

# Scholarly feminists

Building embodied infrastructures in the European academy

*Suzanne Clisby & Adelina Sánchez Espinosa*

**Abstract:** In this article we reflect on our longstanding work within a powerful European network of feminist scholars. Here we consider how we have collaboratively created and sustained embodied infrastructures of care in building feminist academic scholarship, supporting the next generations of feminist scholars into the academy, and working through creative praxis to generate feminist and queer activism within and beyond academic spaces. We argue that our gendered bodies, identities and material actions have built embodied infrastructures that have facilitated feminist access to higher education and career development and advanced gender equalities discourse beyond the academy through our creative activist networks.

**Keywords:** scholarly feminist alliances, transnational networks, feminist embodied infrastructures

Over the past two decades we have had the privilege of working with and among a powerful network of feminist scholars located within higher education institutions across Europe. Moving between conversations, dialogues and co-authorship between the authors and drawing on a few of the voices and thoughts of our colleagues along the way, in this article we reflect on our feminist work together and take this opportunity to explore how we have collaboratively created and sustained embodied infrastructures of care in building feminist academic scholarship, supporting the next generations of feminist scholars into the academy, and working through creative praxis to generate feminist and queer activism within and beyond academic spaces. We argue that our gendered bodies, identities, and material actions have built embodied infrastructures that in turn have facilitated feminist access to higher education and career development and have advanced gender equalities discourse beyond the academy through our creative activist networks.

As Clisby (2022, 141) has argued elsewhere, there are numerous challenges, trials and tribulations in nurturing and defending feminist spaces “in the chinks of the world machine” (LeFanu, 1988, 1). Indeed, it is hard work and comes at a cost, not least in terms of time and emotional labour. Building and maintaining our feminist infrastructures demands persistence, commitment, and sometimes sacrifice. In similar ways to all the often under- and unacknowledged work that women, feminists, and activists all over the world do, it is of “critical importance in the knitting of and maintenance of social networks. Indeed, one could argue that it is these embodied infrastructures and this community management labour that form the (highly gendered) bedrock of society” (Clisby and Holdsworth, 2016, 12). But it has been worth it, and the rewards have been significant, both personally and professionally, as well as for many of the next generations of European and global feminist scholars we have been able to support into and beyond the academy. In what follows, our narrative shifts between conversation and co-authorship as we write in dialogue, posing some questions to ourselves and one another, and providing a synthesis and discussion of some of the ways we have successfully created feminist spaces within the European academy through our embodied infrastructures of collaboration and support.

We begin by taking time to pause and consider, to unpack, just a little, in a dual dialogue with one another, some basic questions that, when you have been in the game for as long as we have, we tend to take for granted. Following this initial conceptual positioning dialogue, we move to provide a theoretical framing of how we understand and define feminist embodied infrastructures. In a third section we again turn to a brief mutual dialogue to consider how we each began to build these feminist embodied infrastructures across the European academy before setting out a ‘roadmap’ of our academic gender work and European feminist collaborations from the 1990s onwards. We conclude by thinking about the value of affective feminist convergences and, in so doing, here we are joined by the voices of two of our scholarly feminist colleagues, A.G. Arfini<sup>1</sup> and Jasmina Lukić<sup>2</sup>, who bring insights both from their work based in Italy and Hungary and as Gender Studies colleagues at differing points in their career trajectories with whom we have been working within and across our European feminist alliances.

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## What does it mean to be feminist? What is a feminist academic?

*Suzanne Clisby*: Trying to think through what it means to be feminist is actually quite a hard question to unpack when I think about it, because I often take it for granted, I know in my bones, my body, what I mean when I identify as feminist. Evoking the words of Jeanette Winterson (1992), it is written on and through my body. Feminism is as deeply embedded in my skin as if it were moving through my veins as tiny feminist molecules in my blood. Then, thinking about what makes us feminist academics, I do not think I could, or would wish to, at this stage in my life and career, extrapolate my personal feminism from my ways of seeing and understanding the world as a feminist academic. As Sara Ahmed (2017) has articulated in *Living a Feminist Life*, our academic feminisms, our feminist theories, our feminist ways of seeing, emerge from our everyday lives. Moreover, being ‘situated knowers’ (Haraway, 1988), it is similarly not possible or useful to extrapolate our gendered selves, our everyday lived realities from our work as feminists. Ahmed (2017) provides us with her vision of feminism, and her words here resonate with me very much as a woman who initially nurtured my own feminism through literature during my formative years growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. This was a time when we still had access to feminist literature and women’s writing through Virago and The Women’s Press, and I also enjoyed novels by the likes of Alice Walker, Isabel Allende, Maya Angelou, and Margaret Atwood. So, reminding me of my own ‘tattered and worn’ formative novels, I feel Sara Ahmed’s (2017) opening paragraph bears reproducing here. She begins by asking:

What do you hear when you hear the word *feminism*? It is a word that fills me with hope, with energy. It brings to mind loud acts of refusal and rebellion as well as the quiet ways we might have of not holding on to things that diminish us. It brings to mind women who have stood up, spoken back, risked lives, homes, relationships in the struggle for more bearable worlds. It brings to mind books written, tattered and worn, books that gave words to something, a feeling, a sense of an injustice, books that, in giving us words, gave us the strength to go on. (1)

Ahmed (2017) then goes on to provide a useful interpretation of how she understands feminism, acknowledging the whole weight of history, politics and ethics that is attached to this single laden word, and considers how we might begin to live a feminist life:

Feminism: how we pick each other up. So much history in a word; so much it too has picked up. (...) Living a feminist life does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct, although it might mean asking ethical questions about how

to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world); how to create relationships with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems; how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls. (1)

Here you will notice how Ahmed (2017) speaks to, if not explicitly of, embodied infrastructures – “how we pick each other up (...) how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems” (1) – and indeed evokes the “solid walls” (1) of those infrastructures. Of course, there is a no singular way of seeing or being feminist. We are a kaleidoscope of shades and colours, and that is as it should be. Nivedita Menon’s (2012) words also come to mind here when she says:

To be a feminist is to understand that different identities – located hierarchically as *dominant* or *subordinate* – are produced at different times and in different spaces, but also to be aware particularly of the processes of gendering. By ‘gendering’ I mean the ways in which people are produced as ‘proper’ men and women through rules and regulations of different sorts; some of which we internalize, some which have to be violently enforced. To be a feminist is to recognize that, apart from gender-based injustice, there are multiple structural inequalities that underlie the social order, and to believe that change is possible, and to work for it at whichever level possible. (Menon, 2012, ix)

I would also add that being a feminist is not the sole right of those who identify as women. Our network includes colleagues and scholars who identify as gender queer, non-binary, trans, or as men. When I see ‘feminist’, and when I reflect on myself as a gendered being – and this builds into and is underpinned by being a feminist academic – I see myself as I identify as a woman, but what being a woman means to me is also personal, political, complex, and nuanced. This leads me to think about the ways Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin (2009) have described what we do as gender studies scholars, how we frame and understand gendered research:

‘Gender’ is the overarching concept for research which is oriented on the inventory and analysis of power relations between men and women and also *within* men or women. Gender is the social-cultural counterpart to sexual difference. Gender studies is guided by the social-constructivist insight brought home by Simone de Beauvoir (1990 [1949]) that we are not born as women (or as men) but that we are made woman in a society characterized by patriarchal gender relations. Research on gender studies is concerned with critically reviewing the

rigid patterns of patriarchal relations and is not bogged down by a biological, deterministic concept of men and women (2; emphasis in original).

So, as Buikema and Van der Tuin (2009) articulate here, when thinking about foundational entry points in our field, we begin as we must by stating that gender is a social construct. In so doing, we critically interrogate and refuse patriarchal essentialisms. As Menon, Buikema and Van der Tuin, and of course de Beauvoir, all similarly infer above, there is nothing fixed about how we understand or perform our gender despite the numerous socio-cultural messages we are subject to from birth that might suggest otherwise. As a feminist academic I call for resistance, indeed a ‘feminist theory of refusal’ to evoke Bonnie Honig (2021), of these normatively hegemonic productions of “‘proper’ men and women” (Menon, 2012, ix), and of the narrow definitions of this gender binary.

People are undoubtedly different, and biology and the materiality of the body exists, *matter* does matter, but many of these differences are not based on fixed or essentialised biological gender binaries. Moreover, our expressions or performances of genders and sexualities – our masculinities, femininities, trans or queer identities and the whole gamut of sexualities available to us – are also nuanced, permeable and can shift and change across a fluid continuum. So, I identify as woman, but what I mean by ‘woman’ and how I choose to perform my femininities, masculinities, and the whole flux of my gender identities, is specific to me, in the same kinds of ways that my sexuality is fluid and specific to me. My point here is that our gender and sexual identities are our own, as our feminisms are our own. While not to naively ahistoricise or acontextualise the politics and power at play in naming, the weight of history and meanings inferred or assumed through identifying as one of the plural gendered identities we have available to us, I would like to retain my understanding that how we perceive and understand our gendered bodies and selves exceeds and defies labels. We can and do shift and change through our life course, and this is to be celebrated rather than vilified. This, for me, is also what identifies me as feminist academic.

*Adelina Sánchez Espinosa:* To me scholarly feminism means transformative interventions which had an import on the urgent transformation of capitalised ‘Academia’ into a friendly small-lettered academy. It is a joint responsibility to teach and research differently. Here I want to place emphasis on the construction of our response-ability as a collective venture since I believe in the tremendous multiplying effect of our affective convergences and our research alliances and it is, therefore, no wonder that the first volume of our recently launched *Researching with GEMMA* book series should be called precisely that: *Feminist Research Alliances: Affective Convergences* (Sánchez Espinosa and Méndez de la Brena, 2022).

What do we mean by this? The answer is given by the loci we have helped to materialise into our present embodied structures. Almost forty years separate the beginnings in 1985 of the Women's Research Institute in Granada from its institutional status of today. It was certainly the construction of affects which transformed our own isolated disciplines into the explosive potential of transdisciplinarity. From our isolation in the ivory tower bubbles inside departments we grew into a collective which was at first local but then became international. As a result, what was back then a tiny little Women's Studies book club seminar in a little common room at the Faculty of Arts, where a small group of pioneering friends got together for a chat, has now become the IUEMG, the Women's and Gender Studies Research Institute, with a grand material presence of its own: a separate building with its own many seminars, classrooms, library, lecture theatres and the embodied presence of around one hundred people between faculty members and students. And this metamorphosis has political import since it has, in turn, built around us the structural scaffolding of the transformative power of the heavy mechanisms of a classic generalist university such as the University of Granada.

This embodied infrastructure at UGR nowadays is the fruit, as I explain, of the synergies of the IUEMG members which had produced outstanding outcomes such as the first doctoral programme in Women's Studies and Gender in Andalusia (since 1987). But not only. The local transdisciplinary embodiment of the IUEMG was in need of other affective convergences and teaching and research alliances at transnational level. And here came GEMMA, the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies which since 2006 embodied into the GEMMA consortium and the networks and consortia which preceded and followed GEMMA: ATHENA, ACUME, EDGES, GRACE, GlobalGRACE and, most recently, EUTERPE. We return to this gendered architecture in our next section.

A second fundamental aspect follows from the initial tenet of my answer to what I consider to be a feminist academic since our affective convergences lead necessarily to our research and teaching alliances to transform the knowledges we help to produce. The group of scholars who have taken part in the networks and consortia we deal with in this article have worked and published on the issue for many years. Some of their most salient – and pointedly, politically frequently collaborative – publications are: *Women's Studies and Culture. A Feminist Introduction* (1995) by Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik; *Thinking Differently* (2002) by Rosi Braidotti and Gabriele Griffin; *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture* (2009) edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin; *Teaching Visual Culture* (2010) by Elżbieta Oleksy; *Theories and Methodologies in Postgraduate Feminist Research: Researching Differently* (2011) edited by Rosemarie Buikema, Gabriele Griffin and Nina Lykke; *Feminist Pedagogies and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis* (2017) by Beatriz Revelles and Ana María González; *Gender, Sexuality and Identities of the Borderlands:*

*Queering the Margins* (2020) edited by Suzanne Clisby; *Seeking Eccentricity* (2021) by Adelina Sánchez Espinosa and Dresda Méndez; the GRACE book series: *Theorising Cultures of Equality* (Clisby, Johnson and Turner, 2020), *Investigating Cultures of Equality* (Golańska, Różalska and Clisby, 2022), and *Performing Cultures of Equality* (Durán-Almarza, Rodríguez-González and Clisby, 2022); and the *Researching with GEMMA* book series with Adelina Sánchez Espinosa as series editor.

These publications, among others, crafted within the frames of our networks and consortia, would never have been possible without the feminist embodied infrastructures we have built.

Last but not least, I want to pay attention to the need to construct our feminist interventions through the sharing of our embodiments as faculty staff and students within the space of the classrooms and also beyond that, in the streets to which we take our feminist activism. New embodied academic structures can only be really feminist through being receptive to the challenges posed by the new generations we train. Only by being alert to their demands and requests can we really transform the schools we belong to. Moreover, our transdisciplinarity and transnationality must also embed transgenerationality if we honestly intend to transform the world we live in into a friendly, supportive, feminist environment. In the next section we will offer a few examples of what this means in the concrete frame of our consortia.

## What do we mean by embodied infrastructures?

Clisby (2016; 2022) has previously articulated and conceptualised the materiality of women's and feminist support networks as 'embodied infrastructures', initially in the context of women's services and networks in what remains the largest life course analysis of women's lives in the north of England (Clisby and Holdsworth, 2016). Here she talked about the ways through which

women and women's services act as forms of *embodied infrastructure*. (...) women's bodies and material actions themselves become the vehicles, the catalysts, the embodied infrastructure, facilitating access to services and enabling change and support through women's networks. This infrastructure is created through a range of encounters, from those women who act as mentors to other women within their working lives, to the services and formal and informal networks women have established that serve to provide a framework, an infrastructure of support for women (7; emphasis in original).

When Clisby began to consider the materiality of infrastructures of support, she was thinking about something Luce Irigaray (1977) articulated over forty years ago,

when she wrote “Women’s bodies through their use, consumption, and circulation provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown infrastructure of the elaboration of that social life and culture” (171). Now, we continue this conversation, considering the ways through which the materiality of our own gendered bodies, our European feminist academic alliances have become “embodied infrastructure, creating powerful networks of support and political engagement on a global scale” (Clisby, 2022, 145).

Normatively ‘infrastructures’ tend to be perceived as physical buildings, constructions built of concrete, steel and glass, and as roads, train tracks and housing estates, rather than as bodies made of skin, blood and bones. Nevertheless, infrastructures can and have been conceptualised and considered in different ways, particularly within academic discourse. Here we present an, albeit necessarily partial, academic genealogy of some of those recent shifts from infrastructures as physical, to social and political, to embodied, and drawing a pathway to infrastructures as people. We begin with Star’s (1999) work, which was notable in that it developed an ethnographic approach to infrastructure, locating infrastructure as both relational and ecological, contextually situated. Although she does not explicitly talk about people themselves *being* a form of infrastructure, she does see infrastructure as “part of human organisation, and as problematic as any other” (1999, 380), as embedded and learned within a given socio-cultural context, and as something that both shapes and is shaped by the conventions of that community. Several years later, Graham and Thrift (2007) developed an “urban phenomenology” (2), inviting us to think about “the familiar sounds of the city as an instance: from the sirens denoting accidents, to the noises of pneumatic drills denoting constant upkeep of roads, through the echoing clanks and hisses of the tyre and clutch replacement workshop, denoting the constant work needed just to keep cars going” (2). In so doing, they highlight the importance of embedded infrastructures for our social and interpersonal relations and understandings of our habitus. Similarly thinking about urban infrastructures anthropologically, Rogers and O’Neill (2012) conceptualised “infrastructural violence” (401) through which infrastructure becomes an ‘ethnographically graspable manifestation’ whereby “infrastructure emerges as an ideal ethnographic site for theorizing how broad and abstract social orderings such as the state, citizenship, criminality, ethnicity and class play out concretely at the level of everyday practices, revealing how such relationships of power and hierarchy translate into palpable forms of physical and emotional harm” (402).

Through these few illustrative examples, we see the concept of infrastructures being extended beyond the physical landscape, the domains of cities and steel, to a consideration of the social and political meanings of such infrastructures. More recently, Wamala-Larsson and Olofsson (2022, 113) make explicit links between gendered masculine bodies and infrastructures. We can see this in their research



exploring connections between “the gendered and marginalised form of masculinity that emerges in and through mo(ve)ments of connectedness”, urban infrastructures and Uganda’s motorcycle taxis which “form part of the informal transport sector” in the context of “poor and insufficient road infrastructure” and the bodies of the taxi drivers in Kampala who “thrive within these constraints at the same time as these limitations degenerate their bodies over time (...) these infrastructural limits expose their vulnerability” (113). These direct links between gendered bodies and infrastructures resonates with our ways of seeing, however, to take a step back in time, our genealogy runs more directly through Simone’s (2004) work, when he also made a more explicit jump from physical infrastructures to the infrastructures of our material bodies. Simone (2004) notably talked about *people as infrastructure* in urban South Africa:

I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people’s activities in the city. African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used. These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure – a platform for providing for and reproducing life in the city. (407)

Simone’s leap from people and infrastructure to people as infrastructure is important and was subsequently taken up by Johnson (2015) in his work on ‘migration infrastructures’ and the ways through which migrants build “platforms for living” (1). As Johnson goes on to argue, “adopting a people as infrastructure approach (...) discloses the ways that migrants themselves fill in the gaps and missing links, recycle, repair or reengineer social and material technologies that are broken, obsolete or, just as often, designed by and for others and quite literally through their bodies, as well as their creative labours, become their own ‘platforms for living’” (18-19). Mark Johnson has been a longstanding collaborator within our feminist networks, and this embodied connection leads us through the genealogical link to these conceptual transitions being developed from Clisby’s more explicit understandings of embodied infrastructures of care both within women’s networks (Clisby and Holdsworth, 2016) and through feminist embodied infrastructures (Clisby, 2022). Through further relational connections, Yoana Nieto-Valdivieso (2022) has taken on this mantle. Yoana Nieto-Validivieso navigated through the European feminist academy initially through these same feminist networks, working with us through her GEMMA Master’s and Doctorate in Gender Studies, and developing a successful career in feminist academic research. In her research with women who were victims and survivors of sexual violence in Colombia, Nieto-Valdivieso

(2022) “conceptualises the practices, actions and everyday activities of women and their organisations as embodied infrastructures” (1) and argues that these women’s bodies “are a central environmental factor influencing how people deal with their experiences of conflict related sexual violence” (1) in Colombia. This partial genealogy serves to illustrate some of the conceptual shifts and academic connections we have seen in our articulations and understandings of people as infrastructures. This in turn we extend to our understandings of our feminist and gendered bodies as embodied infrastructures through which our material actions and creative praxis create a powerful scaffolding for feminist scholars. Now we return to our mutual dialogue to reflect on our positionalities as we both began our European scholarly feminist journeys.

### **How did we begin to build these feminist embodied infrastructures across the European academy?**

*Suzanne Clisby:* In 2006, as a relatively junior feminist academic based at a British University, I was serendipitously invited to collaborate with feminist scholars, all of whom were working through interdisciplinary women’s and gender studies fields within universities across Europe, in the creation of a new European Women’s and Gender Studies (GEMMA) collaborative postgraduate programme. For me, a junior academic, a first-generation woman graduate from a working class background, this was an encounter that evoked both excitement and trepidation. At the time, I was fortunate to be among a handful of feminist academics who together had been carving out space for feminist and gender studies scholarship in the British academy since the late 1990s, working alongside feminist philosopher Kathleen Lennon, academic and activist Annette Fitzsimons, and in tandem with Gender Studies scholars Caroline Wright and Rachel Alsop, to name but a few.

Nevertheless, I was still relatively unfamiliar with European feminist academic networks, and little did I know then that this initial encounter would open a world of new possibilities and set the stage for over two decades of cross-European feminist collaboration. Looking back from where I stand today, I know that I would not be who I am or where I am today, professionally or personally, without this feminist embodied infrastructure of care and support. One thing that comes to mind, especially as I reflect on our geopolitical climate in recent years, is that an indirect benefit of these alliances, and one that I have valued very highly from first becoming part of this international feminist network, was how this network enabled me to recognise the worth of and benefit from knowing others beyond my, until then, rather parochial English world. My newly acquired gender studies European ‘citizenship’ helped me to embrace and develop longstanding friendships

with feminist scholars from diverse cross-European and international contexts. Something that I believe we all need more of, and, sadly, something that I feel has been seriously damaged to the detriment of all British people through antagonistic and divisive political processes in recent years.

*Adelina Sánchez Espinosa:* I cannot look back into the last 25 years of my life without thinking of personal connections, of affective convergences. My first connections were with my colleagues from the Instituto de Estudios de la Mujer (IEM), the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Granada (UGR) (now consolidated into an institutional infrastructure: the IUEMG, Women's and Gender Research Institute). It was 1998 and I had just obtained tenure, which gave me some space to breathe and start planning the rest of my academic life now that I had become a civil servant and, hence, I could contemplate a future of security and a lifelong salary. I was then approached by Cándida Martínez who was candidate to the Direction of the IEM and needed a deputy head who could also undertake the internationalisation of the Institute. I had no experience in any of those two tasks at the time but I was young, daring and eager to discover a world beyond the limited scope of my own department at the UGR. The problem with university departments is that they focus on just one discipline (English Philology in my case). The IEM, by contrast, gathered over twenty women coming from just as many departments within the fields of humanities, social sciences, and medical humanities. And that meant a multidisciplinary which was, already at that time, thirteen years after its beginnings, producing transdisciplinary teaching and research collaborations. I felt at that time what I know now: the richness of those many disciplines would have a multiplying effect as soon as we, the people, the women who were just getting to know each other, had the opportunity to exchange our knowledges. Never mind which field we came from, we all had a passion for gender in common.

### **The power of our feminist infrastructures**

In reflecting on our collaborations and collegiality over the past two decades we realise that we have not previously laid out in one space the history and structures of our academic work in supporting feminist scholars, challenging gender inequalities, and creating powerful feminist spaces, dialogues and discourse within the European academy through our successful projects and fellowships. To address this, and returning to a co-authored narrative once more, we set out a roadmap of our academic work, starting with ATHENA.

Pinpointing a specific date or action is not without difficulty, but it all began, really, with ATHENA. ATHENA was a thematic network financed by the European

Commission in the 1990s. Coordinated by Rosi Braidotti, who embodied gender scholarship within Utrecht University at the time, this network involved over 150 European institutions represented by as many diverse feminists across the academy. Under the sponsorship of the European Commission and its SOCRATES programme we got together twice a year in order to discuss the state of gender studies in Europe and the possible academic actions which needed to be undertaken in order to keep the field growing. Once again, the most inspiring aspect of this venture was its terrific transdisciplinary potential which added to its transnational nature meant a challenge and an opportunity at the same time. Although we all came from many different walks of life and many different European cultures were present in the network, we all spoke the same language: Gender.

Throughout ten years of funded activities the ATHENA members did essential work on the making of European Women's Studies. As the ATGENDER webpage presentation puts it:

ATHENA (...) has played a crucial role in the construction of an academic infrastructure of programme, centre and department in gender studies. ATHENA had over 100 institutional partners and involved active participation of 150 gender studies specialists in almost every European country. The results and achievements of the ATHENA network consist of a successful publication series *The Making of European Women's Studies* (eight volumes published so far), a website, a range of educational innovations and quality assurance projects and the established international reputation that has been built up over the years within the field of European gender studies. (ATGENDER, 2023, n.p.)

One of the ATHENA task forces was called "towards European joint degrees" (ATGENDER, 2023), and it was there that most of the members of the yet to form feminist consortia started working together at the turn of the 21st century. Under the guidance of Utrecht representatives such as, initially, Rosi Braidotti and later Rosemarie Buikema, we spent meeting after meeting following the recently started Bologna process by comparing our local experiences and discussing how we could put our postgraduate programmes together in order to create a European degree in Women's and Gender Studies. The goal seemed somewhat utopian as we all knew that such a venture would require not only the joint imagination of our rectors, but also the joint financial efforts of the universities involved. Even more difficult still: a joint degree such as that would also demand legal changes in each of our European countries in order to make it possible.

Other important foremothers who played a fundamental role in the genesis of GEMMA and the feminist projects and consortia which followed were ACUME, GenderGraduates, and NOISE. Like ATHENA, ACUME was a thematic network

which, coordinated by Vita Fortunati, grouped together over a 100 institutions interested in the interfacing of the sciences and the humanities at European level. GenderGraduates was a European Commission Marie S. Curie Research Project which trained Early Stage Researchers in Gender, and NOISE was and remains an intensive programme supported by the European Commission which materialised in a European summer school. Both of the latter were coordinated by Rosemarie Buikema at Utrecht University. This academic experience and expertise curated through both Vita Fortunati and Rosemarie Buikema have brought their own embodied infrastructures of support for our subsequent feminist networks through their personal interventions as consortium partners.

Thus, by 2004 we were ready to put all this collective capital together. After so many exchanges of words, experiences and knowledges, after the many pre-work shared breakfasts in the same hotels and the many shared beers in bars all over Europe, we knew each other well and were confident we would do well together, if only we were given the chance. We were pretty sure of the 'whats' of our dream joint programme but had no clue whatsoever about the 'hows'. And, serendipitously, it was right at that moment that the European Commission decided to launch its Erasmus Mundus call.

New infrastructures can only truly transpire when situated within new temporalities, and Erasmus Mundus was there at the right time. It was, then and there, that the possibility, the tangibility, of our collective dream started to materialize. The Erasmus Mundus programme was thought of as a push towards the creation of joint European master's programmes. This was the incentive we needed to begin the process of real internationalisation of national curricula. This infrastructural space of possibility was all we needed. The rest is history.

Seventeen years after the European Commission told us, "Thou shalt go to the ball" in 2006 and selected our GEMMA proposal for their Erasmus Mundus funding, we are still dancing together. The European Commission has recognised the excellence of our joint master's programme in Women's & Gender Studies, led and coordinated by Adelina Sánchez Espinosa at the University of Granada, by selecting it as Erasmus Mundus four consecutive times since 2006. During this time we have as a consortium garnered over €20 million in scholarships & staff exchange funding through the European Commission.

The GEMMA Consortium remains a foundational and powerful European network of gender specialists based at the Universities of Granada, Oviedo, Bologna, Utrecht, Łódź, York (formerly Hull) and Central European University. The GEMMA programme is a double award two-year master's, involving student mobility and study across two European partner higher education institutions. The European Commission has called it the representative programme at European level in tuning common curricula in gender studies, and since 2006 we have provided specialist training in Women's and Gender Studies for over 800 scholars at postgraduate level.

We have had the privilege to have been among this foundational team of dedicated feminist scholars who created and nurtured the GEMMA programme from its ambitious beginnings to the flagship internationally acclaimed programme it has become today. As Clisby (2022) has said about GEMMA and her involvement within the consortium:

Being witness to the growth and development of GEMMA since the inception has enabled me to reflect on the challenges and opportunities of the intricate tapestry of international and trans-European connections that GEMMA weaves around those who find their way to us. Beyond the unrivalled scholarly training and expertise in women's and gender studies that we bring together across six nations, GEMMA offers far more, but equally powerful, opportunities (...) Firstly, I suggest that GEMMA facilitates the experiencing and garnering of nomadic knowledges, secondly it encourages us to become cosmopolitan subjects, and thirdly through our international feminist networks of care and gender politics we have created an embodied infrastructure of support, connections, and threads of feminist power that stretch far beyond the borders of Europe. (2022, 141-142)

Certainly, GEMMA was pioneering in its outreach across and beyond European borders. Our teaching and research alliances with transatlantic institutions had started highlighting our consortium as an example of what, back in 2003, Chandra Talpade Mohanty called a 'Feminism without Borders'. In 2010 the GEMMA consortium submitted a tender for a synergic programme called GEMMA World with colleagues at the universities of Buenos Aires, Colombia, Campinas, Chile, Intec Santo Domingo, Florida International University, and Rutgers. From then on we built interdisciplinary gender studies staff and student exchanges between our institutions, and we launched joint publications and co-created new online programmes which could decolonise our own European curriculum in GEMMA. Today GEMMA is a macro consortium of over fifty institutions, with the European academic partners leading teaching of the programme, supported by numerous international academic and industrial associate partners. At this point we want to make special reference to the generosity of the many scholars, such as Chandra Mohanty and Susan Stanford Friedman, who decided to join us throughout all these years. And here we must stop to remember those who are no longer with us: Nawal Al-Sadaawi, Ana Fonseca, Aurora Morcillo, and most recently, Susan Stanford Friedman. You will be always in the hearts of our feminist scholarly community.

GEMMA continues to grow and thus far we have graduated over fifteen cohorts of GEMMA students involving hundreds of feminist scholars. Indeed, GEMMA graduates have coined the term 'GEMMANism' to refer to the collective spirit which GEMMA has helped generate throughout so many years and to the agency of

students in such processes. Their 'GEMMANism' is our 'embodied infrastructures'. The GEMMA dual master's programme inspired us to develop a joint doctoral programme, and in 2013 we created EDGES, the European Joint Doctorate in Women's and Gender Studies, initially supported with over €400,000 from the European Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and led by Lilla Crisafulli at the University of Bologna. The EDGES Project involved eight academic and non-academic European institutions with a longstanding collaboration and expertise in Women's and Gender Studies in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the UK, and Poland. Developing from the strong bonds and expertise within the GEMMA Consortia, the EDGES Project has created the first collaborative European Doctorate in Women's and Gender Studies.

Our next feminist collaboration was an ambitious research project, led by Suzanne Clisby, then based at the University of Hull. The *Gender and Cultures of Equalities in Europe* (GRACE) project, launched in 2015, was supported by over €3.7m, funded through the European Commission's Horizon 2020, Marie S. Curie European Innovative Research & Training Network. The GRACE Project involved ten academic and industrial partners across six European countries (UK, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, and Hungary). Through GRACE we investigated the cultural production of gender equalities across Europe within a framework of multiple interdisciplinary research projects, employing and providing advanced training for fifteen international doctoral fellows. The GRACE Project spent three years investigating the ways in which cultures of equality have been produced, embodied, objectified, and visualised in art, media, material and popular culture, as well as in 'official' discourse in Europe. Our research explored how cultures of equality in Europe are shaped and/or constrained by shifting and contested cultural productions, and how cultures of equality might be produced and performed differently. Our aim was to enquire into the ways cultures of equality are made and remade within and at the borders of Europe through asking three overarching questions: how have cultures of equality been produced, embodied, objectified, and visualised in art, media, material and popular culture, as well as in 'official' discourse in Europe? How might cultures of equality in Europe be produced and performed differently? And in what ways do changing and contested cultural productions shape and constrain people's awareness about, perceptions of, responses to, and deployments of equality discourses within specific social contexts?

It was through the GRACE project that we began to really foreground our links to and expertise in feminist creative praxis, forging direct connections between feminist scholarship and feminist creative activism. Through GRACE we consciously disseminated our academic research in a number of more creative ways, including through the curation of physical and virtual *Footnotes on Equality Exhibition*, a feminist digital app, *Quotidian*, and a film series.

*Footnotes on Equality* was curated by GRACE researchers to visualise and explore how, through their GRACE research across Europe, they encountered instances where the notion of equality is an ongoing struggle sustained by social movements and in dialogue with shifts in governmental policy and legislation. GRACE researchers, informed by their research projects, collected objects as cultural props to tell stories around experiences of (in)equality, as a means to explore and communicate resistances to equality discourses, and ideas about 'achieved equality' or equalities which are 'not yet here'. The research team chose the title *Footnotes* as a means to suggest that the artefacts curated within the exhibition provide the evidence, critique, alternative perspectives, and anecdotes: the 'footnotes' that supplement academic research and readings.

GRACE researchers were also asked to design and programme a feminist digital app, and created what they called *Quotidian*. As the app team explained, this is an interactive app aimed at younger adults that provides users with intersectional feminist quotes from all around the world. The app incorporates feminist principles in ethics, theory, and technology, embracing the tension between the ideal (what a feminist app could look like) and the practical (what needs to be done in order to develop a functioning smartphone app). It was developed through a participatory design process involving the communities in which the GRACE researchers were embedded. Ideas were gathered from the bottom up, leading to the development of the app concept, of a first prototype, and a growing collection of quotes. *Quotidian* was an example of ICT 'done otherwise', exploring the possibilities of community-sourced, participatory alternatives to neoliberal and market-oriented internet technologies and development.

To encourage our researchers to apply a creative visual lens to their research, but also to develop skills in film production, design and visual narrative, we invited our researchers to be involved in a *Filming GRACE* initiative and to work with the support of the internationally acclaimed academic and filmmaker, Frances Negrón-Muntaner (GRACE Expert Advisor, Columbia University), and Goya Award winning Spanish feminist documentary filmmaker, Isabel de Ocampo, throughout the project cycle to design and produce a short film. The majority of the GRACE doctoral researchers took up this opportunity to learn film production and design techniques and created a dozen short films, some of which became part of the final *Footnotes on Equalities* exhibition. The point was not the final films per se, rather this was a process of discovery and through the filming project GRACE researchers were able to learn valuable new creative and technical skills and think about connecting research with visual culture as another medium for communication. The possibilities explored in these short films range from interviews with female boxers and anti-racist playwrights, to experimental juxtapositions of sounds and images that reveal contradictions, patterns of continuities and/or differences that matter.



The *Museum of Equality and Difference* (MOED) also emerged at the same time as *Footnotes*, in 2019, as a sister exhibition, linked to our feminist embodied infrastructures and the creative work of GRACE through the body of Rosemarie Buikema, then the GRACE consortium partner lead based at Utrecht University. MOED was curated through the collaboration between Rosemarie Buikema and Layal Ftouni, Nancy Jouwe, Rolando Vázquez, and Rosa Wevers and supported by the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. The MOED exhibition launched in Spring 2019, entitled *What is Left Unseen*, aimed to reveal how processes of inclusion and exclusion influence the practices of exhibiting and collecting of art in museum collections.

Finally, largely through the work of A.G. Arfni, feminist scholar and GRACE consortium partner lead based at the Women's Library in Bologna, we also created the GRACE Digital Hub, a digital communication system that was independent of any other pre-existing digital platform. This was in part a practical means to creating an independent and secure digital system of shared communication across borders, but also, in larger part perhaps, to prove we could create a new kind of feminist digital architecture.

Our next venture in creating feminist international networks was through the *Global Gender and Cultures of Equalities* (GlobalGRACE) project (2017-2022). Co-directed by Mark Johnson and Suzanne Clisby, based at Goldsmiths, University of London, GlobalGRACE was successfully awarded over £3.7m through the UKRI Global Challenges Research Fund. This was a research and capacity strengthening project that drew together fourteen academic and NGO partner organisations across eight countries. It was comprised of a large international team of 37 researchers, including the direct employment of thirteen Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and support staff, based in Universities and NGOs in Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, and the UK, as well as ten expert consultants, assessors and advisory board members from Africa, Asia, the United States, and Europe. Building from the successes of GRACE, GlobalGRACE combined social sciences, feminist and decolonial approaches, arts-based practices, curatorial and multisensory research, digital and literary engagement, and public exhibitions to investigate the production of cultures of equality and enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally. The project involved original research, capacity strengthening components for researchers and public engagement and impact activities. In addition to diverse scholarly outputs, in 2022 GlobalGRACE launched the co-created and co-curated open access online course, *Experiments in Cultures of Equality*<sup>3</sup> (and our virtual exhibition, *Re/Locating Cultures of Equality*<sup>4</sup>).

3 To access see <https://course.globalgrace.net>

4 To access see <https://exhibition.globalgrace.net>

This narrative history of successful embodied infrastructures of scholarly feminists ends as we begin our latest success as a feminist academic consortium through our new Horizon Europe MSCA Doctoral Network, the *European Literatures and Gender from a Transnational Perspective* (EUTERPE) project, led by Professor Jasmina Lukić at Central European University based in Vienna. EUTERPE brings together fifteen universities and associated partners across nine European countries to offer an innovative approach to rethinking European cultural production in the light of complex social and political negotiations that are shaping European spaces and identities at present. As a complex project, which brings together research, training, and open access publications, the creation of a unique transnational literary dictionary and digital archive, EUTERPE aims to have a strong influence in the intersecting fields of literary and gender studies, as well as in the connecting fields of transnational studies, translation studies, migration studies, and European studies.

And so this is the trail we have laid so far, the path we have carved across the European academic landscape through our collective feminist endeavours. These things do not just happen. It has been rather hard work.

#### *The value of collaborative feminist alliances*

We would like to conclude by drawing on the perspectives<sup>5</sup> of two of our scholarly feminist colleagues with whom we have forged these embodied infrastructures and feminist alliances over the past two decades, A.G. Arfini and Jasmina Lukić. We could, of course, have drawn on the voices of numerous scholarly feminists from across our networks, but we selected just two, in part for brevity, but also as Arfini and Lukić bring perspectives from distinct regional contexts, and at different stages in their academic careers, while both have been key to our collaborative scholarship and embedded within a range of our Gender Studies projects for many years. We asked them:

*What would you say has been the value and challenges of working with colleagues through our feminist scholarship and European networks for you personally and professionally?*

*A.G. Arfini:* To me the most valuable experience has been the possibility of doing scholarship differently, and in a way that is more consistent with my ethics and political beliefs. Such difference is manifest mostly in two ways. First, there is a different approach to collaboration, because it is driven by the desire to do things

<sup>5</sup> These extracts are drawn from email exchanges between Suzanne Clisby, A.G. Arfini, and Jasmina Lukić during February and March 2023 and are reproduced here with their acknowledgement and written consent.

together, and towards a goal that is set *outside* academia (i.e. to bring forward a feminist transformation of the world). In my experience, mainstream academia is instead driven by competition and towards goals that are set *within* the academia (i.e. to bring your department to the top of the rankings). Secondly, there is a different moral view of labour. I feel that in these feminist networks one is first and foremost a person and a feminist ally, and secondly a scholar. This is very consistent with my personal work ethic, influenced by critiques of labour that point out how, under advanced capitalism, our subjectivity is entirely – in its most intimate and original aspects – absorbed within production. It is no surprise to me that some pioneering reflections that exposed the issues of precarisation, unpaid labour, metric-based evaluation, forced mobility, mental health, and so on, caused by neoliberal academia, were produced by scholars in the gender studies field.

As for the costs, I would say the biggest is quite specific to my national location where gender studies is not an institutionalised field. I do not think this is a bad thing in itself, however it meant – during my training years – I had to pursue education in an autonomous and fragmented way. That has been tiresome, and I will admit it has also inevitably produced some gaps in the acquisition of more conventional tricks of the trade within my larger discipline (sociology) that later took some time to fill. Regarding the challenges I would say that currently, after some twenty years or so mostly, yet *not* exclusively, in the field of gender studies and as a visible activist, the main challenge is, in a sense (...) getting out of it! By this I mean that sometimes – given the scarcity of people in my context doing this kind of studies – I feel there is a sort of tokenism at work that makes you the ‘gender stuff person’ and that limits the scope of your research (i.e. difficult to move beyond yet another introductory project/initiative, a kind of pedagogical fatigue) as well as its breadth (i.e. difficult to conduct more interdisciplinary work).

*Jasmina Lukić:* Looking back at almost two decades of working together with the group of scholars who created GEMMA, EDGES, GRACE, and now EUTERPE, I feel truly privileged to be a part of it. In a number of ways this cooperation has shaped and continues to be shaping my academic career. To be a part of all shared projects that the Gemma consortium (to refer to the group in that way for practical reasons, but encompassing all our iterations) has managed to create and put in place together meant to work with the group of scholars who were both colleagues and friends; it was a group of scholars which allowed all its members both to learn from the group and to share with the group. It allowed us all to be confident in our own knowledge and open towards what we still have to learn; to trust our friendship and collegiality and to work in a true feminist spirit of understanding and mutual support.

In my own personal case it led me to the best possible way to close my academic career, getting to run, as the principal investigator, a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions

Doctoral Network EUTERPE programme: European Literatures and Gender from a Transnational Perspective. This major research on transnational literature and the ways in which transnational perspectives can offer new grounds for rethinking literary theory in our times, marked by intense migration processes and intercultural exchanges. It has been my aim for quite a long time now, and as an individual scholar I was never in a position to raise sufficient funds necessary to realise it.

Working with the group of scholars that created GEMMA so long ago, I was finally able to get a chance to fulfil this long-term aim. We are at the beginning of this project and I am looking forwards to the upcoming four years with professional trust and a sense of happiness that this group continues its adventure one more time. When it comes to the question of bodies and bodily feelings all of these are an important part of feeling relaxed and confident in one's own body while sharing the spaces of mutual discussions and the work we are doing together, a feeling I rarely have in other professional conferences and spaces. Our group of feminist scholars has shown me so long ago, and continues to show me all this time, what it means to experience pure joy in sharing work with those that you share the same ethical and political principles with.

Thinking about challenges, since I've worked with the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, I've been in a privileged situation to be supported in the work I am doing on the side of my institution. As a feminist scholar I have encountered misunderstanding and various forms of negative reactions outside the field of Gender Studies, but they were not of primary importance for me nor for my academic career.

### **Pausing the dialogue, final reflections**

In our final co-authored reflection to conclude this article, we pause but do not close our dialogue, as our collaborations continue and there is much work yet to be done. As Sánchez Espinosa has expressed elsewhere, gender studies has a political import which makes "both teachers and students be involved in a more special way than with any other field" (2013, 242). We suggest that it is here that the main challenge and also opportunity resides. An anecdote on the first GEMMA graduation event we held may serve well to exemplify what we mean. It took place in October 2011 at the University of Granada and it was presided over by Bibiana Aído, the Spanish Minister of Equality at the time. At one point in the ceremony, Aído warned the audience that we should not take progress for granted since what takes years of constant effort to achieve can simply vanish overnight. She was certainly prophetic since the GEMMA graduation was the last public event she presided over as Minister of Equality. The following day she was demoted by

Spanish president José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero who, falling under the pressure of the right-wing party, transformed the Ministry of Equality into a 'General Secretary' dependant on the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Another, more recent, event that illustrates sharply how carefully we must protect and care for our embodied infrastructures is the case of Patrick Zaki. One of the GEMMA scholarship holders, Patrick was arrested by the Egyptian authorities as he returned home to Egypt after his Women's and Gender Studies exams at the University of Bologna. He has remained under arrest in Egypt for over three years and, at the time of writing this article, is still awaiting a court case which, since February 2020, has been postponed time and time again. His crime is simply his ethical commitment to the defence of human rights. We have, as a consortium, tried to keep his case in the public domain and support calls for his freedom. But, as Patrick's case highlights, being part of a gender studies and feminist network can also be more dangerous for some of us than for others. Indeed, a few years ago, one of our GEMMA graduates, who we will not name, had to flee from arrest after he received a tipoff as he was about to fly home to Morocco that he had been accused of 'homosexual activities', punishable with up to five years imprisonment, purely on the grounds of studying gender. The Moroccan police were waiting to arrest him when he was scheduled to land. He was never able to return home again to his family and now lives in exile as a refugee, working in support of human rights for other refugees.

Cases such as these are frightening and a serious cause for concern, but they must not deter us from being feminist scholars, or from supporting gender studies scholarship and feminist activism. Rather they serve to convince us that we must keep going, that as long as gender-based human rights violations continue, so must feminist scholarship and activism. We will continue to follow the example of our students and we will keep accepting their invitations to take our knowledges out of the infrastructures of the classroom and into the streets every time we fight collectively, transnationally, and transgenerationally for a common cause such as Patrick Zaki's liberation.

Ultimately, we are all too well aware that the costs of being feminist and doing gender in the academy can be high, especially for specifically geo-politically situated gendered bodies. But so too can be the rewards. Throughout all these years of joint collaboration we have often finished meetings exhausted. We well remember the long days and nights of GEMMA selection and evaluation committees in the University of Granada's residency, Carmen de la Victoria. At least we had a lovely view of the Alhambra Palace lit up as we worked together into the early hours of the morning. So, often exhausted, yes, but happy to be together and to be able to face the global challenges by caring for each other's wellbeing. We are vulnerable, of course, but the sharing of our vulnerabilities is what makes our efforts worthwhile. It is this careful sharing of the collective threats as well as opportunities that makes all the difference. These scholarly feminist alliances generate new material

realities through which embodied infrastructures can emerge which can ultimately transform the individual challenges into collective opportunities, not only for us, but for the new generations of scholarly feminists yet to arrive.

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