

Academic Event Report

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Postgraduate Conference: Boundaries, Borders, and Care: Feminist Ethics in Practice

Venue: University College Cork

Date: 19th to 21st May 2021

‘Boundaries, Borders, and Care: Feminist Ethics in Practice’ was a three-day conference, organised by myself and two other postgraduate students: Brenda Mondragón Toledo and Clare Geraghty. The conference benefitted the support of Dr Céire Broderick and Dr Caroline Williamson-Sinalo from the Violence, Gender and Conflict research cluster in the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, and was generously funded by the Centre for Advanced Studies in Languages and Cultures (CASiLaC). This event saw artists, scholars, and activists gather virtually to discuss feminist ethics.

Over the course of the conference, we explored the practical challenges that we face as early career researchers faced in feminist and gender-focused research. Specific challenges arise with these types of work, such as a risk of burnout, ethical questions, and professional and personal boundary-setting. We were eager to make space to discuss the relationship between scholarship, policy, art, activism, and lived experiences. In total, 65 tickets were sold via Eventbrite, with up to 35 attendees at each panel.

Panel 1: Relationships and conflict in feminist activism

The conference began with a challenging panel on how we relate with others and which conflicts may arise within the feminist movement in Ireland. For this panel, our speakers were Emily Waszak and Dr Theresa O’Keefe, who have both engaged as migrant feminist activists in Ireland. The main issues arising from these conversations were on the avoidance of conflict

that currently exists in Irish feminist movements. Most importantly, the panellists pointed out that generative conflict is something to be embraced rather than feared.

The conversation developed around the panellists' common experience as migrant women in Ireland and how they through the lens of Irish groups. Their role in the movement has allowed them to analyse the imbalance of power within feminism. Emily drew attention to the constant backing of those with the most power, considering how this ends up excluding minority voices, and the problems this generates when building dialogue and resolutions. Panellists mentioned how migrant voices have been excluded from the debates, and migrants' previous experiences in activism are often undermined. It is damaging to leave minority voices behind as they are a central contribution to action. Finally, this dialogue emphasised the significant presence of White feminism in Ireland and the urgency of challenging it in order to build a more egalitarian movement.

Panel 2: Mobility and roots in feminist academia

The second panel saw Dr Chiara Bonfiglioli (Co-ordinator of the MA in Women's Studies, UCC), and Dr Armida de la Garza (Senior Lecturer, UCC) discussing mobility and roots in feminist academia. Both noted that academia is not always the warmest community, however finding support groups, or groups with shared interests, can help one to generate roots in a new culture or country. It is important to collaborate and build communities of belonging, yet this requires energy and initiative.

The panellists were asked about maintaining boundaries between work and life, and they noted that this can be challenging when one is working in an area of passion. It is vital to cultivate this passion, which can be productive and generative, without losing your balance. In discussing career progression, both panellists agreed that this can mean reciprocity and living in line with your values, as well as being upwardly mobile. The panel also considered the issue of women's/gender studies being under threat globally, and the importance of taking an affirmative stance rather than defensive regarding the centrality of gender issues.

The final discussion of this panel related to interdisciplinarity, and the gendered assumptions made about specific disciplines. An engaged audience provided their own ideas on how to persevere in feminist academia, and how to work collaboratively and ethically across disciplines. Some ideas included sharing authorship credits, citing other feminist academics, and creating alternative spaces of dialogue, so that academic discourse can be more open to everyone. The discussion also touched on transnational solidarity and opposing the de-radicalisation of universities. One audience member introduced the term "trebuchet", which

involves throwing rocks over the walls of hegemonic academia, by performing small loving actions, such as providing references or platforms for early career researchers. We also discussed strategic essentialism, following Gayatri Spivak, to maintain our energy in the face of international threats.

Panel 3: Queer activism and the arts

This panel brought together Karen Miano, artist, producer, DJ, community organiser; Bulelani Mfaco, spokesperson for MASI (Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland) and board member of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties; Chandrika Narayanan-Mohan, arts manager, writer, performer. Some of the questions/points raised during the session included the following:

Karen Miano is a co-founder of Origins Eile, an organisation for queer people of colour in Ireland. They spoke of the importance of inward-facing activism, such as closed events and spaces that are only for community members. This can be an opportunity to heal and nourish the community from within, rather than always focusing on public events. They also stressed the value in promoting Black liberation through joy and celebration, instead of exclusively through narratives of suffering and trauma.

Inclusive spaces within the arts, where ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups can contribute as creators, are essential. The power of ownership and recognition for underrepresented communities can be very positive. Art can be a tool to interrogate reality and has been essential in contexts such as protests against the South African apartheid, of which Bulelani spoke.

How do we decide to self-identify as an activist? Many people involved in organising may not describe themselves as an activist, and relationships to this term may be complex.

How can we interact care-fully with each other as activists, artists, academics? By this we mean, in an ethical manner that shows consideration. There can be an awkwardness in being asked to speak on panels about who we are, rather than what we do, according to Chandrika. Particularly as an organiser of this event, I was encouraged to reflect upon why certain people had been asked to speak and others had not been, as well as the potential limitations regarding accessibility that we had perhaps failed to overcome.

Panel 4: Pride, culture, and feminist alliance building

Our penultimate panel featured Zoe McCormack, of Disabled Women Ireland, and Brigid Carmody, of the Cork Traveller Women's Network. Initially, they discussed their experiences as members of over-researched communities. The panellists noted that researchers should

realise that they are guests in the community, and not experts “on” the community, despite their academic prowess. It is vital to avoid epistemic exploitation, and one way of ensuring this is to involve marginalised communities at every step of the research process, not just as gatekeepers to participants. It is important that people stop romanticising and simplifying human experiences, as this erases their complexity. The panellists were asked about taking pride in their identities and cultures, and Brigid noted that Traveller Pride takes place in June, and there are also Traveller Culture awareness training sessions. Zoe noted that maybe we don’t feel proud of particular labels, but we shouldn’t be ashamed. She went on to note that creating spaces for communities where people can be fully themselves is vital, for example the Autistic Art Club that Zoe founded. We discussed how to build alliances between marginalised communities and noted that arts and culture provide many opportunities. It is important that we amplify each other’s voices, recognise people as experts in their own lives, and pass on opportunities. It was also noted that collectives such as Disabled Women Ireland have more power than individual smaller segregated organisations. Furthermore, we can lift each other up by recognising each other’s strengths and struggles and maintaining an open mind.

Panel 5: Craftivism

Our final panel concerned Craftivism, which recentres the power of making, and we had the fortune to invite two craftivists to speak with us: Laura Whalen from The Bábóg Project and Claudia Hernández Espinoza from Zurcido Visible. Both of these women’s projects use creativity to talk about sensitive matters such as the loss lives of babies at the Mother and Baby homes in Ireland (The Bábóg Project), and the murder, disappearance and feminicides across Mexico (Zurcido Visible) by the increasing levels of violence in the country. Laura and Claudia presented their projects and the aims of craftivism in society.

We discussed how even slow processes of making are also forms of activism as they carry the power to communicate in the process as well as through the final outcome. In many cases, the process of making involves healing in community, as well as in silence and privately. This makes it incredibly relevant to discussions of traumatic experience. Claudia noted that we can process trauma when we share it in supportive and empathetic spaces, which helps us to mend wounds in society. The panellists encouraged the conversations around care; how we care for others and how we care for ourselves, and Laura outlined the importance of letting the emotions flow. This panel problematised the rigidity of theorising in academic spaces which can underplay or ignore the relations of emotional affects.

Creative conclusions

Our conference concluded with a creative workshop, in which participants, facilitators, and panellists reflected on the themes of the conversation, while making scrapbooks as reference to the conversations. We used the materials provided to continue the conversation about care, creativity, feminism, ethics, art, activism, academia, and to consider new ways of integrating all of these ideas. We focused particularly on how we can care for ourselves and each other, whilst continuing to engage in ethical feminist practice. Whilst we certainly do have all the answers, we discovered new possibilities to help us forge the right questions.

Doris Murphy is a PhD candidate in Sociology and Women's Studies in University College Cork. She is exploring sex work and care through Participatory Action Research. She is interested in the gendered nature of care, and how sex workers experience care in relationships at personal and societal levels.