The Work of Ambivalence: Autonomy, Collaboration, and Care in the Neoliberal US University

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The Work of Ambivalence: Autonomy, Collaboration, and Care in the Neoliberal US University

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Can science be feminist? Can feminist science emerge from and take hold within the neoliberal university? As a collaboratory of researchers and educators under the name Star Fem Co*Lab, the previous questions have shaped our in-progress book, The Science We are For: A Feminist Pocket Guide. The aim of the guide is to take readers, with a focus on undergraduate and popular audiences, away from routinized ways of thinking about and doing science—such as science in the service of profit over people—towards a feminist science practice that is focused on always asking “who is science for?” In this article, we discuss how feminist collaboration might take shape within the neoliberal university as a challenge to the Eurocentric models of scientific knowledge production and valuation on which the institution rests. Our six-member collaboratory reflects on the experiences and motivations that shaped our co-labor of thinking, writing, and care to shed light on roots and routes toward a feminist pedagogy invested in equipping students with practical tools for social justice science engagement. As such, this article makes the case for a vision of feminist science that brings together feminist theory with scientific research and social studies of science to retool and reclaim scientific knowledge production by and for social justice imperatives to redirect power, resources, and knowledge to benefit communities most impacted by imperialistic science and its histories.

Keywords: Collaboration / Feminism / Imperialism / Pedagogy / Science / Social Justice

How do we work from the spaces of the academic industrial complex, a set of entangled institutions that we are not necessarily “for?” How do we exist in a
structure that we don't believe in, one that is built upon the exploitation and commodification of land, labor, physical, cognitive, and emotional resources? What do we do about educational institutions invested in creating ever more insurmountable paywalls and divisions of labor and knowledge? How can we construct the spaces to do the work we desire to do, in addition to resisting the spaces that make this difficult or impossible?

In this piece, we reflect on these questions and on working together in the university in ways that are sustaining, non-extractive, and autonomous. This may seem simple enough on the surface. However, the complexity of collaboration reflects our ambivalence about the universities that employ us. Rather than offer this as a model for others (which would imply that we are speaking from a position of mastery), we describe our collaboration as one possible relation of contradiction or ambivalence to the university among many. In sharing our account, we strive to explain how, in different ways, we have sought to redistribute the resources of the university to efforts beyond its scope—sometimes more successfully than others, yet not necessarily transcendent of its harms. What we describe as an ambivalent autonomous zone emerged from growing dissatisfaction with the demands placed on our labor and time by the university, while also connecting to the work of others engaged in similar projects of solidarity and collective change.

The piece is intended to be reflective and experimental, rather than programmatic and exhaustive. As such, we have chosen to narrate our collective journey in a more creative form than has traditionally been practiced for academic journal articles. We are far from being the first to reflect on the openings and closures of university-based collaboration, and our debts to scholars and activists who have thought critically about the university from both within and without are immeasurable (Boggs, Meyerhoff, Mitchell, Schwartz-Weinstein 2018; Chatterjee and Maira 2014; Moten and Harney 2013; paperson 2017; Sule 2011, to name just a few). Our hope is that our story will contribute to these ever-emerging discussions and resonate with those who are also looking for ways to emotionally, relationally, and intellectually divest from the university’s structures of validation.

We write from a privileged position as tenured and tenure-track faculty who collectively claim that, while we work in the university, we are not of it. Specifically, we are not in favor of shoring up the academic industrial complex (Bacchetta et al. 2018; Smith 2007). Instead, we are invested in how we can use our positions and privilege to work for the kinds of education, knowledge and change we are for. Navigating this complex landscape takes a toll on us. At the same time, it is through collectively struggling for spaces and changes we are for that we also find the strength to continue. In this article we offer ways that we have learned to build and navigate our collaboration, what we call an ambivalent autonomous zone. We understand ambivalence as a situational position in which our encounters with one another were made possible
by the university, but our continued work together reflects a commitment to create knowledge and relations that exceed the university. For us, autonomous zones refers not to autonomous, sovereign or liberal subjects, but to spaces of self-determination, interdependence, interconnection, and independence that require an immense amount of care, labor, and attention to maintain, even as we remain university employees (cf. Simpson 2017). In these spaces, we study, plan, and lend support to one another’s projects towards the worlds we want and need without containing these activities to the learning and policies of the university (Moten and Harney 2013).

Autonomous zones are created by communities—friends, research partners, comrades, co-conspirators—and are sustained by long-term commitments to self-determination and mutual interdependence. Ambivalent autonomous zones tensely inhabit the material and affective condition of being situated in the neoliberal university while dreaming and building alternatives to it. There are many ways to be ambivalent; it is not a singular position. Doing decolonial work within colonial and capitalist structures necessitates occupying a position of ambivalence in relation to the academic industrial complex, and we draw inspiration from decolonial scholars who underscore the “ethical dimension of the necessarily ongoing practice of healing, which need not even be realized in order to remain a worthwhile venture” (Ureña 2019, 1644; see also Varma 2020). Ambivalence is not a resting place, but a place of action and movement. Despite holding different views on its ultimate utility to lead to conditions of abolition and decolonization, we are compelled by the varying tensions it forces us to confront. This does not mean that we regard ambivalence as clearly defined—it is always situational, and degrees of ambivalence may shift as we navigate within and negotiate the strictures of the academic industrial complex. Thus, even within our collective, individuals are ambivalent towards the university in different ways. Following the work of feminists of color, we foreground how we work in coalition across difference (Nagar 2014; Johnson Reagon 1998; INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2003; Combahee River Collective 1977; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981).

Ambivalent autonomous zones are a feminist strategy for sustaining open-ended political efforts. They are one “emergent strategy” (Brown 2017) enabling imagination, sustenance, and analysis that can coalesce with vibrant multitudes of feminist work—both within and beyond the projects in which we are directly involved. In working to undertake this emergence, we come together through the university system while also working to dismantle it and create alternative possibilities. We co-inhabit the ambivalent autonomous zone as a way of charting and cultivating fugitive practices (Gumbs 2016; Harney and Moten 2013) that open up space for the work we are for within the structures that often foreclose it. It is a means by which we travel together, navigate promises of “the undercommons” (Harney and Moten 2013), and insist on collaboration without being co-opted, absorbed, or swallowed by the demands of capitalism.
For our collective, the ambivalent autonomous zone supports a set of conversations and relations deemed “unwise” or “impossible,” especially as early career or precariously positioned scholars. Relationships—especially equitable relationships—between academics and community members (artists, organizers, etc.) remain mostly illegible in university meritocratic structures. Even when universities call for “community-engaged” research, these are expected to proceed on academic terms and timelines. They also frequently focus on asking Native, Black, poor, or other disenfranchised communities to display or perform pain (Tuck and Yang 2014). This can be the case even when some organizers or artists are academics themselves. Worse, we may be encouraged to extract from communities by focusing on generating grants and news releases that do more for the university than for the communities we are part of and work within. Some of us resist this by deviating from these dominant or expected modes of “community-engaged” research in favor of building long-term, horizontal relationships rather than emphasizing academic outputs or products. Wise to this, as fellow scholars, our engagements with communities outside the university apparatus and with each other exceed the bounds of neoliberal models of collaboration. Throughout our collaboration, we have reflexively engaged with a university that we labor for, while seeking knowledge, histories and lines of flight that can pull us towards different horizons.

Our group came together in 2018 to develop feminist and social justice methods for technoscience. Some of us have backgrounds in computer science or public health, while others research medicine, science, and labor. All of us have stakes in technoscience because its practices shape our worlds. Although the original grant was for a 10-week collaboration, we have spent the last two and a half years studying together. We read, think, write, and also advise and reflect on the conditions in which we work and organize. In this time, we have focused on and worked out what our collaborative labor accomplishes and how it can be reconfigured towards our shared goals. One of the fruits of this labor is a co-authored book called *The Science We Are For*, which aims to expand possibilities of collaborative research by foregrounding a feminist and radical social justice.

While the funds that originally brought us together have long since dried up, we continue to work and show up for each other. We recognize that these kinds of relations within the academy, particularly after graduate school, are not as common as we would like. While some of the work we have done together (such as co-writing a book) goes into our promotion files, we do not work together because it helps us climb the academic ladder. We have been working against the productivity adage to “make everything count!” and attending more to the process of how we work together—the ways we relate to each other, why we find meaning in each other’s company—rather than what we “produce.” In the same vein, our ambivalence to “productivity” does not deny the fact that we need to produce recognizable outputs (articles, books, conference presentations, etc.) in
order to keep stable employment. There is a tension that we often find ourselves in between our process and the things we make together (the “products”)—this tense location offers reflection and imagining of the university we are for.

As individuals and as a collective, we have also fundraised and supported community-led groups, independent scholars, and writers. In so doing, our goal has been explicitly about reorienting the resources of the university away from its own reproduction and instead towards projects committed to building different worlds. We consider this re-routing of resources as one critical aspect of the ambivalent autonomous zone. This call to action in ambivalent formation has been, since the inception of our group, the product of action; the way we came together and how we sustain our actions is not happenstance. Rather, it is a process for bringing together a coalition, one not defined by autonomous subjects but one that sustains an ambivalent autonomous space from which to think and imagine beyond the academic industrial complex, again, even as we are working with it. At the same time, we acknowledge that autonomous zones are undeniably fragile. They are spaces of refuge, but they may also be fraught with obstacles that must be negotiated collectively.

How it Started

Our collaborative was originally funded through the mechanisms of a settler colonial land-grant institution. Yet we formed around the question of how to experiment with knowledge production methods, in the face of urgent social justice needs, to make new kinds of science and technological knowledge possible. This work required us to also experiment with the formats of competitive academic convenings. Such seminars typically solicit applications from individual scholars. A selection committee forms a research group by inviting scholars based on the expertise and projects they bring. The seminars often gather scholars who do not know each other, hoping that they can produce knowledge—books or performances for example—out of their time together. The convener of our collaborative, describes designing a selection process that required participants to have active, politically engaged collaborations beyond the university, bringing those accountabilities and commitments into the room.

Scholars involved in such relations of accountability would be likely to sustain the work to navigate persistent challenges and forge solidarities among diverse movements. Through this work, the convener was able to include former collaborators who not only had a committed research practice of thinking critically about science, medicine, and technology, but who also had histories of feminist collaboration that enabled a level of shared trust from the outset that encouraged forging new connections among us through this process. We spent a significant amount of time together developing these relationships with each other and with the people we invited into the seminar. Working on our collaboration and friendship was the bedrock of this project, even as it might
have remained mostly illegible to funders. During this time, some of us went from being contingent faculty (lecturers) to postdocs to securing tenure-track positions to receiving promotions. As we celebrated these moments, we also held space in our conversations for the ambivalences and struggles that these new structural roles and responsibilities entailed, struggles that many readers may relate to having experienced now or in the past, or are perhaps gearing up for in a contingent future.

Debts and Lineages

What does it feel like to work together from the ambivalent autonomous zone we have created and worked to sustain? Who or what guides a collaboration that is enveloped in ambivalence to the very structures that provide its platform but also seek to take it out from under us? Despite having secured stable employment, we position ourselves on the margins of the university, not quite belonging and not quite at home in the competitive, coldly professional, institutional environments pulled towards white supremacist and capitalist values. These places only value a small part of what we do, and sometimes for the wrong reasons. In order to collectively think, write, and build relationships in these spaces, we have often had to “steal” away from our institutional places of work and gather up the wisdom of lineages that cared for and taught us. We braid these lines in the margins, and in so doing, we make the margins home. Working from the margins is hard work.

In lieu of a statement locating ourselves in academic literature, we offer here a set of lineages and debts that influence how we form and nurture the ambivalent autonomous zone. We reflect on the poetics, organizing methods, solidarity relations and other resources that can hold space to transform or depart from the academic-industrial complex. Each of us brings multiple lineages and debts to our collective work. Even if these disciplines, politics, approaches, and commitments are not always compatible, we have found ways to bring some lessons, ways of living, and warnings from them to propagate here with one another. Across our differences, we have forged what Richa Nagar (2020) has called “situated solidarities”: saathis, or “co-travellers . . . that involve delicate dances of i/we/you/they . . . from unequal locations walk together on bumpy terrains” (2).

Our experimental practices of collaboration draw wisdom from a rich and transnational archive of movement legacies that breathe life into our endeavors: inspiring, conspiring, and provoking. These range from the Confederation of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) (see McAlevy 2016; Ruiz 1987), decolonization and liberation struggles in Turtle Island, Palestine, Kashmir and elsewhere, to black socialist lesbian politics (Combahee River Collective 1977), to ongoing demands for better living and working conditions by lecturers.
and graduate students within the University of California system (such as the cost of living adjustment (COLA) movement) where many of us are located. In our everyday practices of working together, we are also inspired by the care practices of grandmothers (elders) and communities (sometimes called mutual aid groups), by the building of intimate relationships while employed to care for someone else's families, yards and gardens, in political education projects that take place outside the university, and in acts of organized resistance and solidarity to apartheid and military technologies. The lineages are diverse. We need each other, our different insights, and the possibility of creating coalition rather than fighting over the Right Theory of the History of Change. This moment is one that demands that we deepen our understanding of one another's stakes and refuse to subsume or reduce our differences. Not only do we learn from each other by being together, we also become shaped by, part of, and complicit with each other's struggles and commitments.

These lineages draw from a range of work, some recognized as scholarly, some commonly called activism, some fictive, and some drawn from everyday life (Nye and Hamdy 2017; Erdrich 2012; Butler 1993). They signal our refusal to be reduced to a narrow definition of “academic” knowledge and collaboration and they necessarily demand that we commit ourselves to projects and relations that are only tangentially related to—or even deliberately illegible to—the academic industrial complex. Some of us brought lessons from indigenous Zapatista resistance. We drew on these lessons in transnational solidarity, movement building through care, and ethical precepts for working to make a world with room for many worlds (EZLN 2005). Others of us brought insights from organizers working across the Americas addressing housing, health, extraction, and violence. Their work showed us paths towards building solidarities and wider movements that span neighborhoods and continents, through careful and reflective organizing, choreographies, analysis, and reflection that address affect, capitalism, and histories of harm in forms such as the workshop, the panel, the solidarity trip, and the campaign (Fukui 2020; Center for Interdisciplinary Environmental Justice 2019). Some of us drew lessons from South Asian feminisms forging coalitions across class, caste, and difference (e.g., Nagar 2014) while navigating the scattered hegemonies of university theory (Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Some of us learned through laboring and labor organizing in Southern California, interpreting those experiences through the local legacies of black feminist civil rights activism that continue to critically articulate the connections between labor migration, anti-Blackness, and reproductive labor. Some of us drew on our transnational research and activism in liberation struggles in Kashmir to connect militarization as a global process, both there and in southern California, including on our own university campuses, where efforts to privatize, ramp up and militarized policing have escalated as labor conditions worsen for graduate students and precarious academic workers. Several of us were trained in feminist science studies to examine the production of epistemology as situated practices
and enactments, reproduction, and fracturing of power—and one always riven with racialization, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. These approaches demand that we reflexively assess our own positionalities, in identities but also, and more importantly, our social and institutional locations. Following these teachers, we do not critique or “undertake studies of activities in which we do not have a stake” (Helmreich 1998, 17), and as Gayatri Spivak adds, “the most serious critique in deconstruction is the critique of things that are extremely useful, things without which we cannot live on” (Spivak 2009, 5). We join others who critique epistemology of science from a feminist standpoint to re-organize knowledge for liberation (Liboiron 2016; Cruz et al. 2017; Giordano 2017; Reardon 2015; DaCosta and Philip 2010; Weasel 2001). Unhitched from projects that assert universal truths, we have been inspired by knowing our histories and militantly seeking our own and others liberation (Colectivo Situaciones 2003). This is where we write and think from, collaboratively.

Though we are against the academic industrial complex, we are not against education. In fact, our commitments to projects that call into being an anticapitalist, decolonial, and antiracist education system are stronger than ever. In the next section, we dive more deeply into the structures of harm and possibility that the university engenders through its demands for collaboration. We discuss the work of taking up this shared ambivalence and the ways we tarry in the tensions that emerge. We also distinguish between forms of neoliberal collaboration and the texture of social relations we have been trying to cultivate in our collective. We embrace slow research as a method (Mount et al. 2015), all the while working toward dialogical nurture and growth of collectivities that exceed, or even bypass, the logics and demands of the neoliberal university. This is how we inhabit our ambivalent autonomous zone together.

Curing with Venom: A Different Kind of Collaboration

As with any other colonial or capitalist institution, no relation under the neoliberal university is immune to the venom of competition, extraction, or forms of collaboration that recuperate harmful power relations. Here, we think about demands to collaborate that emanate from the university and other colonial and capitalistic institutions as a form of envenomation. By using the term “venom,” we also imagine different ways we can respond to envenomation: through processes of detoxification (removing toxins) and composting (working with leftovers and refusing waste). These processes can be useful responses to the academic industrial complex’s demands to commodify and delimit the kinds of relations we can develop.

Each of us works for a public university but understand the university’s public mission as having been deliberately undermined and eroded (Newfield 2018). The academic industrial complex thrives on toxic relationships and overburdened working conditions that stymie meaningful collaboration. The
allure of the university for many of us was the promise of study (Moten and Harney 2013, 67), answering questions meaningful in our lives and cultivating spaces for students to do the same. For some, this promise can be intoxicating, coaxing us to put our souls to work (Berardi 2009) by caring for students and coworkers amidst debt, precarity, and crisis. We may feel captivated by the work of caring and attempting to repair these harms (see Siciliano 2021), but we are also not trying to constantly repair to the point of normalizing the structures that harm and deepen crises.

Capitalistic infrastructures and practices sting, prick, bite, and inject students, faculty, and staff with competitive and individualistic aspirations on a daily basis. The academic industrial complex demands that we brand ourselves, rendering ourselves a recognizable and authenticated commodity and also violently reshaping our skins to match this performance. In the University of California system, where several of us are located, we have observed the ways people are encouraged to create dominions—collaborations become ways of recognizing and legitimizing those dominions through seeking donor or foundational grants that twist our visions towards the fantasies of the few.

To detoxify ourselves, we must unlearn what it is to be successful in the academic industrial complex. Through labor contracts and moralized matters of duty, we learn that we must compete to have individual success, steward the university, and become productive members of a capitalist society. We must extract from our communities to accumulate social and academic capital. We are supposed to be faithful to the university as an institution, which means being complicit with policing and border enforcement. It means protecting its intellectual property, teaching only enrolled and indebted students, evaluating and punishing students, justifying the accumulation of debt, and working with collaborators who are already contracted with, or recognized by, the university as legitimate partners. The university’s budget and accounting mechanisms seem designed to keep money locked within the university’s towers. Even in calls to collaborate with “community partners,” those organizations are forced to engage in the university bureaucracy’s terms and researcher’s habits, often reduced to being merely the sites or objects of intervention. The research projects fashion university workers as experts—those who formalize knowledge and inform policy—drawing on the creativity and knowledge of the communities so engaged. But as experts and experts-in-the-making, we often become fearful, timid, and alienated, afraid to hear or speak the deeper truths we might sense.

As the bar for academic productivity has rapidly increased in a never-ending milieu of austerity, so too has demand for the humanities and social sciences to justify their worthiness through collaborations across divisions, particularly with non-humanities and non-social science departments. We are encouraged to seek the participation of “hard” scientists, clinical researchers, and other STEM practitioners in our projects, even while they are largely exempted from this demand outside of the established parameters of “ethics” and “social impacts.”
In this “sink or swim” world, disciplines and projects that can bend themselves to the logic of the hard sciences are more likely to survive. Collaboration has also become a tool for the neoliberal university to get more work out of humanities and social science scholars, for whom official modes of recognition for this work are still nascent. All of us have been asked to participate in collaborations not of our own making, which we have found to be circumscribed and instrumentalized. In many multidisciplinary collaborations, the end product is predetermined and our labor is co-opted to meet the needs of a large granting agency, foundation, or some other branding force. Our experiences collaborating with fields such as medicine or computer science have often left a bitter taste, in which the collaboration only happens because there is already money on the table and a pre-conceptualized outcome dreamt and financed by a big funding agency. Humanities and social science scholars often play a prefigured role as translators in these processes: translating the agendas of large corporations into local, energizing projects. University researchers, as workers, contort to form their collaborations by picking a person that makes them look woke or interested in the social aspect of a problem that needs solving. Too often, such collaborations become ways of manufacturing or perpetuating hegemony. Grants are one way that funding institutions do this. They do so by framing challenges and inviting entrepreneurial academic workers to translate their work into a new common sense (Crehan 2016; Gramsci 1971). Though these types of grants provide a physical place, time, and money to “converge” different institutional scholars, the process of collaboration looks different depending on how those scholars want to “converge.” The “how” of that convergence tells you whether it will be one that normalizes envenomations of the academic-industrial complex, or whether it might be open to possibilities for encounters and alliances that exceed the hegemonic frame.

As a collective, we experienced these contradictions first-hand, even as we endeavored to subvert neoliberal models of collaboration. We branded ourselves as a group committed to feminist and social justice approaches to Science and Technology Studies (STS). In our work together, rather than replicate the prefigured collaborations, we drew on a women-of-color led legacy of coalition-building that emphasizes open-endedness and connects sympathetic projects working for social change. Setting aside the institutional economy of our employment, we used our collaboration to create alternate economies of knowledge, labor and politics. To do this, we needed funding infrastructure that could offer us a space and resources to do new kinds of collaboration and to have non-toxic relationships—it provided time and infrastructure to form what we have come to understand as an ambivalent autonomous zone. In a university system increasingly committed to STEM learning, funding that is committed to the humanities is a temporary refuge.

Venom can be either deadly or medicinal, depending on the amount and mode of its usage. We take inspiration from this idea to show how we can take
elements from our toxic environment and remake them. Our goal is to imagine a knowledge sharing practice that exceeds the academic industrial complex. This includes a range of practices, including detoxification and composting (working with leftovers). All these undo the way the academic industrial complex socializes its subjects into toxic relationships and devalues collaborative work at the same time that it invokes that work as cutting-edge and valuable for the university’s portfolio. The toxins of capital accumulation, rugged individualism, and racialized valuation are—at least currently—all liberally emitted by the academic industrial complex. Based on our prior political commitments, relationships, and desires, we spent time discussing what toxic environments we had navigated individually and were mutually against. These critiques fostered relations of trust and shared orientation, often through friction and heated discussion. We also explored how refusal and opposition invite us to imagine new and generative forms of knowledge and practice (see Simpson 2014, Cifor et al. 2019). Our shared work has therefore been to identify and build on our shared goals.

In what follows, we describe the venomous relations we want to refuse, as well as the presents and horizons we are collectively for. These include those we share in the here and now, and as we collectively build on feminist visions for radical connection and near-future transformation. Refusal, frustration, isolation, and anger are mobilizing forces. They guide us to articulate what we don’t want and why we don’t want it. Yet as our sustained histories have demonstrated, this is only half of the work. We also had to invest labor into building something from the rubble. This required creative labor, hope, and engagement. We figured out what we want to build in the wake of refusal—in the practice that emerged from navigating those toxic things we are against (Abolition Collective 2020).

Composting is the work of turning what remains into something useful. It is laborious and slow. Over the course of our collaboration—and our engagement with the other collaborations that are meaningful to us—we stand against a culture that cancels and disposes and that has expiration dates on collaborations and relationships. We draw inspiration from the kitchens we grew up in, where almost nothing was thrown away: plastic bags were carefully washed, hung up to dry and reused; vegetable scraps were separated and used to make compost; and jars and containers became new homes for pickles, chutneys, and salsas. We understand this work as feminist praxis. When funders don’t see our vision, we scrap together small pots of money to enable our continued relationality. Such scrapping allowed us to physically meet even after our funding ended so that we could continue to think, envision, and write our book. We paid for our own gas and plane tickets; we slept in each other’s living rooms; we cooked meals instead of eating catered food. We have learned not to depend solely on the university’s resources to bring us together. As one of our group members put it, “we work from the little corners we cut out.”
The leftovers and remainders we compost are not just material resources, but more importantly, time.

We acknowledge the toxic environment in which we are all swimming, but we create islands of respite. We don’t work together because of the rewards it will bring or for academic accolades, but because of the other elements that continue to bring us together, elements which we describe in detail below. For some people, “relationships” might be a byproduct or side effect (marginal) of a collaboration, but for us it is the reason we keep returning. Working from the margins requires us to be extra care-full—we have to squeeze out time from our work and personal lives, consistently refuse to instrumentalize our relations with each other, and make sure we are revitalizing our connections with each other (cobwebs and dust accumulate quickly in fragile ambivalent autonomous zones). There are periods of lull and transformation. Both require attention. Compost, for example, can remain unusable if it is not cared for, if there is not a balance between green and brown materials or if it is too wet or dry.

In the next section, we reflect more on this feminist ethics of relationality that is at the core of our collaborative practices.

**Collective Care and World Building**

What makes a social justice science collaboration different from, say, the National Science Foundation calls for “convergence research?” First, we need to start from a place that asks “what is this for?” and “whom is this for?” to keep our collaborations autonomous of neoliberal interests. We do not work to promote national competitiveness or imperial might. We work for liberation from capitalism and empire. Second, our work is process-oriented rather than product-oriented. In product-oriented work, there might be no relationship between the people in the room other than a commitment they have made to a grant plan. When we decommodify collaboration, we realize that we are part of many non-institutional collaborations. Process-oriented collective work must displace the university as the central location of knowledge. Collaboration at the core means de-compartmentalizing methods or frames to solve material and epistemic problems. De-compartmentalization enables us to work alongside various communities, collectives, organizations, and peoples for the purpose of solving problems. The compartmentalization, institutionalization, and hierarchization of knowledge within the neoliberal university has produced the deadly venom—but knowledge itself can be medicine. Feminist and other social justice collaborations require that creating relationships emerges as a primary technique. Care might mean giving up privilege or resources: “the persistent critique of what we cannot not want” may require us to give up things we want and feel we need. Rather than a guarantee that such a collaboration can produce a rosy communal space for everyone, it requires commitment to process: negotiation and trust.
Colleague or coworker relations may be friendly, but they are not necessarily friendships. Friendly relationships lubricate productive collaboration (as corporations well know). Social scientists might build rapport to extract knowledge or artifacts for research. Scholars might establish friendly relations to build intellectual alliances, compete for resources, or make their jobs more enjoyable. These lubrications often ride on Euro-American elite social norms, throwing up friction or inflicting harm in ways that are classed, gendered, raced, and xenophobic.

As a collective committed to deprofessionalizing ourselves as intellectuals, we open ourselves up to different ways of relating to each other (Esteva 2018). For us, friendship has been one important process to detoxify ourselves of the interpersonal, competitive expectations of the academic industrial complex. Friendship is not a given, it is a process, a continual negotiation, in which we open ourselves to deprofessionalization and to different kinds of relations. Friendship implies solidarity beyond the zone of exchange or transaction.

What makes our collaboration feel different from other collaborations is that we share an ambivalence about the university as the home for the work we do, and want to do, in the world. We have found a sense of home in each other's commitments and ambivalences through our ongoing friendships (though solidarity and resonance might take many other shapes). Academic institutions have demarcated spaces for collaborative work, but there isn't a place to think about or plan for chemistry. Where there is, it tends to smell of nepotism, old boys' networks, or cruel optimism (Berlant 2011) that envenomates us. Instead, we pay attention to the quality and affective tenor of relations behind how we organize and relate to one another. We try to mark when our labor might be reproducing the academic industrial complex and when it challenges its status quo values of extraction and hierarchy. Sometimes we might do both; however, the point of questioning is to become more mindful of those dynamics of imbrication and cooptation. Those dynamics proceed through infrastructure, through embodied habits, and through ways university processes work to guide us and make us legible. We must attend to whether our feelings of commitment and loyalty to the university hide a contract for uncompensated labor, one that may subvert the possibilities for our collaborations to exceed the colleague/coworker norm to include more of our full selves and lives.

We embrace a desire-based framework in how we relate to each other (Tuck 2009). Extending Eve Tuck's meaning to reflect on research collaborations themselves, we argue against cultural norms in US academia that implicitly oppose pleasure and rigor. We have gotten to know each other as people, not just as academics. We have made substantial space in our relationships for “non productive” time: going on walks, chatting, musing, cooking, and listening to music. We have been able to reflect on and work with that ambivalence thanks to an alchemical mix of friendship, intellectual trust, political trust, and respect we have developed for one another.
We came together thanks to an already existing set of relationships, forged in part through shared political commitments. Few knew everybody else at the start, but everybody came to the group with at least one friendship in place. Friendship underwrote our intellectual and political debates and negotiations with a commitment to move through fears and anxieties together. We weren’t just intellectual and political swipe-rights for each other; rather, we recognized in one another a deep commitment to an ethics of care that we understand as feminist, as well as histories of caring for some of the others in the group. Despite this, it still took time for us to get to know each other, to let the multiple relationalities between us flourish, some faster and some slower. This shared orientation remained somewhat hidden or obscured in our grant proposal and methodology, precisely because these are not the values of university-based research and practice, even in the humanities. Over time, we began to gain an even deeper understanding of how the element of care, of committing to proceeding through shared process and space, with their likely moments of joy but also discomfort, were essential to collaborating and taking risks together. The risks involved experimenting with forms of idea work that are not (yet) part of institutional recognition and reward systems. One product of this work is our unconventional book manuscript about feminist approaches to technoscience, *The Science We are For: A Feminist Pocket Guide*, as well as engaging in open-ended and searching collaborative work.

In foregrounding friendship, love, and care as the situated ethics of collaboration, we draw inspiration from feminist scholarship on revolutionary love. Second wave autonomous feminist Maria Mies, writing from Italy in the 1970s, warned that romantic love was an invention that underwrote the nuclear family and its labor relations, distracting us perhaps from other types of politicized love. Whereas workers contracted their time for wages, the housewife would contract (through the institution of marriage) her work for love. Collaboration can feel like revolutionary love, because it isn’t bound to an institution, it doesn’t hide an unpaid labor contract within it, and it isn’t exclusive. Drawing on feminist notions of revolutionary love allows us to recognize the importance of braiding together friendship and politics (Berlant and Hardt 2011; Nash 2011; Kelley 2002). All of us belong to organizing spaces where politics and friendship nurture one another and offer an opportunity for collective growth. Thinking about how love and friendship play a role in collaborative-thinking, -making, and -desiring should be an essential part of feminist methodologies of collaboration, and indeed, we have worked to elaborate these in our collaboratively written book manuscript. As we grew to trust in one another, we also expanded the collective space we forged to bring together others with whom we organized, studied, and struggled, creating new connections across movements. We resist nepotism and expand solidarity.

We also take friendship seriously as a relational ethic that is foundational to our collaborative work. Friendship offers a counterpoint to romantic love, and to the demand for fidelity to institutions, in that it is a way to practice being...
with others in the world. Friendship allows for both trust and risk to flourish together; we allow ourselves to be influenced and changed by others, including the very foundational reasons of why we work together. We understand that in corporate industry work, friendship and rapport can become financialized as corporate culture and workplace spirit, all under the watchful gaze of supervisors. The relations that result in those spaces are not necessarily friendships where people can co-struggle, where practicing vulnerable modes of becoming a new kind of feminist, more attuned to the nuance of ethics of care, are possible.

In the friendships we have cultivated in our group, we have foregrounded non-instrumental ways of being together—in terms of relations, time, and care. From the scraps of time and resources available, we build spaces to act and think with one another. As we put a meeting on the calendar we feel: I enjoy you, I trust your political commitments, I want to support your work in the world, I learn not only from your research but from how you are in the world and in action. Sometimes, we meet and decide that we are not in the right space to work together. We reschedule. This is fine. We honor the multiple temporalities, obligations, and affective relations that structure our lives, and we try to lean into them, rather than hide them in our collaboration (see also Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020). At the same time, as a close alignment of political commitments and ideas about the world empowers our shared work, love and friendship are not devoid of power. As some of us have argued in our work, care and violence are sometimes interwoven. We do not always agree; we sometimes upset each other. Yet we allow those contestations to become part of who we are together and reshape ourselves, because we fundamentally reject liberal notions of ourselves as self-regulated and rational beings. Instead, we look to deepen the ties, relations, and obligations that connect us.

Our obligations to one another need care. adrienne maree brown (2017) points out that organizing, whether in the university, out, or in between, needs to meet people where they are. Forging a political project together, for brown, means working together in a way that is healing and sustaining. It means creating room for experimentation in how to live with one another in ways that can build the flexibility and trust that keeps a struggle for change strong. We agree that friendship can give space to experiment, to make mistakes, to be accountable for harm, and to be trusted to repair harm in a way that doesn’t break the work we do together.

**Flowing Like Water: Open-Endedness and Time**

In our work, we refuse the fixed teleologies of modernization, democratization, and revolution that are evident in technoscientific and capitalist progress narratives. In their wake, we propose the possibility of shared goals in coalition and a horizon of justice as a way to organize in a cacophonous concert, learning what we can from experimental practices.
Our political projects depend on the possibility of remaking difference in pursuit of liberation. Our projects, theorizing, prefigurations, and organizing confront and transform how differences come to matter where we are situated. For some of us, this has meant investing in projects to remake the academic industrial complex from within (such as UC Davis’ Feminist Research Institute or the Cops off Campus coalition), while for others of us, it has meant cultivating political educational spaces outside the university, in coalition with community groups (such as Turk Workers Coalition or the Center for Interdisciplinary Environmental Justice [CIEJ]). Formations of difference may be durable, but they are not fixed. Our collective work reaches for horizons of a world without exploitation and oppression, even if we cannot know exactly what that will look like from here. The horizon offers a way of speaking of the futures we can turn towards in coalition, even as the horizon is underdetermined in its form. Jodi Dean’s book *The Communist Horizon* describes communism not as a formation, but as a horizon—a “dimension of experience” and a way of marking space, underdetermined but orienting (2012, 1). This echoes Jose Muñoz’s (2009, 113) orientation to queerness as horizon: that which “lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people.” We might work towards a goal, underspecified but sufficiently sketched to draw us into coalition as we work out details. But we can work towards that horizon in myriad ways.

Autonomy is also a horizon of politics that we strive for, one that lets socialism, Indigenous sovereignties, self-determination, and other collective political forms coexist with other, dynamic systems of political co-existence and self-governance. From Zapatista autonomy, we find a model of “Un Mundo Donde Quepan Muchos Mundos”—“A world where many worlds fit”. And from autonomist Marxists, we remember that our social relations have not been formed outside capitalism. The academic industrial complex produces workers who learn to labor, self-invest, and generate debt in service of the social factory of the knowledge economy. We are not hopeful that a multitude in solidarity can organically spring from these social relations (Hardt and Negri 2017) formatted for debt, extraction, settler colonialism, and the reproduction of profitable difference (Dowling 2007). These solidarities in coalition must be worked for through experiments with our bodies, our practices of relating, and our risk-taking in working together across difference to find the emergent strategies that strive for shared horizons from where we are (brown 2017).

We also take seriously the possibility of friendship as a resource for enabling autonomy, experimentation, and accountable transformation of ourselves and relations when coupled with respect for peoples’ dignity and autonomy. Friendship underwrote our relationships with a commitment to care across our differences and adjusting when the forms of care needed were not the ones we knew how to provide. Friendship allowed us to do things together dialogically and playfully, allowing the trust and tolerance for the bumps and repairs that come
with political experimentation and getting it wrong and right. It allowed us to take time for doing things other than work towards a recognizable academic output. We practiced responsiveness that had elements of what Donna Haraway calls response-ability—the capacity of beings to develop in concert and interaction across difference (2008). Postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak also demands that the US academic take responsibility for the others we may overwrite or even erase through our power to speak over them, by creating the conditions in which others may be heard, to be able to respond, even though this necessarily diminishes our own platforms (1994). But more than response in interaction, this responsiveness rests on the kind of care, joy, and healing that is necessary to sustain our movements.

To move towards those horizons in friendship and autonomy, we must flow like water. We must experiment, reflect, and learn from pasts that hold keys to our futures in unexpected places. By flowing, we will find paths for critical practice and resistance. Water might shape shift. It can evaporate too. But when it flows in full, it produces transformative force. It erodes, pushes, and washes new realities into being.

**The Star Fem Co*Lab** is a feminist collective that works from an ambivalent autonomous zone. As a co*lab, we experiment with non-individuated, relational thought, writing, and authorship as part of working with and against the hegemonic material and affective impulses of neoliberal universities. Our self-naming was aided by the synchronistic appearance of a tarot card, The Star, as we formed our relations with one another. The Star arises after destruction and turmoil. Purpose and hope, rather than the structures left behind, guide The Star’s path in materializing alternatives.

**Notes**

1. The Star Fem Co*Lab is a feminist collective that works from an ambivalent autonomous zone. As a co*lab, we experiment with non-individuated, relational thought, writing, and authorship as part of working with and against the hegemonic material and affective impulses of neoliberal universities. Our self-naming was aided by the synchronistic appearance of a tarot card, The Star, as we formed our relations with one another. The Star arises after destruction and turmoil. Purpose and hope, rather than the structures left behind, guide The Star’s path in materializing alternatives.

2. We understand neoliberal US universities as a general, rather than a universal form (Tuck and Mackenzie, 2015). Although this is a special issue on the neoliberal university, we are attentive to the broader entanglements and co-constitutive relations among academic, carceral, border, and military industrial complexes. Building on the work of abolitionist university scholars, we do not understand prisons and universities as the same, or as fulfilling the same functions. Yet, universities and prisons often work in tandem, creating conceptual and political limits on the demand for “schools not jails.” Adding to existing scholarship, our approach seeks to “offer an occasion to trouble the institution as we know and inhabit it—and as it inhabits us” (Boggs, Meyerhoff,

3. All of us are deeply unsettled by the co-constitutive role that schooling plays in settler white supremacy and are inspired by autonomous learning spaces like that of Universidad de la Tierra, autonomous Zapatista learning spaces, and abolitionist University scholarship. We collectively feel that the neoliberal university does not support the kinds of collaboration we desire. We are trying to figure out a way, at least for a moment, to challenge it. We are committed to the ongoing rearrangement of desires and struggles happening within the university—free schools, universal health care, decarbonization, the end to prisons and campus policing, irreverence towards debt, decolonized syllabi, refusals to build space telescopes on unceded indigenous land.

4. At the heart of autonomous zones is the refusal of bad governing, akin to the Zapatistas’ refusal to work with el mal gobierno. It involves the embrace and the construction of self-governance and self-determination—identifying and negotiating collectively what we are for and how we will organize our interdependent lives. In our case, however, we are unable to have full autonomy based on our job contracts with the university on stolen land.

5. We also draw inspiration from the work on racialized maintenance by Roderic Crooks (2019), Salvador Zárate (2018), and Crooks and Zárate (2021).

6. The decolonial projects we are involved with are attentive to the (mis)appropriations of “decoloniality” in academia; advancing Tuck and Yang’s powerful note that “decolonization is not a metaphor.” Our efforts include, but are not limited to: redirecting scientific resources and knowledge to indigenous communities in the Andes (Center for Interdisciplinary Environmental Justice); ongoing work in a University of California-wide and California State University-wide campaign to get cops off university campuses (Cops Off Campus), mutual aid and political education work (People’s University and We All We Got SD), efforts to return ancestral remains and produce institutional accountability from UC campuses to tribes (Carrying Our Ancestors Home); popular education, multi-racial community-led efforts to survive the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern California through strategic partnerships with the University of California, Irvine (OC-CHECT & HEAL OC).

7. In fact, we have encountered the difficulties of trying to get collaborative work in the humanities and social sciences recognized.

8. There are too many authors to cite in this area, but for examples of founding scholarship as well as examples of important recent works, see Haraway 1991, 1997, 2007; Weasel, 2001, Star 1991, Adele Clark 1998, 2005.

9. Thanks to one of our anonymous reviewers for teasing apart this distinction.


11. Or alternatively during the pandemic, we were indirectly encouraged to provide lower quality education to our students (in the name of care), even as their tuition costs remained sky high.
12. The Center for Interdisciplinary Environmental Justice and its members use their academic training in order to answer pertinent environmental and climate questions, but are not bound by their compartmentalized methods and disciplines: http://www.the-ciej.org/

13. Gayatri Spivak describes deconstruction in the postcolonial project: “The relationship between condition of (im)possibility and practice in Derrida would lead, in my understanding and formulation, to . . . the persistent critique of what we cannot not want.” (1997, 42). Spivak also notes, “The most serious critique in deconstruction is the critique of things that are extremely useful, things without which we cannot live on” (1997, 5).

14. One of our goals as a collective is to agitate for commitment to care in collaboration to be seen as an intellectual expertise that can be written into a group grant proposal.

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