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# On Activism and Academia

## Reflecting Together and Sharing Experiences Among Critical Friends

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years HCI and CSCW work has increasingly begun to address complex social problems and issues of social justice worldwide. Such activist-leaning work is not without problems. Through the experiences and reflections of an activist becoming academic and an academic becoming an activist, we outline these difficulties such as (1) the risk of perpetuating violence, oppression and exploitation when working with marginalised communities, (2) the reception of activist-academic work within our academic communities, and (3) problems of social justice that exist within our academic communities. Building on our own experiences, practices and existing literature from a variety of disciplines we advocate for the possibility of an activist-academic practice, outline possible ways forward and formulate questions we need to answer for HCI to contribute to a more just world.

### CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI); Empirical studies in HCI.**

### KEYWORDS

activism; reflexivity; social justice; academic practice

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we present a discussion between researchers who navigate boundaries between *researcher* and *activist* looking specifically at the grey areas that exist where these two modes of seeing and understanding the world come together. We do this through a written conversation between a person who moved from being an activist to becoming an academic and one who has moved the

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other direction: an academic who discovered justice-oriented work and is *trying on* the identity of an activist. Together, we explore our thinking, the ways in which it contributes to and jars with traditional understandings of research, others' reactions and responses to our research areas, the ways in which our work has contributed to the harm caused by academia, and also the ways in which we can think about research differently.

We see this paper fitting into Puig de la Bellacasa and others' framing of critique of ourselves and others as a caring act [115]. We do not see this just as a metaphorical or conceptual frame, but present how such critique as an act of care is embodied, and thus felt, and practical. In several of his writings, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [63], has stressed the importance of emotions like love, humbleness, trust and respect to overcome oppression. This mirrors the feelings we have towards the people with whom we work - the emotions we feel for them, in and outside of academia. But out of this love can come anger at the injustices we perceive, also in and outside of academia. Both love and anger are visible in this paper. But this love-anger is not a dichotomy, it is not a binary - it is a mutually transformative and relational way of understanding the world. We do work towards changing what we do as researchers because of the anger and love we feel towards it. We love academia and what it could be. So we see the work we have done to write this paper, and this paper itself as an act of care - an act of critique because we care and because we want to initiate the change from within [32].

This paper sits alongside HCIs ongoing explorations of social justice-oriented, participatory, feminist, as well as post- and decolonial approaches to research. In recent years, we have seen not only the introduction of terminology such as "feminist HCI" [16], "Postcolonial Computing" [93], "Decolonial Computing" [4] or "Justice-oriented interaction design" [50], but we have also seen the growing debate around the use of these terminologies (see e.g., [59, 120, 144]), their applications, and theoretical argumentations of what it means to "do good" [101, 112], or to work in a justice-oriented way [139]. We draw and build on these theories from within CHI and HCI more widely, but also from more specialist literatures from other disciplines that relate directly to the contexts within which we work.

On top of these debates about research ethos and approaches to design, strides have also been made recently around the political and deeply personal nature of doing this kind of work (see e.g., [11] or [15]). Deeply personal reflections about emotion work in HCI and links to feminist epistemologies relating to reflexivity and extending our understanding of researcher standpoints [15, 29, 81, 159, 163] have started to document the often-hidden aspects of research processes that have played an important role in developing these

practices in our discipline. Following this approach, we describe some of our experiences of discomfort as academics when working with our collaborators *in the field* and at the reception of our work by academic communities, as well as the thoughts that accompanied these. Some of the experiences we describe have been harmful, hurtful, or violent and have shaped our academic practice.

With this paper, we add to an ongoing conversation about emotions and values in the practice of doing research. We introduce the concepts of "community fetishism" to describe the tendency of academics to benefit from the marginality of others and "reactionary superalterns" in opposition to perpetuating terms like subaltern and the oppressed, and tease out specific nuances and issues that arise when we do research with and as activists; contributing another layer of experience to the ongoing discussion. With this, we hope to thicken the existing discourse and provide a new set of lessons learnt from our personal experiences and perspectives of doing research-activism with rural communities in Latin America, with sex workers and about inclusion in our academic communities more widely. Ultimately, our contributions are twofold: (1) we contribute experiential reflections to ongoing discussions in CSCW, CHI and PD, bringing together disparate conversations surrounding social justice and activism; and (2) provide a series of personal experiences and extrapolated questions as starting points for reflection, inspiration, and (un-)learning for ourselves as well as other activist-academics (or academic-activists), which we have learnt from putting our personal experiences into conversation with existing literature.

First, we present a reading of interdisciplinary literatures on research epistemology, participation, and how these relate to activism. Following this, we present a written conversation between us authors, drawing on our experiences as researchers and activists, and reflect on their meanings for research in HCI. To end this paper, we first complicate our reflections with existing literature, before we untangle this mess to draw out questions for ourselves and other researchers working at intersections between research and practice, activism and academia, or science and understanding.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

Feminist and justice-oriented research practices have long explored the standpoint of researchers [81], or how our experiences, identities, and politics impact the research we do. This relates to the kinds of topics we choose to address, the methodologies we employ, and the kinds of questions we ask. These discussions have been picked up by technology researchers and developed into explorations of digital civics [156], activism [17, 60, 149], and doing good [112] in HCI, with large increases of publications in this space and the development of new research labs and doctoral training centres.

In this paper, we add to this ongoing conversation on research methodology and how it relates particularly to work around the design and development of digital technologies in activist-leaning research. We critique existing work as critical friends, adding our understanding of what it means to do this kind of work as part of Western academia. Below, we explore literature related first to the epistemological concerns of action-oriented work that aims to not only acknowledge but also to counter unjust power relations and social injustices. Following this, we explore how this relates

to participatory paradoxes [31], asking questions about our action-oriented work and how this can or could relate to activist research. Finally, we turn our thoughts towards academia specifically to look towards ways in which researchers in HCI and further afield engage in activist academia; how we engage in activism to improve working conditions, equity, and decolonisation in our own academic communities.

### 2.1 Epistemological encounters: what is an activist academic?

Engaged, activist-leaning research must have a specific understanding of knowledge, of what counts as knowledge and how it is produced. Here, we will briefly discuss some concerns related to the epistemological foundations of activist research. We draw on a variety of existing work to outline a foundation that supports knowledge production in activist research, but also to point to some dangers present in any academic work, including activist work, with regards to perpetuating oppression through knowledge production.

Concerning itself with unequal and unjust power relations, post-colonial literature seeks to make an argument against "subalternity". Introduced by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci [71], the term "subaltern" describes those excluded from power and denied a political voice, subject to dominant ideological or material forces. Indian scholar Gayatri Spivak [73] further developed the term to address power and resistance explicitly in post-colonial contexts, describing those whose knowledge and voices are ignored, silenced or considered myth or folklore.

Postcolonial and decolonial scholars criticize the perception that the production of knowledge in subaltern contexts requires the help of Western academia to become *modern* and adopt Western ways of knowing. Post-colonial scholars such as Spivak [136], hooks [87], or Hall [75] therefore criticise this mode of academic engagement with the subaltern, non-Western Other, the oppressed, "Indigenous peoples, people 'of colour', the Other" [133, p. 15], and their stance as *expert* and the ongoing colonial power relations in the production of knowledge [72, 109]. The attempt of these texts to challenge the worldwide hegemony of Western science [58] has been influential to our own work, especially in our collaborations with traditional communities in Latin America<sup>1</sup>. Especially scholars of the Latin American decoloniality movement have argued to untie the production of knowledge from Eurocentric epistemologies and pointed to the ways in which coloniality is continued, also within science and the academy [8]. Indigenous Academics like [7, 51, 114, 133, 160], and decolonized ethnographers [6] are also references of how to do interventionist research respectfully and for the benefit of the community. HCI researchers have included theories of post-colonialism [93] and decoloniality [4] into the context of computing, and continue to work in postcolonial contexts; exploring the role digital technologies can play (e.g., in relation to women's health [111, 144, 153], supporting refugees [147, 148], or in peoples' digital representations [137]). This kind of work often relates to not only postcolonial contexts or philosophies, but may

<sup>1</sup>The terms *traditional knowledge* or *traditional communities* are used to refer to knowledge embedded in the cultural traditions of local and Indigenous communities like fishing, making cassava flour, preparing spiritual bathing with special herbs, and more

also relate to justice-oriented work, participatory processes, and emancipation.

We fully acknowledge our own standpoint in this discourse - we are Western-educated and while one of us is Latin American, she is neither Indigenous<sup>2</sup> nor did she grow up in a rural or traditional context. As such, we must be careful to deeply engage with the communities with whom we work, to work to understand *with* instead of attempting to be *like* them [20] and to ensure we do not fall into the trap of community fetishism.

As Western and Western-educated scholars, there are many tensions that arise when we work with those who may be seen as subaltern, or when we work with those in postcolonial settings. Feminist epistemologies allow us to explore these tensions rather than attempt to solve them. Concepts such as Haraway's "Staying With the Trouble" [78] invite us to hold the tensions, reflect with and on them, and develop new ways of understanding them, rather than racing towards finding solutions or singular ways of making these tensions *go away*. In her influential essay, Haraway addresses the notion of objectivity, questioning science's supposed *neutral* view, the "view from nowhere," the "God trick," emblematic of an androcentric understanding of science and instead argues for an epistemology of "situated knowledge" [77]. Knowledge here is pluralistic and rooted in the specific position or standpoint of a subject. It is therefore contestable. Some researchers even go as far as saying that power relations in society make it impossible to understand the experiences of those in other positions: "The dominant ideology restricts what everyone is permitted to see and shapes everyone's consciousness" [80, p. 343]. In relation to this, feminist STS (Science and Technology Studies) is also concerned with starting research from the margins (see e.g., [126]). But while Harding's point is valuable to point out limits of our own knowledge, we believe that it is possible to understand, to a degree, the situated experiences and knowledge of others, as anthropologists and sociologists such as Peter Winch [161] have pointed out.

We can arrive at this by choosing participatory ways of researching as a way to include different standpoints into our work or through care for research collaborators and their perspectives and commitment to understanding, which at times might include the *un-learning* of our own knowledge, as we will see below. Bringing together differently situated knowledges, including perspectives and ways of knowing made marginal by Western science in participatory research projects, we can see that we must seek and hold the tensions of different knowledges to better understand our worlds and the technologies we create within them. In doing so we can explicitly take into account and address the dominant social order. It is important to understand not only the slow pace of social science and the engagement of it with praxis [74] but also the pace of each community with which we work.

## 2.2 Participatory paradox: action-oriented or activist research?

Modes of knowledge production matter, as do the ways in which we talk about them. This epistemological understanding then, of

course also relates to the practical steps we take in implementing this world-view. We now take a look at precisely this and how the participation of those who are traditionally excluded from decision making in academic research and how the participation of ourselves in the research process influences our epistemologies, ontologies, and research projects. In this, we differentiate between action-oriented research and activist research. Both terms describe research that through participatory methodologies directly addresses social problems. We understand activist research, however, as being more explicitly political, but also taking place outside of established political institutions (see e.g., [13]). Activist research aims to understand the causes of oppression, inequality, and violence. It works directly with collectives of people who are affected by these conditions and tries to directly formulate and enact strategies to overcome these conditions [154]. We do not necessarily understand activist research as separate, novel, or different from concepts and approaches within HCI, such as (Participatory) Action Research (PAR) or Participatory Design (PD), but descriptive of specific work employing such methodologies. This means, for example, that a PD project can also be activist research, but not all PD projects are necessarily activist research.

Providing one of several possible foundations for such engaged academic work, Paulo Freire's theories [63] and Orlando Fals Borda's work [28, 55] had a lasting and influential impact on PAR and adjacent methodologies [121]. PAR is one approach that enables scholars to put their academic practice into the service of activists, communities, or others' goals; or allows them to become activists themselves. In turn, this enables academics to overcome some of the divides between practice and research. Influenced by Freire's work [63], bell hooks [87], Linda Tuhiwai Smith [133], Antonia Darder [35], Catherine Walsh [158], and others, are committed to this kind of work, adding further critical, political, and loving layers to this pedagogy and philosophy, and by specifying his work further as for example in Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) [67, 103, 123].

Several scholars in the HCI and CHI community have reflected on such practices, framed under terms such as, for example, Adversarial Design [48], Critical Design [108], HCI for Peace [90], Postcolonial Computing [93], Decolonial Computing [4], New Media Power [21], Agonistic Design [25], Prefigurative Design [11] and of course PD [24, 52].

PD, PAR, FPAR, and associated methodologies are often lauded as practice-oriented methodologies, aiming to raise up those made marginal in society. With seemingly porous boundaries between these approaches of engaging in research, they have been used extensively in HCI research, especially by those researchers and practitioners who wish to *do good* in the world.

As part of this, activism has become a more visible research topic, as for example by investigating activist use of social media (e.g., [69, 100, 125, 127, 131, 145, 162]). Our concern here, however, is with work that explicitly embraces cooperation with activists or aims to make a direct contribution to social change, blurring the lines between activism and academia. Over the last decade a growing number of researchers have engaged in such explicitly activism-leaning HCI studies and design work on issues ranging from homelessness (e.g., [98]), women's health (e.g., [149]) and labour conditions in the

<sup>2</sup>Albeit she is great-granddaughter of an Indigenous woman who was "caught by the lasso" - a term related to the capture of Indigenous women like animals - to guarantee miscegenation and ethnocide [65]

digital economy (e.g., [94]), solidarity economies [157], technofeminism practices [135] or activism in Transgender communities [99], or the role of technologies in improving working conditions for sex workers (e.g., [139, 140]) and explicitly activist practices of doing this kind of work [143]. Often this work applies one of the above mentioned methodologies such as PD.

While PAR is action-oriented and often employed to *do good*, this aim is not without problems [113]. When questioning the rhetoric of PAR *for good*, it is crucial to not only reflect on the possibly oppressive structures of academia that we support (knowingly or unknowingly) by being academics, but we should also explore whose *good* we are talking about. Participatory approaches easily remain activities of the privileged that often neglect challenges that may arise when working with underserved groups, communities, or populations [82]. Studies within CHI and related communities have begun to reflect these difficulties arising out of participatory engagements, for example when reflecting on the deployment of Google Glass with people suffering from Parkinson's Disease [155], or when working with refugees in Lebanon who are unable to continue their education while their engagement in an academic project serves to continue the researchers' education [146]. While we believe that framing our participatory work in decolonial, Indigenous and feminist STS epistemologies helps us to amend our research practices to be meaningful for our collaborators, these are by no means a guarantee to achieve these aims. Ethical dilemmas and the danger of hurting research participants will remain abound.

### 2.3 Activist Academia: Who are we to talk about how activism should be done?

So far, we have predominantly dealt with our relations and activities carried out with our research partners, but activist work in HCI can also be directed inwards, at our communities and the issues within them. For example, recent discourses on racism and injustices experienced by a group of scholars working to improve the ACM [37] was followed by multiple responses of support from others in the community (see e.g., [83, 104]). This particular case also is reminiscent of previous experiences of censorship of those made marginal in academia illustrated, for instance, when an article about pleasure in LGBT + sexuality was not allowed to be published in the Human to Human ACM XRDS magazine [2], by the necessity for researchers to respond to their experiences of marginalisation at the CHI conference through the #CHIiversity campaign [138, 141], or by the ways in which disabled authors have experienced epistemic violence [163]. There have also been calls for the necessity of including black women's experiences in research [120] and a call for the inclusion of more women of colour's voices in mainstream feminist activism within our discipline [1]. All of these experiences of marginalisation in or through research, also relate to recent discussions about the use of *intersectionality* as a lens of feminism within the discipline [118, 119].

Furthermore, there are also ongoing debates about how we talk about the CHI conference, and how we perceive the work we are doing. For example, Joyojeet Pal [112] started an interesting conversation in response to CHI's 2016 "CHI for Good" theme. He asks the important question of "whether CHI can engineer good is less answerable than whether working for good does something for

CHI" [Ibid., p. 718]. This paper has sparked some more nuanced debate, for example about sustainability [18] and working with marginalised populations [113], but also relates to quiet conversations in conference corridors and informal coffee catch-ups. It is these quiet conversations that shape how we understand research and knowledge (our epistemologies and ontologies) as well as the practical ways in which we carry out our research (methods). Drawing together our epistemologies, the meanings of participation in technology research practices, and the ways in which both of these relate to academia as a whole provides fertile ground for reflection about our practices as researchers; about how we do good or harm with and through our work, or the ways in which our research framing shapes our understanding of what either of those means.

## 3 METHODS

Following the reflexive approach to research presented above, personal reflections by Débora and Angelika on their experiences as activist-academics serve as data. Such personal reflections and accounts are gaining in validity and importance as research tools in social sciences, have been used in HCI as well [15, 53], and can be considered a form of auto-ethnography [122]. After meeting at CHI2019 and later again at C&T2019, Débora and Angelika with frequent participation of Max engaged in a process of regular video call conversations for over a year, exchanging personal experiences about their work, their activist and academic activities, the criticism they shared about their respective academic communities, the criticism they received, and shared readings of texts they had encountered. The findings presented here and the paper as a whole are a result of this extended reflexive conversation. In order to accurately represent this process (including the different positions we hold, and how we have built on each other's experiences and positions) we present our experiences in the format of a conversation between Débora and Angelika, mirroring how the knowledge in this paper has been co-constructed [22, 68]. Max participated in the process of grounding the written conversation in existing literature, in reflecting on the conversation and in acting as a mediator between conversation and the writing of this text.

Given the auto-ethnographic yet collaborative nature of the experiences this paper reports and builds on, the conversation format allows us to both represent our individual experiences of our work and the contexts we work in, as well as the collaborative nature of our reflections. These were not done individually, but together, with each of us offering layers of perspective on our individual experiences.

To arrive at the synthesised version of our extended conversation we began with Débora and Angelika individually writing down their specific experiences that they wished to reflect on in this paper. We then added notes that each of us took during our conversations and collaboratively re-arranged the text according to the ideas and reflections that emerged during our conversations over more than a year. This was done iteratively, with reflective conversations in between, until we arrived at the present structure. The process resulted both in the present structure of the conversation, as well as in the list of questions to ourselves and our work, presented in the discussion.

The three authors have distinct experiences and standpoints that are coming together in this paper: Débora is a Latin American woman, educated in both Latin America and Europe and now a researcher and PhD candidate at a European university. Before starting her PhD she worked for several years as an activist and community organiser, working with rural communities across the globe but predominantly in her home country. Angelika is a European woman, educated in Europe. After obtaining her PhD she is now a lecturer at a university in post-brexite England. While engaged in activism and social support work for many years, has started using the terminology of being an activist through her academic research. Max is a European man and a PhD researcher at a European University. While he was not an activist before, he came to academia with the hope of being able to do engaged, practical research and design work, focusing on social issues for which a market-based economy only rarely provides space.

Following our many conversations, and reflecting on our approaches to research, activism, and our own personal histories, we all ask ourselves whether we are *activists* or whether we are "activated by" [54] injustices we encounter, oppressive institutional contexts, and/or experiences of individuals with whom we interact? Learning from epistemological encounters, participatory paradoxes, and activist academia we see the need to further reflect on our own experiences as researchers, as activists, and our involvement in the furthering of hegemonic Western understandings of *science* and *research*.

#### 4 REFLECTIONS FROM AFAR AND FROM WITHIN

This section is an edited and constructed dialogue between two women. We are both interdisciplinary technology researchers, working in the service of marginalised groups and one of us has often used Post- and Decolonial literatures to frame our work, while the other regularly draws on feminist HCI and STS work. Both of us work in participatory ways, drawing on HCI and social sciences methodologies. We provide personal reflections based on our experiences as people who work within academia and are involved in a variety of activities.

Since being "critical friends" to ourselves and others is one of the main aims of this paper, we frequently refer to *academia* or *academics* with criticism. While we sometimes refer to the global and institutionalised system of academia as a whole, more often we mean a specific type of research and researcher, not dissimilar to ourselves: researchers in HCI and adjacent fields such as anthropology and other social sciences engaged in interventionist work with the aim to do good, but not reflexive enough in their work. This, we believe, is not necessarily an individual fault, but rather a structural one. In our own experience at least, researchers receive little education in reflexivity or how to be critical friends for each other, but positive feedback for their well-meaning intentions. As such, our critique of academia is aimed at a certain kind of canonical academic, who may or may not exist in this rigid way. We do this not to generalise, but rather to help us understand and unlearn some of the ethical issues of this Western system, and the role we as individuals play within it. Many experiences we describe herein are not cite-able, but we know that they are the kinds of

conversations many others have had with us, or amongst their academic friendship groups. We are hoping that writing them down, even if sometimes in a generalised format, will be helpful for other researchers, and that when they are asked to provide references for certain behaviours, hopefully pointing towards this paper will be of help.

We try to provide thick reflections of our work, to address our whole selves rather than only the parts of ourselves that we want to see. We address various topics, showing how they are connected to give a holistic and realistic picture of our experiences and reflections. For the sake of clarity, however, we have organised the discussion along with four broad topics: (1) Relations to collaborators, (2) Experiencing and Perpetuating Oppression, (3) Relations to the Academy, and (4) Changing Everyday Academic Practices.

##### 4.1 Relations to collaborators

**Débora:** Being Brazilian means coming from a racial, cultural and social mix. It means coming from a country where local resources are exploited, and the ways of life and knowledges of traditional communities are undervalued. My father's family lived with and like Indigenous people in the Amazon region before they moved to the capital, looking for better living conditions and formal education for their children. My family performed well in this opposite society in the capital and so did I. I had fifteen years of experience in creating business websites and in the four years that followed, I facilitated and developed low cost and sustainable technologies in areas with no access to basic services around the globe. After learning new skills, I felt the need to go back home, to the Amazon rainforest. I wanted to honour my grandparents and offer my work as a way to diminish injustice. I met members of an association of organic farmers from a rural community situated along a big river, and through conversations, we were able to plan several multi-week ecological design workshops. We worked on local challenges ranging from internet connectivity to developing new products out of the seeds of local fruit.

**Angelika:** As a European researcher who has lived with and experienced various European cultures, and with a background in Education and International Development as well as HCI, I often reflect on the meaning of *justice*. I worked on various projects to promote human rights as a teenager, but as a researcher, I have primarily worked with sex workers, people experiencing homelessness, alcohol addiction peer support workers and people with various intersecting experiences of oppression and stigmatisation. In all of these settings, the meanings of social and criminal *justice* often become muddy and like with so many other topics my political point of view becomes important in my understanding of peoples' lived experiences and understanding of this terminology. Having read the works of Freire [63] and other reform pedagogues during my Undergraduate degree, post-colonial and feminist literatures during my MA, and the works of sex worker rights activists during my PhD, I try to see *justice* from the perspective of those who are made marginal; to use my privilege as a white, middle class, non-disabled researcher to stand with those who are oppressed by unjust systems.

**Débora:** While I experience life as a racialised immigrant in Europe, in Brazil, I am considered to be a white, and middle-class

person. To normalise myself in the rural region and diminish the discrepancy between inhabitants of that riverside community and myself, I decided to immerse in community life and engage with conversations and hands-on activities for seven months. In an oppressive society, I had to look carefully to examine critically the social construction around me and be willing to enter into taboos sustained by social structures. Dialogue is what I was hoping for and, in my learning, it cannot exist without humility, love, and critical thinking.

I did not know it at the time, but being present, listening, paying attention to my emotions and reflecting daily, I was able to build trust with the community members in that rural region and become friends. I was not the first outsider they worked with, but not all of their experiences had been positive. They would say things like: "Usually people come here to teach, and you are different, you teach and learn from us." Another new friend from the community said: "You have your hands dirty with us, professionals who come here, just tell us what to do and watch from a distance." In several instances, complaints about academics also arose: "They come here, get all the information for their degree and never return."

**Angelika:** I have had similar conversations with collaborators where I have been told that I (or my research) am *different* to other academics because I genuinely listen and adapt my methods and projects to the arising needs of my collaborators. While as a person, such comments may be flattering, as an academic it is embarrassing to be told this, and it is hard to write about this without it seeming like virtue signalling. The reason I am sharing this here is that I think these kinds of comments show how badly we need to change not just the ways in which we *think* or *talk* about research and action, but how we must change the ways in which we *do research*, *the ways in which we conceptualise collaborations*, and *how we train researchers*.

When I was taught research methods at universities, I learnt that we traditionally see them as "research instruments" to obtain what we need as researchers. Taking this to its logical conclusion, it can also be understood that we instrumentalise our relationships with participants, with partners to develop them in a way that suits our needs as researchers. But when we look at the kind of work you have been talking about, Débora, we see the impacts this has on communities and the individuals within that community. After taking into account my readings of postcolonial and feminist STS perspectives, or when I take into account some of the histories of PAR - I am starting to unlearn what I have been taught about research partnerships. For example, instead of seeing organisations as gatekeepers, I started seeing them as active participants in research projects during my MRes. As I worked with different partners and with one partner for an extended period of time, the boundaries between research partner, colleague, and friend started to blur. I started to care for and love those with whom I collaborate.

In my training, I was taught that I need to develop sustainable partnerships to be able to do genuinely participatory work, but in trying to do this I have become emotionally involved. While some PD literature allows for this kind of political attachment to the research [23, 26, 47], my training had not prepared me for the deeply personal relationships I would build with partners. I'm not really able to keep my whole self out of some relationship anymore. Canonical Western research literature tells me this no longer makes

it possible for me to work with them as research participants, but my unlearning of these Western ideas of academic research with the help of feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, I now disagree. I am doing the work I am doing with them because I am angry about unjust systems, and I hope that our work together can help mitigate some of the harms caused by it. This is not an apolitical approach, it is not an objective way of doing research. It has taken me a long time and some unsuccessful projects which have left me (and I am sure also my collaborators) emotionally wounded, that I have learnt that relationships with partners are not a means to an end for me. They are the end. But to get to this understanding, I have made many mistakes along with my learning and unlearning about research partnerships - some of which I am still uncomfortable about.

## 4.2 Experiencing and perpetuating Oppression

**Débora:** I have heard stories of my grandparents being called savage for their attitudes and appearance. They also had to deny their beliefs of the "spirits of the forest" to be accepted by a religious community around them. Denying my ancestors' knowledge and discriminating against different ways of living is already something that I have done; I have been colonized. Reading about decoloniality helped me understand my conflict to fit my work into existing HCI discourses.

Since the people we work with "cannot speak" [136] and can speak only if they conform to Western ways of knowing and being, as an academic, I have opened the space to allow them to be heard, and not only "giving voice" to their needs. When I present the progress of my studies at conferences, twice I had the opportunity to invite people that I work with to travel to Europe and present with me. Instead of showing only the struggles they face, they also present all their skills and knowledge. However, opening space for their voice and, at the same time, applying to them terms such as "subaltern" or "oppressed" does not fit well. I do not agree on normalising these terms in our writings, without at the same time introducing a term that critically refers to those who are oppressors, modern, non-"subaltern" or reactionary superaltern, who create this unequal relation. Instead of working to change the experiences of those who are described as subaltern, perhaps we should turn inwards and change the practices of those who are perpetuating matrices of oppression. This could be colleagues or superiors in academic institutions and organisations that exclude other forms of knowledge or working with people, but it could also be us, when we work with other communities and make them subaltern through our specific ways of working. I have found some inspirational academic work done by a French scholar who built his career *on the back* of Brazilian Indigenous communities. One way of honouring their long-term relationship was writing a book [96] with one of his Indigenous friends, where he is not the first author and he does not bring Western epistemologies to the book. The other inspiration is the work from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, professor of Indigenous education in New Zealand, where she developed proposals for indigenized methodological interventions while criticizing colonialism in academic teaching and research [133].

While focusing on the subaltern experience makes it clear that the view of those in Western institutions is not universal, that



relationships of coloniality and oppression silence others. I think it is crucial for us to also investigate how subaltern experiences are created by reactionary superalterns. This includes how we might be creating subaltern experiences, how we are ourselves reactionary superalterns and silence others when we do research. When I began working with the community in Acara, for example, I thought to apply specific design methods I was familiar with, drawing on the design thinking concept, imposing the specific steps and tools entailed in such rather formalised design approaches. It took me some time and a lot of reflection to realise that this way of working was very different from how they work; and that I was in fact, imposing my ideas. After all, I was *an expert* from outside the community, and people listened to me and expected something in return.

One more example happened when I was visiting the community for some weeks, and I met Tacopi, an older man who had acquired a lot of experience during his lifetime. From his wheelchair, after one hour of conversation, he told me: *"My grandfather taught my father who taught me that each lightning comes with an important stone."* In the Amazon rainforest, it is common that lightning hits trees and their roots, creating damage in the surroundings. Some months before, lightning destroyed the trees and the floor of a house a few meters from where we were. He continued: *"I told one archaeologist, who was researching in this area, about the stone that we could not find. However, the academic told me that it was an invention, that there was no stone coming with the lightning."* His face was a bit disappointed: *"My dear, this knowledge has been passed down from my grandparents to my great-grandchildren. Do you know anything about it?"* I was surprised how academia can so rapidly deny knowledge built through generations. Of course, we do not know what the archaeologist researcher actually said, but we know how it was heard by Tacopi and how I received it from him. This was just one more confirmation of how careful academics should be. Unfortunately, I have heard some other similar stories. When I was an activist, I worked in the same community where many are functionally illiterate, to install a wifi router with community members. The difficulty of a friend from the community to understand some technological explanation was replied to by an academic with a text message: *"How many times do I have to repeat this so you understand?"*

At that time, I became uncomfortable with researchers but the interesting fact is that now that I am one, I have heard pejorative comments from NGO partners that they would not work with me because they do not work with *professors*. I was critical of academic researchers in marginalized communities and, as soon as I became part of it, people started to see me differently and see me critically too.

No matter how participatory I am or how much I adapt my methods, I am building my career on the backs of others - of those who participate in the research without adequate remuneration while I am now employed to do this work (albeit at first precariously). This is something I have to acknowledge, and something that must sit with me uncomfortably. To somehow address this skewed relationship, I always look for ways to be a *stair* for people, to create ways for my friends and collaborators to take a step up towards their goals. For example, a friend of mine is opening a shop in the community to provide access and services related to technology

and computers. Through my network and even my salary, I try to help her with this, as she has helped me with my research. I am hoping that like this, some can build their careers also on the back of the work we do together. But these are individual stories, the overall inequality remains and remains uncomfortable.

**Angelika:** It is strange how depending on how we see ourselves and how others see the label that is given to our job are so weirdly intermingled. My own perception of academia and of academics seems to be malleable and relate to what I am currently reading, who I am talking to, and what I am thinking about. For example, when I worked with one particular charity, I initially encountered hostility against academic research because it was seen as not directly impacting their practice - I often listened to conversations that were started when yet another researcher sent an email asking for access to their database. After being in the office for a long enough time, I understood why they were so upset with some academics - they simply asked for data without giving much in return. Hearing these stories, it makes sense to me why I was met with caution initially, and I understood why it took so much work from both the charity and myself to build up the positive relationship built on mutual exchange we had later on in our collaboration. There are so many issues in academia, like these hidden histories, that we are a part of when we work in non-academic settings. My work and I are now also a part of this history.

Before starting to work with sex workers, I looked towards research that came before me, research in the Global South, research that was carried out with groups that are stigmatised and made marginal in our society. As part of this, I found literature written by sex workers for researchers that outlined good practice guidance. But I also found examples that were heavily criticised in the affected communities because it does more harm than good or may only do harm. The work I do now, no matter how distanced I think it is from such practices that I would now deem unethical, is built on this legacy. I am not sure how to deal with this, or even how to adequately hold space for the history of how the academy has dealt with stigmatised communities (not just in HCI, but also many other disciplines) when starting new projects or engaging with new colleagues outside the academy.

### 4.3 Relations to the academy: what counts as research, what counts as knowledge?

**Angelika:** I have also heard critique from other academics about some of the work I do to tackle some injustices and oppressions in our own academic community. For example, my pointing out of harmful behaviours by more senior members of the academy have been shot down by others happy to keep the status quo. Other times I had conversations with those in power where I sensed an attempt at placating my concerns by arranging tokenistic institutional alternatives - insinuating that the work is done, and I can now be quiet. These comments, of course, have upset me but reading Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* [3] and other related works have helped me place them into a wider understanding of structural oppression. It is not these individual incidents that I am most angry about, but it is the cultures of abuse, the unjust power structures, and the ways in which we continue to engage with non-Western academic knowledge that really makes me want to work towards

alternative futures. Reflections about oppression as part of my research seemed to naturally progress to reflections on the oppressive nature of the Western academy as an institution.

While there have been many hurtful things that have been said to me about my work, such as it only being welcomed in the academy because it is a “*sexy topic*”, or along the lines of it being “stupid creative work,” I have been able to brush much of this aside. But much of the critique I have received from academic and non-academic friends alike has been very influential in shaping the development of my practice - their caring (in Puig de la Bellacasa’s thick sense) words have made me stop, reflect, and change research direction. These critical friends call me out when what I say or do is harmful, hurtful, or going into an uncomfortable direction. I need these academic and non-academic critical friends to enact prefigurative worlds in my own work environments, and to go beyond simply calling out injustices when I see them.

**Débora:** I agree that receiving this kind of critique hurts. And a critical friend will hurt you, but as an act of love. Giving this kind of critique is also not easy. If we have a truly caring and respectful relationship, we need to critique one another - live with the hurt and change our actions in response to them. Feeling hurt is not a bad thing, it is about listening and reflecting about the pain. Where listening is an active verb. The problem is we are not listening or maybe listening and not reflecting. When I am painfully criticised, I know that I have to go through a process of healing because it opens wounds. To transform into a regenerative criticism, reflexivity is crucial in this process, and hurt can be transformed into empowerment. Our scars and anger about unjust systems gives us the power to talk; but how can we ensure it is not used only to hurt others? I felt lonely and angry in the last years before joining but also during the PhD program. My work was not paid but I recognise my privilege of being able to do this while living in my grandmother’s home. Gratefully, in my PhD program, I now have the opportunity to read, study, recall diaries, listen to recordings and write about my years of unpaid activist work.

Now that I am involved with grant writing in Europe, I routinely face academic research projects with a budget of 6- or 7-digit sums in Pound, Dollar or Euro, whereas academics from my home country, NGOs and community organisations rarely work with such numbers. This creates uncomfortable situations when for example large sums are budgeted for activities that make sense from an academic perspective (e.g., prototyping), but not from a local academic position where they usually need to be much more restricted in their expenses or community members that do not need temporary prototypes, but immediate solutions.

**Angelika:** Reading about theories of justice, especially Nancy Fraser’s Marxist feminist approach to this in her work on multidimensional justice [62] has had a big impact on me and my activism. Building on her (and others’) work, I ask myself three important questions throughout the research process: What world-making effects do I want to have in this project? How can we move towards this aspect of developing more equitable or just futures? And whose voices do we listen to and exclude when making these kinds of decisions? Working primarily in research spaces that sit at the intersections of various disciplines and boundaries, I engage primarily in participatory and/or collaborative projects that aim to not only build better futures but also to begin to answer these

three questions to build understandings of what this *better future* could look like. This means the research process matters as much as the outcomes, and the kinds of outcomes we develop depend on the needs of all those who participate, not just the researchers.

As a Western, white, cis woman, this means I must read more scholars who are black or people of colour, it means I must read more non-anglo-centric writers, more trans and non-binary writers. All of us academics must more deeply read more authors with lived experience of the oppressions we write of and about. Perhaps most importantly though, I must do the difficult work of seeing these oppressive systems in myself and my own practices. I must see the white supremacy I have upheld through my own actions, the heteropatriarchy I uphold through my complicity in institutional systems of injustice. I am learning that I must not just raise concerns I see in others or the system, but that I must see them within myself. This is hard, hurtful, and uncomfortable work, but it is necessary work I must do.

**Débora:** My own course of unlearning was with regards to knowledge I gained about the design process, co-creation, and design thinking. I felt ready to engage with people who lived like my grandparents, to support any desire for change. I decided to live in a community and practice my recent learnings. After some immersions and meetings with rural Brazilian farmers, in which I asked them to form circles, engaged them in brainstorming, design processes, and prototype making, which I had learned in institutions in the U.S., I realised that their interest in participating in the meetings was fading. I was frustrated, they were disappointed. I first used foreign concepts as a tool to find out about local practices and how I could combine localized rituals and knowledge with globalised concepts. During those processes, I understood there was neither time nor resources to waste. Conversations did not have to be in a circle, like I was told when I learned about the design process, but instead could also take place near the community’s “*igarapé*” (a stream or pond in Tupi language, common in the Amazon) or during an “*aparelhagem*” (specific type of party that happens in the Brazilian Amazon region only) with beer and barbecue. Or drinking *açaí* after making cassava flour for selling. I did not have to bring extra materials for activities or prototypes, it was shocking for them, to see money spent on things as *useless* as a prototype. We started using only local resources and academics, who would teach or install routers, had to trust the ability of the community to find solutions. For example, we started to use “*cipó*” (a local kind of sturdy vine) instead of zip ties, “*miriti*” (a local palm similar to foam) and bamboo to build things, and prize their skills on climbing trees and towers, screwing, and building anything. The experience of exchange is part of the research process and it is one of the most important parts, where we can build trust with the people who have great influence and involvement in the research.

Building trust takes time and it takes effort. So, how about offering hands to do what the community wants and asks for first? In this way, we build trust and engage in a dialogue where academic skills can be entangled with local knowledge. I feel as if we need to learn how to listen and have an equitable conversation to reach trust. Technology is not the only way of helping, it is the collaboration as a whole - the thinking together, the talking together. But that work is not what attracts research money. Funders are interested in funding tools, prototypes, and technologies, but we

need to think about the building of a greater community to reach mutually developed goals. Many communities do not have the ability to write grant proposals, leading the money to always come through academics or other external elites.

**Angelika:** Working with charities in Europe, I have learnt similar lessons. But this learning of local skills and experiences can be a difficult and messy process, one that has no end and that we must continue to work on throughout our careers. Part of this self-education will be learning the appropriate language and unlearning our actions that support institutional oppressions. I write this reflexive piece as an academic who sits at the intersection of disciplines and worlds. I have come to read about similar topics and issues across disciplinary boundaries, but in the last couple of years, I have kept coming back to Puig de la Bellacasa's work on care and thoughts on science. She writes: "*Ways of studying and representing things can have world-making effects*" [40, p. 86]. Seeing this as a starting point for the work that I do, I constantly ask myself what kinds of world-making effects the projects I am working on may have. Bringing this together with my strong feminist beliefs, an immediate response I have to this is: moving towards a more equitable, just, and feminist future. But who am I to decide what this future is supposed to be?

**Débora:** "We are what we do, especially what we do to change what we are" [66, p. 121]. This is a quote from the Uruguayan Eduardo Galeano that tells me a lot about what the future is supposed to be. But more than changing my actions, I have to overcome predicaments, to explore possibilities to work with diverse actors. I live the experience, shaping and being shaped by the world, where I co-created the painful and glorious situations in which I found myself so many times. Being open to listening, allowed the community members of the Amazon region the opportunity to share more than daily events. We built trust that allowed us to reflect on our relationship together and talk about how we talk to each other. There was a woman who said: "*In the first months that you were here, I did not understand anything that you were saying. I agreed with you in every meeting but, actually, I was afraid of telling you the truth.*" It took me a while to realize that group meetings and design workshops in the village happened only to satisfy my wish to call my work *collaborative*. We spoke the same language but we did not understand each other.

In the spirit of social constructionism [68], my reflexivity process would make me ask myself questions like: Why did urbanites believe rural people were lazy? Why was I afraid of talking to men in the community? Why did a compliment or a sexist comment affect me so deeply? Where did my arrogance come from when I was certain that problems with the garbage disposal in the community were more important than building a church or an internet community network? Why do formally educated people have a more powerful voice? How are those interactions impacting my life? How is it impacting others? It is a challenge to engage in collaborative projects and be aware of the uncomfortable feelings and behaviours that the exchange can bring to me and others.

**Angelika:** Working in a way where some of my research could be conceptualised as activism, this reflecting, learning, and unlearning, are incredibly important. It must be mutual and relies not only on good intentions from researchers but genuinely engaging with discussions and following through on them. In sex work research,

for example, as academics we often state we support sex worker rights, but how do our projects actually support rights activism? And how do we benefit from this stance ourselves within and outside the academy? This also relates to what happens when we as researchers inevitably make mistakes (in our fieldwork, conversation with others, or do not quite know how to approach a new project yet). On one hand, we must trust our collaborators to let us know when we make mistakes, but on the other hand, they must also trust us to engage in work in such a way that we avoid making mistakes where we should have known better, and that we change our actions after we have made the mistake. How can we best acknowledge what we do not know, and work towards building understanding around these areas? Of course, we will learn from our collaborators, but we must not rely on them expanding energy to teach us everything. Primarily, we should reflect and educate ourselves.

#### 4.4 Activism in the academy: changing everyday academic practices

**Débora:** The PhD program is an opportunity to reflect on my experience and analyze it from different perspectives. Conferences, workshops, summer schools and colloquiums were opportunities for me to learn how academics think and work from inside. And while I already had a lot of data for my PhD from my previous work, I had to combine theories, concepts, methods, and perspectives with my experiences and emotions. It was a deeply dislocating process to learn that I was not at all acquainted with many of the words scholars use frequently, and even more when I noticed that familiarity with the terms does not necessarily mean comprehension [39]. When presenting my first paper, a senior professor reacted to my action research approach: "*This is not science... You are not a scientist.*" Having an emotional connection to my research partners, trust in them and interest in their account was also not well appreciated: "*So your data is based on your belief in what they told you?*" Others were not so direct in their criticism and did not even intend to be critical, yet their comments left me equally uncomfortable, such as praise I received when my first paper was accepted: "*Congratulations! Your topic is exotic, that makes it easier to be accepted*" or "*It was a great presentation, but maybe too political?*" The reactionary superaltern can also be found inside our own institutions when less direct comments affect us as micro-aggressions, where knowledges or research approaches are "made subaltern." bell hooks [88, 89] also suffered and wrote about similar devaluations.

**Angelika:** How we talk about research, and the language we use matters, it influences how we conceptualise our research, findings, and collaborators in writing. How do we communicate the work we have done to others in the academy in the publications we write? Débora's discussion of how academic workshops have helped shape her understanding leads me to another important but mundane practice we as academics can use to engage in activism: citation practices. As an academic, writing papers is one of the important ways in which I share the knowledge collaborators and I have produced through our research. In these papers, I refer to previous work, use existing knowledge to contextualise my work and build on this knowledge through scholarship. As such, reading and citations are an important aspect of our work. Drawing on Puig

de la Bellacasa's reflections on Haraway's writing style, I too see the ways in which I write my papers as part of a wider conversation with other academics. One where I thicken the discourse, adding a different perspective or thickening existing ways of understanding, part of a non-linear process.

Like others (e.g., [3] or [46]), in recent years, I have started to acknowledge the power of citations more and more, and proactively subvert existing structures by increasing the diversity of sources I rely on. For example, I aim to include non-academic articles such as books, blogs, or guidance written by activists and practitioners with an equal footing as academic literature. I am also working towards becoming more genuinely interdisciplinary in my scholarship, meaning I include academic citations from various disciplines, alongside and in conversation with one another, wherever it is useful. However, there are also certain bodies of text I refuse to cite - discourses that dehumanise those with whom I work, or that are built on a lineage of harmful epistemologies. For me, these may include radical feminist literatures related to sex work and trans rights, racist or colonial descriptions of non-Western contexts, or theories and practices that are documented by known serial abusers. Of course, this practice will never be complete, and is always a work in progress and of learning - I am sure I have cited such work in the past, and am likely to continue to do so where I am still ignorant of the dehumanising discourse. Some reviewers and colleagues have told me that I must include citations of differing perspectives and that certain literatures in the canon must be mentioned, even if I disagree with them, but if this is the case, am I not perpetuating the harm caused by these papers? I know I am not the only one who does this (see e.g., [3]). Coupling the inclusion of non-academic writing, genuine interdisciplinarity, and the inclusion of diverse voices, with my exclusion of certain literatures is my attempt at working prefiguratively to develop more equitable and just worlds in and outside of academic publication practices. But it is a complicated point of contention that I do not feel I have a complete answer to yet, but it is a step in the right direction for me if we are trying to decolonise our practices, or are working to bring to light non-mainstream approaches and histories.

**Débora:** I agree that citations are something we should be careful about. In my work, I also try to expand what *participation* means, for example by involving members of rural communities in more academic activities such as sharing authorship and including them in grant proposals, as a way to transfer more control over the research project to them. For those friends from the community interested in formal education, this is also the first step to join the university. This is not always easy: registering as an author of an academic paper, for example, requires having specific accounts elsewhere, such as Google Scholar, Orcid, etc., but some of my co-authors are not scholars yet, do not have these accounts or maybe not even an email account. Including them in grants is even more difficult for organisational reasons. Even when I tried to register authors who had email accounts, many times they did not have internet connectivity and the confirmation email would expire at the end. So I learnt from failing. Many of my applications had to be done in advance to guarantee their participation, or I had to create fake emails to guarantee their names in the list of authors. I feel that institutionalised academia often does not facilitate this kind of inclusion, as there are no warnings on the websites; instead

it is expected everyone has direct and constant access to email, computers, cellphones, and internet. On the other hand, however, there is a lot of room for work and forms of *inclusion* that I think should be questioned more, not to police our work, but to question its quality, just like we question the quality of each other's writing, to help and improve each other's practice.

For example, when I asked scholars about their reason for being involved in a grant or project to research in the Global South, the answers included uncomfortable responses such as: *"I want to be at the beach," "I have more financial opportunities if I work with them,"* or *"I write about this local movement but I have never been there or spoken to them."* When trying to go deeper into the conversation about the outcomes for the communities, I heard stories of abandonment: *"I am actually not sure if the technologies are still working," "I do not have contact to any community member anymore," "I never returned and do not plan to go back"* or *"We are applying for another grant to continue the project,"* explaining that until then, nothing more can be done. Bødker and Kyng say that we are "largely missing concerns for the long-term perspectives (of both technologies and the skill development of people)" [27, p. 8].

I also met people who were not involved in any project in the Global South but had an interest in starting something. Some scholars asked me to put them in contact with communities in Latin America. One of them said, for example: *"My supervisor told me that Indigenous cause is in vogue now, it would be great to write about them. Can you introduce me to any Brazilian Indigenous people?"* A European academic said: *"I would like to transform their skills in climbing trees into a fitness program in Europe. And also, design gear to make the climbing easier and sell it to the Brazilian rural population."* Even if their interest in contributing to the *development* of the Global South would be sincere, in some cases, the ecology in which the community lives is seemingly ignored and the most important point is academics working to improve their curriculum.

**Angelika:** I continue to be amazed how difficult it is to engage in equitable relationships through traditional funding mechanisms. It is rare to share the Principal Investigator (PI) status, even if in practice the Co-Investigator does the same amount of work as the PI. Last year, I did find an opportunity where we were able to apply as Co-PI - being amazed at this opportunity, I emailed an international colleague with whom I had been wanting to work for a while. We worked on the application together, each completing an equitable amount of work. But even with this official status, the relationship would not have been equitable: in this particular funding scheme, we were each applying through our respective funding bodies, but the final decision rested with the U.K. funder; the U.K. academics had much more resource available to them than the Turkish counterpart, and the types of documentation that were needed for the application seemed to be much more onerous for my colleague than myself. So while we were equitable partners according to our titles and in our work practices, the relationship would not have been equitable.

**Débora:** Often, this is even harder when partners are not academics. A Brazilian Indigenous friend of mine, whose tribe was *discovered* fifty years ago and has been the focus of research, wrote a manifesto: "We request the inclusion of resources and funding, throughout any research, to at least one Indigenous researcher with traditional knowledge" [14]. He points out that the Indigenous

would be responsible to monitor, participate and co-author any research, publication and/or production of knowledge, regardless of whether one is enrolled in a university or not. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to find funds that support this and/or academics willing to collaborate in that way. As an activist, I had to go back to the academic life to be paid through a scholarship for work I did without payment before. All my networks were built and a lot of my data was collected before becoming a scholar, so I could use the three years of scholarship to build on that, and I am extremely grateful for this. I am interested in continuing the academic life. However, the positions available are all related to projects and topics different from my interests. Consequently, I have to work on my independent projects while working on another project in parallel, giving me double work.

**Angelika:** It is these kinds of thought processes and actions in response to them, the mundane practices we do as academics that build academia and shape the kinds of research that we do. In the U.K., precarity, standardised and national systems to measure research quality or *impact* (e.g., [105]) foreground certain kinds of scholarship. The need for the quantity of publications (especially for Early Career Researchers) to get jobs or progress in an increasingly commercially driven academic sector makes it more difficult for researchers to engage in caring projects and collaborations. But individual scholars, networks, groups, and unions are countering this model. Together, we are building a prefigurative politic that allows us to build the world we want to see. Ideally, however, I think these everyday actions would be aligned with systematic change in the academy related to workers' rights, accountability for (serial) abusers, etc.

As pointed out by Débora though, we also need to see changes in funding structures, in academic structures to be able to do work sustainably in the way we talk about in this paper. But it is up to us to work prefiguratively to enact that change - we cannot wait. Partners and communities cannot wait for academia to change its institutional structures. We must do the work in the now, either outside of or within these imperfect academic systems to the best of our abilities; relearning and unlearning as we go along.

## 5 DISCUSSIONS TO CARE

As the reflections above illustrate, combining activism and academia in a hybrid professional and personal practice is challenging and complicated by a variety of factors. We are not the first academics who want to carry out engaged research to move towards more just worlds and political and social change. Numerous epistemologies and methodologies have been proposed in various disciplines (including design and HCI) on which such a practice can be based, some of which we have already introduced above. But even if this provides a strong foundation, inspiration and legitimation, they do not solve all practical, emotional or relational difficulties that we have also described above. In the following, we attempt to untangle these challenges by reflecting on relations with the communities with which we work and on relations to our own academic communities. To end this section, we draw out a list of unanswerable questions that have helped us in our own practice, and that we come back to when we are struggling. We hope that these questions will

also be helpful in holding the tensions of the kind of work we describe for other researchers who are encountering similar emotional concerns when working on justice-oriented, community-driven, and/or socially engaged research and academic-activist practice.

Drawing on our own work, conversations with others at workshops (e.g., [12, 30, 76, 142]) and informally, we appreciate that there is a strong interest amongst institutions like NGOs, academics and activists to work with communities that are made vulnerable by the current socio-economic and socio-technical status quo as an opportunity to design collaboratively and to bring a positive impact to the world [86]. However, as our own experiences and reflections above, as well as previous publications in HCI [82, 112] show, there is a real risk of perpetuating violence, oppression, and exploitation when working with certain communities towards justice, as we aim and hope to do.

Some of these risks can stem from the different intentions motivating this kind of work and from our disciplinary limitations. By engaging in activist-oriented work we aim to work towards justice or to "repair our world" as Joan Tronto [151] wrote in her definition of care. But especially within technology-focused disciplines, such as HCI and perhaps CHI specifically, we run the risk of focusing excessively on neoliberal and Western forms of technosolutionism, imposing our own view of what a *good* solution is [27, 44, 45]. We have experienced this ourselves, for example when Débora was looking for problems to solve in the community she was working with, putting their wish for an improved internet connection to the side when searching for what she thought were more important problems. This sense of importance was not shared by the community themselves, as she came to realise that she was an oppressor and a reactionary superaltern.

At the same time, in reflecting on exactly such efforts to support communities at the global margins, Irani et al. [93] note that such a focus can also be part of an attempt to make a market of consumers in the name of empowerment. This is exemplified when academics try to turn a local traditional tool into an innovative product to be sold to the same people they have worked with to create that tool or to develop some product to increase income so that people can buy more. Another example is when scholars easily become engaged in the destruction of other, equally valuable, ways of knowing, as the example of Seu Tacopi and his reasoning of the stones created by lightning shows. Whether this view of the world is supported by a natural science-based understanding of the world or not, this knowledge was clearly meaningful to him, not only because it made sense to him, but also because it was connected to the history and experience of family. By reading and better understanding the works of non-Western critical thinkers (as some ICTD scholars have started to do [42, 43, 49]), we want to encourage our future selves and others to think more deeply about the work we are doing, the impacts we intend for it to have, and what unintended impacts the work may have in our academic worlds as well as the worlds we visit and inhabit as part of our fieldwork and collaborative engagements. We need to be very attentive to how our worlds might collide with the worlds of collaborators outside of institutionalised academia. This is not to say that, when confronted with knowledges different from our own (perhaps even incompatible), our own way of knowing, whatever that may be, should be denied. Instead, we argue for humility and a willingness to remain in the discomfort

of the confrontation, and explore possibilities to build knowledge together, to adapt to the specific context we want to study [128] and to "combine academic knowledge with popular knowledge and wisdom", as Fals-Borda stated [28, p. 88]. Similarly, Antonia Darder [36] argues that each of us has partial knowledge; that we need each other to "understand the world better."

### 5.1 The means do not justify the ends, they are the ends

Western science has an unjustified hegemonic position in the world, as has been noted by Feyerabend [58], expressed even stronger by Latin American thinkers of decoloniality through "epistemic disobedience" [57, 109, 110, 116, 129, 158] and by Indigenous and Native communities [7, 14, 51, 97, 114, 132, 133, 160]. Whether one generally agrees with Feyerabend's epistemic anarchism or not, when working with partners who have different ways of knowing the world, remembering his statement "anything goes" is in our view a useful first step to overcome an often unjust and unequal relationship - and to avoid the "epistemicide" de Sousa Santos [41] has warned of. It is equally important to be open to *unlearn* what one knows already, if specific knowledge is unhelpful or even destructive in a specific context, and to create new knowledge and practice together. This relates, for example, to our own knowledge gaps as academics and our need to "deschool" [91] our own worldviews, as a "permanent decolonization of thought" [38, p. 40]. At the same time, we must be aware that the word *decolonization* should not be used as a metaphor [152], at the same time that it is indispensable to be attentive to who "is speaking alongside us" [150, p. 19]. This relates, for example, to Débora's experience, when she was told that, in the early phases of her relationship with a community, no one could understand her and together they created a way of understanding and talking to each other; or Angelika's experiences with some other academics when talking about her activism. As we learn from these different examples, discussions about challenges and injustices are not born solely out of design goals or workshop activities [82], nor can they be solved by these - no matter how transformative or relational our approach or theoretical framework is.

Similarly, the relation between academic activists (or just academics) and communities we work with is not only troubled by epistemic differences. The very practical structures of our academic communities, the incentives and cultures create further problems. As might be obvious, in such work the research process, the activities one engages in together is equally important, perhaps even more so than the physical outcomes of the projects (such as novel technologies, applications, or implications for design). Several others have reflected on the difficulty to structure the very practice of engaged justice-oriented research in ways that support its goals, such as prefigurative design [10] and justice-oriented interaction design [50]. Both of these have been influential in our work, but neither fully addresses the pragmatic issues we have faced when doing this kind of work. We learn from our experiences that studying and working with communities and places that are socially constructed to be in need of help, is perceived to increase the chances of publication in prestigious venues such as CHI. Whether this happens knowingly or not, we use people as sources of data that make for a

*good* paper when we do this. Lindtner et al. [102] have reflected on the difficulty to not give in to the Western discourse of the exotic other. This is of course not to say that we should never do work with those in less powerful positions, but instead, we are calling for an acknowledgement of our academic privilege in publications and presentations; as social scientists and technologists, we might build our careers on the backs of others.

Coming back to our reading of Paulo Freire (1978), we learn that "authentic help" [63, p. 11] is a practice where the helper does not control the helped, they both grow together and contribute with each other's needs and transformation concurrently, "in which the helpers [do not] dominate the helped" [64]. Fals-Borda calls it "solidary self-teaching" or mutual education [28, p. 35], where activists are expected "to make a special effort to achieve modesty, understanding, empathy and a capacity for self-criticism" [Ibid., p. 39]. As academics then, the least we can do is acknowledge collaborators' and participants' expertise and input, employing justice-oriented or decolonising methodologies, and work alongside their struggles.

Differences in understanding about the purposes of research within academia and the communities with which we work also relate to publication practices. Academic systems of publishing provide incentives for researchers to engage in more or less covert acts of exploitation, where conversations and activities with communities become raw materials drawn through a process of transformation and delivered as commodities or papers, like an academic supply chain. Taking inspiration from Marx's concept of "commodity fetishism" [106], we propose "community fetishism" as a term to describe the tendency of academics to benefit from the marginality of others, without necessarily paying back to the collaborators. This does not necessarily take the form of conscious exploitation, but can also take place when researchers have good intentions. However, inexperience, ignorance, or the structures of academia, including the field of HCI, can lead us towards exploitative relationships with collaborators.

Looking towards postcolonial and decolonial literatures, community fetishism is reminiscent of neo-colonialist and extractivist attitudes. Such extractivism has for example been explored by Hayden [84, 85] in studies on pharmaceutical research that draws on local, Indigenous and ethnobotanical knowledge in the production of pharmaceutical products. Similarly, Irani [92] details how entrepreneurial practices in India transform practices of people's everyday lives and inventiveness (often rooted in necessity and precarity) into sources of inspiration for new entrepreneurial practices, services and products. While these examples illustrate the extraction of local knowledge for the generation of market-oriented products and services, we aim to describe how academics extract value that ends up in academic publications (from which at least authors do not directly profit financially) or recognition and reputation within our academic communities. Furthermore, Linda Tuhiwai Smith [133] wrote that the word *research* "is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary" [133, p. 1] and, expanding another text from her, we argue that Indigenous, rural and marginalized communities are considered "potential market players because they offer unique commodities such as traditional knowledge. [However] they have not yet been 'discovered' in the research sense" [134, p. 78]. That statement reinforces that the link

between knowledge and power is associated with a series of values based on the power that came with the rise of globalization and capitalism [51, 130]. It also refers to the distancing of the ecosystem of the collaborators from scholarly knowledge generation, possibly causing misrepresentations and creating distrust towards the research field, academic or not. The Decolonizing Methodologies, as well as Design Justice framework, provide an alternative to this: “design justice practitioners are working to rethink extractive design processes and to replace them with approaches that produce community ownership, profit, credit, and visibility” [34, p. 235]. Academic interest in someone’s living conditions, even if this learning intended to improve governmental policy or improved public, private, and/or third sector services is not the same as genuine care for another human being; and writing academic articles is different to building knowledge together and sharing this back to relevant communities. The statements we have heard from some of our partners make this clear: “*Researchers come here to get their title.*” When we consider the encounter between academics and communities as an exchange of gifts (of which data is one) we should carefully and sincerely consider what we give in return [107], and whether our gift is actually needed or welcome.

Even worse to think that universities in the Global South, not only marginalised communities, provide data and experiences, while the Global North theorizes and applies them [9, 33, 117] or “the academic equivalent of the renowned maquiladoras [...] that exploit cheap local labour to produce goods for northern markets” [70, p. 40]. The accumulation of capital connected to multiple projects in Western Universities in partnership with the Global South Universities is also criticized by community fetishism. It is incredibly rare to have more than one PI on a project (even when these projects are collaborative), they often cannot cost non-academic collaborators into projects, and the amount of funding for each university is starkly different. But the accumulation of capital does not happen only in universities; academic associations have different monetary resources like private company donors, income from the subscription of conferences (that less prestigious and Global South Universities may not be able to afford), and income from the access of the papers by scholars affiliated to Universities (independent scholars or citizen scientists might not be able to pay the amount asked to access each paper).

How is it possible to build trust in such contexts? Understanding what topics, questions and problems are meaningful and welcomed, and learning together requires the building of mutual trust, for which there is no easy or straightforward way. It requires time and effort on all sides. While the notion of needing to build trust with our partners is not new in HCI research, we want to make clear that we are referring to relational trust here rather than trust that is needed for transactional research processes to take place. In our case, we do not mean we need to build trust with communities for the purpose of being able to research with (or on) them. Rather, we are building trust for mutually positive relationships, for engagement, for reflection, for unlearning and relearning on the part of the academic and for hopefully improved situations for partners. This trust should not be seen as a means to an end, but an end in and of itself.

## 5.2 Relations within our academic communities

The difficulties we experienced with this hybrid activist-academic work do not only come from our relation to our partners and the influence academic structures have on them, but they also stem from relations within our academic communities and the reception of such work. The very structures of academia make the relational and caring encounters with collaborators that we talk about difficult. Academic incentives relate to publications and the stories one tells in them, not to just relationships with research partners. Peer review processes are not designed to adjust this as their aim is to ensure academic quality. Apart from writing and incentives of academia in general, the structure of our research projects is often equally troublesome. The majority of monetary gains are usually directed towards Western academic institutions, creating an imbalanced relationship from the start, and it is often difficult to include NGOs or non-Western academic institutions not just as associated partners, but as fully funded consortium members. In both our contexts such parties routinely have to come up with their own funding for collaborative projects, as their expenses are only covered in part or not at all. Weirdly, money has also different perceived/relative value in academic and community contexts. Such economic differences and conditions make the justice we strive for and the trust that is necessary to work together very difficult. The relationships within “matters of care” [115] can easily, despite the best intentions, be deeply unequal and unfair [151].

When Débora presented a paper based on an ethnographic study to senior academics, she was met with the criticism that her work was too engaged, that she needed to distance herself from her studies in order to provide a better account and that she should not trust everything her subjects tell her. Almost needless to say, such comments addressing some core aspects of an activist-academic practice as we have outlined above, are harmful and we believe unwarranted. While Western understandings of *science* as objective and distanced are traditionally understood as *best practice*, there are local and traditional practices that are subjective and sensitive, and researchers should understand and respect when engaging in an external community. Furthermore, a long history in various disciplines including HCI make room for (and even argue for) an engaged, critical science. Amongst these is Howard Becker’s [19] question “Whose side are we on?”, pointing out the impossibility of not taking sides in research, and the feminist epistemology of Haraway [77], Harding [79], Rosner [126] and HCI conceptualisations [16, 59, 124] already mentioned.

These kinds of discussions are long-standing and important and need to be taken into account in HCI and design curricula, as well as graduate studies and as part of our continuous learning (and unlearning processes) as researchers and practitioners. With this paper, we add to this growing body of work that brings engaged, critical, reflexive, and emotional entanglements with research partners to the fore. These kinds of relationships require an emotional and personal engagement with worlds and the beings and problems within them. Despite its contradiction to traditional science, this way of working is not a hurdle to the academic notion of knowledge-creation, but instead should be seen as a starting point to this knowledge-building. We have outlined above the importance

of trust for an engaged academic practice as the foundation of the co-creation of knowledge, which is by its very nature biased, situated and surely not objective. Adding to this, matters of care [115] shows us that there is obviously a place for caring emotions and affection in research and that these relate to holding one another to account over our mistakes as much as it reminds us that those with whom we engage are human.

On top of our engagements with collaborators, Asad [11] writes that when we talk about prefigurative design approaches, we can also think about how we can become academic accomplices to the communities with which we work - we expand this notion here, pointing inwards to our own academic institutions and communities. Holding and creating space for explicitly engaged scientific accounts is only one of the necessary steps within our own academic circles. Despite a solid foundation to lean on, creating such spaces can be challenging or dangerous, especially for junior researchers in an environment that is as disciplinarily diverse as HCI and as competitive as academia, as has also been expressed by Almeida et al. [5] in their introduction of TOCHI on Reimagining Women's Health [95]. It means addressing flaws and injustices within our own circles, which can be confrontational, uncomfortable, and dangerous. Racism, ableism and other forms of systematic discrimination and exclusion also exist within the HCI community (see e.g., [3, 56, 119]). A possible strategy to eradicate these is perhaps the creation of formal or informal subspaces, collectives, discussion groups, where disagreement/dissent can be voiced and discussed in a safe space, to build a platform from which to address issues in the larger community with more strength. This echoes Nancy Fraser's [61] call for subaltern counterpublics. It is however an unsolved task, how to move from informal spaces and communities to the larger and more formalised community spaces and tools. It took some centuries until non reactionary superaltern would become professors at the Western academy and propose changes on our way of working and doing research. Many had the responsibility to immerse themselves in the universities to make sure they appropriate the scientific knowledge [7] and somehow use them for the benefit of their communities. Looking towards ACM SIGCHI specifically, instruments such as SIGs or workshops about specific topics can play crucial roles for such discussions, but they rarely lead to the development of new formalised structures. Sadly, even when they do, these new and often more critical or caring structures are then often stifled by remaining power imbalances.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Our motivations or our good intentions do not stop the risks of creating harm. As academics, we have to unlearn what we have been doing for so long. Even if we sincerely believe that what we propose as a research process will lead to a better life, our idea of a better life can be so radically different from others, even our research partners, that we end up bringing harm. Putting this statement into dialogue with our own experiences and the texts of feminist epistemologies highlight several points: forms of knowledge and knowledge production that are cultural and non-Western are ignored or devalued in the sciences, including HCI. Thereby, specific *situated* experiences and perspectives of the world are systematically excluded while other standpoints and forms of knowledge

production are privileged, mostly the academic *method*. As a result, other worlds are made invisible by the dominant narratives, including academic *authority*, and therefore also disappear as starting points from where to design. Design, by definition, is a form of changing the world and making new ones. But given the systematic exclusion of specific perspectives, we would argue that as researchers in general and HCI researchers and designers in particular, we need a critical sensibility to question our situated understanding of the world from which we set out to design. This, for example, means to ask ourselves, what other ways of understanding the world exist which we might ignore, before we set about remaking the world through design, however modest our understanding of our own design practice and its possible effects is. As we have tried to outline above, we believe participatory forms of research and the kinds of relations we have to our participants are one possible way to include other worlds and check our own standpoint to de-privilege dominant positions.

In this paper, we have reflected on our own experiences of engaged, activist, and justice-oriented research and work within academia. First, we thought through the risks of perpetuating violence when working with marginalised communities, the receptions we have received for our activist-academic work, and the issues of harm and injustice we face within academia. We proposed the concept of *community fetishism* to describe the possible exploitation of communities that are constructed to be in need of help through activist-leaning research. Then, we wove these experiences into wider discussions of research processes not only as part of transactional relationships between partners, collaborators, participants, and researchers but also human connections. We then expanded on the ways in which we work when we work in these justice-oriented ways, impact on academia as a whole, and our standing within this. In the above sections, we have started to do this by raising questions about the kinds of world-making effects we want to have with our projects and relationships, the kinds of futures we want to see created with and through our work. Putting these questions into context with the risks of doing more harm than good with our research, we provide questions that might be useful for researchers to reflect on when designing new projects with those who are marginalised. While some of the questions existed in some form or another in our heads before we engaged in our conversations, they were formulated as presented here during the process of collaboratively reflecting on our experiences as potentially helpful for our own work as well as those of others.

- What effects or impacts am I wanting to have with this work, as a researcher/practitioner?
- "Who defined the research problem?" [133, p. 175]
- "For whom is this study worthy and relevant? Who says so?" [133, p. 175]
- What are the needs that already exist in the community I am working with?
- What effects or impacts are the participants wanting to have with our joint work?
- Before bringing my skills, what are the skills that I can learn from the participants?



- What pathways forward are there to reach these aims, and which is the most useful for participants; and who is included / excluded in this process?
- How do my and our aims relate to the lived realities, wishes, needs, and expectations of those with whom I work?

The academic elements of our hybrid academic-activist practice are concerned with emotions and the creation and engagement with different knowledges. This means, as academics, we need to ask ourselves:

- What counts as knowledge in our projects and what different knowledge exists in the community I am working with?
- How do we create and develop knowledge and understanding without harming others or ourselves?
- What are the attitudes, words and injustices that affect me emotionally? Why?
- What are the external skills and the network that I can make available to participants and collaborators?
- How might my work be exploiting or oppressing the people and communities that I aim to work with?

Depending on the answer to these questions we could easily become engaged in the destruction of other, equally valuable ways of knowing. By reading and better understanding the works of non-Western critical thinkers, we want to encourage our own future selves and others to think more deeply about the work we are doing, the impacts we intend for it to have, and what unintended impacts the work may have in our own academic worlds as well as the worlds we visit and inhabit as part of our fieldwork and collaborative engagements.

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