knowledge, unruly emotions, or decisions that can derail “successful” academic careers. Accordingly, modeling public/visible caring relationships across academic rank, collaboration, and partial knowledges is argued to undermine masculinist rationality and instead “leverage[s] and celebrate[s] embodied difference as co-existence” (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019, 463).

Though promising, framing emotion as a premier oppositional position to rationalism both obscures the blurriness between social re/productive spaces in academia and inscribes a limit of meaningful irrationality. Ironically, this collusion often occurs through arguments to counter to rationalism’s dominance through making public/visible the emotion and care that are formative of our academic subjectivities. In a few examples, care and emotions that beckon, suffuse, and follow said care, are positioned as political because of its marginalization (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019; Askins and Blazek 2016). This framing of *pathos* as oppositional to rationalism begins to align the former with historically pathologized feminine emotional “excess” and sensitivity (Schuller 2018) (“we are the descendants of the hysterics you couldn’t institutionalize”?). Yet, as much as these are oriented toward emotion, affect, and thus toward the unruly and un-articulable, their path is “straightened” (Ahmed 2006) by disciplinary technologies of academia, which reorients the work of care and emotion towards reproduction of these technologies and rationalist systems.

One example of this tactic is in publishing work that leads with emotion, rather than an articulated rationalism. This practice is forefront in Askins and Blazek’s (2016, 1088) piece that took shape after collective writing and reflection in which the co-authors “started by narrating...emotions to each other, then sharing reflections to engage together in making sense of them, as both rational and emotional process.” They argue that this rationalizing of emotions does not displace them nor is it masculinist, since sense-making helped them understand the power dynamics and hegemonic values that shaped their academic and research experiences. This is a valid and valuable reflexive exercise, and certainly the affective turn has long shown the benefits of exploring ways of expressing and analyzing the un-articulatable. However, in this oppositional framing, in which emotion is distinct from rationalism but still necessitates a process of sense-making to register its value, marks the limit of thinking regarding (non)sense and subjectivity. If rationality is something that we critique but still require to communicate, relate, and, well, critique, it risks expelling—or assumes nonexistence of—those who cannot but fail to make proper sense, namely the mentally disabled and neurodivergent (Price 2011; Yergeau 2021). In other words, if affective intensities are assumed to have meaning, or *assumed to only have meaning if they make sense*, then we are shutting down possibilities to undercut the link between rationalism and knowledge production and, even more fundamentally, effectively leaving the privileged position of rationalism intact within feminist geography itself.

This dynamic takes on a more explicitly spatial element in discussions of relations emergent from feminist relationships, embodied knowledge, and academic carework. For example, feminist mentoring is framed as countering the depersonalized, transactional, and hierarchically structured advisor relationship (e.g., Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019; Goerisch et al. 2019; Curran et al. 2019). Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston (2019, 455-456) share positive reflections on their long-term mentor-mentee relationship, suffused with positive affectivity that paints a picture of the idealized feminist academic position: having ceaseless time to lend an ear, endless patience, assured comfort in editorial roles, complete

trust, and continued professional academic development. They come from a feminist position that “redefines embodied and emotional experience as a source of knowledge and an integral part of academic development” (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019, 457). This feminist framing of emotion that undermines the academic public (rational)/private (emotional) divide as resistance is common and often amounts to professional development that may jostle local departmental cultures but ultimately aligns with the rehabilitative logic discussed above. That is, these relations, while cited as challenging the university order, is couched as being the force that enables academic access and mobility (Adams-Hutcheson 2019). This vein of the literature thus risks reaffirming “comfort feminism” (Eaves et al. 2022) that still relies on expulsion of too-irrational others to the realm of the abject.

In these cases, there is an assumed intentionality in importing *pathos* into academic geographies that marks the politicalness of these relations. Yet, living with the possibility of being Mad in public—of having a psychotic break at work, for example—complicates these discussions (England 2016; Price 2015). That is, there is not always choice in undermining boundaries of rationalism, in deciding when we “straddle” mad and rational spatialities (Chouinard 2012). If care in academia is considered political “because of its marginalization” (Askins and Blazek 2016, 1097), does this stand in relation to the marginalization of Madness as well? If someone disrupts the smooth surface of rationalism without intention or will, how do they become legible in projects of feminist geographies of academic care, if at all? The tendency to situate psychic pain as symptoms of the neoliberalizing effects and implicit focus on comfort suggests such cases may be read as evidence of the patriarchy and capitalism that denies the reality of the Mad person in crisis (Johnson 2021; Kim 2017). The emphasis on futures of social cohesion and feminist belonging also suggests that those whose psychic pain triggers or scares others, or who reject normative care are more likely to fall out of the feminist geographic project, rather than be co-constitutive of it.

Crippled Out Conclusions

I have argued logics of rehabilitation are perfuse in the work here called feminist geographies of academic care. We’ve come to the part where the harm has been laid to bear and we must now ask what we do with it. In this concluding section, I offer some reflections to spur further discussion of how to crip our feminist geographies of academic care. In doing so, I avoid any form of academic institutionalization as a possible resolution due to the risk of cooptation and expansion of social and medical control via formalization of carework and feminist labor (Al-Saleh and Noterman 2021; Hatrick 2020; Sins Invalid 2015). Instead, I recall the opening epigraphs to call for further collective crip creativity and crankiness in our carework.

If we accept the interdependence of social reproduction and capitalist crisis proposed by Norton and Katz (2017) above, then we must become attuned to the modes of care and survival that seize upon the opportunity that crisis presents (Gilmore 2007). In other words, rather than orienting ourselves towards academic futures of social cohesion and belonging, it might do us more collective good to disrupt these spaces further. This article is meant to be one minor form of such disruption. Minor disruption can also take the form of reminding people that, in the final revising of this piece in early 2024, the COVID-19 pandemic is *not* over, and refusing to accept demands to return to “normal” in-person sociality without basic

protections.¹⁰ Other modes of disruption have been offered from a wide range of (not always citable) sources: theft and redistribution, guerilla retrofitting bathrooms and other public spaces, cross student, staff, and faculty organizing, (mis)using university space without permission, and labor and student strikes (e.g., Hatrick 2020; Smyth, Linz, and Hudson 2019; Meyerhoff and Noterman 2019).

This disruption also requires being the crip killjoy of normative feminist killjoying—an unenviable position. This work is typically and exhaustingly undertaken by disabled people themselves but urgently needs those who are able-bodied/minded to get on board (Mingus 2017). A first substantive step to doing this work is an epistemological shift that stays in the discomfort of being associated with disability and Madness. PTSD, grief, burnout, depression, anxiety—these are all affective and visceral phenomena identified in the work discussed here that have intermittently co-mingled with medical-cultural framings of disability. Yet these connections are typically obscured in the literature. While this in part functions as depathologization to disrupt the epistemic violence of psychiatry, this move takes up a (unfortunately common) defensive position that asserts “we’re not crazy” to highlight academic double binds and to claim authority of our own voice (MacLean 2016; Awkward-Rich 2022).

But some of us are! Crazy, that is. And it benefits us all to learn how to let people be “in their crazy” even if that makes us/you/me/them *feel* scared and uncomfortable, though unlikely unsafe (Kaufman-Mthimkhulu 2022). Co-lingering in these associations rather than try to rehabilitate away our bad feelings, spurs renewed sites of solidarity and modalities of care. As other scholars have highlighted, the ambiguity of disability as it intersects with race and gender can enable emergent forms of fugitivity (Samuels 2014), autonomy (Awkward-Rich 2022), and other crip tactics of protest (McRuer 2018). These are emergent and temporally fleeting and thus not programmable. Yet it is in these time and place-based moments that we can begin to further enact the transgressive potentials of social reproduction to reproduce life without reproducing the systems that uphold the rationalist university—perhaps infusing the Marxist maxim “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!” with its own Mad, crip sense (Hall 2023; see O’Brien 2023). It might begin with sitting in the pain and discomfort, in witnessing the university’s expansive reach of harm and violence and asking, “*how do we use this opportunity to practice parts of disability justice?*” (Mingus 2017).

I feel great discomfort with this last recommendation, as we have already seen the academic co-optation of this radical movement, exacerbating extraction and abandonment of disabled folks who are working class, undocumented, isolated from kin, and predominantly Black and Brown. It is thus essential to also remain cognizant and deeply upset by the full scope of academic ableism’s violence. The scope of this paper disallows analysis of the “contour lines” (Katz 2001) that connect the disparate sites and effects of academic ableism, from the displacement of communities for expanding campuses and university contracts with weapons manufacturers. Here, though, I pose some final questions that point to the violent limits of reforming academic care cultures, making us sit with the weight of the demands that bear these questions. For one, what does it mean for those of settler origin to demand

¹⁰ Despite WHO having declared the pandemic over, in the US, approximately 500-2,000 people have died from the virus every week in 2024, while it’s estimated that globally ~400 million and in the US ~18 million—with six million of those being children—are experiencing Long Covid (CDC 2024; Altmann et al. 2023; AAP 2024).

(imperfect) access to a university on stolen land (Jaffee and John 2018)? What would it look like to challenge the “assumed desirability of access/inclusion” in our feminist geographies of academic care (Mingus 2010)? And in the current moment in which interdependency is the new catch-all solution (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2022), how do we confront the uneven interdependencies that reproduce the university while also spurring counter-interdependencies with those who may sometimes be unable to care, emote, behave, or communicate in ways that are needed or desired? And finally, in what moments can turning away from happiness offer us richer, more complicated affective relationalities?

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