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Perspective

Deconstructing the ivory tower: The liminal space between margins and centers in climate research

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to produce climate science in 2026? Building on the dialogical approach of Fenner and Harcourt [1], this paper explores how positionalities and emotional landscapes shape the work of three female researchers in climate science. Through a collective, reflexive dialogue, we confront the personal and structural tensions embedded in global climate science, examining power asymmetries, the tokenization of diversity, and the hegemonic dominance of quantification and masculinized norms. Our reflections draw attention to how scientific practices often, even unintentionally, perpetuate the very injustices they aim to address. These inherent exclusionary practices lead us to the idea of academia as a border. By weaving together anecdotal recollections and critical theory, we illuminate how situatedness matters, not just methodologically but politically. We critique the neoliberal and heteronormative underpinnings of academic institutions and propose a future-oriented agenda grounded in relationality, emotional honesty, and epistemic inclusivity. Our concluding recommendations aim to shift academic practice from extractive performance metrics to spaces of resistance, care, and collective transformation. As part of this, we bring a reflective tool inspired by Audre Lorde's [2] *Questionnaire to Oneself* to invite deeper engagement with the contradictions and silences within our own scholarly work.

1. Introduction

What does it mean to produce climate science in 2026? Some have popularized the metaphor of Cassandra: Climate researchers – like Cassandra – are gifted with the ability to prophesize future disasters, but cursed with the inability to influence effective policy changes and interventions [3,4]. Indeed, climate breakdown is being acutely experienced in several places across the globe and communities for some time now, and we will reach the 1.5 °*C* limit by 2030 [5]. However, year after year, climate scientists produce more and more evidence and warnings. These warnings seem to fall on deaf ears, eclipsed by entrenched economic interests. Are these merely symptoms of capitalist societies on an inevitable path to self-destruction, or are there structural changes within global climate research that could improve the delivery of climate science and foster a more inclusive, equitable, and representative body of knowledge, and lead to a wider uptake of climate action?

One critical issue within the global research system is that it reproduces structural inequalities, positioning Global North scholars at the core with privileged access to funding, infrastructure, and epistemic authority, while Global South researchers face material and institutional barriers, reinforcing dependency and marginalization within global knowledge production. While it is common knowledge that the climate impacts are being felt most in the Global South, about 80% of climate change research is still authored by scientists from the Global North. Institutions based in Europe and North America received 78% of funding for climate research in Africa, whereas African researchers only received 14.5% [6]. Another example is the 'Hot List' of 1000 influential climate change scholars, of which only 12,2% are women, and 2,4% are based in institutions in the Global South, excluding China [7].

Moreover, scholars from the social sciences and humanities are underrepresented in global climate scholarship. The IPCC, despite efforts to diversify its author pool, still reflects these dynamics, with systemic

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barriers limiting true inclusion [8]. Researchers at the margins in the IPCC face persistent barriers to full participation, shaped by intersections of nationality, race, language, and disciplinary background [9]. While representation has modestly improved over time, many marginalized researchers report limited influence and visibility within the process [10]. Further, every top-down solution proposed by the IPCC overshadows local community perspectives, reinforcing the divide between researchers and the communities they study. Such situations perpetuate the current hegemony of thoughts, language, and frameworks, while sidelining multiple worldviews, and hinder equitable research in climate research. Addressing climate change equitably demands not just diverse representation, but genuine inclusion of different geographies, disciplines, epistemologies, and lived experiences.

Climate knowledge production and academia thus emerge as concrete sites where the persistent marginalization of BIPOC and Global South scholars is reproduced, leading us to conceptualize academia as a border. Academia functions as a border by regulating who can enter, speak, and be heard within knowledge-making spaces. Dismantling this border becomes especially urgent under fascist regimes, where control intensifies over who can produce, access, and legitimate knowledge. As Harsha Walia [11] reminds us, "the border is everywhere": crossing it does not end the struggle for undocumented people because the border remains mobile and continually enforced. Similarly, academic borders – linguistic, institutional, and epistemic – travel with scholars, reproducing exclusion even within ostensibly open and free spaces.

These borders operate in diffuse yet consequential ways, shaping academic lives across multiple dimensions. In neoliberal academia, precarity is structural: visa clocks, for example, profoundly shape life and career decisions, particularly for 'foreign' early-career women academics [12]. Academic borders also materialize through multiple checkpoints, including the myth of meritocracy, colonial knowledge hierarchies, persistent marginalization, class and cultural tensions, and the limits of interdisciplinarity. As Judith Enriquez's ethnographic account shows, academic mobility is far from seamless; instead, border crossing is experienced as a "thickness that passes through time" [13].

These observations guide the choice of literature we align with. Our work responds to – and resonates with – recent feminist and decolonial interventions that call for pluralizing justice [14]. We extend this agenda by interrogating how such epistemic commitments unfold within the lived realities of climate researchers themselves [15,16].

Furthermore, we join Valdes' [17] call for academia to become spaces of resistance against subordination, opposing rising reactionary violence, and advancing anti-subordination values through critical knowledge, education, and collective action. Today, universities globally are increasingly under attack through funding cuts, censoring and efforts to turn them into instruments of surveillance, control, and strengthening fascism. This makes it all the more urgent to defend spaces for independent and transformative thoughts [18]. In the United States, the Trump administration, most notably exemplified by its funding cuts and legal ramification of Harvard University, calls for unprecedented cuts to scientific agencies in the proposed fiscal budget for 2026 [19], a further step of the coercion, censorship, and institutional violence towards silencing academic inquiry. This is a global pattern: amid the ongoing genocide on the Palestinian people, Germany has shown police brutality and intolerance towards campus activism from the leadership level[1] to students protesters experiencing an escalation in censorship and state-violence.[2] As it stands, academia find itself in a moment of multiple crises, it must actively resist such violations and being turned into instruments of the state.

Here, we have deliberately chosen a dialogical format[3] that allows knowledge to emerge organically from lived experience. Rather than starting from abstract theories or detached observations, we begin with personal narratives and reflections, allowing broader insights to be drawn from situated encounters. This approach stands in contrast to the scientific methods in which we have been trained, which often involve studying a subject from a distance, without direct experience or embodied understanding. By reversing this movement, we aim to foreground knowledge that is rooted, relational, and responsive rather than imposed from above. Moreover, this format enables us to embody knowledge in the sense described by Haraway [20], as many of the experiences we recount – often difficult or unsettling – manifested first in our bodies, signaling that something was wrong. Knowledge, in this case, arose not from abstraction but from visceral, bodily perception [21]. In doing so, we critically reflect on the positionality of researchers and the need to decolonize academic practices themselves.

In this conversation, we ask what new roles academia can take on, especially in climate research. We see the decolonization of academic institutions as essential: it implies not only questioning who produces knowledge, but also how and for whom it is produced [22]. Through our conversations, we try to find a different language – one that grows from shared experiences rather than from abstract theories – away from the tyranny of psychological distance towards climate change. Our goal is to connect ways of thinking and being that are often treated as separate and different to the status quo, and to challenge academic structures. In this way, we hope to foster the possibility of a change in academia while still defending the space needed for deep, honest inquiry.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, we position ourselves within the debate. In Section 3, we dive into three different themes through which we define our common, lived struggles. Section 4 proposes ways forward – four practical steps to build an academia that prioritizes care, context, and relationships. Lastly, Section 5 concludes.

2. Between (two) worlds: Positioning ourselves

We begin with Gloria E. Anzaldúa's concept of *mestiza consciousness* [23], which we understand not as a fixed identity but as a way of holding multiplicity and contradiction. *Mestiza consciousness* engages simultaneously with center and margins, recognizing how we may inhabit positions of both privilege and marginality and how situated knowledge emerges from these tensions. It invites us to acknowledge the conflicts within ourselves, where norms, values, and expectations collide and from which complex forms of situated knowing arise.

Our borderline experiences may arise from feeling torn between female and male polarities; from present stories and histories of migration; from inhabiting physical or cultural borderlands; or from being shaped by dislocated belonging and longing. In these in-between spaces, we confront the taxonomies of power – most notably those that frame gender and geography as fixed oppositions, such as "male versus female" and "Global North versus Global South". Rather than treating these as rigid binaries, we approach them as relational dualities, hence as historically produced forces that are often positioned in tension. Our gendered, sexual, and cultural identities often complicate and exceed the categorical limits of these dualities.

We acknowledge that this ongoing fluidity and tension continuously reshapes and renegotiates which aspects of identity come to the forefront, depending on the individual's social, temporal, and geographic context. In this way, *mestiza consciousness* disrupts the idea of power as something fixed and absolute. At the same time, an individual can

[1] For instance, Berlin's Hertie School President Prof. Dr. Cornelia Woll was forced to apologize for her graduation ceremony speech that mourned Palestinian and other victims.

[2] https://www.npr.org/2025/04/20/g-s1-60984/germany-deportation-protesters and the database on the systematic repression of Palestine Solidarity in Germany https://www.index-of-repression.org/ (both last accessed 10/29/2025).

[3] The dialogical format draws on feminist epistemological traditions that privilege dialogue and relationality.

choose to make the world of the center the dominant identity and meaning, to ease the constant inner contradictions, and to access more privileges by being read as male, heterosexual, White or from a country of power (see also [24]). In the context of academia, where metrics of success are measured by numbers, objectivity, and a distancing from emotions, the pressure to conceal certain aspects of the self becomes a matter of survival. Then, masking our embodied knowledge, emotional insights, or hybrid perspectives may be necessary in order to gain recognition and legitimacy. We believe this raises urgent questions about what kinds of knowledge are valued, and at what cost. These reflections compel us to turn inward – to examine how our own positionalities shape the knowledge we produce.[4] We also wish to remain mindful of the caution issued by Gani and Khan [25], namely that positionality statements can risk reifying hierarchies or functioning as performative gestures that leave underlying power relations intact. Taking this critique seriously, we approach positionality not as a claim to legitimacy, but as an ongoing, reparative practice aimed at unsettling rather than stabilizing epistemic norms.

Z. Soomauroo: I am a cis woman of color from a small island state living and working in Germany. I am often in a position and state of transience. I define myself as a "third culture kid" and this upbringing made it easier for me to think beyond the concepts of nation-states and see interdisciplinarity, internationality, and antifascism in both my personal and academic life as a given.

All my formative academic experiences have been at predominantly White institutions and teams. My previous institute, where I spent seven years, primarily focuses on "exporting" and "guiding" energy transitions of peripheral countries. My coworkers are well-meaning regarding diversity and questioning subconscious biases and inherent power dynamics, but these discussions and dialogues have been confined to a small group of researchers, making it seem hypocritical against a backdrop of the greater institutional racism and reinforcing historical power dynamics, even if unintentionally (disparity between intentions and commitment to the communities we work with and the agendas of the national and international funders). For these seven years, I have been the only, or one of the few, people of color, which has meant that discussions around race, power dynamics, and company culture have de facto become my responsibility – an experience and expectation which has caused me more burn-out than positive experiences. Most of my research centers around international climate governance and politics – I have worked with minorities and Indigenous groups but find it difficult to come to terms that even advocating for diverse presence and participation is an uphill battle in academic and research environments – mirroring asymmetrical power structures that define global policy-making. As most of my work is based on Global South contexts, I have had to also fight for these contexts to be included in projects and academic papers, resulting in frustration with the current research environment.

Moreover, I suffer from two chronic illnesses. These conditions, especially endometriosis, have profoundly shape my academic capacity – I lose at least four cognitively productive days each cycle, resulting in missed deadlines, decreased focus, and an ongoing sense of professional inadequacy. In the early years of my career, I suffered in silence – internalizing the belief that academia was not designed for someone like me. Only later on did I discover that many others (in fact, the majority of cis-women in my academic circle) struggled with similar conditions. This silence within academic culture reinforces the myth of the disembodied, always-productive scholar – a myth that marginalizes bodies that do not or cannot perform to that standard. Throughout my academic career, I have both simultaneously felt alone in being a person of color and advocating for DEI[5] and navigating both institutional violence and discrimination and micro-aggressions, even from allies. At the same time, I have often taken on responsibilities of care in my research groups. I have pivoted from technical energy and transport related topics to critical studies, feminist political ecology, and decolonial studies over the last years – academic strands which make me feel at home, but laid bare myriad academic hierarchies. I enjoy academic research but feel very unhappy with my past years and experience in a very masculine and White-centric environment. I often ask myself, who would I be if I wasn't so busy fighting dehumanization of researchers and communities, ingrained and widespread masculine dominated spaces, micro-aggressions, and institutional violence as a researcher?

C. S. Bez: I am White, German-Italian cis woman. I am a quantitative researcher and hold a PhD in Economics. Neither my parents nor my grandparents have a university education. My future employment and life situation are unclear as my postdoctoral contract will terminate next year. During my PhD, my research focused on geographies I was most familiar with – namely, Europe and the United States, where I had lived and studied. Today, my positionality has shifted: I am a researcher based at an institution in the Global North, working on projects situated in the Global South. I have now spent three years in this space and I do not identify as a "Global South" or "development" researcher. I feel uncomfortable with these labels in general. I have forthcoming work on Colombia, South Africa, and India, have never traveled to the latter two, nor do I always have local collaborators (which is not a guarantee of anything in itself, as we will explore below when discussing tokenization). Hiding behind the neutrality of a quantitative researcher's perspective never felt morally adequate. I want this discomfort to inform my approach: I strive to remain critically aware of the structural dynamics that shape my research and my place within them. My *mestiza consciousness* comes in several forms. First, I am trained as an Economist, but what makes me feel at home are political ecology, political geography, and critical discourse studies. My relationship with Economics thus remains conflictual, as a world I know so well but does not fit me. At the same time, the discipline of Economics remains largely intra-disciplinary in the way it is taught and is hegemonic among the social sciences [26]. Second, my long experience in male-coded Economics spaces has made me hard and assertive in academic settings. I have internalized the code very well, and play it very well. My mantras are to be organized, productive, fast, and I embody them. Where is my softness at work? The only female superior in my entire academic universe once told me that I should not have children, as I would lose time and hence lag behind my male colleagues. Third, I constantly engage in academic side projects besides my paid employment - where I can be myself in terms of intellectual thought, with clear political goals, to maintain my intellectual sanity, and to break the academic ivory tower. But I cannot be open about it and I dare not call myself an activist in academic settings. In summary, I have been feeling like living with multiple identities for a long time.

C. Belmin: I am a cis-women born and raised in France and currently living in Austria. Both of my parents are in academia, and I have been raised in a privileged situation and never lacked anything. My family history is a complex mixture of Jewish-Moroccan migrants, administrators in the French colonies and anti-colonial advocates, which naturally makes me reflect on my own relation to anti-colonial movement. I completed my PhD in Germany, and focused on energy access in the Global South, demographic transition, and gender, with mostly a quantitative, disembodied approach to my topic. I have regularly experienced discomfort when it comes to my own PhD topic. First, I studied energy access (and thereby lack of) in the world's poorest region while never having experienced any lack of material comfort myself, and

[4] Our intention is not to position ourselves against a presumed 'default' standpoint, but to critically examine how different configurations of power shape climate knowledge production. This raises a further question that we leave deliberately open: If inclusivity is always situated and contested, whose standpoint is implicitly taken as the reference point from which 'inclusion' is assessed, and why?

[5] Short for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

never having conducted field research to get to know the reality of the populations I was studying. Another dimension of my research was fertility decline, studying the experience of women who have little to no reproductive choice, often having many children, and no perspective for empowerment. The general framing of my research was focused on energy access as a precondition to fertility decline and thereby empower women. However, given the heavy history of population control and its connection with colonialism and racism, I have been questioning where my research stands in relation to that past and to what extent it carries any developmentalist or neocolonial undertones.

Although still very interested in population discourses, I have now partly shifted my academic path. I started a fine arts degree in Vienna, and I now spend a significant amount of my time working on approaches that bridge art and science, mostly focused on topics like climate change and gender. While this often makes me feel like an outcast in academia (a not-so "good academic", in the words of Tekeste [16]), I know it provides me with the ability to translate knowledge from one world to the other. Not following the traditional pathways of academia also puts me in a rather somewhat precarious work situation at the moment.

3. Connecting the dots to define common struggles

The following subsections are a conversation on common struggles between the three authors, entering in dialogue about power asymmetries (3.1), the tokenisation of diversity (3.2), quantification (3.3), and finally, emotions (3.4). This form of collective dialogue follows a feminist tradition that views conversation itself as a method of theorizing and mutually educating [27,28].

3.1. Situatedness and power asymmetries

Z. Soomauroo: During my Ph.D. – a collaboration between a university and an applied research institute – I was brought onto a project emblematic of many Global North-led development efforts. The german development agency (GIZ) posted a call for short-term "consultants" to explore business models for German enterprises entering the electric vehicle market. This initiative, like many techno-economic research projects funded through national development grants, seemingly aimed to promote sustainable mobility in the Global South - in this case, Mauritius.

The project was, on paper, straightforward: We – two junior female researchers - were tasked with working closely with six Mauritian corporations, analyzing transport data to support their fleet electrification journeys. It was framed as a research endeavor; one where we could critically assess the feasibility of electrification, and provide evidence-based support for businesses that had actively chosen to participate (and paid to do so). From the outset, the project reproduced the Orientalist gaze: a configuration of knowledge and power in which the Global South is framed as a site of intervention, never expertise [29,30]. Power hierarchies quickly became visible. Our GIZ counterparts operated within a rigid, top-down structure, expecting us to go well beyond the agreed-upon terms. The leadership at our institute remained uninvolved, choosing instead to nominally "strengthen" the team by adding senior researchers who played no real part in the work. Despite this institutional neglect, we made headway over three months, both in modeling and in developing a nuanced understanding of the local political economy, financial realities, and socio-technical context.

Then came the fieldwork. Our field visit was unexpectedly taken over by a GIZ representative who, officially, had no role in the project. In what can only be described as a neocolonial performance, he hijacked our meetings with Mauritian CEOs – interrupting us to declare what "they needed," despite having no grasp of local context or project background. In one instance, he locked me out of a key meeting – he claimed it was "an accident". Later, having acquired our phone numbers for logistical purposes, he sent me unsolicited and inappropriate messages, well after the project had ended. For me, this event laid bare gendered and racialized power asymmetries: the masculinist control over space and dialogue, the erasure of women's authority, and the embeddedness of research in extractive relationships – intellectual, emotional, and labor-based. This encounter was not an isolated incident. It was part of a pattern I witnessed during my seven-year position at the institute – one rooted in coloniality, gendered power asymmetries, and a deep resistance to accountability.

C. Belmin: I am sorry you have been through these experience, Zakia. While my own research has not involved fieldwork, I deeply resonate with the notion of situated knowledge in academic inquiry. In the domain of energy access and electrification – as with much of climate research – the majority of scholars come from the Global North, where access to modern energy has been achieved almost universally since many decades. This often creates a dissonance between the intended utility of the research and the underlying power asymmetries it perpetuates between researchers and those being researched, not to mention the profound differences in lived experience. There is something inherently paradoxical about running complicated models on cluster computer using a lot of electricity in modeling the effect of energy poverty on a simulated population of Zambian communities. While I do not question the importance and primordiality of addressing and researching on material poverty, I regret that there are so few institutional spaces in which we are encouraged to reflect critically on these contradictions within our own research practices and what it means for the knowledge we create.

3.2. Tokenisation of diversity: How the settler moves to innocence

C. S. Bez: Last year, I participated in what was framed as field research. The "field" involved me sitting in an office in Bogotá at the most prestigious university in South America – where *prestigious* essentially means private and very costly. The goal was to conduct joint research with several local researchers, funded by a grant that proudly promotes core-periphery collaborations. Partnering with a local university was the prerequisite for accessing the funding. The university prides itself on competing internationally – another way of saying it is heavily westernized. Our collaborators had neither prior experience with the research methodology nor much time to dedicate to the project. They enabled the grant – unlocking a significant amount of funding – and gave our research the label of being "in-depth and truly collaborative". However, the research itself ended up being almost entirely designed and conducted by my Germany-based coworkers and me. This was my first experience with core-periphery collaboration, and I was astonished to witness the behind-the-scenes dynamics. On paper, it was a success, we ticked all the boxes. Most importantly, having our Colombian coauthors' names on the manuscript made our research immune to the criticisms we might otherwise have faced.

I suppose that many other joint research projects are more ambitious in terms of trying to achieve horizontal collaboration. But was is the true value of diversity and collaborations, regardless of how earnestly they are implemented, when considering 1) internal colonialism, 2) the westernization of elite universities in the periphery, and 3) the tendency to select researchers whose values and ideologies align with your world views? Over the last years, I always came back to asking the following question. How, if at all, can I be a White researcher who does not (unconsciously) contribute to the production and reproduction of the dominance of one empire over the other? In that sense, advertising a "multicultural" and "interdisciplinary" research collaboration hides the hegemony of one culture over another, one discipline over another (e.g., the quantitative over the qualitative, as discussed below in 3.3).

Z. Soomauroo: Unfortunately, these dynamics you describe seems to be different layers of the same system of remaining within the superficiality of tokenisation in academia. This reminded me of a research project I conduced which focused on citizen-led mobility initiatives in urban areas in the Middle East. Our team hired a Palestinian research assistant, whose fieldwork and analysis were critical to the project's

success. On her second day in Germany, an HR representative insisted—in German, a language she did not speak, that she leave the institute. The reason? A suspicion around her documentation, despite her having valid paperwork (which she had waited for over 5 months for). This moment encapsulated how institutional racism and bureaucratic violence intersect with global research, embodying the "necropolitics" of border regimes [31]. She was not just denied hospitality at an institute which had signed the diversity charta and claims internationality as its strength; her presence as a Palestinian woman was rendered precarious and disposable once her labor was no longer needed.

The experience highlighted multiple forms of systemic failure: the exploitation of underfunded researchers, the disconnect between administrative and academic staff, and the racialized policing of research mobility. These dynamics are foundational to what decolonial climate justice scholarship critiques: the reproduction of global hierarchies in the guise of environmental collaboration [32]. My team, ostensibly committed to decentering Whiteness and German-centrism, often recoiled at attempts to introduce conversations around racial colonialism and justice. My own efforts to do so were met with backlash – professionally and personally. As a woman of color, my positionality rendered me hyper-visible when I challenged institutional norms and invisible when I asked for support. Often, initiatives I advocated for – such as critical development trainings or the establishment of awareness teams at conferences – were later co-opted, diluted, or publicly credited to others. This repeated erasure reflects a broader pattern of institutional gaslighting, where the labor of women and marginalized scholars is simultaneously exploited and rendered invisible [33]. Within feminist labor theory, this is understood as the appropriation of affective, intellectual, and organizational labor – forms of work often deemed "non-essential" by institutions yet foundational to their functioning [34]. Rather than being acknowledged as critical interventions towards justice and inclusion, such efforts are then co-opted by others with more institutional capital, thus maintaining the existing power hierarchies while extracting from the very critique that sought to challenge them. More broadly, our team continued to produce knowledge about peripheral contexts while failing to hire or collaborate meaningfully with researchers from these contexts, particularly Black scholars. This exclusionary practice is a stark example of the term "settler moves to innocence" [35]: the institutional tendency to acknowledge colonial injustice rhetorically while continuing to benefit from it materially.

Development work, whether framed as poverty eradication, sustainability, or climate resilience, remains rooted in colonial logics. It operates on the premise that Western models of progress are universal and desirable, while local and land-based epistemologies are sidelined or instrumentalized [36]. Our experiences demonstrate that such practices of development research are often extractive, instrumentalized, and decoupled from the sociocultural and technical realities of the communities they engage with. Development projects are rarely neutral. The "field" becomes a space of extraction – where knowledge, data, and labor are appropriated under the guise of partnership [37]. Global climate research, particularly in peripheral geographies, reproduces colonial continuities through who sets the research agenda, who is deemed an expert, and who has access to funding and visibility.

C. S. Bez: Exactly! We must reflect on the possibilities and responsibilities that researchers in the core have: accessing grants, infrastructures, cultural hegemony, dispossessing of a voice that is heard and accepted, and the relative freedom to choose what we research and with whom. How should we use (or not use) this positionality, how can we use these means to give voice to other voices, without imposing our worldviews, washing our positions by "collaborating" with locals, or creating power dynamics of enabler versus enabled? I want to bring in Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui [38], who critiques the superficial forms of multiculturalism that often serve to maintain existing power structures rather than dismantle them.[6] Applied to core-periphery dynamics in research, her theory of multiculturalism invites us to reflect upon tokenism and neutralization of more radical forms of decolonizing research. Taken one step further, I believe we must profoundly rethink the epistemological foundations of research. We must go beyond practices of diversity whose primary goal is to wash the guilt of extractivist research practices?[7] I hence believe that power asymmetries make horizontal exchange impossible between those that study and those that are being studied (see also Section 2). Is the solution for my positionality to limit my research to the geographies I belong to? Much has been written about the facets of internal colonialism and its workings within academia as upholders of cultural hegemony (see for instance Quijano [39]; Fúnez-Flores [40]). We must do a better job at acknowledging and acting upon the coloniality of knowledge, not at least because climate research and colonial histories are deeply interlinked.

3.3. Hegemony of quantification

Z. Soomauroo: Academia and the hard sciences valorize traits of rationality, objectivity, detachment, and analytical thinking, the same traits that have been historically perceived as "masculine" traits. Academic fields of the humanities and the social sciences, which are grounded in subjectivity and emotional labor, are often devalued, both from an economic and societal viewpoint. This creates a kind of epistemic hierarchy, where not only is certain knowledge valued over others, but also the way it is known (cold, hard data vs lived experience) is gendered and political. In mobility transitions and science (similar to many climate mitigation fields), we see a hyperfixation on big data. This quantification and datafication are seen as objective, neutral, and truth-revealing – again very much align with masculine-coded ideals of knowledge. On the other hand, context, emotions, ambiguity, and qualitative nuance are often flattened or erased in the process of turning experience into numbers. The more we rely on big data, the more we sideline emotional, narrative, or embodied forms of knowledge – which are often the domain of marginalized voices (women, queer folks, BIPOC communities). Again, within transport research, if we focus on big data, we risk losing context and there is the danger of transport turning into an issue of social justice. There is also very little communication between hard quantitative researchers and those in the qualitative domain, again with an underlying current of hierarchies. Historically, transport research has focused on efficiency, speed, and capacity. Classical questions look at how to model traffic flows, optimize logistics, or reduce commute times, asking for a heavy reliance on quantitative data from GPS, mobile data, travel surveys, and simulations. However, transport is an inherently very intimate, emotional, and embodied experience. People's mobility decisions are influenced by fear (of walking alone at night, of taking a taxi alone, etc.), care responsibilities, discomfort, and identity (race, gender, disability, and class). For example, in a survey I conducted, a person told me that the only mode of transport they use is cycling as they don't feel safe or comfortable using public transit or getting into taxis. This person identified as a White, trans man, living in

[6] Her critique directly relates to the concept of "Gatopardismo", i.e., superficial changes to maintain the status quo. Gatopardismo can manifest as gestures of inclusivity and diversity such as tokenizing local voices or Indigenous knowledge, without addressing the epistemic violence perpetuated by the dominant system.

[7] One common form of extractivist research is helicopter research [60], defined as external researchers collecting data in the periphery, and leaving without meaningful collaboration, benefit-sharing, or accountability to the local communities involved.

Berlin. But these experiences are ignored in modeling exercises and transport planning. Algorithms may replicate existing gendered or racial biases in how infrastructure is designed or accessed.

C. S. Bez: I want to pick up on the last thing you mentioned. I wondered whether you were able to correctly account for the person's gender identity in the survey, beyond the gender binary. Being forced to quantify brushes over everything that is outside of the norm of hetero-patriarchy (for instance [41], gives many examples). Our culture, spellbound by rankings and metrics, emphasizes quantifiable outputs. The consequences? Our culture ignores different burdens of care work, different access to reproductive labor, and takes for granted that technical-administrative tasks are performed "for free". Having said that, the spell of metrics also took over in my own life. When I decided to study Economics, I did not know that the discipline had already drifted away from its roots as a social science grounded in normative questions. Now, it is obsessed with mathematical modeling and econometrics. Qualitative insights and interdisciplinary thinking were pushed to the margins, deemed "not real Economics", while the academic rewards system began favoring technical rigor and standardization over originality. And my own academic profile? On my website, I self-define as a researcher that "applies causal econometric methods and cutting-edge text-as-data methods within the domain of computational social sciences". I give workshops on text-as-data methods, I present my work at Computer Science Departments, and spend more than half of my working days coding in Python and R. I did not know I had signed up for this, but now I am deep inside it. When my family or friends ask me to explain some of my research in "simple words", or in languages other than English, I stumble. In such moments, I lose my fluency. Feeling out of touch, bound to my ivory tower, which I never wanted to climb. Not being able to switch is also the consequence of my mestiza consciousness related to the fractured identities between being a scholar and an activist (see above).

Z. Soomauroo: I so resonate with all of this! I have also never felt at home in neither Economics or Engineering and often feel like I am wasting both time and resources because these tools is a backdrop to the world which no longer serves us. I am currently working on a systems model of care work and policies, and while this is an inherently grounded in feminist theories Federici [42], some of the feedback I have received were "you can only achieve so much if you only look at gender" and to do away with all power dynamics and relationships with capitalism. I often feel like we are putting our models and quantification on a pedestal and that this is the only way to do science. At the same time, I also feel most understood in within academic circles as well.

C. Belmin: I resonate with a lot of your experience as a trained quantitative researcher/Economist. One of the research field of my PhD was demography: the study of population, which deals with the quantification of stocks and flow of population and its three determinants: fertility, mortality and migration. What always struck me with demography is the discrepancy between the existential/emotional content of those three components (life-death and moving home), and the dryness of the quantification. While assisting to a lot of talks from demographers, I was always amazed how one could talk, for example, about conflict-related mortality in such a detached way?

While giving a talk about positionality in demographic research to my colleagues, one of my colleague once confessed: "Sometimes people accuse me of dehumanizing, but I can't focus on individual stories, this is my job to look at aggregated trends". Yet in their voice, I could feel the same turmoil as I feel. Are there ways to quantify without losing the multitude behind the numbers, without losing the stories? For me, discovering the work of Catherine d'Ignazio and her colleagues was ground-shaking. As one of the two authors of Data Feminism, she also wrote *Counting feminicide* [43] in 2024, which "documents the creative, intellectual, and emotional labor of data activists across the Americas", who are fighting for the (ac)countability of feminicides in Latin America. Such an approach acknowledges the importance quantifying ("what doesn't get counted does not count"), while not leaving behind the emotional aspect and care aspect doing with it. How could such approach, holding care at the core, be transferred into other contexts? How to acknowledge the suffering of lives while keeping the scope of the big picture?

3.4. Masculinization and emotions

C. Belmin: My desire to work in the field of environmental studies was sparked at an early age, born of a complex mix of sadness, tenderness, and perhaps even guilt, as I encountered the highly-mediatized image of a polar bear stranded on a shrinking ice sheet, adrift in the ocean. Though widely regarded as a cliché symbol of the environmental movement, this image and the emotion it sparked instilled in me as a child a sense of responsibility, one that led me first to study biology, then environmental science, followed by environmental economics, and ultimately to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology, where I examined the intersections of gender, climate change, and poverty in countries of the Global South. However, after several years immersed in a research institute predominantly focused on quantitative approaches to climate change – an environment largely shaped by masculine norms of performance, rationality, and detachment – I found myself increasingly disenchanted. Surrounded by a constant stream of bleak scientific findings and flooded with catastrophic climate tweets, all delivered with a conspicuous absence of wonder, emotion, or imagination, I became completely numb. My initial sense of urgency and commitment gave way to a narrow preoccupation with academic metrics: publishing in high-impact journals, optimizing performance, and meeting institutional expectations. It is like climate change, and my relationship to the living world, had disappeared from my research, something that Hannah Hughes has described in the context of research on International Relations and climate change [44].

Four years into my Ph.D. I decided to start a Master of Fine Arts at an art university while finishing my Ph.D. Arriving in a completely different environment where emotions are not repressed was liberating and made me realized how alienated I became. Art is also a space where enchantment naturally has its place, I found different people, collectives that kept – and nurtured – this spark, this enchantment for the living, that one that made a lot of us start environmental studies. Finally, I could cry again, in random moments looking at trees, or a bird. I felt the crisis in my body. Although these moments are hard, I found for me these were so necessary in keeping working, with my full energy and heart, on this topic. I wish that global climate research can depart from the masculinist vision of science that emotions are a hinder to science. Giving them more space would make climate scientists less alienated and depressed [45], because we need them healthy and eager to put all their creative energy in crafting better futures.

Z. Soomauroo: My academic journey also started from a place of sadness – after years of diving, I became obsessed with the (also highly clichéd) image of coral bleaching. I often imagine that they haunt me, as ghosts, questioning my complicity in the climate catastrophe.

Thinking and talking about hypermasculinity and emotions within this hypermasculinized and emotionless space brought out many thoughts: First, who is allowed to show emotions? In the lab meeting, I once told my team I wouldn't be able to volunteer for the Long Night of Science because I was traveling for work. No one else stepped up to take on the task, and my boss yelled at me – in front of everyone. In another moment, I pointed out to a co-author that all her quotes in our book chapter on gender and energy were from men. I suggested we include more voices from women. She was so angry, she didn't speak to me for two months.

What I've learned is this: expressing emotion in academic spaces comes with consequences – but not equally for everyone. Every time I voiced frustration, concern, or disappointment, I faced backlash. My emotions were seen as disruptive and unprofessional. Yet when White colleagues – especially men – expressed anger, it was accepted, even respected. Their anger was a sign of passion or conviction. Mine was

interpreted as a threat and a sign of weakness. As a woman of color in climate research, I experience a double bind. I'm expected to be composed, accommodating, agreeable. But when I challenge the norms – or simply speak up – I'm punished for it. Emotion becomes political. Who gets to show it, and who doesn't, is not just about personality. It's about power and biases we hold inside us and have not yet been able to deconstruct.

I also want to address your point on numbness in climate research and found this quote very fitting: "The second response (that I hear all too frequently to the horrors the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene), [. . .] is probably even more destructive: namely, a position that the game is over, it's too late, there's no sense trying to make anything any better [. . .]. Some scientists I know express this kind of bitter cynicism, even as they actually work very hard to make a positive difference for both people and other critters. [. . .] Sometimes scientists and others who think, read, study, agitate, and care know too much, and it is too heavy." [46] For me, this quote from Donna Haraway embodies how my emotions towards my research and climate has evolved. After three years, everything felt so overwhelming and unbearable to contain within me (tipping points, exceeding the 1.5 °C limit, insufficient mitigation and adaption measures, just to name a few), and I had the first of a series of emotional breakdowns: I remembered standing in the lake and crying for hours. I've done months of therapy since then but found it hard to focus on cognitive behavior changes when the problem at hand was so systemic and institutionalized. These breakdowns have often led to months of numbness and depression – in these moments, I am surprisingly able to work (on my models, papers, projects), but unable to feel anything – from joy to anger. I retreat into myself and apart from my work, and feel as if I have disappeared from the world.

Talking about emotions or even anything remotely subjective in very masculine-coded spaces (for example one academic community I am part of involved in big data modeling) is not taken seriously. I think we are impeding on the robustness and realism of science if we do not create spaces. We are now living in a very different world (multiple genocides, dissolution of democracies, rise of authoritarian fascism) than COP21 and I see such a reluctance to acknowledge the monumental happenings and integrate them in our research.

C. Belmin: Zakia, thank you for sharing your experience and for highlighting the important fact that not everyone can do so without facing consequences. It saddens and angers me that we live in a world where patriarchy has spread so profoundly that expressing emotions is dismissed, particularly affecting marginalized groups.

C. S. Bez: I resonate a lot with your experiences and thoughts. How you both laid out so meticulously how emotionality moved you into the field, and once inside, emotions were gone (see also [44]). Emotions were no longer useful to be productive or to fit in. This makes me think of how I used to feel like nobody around me was as anxiously obsessed with the climate crisis as I was. That was from around 2014 until 2019. Before knowing the word climate anxiety, I lived through it. Now, I no longer feel this anxiety. Now, I am the pragmatic researcher who flies to other countries to speak about my work, to provide evidence on how transition policies leave behind the already vulnerable. The research conversations in the academic environment mostly leave my emotions unaffected. It is the activists and community organizers who still give me goosebumps. What happened to my feelings? I feel excited about a new machine-learning package for Python, or about getting accepted to a conference. I also feel sad, anxious, or frustrated sometimes, but these more difficult feelings are limited to the 'how' (e.g., an undeserved co-authorship or administrative labor forced on me), not the 'what' (i.e. the content of my research, and especially its findings).

4. Ways forward: Towards a practical future agenda

Recognizing the personal and structural tensions embedded in global climate science is only the first step. Through envisioning and implementing alternative futures, the dots that define common struggles will move towards transformation. In this section, we hence suggest practical steps that can be taken to build an academia that promotes feminist ways of knowing and that prioritize care, context, and relationships. We begin with the self, because transformation arguably must take root in our own consciousness [2], as a precondition for collective practices and solidarities which form the heart of our proposed agenda.

We also argue that transformation cannot be deferred to future generations alone, but must be actively cultivated. As Friere [27] writes, liberation must occur in the present through praxis. Education is not a neutral transmission of knowledge; it is either site of reproduction or becomes a site of intentional disruption. This entails embedding the agenda proposed below into teaching and training as core competencies. Such practices should be cultivated as habits that shape everyday academic life, enabling emerging climate scientists to recognize and challenge the status quo of knowledge production. In this sense, pedagogy becomes a central arena for enacting feminist ways of knowing.

4.1. Self-inquiry as scholarly praxis

Silence becomes complicit within these oppressive power systems, and those who wield the language often wield the power. In this way, self-inquiry can be a powerful tool to reclaim "the language which has been made to work against us" [2]. It shows how self-inquiry as scholarly praxis opens up self-reflections on one's own complicity in systems of exclusion and silencing, acknowledging the emotional and political dimensions of knowledge production, and finally question whose voices have been marginalized or erased. To imagine a future of resistance and relational transformation, we must first sit with the questions that unsettle us. The path forward is not paved by strategy alone but by profound self-inquiry. Inspired by Audre Lorde's [2] call to interrogate the silences we inhabit, we offer these reflections – not as answers, but as openings. Each of us authors tried to answer the following questions for herself:

1. What are the words you do not have yet?
2. What do you need to say?
3. If we have been "socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition," ask yourself: "What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?"[8]

Our answers are printed in the Appendix. They express a profound yearning for language to articulate the emotional and ethical dissonance experienced within academia. Indeed, all authors grapple with the fragmentation of self and the search for a radical, humanizing form of research that resists colonial and patriarchal norms. We also voice our desire for a system that honors embodiment, relationality, and accountability as a scholarly norm. Lastly, we reckon with the personal and political stakes of truth-telling within academia. The fear of being rejected, discredited, or marginalized, stands in constant negotiation with the complicity of silence. We invite the reader to follow our example by answering the questionnaire. We envisage this self-inquiry to be the foundation of strategy. From these reflections, a practical agenda can be begin to emerge.

From a practical standpoint, incorporating positionality statements into scientific presentations or outlets in global climate research can be a step towards adopting a more feminist and situated approach. While such reflexive approaches are more established in disciplines like anthropology, they have yet to gain broader traction across the climate research landscape. This is especially pertinent when considering the vast disparities between researchers from the Global North and communities in the Global South in global climate research [47], as

[8] The entire questionnaire can be accessed, for instance, via https://blogs.depaul.edu/via/2023/01/12/the-audre-lorde-questionnaire-to-oneself (last accessed 10/29/2025).

discussed throughout this paper. When working on a positionality statement, the following questions can be considered: "What is my relationship to the subject of my study?", "Do power or privilege imbalances exist between me and the individuals or communities I am researching?", and more critically, in line with Gani and Khan [25]: "Does the act of declaring my positionality risk centering or legitimizing existing hierarchies rather than unsettling them?" and "In what ways might this positionality statement function as a performative act, such as a redemption of guilt?"

Researchers can also engage in reflecting, either individually or collectively, on the world view and epistemologies they carry with them and throughout their research [48]. As Rubiano Rivadeneira and Carton [49] write, "dismantling structural injustices also requires deeper reflection on the assumptions and colonial relations that enable research practices to sideline other geographies and epistemologies. This reflexivity is a fundamental first step to question the practices that contribute to legitimize and perpetuate injustices ingrained in the current social order." Departing from this, we invite the reader to ask the following practical questions: "What assumptions do I make about what counts as valid knowledge?", "Whose voices, knowledge systems, and experiences are centered in my research – and whose are excluded?", "How has my academic training shaped the way I understand truth, evidence, and objectivity?" and lastly, "What cultural, institutional, or disciplinary norms have influenced my thinking, and how might they reproduce existing power hierarchies?"

Adopting such reflexivity allows different worldviews, knowledge systems and solutions to be considered and come forward in the complex task of addressing climate breakdown.

4.2. Centering care

The call for a new way of being for academia, one built on care and solidarity, is nothing new or revolutionary. Weatherill [50] writes about "embracing vulnerable research", Urai and Kelly [51] list concrete steps for reimagining a new academic paradigm based on Kate Raworth's doughnut principle for a safe and just space, and how these may inform a more equitable future studies (see also [52]). A more caring academia could take the shape of (mandatory) regular supervisor meetings, sharing circles, or seminars dedicated to reflect on our research practices. A simple yet powerful collective practice, still far from being largely adopted, is to schedule regular check-in rounds where each team member shares their current progress and potential challenges being faced. Beyond holding spaces, groups such as "Graduate womxn in physics"[9] or "the international associate for feminist economics"[10] bridges specificities of intersectional identity analysis and group solidarity demands. These spaces must be empowered so they can continue the difficult work of genuine transformation and provide different marginalized voices with a platform.

Furthermore, we must create intentional spaces for colleagues from marginalized backgrounds to speak, be heard, and shape the conditions of academic life. We need to constantly examine how our research may continue to produce forms of epistemic injustices by erasing diverse voices and knowledge [53,54]. Research groups and institutes, conferences, and workshops might also benefit from acknowledging and giving space to our eco-anxiety and grief. Regarding a more equitable global collaboration, Tilley and Kalina [37], based on their lived experiences as researchers from the Global South, propose ten concrete steps that we invite the reader to consult.

Lastly, universities need to play a bigger role in examining and undoing the institutional harms of academia. While discussing the role of academia in war-profiteering is outside the scope of this paper, universities can rethink the legal and institutional barriers facing graduate scholars. For example, global financial pressure and competition for research funds not only influence academic integrity but also lead to a culture of individualism [55]. Vulnerable groups, such as international researchers and women, face additional challenges, including threats to visa status and gender-based harassment. Movements like IchBinHanna in Germany,[11] formal support networks, and more spotlight on these issues are emerging, yet many structural changes remain pending [56].

4.3. Epistemic interplay and feminist-affective collaborations

Promoting more feminist research practices in global climate research can be achieved through the valorization of research deliverables that move beyond the traditional scientific paper and scientific talk formats (see also [14]). For example, it is crucial to mainstream reflective practice *as* a research goal. This can be achieved through formats such as this one, inspired by frameworks advanced by Fenner and Harcourt [1]. Further, placing more emphasis on the sharing and communication of knowledge, and allocating the necessary resources to support this, must become central to step down from the academic ivory tower. Doing so is essential for returning knowledge to the communities it concerns, and for responding meaningfully to socio-political realities. In this context, re-valuing science communication and providing it with more substantial funding and institutional support is a critical step. Rather than treating science communication as a peripheral or optional component in research proposals, it should be recognized as a core element of the research process itself. Returning knowledge is indeed integral to ensuring relevance, accessibility, and accountability in scholarly work. In addition to the changes of research deliverables, we also acknowledge the importance for new collaborative frameworks. There is slow agreement that facts alone are not effective in communicating climate realities. Storytelling must evoke feelings and empathy. Focusing on the facts has never been enough and the scientific community is increasingly trapped in a "bad news problem", which goes beyond the climate one (compare also to the Cassandra metaphor in the introduction). As Dunlap and Tornel [53] argue, such narratives risk reproducing epistemic and affective forms of violence by constraining the imaginative horizons of climate research. The authors instead stress the need for opening space for insurgent, plural, and decolonial futures.

In particular, fostering collaboration between climate change research and the arts offers powerful ways to engage with knowledge production that is embodied, affective, and attentive to lived experience. Research communities should nurture shared learning processes that integrate artistic practices, such as storytelling, performance, visual arts, and creative writing, to foster understanding and communicating climate realities. These interdisciplinary approaches break with the dominant masculine model of academic research, which is often abstract, detached, and aspires to objectivity. Crucially, these collaborations do not aim to subordinate one discipline to the other, but rather to sustain a meaningful and reciprocal dialogue. They create space for rhetorical and epistemic interplay, where both scientific insight and artistic expression inform and enrich each other.

Yet resisting the fast-paced, productivity-driven ethos, through the metaphor of the ruminant [57], requires a real culture change in climate change research. It is thus integral that researchers are officially recognized for their public engagement and efforts to communicate their results and collaborate with researchers and professionals outside their fields. Yet the ultimate aim is to move beyond individual recognition altogether.

4.4. Growing solidarity networks

The future of resistance must focus on building solidarity across

[9] https://web.mit.edu/physics/wphys/ (last accessed 10/29/2025).
[10] https://www.iaffe.org/ (last accessed 10/29/2025).
[11] https://ichbinhanna.wordpress.com/english-version/ (last accessed 10/29/2025).

diverse groups and redistributing power within institutions. It should prioritize feminist ways of knowing grounded in care, context, and relational accountability. Resistance is a process of reflection and transformation that requires sustained work. It must begin with the courage to speak openly about what has been ignored or suppressed, and recognizing our (complicit) roles within systems that cause harm. This is in line with Lorde [2]'s frame of collective truth-telling and survival, and with Sovacool et al. [54] on reflexivity and accountability within power-laden research practices. When all minorities are allies, are they still minorities? This is an invitation to practice new forms of kinship and decision-making, and to actively seek for ally-ship when it comes to amplifying marginalized voices in academia. Solidarity among oppressed groups is essential to building collective strength. Fragmentation along lines of race, class, and institutional status weakens our efforts. To offer a meaningful alternative to dominant research paradigms, we must overcome these divisions and work towards collaborative, inclusive structures that support equitable knowledge production.

Feminist epistemologies provide concrete pathways for change. By centering relationality and care, we can shift away from audit-driven models that prioritize metrics while neglecting the unequal burdens of care work, unpaid labor, and administrative tasks disproportionately carried by marginalized scholars [14]. This requires a collective commitment to making space for dissent and practicing active disloyalty to academia by rejecting its colonizing mission and making room for community as rebellion [58]. Lastly, as artificial intelligence increasingly shapes how knowledge is produced and validated, we are at a crossroads: academia must either take a stand or become complicit in the machinery of exclusion and control.

5. Conclusion

This work contributes to climate change scholarship by foregrounding knowledge produced through lived experience and by translating feminist commitments into concrete scholarly practices. We advance a set of forward-looking recommendations that move beyond critique towards institutional transformation. We further argue that these practices should be embedded into teaching and training as core competencies.

With this work, we strive to contribute to the deconstruction – and eventual reconstruction – of academia. Grounded in guided reflection and dialogue, informed both by those who came before us and those with whom we build community today, we seek the language to name, recognize, and challenge the patriarchal and White supremacist foundations of academic culture. We also aim to confront the subtler yet pervasive blind spots and privileges that sustain its inequities. As academics engaged in climate science, we carry a dual responsibility: to the planet, and to a research practice that foregrounds equity, justice, and inclusion. Meeting this responsibility requires that academia itself evolve into a system that empowers scientists to act accordingly.

We come back to reiterating recent feminist and decolonial calls to pluralize justice [14] as we understand this transformation as both an epistemic as well as institutional project. It requires diversifying the ontologies and affective registers through which knowledge is made. At the same time, echoing Dunlap and Tornel [53], we recognize that such pluralization must not be domesticated by the very systems it seeks to contest. We thus seek to contribute to demands of insurrectionary and autonomous reimagining of what counts as valid scholarship and of how power circulates within academic spaces.

Through the deep work of interweaving our positionalities, disciplinary languages, and research experiences with broader analytic frameworks, we explore how these intersect with systems of neocolonialism, gender oppression, heteronormativity, and profit-driven logic. These reflections, rooted in cross-disciplinary translation and collective introspection, are a first step towards recognizing what must be challenged, what must be changed, and how we can bring together and amplify as many voices as possible within both academia and our research communities.

Our analysis acts as a call both to ourselves and our fellow academics to critically reflect on how our academic tools remain rooted in the very problems they want to address. Here, we propose a research practice and way of being that is rooted in continuous self-inquiry, care, and solidarity. This starts with cross-disciplinary translation and extending towards epistemic pluralism [14] – what Dunlap and Tornel [53] envision as insurrectionary praxis. These reflections act as a first step for the climate community to understand what must be challenged, what must be changed and how to go about the first steps towards implementing alternative futures.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Camille Belmin: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Charlotte Sophia Bez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Zakia Soomauroo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix. Audre Lorde's questionnaire to Oneself

1. *What are the words you do not have yet?*

C. S. Bez: I do not yet have the words for the pain of prioritising reward metrics over meaning, that producing "something new" "fast" is seen as inherently positive, being blind to the entrenched injustices of knowledge that reproduce what we, theoretically, want to fight against. I do not yet have the language to fully capture the quiet despair of feeling the research-me divorced from the real-me, my multiple personalities, the soft versus the rough, the female versus the male battling inside of me, and solidarity fragmented. I search for the words to describe a form of kinship radical enough to unsettle colonial epistemologies – academic collaborations that elude all forms of structural violence and power dynamics.

Z. Soomauroo I do not yet have the words for understanding and explaining true compassion and solidarity. Many books such as "White supremacy and me" does it so well, but we get so lost in proposal writing, article writing etc., and it is so easy to gloss over what makes meaningful research, and to produce quick research. Having started my career in technical teams, I see so many research questions looking at how to

quantify XY, whereas we hardly sit down and ask "why". I don't yet have the words for the way I feel when I enter a room and again, the space is dominated by White, male professors and while I know there is a reason I am also in this space – being there is often a struggle. I also do not have the words to understand why, despite committing to myself over and over to seek out the "whys" of research, I constantly find myself in the superficiality of research. I search for the words for deep solidarity – where everyone's humanity is a given, and does not need to be defended.

2. *What do you need to say?*

Z. Soomauroo: I want to say that there is power in the in-between. That after a year of deep sadness and burn-out, I am finding power in resistance, in community, in poetry and protest, in music and movement, in believing some work is resistance. From Neal Haddaways's "Hope?"[12] to the Nawi Collective,[13] spaces of resistance to conventional academia are taking root and we must nourish these spaces. I need to say that an academia which is grounded in hardness and power dynamics can only get us so far – the system is rife with burn-out and depression [59].

C. S. Bez: I need to say that resistance begins in embodied perspectives, in the body that refuses the normalization of hierarchies, exhaustion, and suppression of emotions as a badge of value. I need to say that relational work is work. That slowness is resistance. As a White person, whose voice will matter relatively more in the present academic landscape, I do not have the right to simply start working on a new project without understanding the "why", "how", and "under what conditions". I have the privilege of not having to ask these questions – and that privilege is precisely what differentiates my position. Knowledge must return to those who have been dispossessed, and I do no longer want to be complicit in a system that makes me speak on behalf of others. It does not matter how well-meaning and well-read I am.

C. Belmin I need to say that the difficulty of our times requires stepping out of our disciplinary comfort zones and find the courage to listen to our bodies. This is a large task, especially for those who have lived their lives repressing those. I also need to say that women, and more generally FLINTA* researchers should find strength to fight against patriarchal structure in academia and beyond through community, supporting and empowering each other.

3. *If we have been "socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition," ask yourself: "What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?"*

C. Belmin The "worse" that could happen is not lose the legitimacy from those who don't have the same worldview or that have been stuck too long in patriarchal knowledge system that denied the role of care in academia. But I try to accept that and to focus on attracting, by telling "my truth", those who will join the same struggle as me.

Z. Soomauroo: The worst, as a junior researcher, would be (from the perception of "conventional" scientists), to be pigeonholed into being perceived as not a "proper" scientist but rather as someone who is radical and "woke". I do not have fear of wokeness or radical thoughts or deconstructions but from knowing that academia has rigid rules by which we must all adhere to. Living through the genocide and rising tides of fascism, we however do not have time to play by these rules, even more so when the system is so intrinsically complicit in aiding those destructive forces.

C. S. Bez: The worst might be rejection, dismissal, loss of legitimacy. In the light of the genocide of the Palestinian people, which we are witnessing in real time, I have been reflecting on the value of telling the truth. I came to the conclusion that the greater loss is always silence itself, and that we have to actively move against being complicit. Telling the truth, then, becomes not just an act of courage, but of necessity. However, I am aware that the loss of power will be uncomfortable. It can trigger identity crises, it breaks with the world we know and with epistemologies of knowledge.

[12] https://hopequestion.github.io/ (last accessed 10/29/2025).
[13] https://www.nawicollective.org/ (last accessed 10/29/2025).

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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