# On the Need for Women's Alliances in the Gendered Spaces of Doctoral Programmes and Academia: An Account of Challenges and Strategies

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## INTRODUCTION

In one of the pre-pandemic summers, I was given the opportunity to attend a conference to share progress on my doctoral research with an interdisciplinary and international group of junior and senior academics. My paper submission had undergone expert review, and my position as a white European woman doctoral student, who was studying at a North American institution at the time, had helped me to secure financial support to partake in the gathering. I was fortunate to have had the ability to join the event and proudly carried the conference badge around my neck, which identified me as a member of this community of researchers. Overall, the conference space tried to construct a kind of flexibility that temporarily

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allowed participants to perform their academic selves, unbound from the restrictions of heteronormative gender politics that so often determine the way in which young women academics are able to enter and participate in academia.

In this environment, women academics of different positions in the scholarly community were able to come together, exchange experiences and reflect on one another's journeys as women trying to pursue a doctorate in contemporary academia. Over the course of the following years, our conversations continued and collectively we noticed similarities in the struggles that we faced but also in the strategies that we developed to position ourselves as young women scholars. The question recurred about the spaces within which women can develop an academic self. In other words, at issue is where women can exist and where they can make a place for themselves as early career researchers within the restrictive environment of academic institutions today.

Therefore, this chapter presents a collective account of women academics' different experiences in doctoral programmes in Europe and North America. I address the challenges and opportunities open to women academics to perform their academic selves within the contexts of academia, and specifically how these experiences are linked to women's perceptions of the heteronormative spatial geography of academia. It has been widely researched that the constraints of academic spaces continue to put women academics at a disadvantage (Bagilhole, 1993, 1994, 2002). However, the experiences specific to different women academics in doctoral training programmes need further articulation and reflection.

Writing this reflection on the collected account of women academics' stories from the vantage point of performance studies, I draw attention to the physical and the virtual spaces on academic Twitter, which my conversation partners have identified as an integral space of academia today. This part of the paper provides an account of strategies for creating alliances, visibility and authority in the contemporary international scholarly communities.

## WOMEN ACADEMICS AND PERFORMING THE ACADEMIC SELF

Broadly construed, the notion of an academic self, as it is used in this chapter, refers to women's self-perception of who they can become as women in academia. Richard Shavelson et al.'s (1976) study of the self-concept in academic performance argued that the "self-concept is a

person's perception of himself…formed through his experience with his environment…, and [is] influenced especially by environmental reinforcements and significant others" (p. 411). The academic self-concept is part of the general self-concept and describes "one's academic self-perceptions or one's perception of one's ability in school" (Kadir & Yeung, 2016, p. 1). Complementary to Shavelson et al.'s work, this paper argues that the academic self-concept of a person is not only connected to how a person performs academically. The conditions under which an academic self can develop and exist must also be taken into account. That means that we have to acknowledge that the spaces of academia, its codes of behaviour and its regulations for access determine who a person can become.

The field of performance studies provides the concept of a performing self that helps us to understand how people become who they are. The notion of performance draws attention to the conditions under which people appear to others. Therefore, we can begin to grasp the role that the environments that we inhabit play in establishing oneself in the different spaces of academia. In order to perform one's self, Ervin Goffman (1956) wrote, the social characteristics that a person exhibits need to be recognised by others:

> when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon others, obliging them to value and treat him in a manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. (p. 6)

Therefore, the academic self of a person is not only dependent on how a person perceives her academic ability, as Shavelson et al. (1976) stated. Instead, the conditions, meaning the spatial conceptions and structures of academic spaces in terms of architecture and institutional organisation and management, matter for the kinds of possibilities that academics, and specifically women academics, have to express their academic selves and have those academic selves received as such with value by others.

For women academics, this raises questions of experiencing institutional and intellectual belonging. Growing into a young scholar is the pertinent goal of doctoral programmes. We frequently attend courses, workshops, conferences and informal intellectual gatherings. All of these are prominent occasions during which doctoral students are expected to shape their academic selves. Part of that process is aligning one's own academic self with disciplines, movements and intellectual belief systems. The

creation of the academic self in the doctoral programme is a process of material and conceptual crafting that is determined by reiterative practices and performances, in the sense of self-representation through material and verbal acts that are grounded in conventions (Butler, 1990; Crane, 2002).

In her study of performances of selves in medieval courts, Susan Crane (2002) convincingly explained that from the vantage point of performance studies "reiterative behavior recreates social identity, alters social relations, even reshapes beliefs and institutions" (p. 3). Therefore, the function of organising space in a specific way is to determine the behaviour, speech and appearance that people are expected to exhibit to mark their social positions. I argue that women academics develop an academic self by reflecting on how they perceive their ability to perform as an academic. In this context, the notion of being an academic is a gendered concept. By that I mean that academic spaces are not produced for different women to exist in them. Therefore, for many young women academics who are trying to develop a sense of academic self, it is difficult to do so because the conditions under which they attempt the journey do not recognise or make space for different women's needs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While this chapter wants to draw attention to the gaps in research and the gaps in conversations about equity in academia, I by no means argue that the account presented here captures the whole picture. There is ample scholarship that details how academia leaves women at a disadvantage structurally, and the ways in which interpersonal interactions can perpetuate experiences of discrimination and the feeling at a constant disadvantage (Acker, 1983; Bagilhole, 1993, 2002; Bhatti & Ali, 2020; Morley & Walsh, 1995; Rhoads & Gu, 2012; Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Thomas, 1996; West, 1995). Previous research placed the focus on discussing the influence of curriculum and disciplinary canons on perpetuating the low representation of women authors (Maddrell, 2015). We also know that there are gendered assumptions about intellectual capabilities with regard to women's care responsibilities (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016), and the quality of research by women (Lund, 2012; Wilson, 2005). Other scholars have focused on research productivity by women academics in different fields (Aiston & Jung, 2015; Kitchener, 2021; Over et al., 1990), and on institutional failure to promote women in particular fields (Howe-Walsh et al., 2016; Vohlídalová, 2021). This is an issue more broadly in

professorial positions across all disciplines (Ceci et al., 2014), and there is a lack of role models and informal support systems within academia (Bagilhole, 1994), in particular for Black women and People of Color scholars (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Mokhele, 2013; Wright et al., 2007).

Scholarship about the experiences of women in academia resonates with much of what Judith Butler (1990) described in *Gender Trouble*. Butler explained that the concept of normative heterosexuality structures society in a way that a person's identity as a woman is discursively constructed. Laws, regulations and social rules assign women to specific social, economic and political positions, and ask women to perform those assigned positions by way of language, behaviour and thought. Sandra Acker (1983) commented: "The barriers to equality encountered by women academics have their roots deep inside the structure of higher education, itself influenced by norms and values of the wider society" (p. 88). The power allowed to women in academia is limited and the spaces in PhD programmes, tenure tracks and senior professorial positions are numbered.

As a result, spaces of action are, therefore, often micro-environments that women academics create for themselves within their departments or research groups, at conferences and in convivial practice. The goal of this chapter is to explore the spaces of action that women academics use in physical and digital environments to give insight into the function of academia's spatial geography.

## Research Design and Data Collection

To understand what is working for women who are growing into careers in academia today, this project draws on a qualitative approach to provide opportunities for expressions of self-perception and individual perceptions of spaces in academia. Using collaborative ethnographic chats (Selleck, 2017), the study brings together the experiences of 14 women academics across disciplines and institutions (Table 6.1). The group of women who have contributed to this project are woman from different geographical origins, who pursued or are pursuing a doctoral degree in a European or North American context. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling via academic Twitter and via direct recruitment through my international network of women academics from different academic and non-academic institutions. The process of sampling produced a group of participants where some women recently completed their doctorate while

**Table 6.1**   Participants and their doctoral programmes

| # | Pseudonym | Field of research | Geographical location of the doctoral programme | Status regarding the doctoral programme | Type of doctoral programme |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Lena | Social Sciences | Europe | Recently completed the doctorate | Partially funded doctoral programme, not structured |
| 2 | Lin | Natural and Social Sciences | Europe | Quit her interest in a doctoral programme | Funded through a research grant, doctoral programme not structured |
| 3 | Lexi | Natural Sciences | North America | Quit the doctoral programme after four years | Funded through research grant and teaching assistantship, structured doctoral programme |
| 4 | Lydia | Social Sciences | North America | Finished her doctorate in the 1990s | Partially self-funded and financed, structured doctoral programme |
| 5 | Lily | Education | Europe | Current doctoral student | Funded through research position, structured doctoral programme |
| 6 | Lucy | Social Sciences | Europe | Current doctoral student | Funded through research grant, structured doctoral programme |
| 7 | Layla | Education | North America | Current doctoral student | Self-funded, structured doctoral programme |
| 8 | Louisa | Natural Sciences and Economics | North America | Recent doctorate | Funded through research grant, graduate school and teaching assistantship, structured doctoral programme |
| 9 | Liane | Computer Science | North America | Current doctoral student | Partially self-funded, partially through a teaching assistantship, structured doctoral programme |

(*continued*)

**Table 6.1** (continued)

| # | Pseudonym | Field of research | Geographical location of the doctoral programme | Status regarding the doctoral programme | Type of doctoral programme |
|---|-----------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 10 | Leila | History and Humanities | Europe | Current doctoral student | Self-funded, doctoral programme not structured |
| 11 | Luna | History | Europe | Current doctoral student | Self-funded, structured doctoral programme |
| 12 | Lisa | History | North America | Recent doctorate | No information |
| 13 | Larissa | Social Sciences | North America | Recent doctorate | No information |
| 14 | Lorelei | Social Sciences | Europe | Current doctoral student | No information |

others terminated their programme and academic work. One person is a senior academic. All participants were given pseudonyms to support anonymity, and were asked for information about the location of their doctoral programme, their current status regarding the doctoral programme and the type of doctoral programme (funding and structuredness through courses or cohort activities).

I conducted five semi-structured ethnographic chats via video chat (#1–#5) or in-person, and five semi-structured ethnographic chats via Twitter chat (#6–#10). Participants who were identified through Twitter were offered the opportunity to engage in this study more deeply through extended ethnographic chats via videoconferencing. I further received four short responses regarding Twitter as an academic space for women academics (#11–#14). Participants shared only a brief reflection on the issue, which is typical of the user behaviour associated with that particular social media platform. All contributions were labelled according to participants' geographical locations to support participant anonymity. Finally, the data were analysed using thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify pertinent and recurring themes in participants' contributions. I re-present central themes of these conversations in this chapter that speak

to the relationships of space, concept of self and performing as a woman academic in physical and virtual academic spaces.

The study participants' positionality reflected different experiences of privilege and precarity. I acknowledge that the experiences re-presented here speak to academics who self-identified themselves as women in the research. When I refer to women academics in this chapter, I do not mean the biological binary of men and women. Instead, I emphasise that the term "woman" refers to people who understand being a woman as part of their identity and who understand their means to perform themselves as women academics within the parameters that academia sets for women. There are nuances of difference in experiences by trans women academics that must be acknowledged in this respect, but that cannot be addressed in detail in this chapter. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from the data do not attempt to be representative of all women academics' experiences, especially the experiences of Black women academics. Nonetheless, the collected account offered in this chapter re-presents that there is breadth in the realities of different women academics who pursue a doctorate.

## Physical and Virtual Architectures of Challenge and Opportunity

Already at the beginning of my investigation, the way of conducting the fieldwork with women academics took place in both physical and virtual worlds. On WhatsApp, Instagram or Twitter-chat, we would update one another on the progress of our PhDs, share our challenges and anxieties over making submission deadlines for chapter and full dissertation drafts, and illustrate moments of frustrations on this journey through GIFs and memes, as, for example, the PhD comics by Jorge Cham (2021). In person, we shared moments in which our collective physical presence could be understood as an expression of solidarity for one another. As the Covid-19 pandemic made such physical interactions ever more difficult, online spaces gained importance. In lieu of frequent in-person meetings with peers and academic mentors, for me and many others, #AcademicTwitter, a common hashtag that is used to start and follow conversations in the academic community on Twitter, became an extended network of peers of different disciplines, fields, specialisations, backgrounds, positions and experiences.

Instead of dropping in on events and conversations in the halls of academic buildings, we would drop into threads and comment sections. The accessibility of virtual platforms such as Twitter offered the opportunity to stay in touch with one's wider academic network through a myriad of different forms of engagement. It is possible to observe, listen in and participate in conversations related to the doctoral research. At the same time, there is a community of scholars in social networks such as Twitter with which we shared personal experiences of going through the process of the doctorate. Lily described her usage of Twitter as "a space where the personal and the professional meet".

The platform has different tools to personalise self-representation. Besides adding a profile picture, the short description of oneself in 160 characters allows users to choose their affiliations with institutions and the field. Pinning a specific tweet to amplify research or a thought process makes transparent the type of engagement that the user seeks. For Lily, Twitter's features to represent herself to others in a multi-sited way provided her with "the ability to act out more of her personal self and connect it to her professional [academic] self". For her, staying connected to peers via Twitter was crucial because she could be open about her experiences of discrimination and abuse in academia without fearing the same repercussions in her institution.

The opportunities that the virtual space presents to its users are the seemingly limitless chance to become involved in an existing space and to make it partially their own. The possibility to report discriminatory behaviour and to block people to protect oneself from online abuse provides its users with a sense that they can help themselves, and that they can rally others to come to their defence. Lydia, who reflected on her usage of the platform, stated that "connectivity gives people energy". Even though it takes time to "become part of a network and forge connections", Lydia said, Twitter can have a disruptive potential to interfere in the way that institutions treat women academics. The disruptive potential lies not only in organising in solidarity to support marginalised members of the academic community. There is also potential to change the notion that performing as an academic is only possible according to academia's normative heterosexual norms. For example, Lydia reported that she participated in a #shoetweetchallenge that was started in order to "represent a type of person in academia that defies the standard academic with Oxford shoes". Lydia explained that women often are not read as academics if they are not dressed a certain way. Showcasing a variety of different shoes that belong

to different academics, women academics in particular, was meant to challenge the institutional norms set for expressing one's academic self.

Throughout my conversations, my interlocutors noted that Twitter is in a sense one of the unique spaces of the virtual sphere of academia that adds possibilities where the physical world poses restrictions. Lily said that especially people who already experience restrictions in real life find new opportunities to interact differently with the scholarly community online. To Lily, Twitter provides an opportunity to get things "off your chest…slightly better than talking to a wall [because Twitter can function] as a safe space to express yourself in a space that you made yourself".

The idea that women in academia often perceive that they are "talking to a wall", as Lily phrased it, is a common observation (Bagilhole, 1993). Briony Lipton and Elizabeth Mackinlay (2017) argued that "it is very difficult for women to be heard and given the space to speak" (p. 75). In her analysis of women's place in philosophy, Justine McGill (2013) pointed out that the environments within which women seek an audience and participation employ "gender-based silencing tactics" that "[threaten] women's ability to survive and flourish in these places" (p. 198). On the one hand, the frustration of not being heard is a result of a lack of representation of women of different backgrounds in full-time professorial and research position across different fields and institutions (Crimmins, 2016). On the other hand, women academics continue to experience discrimination on the basis of their gender, race, ethnicity and care roles because "universities' gender equity policies fail in that they do not challenge preexistent gender assumptions" (Lipton & Mackinlay, 2017, p. 75).

There are systemic means in place to prevent women academics from occupying positions of power and decision-making that would allow them to create spaces within which they can be seen on their own terms. Lipton and Mackinlay (2017) convincingly noted that academia is thus a space of ambiguities for women academics. Women academics cannot act out their academic selves if they are restricted from speaking or prohibited to speak, and if not given the chance to speak in a manner that makes space for women's needs and perspectives. Lipton and Mackinlay (2017) observed that, being "out of place" in this way, women academics silence their voices in order to fit into the social hierarchy of academia by way of "neutering" their language in order to appear "homologous" (p. 76) with their men peers.

Experiences that my conversation partners for this chapter shared resonated with this argument. Lexi explained that, when she entered her

doctoral programme, there were "not a lot of good living mentors" around and that being a woman in the field of natural sciences meant that she was not taken seriously by men academics. For her, pursuing a doctorate was linked to achieving a professional qualification to teach in higher education. The fulfilment of her sense of academic self should have been linked to achieving this goal. However, in her experience, natural science departments place little importance on teaching. Senior faculty used a degrading language to devalue teaching in favour of doing research. The reason for that was that most funding stems from research grants, which speaks to the neoliberal organisation of her department. In this environment, her personal goal to teach was an invalid goal. Senior scholars conveyed to her that, even though she occupied this academic space, her work did not contribute to the way in which the department could preserve its value. Consequently, she began to question her academic self, and she started to define it more by what she could not do than what she could do. Attempting the path of mirroring the goals of the men academics in her doctoral programme became a dreadful and frustrating experience for her, which produced a sense of regret of ever having started a PhD at all.

After deciding to leave her programme, Lexi explained that being forced to perform someone else's reality to be worthy of a place in academia was a problem. The rules of the space that you occupy determine who you can be. Even if there are spaces of support for women in academia, these spaces can quickly become silos and narrowing spaces, and yet another means for exclusion. Lexi perceived that the root of the problem was that "the people who train us can often not relate to us". For women academics, the realisation that we are not understood becomes so much a reality that we accept it, and when we finally find support, to put it in Lexi's terms, "having support [feels] weird and feeling weird about this feeling [is] weird".

The notion of feeling out of place and of having to adjust who we are to fit in can further be reiterated through the structure of the physical environments in academic institutions. While open door policies attempt to promote an approachability, doors can also become reminders of our worth, or lack thereof. When we stand in front of an advisor's office door after he had delayed yet another meeting with us but not with the men academics around us, we wonder, "Are we even worth his time?". Other advisors' doors become warning signs for when we might become subject to harassment so that we can alter our path through buildings accordingly.

Besides the symbolic function that doors can be roadblocks instead of entry points, there are many more spaces of (dis)comfort built into the architecture of academic spaces. With the many alley ways in buildings and on campus itself, it is often not possible to build a critical mass among scholars of different disciplines or fields. For women academics in pursuit of a doctorate, the architecture of campuses reinforces a sense of gatekeeping that disadvantages women from different backgrounds. My conversation partners and I reflected that we often sought out alternative spaces of exchange, and created our own gatherings and opportunities. Lin stated that the oppressive structures of academic spaces made her quit her path to research. For example, when invited to the table to share her ideas in a conference space that was dominated by men academics, she felt that she was not recognised as a valued conversation partner on research despite her expertise in the field.

Louisa and Lucy reported that the ability to engage with like-minded and supportive individuals in online communities helps to bridge the issue. Leila explained that she observed that

> diverse and female-led departments in some disciplines (usually ones that have an interest [in] or awareness of feminist theory) tend to create an environment that takes into account challenges that marginalized groups in academia such as women from diverse backgrounds tend to have.

Liane and other conversation partners made similar observations. The possibility to mirror a lived inclusivity in departments relates to how women academics perceive that they can exist within the architecture of academia. If it is acknowledged that academic practice is multi-sited, there would be no need to perform as Superwoman in all spaces of academic engagement. Being an authentic woman academic could then be conceived on other terms than the traditional academic frameworks. Further, taking into account that women's academics have worth and are a value to multiple sites of intellectual growth and practice could help to avoid the fear of accusations of co-opting oneself as a token in departments' gender statistics. There would be the option of counting women academics' contribution to the alternative spaces of knowledge production as part of their academic and personal achievements. When there is pride in one's own work, Lexi stated, we have more respect for ourselves and for what we do because we see ourselves in what we have achieved.

Throughout my conversations with women academics in this project, the issue recurred that women academics who are interested in a doctorate are in need of being able to experience this sense of acceptance. There is a need to know that, when you grow into who you want to become, there is much that we do not know and many mistakes that we will make. Therefore, we need to know that belonging in alternative spaces of contribution and exchange where we can gain the experiences and knowledge that will help us to grow is valid and valued. Even though collaborative spaces exist in both physical and virtual academia, the architecture of the academic environment reduces the visibility of these spaces by way of creating a contorted landscape of silos. While privacy for one's own academic work is certainly important, especially young women academics in doctoral programmes need networks with like-minded people to build community in a period of their professional development that poses many barriers.

## Conclusion

For many of my conversation partners, the virtual opportunities of Twitter could do some of this work, as Luna, Lorelei, Larissa and others stated. Twitter's flatter hierarchy makes it much easier to interact, Louisa said. However, it also requires the digital literacy of its users, she cautioned. You have to learn how to benefit from the online community. All conversation partners noted that learning how to act and perform according to the expectations of different academic spaces requires learning how to make connections, how to perform relationships and how to present oneself as a woman academic.

The role of the advisor is crucial in this process. Lexi and Lin noted that good community encourages growth, and that, by being invited openly and without prejudice into scholarly communities, we can anchor ourselves within our fields of research. Relationship-building through intellectual exchange that is not bound by the gendered conventions of traditional academia can be helpful to establish a sense of belonging—for example, when you see your experiences as a woman PhD student reflected on Twitter, as Layla experienced. Discovering iterations of our networks in both the physical and the virtual world is motivating, and fosters confidence that we are right where we belong, Lena noted. When we feel that we can take up space and use a language that reflects how we want to be seen by others, we are more able and we trust ourselves more to live out

parts of our academic selves that we would otherwise keep hidden. Advisors who encourage this type of engagement with academic spaces and our own academic selves are the role models whom we need.

Therefore, this chapter concludes by positing that we need to challenge the architecture of academic spaces that often leave women academics, especially in the early stages of their careers as doctoral students, at a disadvantage. We need to make use of the spaces available to us in the physical and the virtual world to use our academic value in mentorship, advising, consultancy and translation of knowledge into non-academic spaces to make transparent that women academics' academic selves do not have to be bound by the normative structures of academia. Instead, we should be afforded the right to contribute in the manner(s) in which we would like our capabilities as women academics to be framed and in whom we want to serve with our knowledge.

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