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Awesome women and Bad Feminists: the role of online social networks and peer support for feminist practice in academia.

Abstract

In her book, 'Bad Feminist', Roxane Gay claims this label shamelessly, embracing the contradictory aspects of enacting feminist practice whilst fundamentally being 'flawed human[s]'. This paper tells a story inspired by and enacting Roxane Gay's approach in academia, written by five cis-gendered women geographers. It is the story of a proactive, everyday feminist initiative to survive as women in an academic precariat fuelled by globalised, neoliberalised higher education. We reflect on what it means to be (bad) feminists in that context, and how we respond as academics. We share experiences of an online space used to support one another through post-doctoral life, a simple message thread, which has established an important role in our development as academics and feminists. The paper, written through online collaboration, mirrors and enacts processes fundamental to our online network, demonstrating the significance and potential of safe digital spaces for peer support. Excerpts from the chat reflect critically on struggles and solutions we have co-developed. Through this we celebrate and validate a strategy we know we and others like us find invaluable for our wellbeing and survival. Finally, we reflect on the inherent limitations of exclusive online networks as tools for feminist resistance.

Keywords: 'bad feminism'; precariat; feminist geography; online social networks; peer mentors

Introduction

[INSERT Figure 1 here] ¹

INSERT Figure 2 here]

In Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*, number 5B on her list of 'How to be friends with another woman' reads:

"If you and your friend(s) are in the same field and you can collaborate or help each other, do this without shame. It's not your fault your friends are awesome. Men invented nepotism and practically live by it. It's okay for women to do it too".²

This paper tells a story inspired by and enacting Gay's advice. It is the story of a proactive, everyday feminist initiative to survive as women in a precariat fuelled by globalised, neoliberalised higher education and reflection on what it means to be feminist in that context. This paper is a collaboration between five women³,

dispersed around Europe, who developed an online space to support one another through post-doctoral life. We call ourselves The 5B group. Our online space, a simple message thread, has established an important role in our development as academics and feminists. Here we reproduce and examine our online conversations, providing further evidence of challenges confronting women in the academic precariat.

To those who recognise themselves in such interactions: we see you. To those surprised to find this content in a geographic journal we say: consider why people feel a need to find alternative ways of doing academia, and what you can do to make it easier for them. To geographers' who've taken similar steps to write in a collective and reflexive manner:⁴ thanks for the inspiration. These issues should be understood against the backdrop of contemporary neoliberal academia, and a wide body of work examining multiple ways women - especially those of colour - come under pressure.⁵ Women face particular challenges in pursuing academic careers; doctoral graduates' precarity has gender dimensions often limiting women's career progression or pushing them out of academia.⁶ Sexual harassment and discrimination are rife in Swedish academic institutions, for example.⁷ Women of colour, non-cisgender, and queer women are particularly under-represented in academia where, on top of discrimination and harassment, they bear the burden of diversity work.⁸ Gender imbalances persist, especially at senior levels in the UK,⁹ Sweden¹⁰ and beyond. Geography is not immune to this,¹¹ with persistent gender inequalities in appointments, working cultures and environments,¹² and women over-represented in more precarious positions.¹³ The members of 5B are situated at the coincidence of these struggles, but as relatively privileged white, first-language English speakers we have it easier than many.¹⁴

We build on a long tradition of the feminist care ethic and the everyday as political practice, using digital spaces as a network of support across spatial boundaries. The benefits of 5B are clear to us: a safe space that enables us to seek advice, vent frustrations, and share stories without judgement. In a context of hyper-mobility, where network building is challenging, the group facilitates peer mentoring, and simple friendship using online social networks (OSNs). Excerpts from 5B's chat reflect critically on struggles and solutions we have co-developed to survive in academia. Conversely, as white, PhD-educated, Anglophone, cisgender women our exclusionary network does little to disrupt or address deep inequalities in academic geography, nor does it offer tangible support or solidarity beyond our group. Embracing this contradiction, the paper, written through online collaboration, mirrors and enacts processes fundamental to our network, advancing feminist approaches to cooperative writing and solidarity. We do not offer answers but reflect on the tensions inherent in - following Gay -- (bad) feminist practice in academia and the challenges in overcoming them. We both draw on important work that has inspired us, and in turn hope to inspire others to develop strategies to survive and thrive in such contexts.

What is and who are 5B

The 5B group comprises five former PhD colleagues, primarily ‘meeting’ and exchanging through online messaging, initially to replicate the - physical and emotional - support space previously offered by a shared office. We adopted the name 5B to mark our self-recognition as awesome friends supporting each other, as Gay urges. Gaining a name shifted perception of the group and 5B evolved from informal messaging, into a support network and ‘safe space’ to discuss issues in our careers and lives, share jokes, or advice. In members’ words:

Tammy¹⁵: We are former PhD colleagues who met in a Geography department, now between 4 and 1 year post-PhD. 3 currently work within academic posts. 1 worked within a university professional services role before moving back into research, 1 is a researcher for a government agency. 3 still live near where we met, 1 overseas. 1 is parent of a young child, 1 of a cat, and 2 of dogs. We represent various stages and pathways of post-PhD lives. Now most often in contact online, too rarely meeting IRL.

Ethel Beavers: We are not all in strictly academic jobs and do not see academia as a sacred entity, challenging boundaries between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ careers which make it hard to forge connections between different struggles and suggest a specific idea of ‘success’.

We did not intend to be a network; it emerged because institutional support for women and early career researchers does not easily meet our needs or interests hence our need for alternatives.

Writing as 5B

5B wrote this paper together, never all sharing a physical space. We began by reviewing a Facebook message thread stretching back to 2015, noting themes, key moments of challenge and support. Extracts were supplemented by new chat discussing the paper, sharing literature, reflecting on the group’s value. We wrote, re-wrote, commented and edited through online documents. Using extracts from our chats and a conversational structure adds to a growing tradition in which critical writing is undertaken collectively and through dialogue,¹⁶ broadening the scope of academic writing.¹⁷ As human geographers, we position this alongside calls to pluralise ‘ways of framing and interfering with the world’.¹⁸ The collective writing process enacts our view that feminism is work best done collectively, critically and creatively, always a work in progress, lively with contradictions¹⁹ (footnote to this philosophy of feminism). Our writing was prompted by a special issue focused on early-career women in geography to which we submitted a previous version, judged not sufficiently ‘scientific’ for inclusion. Rejection reinforced our view that geographers like us need spaces to air what is important to us, and pushed us to state why this matters.²⁰

Rather than removing the ambivalence, tentativeness, anger, joy and laughter we experience both within 5B conversations and through the process of writing, we respond to calls to include authorial affect within academic writing, rather attempting to excise it.²¹ As our reviewers noted, it is impossible to represent these online interactions in a paper, or to share their spirit beyond the original intended audience. We struggled to balance the will to retain our honesty and humour with the desire to speak to something bigger. No one else will find our words as funny or as powerful as we do, so to compensate here's a picture of a dog.²²

[INSERT Figure 3 here]

Bad feminists?

We are inspired by Roxane Gay's work, including her "pro-nepotism" directive 5B. Her advice on being friends with other women is refreshing as it acknowledges grey areas and imperfections. Her collection titled *Bad Feminist*, introduces this idea:

I openly embrace the label of bad feminist. I do so because I am flawed and human. I am not terribly well versed in feminist history. I am not as well read in key feminist texts as I would like to be. I have certain ... interests and personality traits and opinions that may not fall in line with mainstream feminism, but I am still a feminist. I cannot tell you how freeing it has been to accept this about myself.²³

Gay offers bad feminism as antidote to our perfectionist ideal of feminist practice; this enabled us to understand the power the 5B group has for us. By providing a space to air our views and gain peer support, even though we are often not being 'perfect feminists' we have been able to hone and raise our voices in academia. We connect with Gay's work in three main ways. First is her unashamed use of humour as powerful feminist tool:

The trolls get so incensed by a woman having an opinion or a thought or daring to think she's funny, which, by the way, I'm very fucking funny, thank you.²⁴

Secondly, her inspirational acceptance of imperfections, flaws, contradictions. Reading Gay is to feel one can be both bad and good feminist, that one can indeed "measure up" to what a feminist should be. As Baumgardner says:

If this prolific, politically astute, deeply knowledgeable woman was a bad feminist, then there was room for lots of flaws, lots of kinds of people, lots of kinds of feminists.²⁵

Finally, we embrace Gay's admission of enjoying, alongside serious theoretical engagement with, cultural forms and outputs typically considered too low-brow for serious academic forums like geography

departments, where Foucault, Bourdieu, Marx, and a bus-load of other dead white dudes are what *should* be discussed. Serious engagement with potentially trivial subjects is inspiring, because as Wolf expresses:

Bad feminist, for paying such serious attention to such “trivial” subjects. Great feminist writing, as it takes courage to take seriously and seriously analyze themes and texts to which millions of other women also pay close attention and also have strong responses.^{26 27}

For Gay, *The Hunger Games* and *Sweet Valley High* books are valid cultural reference points. For us it is *Parks & Recreation*, a US sitcom based in the titular municipal government department. The saying goes, women can't be what we can't see, and struggling to find aspirational academic role models we look to fictional boss-ladies like those in *Parks & Recreation*. And yet ... the evolution of this paper coincided with the #MeToo movement, during which male stars of the show were identified as perpetrators of sexual harassment, forcing us to confront the misogyny deeply embedded in popular culture. As feminists, is it still OK to watch and even cite this show? Again, Gay got to this conundrum before us, in her case feeling conflicted over a love of music which is “degrading to women”.²⁸

Through 5B we acknowledge and validate ourselves as “awesome women”²⁹, and bad feminists. But this does not blind us to wider inequalities. Shared cultural experience and social capital makes it easy to support one another, using familiar references to poke fun at the patriarchy without missing a beat. But, as becomes clearer through sharing these conversations publicly, the particularity of our experience is problematic. By assuming readers recognise Amy Poehler, are we re-enacting the mistakes other geographers make in relation to presumed acquaintance with dead white dudes? Central to Bad Feminism is the freedom to embody such contradictions without shame, to know it's OK to “eff it up on a regular basis”.³⁰ We expand on what this means in the specific contexts of building feminists' careers within the academic precariat later.

Why we seek safe online spaces

We know the struggles of surviving and building a career within academia where women often fare particularly badly. Readers who do not recognise this are urged to read the material we cite, or ask colleagues who are not cis straight white men how things are. Our response was to create a safe online space, one with benefits and contradictions we reflect on here. This safe space fulfils roles lacking in everyday contexts which *should* facilitate support and discourse: too many academic spaces have become negligent or even toxic. Heightened competition combined with workload intensification and an audit culture place huge pressures on staff, often damaging wellbeing.³¹ But the ‘hidden injuries of academia’ are usually borne silently and alone,³² an individualising culture that breeds isolation and compounds threats to wellbeing.³³ Women are particularly harmed by these patterns. Firstly, neoliberal managerialism increases gender inequality by reinforcing masculinist measures of success and characteristics over other ways of being a professional, hampering

women's career progression,³⁴ particularly those with caring roles.³⁵ Secondly, women are over-represented in precarious temporary, part-time and junior posts, creating additional insecurities.³⁶ Some women respond with hyper-diligence in the effort to demonstrate that they deserve their place,³⁷ pushing them to work extra hard, in ways which can harm their wellbeing.

Many attempts to heal academia's hidden injuries place responsibility on individuals to enact self-care, creating additional burdens.³⁸ Breaking this cycle requires collective action countering isolation with solidarity, and resisting competitiveness through collaboration to find collective solutions.³⁹ Instead of each individual caring for their own wellbeing, we might extend care to others so it becomes a political act of resistance.⁴⁰ Neoliberal individualisation is being countered by openly sharing common challenges,⁴¹ collaboration to shape new academic norms through innovative scholarship and writing,⁴² or unconventional approaches to self-care.⁴³ Such responses, known as 'slow scholarship', are deliberate counter-point to pressure to always advance.⁴⁴ Wright et al. suggest women develop particular practices to manage masculinist academic environments, including shaping protective feminised enclaves.⁴⁵ Such support mechanisms need not be founded on physical proximity or limited to geographically local communities. But surprisingly few discussions of academics' collective support consider virtual communities, or the mechanics of collectivism across distance. The role of information technology in workplace wellbeing is often portrayed negatively, as constant communication pressuring us to be always on duty, or as institutional online spaces exhorting self-care.⁴⁶ But when digital technology disrupts 'at work' spaces,⁴⁷ the results are not wholly negative. The positive counter-balance is their potential as safe, supportive online gathering spaces.

Women in geography seek such spaces because they often feel isolated and disconnected, especially within their institutions.⁴⁸ Typical shared academic spaces can feel exclusive or inhibiting, hence the need for feminised domains.⁴⁹ We argue that the safe feminised spaces some create in classrooms or other physical spaces, and new spaces of collaboration or care fostered by slow scholarship,⁵⁰ are recreated and extended in online social networks. What on the surface seems mere online gossip becomes a political act when connected to feminist roots in the care ethic and personal as political. As exhorted by O'Dwyer et al.,⁵¹ and Lorde's emblematic feminist words,⁵² reflecting on self-care is an act of resistance. Crucially, online networks provide spaces to air problems and develop solutions collectively, not individually. Recognising self-care as a shared responsibility delivered through cooperation it becomes an act of resistance.⁵³ An academic structure which expects us to compete, is resisted by our cooperation. Institutions which harm our health are disrupted when we prioritise each other's wellbeing.

For 5B, supporting one another online enacts and evolves our feminism just as others have in collaborative scholarship such as feminist writing collectives,⁵⁴ and the ‘oral tradition’ of women sharing stories of sexism⁵⁵. By sharing our stories privately, we found courage and language to share some publicly.⁵⁶ We remain painfully aware, however, that such a caring space, is inherently exclusive, possibly exclusionary. It is rooted in feminist politics of resistance, and also in bad feminism – an essential compromise between challenging patriarchal injustice, making friends laugh and just making it through another day.

What do early career academic women talk about when no one is listening?

We propose online social networks (OSNs) like 5B provide crucial safe spaces where academics who too often go unheard voice things important to them, and are heard by supportive, empathetic peers. This section presents some typical 5B content to explore its role, before we reflect on its value as peer support space. Extracts from the online chat have been edited for clarity and to make them accessible to an international audience, whilst seeking to maintain the spirit of our informal communication which includes heavy use of sarcasm, swearing and ironic use of sexist language.

Considering what we have discussed over roughly four years, certain themes emerge:

Tammy1: Our chat is a mix of rants about work frustrations, requests for advice, recounting experiences of everyday sexism, celebrating and bolstering achievements, consoling when things haven’t gone right, chivvying when self-doubt is aired, and of course discussing whatever food, TV and general everyday things pop into mind. There are dogs. And dog GIFs. Or to quote ourselves ‘Classic 5B mix of rants and trying to negotiate basic life skills’.

The group has functions relating to work, life and wellbeing particular to us as post-doctoral geographers, in ways which blur a personal-professional divide.⁵⁷ As is common amongst academics in precarious positions, we have suffered with wellbeing problems; 5B allows us to discuss these and find support. The group is often first point of call at key career moments, when we need to make a decision or commiserate about rejection and criticism. We want to highlight these support functions as viable solutions for others, whilst recognising the role of spaces to air bad experiences and feminist rage. We share some of our rants to evidence the persistence of gender inequalities geographers face, in solidarity with the feminist tradition of sharing personal stories.⁵⁸

Everyday academic sexism – not all academics?

Despite being a critical, left-leaning discipline which has been through its feminist turn, cultural and social geography no discipline is 'too critical' to reproduce sexism and racism.⁵⁹ Women geographers remain victim to everyday sexism and micro-aggressions,⁶⁰ which are intensified for women of colour⁶¹ so we share lived experiences to make visible that it's #GeographersToo. The 5B group is somewhere to discuss such everyday sexism, receive sympathy, safely complain and joke about frustrations centred on unfair gendered treatment:

Ethel Beavers: I'm at a local event for businesses and they have just won the "Congratulations you have arranged an All-Male Panel" award.

~

April Ludgate: I just sat on an expert panel where I was the only woman. Turns out I'm the only female⁶² speaker all day. Sick of this shit. But at least I only got talked over once. Although that was when it was specifically my turn to answer and some dude talked over me to give the exact same point I was about to make. It was so inevitable.

~

Ron Swanson: So [well respected white male academic] is in my department today and he was super patronising when I asked him a question. And then answered all the men's questions super seriously.

Common micro-aggressions include mansplaining and what we call 'manpropriation'⁶³:

Ethel Beavers: I just had my first experience of saying something in a meeting, having it parroted by a man and then everyone referring back to the man when they were saying about how great a point it was. I feel like a real academic now.

Tammy1: Congrats! Did you have your klaxon? There's a bloke I work with who is really good at crediting me when someone else manpropriates. It's ace. Although it would be acer if the guys didn't steal my ideas in the first place!

In some cases the group allows us to voice what we *should* have said to the everyday sexist, like the male academic representing his status as a father in a presentation:

Ron Swanson: Who is doing all that reproductive and caring labour for you?! The only way this is OK is if his wife is an academic of equal or higher standing than him. I should have publicly asked him how many months of paternity leave he took and how many hours a week he acts as primary carer for his kids.

Privately chatting about sexism does not undermine it, but these exchanges helps us survive sexist environments.

For those 'is it just me?' moments, 5B helps us process whether experiences are more than personal, for example reflecting on gendered ageism.⁶⁴

[Insert Figure 4 Here]

By agreeing experiences are Just Gender Shit the group helps us to overcome self-criticism and recognise the bigger problems we are part of. Many encounters are definitely #JGS:

Ron Swanson: one of the blokes commandeered the conversation with [esteemed male geographer] like this, literally "We have something in common: we both have [nationality] wives" and then they chatted for fifteen minutes ignoring me. Shame I couldn't join the wife chat. Next time I see a senior female academic I'm going to say "oh we have something in common – we both have white husbands"!

And if nothing else, sharing #JGS gives us a good laugh.

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Such situations are frequent, making humour an important survival tactic; amongst 5B we can laugh without being accused of trivialisation. As Gay herself suggests, venting or requests for reassurance from fellow bad feminists deserve a response, even if only "I hear you"⁶⁵. It is also where we rehearse the voices we need to call out such treatment in future, helping each other sharpen the tools we need in our feminist toolkit.⁶⁶

Support, care and safe space

Another feminist tool 5B sharpens is the ability to overcome imposter syndrome.⁶⁷ We can be reluctant to ask 'stupid questions' for fear of revealing the inadequacy we feel, so need a space where someone tells us we are not stupid. Or to access honest advice founded in friendship, getting answers to what we dare not ask elsewhere.

[Insert Figure 6 here]

Combating imposter syndrome also means offering advice, or encouragement:

[Insert Figure 7 here]

Sometimes supportive words are enough, but there's also practical advice. 5B's discussions veer between the mundane and seemingly trivial to the serious and significant:

April Ludgate: Best viva exam advice ever passed on by me from another awesome lady academic.
After an hour or so ask for a wee break. It will give them a chance to talk amongst themselves if they

need to ask more questions and they may decide they don't. Me and my friend did it and got away with an hour long viva! Even if it doesn't shorten the viva you can sit on the loo and have a five minute chill.

Being in precarious roles can feel like constant career decisions in the seemingly never-ending search for funding or permanent contracts, so we discuss how to develop our careers:

Ron Swanson: Right proper career dilemma incoming....brace yourselves.....I have seen a position advertised that I fit the requirements for, but it's a considerable commute and would require staying over a couple of nights a week. But...I am worried about leaving [my child] regularly and [my partner] having a lot of parental responsibility when I'm not there. And he's going to lose his shit with me if I make him move again. WWYD?!? (obviously bearing in mind the impossibility of getting permanent lectureships and I want to stay put for a bit and am genuinely concerned about what I will do if I can't get funding).

Collective Q&A breaks down intimidating decisions through collaborative appraisal:

April Ludgate: Question. Do I want to put myself forward for a funded postgraduate course? Uni are funding people to do it, seems like it's not too much work. Part of me can't be arsed but part of me thinks career progression opportunities are sensible things.

Ethel Beavers: Ooh that's a tricky one. Do they give you time to do it out of your workload? Is it likely to help with a promotion or future job application?

We share expertise on academic literatures, methodologies, and writing as well as navigating recruitment and promotion. Crucially, no question or situation is deemed too small to warrant advice, and we know the group will not judge us for asking about what others may perceive as more trivial aspects of academic life.

There are, however, some silences in this paper, discussions too personal or painful to share publicly where we describe not coping, feeling shit, freaking out:

[Insert Figure 8 here]

This redacted discussion indicates that 5B is not silent on profoundly negative feelings and experiences. In contrast to public groups, private online chat is a valuable safe space to share these and find emotional support. Sometimes the discussion of sexism encountered is more serious than those described humorously above.

[Insert Figure 9 here]

These exchanges are likely oblique to those outside 5B; that is the point. Not all discussion in such a network is suitable for public consumption beyond the original audience. We include this partial conversation to highlight this type of communication happens, and the value of being able to receive immediate responses and support from trusted peers when something personally painful happens in a work environment. Sometimes we need places where nothing is redacted and there is no need to self-censor.

These ‘silences’ should also convey the harm women academics experience; we are conscious that others might insert much heavier silences. We are also aware that many women - including geographers - take their own painful experiences public. But this is a fraught step, meaning much - including our redacted examples - remains hidden.⁶⁸ To speak up requires feminists to hone our voices, sharpening them as a tool with which to confidently speak out.⁶⁹ 5B provides space to rehearse complaints, test responses and practice retorts ready for the next offender. These rehearsals have empowered us to take experiences public,⁷⁰ and to be more confident speaking up as feminists in our workplaces. Yet to become ‘better feminists’ we all need to learn also to speak up for those silent not by choice but through systemic silencing.

Creating and valuing safe spaces for bad feminism

We are not the only ones to create safe, supportive space for speaking our minds and sharing advice. Mentoring schemes are commonly offered to counter gender inequality in academia, enabling junior academics to receive support from senior colleagues.⁷¹ But we value a peer approach:

Tammy1: Mentors who were my seniors were just too busy to offer much support, and were in my position in very different times. As peers we understand better and want to give time. Plus I trust you’ll have my interests in mind, rather than some institutional agenda. Setting out issues, mulling them over and gaining several perspectives helps.

April Ludgate: For me, it’s been in- and post-PhD support. In-PhD support was primarily around mental health, a hugely important aspect of a network like this. There is a stark gap between acknowledgement that PhD life can be very detrimental to one’s mental health, and support available. I was based away from my host institution so university support networks were unavailable. 5B was invaluable in plugging that gap and reminding me I was not alone. Post-PhD support, I’m aware my career path hasn’t been one ‘expected’ of a doctoral graduate. Remaining ‘in the loop’ with individuals on the academic route, receiving support (and validation) for my decision to leave academia has been very important dealing with the issue of feeling lesser or ‘a failure’.

The FemMentee Collective⁷² argue ‘self-peer-ceptive feminist mentorship’ facilitates sharing personal experiences of navigating the academy as a means to challenge institutional inequalities. A notable advantage

of *peer* mentoring is the opportunity to air dilemmas without fear of judgement, or of disadvantaging careers by voicing something personally detrimental to someone in a position to support our advancement. 5B members work in different roles and sectors, but diverse workplace perspectives are valuable:

Ron Swanson: it really helps sort out some of the 'grass is always greener' feelings from what is genuinely problematic or frustrating about being an early career researcher.

Lil'Sebastian: Using the group as a platform to ask questions and seek solutions is invaluable - research is research and it's reassuring to find that the similar challenges crop up regardless of which domain we work in.

This situation emerged unintentionally from our beginnings as fellow post-graduates and our subsequent pathways. Such networks are likely and valuable in academia because graduate colleagues develop relationships of trust which provide a necessary foundation for critique.⁷³ We are unashamed about 5B being founded on friendship, and arguing the importance of building academic friendships - not relationships formed in pursuit of self-advancement or excellent research collaborations, but of kindness and joy.

The place of online social networks

Geographers have long considered the spatiality of communication and social relationships,⁷⁴ including friendships, in a world where digital technology can replace face-to-face interaction.⁷⁵ In digital space we maintain regular interactions facilitated by physical spaces despite moving apart physically. This offers particular forms of intimacy,⁷⁶ as OSNs encourage frequent discussion in which thoughts, emotions and jokes are easily shared. A trusted group of peers, available 'anywhere' provide invaluable support.

Tammy1: I tell people at PhD stage to get a personal cheerleading squad. You constantly get knock backs so it requires a degree of resilience which few have internally. You need people to go "oh yeah, me too" so you realise everyone struggles. They will remind you #YouGotThis - ideally with a Leslie Knope GIF.

Such support is essential in neo-liberal academia, and not only for those who identify as women, combating isolation, countering institutional individualisation of care.⁷⁷ Hanson suggests a feminist dimension to networks which raise awareness of inequalities and empower women to tackle them through 'the power of solidarity'.⁷⁸ If collectives are important support mechanisms it makes sense to capitalise on the potential of technology to foster networks. The value of informal online support is apparent in the growth of OSNs for academics seeking safe places to discuss challenges and seek advice. The Facebook group *Women in Academia Support Network* gained over ten thousand members in less than a year, and receives numerous posts daily. The advantage 5B-type groups have over such public fora is the origin in face-to-face friendships which allows

trust to build. As a place for familiars only, members share emotional and risky elements in discussion without fear of public opprobrium.

Bad academics?

It is important to have a safe space to offer care and support, boost confidence and make sense of the experience of working in a neoliberal context because it enables us to challenge the paradigm of ‘success’ promoted through normative progress markers. ‘Doing well’ in our careers does not match a linear progression towards being a well-known, well-funded professor. Stepping out of academia can feel like failure, but a network of mixed-career-peers emboldens us to celebrate less typical successes:

Ron Swanson: Picking each other up and dusting each other off is a lot of what the network is about – sharing that we all have these issues and reminding each other that we are great and can do this.

Tammy1: An online network counters isolation. I think we’re starting to work out how it resists competitiveness – like this collaborative writing.

April Ludgate: Isolation was probably my worst part of academia. In an almost contradictory way, the support we’ve offered in terms of highlighting that each individual is awesome and successful regardless of their career decisions has enabled us to achieve more, whether or not within the parameters of a standard early academic path.

Lil’Sebastian: On top of the group being a space to support and encourage one another, without judgement on our chosen career paths, I definitely feel it helps keep me connected to academia in some way. It’s great to see PhD friends succeeding, even if they’re not exactly where they want to be *yet*.

5B helps us abandon what Gay calls “the cultural myth that all female friendships must be bitchy, toxic, or competitive.”⁷⁹ For some, staying in academia was neither tenable nor desirable, due to the impact on mental health and family life of precarious income, everyday knock-backs and sexism. Others are ambivalent about the personal costs of academia, resulting in declarations to 5B that we’re about to quit. An academic culture of individualisation and competition leaves little room for such uncertainty, often feeling like all-consuming lifestyle rather than a job. We therefore value 5B as space to imagine ‘success’ differently, and develop ambitions beyond academia, a sphere which often downplays women’s contributions.⁸⁰ Sometimes success is getting out of bed, getting through a meeting without being manappropriated, finishing work in time to swim in the sea. 5B embraces this, enabling us to be resilient, not so that we can keep working harder but so that we can be well and happy. If this makes us bad academics we’ll celebrate that too.

Limits to OSNs, peer support and 5B

There are limits to 5B as a support strategy. We may neglect the root problem by becoming better able to function alongside the patriarchy, rather than undermining dominant systemic injustices. Others share our ambition to support each other by creating safe feminised spaces through writing.⁸¹ But, as they acknowledge, this risks prioritising short-term wellbeing over longer-term career:

Tammy1: Are we committing slow career suicide by writing together rather than focusing on all those high impact factor papers we *should* be working on?

Birch et al.⁸² similarly acknowledge challenges around early career academics investing time in collaborative writing or support. Perhaps we are deluding ourselves that time spent chatting online is important work rather than procrastination or distraction.

[Insert Figure 10 here]

Using OSNs rather than more public channels are we bad academics as well as bad feminists? If so, we doubt we are the only ones. We know that others who feel marginalised within academia similarly form online groups through which they find outlets and support. Such mechanisms help people to continue working in hostile or unhealthy environments, but also allow academia to continue being 'bad'.

One critical dimension is the emotional labour this peer mentorship requires.⁸³ Our discussion space can push emotional labour onto our peers, so we struggle to balance support and solidarity with burdening already over-burdened emotional labourers. We don't want to enforce a narrative that emotional work is women's work. The 5B group may also reinforce other gender norms we are trying to fight:

Ethel Beavers: Our chat is often filled with hedging, ambivalence and equivocation, or codas to messages like "well that's just what I think anyway" or "rant over". Maybe this is a way we make 5B a safe space. We never discussed this but have regulated ourselves to prevent others feeling uncomfortable.

Conversely:

Ron Swanson: Having the digital record shows when we're not as kind to each other as we should be. An inherent problem with digital text is you can't interpret tone easily. I tend towards the blunt and when I read back I think that I should have been more positive or sympathetic.

Communicating online is different, and whether or not an OSN can replace face-to-face contact is debatable.⁸⁴ But against academia's mobility,⁸⁵ and the varied career paths pursued by people like us, it is an excellent substitute or supplement. It is difficult to judge whether such collaborative endeavours resist the neoliberal academy, or are merely distraction placing our feminist perspective to the side of rather than undermining masculinism.⁸⁶ But the positive potential energises us:

Ron Swanson: The solidarity and support, and also the “joining together of voices” can embolden us and help us to call out sexist bullshit when we see it, rather than just taking it as a personal weakness or fault.

Further energy has come from working to share such experiences here.

Throughout this process we’ve been conscious of what Gay might make of us, a bunch of white feminists, and face discomfort using her words to interpret our relatively privileged situation:

Ron Swanson: I keep imagining Roxane Gay snark in my head, which is making me question everything about the paper.

Ethel Beavers: Yes, I was just reading something of hers and she was quite rightly basically telling white feminists to STFU and I agree, hence white guilt.

Ron Swanson: Yep she’s literally going to be like “Oh these dumb white chicks”....

Maybe we do more harm than good by occupying space in the name of women without sensitivity to our relative privilege. Her guidance helps us navigate this:

“You don’t necessarily *have* to do anything once you acknowledge your privilege. You don’t have to apologize for it. You need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about. You could, however, use that privilege for the greater good – to try to level the playing field for everyone, to work for social justice, to bring attention to how those without certain privileges are disenfranchised”.⁸⁷

Firstly, this prompts reflection on our relative privilege and how to ‘use’ it to improve the situation for those experiencing greater injustices within academia. Secondly, it urges us to want those most powerful in academia to read and digest her statement, as the basis for shaping better worlds. By illustrating everyday sexism we face, we hope certain members of our geographic communities will see and understand the need for change, to benefit of others.

We see 5B as opening up the proposition of nepotism as a resistance strategy, a way of subverting patriarchal practices to our own ends, flipping the power dynamics. But nepotism is a loaded term; women’s engagement in unjust workplace practices is not justified by the fact that men used them for years. Moreover, even if we wanted to offer advancement to our friends – whatever their identity– we are not in positions to do so. Nepotism, to date, has primarily closed doors to diversity rather than opened them. Perhaps the distant prospect of a more equitable nepotism leads us to not take point 5B too seriously. Our emphasis is Gay’s urging that as women we support and collaborate with each other, make space for women of colour, and recognise women’s awesomeness without shame. Put simply, if academia won’t look after us then we’ll look after each other.

Conclusion

In this paper we have explored our use of OSNs to facilitate peer mentoring and collective support in face of neoliberal academic work spaces. Academic cultures which too often harm wellbeing can be redressed, even challenged through caring networks which collaborate not individualise. Sharing the story and functions of 5B demonstrates its value, and the potential of digital technology often cast as part of the problem. We note the irony of re-presenting online chat – originally an antidote to institutional pressures - as an ‘output’ which may help us scramble towards the safety of being suitably ‘published’. But we are not driven by an urge to ‘get ahead’ in academia, rather we resist a toxic culture of self-promotion. Writing together marks a crucial step in 5B’s journey, pushing us from informal chat to formal collaboration and recognition, offering a springboard for further cooperation. Writing as 5B prompted us to look outwardly and reflect inwardly, and to engage more with work by women of colour. Reviewers’ feedback challenged us to define our feminism, and to question the value of sharing it with others. Taking 5B public, we join with others facing these issues, for whom the neoliberal academy offers inadequate support, and who seek a more human face to academic life.

The spirit of this paper pays homage to Roxane Gay’s work, where the complexity of navigating everyday life whilst adhering to feminist principles creates tensions as we both reproduce and resist wider oppression. Gay’s advice - use your networks to your advantage - requires that we acknowledge our own as exclusionary, partial and entangled with raced and classed inequality. As white, middle-class cis-gendered women with relatively well-paid - albeit precarious - roles, our OSN is ultimately exclusionary, and despite our personal motives towards intersectional, queer, de-colonial feminism, does little to break down power inequalities. We are still bad feminists in several senses. We have not tried to gloss over this anachronism but use it productively to reflect on both potential and pitfalls of a network like 5B. Gay’s own online interactions in a Twitter feed where she relentlessly calls out everyday racist and sexist acts, sometimes in anger, sometimes in humour, is constant reminder of the potential for powerful bad feminists. As bad academics we bring this ambivalence to our professional sphere, happy to regularly eff it up, satisfied to do so in good company.

Appreciating and attempting to work through these deep flaws in our practice and our work, through 5B we have found space to talk through our challenges and developed the confidence to voice them publicly. Looking forward, we expect to continue supporting each other, perhaps adding to our network through wider collaborations. For the longer-term? We have a plan:

[Insert Figure 11 here]

Notes

¹ I. Cook et al., 'Geographies of food: Afters', *Progress in Human Geography*, 35 (2010), pp. 104 – 120.

² R. Gay, *Bad Feminist*. (UK, Hachette UK, 2014), p. 48.

³ Throughout we refer to our experiences as 'women'. We recognise that the challenges we discuss are not unrelated to those experienced by non-binary, queer and trans people. We use the term 'women' because we do not wish to speak for, or indeed over others.

⁴ E.g. A. Mountz, A. Bonds, B. Mansfield, J. Lloyd, J. Hyndman, M. Walton-Roberts, R. Risa Whitson, R. Hawkins, T. Hamilton, and W. Curran, 'For slow scholarship: a feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university' *ACME* 14 (2015) pp1235-59, p1239; Cook et al., *Geographies of food*; FemMentee Collective 'Emotional masking and spill-outs in the neoliberalized university: a feminist geographic perspective on mentorship' *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 41(2017): 590-607.

⁵ Inspired by S. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (London, Duke University Press, 2017), and C. Mott & D. Cockayne, 'Citation matters: mobilizing the politics of citation toward a practice of 'conscientious engagement'', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24 (2017), pp954-973, and discussion during the Nordic Geographers Meeting 2017 on women in geography, we favour citing women and people of colour.

⁶ J. Grove, S. Djerasimovic, and J. Crane, 'The Hybrid Academic: A Project Short' (Durham University, Working Knowledge/Hearing the Voice, 2018) http://www.workingknowledgeps.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/WKPS_TheHybridAcademic_PDF_Interactive.pdf

⁷ Svenska dagbladet 'Visste inte om jag skulle dö – sen våldtog han mig'. SvD.se, Nov 24th. 2017 <https://www.svd.se/visste-inte-om-jag-skulle-do--sen-valdtog-han-mig>

⁸ Ahmed, *Feminist Life*.

⁹ A. Maddrell, K. Strauss, N. Thomas, and S. Wyse, 'Mind the gap: gender disparities still to be addressed in UK Higher Education geography.' *Area* 48 (2016) pp.48–56

¹⁰ Universitetskanslersämbetet, *Universitet och Högskolor Årsrapport 8* (Stockholm: Universitetskanslersämbetet, 2017).

¹¹ For example: S. Akinleye, 'Against the Odds: Does geography make a difference?' *Gender, Place and Culture* 13(2016) pp.27-31; S. Hanson, 'Networking' *The Professional Geographer* 52(2000), pp.751-758; C. Mott, and S. Roberts, 'Not Everyone Has (the) Balls: Urban Exploration and the Persistence of Masculinist Geography' *Antipode* 46(2010) pp.229-245; C. Moss-Racusina, J. Dovidio, V. Brescoll, M. Grahama, and J. Handelsman, 'Science faculty's subtle gender biases favor male students' *Proceedings of the National*

Academy of Science of the USA 109(2012) pp.16474–16479; Z. Šadl, 'We Women Are No Good at It': Networking in Academia. *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, 45(2009) pp.1239-1263.

¹² K. Al-Hindi, 'Women in geography in the 21st century. Introductory Remarks: Structure, Agency, and Women Geographers in Academia at the End of the Long Twentieth Century' *Professional Geographer* 52(2000) pp.697-702; Akinleye, Against the Odds; R. Pugh 'Who Speaks for Economic Geography?', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 50.7 (2018) pp. 1525-1331.

¹³ Maddrell et al., Mind the gap.

¹⁴ D. Tolia-Kelly, 'A day in the life of a Geographer: 'lone', black, female' *Area*, 49 (2017) pp.324-328.

¹⁵ All names in excerpts from the chat are pseudonyms - any similarity to fictional characters is purely intentional.

¹⁶ J. Guthman, 'Special Issue: Nutritional deficiencies: dietary advice and its discontents', *Gastronomica* 14 (2014) pp.1-4.

¹⁷ K. Fisher, M. Williams, S. Fitzherbert, L. Instone, M. Duffy, S. Wright, S. Suchet-Pearson, K. Lloyd, L. Burrarrwanga, R. Ganambarr, M. Ganambarr-Stubbs, M. Ganambarr, D. Maymuru, D and B. Country, 'Writing difference differently' *New Zealand Geographer* 71(2015) pp.18-33; J. Laws, 'Magic at the Margins: towards a magical realist human geography' *Cultural Geographies* 24 (2017) pp.3-19.

¹⁸ M. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Univ Of Minnesota Press) 2017.

¹⁹ H. Wright, L. Cooper, P. Luff, 'Women's ways of working: Circumventing the masculine structures operating within and upon the University, *Women's Studies International Forum* 61, (2017) pp. 123-131

²⁰ We are grateful to the editors for encouraging this.

²¹ G. Davies, & C. Dwyer, 'Qualitative methods: are you enchanted or are you alienated?', *Progress in Human Geography*, 31 (2007) pp.257-266, p.258

²² We appreciate that the particular brand of 5B "humour" may not be to all reader's tastes, so we ask for patience and generosity in interpreting our "jokes". We include these in the paper because humour is key to how we communicate, practice feminist care for each other, and deal with difficulties we face. Who knows - maybe someone else finds us funny.

²³ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. xi

²⁴ R. Nicholson, 'Hannah Gadsby meets Roxane Gay', *The Guardian* (8 December 2018).

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/dec/08/hannah-gadsby-roxane-gay-in-conversation-body-image-fan-encounters-trolls>

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- ²⁶ N. Wolf, 'Bad Feminist, Great Rhetorician', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 41:3, (2016), pp.709-712
- ²⁸ R. Gay, Confessions of a Bad Feminist,
https://www.ted.com/talks/roxane_gay_confessions_of_a_bad_feminist?language=en
- ²⁹ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p. 48.
- ³⁰ B. Cooper, 'Feminism for Badasses', *Signs* 41 (2016), pp. 704–705, p. 704.
- ³¹ B. Davies and P. Bansel, 'The time of their lives? Academic workers in neoliberal time(s)' *Sociology Review* 14(2010) pp.47-58; D. Epstein, and R. Boden, 'Managing the Research Imagination? Globalisation and Research in Higher Education.' *Globalisation, Societies and Education*. 4 (2006) pp.223-236; Maddrell et al., *Mind the gap*; C. Shaw, and L. Ward, 'Dark thoughts: why mental illness is on the rise in academia' *The Guardian. Higher Education Network*, 1(2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2014/mar/06/mental-health-academics-growing-problem-pressure-university>
- ³² R. Gill, and N. Donaghue, 'Resilience, apps and reluctant individualism: Technologies of self in the neoliberal academy'. *Women's Studies International Forum* 54 (2016) pp.91-99.
- ³³ e.g. K. Birch, S. Bond, S., C. Harris, D. Hoogeveen, N. Laliberte, and M. Rosol, 'What can we do? The challenge of being new academics in neoliberal universities', *Antipode* 44 (2012) pp.1055-1058; Davies and Bansel, *Time of their lives*; R. Hawkins, M. Manzi, and D. Ojeda, 'Lives in the making: power academia and the everyday' *ACME* 13 (2014) pp.328-51.
- ³⁴ Hawkins et al., *Lives in the making*; H. Wright, L. Cooper, and P. Luff, P. 'Women's ways of working: Circumventing the masculine structures operating within and upon the University' *Women's Studies International Forum* 61 (2017) p.123.
- ³⁵ M. Crang, 'Malestream geography: gender patterns among UK geography faculty' *Environment and Planning A* 35 (2003) pp.1711-1716.
- ³⁶ Birch et al., *What can we do*; Maddrell, *Mind the gap*; Grove, *Hybrid Academic*
- ³⁷ S. Garvis, 'Are you Old Enough to be in Academia? You don't have Grey Hair', in: N. Lemon, S. Garvis (eds) *Being "In and Out"*, (Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2014) pp.19-30.
- ³⁸ Davies and Bansel, *Time of their lives*; Gill and Donaghue, *Resilience*.
- ³⁹ Birch et al., *What can we do*; Wright, *Women's ways*; Davies and Bansel, *Time of their lives*, p.57.
- ⁴⁰ Mountz et al., *Slow scholarship*.

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- ⁴² A. Datta and A. De 'Reimagining impossible worlds: beyond circumscribed geographical imaginations. A play in many acts', *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (2008) pp.603-612.
- ⁴³ S. O'Dwyer, S. Pinto, and S. McDonough 'Self-care for academics: a poetic invitation to reflect and resist', *Reflective Practice* (2018) pp.1-7.
- ⁴⁴ L. Peake, 'The Suzanne Mackenzie Memorial Lecture: Rethinking the politics of feminist knowledge production in Anglo-American geography', *The Canadian Geographer* 59 (2015) pp.257–266; Mountz et al., Slow scholarship; L. Martell, 'The slow university: Inequality, power, and alternatives', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 15 (2014) <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1403102>; M. O'Neill, 'The slow university: Work, time, and well-being.' *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 15 (2014) 14.
- ⁴⁵ Wright et al., Women's ways.
- ⁴⁶ Gill and Donaghue, Resilience.
- ⁴⁷ L. Richardson 'Feminist geographies of digital work', *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (2018), pp. 244-263.
- ⁴⁸ Hanson, Networking.
- ⁴⁹ Wright et al., Women's ways.
- ⁵⁰ Mountz et al., Slow scholarship.
- ⁵¹ O'Dwyer et al., Self-care.
- ⁵² A. Lorde, *Burst of light: Essays*, (Firebrand Books) 1988.
- ⁵³ Mountz et al., Slow scholarship.
- ⁵⁴ See for example Cook et al. 2010;; Mountz et al., Slow scholarship; Wright et al., Women's ways of working; FemMentee Collective, Emotional masking.
- ⁵⁵ Al-Hindi, Women in geography.
- ⁵⁶ Pugh, Who speaks.
- ⁵⁷ Hanson, Networking.
- ⁵⁸ Al-Hindi, Women in geography.
- ⁵⁹ Ahmed, *Feminist life*, p.155.
- ⁶⁰ Maddrell et al., Mind the gap; J. Pickerill, 'International Women's Day: being female in academia' *Times Higher Education* 8 March 2016, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/international-womens-day-being-female-academia>; Pugh, Who speaks.

⁶¹ Tolia-Kelly, Day in the life.

⁶² The original 5B chat has not always been consistent or correct in use of gender terminology. We have retained the original wording in acknowledgement of our own unconscious biases, and as part of a learning towards being 'better' feminists.

⁶³ Along the lines of 'mansplaining', we see this as a man appropriating someone else's - usually a woman's - idea, regurgitating it, then presenting it as his own, to be greeted positively, the original contribution forgotten. In online communities this has been referred to as bro-propriation.

⁶⁴ Garvis, Are you Old Enough.

⁶⁵ Gay, Bad Feminist, p.50.

⁶⁶ Ahmed, Feminist Life.

⁶⁷ Pickerill, International Women's Day.

⁶⁸ S. Ahmed <https://www.saranahmed.com/complaint>

⁶⁹ Ahmed, Feminist Life

⁷⁰ Pugh, Who speaks

⁷¹ P. Moss, K. Debres, A. Cravey, J. Hyndman, K. Hirschboeck, and M. Masucci, 'Toward mentoring as feminist praxis: Strategies for ourselves and others' *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 23 (1999) pp.413-427; FemMentee Collective, Emotional masking.

⁷² FemMentee Collective, Emotional masking.

⁷³ Hanson, Networking.

⁷⁴ E.g. M. Sheller, and J. Urry. 'The New Mobilities Paradigm', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 38, 2 (2006) pp. 207-26.

⁷⁵ S. Bowlby, 'Friendship, Co-Presence and Care: Neglected Spaces', *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 6 (September 2011): pp.605-22.

⁷⁶ Richardson, Feminist geographies.

⁷⁷ Gill and Donaghue, Resilience.

⁷⁸ Hanson, Networking, p.756.

⁷⁹ Gay, Bad Feminist, p.47.

⁸⁰ Hawkins et al., Lives in the making.

⁸¹ Wright et al., Women's ways.

⁸² Birch et al. What can we do.

⁸³ FemMentee Collective, Emotional masking.

⁸⁴ Bowlby, Friendship.

⁸⁵ R. Pugh and E. Thomas, 'Moving, settling and becoming: A conversation about mobility between two early career researchers' *Regions*, Regional Studies Association (2018) [DOI: 10.1080/13673882.2018.00001003](https://doi.org/10.1080/13673882.2018.00001003);
Pugh, Who speaks for economic geography?

⁸⁶ Wright et al., Women's ways of working.

⁸⁷ Gay, *Bad Feminist*, p.17