



## Grasping the affirmative: Power and the process of becoming joyful academic subjects



Pamela Moss<sup>a,\*</sup>, Leslie Kern<sup>b</sup>, Roberta Hawkins<sup>c</sup>, Karen Falconer Al-Hindi<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Human and Social Development, University of Victoria, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Department of Geography and Environment, Mount Allison University, Canada

<sup>c</sup> Department of Geography, University of Guelph, Canada

<sup>d</sup> Department of Geography and Geology /Women's and Gender Studies, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Becoming  
Braidotti  
Collective biography  
Joy  
Subjectivity

### ABSTRACT

We investigate becoming joyful subjects in academia among feminist geographers using the methodology of collective biography. Collective biography uses the researchers' own written memories about a set of experiences as texts for analysis. This paper brings together ideas about ontological positivity and power and applies them to the process of subjectification. We use the concepts *potentia* and *potestas* to explore force relations that generate particular subjects: here, joyful ones. We suggest that the generation of joyful subjects, even momentarily, helps to sustain the possibility of an affirmative politics. Joy, as an effect of the positivity of power, offers one pathway towards engaging varied feminist world-making projects within the academy, and beyond.

### 1. Finding joyful academic subjects

How can we participate in generating political spaces within the university that affirm the world we live in, that make us joyful in what we do as academics? How do possibilities arise for sustaining joyful subjects through our actions? How does subject formation work in and through our everyday relationships that facilitate becoming a joyful academic? Examining power helps address these questions. We understand power as generative, moulding all sorts of subjectivities as well as other things in the world. A crucial project for feminist and critical geographers is to understand how sets of power relations are organized between people and in institutions, how these power relations have sedimented into structures, and what subjects are generated through power.

As part of the emotional turn in the social sciences, and in geography, we seek to explore particular emotions associated with the generation of academic subjects. Emotions – arising from everyday activities in both professional and non-professional parts of life – are enmeshed in the process of becoming as much as the practices of reading, writing, and learning. We chose to look at joy. Our recent work has shown that joy is turbulent and is rarely felt in academic settings in ways that would be recognizable in non-academic ones (Kern et al., 2014). For instance, rather than ecstasy, the joy associated with the following memory is of what one might call the ‘slow-burning embers’

variety.

*Our group for lunch was smaller than usual, just the two of us sitting across from one another at the end of a long cafeteria table. [...] Our easy interaction was full of laughter about baseball, movies, and cooking mistakes. “What about next year?”, he asked abruptly. I swallowed the gulp of water I had in my mouth. How did the conversation turn to plans for the future, my plans for the future? I leaned forward, schlumpfing over my plate of food. I leaned to the side, my left elbow on the table where the misplaced spoon lay unwanted. My hand cupped the side of my forehead, while I picked at what remained of my green beans and macaroni-and-cheese with a dull-tined fork. I couldn't meet his eyes. I don't know. I mean I think I'd like to do this. I enjoy thinking about ideas. “So you don't think you'll get a job?” I drop my hands to my lap and look up. I just don't know. Maybe? “You should think so,” he replied, in a tone that was unlike any that I knew of him: soft and more resolved than our usual banter.*

This memory was written in response to the prompt: Do you recall a moment of joy when you were involved in some aspect of academic training when you were being trained? Though privileged in academic communities, training is only one part of becoming an academic subject, a process that is ongoing without a resolution or endpoint. Reflections on training in the literature tend to address complicated relationships between students and supervisors and the complexities of

\* Corresponding author. Faculty of Human and Social Development, University of Victoria, PO Box 1700 Stn CSC, (3800 Finnerty Road for courier services), Victoria, British Columbia, V8W 2Y2, Canada.

E-mail address: [pamelam@uvic.ca](mailto:pamelam@uvic.ca) (P. Moss).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.06.008>

Received 15 December 2017; Received in revised form 9 June 2018; Accepted 25 June 2018  
1755-4586/ © 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

making decisions in the field (e.g. Cook, 2001; Jokinen and Caretta, 2016; Sotoudehnia, 2017). Yet in this memory, the reflection privileges joy when engaging with an authority figure. In the memory, ‘he’ is an academic authority and – most important for our argument in this paper – acting from an already formed subject positioning – that of dissertation supervisor. Our purpose here is to figure out how power works such that this encounter fosters an atmosphere of joy, rather than one of admonishment for not being finished yet, and for not knowing what lies ahead career-wise.

Our previous work on becoming a joyful academic subject has focused on various aspects of becoming: cultivating joy (Kern et al., 2014), methods for investigating joy (Hawkins et al., 2016), and becoming an intimate collective through work on joy (Falconer Al-Hindi et al., 2017). We extend this work by bringing together ideas about ontological positivity and power, and applying them to becoming as manifest in the process of subjectification. We use the concepts *potentia* and *potestas* to explore force relations that generate particular subjects. In this case, joyful ones. In the rest of this article, we first contextualize our work in relation to feminist geographical scholarship on emotions, in order to specify how our work departs from this tradition: namely, we begin from the question of power, rather than the nature of affect or emotion. We then explain Rosi Braidotti’s notions of *potentia* and *potestas* as a way both to capture the process of becoming and to talk about power and joy. We next review a collective biography approach to working with memories. In the remainder of the article, we begin to follow the paths of *potentia* and *potestas* through a shared analysis of a set of systematically-recalled memories about the process of becoming feminist academic subjects. We trace the emergence of joyful academic subjects in terms of harnessing *potentia* and *potestas* and stepping into the flow of *potentia* and *potestas*. We close with a return to the memory above to emphasize that a joyful academic subject emerges through engagements with power that are available in everyday scholarly life.

## 2. Framing power in subject formation

Feminist geographers have been at the forefront of empirical and conceptual work on emotions in geography, including fear, anger, love, hope, care, and intimacy, among many others (respectively, Pain, 2010; Boothroyd et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2013; Moss, 2014; Lawson, 2009; Olson, 2016; Moss and Donovan, 2017). This work is concerned with the role of emotions in everyday living as well as their connections to processes and flows of power across multiple sites and scales (Mountz and Hyndman, 2006; Oswin and Olund, 2010; Pain and Staeheli, 2014). Joy has rarely been included in the range of emotions under consideration. Our earlier work on joy (Kern et al., 2014) explored how joy manifests in academic practice, often through surprisingly mundane activities, such as revising a paper, answering an e-mail, or leading a seminar. In Kern et al. (2014) we found that so-called pure joy was typically absent from memories, and that joy was often entangled with a cocktail of other emotions such as anxiety and self-doubt. In our work, joy was both embodied and spatial; we found it to be generated relationally with colleagues, places and objects, disrupting the idealized myth of the lone self-sufficient and efficient scholar.

Extending this work, we want to consider academic practices that bring joy to us as feminist academics rather than those that bring us dejection, sorrow, and unhappiness (e.g. Brunila, 2016; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Dowling, 2008). In doing so, we position our project within the small but growing group of feminist geographers committed to affirming life even as we engage in the work of critique (e.g. McKittrick, 2006; Parker, 2017). The affirmative turn makes space to consider positive affect and emotions within a theoretical, conceptual, and political landscape that is often stark and austere (e.g. Lawson, 2009). It also creates room for considering the range of emotions that doing academic work generates and that produces us as subjects (e.g. Askins, 2017; Moss, 2014b; Willis, 2012; Colls, 2012). Paying attention to academic practices that bring us joy within a wider

project of affirmation permits an accounting of how power works in the making of a joyful feminist subject in the academy.

We know that exploring joy in the context of power is unusual. Feminist geographers have written about how the neoliberal(izing) university constrains actions and agency, intensifies labour, valorizes particular identities, and shapes subject positionings available to feminist academics and academics who identify as women (e.g. Dowling, 2008; Strauss, 2013; Maddrell et al., 2016; Gillen, 2015; Mountz et al., 2015). The neoliberal academic subject is enmeshed with persistent adverse actions such as bullying, harassment, and labour rights violations amidst the imposition of well-documented neoliberal practices that keep academics busy advertising both themselves and their courses, fighting program closures, and accounting for their time (see Crooks and Castleden, 2012; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Moss, 2013; Berg et al., 2014). Through nuanced accounts of the entwinement of the power relations constituting subjects, this work shows just how varied the neoliberal academic subject is. Yet exposure of the multiple ways in which the university as a workplace positions academics is not a welcome critique. Feminists, often derided for pointing out the oppressions built into the organization of society and polity, are cast as killjoys, who throw wrenches into otherwise smoothly operating systems and institutions that reward some at the expense of others (after Ahmed, 2010; see also Ahmed, 2017). In our project, we acknowledge that the work of feminism is to point out inequities and create pathways to social justice (see Parker, 2017). It is not our aim to cling to an elusive, idealized notion of a joyful, contented academic in the midst of ongoing systemic and systematic exploitation within institutions and in everyday encounters. Nor do we aim to promote “positive thinking” as a political strategy to dismantle systems of oppression (a position thoroughly critiqued in disability studies, e.g. Clare, 2017; DeVolder, 2013; Sunderland et al., 2009). Further, our work is not concerned with identity. Rather, our purpose in this paper is to focus on the process of becoming joyful academic subjects, ones that are not necessarily or solely killjoys, cynics, or neoliberal subjects.

Nomadic theory provides an affirmative framing for understanding the process of becoming. Nomads are transitory and simultaneously inhabit multiple subjectivities that can be relatively bounded and solid or somewhat diffuse and ephemeral (Braidotti, 2011a, 55–63). Figuring out how power works in the process of becoming is central to understanding how multiple subjectivities reside in a single nomad. Instead of positioning an individual through markers of social identity within a set of interlocking systems of oppression, in an affirmative framing the departure point for analysis is in the process. In scrutinizing what power is doing, how it is moving, and what its effects are, it can then be mapped onto the nomadic subject. An affirmation rooted in a sustainable ethics, that keeps the subject from dissolving, can guide how nomads maneuver through embodied subjectivities. Through a sustainable ethics, nomadic subjects, who comprise both the imagined ideal and the embodied divergences, hold the potential to generate “social horizons of hope” (Braidotti, 2010, 57).

Our work is focused on joy and organized around the emergence of a joyful academic subject. As part of the analysis, we did not mediate joy through any other marker of social identity. As part of her affirmative politics, Braidotti (2011a, 293) encourages “experimenting with alternatives, working both at the concrete and imaginary levels” as a way to provide both form and content to the embodied subjectivities one inhabits. This type of approach refuses an oppositional, adversarial politics and favours a politics that works with what is available within a continuous stream of what could be possible. While the use of critical theory is incredibly effective in critiquing how subjects form and what they consist of, it must also be central to informing what subjects could look like and what they could consist of (Braidotti, 2011b, 6). In this sense, we are showing what a joyful subject could look like in light of the process of becoming.

A joyful academic subject as nomad then requires scrutiny so that a critical lens of feminist inquiry can trace how power works in the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7322762>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7322762>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)