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(Feminist) Academic Friendships: Discussing and Re-Thinking the Labour of Love

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The act of collaboration is complex, as are the reasons academics engage in the practice. Some scholars form collaborative relationships to combat loneliness and isolation. Others view collaboration as a means of expanding their knowledge or abilities, or as an avenue to compensate for weakness. Still others enjoy working with one or more persons in areas of shared interest, believing that the result will be more meaningful, satisfying, and significant than what would be accomplished individually.¹

Dalila

In preparation for this piece, Giovanna and I have reflected upon our relationship, and we agreed that our scholarly collaboration has been mostly informal and perhaps precisely for this reason, it means more than a few additional lines on our CVs. Indeed, across the years, we have developed a very distinctive academic relationship: we haven't co-authored articles or ever presented together, yet our exchanges have still had an impact on how we live our careers and approach to scholarship.

Research on academic friendships and collaborations reveals that men and women develop different strategies to build their networks with peers: in sum, women are seen as more likely to establish mentor-like relationships and use them to cope with emotional labour and gender inequality.² As far as I know, mentoring is not diffused or incentivised in Italian academia, whereas in the UK, in the two years I have worked here, I have taken part, as a mentee, in two distinct mentoring programmes, one in my university and another involving a network of institutions, which was especially aimed at women. In the latter, the mentor helped me navigate my insecurities as a woman in academia, reflecting upon my expectations and aspirations. I am glad of these exchanges, and it felt good having my need for guidance and support acknowledged, yet the fact that this programme addressed gender inequality as an individual matter, proposing confidence and self-branding as solutions, didn't make sense of my deepest preoccupations. In other words, I ended the programme asking myself: 'Are you sure that your sense of precarity and your feelings of dependence are all down to you?'

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My relationship with Giovanna, although not framed in a proper programme, can also be understood as a sort of messy, informal, mentoring exchange. We met each other almost seven years ago, right before I began my doctorate programme, thanks to our common research interests. She immediately struck me as a role model, suggesting to me that there existed a different way to stay in academia, one that could welcome someone like me, a former punk with a working-class upbringing: she researches marginalised scholarly subjects, like porn and popular low-budget films, but also wears amazing outfits, different from the boring blouses and ballerina shoes that I thought were mandatory to be taken seriously in this field. Throughout the years, most of our conversations have dealt with a variety of topics and concerns that go well beyond our scholarship, such as films, politics and music (especially Prince), but also work-related issues, like job applications, precarity, and stressful workloads. When I think back to our conversations, I am sure we have built a particular kind of friendship, whose proximity with work makes it quite different from the *others* I maintain outside of academia. On the one hand, the apparent unproductivity of our collaboration makes it closer to a classic friendship: we hang out just for the sake of it; on the other, the institutional framework in which it started always stays in the background, making our discussions very specific, intense, and almost nerdy about how we feel, our research, and our concerns about work. As such, I think that the key for unpacking this ‘mentoring-friendship’ is emotional labour, as mutual emotional support foregrounds our scholarly exchanges as well.

The main reason is that academic work, including in our experiences, often means isolation, hypermobility, dependence, and uncertainty. In an essay discussing the reasons for quitting academia, Francesca Coin³ uses the famous feminist expression ‘labour of love’, originally associated with unpaid housework, to describe how academics accept to perform unpaid, solitary, and emotional labour in their profession. Coin also points to the toxicity of this work environment, and how it intertwines with mechanisms of neoliberal accumulation that ultimately force many to quit. Sarah Jaffe has recently published a book discussing the neoliberal compulsion to love our jobs, and how ‘work never, ever loves you back’.⁴ It is not by chance that Jaffe devotes an entire chapter to academic labour, and how neoliberal values and marketisation have impacted universities and their workers. Trapped in a one-to-one dysfunctional relationship with our jobs, we convince ourselves that the solution to their failure to love us back is to move on or to try harder, feeling guilty and responsible for not doing enough to make it work. In this framework, academic friendships are a space to vent about a neglectful lover, without feeling judged or threatened. In other words, these friendships help us to cope with the ‘cruel optimism’⁵ that makes us stay in academia hoping for it to be a good job, a stable and fulfilling one.

Without forgetting our privileged position, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit researchers and scholars hard, and scholarly friendships have been crucial in alleviating the burden of isolation in such challenging times: working from home, the pressures of being resilient, and the uncertainty of funding and contract renewals have in some ways exacerbated the existent problems that I mentioned above. The pandemic has re-emphasised the existence of a ‘crisis of care’,⁶ strengthened by the unequal distribution of care-work, including emotional labour. At the same time, the crisis has also reawakened the hopes for a transformation of society towards the values of solidarity and mutual support, inviting us to reevaluate our

extended kinships, including our friendships. In this context, having the opportunity to talk with Giovanna, including in preparation for this contribution, has been not just a way to cope with and reflect on these issues, but also a chance to valorise the ‘unproductivity’ of chatting and ranting, and the importance of verbalising discontent while academic work hasn’t stopped demanding resilience and productivity. We also acknowledged that those moments of vulnerability had to stay private, as they could have a cost in terms of exposure. Indeed, our conversations are so frank and direct precisely because they remain private and confidential, like in a mentee–mentor relationship.

Talking about these issues is certainly a good practice, yet doing it behind closed doors doesn’t compensate for the structural inequalities at the root of these problems. The lack of a public discourse on these (negative) feelings has ultimately striking political consequences. To paraphrase Ann Cvetkovich,⁷ we should deprivatise and depathologise negative feelings and think of them as a resource for political and transformative action. We should celebrate our friendships and informal collaborations, but also look at these experiences as incitements to change things together, demanding better working conditions and practising solidarity towards our colleagues. This public culture would make academic friendships primarily about intellectual nourishment, and not a space where we cope with the constraints of precarity, competition, and hyper-productivity. These relationships can also help us to think of a more solidary and collegial way to do research. In a way, it is already like that: my conversations with Giovanna have often made me think outside of the box, nurturing my passion for my work, but what would it be like if this friendship were free to express its feminist and transformative potential?

Giovanna

During the first Skype call I had with Dalila in preparation for this article, I was particularly struck by one thing she said. She told me that she remembered that one time, during a post-conference drink with other colleagues, I laughingly admitted that I couldn’t follow the conversation because of my total ignorance of its subject (philosophical matters, she seemed to recall). She felt somehow relieved that a colleague was so candidly up front about not always being on top of the situation, about not necessarily knowing everything. In the days following my Skype conversation with Dalila, I kept thinking about this episode, and I concluded that this seemingly unimportant detail about when and how Dalila and I started to talk as friends is symptomatic of what I believe our relationship is based on. To put it differently, I think that what had begun as little more than one of my frivolous (although typically self-deprecating) remarks over a glass of wine actually was an unconscious exercise in both self-confidence and trust. I realise now that I was self-confident enough to be honest about my shortcomings and mild uneasiness in that situation because I knew deep down that I could trust the person in front of me to understand what I meant and not to define me (as a scholar, or even as a person) on that basis. I can’t exactly say why I felt that way, since I didn’t know Dalila very well at the time: perhaps it was her decidedly ‘subcultural’ flair (which I absolutely liked and definitely related to), or maybe it was just because I enjoyed her conversation (so naturally ironic and smart). But the fact is that I felt safe while so casually sharing my feelings.

This 'need for a safe, trusting space to share'⁸ is paramount within an academic world in which everyone is expected to live up to increasingly high levels of competition and standards of productivity, often translating into forms of exhaustion and self-abuse.⁹ And that's probably one of the reasons why Dalila and I have developed, over the years, a relationship of both collegiality and friendship, grounded on emotional support as well as scientific exchange. Two elements seem, in fact, to be inextricably linked to the way I perceive my academic and human bond with Dalila: a genuine feeling of companionship that helps us navigate 'the often lonely waters that veil the overt and covert requirements' of academic life¹⁰ and a fruitful intellectual cooperation aimed at the production of better research.

The idea that immediately comes to mind is that our relationship could be interpreted as a non-institutional form of peer mentoring – that is, as a relationship 'in which each individual function[s] as both a mentor and a mentee to [the other], emphasizing mutual interdependence [and incorporating] feminist principles that support an equal balance of power [...], accept emotion as facilitating learning and value the integration of personal and work life support'. On the one hand, since I trust Dalila with my emotions, I find it easy to confide in her when I'm feeling doubtful or fragile and insecure; besides, sometimes it is just so comforting and funny when we simply spend time chatting and having a good laugh (and maybe even a good rant) together about many things (work related or not), as she rightly states in her section of this article. On the other hand, we talk extensively about our research projects, we rely on each other to test our theoretical approaches, methods, and hypotheses, and we exchange precious materials and unpublished works; as I value her research skills and I respect her perspective on things, I always find her point of view and her comments truly compelling and inspiring. In this regard, while I certainly agree with Dalila when she stresses the importance of valorising the playful unproductivity of certain aspects of our collaboration, I think that the dialogue I have with her has helped me improve my scholarly productivity as well – if by productivity we mean something more complex and less 'arid' than the greedy accumulation of titles and articles, of course.

In my effort to further describe my professional relationship with Dalila, I encountered another notion that has helped me conceptualise our collaboration in more detail. According to Bruce Macfarlane, there are at least 'six forms of collaboration in academic life represented by a continuum of moral permissibility based on the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding behaviour'.¹¹ For Macfarlane, academic relations aimed at increasing one's own productivity and success (collaboration-as-performativity), or reinforcing the power of established networks through the exchange of gifts and favours (collaboration-as-cronyism), or even exploiting the work of other (generally younger) researchers (collaboration-as-parasitism) can be considered examples of self-regarding behaviour; in contrast, other-regarding behaviours include collaboration-as-mentorship – i.e. 'working with less experienced colleagues to encourage and support their development'¹² – and collaboration-as-communication – i.e. 'seeking to share and communicate ideas bringing them to the attention of others',¹³ for instance by disseminating one's own research activity via publications and conference papers.

However, the definition of collaboration whose meaning I find particularly fitting when I think about my relationship with Dalila is the one that Macfarlane places at the 'other-

regarding end of the moral continuum' scheme: 'collaboration-as-intellectual-generosity'. This can certainly be interpreted as 'the most idealistic version of the purpose of collaboration', because it mainly consists in 'the free sharing of unpublished ideas between close academic colleagues in a spirit of good will and the common pursuit of truth in science'.¹⁴ I really think that this is the spirit that ultimately underlies my collaboration with Dalila: the sharing of thoughts, opinions, doubts, 'discoveries', and methods 'not for the sake of an external purpose or to compete for prestige [...], but for the sake of increased insight'.¹⁵ In other words: one of the main goals of our collaboration is producing better scholarship, without any consideration of direct personal advantage (for instance in terms of career advancement, or for the mere addition of items to our CVs), even though this might seem a bit 'naïve' in an academic environment where the 'stress on measurement in evaluating academic performance reifies individual achievement over the achievement of collective goals'.¹⁶

A collaboration process of this kind – which we have defined as 'informal' and 'messy', but which can also be framed as 'peer mentoring' or 'intellectual generosity' – is actually not that unusual in the human sciences, where formal research networks and practices are less common compared to the field of natural sciences.¹⁷ It also testifies to a more articulate understanding of academic collaboration as a 'dynamic experience'¹⁸ in which researchers engage as 'socio-emotional entities'¹⁹ rather than simply as disinvested and 'disinterested scientists'.²⁰ In this sense, academic friendship might be a very effective (albeit still underestimated) resource for researchers in terms of enhanced productivity, in that it offers a more diversified approach to knowledge, grants access to unexpected resources, and helps mitigate the frequent creative tensions inherent in scientific production;²¹ contrary to what seems to be the dominant narrative, in fact, alliances and mutual care are of vital importance if we intend scholars to be 'not just institutional agents acting according to formal norms within a system of education and research', but also and mainly 'real people with all the psychic and social complexity this entails'.²²

Notes

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