

Research Article



Straddling and resisting the scholar-community action boundaries

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Issue: Feminisms for our time!

Sinead D'Silva

When I started my degree in Sociology with minors in Economics and English Literature, I intended to get through it so that I could start working and get on with my so-called adult life. To go to university was to access better opportunities – a mechanical task. I wanted to work after high school, but my mother would have none of that. It was during my degree that I began to dig deeper and explore questions I had about my own experiences and the world around us, as well as to challenge my own biases and those of others, and to articulate the contradictions I observed between education and lived reality. The chaos of creativity and imagination with which my brain functioned, for which I previously had no words or theories to articulate, now found itself validated. In simple words, the accusation could be made that I was “radicalised” by a critical education, but only one that could build on what I already observed through my life experiences or about which I was curious.

This reflective piece considers the ebbs and flows of engaging with social justice praxis in my life as I have made my way through the world. I first reflect on my educational experience in the Global South, particularly as a girl of a non-dominant cultural background, my experience of being racialised in a new way when moving to the Global North, and finally, my internal conflicts as I contended with putting education and social justice related community work into practice within the institution of academia. Of late, rather than existing alongside my formal work, my participation in community informs and is allocated within the formal employment I undertake in academia, albeit with precarity. This previously only occurred through work within the charity sector or being part of community groups. I contend that this is not unusual, and seems exacerbated in our current times, where we might find ourselves resisting on a more regular basis.

Finally, underpinning the thoughts presented in this piece and hopefully woven through it, is the process of developing some of my vocabulary to articulate my present and my hopes for a feminist future of care and joy alongside resistance. This ranges from encouragement to actively loiter as an act of resistance as a girl in India (Phadke et al., 2011) to the refusal to be silenced in one’s attempts to speak truth to power, extending pro-democratic solidarities that glorify no past (as in the case of Roy, 2009), to appreciating indigenous forms of caring for land as quiet resistance (Cabrera-Pacheco, 2017), to the potential of anti-authoritarian, decolonial historiographies (Ramnath, 2012), and the numerous zines and literature I have consumed. Alongside, as a researcher, refusing the simplistic approach to positionality, and moving towards a practice of accountability and collaboration, while recognising the “disjunctures between the sites of face-to-face encounters with people whose stories we want to tell, and the institutional locations from which we produce knowledge about them” (Nagar, 2014, pg. 89), is a mammoth task that is indeed processual. It is true that only a few aspects of our hopes for the future can be articulated in words – the reality is expansive beyond this. For many of us that are socially involved just by virtue of our values, finding the space to do this – even if only in part – within formal employment is simultaneously satisfying while also leaving us suspicious. The extent of our energy and resources involved in this is invisibilised, yet the exchange remains steeped in our commitment to causes.

Reflection 1: On educational trajectory, a critique of formal education systems, and other possibilities

To be a sociologist and a teacher of sociology, as my late undergraduate teacher Arun de Souza (2012) put it, one had to ‘do’ sociology in the world. My degree reiterated and stressed that learning did not happen just inside of four walls at universities – my teachers were more critical than this. Most prominently, those who were Jesuit priests had their practice sitting between critical pedagogy and liberation theology, both of which emerged from radical tradition in Latin America. Popular criticisms of organised religion withstanding, this combination offered a way of understanding the world that prioritised social justice through collective liberation and drew from an anti-colonial outlook towards knowledge and being. Thus, morality in pedagogical praxis is understood based on how a teacher situates themselves in relation to two sets of actors.

On the one hand, empire — or the “cultured” national elite — is the active subject. On the other hand, the active subject in the “cultural revolution” (which begins through revolution and continues by the construction of a new educational system, which is the fruit of the liberatory pedagogical process in its conjunction) is the child, youth, and the oppressed; the marginalized communities in the neocolonial nations of our global present (Dussel, 2019, pg. 165).

It is a call to actively topple the systems of oppression that manifest as adult supremacy, statist domination, and authority that stifle the creativity and revolutionary potential of young people’s rebellion, which is a colonial, patriarchal project that is enacted through education systems.

The liberatory teacher of the future is led by the hand, blind and weak in the darkness of the new world (which is what the Other is in reality), by [their child], the youth, the people. Only the confidence in their language guides [them] away from erring, misstepping from the path which brings [them] to the Other (Dussel, 2019, pg. 177 – edited for inclusive language).

This combination of liberation theology and critical pedagogy was particularly prominent during the 1980s and 1990s, which made for the further dispersal of critical thinking about the world via some churches, which was my experience within the Global South, namely India. This impact is well recounted by Ferreira (2021), whose upbringing in a Catholic community and education paralleled aspects of my own life. Here, I wish to note that Ferreira’s memoir is chilling: he has been punished for work he has done in solidarity with oppressed groups and been imprisoned on charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA for short), all of which were eventually proven false. His story is not unique in India.

Liberation theology and critical pedagogy filtered into my life, as previously mentioned. During my education, I was able to engage the multitude of possibilities and begin to make sense of the world around me, put into words some of the inequalities I observed through my life, learn about other perspectives and struggles, and review my perspectives if needed. This also made space for the more creative ways in which my brain functioned, switching between realms of chaos and possibilities. It made clear the contradictions of nationalist speech, of social hierarchies and stratification, of histories, of the problems with education, patriarchal structures, limitations of science and modernity, and how

popular culture and social reality/realities intertwined to produce the dominant and silenced narratives of the world and in my specific context – alongside its multitudes. Some of this, I realised, I had thought of or felt growing up in Goa, but never possessed the vocabulary to express. I must mention here that my education also brought with it self-critique and the consideration of my own privileges. This was a strong thread. Encouraged by de Souza's (2012) and other teachers' approach to teaching, as well as the content of my course, I found myself committed to community action for social justice, which I aimed to undertake through social research. It led me to my first job with a child rights NGO in Bombay. This was my first experience of the possibilities of research as a way to not just make sense of the world in critical ways but also as a mode of resistance, of fighting that did not require physical force (which I do not possess). As mentioned in the introduction, threads of feminist thought simultaneously wove themselves around me and my understanding of the world. I pondered on what it meant to 'do' sociology in the world. Beyond the critiques of systems, I reflected on my experiences of my body and self making their way through a society that would rather see girls oppressed or dead. And then I set off.

Eventually, I moved to England under the illusion that I would have access to better literature and resources and advanced training through a less oppressive structure than the one in which I was previously educated. Much of this was true, but only to an extent, and I found myself learning additionally owing to the various international postgraduate researchers and fellow students who came with their own worlds of knowledge to share. Alongside my master's programme that was taught by a host of scholar-activists, I came up against a different set of structures of oppression. Amongst teaching staff, I was impressed by Routledge's (2001) ability to present Goan resistance in a way that I had not yet seen but felt deeply. I began to dip in and out of struggles against the European border control regimes and queer organising. Changes in my life kept me back in England when it was time to return to India. My family worried about how much of a loudmouth I was, and where that would land me after the voting in of the authoritarian regime there in 2014 that persists today. Not long after, I began a PhD.

My argument here is nothing new – education cannot be contained within a box of concrete walls – it does and must interact with the world around it and the lived experiences of those who partake in it alongside the experiences they embody. Thus, any illusion of what constitutes learning as being hidden in gated towers or libraries, or solely written in books, misses an essential aspect. That is, learning is all around us and takes place in community.

Reflection 2: The emotional and financial burden of being in the neoliberal academy as a racialised, queer woman, immigrant from the Global South

Beginning my PhD in 2016 took me by surprise. I hadn't imagined the possibility of moving into academia, although I intended to carry out social research. Of course, this continues to remain an illusion, as I am due to finish yet another fixed term contract in academia as an early career researcher. My preferred idea to study a particular situation in Goa proved to be difficult to fund, owing to the political climate in India. Interest in youth decision-

making about education and work proved to be a good second option. Keen to be involved in equality related work then, I supported evaluative research on the higher education agenda, such as widening participation and addressing the attainment gap for minority ethnic students. I also dabbled with the budding decolonisation calls from students, which started with the Rhodes Must Fall movement, where students in South Africa mobilised and had the statue of coloniser Cecil Rhodes removed from campuses in 2015, first at the University of Cape Town. Following this, students at the University of Oxford initiated a similar campaign, which the university management did not support, owing to the funds it receives from colonialism sympathisers. It sparked conversations on decolonisation, such as the project “Why is my curriculum White?” at the Leeds University Union. I supported research on this project, drawing from my expanded knowledge on race and racism as a result of being coerced into undertaking a master’s dissertation on the ethnicity question in England.

Much of my research on inequality within the university was carried out alongside my full-time PhD which did not relate to inequality. As with anybody else who has been involved in ‘equality, diversity, and inclusion’ (EDI for brevity) work, and who has a critical disposition towards neoliberal framings and functioning of the world, it did not take long to understand that this was generally a farce. In some instances, I noted being the only racialised person or woman in many a room. In instances in these EDI spaces, my speaking up as a Brown woman confused White staff, who perhaps expected me to sit quietly and not cause much disruption, their ethno-racism and anti-Black racism showing in their expression. This set off various thoughts, particularly an overarching question which I found echoed by Ahmed (2012, pg. 49): “What does it mean to have a body that provides an institution with diversity?” Indeed, as a response to this question, it is revealed that the language of diversity has a somewhat nullifying effect, through which performativity around institutionalised practices of ‘diversity’ work, alongside legislative procedures, creates a strange illusion of commitment. Eventually, this leads to the creation of defensive spaces in which raising issues – particularly those of race – are silenced through defensive tactics and enabled through documents that are written to demonstrate apparent commitment to ‘diversity’ (Ahmed, 2012). Of course this does not end at race, and the experiences of Black women in academia is compounded by misogynistic attitudes, leading even to sexual harassment (Gabriel and Tate, 2017). These intersections do not fade even as myths of a post-racial society emerge, as Bhopal (2018) dispels. Eventually, Ahmed (2021) makes a compelling argument for the need to be troublemakers and use complaint as feminist pedagogy in the face of institutional violence.

Here is another argument I wish to make. My PhD focused on the ways in which physics students in England make their way through their degree programmes and eventually transition into their career futures. What is hidden from the eventual thesis is my simultaneous path through my doctoral programme in a British HE system. I want to draw attention to a crucial aspect that often goes unnoticed. While the White, male researcher does not engage with literature outside of their research area as those similar to him are everywhere and in domination, people like me must in order to articulate experiences we

have and to support others. Where they may spend all their time focusing on research interests and areas, we spend time digging deeper about something that does not relate to our research. Yet both are compensated for the same work, with large pay gaps in addition, inadvertently reiterating that what we do through considerations and care is unvalued. We spend time thinking of what these engagements and encounters mean, and how can we make sense of them OUTSIDE of our research topics. It appears that the burden of disrupting spaces as racialised people and women, which makes us appear as invaders (Puwar, 2004), puts us in a position of being made to jump through various hoops (see also Johnson, 2020). Therefore, in addition to my research area, I attempt to navigate another whole set of literature on what it means to be a racialised researcher from the Global South undertaking a PhD in a British university.

I would be interested to know just how many White PhD researchers have made the effort to make sense of coloniality or other themes of literature without proposing to do their research on it, which itself is fairly ironic. Although the literature is fascinating and, in a way, soothing to know that I am not alone, it still leaves the reality weighted.

Reflection 3: Employment under late capitalism and critical disciplines merging community lives in contentious ways

As I look at my personal bookshelf, one that I have curated since earning a livable salary through my post-doctoral position, I am reminded of some of the first few books that I purchased. Alongside various anarchist literature, I bought the book *Why work? Arguments for the leisure society* (Power, 2018). Within the pages of this book, which I find myself flipping through often, are various texts from across decades but also artwork for a potential future beyond (capitalist) work. I close the book before I let the ideas spend too much time in my head – I do not yet possess the luxury of living that reality without taking care of other issues first.

My move to England was paralleled by a series of life experiences, precarity, and isolation, with financial difficulties that kept me in unsafe situations. Yet, holding me together has always been a deeper dwelling of values that could not be knocked out of me, and a network of care that patiently and quietly supported me in solidarity that had been forged and sustained over time. When I finally moved away from England to Portugal, a new blow was dealt through the COVID-19 pandemic, at a moment when I had finally achieved a relief from financial stress owing to postdoctoral funding. I became unwell for what I thought was a short duration, but the impact has been long-lasting. In this moment I was pleased to observe networks of care that I was able to tap into, and I watched as other instances of mutual aid appeared. I was also able to reflect on my existing networks of care. Here I found moments of joy, particularly with other women in my life, usually from the Global South. What the pandemic meant for precarious scholars, mainly from the Global South but not exclusively, also developed into calls for solidarity across institutional and border divides (see, for example, Urban ECA Collective, 2022). While relating to this instance, the piece alludes to a wider phenomenon of exclusion and an ever-important need to renew commitment to collective, collaborative practice against colonial, capitalist, and statist ordering of society and knowledge. It isn't just 'now more

than ever', it is a re-assertion in yet another moment when the lives and dignity of some peoples in the world are threatened, at the mercy of global systems of oppression.

Accepting that it was not, in fact, normal to be living under times in which we heard about over ten thousand deaths occurring daily brought a sense of normalcy. While this occurred, we were simultaneously watching the utter disregard for human lives through people denying the existence of the virus. We also saw states using this situation to reassert their power and monopoly over violence.

Whenever we rely on a capitalist, imperialist system to provide vital necessities, we can guess that the provision will be fragile and inadequate, and designed to transfer far more wealth to the population those systems were designed to support. [...] Often, the concessions are never delivered at all, only promised in an effort to quell resistance (Spade, 2020, pg. 37).

Surely this pent-up rage needed to go somewhere. Now that I had only one job, although it was not playing out too well itself – racism and workplace bullying in Portugal was a new challenge – but was not as demanding, I found myself with an additional resource of time. When a social movement broke out in my hometown amidst the pandemic, in resistance to the state's destructive proposals for infrastructure projects through a protected forest area, I found myself able to give my time to compile research reports. When a local community centre was struggling to organise to pay rent, I found myself able to give time to volunteer. When anti-racism resistance emerged in response to the murder of a young Angolan actor in Lisbon in a racist attack, I found myself able to give time to be present and support as I could. In turn, these instances enabled me to feel that I could participate in and act on what was important to me. All acts of resistance amount to more than we are allowed to realise, big or small. I observe this in the phenomenal research carried out by Global South feminist, decolonial scholars, who combine care, curiosity and joy, against the grain. In our burning world, we may take hope from our very participants and our experiences of carrying out the research process, something that comes across strongly in research by Cabrera Pacheco (2024) on how Indigenous women face both challenges and joys as they care for the environment and their families – which even comes with recipes! I was returned to the place I was during my degree, with the possibility of academia being a space through which social justice practice could be realised.

Once my funding came to an end, I continued despite being rendered unemployed for almost 2 years. After this, remembering my position as an economic migrant, I sought employment. This new phase came with an additional development that unimaginably compounded my distress, pulling together all fears. The ear-ringing silence from scholars in the Global North and universities here to date, even actively targeting those who speak out about the genocide in Gaza, has been appalling and lays bare the selective nature of so-called academic freedom (Fúnez-Flores, 2024). This hypocrisy is articulated in academia as scholasticide (Hajir and Quato, 2025) and demonstrates how this silence functions as epistemic violence wherein certain peoples are excluded from the apparent equality and inclusion agenda in most institutions (Shoman et al., 2025). There must be a

response to the system in which we currently exist. Ajour (2025) very clearly names this, in the case of attitudes towards the genocide in Palestine, as a need for solidarity rather than sympathy. Indeed, engaging with the expression of dissent, such as extending solidarity at student encampments, while also urging a continuation of my engagement with other activities, reinforced my solidarities.

Overall considerations and yearnings

These occurrences have returned me to the conclusion that, despite the flaws of being legitimised by an institution, it was still more of an advantage to have solidarity and some autonomy for me. This returned me to the possibility of mobilising research-related resources for community-focused activities, despite the complexity of what it means to do this within the university system (for a deeper consideration of this issue, see Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021). The discomfort of being positioned as a so-called scholar activist feels more jarring than usual. Yet I have found space to present community-based involvement at conferences which attempted to balance academic and community organising attempts at making sense of the world. Amongst other recent experiences, at the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology Conference (2024), my presentation was well received and brought me into contact with other groups that shared my outlook and ethos, ones of internationalist solidarity. Simultaneously, reflecting on the burnout on which our current system thrives must not be overlooked. The need to acknowledge it and rest continues to be crucial (Muir, 2024).

The social action in which I have been involved reminds me of core values. Through my mother, grandmother, granduncle, community, and others in my life, I have attempted to learn how to be caring, resilient, and daring. Mundane experiences came to the forefront when the social movement broke out in my hometown, and I was able to articulate the depth of my relationship to land, but only to a certain point. The remainder was an emotional connection that could not be articulated in words. My engagement with anarchist thinking and social ecology has helped put some words to these emotions and practices. Herein lies the conflict with academia. The colonial mentality that derives from the need to find words to describe the feelings that push us to action in defence of land and people stems from a perspective of domination and attempts to order the world, justified as scientific rationalism. Its continuation in statist mentalities and in the functioning of the nation-states do little to support human life but rather maintain colonial disparities. Of course, this is not to say that hierarchical systems did not predate colonialism and do not continue after it. To the contrary, in India, the Brahminical hegemonic system was oppressive prior to colonialism and has since been emboldened by it through the development of Hindutva ideology. Statist domination aligned with this, fuelled by communal hatred (which is not new to the region – see again Roy, 2009), has escalated from cow vigilantism-related deaths to warmongering in response to an incident in Kashmir in May, 2025; Kashmir is the most militarised zone in the world. This continues to be the moment when feminist perspectives on violence are all the more important, which as Vergès and Thackway (2022) argue, must challenge carceral feminism, include anti-racist and anti-colonial thought, and work towards restorative justice. Here, I

am reminded of my education.

I have accepted that there will never be words to articulate all that I see and experience through any community-focused research, but rather that the few loan words that we may string together to put either into ground proposals or into publications, like this one and others, will always be severely limited. I find hope and peace in the ways in which authors from the global majority resist and articulate this resistance. This is primarily done through critique and through living out politics. The conversations that I have had with a variety of people from across the globe through which we have shared our own specificities while also having deep similarities and bonds of solidarity, that transcend concepts or attempts to universalise reality, have grounded and supported me. The Zapatista notion of inhabiting worlds within worlds speaks clearer of the truth, or various truths, that may begin to soothe my discomfort with the scholar activist boundaries. Knowing that nothing that I do within that academia will ever have a profound effect, it will at the same time contribute greatly to supporting and recording resistance and ways of seeing the world that are non-Eurocentric, non-Anglocentric.

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Authors



Sinead D'Silva

Research Fellow » School of Geography, University of Leeds

Sinead D'Silva is a social researcher (betwixt human geography and sociology) interested in the entanglements of youth futures, education and work in society, social justice action, and relationship with place. They adopt a critical approach to the ways in which state and market converge to create narratives of futures articulated in disconnection from those whose lives it impacts. Recently, Sinead has turned her focus to the ways in which people relate to place (land, culture, society) and imagine futures in their own terms. Sinead is particularly biased towards the stories people share from their lived experiences. They draw on social ecology, decolonial feminism, and thinking related to anarchist and anti-capitalist movements.