‘A thousand tiny feminisms’: An interview about writing retreats for academic women and feminist praxis in academia

Sarasadat Khalifeh Soltani[1] with Barbara M. Grant

This is an interview with Dr. Barbara Grant, Associate Professor in the School of Critical Studies in Education at the University of Auckland. The idea behind this interview originates from my own research interest in the ways academic women live the existing norms of academia, how they submissively or unconsciously accept, or push, or even ‘transgress’ these norms by the daily possibilities of change. What does it mean to be a feminist academic and to practice feminism in universities today? Barbara Grant’s research field is higher education and she has researched and published in a wide range of higher education areas, including postgraduate research supervision, researcher identity, student subjectivity, and academic writing. She has been running residential writing retreats for women academics twice (and now thrice) a year since 1997. The retreats have attracted women from different countries, institutions, disciplines, and stages in their career paths. Writing for publication is crucial in the research productivity-rewarding milieu of higher education, and writing retreats are a form of academic development, as Barbara argues. Given Barbara’s experience of writing retreats, and her notion of ‘a thousand tiny universities’ (Grant, 2019), I interviewed Barbara on March 30, 2021, focusing on feminist praxis in higher education to explore further the possibilities of becoming a woman academic.

Keywords: academic writing; feminist praxis; women academics; writing retreats

Setting the scene

For a junior researcher in the field of higher education interested in feminism and women doctoral students’ subjectivities, it is a great opportunity to interview a senior researcher in research education, who not only sought to explore academic identities and development, but also engaged in the practical opportunities of highlighting women’s academic work today, specifically through writing retreats. Thus, I embraced JPHE’s Editor-in-Chief Petra Angervall’s idea to interview Barbara Grant.

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As I live in Iran and Barbara lives in New Zealand, we arranged a time suitable to hold the interview through Zoom. Barbara is a warm, caring woman with short gray hair and a beautiful smile. All through the interview, I saw the reflection of my image via her spectacles as she spoke with her friendly tone of voice. This cordiality made it an engaging interview not only about her lived experience as an academic woman depicted in the narratives of her career, in particular the writing retreats, but also about my own lived experience as a PhD graduate with my concerns and curiosity about my future career reflected in another woman academic's narrative.

What follows is an attempt to portray some aspects of feminist praxis discussed thorough a conversation with a woman academic highly-recognized in the field of higher education research. Our conversation commenced with a very specific example of feminist praxis, namely women's writing retreats.

The Interview

Sara: How did you come up with the idea of the writing retreats?

Barbara: My friend had got a job in another university, in another part of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) and we weren't seeing each other very often. So one of the motivations for the retreat was to create an event where we would get together and hang out. One part of it was me wanting to find a way to meet my friend in a situation when it wasn't very easy to stay connected. Another part of it was that I went to another university in NZ for a couple of days to run some workshops on writing, and I ran one just for women. It was controversial. There were people who were critical of that. So I had to do a second one that was open to anybody to balance out the one that was for women only. There were about 20 women at this workshop; one of the women was very lively and afterwards she came to me and said: 'it would be so cool if we could get together and actually do some writing. Why don't we try that idea?'. But I was about to go on study leave. When I came back, I got in touch with her and we talked about this idea. She was in one part of NZ and I was at another. She was a PhD student, and I was also doing my PhD, but I was a staff member in academia. So she went to her hometown and found a place there. And the hometown happens to be in the middle of the North Island of NZ, more or less equidistant from where she was studying in Wellington, where I was living and working in Auckland, and where another interested friend was living in a third city. So she found this place, a retreat center, in her town and said: 'let's try it'. She found the location, while I provided the writing expertise and designed the retreat

structure. The three of us each recruited a couple of friends—in the end, I think seven of us from three different universities went to the first retreat.

But the other thing that was quite important was my experience of growing up in a large Catholic family. My mother was a full-time mother of seven children and, once a year, she would go on a women-only spiritual retreat for a weekend at a beautiful old house, a convent where nuns lived. In NZ in those days, your mother leaving the family to do what she wanted was a big thing. She never did that otherwise when we were children but, on those weekends, my father would hold the house together. The rules of those retreats are that you go and you don't have any contact with your family. You listen to some talks, you pray, and you otherwise are on your own in quiet reflection. So I took that kind of experience of my mother and my later experience of going off to spiritual retreats myself, and I used that experience to shape the culture of the writing retreat.

So there was the missing of my friend, the meeting of another woman who had a lot of energy, slightly mad and wonderful, and there was this old story of my childhood, remembering my mother going away because it was so unusual. She was pleased to go but it also was exciting as children to have her go. I think it was good for us. My father would spoil us by cooking things that we didn't have, except on special occasions because he wanted to make it a treat. So I had that feeling of the specialness of retreats for everyone in a woman's family. When the retreats began in 1997, my younger daughter was ten, so I was trying to work, do my PhD with a daughter of ten and another daughter who was quite a lot older. I really wanted to go away and just write sometimes—rather than fighting to make space to write which is what it's like in everyday life.

Sara: In your papers, including *Flights of imagination: Academic women be(com)ing writers* (Grant & Knowles, 2000) and *Writing in the company of other women: Exceeding the boundaries* (Grant, 2006) about the retreats, we read mostly about participants' and colleagues' feedbacks, reactions, but how about you? How have the retreats had an impact on you as an academic woman?

Barbara: That's interesting! I got an email today from someone who just came once a long time ago, but said how important the retreats were for academic women in NZ. And I wrote back by saying to her that, for me, they were really important as well.

I started running the retreats in NZ in 1997. From the following year, we had two each year until recently—now we have three a year. I think one of the things they have done for me is I created a place where I could be an academic woman with other women and enjoy myself. And escape some of the crazy things

that happen at the university, or through an academic career. I mean you don't escape it completely because you take it with you and the stories that we share around the meal tables as we talk about our work are often quite painful ones. But the experience of going there once or twice a year was an escape, an escape into writing. Because one of the realities for most academic women is that it's very difficult—perhaps especially in societies like NZ where we don't have domestic labor in the house, where we do our own domestic labor pretty much—it's difficult to find time to write and to create the priority to write. Also, for middle-class white women at least, we have strong norms about being hands-on parents. If you are a middle-class woman from a different community, there might be a more collective ethos around the care of children, but where I inhabit—and indeed the academy we inhabit—is very individualized and it's still very genderized. Possibly among academics there's a higher level of shared care of children and shared participation in the house-keeping than in the general population, but still it's highly gendered. I'm lucky, I have a situation where I have good support. But, at different times of my life, it hasn't been like that. And there's always also the struggle to free my inner narrative from the stories I have which are about how I must be with respect to my children, to my friends, to my colleagues and writing often comes at the bottom of the pile. So the writing retreats have also been for me a really important thread of my working life.

Although I run the writing retreats, I've always also participated as a writer. That was the basic structure from the outset. It wasn't a workshop that I provided for other women; it was something that I was participating in. It's true that over all those years I have run a lot of little workshops about different aspects of writing, and I have also taken responsibility for the path of the retreats, but I have always written.

So the main part of the writing retreat day is actually writing and again this comes back to the model of the spiritual retreat where there are times you are together—you eat together and maybe times when you are together to listen to a speaker. At our writing retreats we don't listen to speakers but we get together to teach each other things. But the main part of the retreat is being in your own space. Because that's what I think women mostly are desperately in need of. Yes, a lot of women that come to those writing retreats do not have children, but many do. Some are in relationships with men, some with women, some have daily caring responsibilities, some do not. Different women come with different kinds of lives but most of us struggle to keep our academic lives in balance in a way that allows us to write and so we come to write. The time for writing is really important.

Over the years, there's been quite a lot of literature about academic women and writing, some of it saying that women don't write as much as men and don't

get promoted as much as men, all of those things. That's kind of the background in my thinking as well. In the early years, when writing retreats were uncommon, we got criticisms that they're not open to men. But I would just say, 'here, I have lots of resources for any man who's interested in running writing retreats for men or for men and women together and I'm really happy to share them. That's not just what I want to do.' I ran retreats in both Australia and Canada at one stage and I did a few in which men and women were together and they were perfectly enjoyable. But very early on in the ones I was doing in NZ, the women who came were clear they wanted the retreats to stay for women only. A lot of women would get up early and write in their pajamas. We were staying at a venue that is not a luxury venue where every room has a bathroom: we have shared sleeping spaces, shared bathroom spaces. Women just wanted to be comfortable to move around and not worry about their clothing, access to bathroom spaces, or navigating the normal division between public and private life. They also wanted to be free of the gendered issues that are part of institutional life, where we are used to spaces in which men often dominate the conversation. We want *not* to have that occasionally.

Sara: Being outside of academia, not inside, enables us to find our narratives and strength, right? So, do you mean that we still need to seek spaces outside to be away from the tensions of academic life?

Barbara: Once you're inside the retreat, the other part of the battle is with the internal voices that can powerfully undermine your confidence to write. Sometimes the struggle with writing seems endless. So that's another thing about the retreats, I think, and the way that they were designed: it was *never* the model where women can go once and get fixed. It's always been like the model of the spiritual retreat: it's a place to go to get regenerated and also to get rested, to get new ideas about writing to take back—as well as to do some writing. So when you get back to university, you are hopefully restored to yourself, you can be recommitted to struggle to be the kind of academic woman you want to be, which is not usually the same as your inner voice. This voice is often that of our mothers, our grandmothers, and wider society. It can be a very confusing voice which makes us torn in different kinds of way, as daughters, as mothers, as friends, right?

Going on a writing retreat regularly is a place that can give you the energy and strength to go back to the university, to go on in an academic life and survive it, or even better than surviving sometimes. But maybe sometimes just surviving academic work and life is enough to hope for? I mean universities everywhere in the world have experienced tremendous pressure and so much change over the last 20 to 30 years. Many of the changes have intensified a kind of chauvinistic

competitiveness that we now see in the international university scene that, probably, no country is immune from. So, to survive, we need to keep a sense of humor and joy for our work, our students and our colleagues. For some people I think it's fine. The new competitive culture suits them, but for a lot of us it's actually an ongoing project just to survive. So, for me and some other women (but not all by any means) the writing retreats are a survival kit. The other thing I thought about today, because of that email from the colleague, was I've written some things that I would never have written if I hadn't gone on a writing retreat. I've written some things that really cost me to write, that I struggled with, particularly things about the experience of being an academic woman. If I'd not been on a writing retreat, I would probably never have finished them. Because I was there, I could go into the despair and the fear (of not having something worthwhile to say, or of saying it in a way that was far too exposing) and stay with those feelings and come out the other side. We're there for five days, it's quite a long time. If it were two days, I might not have been able to get through and write some of my braver writing.

Sara: Talking about the retreats and what you argued about what's going on in the international landscape of universities and higher education and each of us as a 'tiny university' in *The future is now: A thousand tiny universities* (Grant, 2019), I wonder: How is it achievable? And how is it related to the prevalent discourse of internationalization in higher education nowadays?

Barbara: It's like a monster we're all living in the shadow of. No one has really seen this monster, the globalized university, but it's kind of lurking there all the time. We get traces of it in rankings and so on.

The 'thousand tiny universities' piece, which started as a keynote for the HERDSA conference in 2018, was me trying to think about the first 10 or 15 or maybe 20 years of my academic life. I had this idea that by collaborating with other people at the university you really can change the university to be a better kind of place. What I learned from those experiences is that you can make some things different but you can never know if the differences you make are going to be the things you imagined or their evil twin.

One of the consequences of that learning was to become quite deeply exhausted with the university. And to feel as if I had no love for the university anymore was a terrible shock because I had felt, from quite an early time because of my own experience as an adult university student, just a great sense of the possibilities of a university education. And then, for the first 10 or more years, I was working in the student learning unit with a lot of other adult students who were really finding themselves as powerful people, particularly women, by coming to

university in their 30s and their 40s. That was the time in NZ history when a lot of mature women were coming into university, but that time ended in the early 1990s with the shift in funding onto students. But during that period I was very excited and I had a strong sense of what a university can offer both as a personal and a social transformation. But, over time, I lost some of my hope and my belief in that. Over the turn of the century, I saw the university become something really different. I found it much harder to love the university. I think it's basically become a kind of credential factory—it's not *only* that, but it's a lot like that now and that logic drives a lot of decisions around teaching. (I've written recently about that trend in a piece on the 'policification of teaching' (Grant, 2021).)

We're pumping out students with degrees they can't get good jobs with; they have a lot of debts now that they didn't once have because we used to provide a university education more or less for free. So many things have changed. I guess the thinking I was expressing in the 'tiny universities' paper was somehow trying to come to peace with the fact that every time I talk with other academics I find the university we love is a different thing, one from each other. But we need to have one that we love because it's the love that makes our teaching alive and means that we've got something to offer to our students beyond the credential; something about the belief that studying and coming to university can be transformative in some kind of way. But it's about not expecting that any time soon there will be a beautiful university in front of me.

It's about me trying to find a hopeful place for myself again as an academic after quite a long period of feeling like I'd really lost my hope. I don't mean every academic experiences university like that, loses their hope, but I think a lot do, actually. I think this is to do with the history of universities and with broader social history. We've had quite a bad patch for social movements, for activism, for feminism, over the last 15 or so years in NZ. Maybe we got lazy, I don't know. But there seems to be some resurgence now on some of these fronts.

Anyway, the point of that paper was trying to excavate a space to make a fire of hope in myself and to understand that, if that's an issue for me, it'll be an issue for other people because these issues have always got structural and systematic dimensions to them. That's feminism,'the personal is political', right? If I'm in despair with university, other people will be in despair as well. So, I try to find my way out of despair to hope with that idea of the 'tiny university'. And after the keynote, especially, I had a lot of people writing to me about how important it was. Not necessarily because I gave them a solution, I just acknowledged that it's really hard to be hopeful.

Sara: It seems prevalent around the world that there are more men academics, who write more, who conduct more research because they have their own time, they make space for that as if it's normal, natural for them, but not the same for women! It is argued that it could also be related to the dichotomy; the binary opposition of 'private' and 'public'. No personal is allowed into 'the scientific' sphere of the university, 'the public'. As you were talking about the writing retreats, I was thinking that it was all for personal reasons and lived experience of yours and of course the ones who shared the same concerns and aspirations that those retreats were formed. Living bodily experiences in conjunction with the prominence of mind and intellectual activities in academia seems to be one of the biggest challenges for women in particular. In the chapter, *Rebirthing the academy, unruly daughters striving for feminist futures* (2020), you and your colleagues argued about a kind of academy in which we don't have those binaries. What seems more complicated and challenging to me is when we want to put it into practice and challenge the norms, or say feminist praxis, how can we achieve that kind of academy? Of course, we can witness changes in the universities, but how can we really get to that kind of university you argued about?

Barbara: It may well be that as the academy becomes more feminized as a working place, which is happening to it to some extent slowly, in its tail comes these kinds of changes, that it becomes a more *feminist* place. But feminization and feminism are not the same thing. And then there are the pervasive forces of globalization that, at least in how they affect the academy, generate competitiveness. And competitiveness nearly always favors the single-minded and the person who doesn't let other things—relationships, 'lowly' domestic cares and what not—distract them from research and publishing, which are undoubtedly the most valued and distinctive academic activities. So, it's hard to know whether there's a real possibility of a university that is shaped in a more feminist kind of way. Or whether it's always going to be the job of feminists to keep destabilizing it from the inside (from the minority position), stopping it from settling into itself as it were, and to keep on reminding it of its stupidities and cruelties. I mean the difficult thing, of course, is that if you work in the academy, it's really hard not to cooperate with the dominant logic because of its attraction. The competition, the status, we're not immune to the pleasures of those things as they become more and more embedded in institutional recognition structures.

I became an academic in a time when academic life was different, more tolerant of different ways of being an academic perhaps. That different time formed the basis of what it means for me to be an academic. It's very different now for young academics. In my university these days, the culture is to make very public

displays of people who achieve competitively and to just sort of ignore everybody else—and sometimes worse than ignore them, you know. For example, I'm thinking about the redundancies that I write about in the tiny universities paper. (I notice that in my own university this culture of display has decreased over the past 12 or 18 months—it's hard to know if it's a response to COVID-19 or the different approach of our new Vice-Chancellor—time will tell.) The ruthlessness of the current culture is not such a worry to me personally because of my age (I could finish work and be ok), but it's tough for my younger colleagues. So, do I think it's possible for women to reinvent the academy, the academy that we have now? I really don't know, I really don't know, I just don't know the answer …

Sara: We have always had these ideas with theories and then, in practice, we find some ways but you know, as you said, for example, the retreats are outside of academia. I don't want to sound like the one who criticized the retreats, yet isn't the retreat about us, as women, finding our strength, our narratives but again in a place away from academia? Though away from the tensions of the academic life, you still find your own room outside academia and not inside it, right?

Barbara: We have the inside, that is doing academic work, but on the outside—away from daily academic life as usual.

Sara: Absolutely! I'm really thinking of it in a way that we gain power when we are literally inside academia and have that opportunity and right to be respected as a group of women working together, for instance.

Barbara: But women being together is sinister for some people! And there are other considerations, too. At some point in the early years of doing the writing retreats, I had a conversation with a very senior woman at my university about my work—I was in a leadership position at that time and she was doing my annual performance review. We talked about the retreats—I was taken aback to realize she didn't really get why they might be worthwhile, it felt like she thought they were frivolous. (She did not have children herself so maybe it was hard for her to imagine the lives of academic women who do.) But when she realized academic women from other universities were participating, not just my own university, she was like 'but they are our competitors'! This from an academic woman who'd been very courageous as a feminist in the university for many decades. But by this time she was a leader in the university and perhaps her feminist principles were overridden by the ideology of competition between universities in NZ, which was really bad the 1990s and early 2000s. To some extent, it's been undone since then but, at the time, it was

encouraged by the government by the way they funded universities. And universities jumped right on in.

Women, even feminist women, are not homogenous around what the university is or should be. Once we occupy positions of power in the university, it's hard to stay outside the macho logic of competition. In my university, it's all about people who get prizes and huge research grants and, yet, in our national environment there is very little of any of that available. So, it's a zero-sum game where only a tiny number of people can get the sparkly things and everyone else doesn't get anything. And those who get the sparkly things seem to get more of them. It's kind of ugly to me. People who try to do things more collaboratively can be seen as lazy or not doing things properly—they struggle to get recognized and rewarded. Like many academics, I don't need competition to do stuff in my academic life, I do it for a lot of other reasons. Maybe other people do, I don't know. That certainly seems to be the government's and institutional leaders' assumption. You know, I feel more mystified by the world now that I'm 65 than I used to when I was 35!

If I think about the writing retreats as like persons, they've been like regular silent witnesses of the ups and downs in my academic life. Other people's company really mattered to me through those ups and downs. The sometimes difficult experience of the retreats themselves mattered to me.

Sara: Talking about ups and downs, what does it mean to dwell in academia as a feminist in the universities today?

Barbara: Well, in one sense, now, today, 2021, there is some resurgence as I said earlier in terms of activism and feminism which is amazing because there was a period for about 10 or 15 years when I felt like feminism had lost its relevance in the eyes of younger women. They didn't want to use the word to describe themselves. They didn't think they needed feminism. But now we're in a time of resurgence in feminist consciousness. It's complicated, though, because some of is entangled with a kind of 'feminist machismo', if I can use that word. It's tangled up with some very strong views that lead us into cancel culture, that seem to be underpinned by an angry desire to repress discussion of complex issues around feminism, gender, around race.

Feminism is always entangled with these other social constructs as well. There is now, although perhaps not for everybody, a newly risky kind of feeling associated with the politics of feminism. For example, I'm watching friends and others who have been long-standing feminists and anti-racist workers become caught up in accusations of being racist—inappropriate (and painful) accusations

from my perspective. So, there are things that are shifting quite a lot and the space of being a feminist, particularly for white feminists, is feeling kind of strangely dangerous in one way. Although, as a friend of mine recently observed, one way to think about this is that new things are being born that will lead us into a better social order and we are caught up in the birthing pains. I really hope so. But I hate the shaming and careless cruelty of the kind we see on social media. In this environment, the danger doesn't lie so much with men—there is a familiarity in their defensiveness and/or incomprehension—but more with other women with very different ideas that can only be expressed with charge and accusation. How can we disagree without seeking to destroy? Maybe this is touched on by my 'a thousand tiny universities' thinking, although I wasn't thinking that when I wrote it, to be honest.

I took that idea from Elizabeth Grosz's 'A thousand tiny sexes' (1993). She is trying to think away from the binaries of male and female, and how we (in western thought at least) force people into that binary. She is trying to think into a thousand tiny sexes, so then why would it matter what our sex is. It would be irrelevant, we're just in the world, doing what we do. Maybe for feminism we are in a space with a 'thousand tiny feminisms' and we need to make sure that doesn't become a thousand tiny ways to injure each other, to wound each other as feminists. This happened as you know in the second wave of feminism. There was a kind of massive splintering and it probably needed to happen, because there was obliviousness to the difference among and between women. This is one of the fragilities of identity politics—the over-assertion of a particular identity becomes a violence of its own, because of the way it excludes others' identities. So, feminism needed to be reminded that it was not monolithic and singular, but it could become 'a thousand tiny feminisms' which, angrily, seek to cancel each other out. More hopefully, a thousand tiny feminisms could lead to feminism as a big social project becoming irrelevant. In his article called *What is theory?* (1990), Terry Eagleton says that when critical social movements like feminism do their job really well, they become irrelevant. If feminism is successful as a social movement, it would be no longer needed. But so far there's so much evidence that it *is* still relevant.

Coming back to there being a kind of resurgence of feminism: I'm glad of that because I think there's so many issues still to think about and plenty of evidence that the ground won for women to date is not secured. But within that resurgence, there's space of attack on each other. And I think somehow we need to find a way to be different and have different standpoints without using the forces of social media, and things like policies and institutions, to punish people who have different standpoints. We need to challenge each other, for sure, but it's the other stuff, the shame and punish stuff that we don't need. Shaming and silence, and the destruction

of people and their reputations. It's something we need to be thinking about and talking about, but it's quite hard because the risk feels high.

To be honest, I don't participate much in social media. It's not really my milieu. One of my daughters, she follows things and takes it as her job to keep me posted. It's kind of self-protection that I don't participate (including of my precious time to dream), but she has forwarded me things around debates about race, about transgender and so on. Some of these debates are too angry.

One of the issues for a feminist, an ongoing issue, is the underrepresentation of women in the universities, especially at higher levels. But the other issue is what's it like to operate in those spaces. I've realized I don't want to be one of those women. I don't want to be the woman telling me don't run retreats for women from other universities because you've got to keep up our university's competitive edge. I don't want to be thinking in that way, so to me the kind of culture of universities is very hostile to the interests of feminists. It's one thing to be an academic but, my goodness, to be a leader in university and maintain a healthy feminist stance? I think it's really hard.

Sara: That's the reason why I asked you about how we could achieve that kind of new academia and 'tiny universities' of ours that, as you said, may cancel each other!

Barbara: I think our classrooms—we need to think of our classrooms as microcosms. Every class that we have is the university in action. So when I teach in my classrooms, I teach as a feminist, I teach as a woman with children and an elderly mother, and with grandchildren. I make those things visible in small ways so that I'm a human being navigating a complex life but holding on to having an academic life in amongst it all because of its possibilities. Not all academics do this. I don't keep that separation between the public and the private. But neither do I think of the rules of each are the same. I try to make the tensions between them visible because I think I want people to see that I'm being an academic and I'm having a life. And I'm not sacrificing one thing for the other. The retreats have been an important part of that as well. Because everything else goes to shut down—I've got this week of writing retreat to write something. So, a couple of times each year I have a whole week when I can write. I don't usually get anything finished in that week, but I can do enough there that means every year I keep writing. When the writing's going well at the retreat, I love it; when it's not going well, it's excruciating. But it always makes me grow a bit more as a thinker and a writer.

Sara: My final question is: what are your recommendations for PhD graduates, people like me, and other early-career researchers who want to be part of academia and hopeful to make changes?

Barbara: I think if you want to enter the academy, you should have faith that it will happen. But as to how it happens? The road to enter the academy is not always a straight kind of road, sometimes it's quite a curved kind of road. But you should keep reaching toward and into that world. If you are not in the academy and you want to get into it, stay connected with it. Make as many connections as you can. Find ways to be connected. To get into the academy is about writing—nowadays everybody needs a publication record, right? Just about always. So one thing to think about is how to have a writing life so that, even if you are not in the academy now, you are allowing yourself that writing because it's both an instrument for getting you into the academy, and it's also a way to grow as a person, as an academic, a scholar. To write, you have to read and you have to think, so it will keep your academic subjectivity growing even if you're not an academic in a formal kind of way. Keep your reading groups, keep working with others, keep writing; then you are kind of being an academic even if you don't have the job. If you can be, stay connected to it.

In my own life, becoming an academic was so accidental—I never ever imagined that I would be one. It was so accidental over several stages and I see, even now, with colleagues who are more recent academics in my school, they've often also had accidental roads. But they have stayed on the road because that's what they want.

In conclusion

In response to our correspondence following the interview, Barbara elaborated more on her own perception and practice in higher education. She argued that feminist praxis in higher education can inform our teaching in classrooms as women academics by not intensifying the binary oppositions of the public and the private, as she further noted:

> Over the years I came to see that, when it comes to practices, feminist classroom (and research) praxis has a great deal in common with other minority discourses of university pedagogy. 'Minority discourse' is a term developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2013) to describe the voices of those who exist in cramped social spaces, squeezed by norms

> that exclude them: 'Majority assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around. It assumes the standard measure, not the other way around. ' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 105). So minority discourse comes from those who are not dominating, not the standard measure, who exist the other way around.

Reading and thinking about a range of minority positions over the years has informed her teaching practice, which she believed could be called feminist or some other 'minoritarian' name, manifested in:

> collaborative setting of ground-rules for the class, varying class activities to create different opportunities for participation, giving space to forging connections between theory and experience, hesitating over requiring student voice, placing myself personally in relation to curriculum (my love for it, its value to me), foregrounding the politicalness of academic practices such as reading and writing.

Barbara asserted that collaborative lives of women academics are various as we are and feminisms as not monolithic and singular could raise our hopes higher for universities and higher education. She discussed further feminist praxis outside the classroom at universities:

> Outside the classroom, the key principle of a feminist praxis for me has been collaboration with others to take forward agendas emerging from the ground. I'm much less interested in agendas from above—in fact, I am now completely suspicious of them.

She has been involved in projects and programs concerning minority discourse, including women as 'a kind of minority, in a collaborative mode which made her conclude:

> All of these collaborations came out of conversations with others who shared a concern about the university in relation to its minorities and wanted to do something to change the status quo. And, each in its own way, was successful if transient.

Throughout the interview, Barbara referred to her lost 'love' and 'hope' for academia, to a large extent because of the 'ugly' milieu generated by the emphasis on 'credentials' and 'competitiveness'. Nevertheless, she highlighted the

importance of trying to develop our own 'tiny university' despite the hostile culture of universities to the interests of feminists and some 'angry' arguments among various feminist approaches at this time of the 'resurgence of feminism and activism' in academia; to develop our thousand tiny feminisms which is attainable inside academia by daily practices in classrooms, and outside academia by writing retreats, for instance.

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