Blank(et) Spaces

Weaving a Transfeminist Geography of Precarity in Academia

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Abstract

The paper presents a collective autoethnography of fourteen transfeminist scholars from diverse geographical backgrounds, exploring the experience of precarity within the Italian academic landscape. We have developed a supportive network, a virtual space where we could share our struggles in the competitive and isolating neoliberal academic system, away from its toxicity that often leaves us exhausted and burdened. Responding to the call from the transfeminist journal *Lüvo* for contributions on feminist and decolonial geographies, we engaged in a reflexive process that led us to imagine ourselves as islands within an archipelago, ultimately transforming into a patchwork blanket that is a metaphor for our solidarity and interconnectedness. We examine themes of loneliness, anxiety, and hypermobility, revealing how these experiences intersect with gender dynamics and academic hierarchies. Our work is about care and community, as we wove together our stories to challenge the neoliberal structures of academia. Through this collective work, we aim to illuminate the complexities of our experiences and foster alliances. We hope that others will join us in our struggle.

Keywords

solidarity, care, transfeminism, neoliberal academia, scholar activism, creative methods

Brief Commentary

We are fourteen geographers, coming from transdisciplinary backgrounds, doing research on diverse topics, struggles at different latitudes with different methodologies and desires.

We are a non-mixed group that came together through the permanent assembly of precarious early-career geographers, Smarginando.[1] We are each other's support groups for academic grievances. At big conferences, we are each other's friendly faces, hostel companions, people to share a bed with. In the evening, we become each other's unofficial social dinners because, let's be honest, who among us can stand and afford to go to the official ones?

[1] We know each other because we are part of, or participate in the activities of Smarginando, a Permanent Assembly of precarious early-career geographers in Italy, launched in 2022. A description of the Assembly and its activities can be found at: https://sites.google.com/view/smarginando/home-page.

At the beginning of October 2023, the transfeminist journal *Lüvo* opened a call for contributions titled "Troubling spaces: feminist and decolonial geographies."[2] Within minutes, emails were exchanged, texts sent, and we all started thinking: we should write something. The day after, we had a mailing list running, and a plan to meet. We decided that, as people who were assigned female at birth, and sharing a transfeminist and critical positionality, we had something to say. We felt like we needed to say that something. How to say it was up for discussion. We met on a video call. As geographers working in the Italian academy, we are dislocated and dispersed in various departments. Moreover, due to our precariousness we are all scattered around the world, living in different places in Italy, in Sicily or Sardinia, travelling to the "field", on a visiting period somewhere, or to visit our loved ones – spinning cogs of a messed-up machine.

When we started meeting we were enthusiastic and had a lot of ideas. Most of all, we were craving a space of encounter, solidarity, and closeness in the midst of the hyper-mobility that is part and parcel of our academic life. And from this we started thinking: What does being geographers in Italian academia mean? Is it being isolated, missing out, and being "flexible" about what our life is bound to be? Is our on-screen persona more alive than our flesh and bones?

We began reflecting on our "loneliness", on the dynamics of power that it helped unveil, and decided to conduct a collective autoethnography, what SomMovimentonazioAnale calls an *autoinchiesta* (2017). During our debate, there was a geographical metaphor (Dematteis, 2021) that kept coming up, namely, ourselves as islands. Islands in the sea of Italian academia, islands that can be re-imagined and re-positioned within an archipelago. So, we decided that each of us was going to write a text to describe their "island", their experience within academia. We gave each other some time to do so. However, none of us felt comfortable commiting our thoughts to a shared text. The archipelago was a blank space. And we were taken aback. We felt vulnerable, we did not want to expose ourselves. We did not trust each other despite what we said above. First rule of the Italian academia *Fight Club:* "never say something that could be used against you". Because it *will* be used against you.

We then worked towards making this blanket space a bit safer – each of us started writing some keywords down, which resonated with some of the readings we were doing. Anxiety (Horton, 2020). Loneliness. Hypermobility (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston, 2019; Bartos and Ives, 2019). Isolation (Wright et al., 2017). Over and over, these words kept multiplying, weaving together our unease, uncertainty, discomfort, fear, paranoia. And then we started reading our "islands". We laughed, we cried, we did not know what to say, we stared at each other through the screen. The paradox of opening up, but being so distant hanging heavily over our heads.

We found out that we went through similar experiences. We discovered that some of the things that happened to us, the ones we used to gaslight ourselves on ("it's all in your head, it's nothing"; "you are not special, this is happening to many others and they cope with

[2] You can find the special issue at:
https://www.calameo.com/read/00481305911cf206295b9?fbclid=IwY2xjawGApddleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHU58KwqDHrU7MPtEBWDlIPrHvSACWUpU_ytnsxdsVW8XLrAZUxzhgsjAyQ_aem_rR5LMGMM4looYoxZyI9i_A.

it"), were incredibly wide-spread (see Hawkins et al., 2015), diffused, and clearly intersected with gender dynamics, our political positionalities, and the different privilege positions also among us. As transfeminist geographers engaged in many struggles, we couldn't and will not be silent.

We moved beyond the metaphor of islands because we needed a place where to feel warm. We started weaving our experiences together, from an archipelago to a patchwork blanket. Thinking through metaphors, each of us started assembling stories, creating their granny square. We then knitted them together to strengthen our shared conditions, and the structural causes of our pain and our privileges.

I feel slow. I have to suck it up. Why can't I sleep? I miss my friends. Train-plane-bus-repeat. I don't have enough money. What was that sentence that big professors like to hear that I need to use to justify my transfeminist approach? Am I too slow? I am too slow. Ruins. Earthquakes. What am I doing? Do I belong? We are not a place to be conquered. It's kind of dark here. How many calls have I scheduled for today? It's nice to see your face (wish I could hug you, too). Tales from inside the hamster wheel. My jaw hurts from all the compulsory smiling. How many times was I sexualised today?

We transformed our blank space into a blanket. Putting all our squares together took effort, it hurt, it was tiring, slow and energy consuming. Our squares differ by material, colour, language. Different dimensions made it difficult to reach the perfect shape. The blanket is a bit sloppy but it's warm. It is queer - crafted with care and intention. It is an act of political warfare (Ahmed, 2014), community building from marginal positions, to challenge the academic space that polishes and tarnishes its image – to see how all that marble and gold are built onto intersectional power dynamics. It is our way to care for and with each other (Lopez and Gillespie, 2016). It may appear opaque – that's how we felt it was supposed to be.

Together, we created a "list of grievances." Inspired by the *cahiers de doléances* created during the French Revolution, we parodically reworked our sorrows, pain and problems and we listed them at the end of our blanket. A bibliography for our experiences, the reasons behind our burnout, loneliness, anxiety, panic attacks (Askins and Blazek, 2017). They say a lot more about our experiences than we would have been able to do with texts and stories.

Through this experiment, we have established a discussion that touches upon our difficulties within academia while also unravelling issues of gender and class dynamics within the workplace (Laliberté and Bain, 2018; Oberhauser and Caretta, 2019), mapping and consolidating friendly alliances within academia (Taylor and Klein, 2018).

During our writing process, we often came back to the question: which language do we write in? The decision to write in Italian stemmed from the fact that we all share this linguistic positionality, albeit differentially acquired. We were all socialised to Italian as a vehicular language. However, most of us grew up speaking other languages or dialects - languages that have historically been erased, or replaced by Italian. In academia, we are required to speak Italian with a high register, which connotes class dynamics and differentiates us according to North/South/Islands divides, also highlighting city/rural areas discrepancies. We are constantly judged on our language skills (or the lack thereof). We are asked to speak perfect Italian, perfect English, and it is "preferred" for us to know other

languages. But we are discouraged to inhabit our own language positionalities when considered minor, "useless".

Our granny squares speak different languages; the former text – and this one translated in English – is written in a style that reflects this diversity and allows for contamination, through the presence of words in other idioms that we use daily, in our work or private life. We know that reading something that cannot be understood may cause discomfort, but, as Gloria Anzaldùa (1991) wrote, the audience of a text can begin to understand the discomfort of people from marginalised linguistic communities in having to adapt to vehicular languages. We decided to translate the article in order to spread and share our desire to make discomfort in academia visible and to build alliances (Askins and Blazek, 2017; Fem-Mentee Collective *et al.*, 2017; Lopez and Gillespie, 2016; Sotiropoulou and Cranston, 2023).

Our collective blank(et) space is a space of solidarity, struggle and resistance. We don't know how this space will evolve, but what we learnt is that being alone is one thing, being lonely can be fought against.

Blank(et) Spaces: Weaving a Transfeminist Geography of Precarity in Academia

We are a group of Italian, Sardinian and Sicilian geographers assigned female at birth. We are PhD students and research fellows scattered in different Italian universities in Bologna, Cagliari, Catania, L'Aquila, Milano, Napoli, Padova, Roma, Torino and Trento. We come from the North and from the so-called *Meridione*, from the islands and the Italian mainland.[3] We are forcibly (im)mobile bodies that inhabit places but are forced to live somewhere else. Bodies that wish to be there but are stuck here. Bodies marked by the different prestige assigned to the universities we work in/for. We call each other *compagne*.[4] We identify as straight, bisexual, and lesbian, as well as cisgender and non-binary. We share eco-transfeminist, anticapitalist, anticolonial, no-border, pro-Palestine struggles. We are weary, carrying light wallets and heavy minds. We speak a variety of languages and dialects – some learned in childhood, others acquired along the way. They may reflect the places where we grew up, be the result of socialization or may have been imposed on us as vehicular languages. We are continuously translating, adapting, and mediating to make ourselves understandable to each other. At the same time, we must be readable to the rest of the world. We remain contaminated, hybrids. We often say uncomfortable things.

When we first read *Lüvo*'s call, we quickly connected online. There was excitement in the virtual space we had just created because it offered us a place to imagine and perhaps understand our needs – a collective space to reflect on our shared experiences and, for a

[3] "Meridione" refers to Southern Italy and the islands, not just as a geographical location, but also as a concept that encompasses cultural, historical, and economic differences, as well as power asymmetries within the Italian nation-state (see Gramsci, 1967; Ferme, 2021). In English, the "Questione Meridionale", which explores these dynamics, has been translated as the "Southern Question" for anglophone readers to understand this phenomenon within a broader framework that considers "south" as a plural and multifaceted category (Cassano, 2001).

[4] The closest translation to this term in English is "comrades" but we feel that the Italian word entails a deeper meaning which is nowadays entangled with class, gender, race, and post-anthropocentric world struggles, thus referring to a specific way of being comrades (on the perils of loss in translation and its spatio-political implications see, among others, Rivera Blanco et al., 2021). https://radicalhousingjournal.org/2021/vecinas-neighbours-en/.

moment, expand our shrinking horizon. A space to breathe freely, away from the toxic academic competitiveness that leaves us feeling exhausted and burdened. A space where we could engage with academia in the way we envision it, fostering the kind of environment we aspire it to become. The question: How do we feel? The answer: We feel lonely. But are we truly alone, and (how) do we express our loneliness?

We decided to work through *autoinchiesta*.[5] We would have shared our experiences through a written text. However, two days before the deadline we had set for the following meeting, the shared text was still a blank space. None of us had managed to offer her stories to the others. Who, after all, has the privilege of being vulnerable?

We are used to whispering about our lives, because talking about them within academic spaces is dangerous and inappropriate. In that moment, insecurity, anxiety, paranoia, and a lack of trust took hold. We began to wonder: What if the things we share during our online meetings escape the boundaries of our group? What could happen if we expose ourselves too much and make ourselves vulnerable? What are the costs of crossing the invisible line between job performance and solidarity? And again, what if we denounce the academic industry rather than keep on performing the young good researchers, respectful, workaholic, groundbreaking but not too loud, commendable when critical but only toward the "outside world"? As the new promises of Italian academia, we may be praised for being politically positioned but only if the Italian academic hierarchy lies untouched by the critical equation. Faultless products of a system permeated with and structured upon patriarchal, colonialist, classist, and racist mechanisms.

We shifted from the written text to the ephemeral but not less effective medium of our voices to narrate our stories and experiences. Empathy curbed the fear of exposure. To warm and cover each other up we decided to fill the blank space on our screens with a blanket, *una coperta*, *una manta*, *eine Decke*, ***оно одеяло***, *une couverture*. Each of us crafted a tile, a granny square. We did so at a slow and tiresome rhythm that allowed us to make mistakes and start all over again, leaving behind the thought of being scrutinized and without the error leaving a scar on us. Turning to our self-enquiries, we sewed (and materialized) the hard-to-say, the unsaid, the whispered, the between-the-lines. A quasi-meditative practice, that recalls the rhythmic gestures that make your arm sore but lighten your mind and slow down the flow of your thoughts. We then weaved threads among our granny squares. We followed the pattern, the thread that connects us, and a picture started to take shape and make sense of our frantic and angry voices, comprising and encompassing our (collective) selves through an unexpected creative way.

With this blanket we kept ourselves warm, we became crossroads for one another, and we took care of each other; it allowed us to break through the competitive and paranoid mechanisms of academia. The granny square represents a fragment of meaning in the collective blanket-making process, whereas the blanket becomes a net and a floor onto which we can walk barefoot. It is a collective weaving practice that fills out our individual blank

[5] Taking up the meaning and reconstruction proposed by SomMovimentonazioAnale in https://sommovimentonazioanale.noblogs.org/post/2017/12/27/autoinchiesta-cose-per-noi/ [last access: 17/10/2024].

spaces, made up of a multitude of experiences, feelings, languages, subjectivities, and academic and political positionalities. The blanket unfolds as an instance of co-writing and co-research: Starting from our anger, loneliness, tiredness, and awareness, we created a messy, *sgangherata*, *arrogada*, *accocchiata*[6] blanket. We weaved ourselves and one another into a solidarity network made of collective warmth, reciprocal acknowledgement, care, silence, and noise.

Figure 1. Blank(et) spaces

List of grievances

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[6] These are translation of the term "messy" in the Italian, Sardinian, and Neapolitan languages.

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