



Grasping the affirmative: Power and the process of becoming joyful academic subjects

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ABSTRACT

We investigate becoming joyful subjects in academia among feminist geographers using the methodology of collective biography. Collective biography uses the researchers' own written memories about a set of experiences as texts for analysis. This paper brings together ideas about ontological positivity and power and applies them to the process of subjectification. We use the concepts *potentia* and *potestas* to explore force relations that generate particular subjects: here, joyful ones. We suggest that the generation of joyful subjects, even momentarily, helps to sustain the possibility of an affirmative politics. Joy, as an effect of the positivity of power, offers one pathway towards engaging varied feminist world-making projects within the academy, and beyond.

1. Finding joyful academic subjects

How can we participate in generating political spaces within the university that affirm the world we live in, that make us joyful in what we do as academics? How do possibilities arise for sustaining joyful subjects through our actions? How does subject formation work in and through our everyday relationships that facilitate becoming a joyful academic? Examining power helps address these questions. We understand power as generative, moulding all sorts of subjectivities as well as other things in the world. A crucial project for feminist and critical geographers is to understand how sets of power relations are organized between people and in institutions, how these power relations have sedimented into structures, and what subjects are generated through power.

As part of the emotional turn in the social sciences, and in geography, we seek to explore particular emotions associated with the generation of academic subjects. Emotions – arising from everyday activities in both professional and non-professional parts of life – are enmeshed in the process of becoming as much as the practices of reading, writing, and learning. We chose to look at joy. Our recent work has shown that joy is turbulent and is rarely felt in academic settings in ways that would be recognizable in non-academic ones (Kern et al., 2014). For instance, rather than ecstasy, the joy associated with the following memory is of what one might call the ‘slow-burning embers’

variety.

Our group for lunch was smaller than usual, just the two of us sitting across from one another at the end of a long cafeteria table. [...] Our easy interaction was full of laughter about baseball, movies, and cooking mistakes. “What about next year?”, he asked abruptly. I swallowed the gulp of water I had in my mouth. How did the conversation turn to plans for the future, my plans for the future? I leaned forward, schlumpfing over my plate of food. I leaned to the side, my left elbow on the table where the misplaced spoon lay unwanted. My hand cupped the side of my forehead, while I picked at what remained of my green beans and macaroni-and-cheese with a dull-tined fork. I couldn't meet his eyes. I don't know. I mean I think I'd like to do this. I enjoy thinking about ideas. “So you don't think you'll get a job?” I drop my hands to my lap and look up. I just don't know. Maybe? “You should think so,” he replied, in a tone that was unlike any that I knew of him: soft and more resolved than our usual banter.

This memory was written in response to the prompt: Do you recall a moment of joy when you were involved in some aspect of academic training when you were being trained? Though privileged in academic communities, training is only one part of becoming an academic subject, a process that is ongoing without a resolution or endpoint. Reflections on training in the literature tend to address complicated relationships between students and supervisors and the complexities of

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making decisions in the field (e.g. Cook, 2001; Jokinen and Caretta, 2016; Sotoudehnia, 2017). Yet in this memory, the reflection privileges joy when engaging with an authority figure. In the memory, ‘he’ is an academic authority and – most important for our argument in this paper – acting from an already formed subject positioning – that of dissertation supervisor. Our purpose here is to figure out how power works such that this encounter fosters an atmosphere of joy, rather than one of admonishment for not being finished yet, and for not knowing what lies ahead career-wise.

Our previous work on becoming a joyful academic subject has focused on various aspects of becoming: cultivating joy (Kern et al., 2014), methods for investigating joy (Hawkins et al., 2016), and becoming an intimate collective through work on joy (Falconer Al-Hindi et al., 2017). We extend this work by bringing together ideas about ontological positivity and power, and applying them to becoming as manifest in the process of subjectification. We use the concepts *potentia* and *potestas* to explore force relations that generate particular subjects. In this case, joyful ones. In the rest of this article, we first contextualize our work in relation to feminist geographical scholarship on emotions, in order to specify how our work departs from this tradition: namely, we begin from the question of power, rather than the nature of affect or emotion. We then explain Rosi Braidotti’s notions of *potentia* and *potestas* as a way both to capture the process of becoming and to talk about power and joy. We next review a collective biography approach to working with memories. In the remainder of the article, we begin to follow the paths of *potentia* and *potestas* through a shared analysis of a set of systematically-recalled memories about the process of becoming feminist academic subjects. We trace the emergence of joyful academic subjects in terms of harnessing *potentia* and *potestas* and stepping into the flow of *potentia* and *potestas*. We close with a return to the memory above to emphasize that a joyful academic subject emerges through engagements with power that are available in everyday scholarly life.

2. Framing power in subject formation

Feminist geographers have been at the forefront of empirical and conceptual work on emotions in geography, including fear, anger, love, hope, care, and intimacy, among many others (respectively, Pain, 2010; Boothroyd et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2013; Moss, 2014a; Lawson, 2009; Olson, 2016; Moss and Donovan, 2017). This work is concerned with the role of emotions in everyday living as well as their connections to processes and flows of power across multiple sites and scales (Mountz and Hyndman, 2006; Oswin and Olund, 2010; Pain and Staeheli, 2014). Joy has rarely been included in the range of emotions under consideration. Our earlier work on joy (Kern et al., 2014) explored how joy manifests in academic practice, often through surprisingly mundane activities, such as revising a paper, answering an e-mail, or leading a seminar. In Kern et al. (2014) we found that so-called pure joy was typically absent from memories, and that joy was often entangled with a cocktail of other emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt. In our work, joy was both embodied and spatial; we found it to be generated relationally with colleagues, places and objects, disrupting the idealized myth of the lone self-sufficient and efficient scholar.

Extending this work, we want to consider academic practices that bring joy to us as feminist academics rather than those that bring us dejection, sorrow, and unhappiness (e.g. Brunila, 2016; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Dowling, 2008). In doing so, we position our project within the small but growing group of feminist geographers committed to affirming life even as we engage in the work of critique (e.g. McKittrick, 2006; Parker, 2017). The affirmative turn makes space to consider positive affect and emotions within a theoretical, conceptual, and political landscape that is often stark and austere (e.g. Lawson, 2009). It also creates room for considering the range of emotions that doing academic work generates and that produces us as subjects (e.g. Askins, 2017; Moss, 2014b; Willis, 2012; Colls, 2012). Paying attention to academic practices that bring us joy within a wider

project of affirmation permits an accounting of how power works in the making of a joyful feminist subject in the academy.

We know that exploring joy in the context of power is unusual. Feminist geographers have written about how the neoliberal(izing) university constrains actions and agency, intensifies labour, valorizes particular identities, and shapes subject positionings available to feminist academics and academics who identify as women (e.g. Dowling, 2008; Strauss, 2013; Maddrell et al., 2016; Gillen, 2015; Mountz et al., 2015). The neoliberal academic subject is enmeshed with persistent adverse actions such as bullying, harassment, and labour rights violations amidst the imposition of well-documented neoliberal practices that keep academics busy advertising both themselves and their courses, fighting program closures, and accounting for their time (see Crooks and Castleden, 2012; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Moss, 2013; Berg et al., 2014). Through nuanced accounts of the entwinement of the power relations constituting subjects, this work shows just how varied the neoliberal academic subject is. Yet exposure of the multiple ways in which the university as a workplace positions academics is not a welcome critique. Feminists, often derided for pointing out the oppressions built into the organization of society and polity, are cast as killjoys, who throw wrenches into otherwise smoothly operating systems and institutions that reward some at the expense of others (after Ahmed, 2010; see also Ahmed, 2017). In our project, we acknowledge that the work of feminism is to point out inequities and create pathways to social justice (see Parker, 2017). It is not our aim to cling to an elusive, idealized notion of a joyful, contented academic in the midst of ongoing systemic and systematic exploitation within institutions and in everyday encounters. Nor do we aim to promote “positive thinking” as a political strategy to dismantle systems of oppression (a position thoroughly critiqued in disability studies, e.g. Clare, 2017; DeVolder, 2013; Sunderland et al., 2009). Further, our work is not concerned with identity. Rather, our purpose in this paper is to focus on the process of becoming joyful academic subjects, ones that are not necessarily or solely killjoys, cynics, or neoliberal subjects.

Nomadic theory provides an affirmative framing for understanding the process of becoming. Nomads are transitory and simultaneously inhabit multiple subjectivities that can be relatively bounded and solid or somewhat diffuse and ephemeral (Braidotti, 2011a, 55–63). Figuring out how power works in the process of becoming is central to understanding how multiple subjectivities reside in a single nomad. Instead of positioning an individual through markers of social identity within a set of interlocking systems of oppression, in an affirmative framing the departure point for analysis is in the process. In scrutinizing what power is doing, how it is moving, and what its effects are, it can then be mapped onto the nomadic subject. An affirmation rooted in a sustainable ethics, that keeps the subject from dissolving, can guide how nomads maneuver through embodied subjectivities. Through a sustainable ethics, nomadic subjects, who comprise both the imagined ideal and the embodied divergences, hold the potential to generate “social horizons of hope” (Braidotti, 2010, 57).

Our work is focused on joy and organized around the emergence of a joyful academic subject. As part of the analysis, we did not mediate joy through any other marker of social identity. As part of her affirmative politics, Braidotti (2011a, 293) encourages “experimenting with alternatives, working both at the concrete and imaginary levels” as a way to provide both form and content to the embodied subjectivities one inhabits. This type of approach refuses an oppositional, adversarial politics and favours a politics that works with what is available within a continuous stream of what could be possible. While the use of critical theory is incredibly effective in critiquing how subjects form and what they consist of, it must also be central to informing what subjects could look like and what they could consist of (Braidotti, 2011b, 6). In this sense, we are showing what a joyful subject could look like in light of the process of becoming.

A joyful academic subject as nomad then requires scrutiny so that a critical lens of feminist inquiry can trace how power works in the

process of becoming. We are interested in the effects of the exposure of the subject to “constant though nondestructive fluxes of transformation,” which both foster and restrain the emergence of a subject (Braidotti, 2011b, 303). A joyful academic subject must withstand the incessant stream of demands, pressures, and tensions that inundate an academic's life, in order to be stable enough to take form, sustain itself, and connect to other subjects. Recognizing that there are myriad force relations involved in this process of becoming, we have chosen to focus on two that are particularly generative. Braidotti (2011a,b: 367, fn.1) uses *potentia* and *potestas* to describe the difference between affirmative and restrictive aspects of power. *Potentia* is the generative aspect of power that creates, produces, and sustains flow; *potestas* is the generative aspect of power that interrupts, squashes, and restricts flow. *Potentia* need not be linked to positive feelings such as joy, love, and hope, just as *potestas* need not be linked to sorrow, hate, or despair. *Potentia* involves the capacity to endure, to continue carving out favourable space, and to nourish one's self in the face of hardship. It explains how solidified nodes of aggregated force relations break apart, are pushed aside, or even displaced entirely in order to open up possibilities for actions, change, and inhabitation (see Falconer Al-Hindi et al., 2017). *Potestas* forms obstructions, roadblocks that reduce options for action and prevent change. It explains how existing configurations of power maintain their form, fend off transformative interactions, and fortify boundaries.

Like Braidotti (2011b: 95), what we seek to facilitate “is not a ‘feel-good’ sort of sentimentality, but rather a rigorous composition of forces and relations” that contribute to becoming. Both positive thinking (as in ‘we can change the world’) and negative emotions (such as anger) have served feminist politics well. Because *potentia* and *potestas* attempt to capture *how* power works in subjects' emergence, there is no direct link to what one would consider either positive or negative emotions. Indeed, we are interested in the condition of generativity and not the experience of emotion. We are interested in what joy does, not how it feels. Scrutinizing the generation of embodied subjectivities, that is, scrutinizing the process of becoming, in this way permits us to chart some of the spaces that comprise the “politically invested cartography” we dip in and out of in our daily lives as academics (Braidotti's 2011a: 4 and 54). As part of our cartography, in this paper, we trace but one subjectivity outside social markers of identity that we occupy through our nomadism: being a joyful academic subject.

3. A note on method

Collective biography is a methodological approach in feminist research that has been designed to interrogate processes related to subject formation. The two most prominent collective biography practices are Haug and her colleagues (1987), who focused on feminine socialization processes from a socialist feminist perspective, and Davies, Gannon and their students and colleagues (Davies and Gannon, 2006), who focused on the neoliberal subject using poststructural theories in analysis. Analytically, a focus on experience can show how varied subjects form in similar circumstances, such as working conditions at a university as a feminist academic (Zabrodskaja and Ellwood, 2011; see also Falconer Al-Hindi et al., 2017). Collective biography uses the process of recalling memories through a set of prompts designed to elicit specific types of memories; say, as in our work, of feeling joyful as an academic subject. After each group member writes an initial draft of a memory, the drafts are discussed by the group and finalized individually (Hawkins et al., 2016; see Mulvihill and Swaminathan, 2017).

Our collective biography work entails reading the written memories to delve more deeply into the process of becoming. Instead of describing the production of (unfinished) gendered subjects (after Haug et al., 1987) or neoliberal academic ones (after Davies and Gannon, 2006), we use our memories to trace the processes through which *affective* subjects form in the academy (see also Kern et al., 2014). Here, we use our memories to illustrate how restrictive and enabling aspects

of power are deeply intertwined, swirling together in our day-to-day practices as feminist scholars. The emergence of joy through these practices is not the vanquishing of *potestas*; rather, we have found that joy surfaces through turbulent circuits of power. Engaging with the question of what joy *does* leads us to examine how embodied subjectivities are generated through both the momentary harnessing of *potentia* and *potestas*, as well as the willful grasping of the affirmative when it becomes available.

We have come to understand that there are many dimensions of joy that register in some way as making us joyful in our work as feminist geographers. We grouped memories that resonated with one another. Bodily descriptions of joy include comportment, kinetics, and sensations. Relational descriptions include connections among us as group members, people in our personal and professional lives, and non-living things that have come to be part of our repertoire of joy. Affective descriptions include ways to describe our experiences of feeling, and the panoply of constituent emotions associated with our experiences of joy. There were dimensions of joy emerging from embracing the opportunity to push back against the institutional constraints of being an academic subject. Sometimes, joy surfaced through disengagement from the daily grind of academic work and at other times through engagement with agents of the university. Of particular note for this paper were those dimensions of joy that buoyed us as feminist academics and pushed us into sustaining spaces of possibility. By sustaining, we refer not to the length of the joyous moments, but to the sustainability of the work we do within the academy and the university as an institution. Once joyful subjects took form, staving off the strength and intensity of institutional force relations became important for sustaining the joyful academic subject among a sea of neoliberal ones.

4. Recognizing *potentia* and *potestas* in the process of becoming

We offer a generative take on power that brings into focus the process through which a subject emerges. Our goal in this section is to indicate some of the ways in which *potentia* and *potestas* together generate joyful academic subjects – at least momentarily. We use excerpts of our written memories to illustrate how we came to recognize *potentia* and *potestas* in the process of becoming.

I hang my head as I walk, chin grazing my collar bone with each step. I stick my fisted hands deeper into the pockets of my red fleece. My belt digs into the top of my hip. I mull over the pros and cons of moving to Sociology or staying where I am. Colleagues would be great to have. [...] Maybe I could teach feminist theory? [...] Max has heard it before, all the way to the beach, and now back. He listens, interjecting uh-huhs occasionally, still with sincerity. I stop and turn sharply to him. I raise my arms in the air, gesturing to no one in particular; the veins in my forearms standing out. “Telling us that we get to keep our jobs. What was that about? Why can't she leave us alone?” I clench my fists again, and shove both into my pockets. We continue our walk. I hang my head again, this time a little lower.

[...] I begin to speak, but a car door slams and interrupts my voice. Startled, I turn back. Diane comes rushing out of the car and runs toward me. I smile – deeply – “Oh, my, I haven't seen you in so long!” She reaches me before I can take a step toward her. She hugs me. My fists unclench as I draw them out of my pockets, and I grab her around the waist, tangling my arms in her scarf. “It's been way too long.” [...] Chit-chat. Then, parents. Cupcakes. Plans for study leave. It's late November. Maybe we should do that writing group. Yes. Yes! For sure! Diane waves as she climbs back in her car.

We continue our walk, more like a stroll. My chin lifts, I feel a little taller. I look up past the streetlight while Max talks about supper. The leaves on the oaks are clinging to the twisted branches. My running shoes are almost springy. My arms swing freely by my side. We decide to change our menu – let's have quesadillas – they are so fun to make. [...] With the breeze at our backs, the rest of the way home offers us pink clouds in a

turquoise sky.

In this excerpt, power relations swirl and shift as first *potestas* and then *potentia* expands and takes hold, showing how the joyful academic subject is produced by and through power. While out for a stroll with Max, she struggles under the weight of worries about work, clenching her fists and hanging her head. There is evidence of *potentia* at play even as she struggles, when she imagines teaching feminist geography in the future. But *potestas* seems to cloud these glimmers of hope. She carries the force relations and authority associated with the institution with her even when she is far from campus. Then, the slam of a car door startles her and interrupts *potestas* as Diane rushes towards her. The deep smile she gives Diane and the hug they share begins to shift the circuitry. Diane's cheer and enthusiasm invites *potentia* into the moment. Disentangling themselves, the ensuing chat about parents, cupcakes, work, and a writing group is now filled with notions of possibility. She lifts her chin, feels taller, her shoes are springy.

The joyful academic subject is now taking form. Diane's appearance is so very welcome, and the interaction so positive, that *potentia* suppresses *potestas*. The flows of power have shifted so dramatically that she is transformed. She moves differently, her body lighter, and her conversation with Max is so elevated that *fun* is a criterion for supper. This churning suspends the subject across at least two positionings. One is the disgruntled yet compliant academic subject who recognizes but rejects the idea that she should be grateful to the university. And one is the happier yet disdainful academic subject who contests the subject positioning on offer as she slides into one where she is reminded that there are like-minded colleagues. The intensity of the university's authority wanes as the shift shores up the boundaries of a different subject, reinforcing it as joyful. We want to emphasize that it is not *potentia* itself that is the force relation that generates joyful academic subjects: rather, the shifting interactions among *potentia* and *potestas* as the subject strains to grasp the affirmative aspects of force relations are responsible for the turbulence. Of course, this does not generate the joyful academic subject in the same way every time. In the rest of this paper, we follow two types of grasping the affirmative: harnessing *potentia* and *potestas* and stepping into the flow of *potentia* and *potestas*.

5. Grasping the affirmative

As shown in the excerpt above, force relations can be shifted by unexpected encounters. Recognizing the generative nature of turbulent flows of power in the constitution of subjects allows us to examine more intently the process of becoming through *potentia* and *potestas*. We found that sometimes, the subject took an active role in redirecting flows of power or maneuvering into the flow of *potentia*. We came to code this as “agency” and we understand it to involve what Braidotti (2006: 180) calls the activation of “a more affirmative set of passions,” wherein “the subject subtracts him, [their] or herself from the reactive affects by stepping out of the negativity circuit. By virtue of this she or he transcends negativity, thereby generating and making room for more affirmative forces.” From our analysis, two processes emerged that describe the agentic possibilities of engaging with these force relations. The first we named “harnessing the flow,” as part of redirecting the circuitry toward the emergence of a more affirmative subject, and the second, “stepping into the flow,” as part of recognizing a flow that would sustain a more affirmative subject. In the sections that follow, we detail these processes as we observe them working in the becoming of joyful academic subjects.

5.1. Harnessing *potentia* and *potestas*

Many of the joyful moments we recalled were bound up with anxiety or distress as the effects of force relations pressed upon and entangled us in circuits of negativity, organized by institutional power and inequitable relationships. The emergence of a joyful subject was

sometimes shaped by redirecting the momentum of *potestas* in a process that we have come to call *harnessing the flow*. We understand harnessing as the capacity to direct the flow of force relations. Thus, harnessing is a term we use to capture the movement of *potestas* and *potentia* as part of the emergence of a less subjugated and more affirmative subject. In some cases harnessing involves individual actions that momentarily shift the inertia of institutional force relations in different directions, or bolstering the flow to generate space for a more joyful academic subject to emerge. We acknowledge that there is no guarantee that these actions will have the desired effects, and indeed below we illustrate how the holding back or redirection of *potestas* does not necessarily alter institutional conditions or even produce an unequivocal positive affect. Nonetheless, we want to emphasize agency here as part of a set of practices important for generating feminist and affirmative politics.

The provost opens a plain brown file folder and pulls out a small stack of papers. [...] She takes a long moment to flip through my CV with great deliberation, as if I am not the job candidate who has already been here for years. “Arrange your face,” I remind myself as I silently clench and unclench my teeth. I focus on the small round dish of candy on the table. It sits exactly halfway between us. Reaching out to take one would surely be cheeky but that realization only heightens the temptation. I taste the sweetness on my tongue, cutting through the fuzzy coffee feeling in my mouth. [...] This interview has been delayed by the three-week faculty strike that ended just last month. “So,” the provost finally begins, putting the pages of the CV back in order and focusing on the first. “How does your training influence your current research?” I slowly pull in my diaphragm and it stays that way. My eyes narrow slightly at the disingenuous question. I give my standard response. [...] She nods slowly. Condescension? Under the table I flex my ankles and let my high heels slip halfway off my feet, wiggling my squished toes in my tights, feet a little sore from a morning of teaching. I glance at the door, once, twice. “And now that you're back at work, how are your classes going?” Inappropriate question. I keep my breathing steady, although it is confined to the top of my lungs. “They're going well,” I reply politely. [...] She gives me a tight-lipped smile, her head tilted slightly to one side. “But really, how are your students?” Her saccharine tone and exaggerated expression of concern are cues that I should use this opportunity to express sympathy for my poor students, and most importantly, remorse for going on strike. [...] Separate myself from my militant colleagues, and my thorn-in-her-side department. My chest is hot, but any red flush is hidden beneath my dress. I lean back, let my shoulders lower and my chest expand. My eyes meet hers with intensity. “My students? They're great. We have an excellent relationship and they've been quite understanding of the whole situation.” She snorts a terse “hmpf” as she snaps my file closed and stands up. I pop my feet back into my shoes and push my chair away. I smile widely but my eyes spark coldly as I rise up, taller than her in my heels. I shake her hand firmly and turn toward the door.

Institutional authority saturates the context within which she must carve out a place to inhabit the university. Some of her subtle movements hold the constraints of *potestas* at bay – perhaps just barely – such as arranging her face and offering only a standard response. Others, such as her contemplation of reaching for the candy, and glancing longingly toward the window, do more: They reorient the flow of power toward *potentia*. She tentatively asserts herself as she flexes her ankles under the table and takes up a little more space in the room. Her silent labelling of the Provost's remarks as “disingenuous,” “inappropriate,” and mere “cues” reject her discourse, enhancing the promise of *potentia*. In response to *potestas* filling the room via the Provost's actions, including the question, “But really, how are your students?”, she maintains her composure and reorients the flow of power with words and bodily acts, ultimately shifting the tone of the encounter. In her refusal to collude with the Provost, she affirms the potential for joy as an effect of the positivity of power, and opens up political possibilities for herself, her “militant colleagues,” and progressive change.

Redirecting the flow of force relations is not easy. Immersed in the

belly of the institution, in the Provost's office, she tries to find a way out by harnessing flows of power – both *potestas* and *potentia* – via an accumulation of subtle, embodied acts and imaginings that have been bubbling under the surface. In other examples of the process of generating joyful academic subjects, the harnessing of *potentia* was accomplished through attempts to interrupt the flow of *potestas*, holding it back and containing it, in order to survive while still mired in restrictive force relations of the academy.

I shuffle through the stack of printed papers. Okay, this is it. Did anyone see it? What about me? I bite my bottom lip, and wrinkle my forehead, and rub the back of my left ear. I hear my name. I jerk around, catching the stapler before it hits the ground. Yes, I had a good weekend, and you? I take a few more steps, sliding through the heavy door, hoping it doesn't slam behind me. I walk slowly back to my office, stepping into the comfort of my boots. I hear a rhythmic hum, quiet at first, then mostly audible, then quiet again. Halfway down the hall, I realize it is my own breathing. I pass an unknown colleague. I blink my eyes, avert his gaze, and squeeze my mail tighter. I arrive at my office. I take a deep breath and noiselessly place my mail on the edge of the desk. I pluck the letter off the stack and grip it with both hands. I take a couple of steps backward, leaning into the door. The knob jabs my side. I sidle further to the left. Don't crinkle the letter! As I loosen my grip, I stretch my neck, first left, then right. I look at the paper. There is a cottony feel to the bleached white paper. I roll my shoulders slightly forward. The crispness of the letters in black ink stands out: "Dear Provost, I am writing to inform you that I am resigning my position effectively immediately. ..."

Although the details are unarticulated, *potestas* in the form of working conditions that the subject can no longer bear permeates the moment as an absent presence. She seeks a strategy to release herself from being crushed under the weight of the obstructive university climate. Her solution is the letter. Freshly printed, it lurks amongst a stack of printouts in the copy room, silent yet brimming with explosive potential. She furtively plucks the letter from the pile and attempts to slip back to her private office. Yet she is forced again to engage in awkward office banter, a practice that maintains the everyday relations of the institution. In the quiet of her office, behind a closed door, she clutches the letter. Its material existence relieves some of the pressure of the restrictive force relations. Despite being neck deep in the institution she manages to eke out some comforting space for herself, using the very tools of the institution itself (letter writing, forms, correspondence). She redirects the flow of *potestas* by refusing the negative circuitry, using the possibility inherent in the letter to hold destructive forces at bay, making room – ever so briefly – for *potentia* to take hold. In a sense, the letter is a physical artifact of *potentia*, changing how she understands her relationship to the institution in a subtle but powerful way. The joyful subject emerges from the harnessing of force relations by making an active intervention where she partially shapes her relationship to the institution.

Being able to direct the flow of either *potentia* or *potestas* forms the basis of acts of intervention. In her description of Gilles Deleuze's academic practices, Braidotti notes (2006: 180) that some academics choose to "distance" themselves from the "negativity" emanating from and enveloping the common practices of academia. Working within institutions where intense competition, narcissism, boorishness, and self-aggrandizement are on the rise (Strauss, 2013) makes this all the more urgent. Joyful academic subjects can be generated through agentic acts that interrupt the flow of *potestas* and redirect it in order to interrupt oppressive force relations in a way that nourishes *potentia*. Being able to harness flows of power while being immersed within institutional practices and power dynamics is difficult and often involves subtle acts from within the confines of these institutions. Actively harnessing the flows of *potentia* and *potestas* to generate spaces that eclipse this negativity, even momentarily, sustains us as feminist academics.

5.2. Stepping into the flow of *potentia* and *potestas*

Joyful academic subjects might also emerge as they step into the flow of force relations. Affirmative possibilities are available in particular settings, and one can act to travel with the currents of *potentia*. In these instances of grasping the affirmative, *potestas* is always present. But rather than be drawn into limiting, institutionalizing force relations, the emergent subject aligns herself with other possibilities. Recognizing the availability of, and then embracing circuits of positivity, may generate more opportunities for joy. Often stepping into the flow of *potentia* means refusing negativity, creating connections, and building community. Sometimes the subject can plan or predict moments where access to the flow of *potentia* is likely, such as attending an event meant to foster community. At other times, the moment catches one by surprise and stepping into the flow may call for agility, perhaps in reaching for the unexpected.

As illustrated below, when an opportunity arises, the subject is drawn to *potentia* and is able to step into its path.

The speaker's passion reached across the first row of chairs to land in my chest. As she finished her first-person story of sexual assault and began to show the first in a series of video clips, I realized with the sensation of cool air across my forehead that I had taken the role of an active bystander in the past. I saw myself take the place of the video's actor demonstrating the role of active bystander. I thought, "yeah, that would work!" I caught myself nodding agreement as my backbone drew my body into a "ready" posture, confident that each of the three tactics demonstrated in the vignettes would be just as clear for the students who would have occasion to deploy them much more often than I. So much could change! This can work for racism, sexism, bullying – so many things! My chest expanded with the notion that our campus could transform itself, one bad incident averted at a time. As I turned first to the right and then to the left, my shoulders loose, I observed colleagues and students from across the campus nodding and smiling, too.

In the auditorium, *potentia* builds, gets whipped up, and spreads, generating a sense of possibility despite the troubling context of sexual assault. She is supported by the speaker's contagious enthusiasm as well as the logic of the specific steps of intervention explained in the video clips. She sees herself as an active bystander both in the past and in the future. Her assertion that the "campus could transform itself" is visceral as she assumes her "ready" posture which is reinforced for her by the nods and smiles of colleagues and students. The joyful feminist academic subject emerges out of alignments with currents of *potentia* in this moment of possibility for affirmative politics, a moment that interweaves individual action (the tools for intervention) and collective work towards change (with colleagues and students).

Embracing the flow of *potentia* facilitates the emergence of a joyful academic subject. The following memory details how one can get caught up in the circuitry of force relations where *potentia* dominates and appears abundant in its flow.

I pull open the stiff door balancing my heavy bag on my shoulder. A dull ache throbs in the muscle between my neck and shoulder from lugging this load around all day session to session – my program, computer, papers, sweater, snacks and water. My face is flushed and my dress clothes damp with a thin layer of sweat. I enter into a dimly lit warehouse-style building with high loft ceilings, shiny concrete floors and rows and rows of towering wooden bookshelves. [...] Am I in the right place? Then, I hear it far away in the distance. Voices. Laughter. I begin to move down the rows of colourful books. [...]

Suddenly I emerge. In the warm lights I see lots of people – mostly women – gathered together in small groups chatting, laughing and gesturing enthusiastically. [...] I hear my name being called and I twist around – a friend! Hugs and squeezes. [...] I gather around to share stories – "Can you believe this happened?" and "What an amazing accomplishment!" and "Have you checked out this new movie?"

The night begins to blur as I move from one group of friends to the next and then – I just do it. On my way back from the bathroom I walk directly up to a pod of strangers and tell them my name. [...] I am soon folded into this circle chatting and laughing, I learn about new exciting books to read, some ideas of what and how to teach and share some advice with the gathered grad students. [...] I flit from group to group spinning in a whirl of laughter and cheer, hearing one story after another, my cheeks ache from smiling and laughing, my throat is sore from talking, I have no idea what time it is.

Her bag is heavy, loaded with the accouterments of a scholarly life, and even her body's sensations – sweat, flush, ache – are those of the weary conference-going academic. *Potentia* and *potestas* accompany her as she wonders “Am I in the right place?” The space envelops her as *potentia* draws her down the rows of “towering wooden bookshelves.” Although she follows the sound of voices and laughter, she still feels doubt about being in the right place. Affirming a more joyful academic subject seems to be quite a bit of work as power swirls in an unfamiliar pattern. Yet this is a friendly and women-centered gathering; the possibility of becoming feminist academic expands, confirmed by the mix of supportive accolades and talk of life outside of work. *Potentia* gathers momentum as “the night begins to blur” and she “just [does] it.” Aligning herself with this powerful force, she steps toward a group of strangers and is soon talking and laughing with a new community. She has largely maneuvered away from the pull of *potestas* by grasping the affirmative and is enfolded within academic pleasures: exciting books, helpful teaching techniques, and encouraging graduate students. In sustaining herself, she affirms the lives of those around her and has become the joyful academic subject.

Stepping into the flow of force relations in these moments is facilitated through connections to others who through their presence, enthusiasm, and openness make space for *potentia* to emerge and be (momentarily) sustained. This points to the importance of feminist spaces and feminist world-making via collective imaginings of new types of institutions, and collective efforts to resist the weight of negative force relations in the academy. They are buoyed by the *potentia* swirling around them and their colleagues, recognizing and embracing it. Grasping the affirmative through stepping into the flow brings clear moments of joy, however ephemeral. It is through these generative acts that feminist politics are lived.

6. By way of conclusion

We began this piece by posing questions about how to generate political spaces that can affirm the world we want to live in. We wondered how joyful academic subjects emerge through our everyday relationships and if they might counter some of the other subjects that dominate the academy. We thought that if these relationships actually matter, as we think they do, they carry possibilities that could assist in sustaining a world where we want to live and work. Because we understand power to be integral to the formation of subjects, we chose to examine a specific set of force relations, that of *potentia* and *potestas*, within the process of becoming. This analysis helps us understand how the flows of power work. Once we have some idea of what is going on as part of becoming, we can hold some flows at bay while directing others. Political spaces can then open up so that we can resist the dominance of some politics while encouraging. By focusing on the emergence of joyful academic subjects, we hoped to find a basis from which to move toward an affirmative politics. This process-focused account of becoming – as part of a positive ontology – in the academy could be used to disrupt the repetition of a monolithic neoliberal academic subject. Through this type of affirmation, we can nourish the connections that sustain us and help us and other feminists flourish.

Tracing specific flows of force relations, here *potentia* and *potestas*, is empirically challenging. Conceptualizing flows, including affective

turbulence, within a positive ontology can however aid in figuring out the effects of this flow in subject formation. Finding pivotal points in the generative process of becoming can show where and how to identify possibilities in order to track and grasp more affirming relationships. Within this positive ontological approach, understanding joyful academic subjects as nomadic releases normative parameters that circumscribe academic subjects within academia. Part of our political investment is to show how sustaining ourselves within the academy relates to the wider project of affirming life around us. An affirmative politics for us means holding onto the kind of embodied subject that we would like to be, the type of academic work we would like to engage in, and the sort of life as an academic that could be ours. Joy, as an effect of the generativity of power, offers one pathway towards fulfilling for ourselves our commitments to varied feminist world-making projects within the academy, and beyond. Such a politics creates potential and opens up possibilities. Remembering, holding onto, and embracing these pivotal moments permits feminists to move toward inhabiting potential and affirming different world-making projects.

We return to the memory with which we began to emphasize that a joyful academic subject, while not joyful in every moment, has the resources to move with *potentia* when it manifests. In the memory, *potentia* moves through a relatively fixed academic subjectivity of the advisor to open, for the student, the possibility of a place within the academy. The abrupt shift to talking about the future, her future, brings attention to how *potentia* can manifest. Power swirls around and through their bodies and interaction. Turbulence pocks the encounter, highlighting the complexity of the relationship between her and her supervisor. Force relations ebb and flow, showing the positivity of how power generates a joyful space within which to talk about academia. The joyful subject in this memory – as well as the others we discuss – is complicated by other emotions, including self-doubt, affection, and anxiety. Nonetheless, she recalled the memory as joyful because it registered as a key moment for grasping the affirmative and taking up an academic subjectivity.

I looked into his eyes, just a little bit closer, and thought of the smudges on his new set of glasses. Some things don't change. I smile, more like a wide grin. I want to laugh, but it would probably come out as a chortle, so I hold back. I sit up, reach for my water. I take a sip. Can I get a job? I can get a job. I return to my food, gobble up the last bits. I grab the tray, shovel my dishes onto it. We stand up to leave. He flashes me a smile.

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