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# Embodied Belonging in the Social Science Lab

Embodiment Lab, Hanan Abou Ali , James Edward Bryan , Carrie Chennault , Dharni Grover , Mehrnaz Haghdadi , Faisal Bin Islam , Nari Kim , Nora Lucas , Nusrat T. Mohana , Lindsay Naylor , Rebecca Nixon , Kelsey M. Obringer, Georgina Ramsay , Naznin Nahar Sultana , Kaanan Thakkar and Nathan Thayer

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### Article abstract

The Embodiment Lab, rooted in critical human geography, is grounded in embodiment, belonging, mentorship, care, and temporal dynamics to challenge norms in the neoliberal university. We argue that the Lab serves as a counter-practice within the academy by prioritizing our individual and collective well-being over productivity metrics. Weekly practices cultivate radical vulnerability, creating a foundation for a caring environment. Delving into multifaceted spatial dimensions our experiences suggest that the Lab becomes a living example of a feminist ethic of care. Belonging emerges as an antidote to the exclusions ingrained in academic spaces. The Lab empowers its scholars to challenge uneven power dynamics, fostering inclusion where diverse voices are heard. The Lab's emphasis on collective action and intentional processes of growth contrasts with a conventional fast, metric-driven tempo. In this paper, we offer a model to center care in lab spaces by reflecting on our own experiences in a space that values scholars as whole individuals rather than vessels of productivity. We illustrate the reflexive character of the Lab, acknowledging its adaptability and dynamism over time. Rejecting the neoliberal norms that too often dictate research spaces, the Lab exemplifies the messy and ongoing process of creating care-full academic spaces.

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# Embodied Belonging in the Social Science Lab

## Embodiment Lab

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware

### Hanan Abou Ali

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware

ORCID: 0009-0008-7164-8150

habouali@udel.edu

### James Edward Bryan

Department of Geography & Environment, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

ORCID: 0009-0000-8558-3249

jameb@unc.edu

### Carrie Chennault

Department of Anthropology & Geography, Colorado State University

ORCID: 0000-0002-4733-4134

carrie.chennault@colostate.edu

### Dharni Grover

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware

ORCID: 0009-0003-2716-6318

dgrover@udel.edu

## **Mehrnaz Haghdadi**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0009-0008-2662-9233  
mehrnaz@udel.edu

## **Faisal Bin Islam**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0002-3336-8018  
fislam@udel.edu

## **Nari Kim**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1455-3549  
narikim@udel.edu

## **Nora Lucas**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0009-0009-8952-8621  
noraluc@udel.edu

## **Nusrat T Mohana**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1584-1681  
nusrattm@udel.edu

## **Lindsay Naylor**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0002-4852-3295  
lnaylor@udel.edu

## **Rebecca Nixon**

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0003-3418-4971  
nixon@udel.edu

## Kelsey M. Obringer

STEM in the Liberal Arts Program, Bryn Mawr College  
kobringer@brynmawr.edu

## Georgina Ramsay

Department of Anthropology, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0001-8323-0626  
gramsay@udel.edu

## Naznin Nahar Sultana

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0000-0001-5153-3606  
naznin@udel.edu

## Kaanan Thakkar

Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences, University of Delaware  
ORCID: 0009-0001-7684-7844  
kthakkar@udel.edu

## Nathan Thayer

Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, Virginia Tech University  
ORCID: 0000-0001-5836-9861  
nethayer@vt.edu

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### Abstract

The Embodiment Lab, rooted in critical human geography, is grounded in embodiment, belonging, mentorship, care, and temporal dynamics to challenge norms in the neoliberal university. We argue that the Lab serves as a counter-practice within the academy by prioritizing our individual and collective well-being over productivity metrics. Weekly practices cultivate radical vulnerability, creating a foundation for a caring environment. Delving into multifaceted spatial dimensions our experiences suggest that the Lab becomes a living example of a feminist ethic of care. Belonging emerges as an antidote to the exclusions ingrained in academic spaces. The Lab empowers its scholars to challenge uneven power dynamics, fostering inclusion where diverse voices are heard. The Lab's emphasis on collective action and intentional processes of growth contrasts with a conventional fast,

metric-driven tempo. In this paper, we offer a model to center care in lab spaces by reflecting on our own experiences in a space that values scholars as whole individuals rather than vessels of productivity. We illustrate the reflexive character of the Lab, acknowledging its adaptability and dynamism over time. Rejecting the neoliberal norms that too often dictate research spaces, the Lab exemplifies the messy and ongoing process of creating care-full academic spaces.

## Keywords

embodiment, belonging, care, mentoring, time, feminism, lab

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## Introduction

“What is giving you life?” We begin our weekly Lab meetings by going around the room and answering this question. It is a question that asks us to be radically vulnerable (cf. Nagar 2019) while sharing joy (or the tempering of joy—sometimes we are not okay—as the case may be). The answers to this question help everyone understand each other’s sensitivities and priorities. It has become a touchstone as we seek to co-cultivate a caring environment. Through the Lab we create an inclusive space of belonging, establishing a culture of mentoring and care for social scientists in our broader networks. Care, here, refers to a feminist ethic of care, associated with the practice of mentoring in teaching, learning, and working within and against spaces in the academy (Adams-Hutcheson and Johnston 2019: 451; Puāwai Collective 2019; Smyth et al. 2020).

While our attempt to center care may suggest a disconnect from what is expected in lab spaces in the neoliberal academy, we find that it is vital in our peer-mentoring space. Centering care underscores the ethical responsibility to create environments and systems (both academic and non-academic) that support the diverse needs and identities of individuals (and groups). Inculcating a culture of care in a lab allows for recognizing, valuing, and attending to everyone’s wellbeing. It actively promotes inclusion and dismantles barriers that limit feelings of belonging in the academy. Our Lab promotes possibilities for empathy, compassion, and nurturing a sense of connection, as highlighted by five thematic threads presented in this paper—space, embodiment, mentoring, belonging, and time.

Throughout this collaborative paper, we explain what it means to us, to participate and belong in the space of a critical social science lab. We argue, following Lawson (2007), that the mainstream academy is a fundamentally uncaring space that forces many scholars to assimilate into systems that were not built for them (see: Naylor 2023) and that our co-developed lab space stands counter to this uncaring. While academic labs at research institutions in the U.S. may be regularly associated with hypothesis-testing, a single principal investigator, and their research team, we suggest that gathering in a re-imagined lab changes how we relate to each other, and hopefully can change the university as well as norms around how we produce knowledge.

The Embodiment Lab exists within the broader context of a predominately white research institution and land-grant university in the U.S., built on legacies of theft and exclusion of Indigenous, non-white, non-cis hetero, non-male, and non-affluent people. Although recent efforts suggest that academia has overcome many exclusionary barriers

through policy measures reflecting the diversity, equity, and inclusion zeitgeist, in practice exclusion and marginalization persist both in the academy at large and geography specifically, (see: Bruno and Faiver-Serna 2022; Faria et al. 2018; Giesecking 2023; Kinkaid et al. 2022; Mahtani 2006). Attacks on higher education in the U.S. have exploded in recent years—targeting affirmative action, the teaching of Critical Race Theory and about gender and sexuality, and general attacks on so-called ‘wokeness’—reinforce already existing barriers for many would-be scholars. Moreover, the experiences of international students illustrate multi-scalar barriers to entry, including Anglocentrism, inequitable currency exchange, and visa requirements.

The impacts of neoliberal policies on higher education are also economically visible through the student debt crisis. Students are treated as customers, with emphasis on branding and marketing, while at the same time financial burdens are being placed on students due to rising tuition fees and plummeting government funding for higher education (cf. Slaughter and Rhoades 2000). Simultaneously, universities cut costs through increased reliance on adjunct faculty, who are poorly remunerated. Graduate student stipends are stagnant, which led to strikes, sit-ins and protests for better wages starting during the height of the pandemic in the U.S. The neoliberalization of the academy creates an imbalanced financial landscape that is then overlaid by unequal power dynamics and unrealistic expectations for a system of counting that asks academics to do more, more, more (see: Dufty-Jones and Gibson 2022; Mountz et al. 2015). It is within this larger context that we, as a diverse group, seek more caring relationships and mentorship in the process of scholarly becoming.

The Lab itself is an ensemble that comprises a series of individual resistances; it means something different to each person, and that meaning changes in time and space. Nevertheless, the Lab can be understood within the context of other intentionally constructed care-full spaces in the academy (see: Naylor, forthcoming). We are inspired by the calls of other collectives to “assemble... in new non-hierarchical relations to subvert the norms of thought and action” (Smyth et al. 2020: 874). While academic articles detailing these spaces are a relatively recent phenomenon, they have long existed. Although they may not have taken on the moniker of “lab,” “coven,” or “collective” (cf. Caretta and Faria 2020; Dombroski et al. 2018; Fem-Mentee Collective et al. 2017; Görkariksel et al. 2020; Puāwai Collective 2019; Smyth et al. 2020; Storying Geography Collective 2023), they are still found in the offices and classrooms of the non-tenured, women, people of color, and other “shadow advisors,” where students and faculty have sought places of refuge. The Lab did not follow the specific model of an existing feminist collective within geography and in continuing to exist and change through multiple years, new members, a global pandemic (see: Storying Geography Collective 2023), and the neoliberal university, the Lab joins other feminist collectives in geography in solidarity—in navigating the contradictions of resisting and existing in the neoliberal university, in caring for ourselves and others in a largely uncaring space, and in opening up new possibilities of what the academy *could* look like.

We turn next to the background of the Lab. From there, we examine major thematic threads common across our experiences in the lab to share possibilities for creating caring spaces of belonging imbued with a feminist ethic of care. To conclude, we reflect on the role of the lab in our lives, what we learned along the way, and possible directions for the future.

## Context and Background

We are an interdisciplinary lab based in the Department of Geography & Spatial Sciences at the University of Delaware. At our foundation is critical human geography. Geography comes from the Latin geo-graph or earth writing. Research in the Embodiment Lab is focused on how we write the earth from the globe to the gut, past and present. We aim to produce research that illuminates the embodied politics, ecologies, and frontiers on and below earth's surface and into outer space. Our goals in this work are to provide data and tools that empower, inspire, and facilitate change (Embodiment Lab, 2018).

The Lab website's statement of "what we believe" recognizes that bodies and embodiment are inseparable from scholarship. What we know and how we know the world depend on our lived experiences and situatedness within it. The lab's emphasis on positionality—who we are and what we bring to this space—has allowed us to come together to share our backgrounds, histories, identities, and how we have variously navigated intersecting axes of privilege and oppression.

In developing this paper, we originally worked together to write and share our positionalities with one another, and with our readers. Opening to one another, and opening to readers, are different processes that serve different purposes. The relationships we developed with one another through the lab afforded us greater trust to share the embodied, intimate details of our lives that made us who we are and brought us to the lab. In writing positionality statements for this paper, we created a new opportunity to know one another in a way that was not part of our usual weekly conversations in the lab space.

Yet, what does it mean to share those details with an unknown audience and publish our intimate lives in print? We are still grappling with these questions. For you, our audience, we want you to understand what sparked our needs and desires for joining a space like the Embodiment Lab, and how we each see ourselves contributing to its ongoing development. But how vulnerable do we need to be, and what purpose does sharing our personal journeys accomplish in the context of this manuscript? In lieu of offering positionality statements here, we aim to draw connections between our experiences of lab and daily lives as scholars navigating the broader terrain of academia. We express why that matters for enacting counter-practices of care and rethinking the university "lab" through mentorship, embodiment, time, space, and belonging.

### *How it began*

When Naylor arrived at the University of Delaware in 2015, among the faculty there were three early-career human geographers. We were new to mentoring and all came from much larger geography programs with strong cohorts that we had done reading and writing with. So, within days of being on campus Naylor proposed and we decided to start a weekly mentoring space called the Human Geography Roundtable. In the beginning it was a faculty-led space where faculty and students set the agenda for the semester. As students in the Roundtable advanced to different stages in their career programs the character of the space changed in terms of what populated the agenda. We tried to make it a mentoring, professional development, and seminar space—to make up for our inability to offer graduate seminars in our core areas of research.

Being in a largely physical science college where we were constantly challenged to explain our work while not having our own research labs, the faculty decided to rebrand roundtable as “lab,” to be legible to our colleagues (see also: Caretta and Faria 2020) even though we were not all working on the same research, and everyone had independent projects. Attendees were primarily advisees of the faculty facilitators, but the Lab was intended to be a welcoming space that anyone could participate in and so folks cycled in and out based on their schedules, and we had students join us from other departments on campus and even outside our university. We also adjusted so that any member of Lab was a facilitator. The personal experiences of joining and participating in the Lab are recounted through testimonials that we weave through the thematic threads that follow.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, the Lab is comprised of 16 faculty, student and alum members who meet weekly for at least 1 hour. As part of care-full practices, on a day-to-day basis, we have pre-set agendas for each lab day led by members targeting training, review, resource sharing, professional development activities, and emotional healing. The training involves theoretical and methodological coaching in social science practices, sharing, and learning from our experiences. For example, the lab agendas include sessions on guidelines for shaping a conceptual framework for research, training in technical skills such as software (e.g. NVivo), preparing for fieldwork (e.g. Institutional Review Board protocols), fieldwork reflection or exchanging knowledge on challenges and solutions. Aiming for professional success, such as assembling information and forming a database on project funding sources, fellowships, and conference opportunities. Peers act in the role of mentor and help brainstorm ideas for research topics and networking. The lab also offers space for sharing personal emotional moments and can offer a therapeutic landscape to restore and revive.

### Thematic Threads of the Social Science Lab

When we suggest that the lab is grounded in a feminist ethic of care, we are referring to an approach that transcends traditional dichotomies such as public versus private and rights versus duties, integrating both emotional and practical dimensions of labor. This perspective emphasizes that caring is a process that involves navigating and addressing contradictions within caring relations, and it highlights the importance of understanding the political values embedded in our experiences and ideals of caring (Fisher and Tronto 1991; Askins and Blazek 2017). It emphasizes care as a dynamic process that integrates contradictions and values, aiming to reshape both individual interactions and the broader social institutions that frame our lives (Askins and Blazek 2017).

Geographical debates on ethical and political responsibilities have significantly contributed to our understanding of how space and spatiality intersect with notions of care. Research in this area often examines the ethics of responsibility toward both close and distant others. Feminist geographies, in particular, critically examine the spatial dimensions of care, focusing on social spaces and the complexities of care work (McEwan and Goodman 2010). By recognizing that care acquires its meaning within specific social contexts—whether in households, marketplaces, or bureaucracies—we advocate for reshaping these contexts and

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<sup>1</sup> Of the three founding faculty members, only Naylor remains at the University of Delaware, but all were responsible for the foundational elements.



institutions to better reflect our caring practices by creating a 'space' such as this lab (Fisher and Tronto 1990).

In the context of our lab, this feminist ethic of care manifests as a commitment to fostering supportive relationships and equitable structures, counteracting the often uncaring and competitive character of neoliberal academic environments (Lawson 2009; Naylor 2023; Naylor, forthcoming). By focusing on the embodied and relational aspects of care, we create a space where every member's needs and contributions are valued, and the labor of care is both acknowledged and fairly distributed (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). This approach is not merely about maintaining current practices but about actively working towards fairer, more sustainable relations within academia and beyond, embracing care as a transformative force for new, inclusive ways of 'being together' (Conradson 2011).

Further developing our feminist praxis around care ethics, we aim to create spaces where we can be radically vulnerable. Nagar developed the term radical vulnerability as a central feature for creating community and engaging in co-authorship with *saathi* (Hindi word for friend) grassroots farmer and laborer activists in India. Nagar and collaborators found that building trust and engaging in critical reflexivity were vital practices to crossing borders of difference and forming alliances. Rather than erasing difference, radical vulnerability allows their collectives to solidify relationships with one another, bridge the spaces between university and community, and ultimately work to undo oppression precisely by recognizing the unevenness in social locations that are being forged together in struggle (Nagar and Shirazi 2019: 237). While members of the Lab are located within university structures, the work of resisting the neoliberal university and broader social injustices has similarly demanded that we work together collectively to build trust across and through difference. Attention to embodiment, in our scholarship and in the whole selves that we bring to our lab space, aims to do just that. Or, as the *saathis* put it, "the only way to fight against this injustice is to stand with one another while also being forever attentive to the convergences and divergences in each of our locations, paths, and journeys" (ibid: 236). And so, we make attempts to move through spaces together with care at the forefront.

Our collective experience in the Lab is in conversation with scholarship related to space, embodiment, mentoring, belonging, and time in the academy. In the following sections we situate our lab practices and experiences within those concepts and join the call for lab spaces that center care. Interwoven through these thematic threads are testimonials from lab members, which show how the lab is moving and changing through time. Many testimonials engage multiple themes, but here we focused on one theme each to draw out the concrete ways in which the lab is a place where we are actively insisting on an ethic of care as its foundation.

## ***Space***

Space is central to our work, providing a dynamic where care and community intersect, moving from a simple concept, a "lab," into a dynamic environment. Understanding spatial arrangements helps us grasp their influence on our world (Murphy 2018). In the Lab, we transform space into a nurturing setting where individual academic journeys merge with collective growth.

Space, as articulated by Tuan (1977), represents freedom and the potential for movement and here we draw heavily on Tuan's early thinking. Tuan posits, "place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (ibid: 3). This distinction underscores how space, with its inherent openness and possibility, allows for curiosity and movement, while place provides the stability that anchors us. When we consider space as that which allows movement and place as the pause we take to assemble and create, space becomes where we make place through meaningful pauses and moments of reflection. The interaction between space and place highlights how our physical and emotional engagements with our surroundings shape our experience (ibid). As individuals, we remember the connections between the human body and spatial organization, since humans, through intimate experiences with bodies, organize space so that it conforms with and caters to biological needs and social relations (ibid). Thinking about the space of the lab, a lab member recalls:

I was invited by Naylor to join the Lab when I started my PhD program in Fall 2021, but because of conflict with coursework I was not able to officially join the Embodiment Lab until Fall 2023. However, despite the delay I always felt welcomed at the Lab. I had an impression about the Lab's structure and function, and imagined it to be like a social science research group where the lab works on a common project with weekly accountability meetings. Surprisingly, it turned out to be very different from my expectations of a typical lab. I found the Lab to be a comfortable space, used to support lab members' academic/professional endeavors. Although we did work on collective projects, the work is distributed voluntarily in accordance with everyone's schedule and ongoing life events. It is difficult to describe a lab space like ours, the best way to explain it is as a hybrid between a support group and a mentoring workshop. The activities of this lab entail working on a collaborative paper, providing feedback to each other's conference presentations, and seminars about geography theory. As an international grad student, it has been pleasant to have a supportive academic lab space.

Our interactions with space are not merely about occupying it but about commanding and creating it through intention—thus becoming an intimate setting on its own. Tuan notes, "intimate occasions are often those on which we become passive and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, exposed to the caress and sting of new experience" (ibid: 137). In the Lab, our space becomes intimate through the process of collective engagement and vulnerability, where we find comfort and security akin to the nurturing environment described by Tuan. Such spaces allow us to pause and reflect, transforming them into centers of felt value (ibid). Tuan's view that "intimate places are places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss" (ibid: 137) is reflected in our approach, transforming our space into a meaningful place of care and belonging. In considering the lab space, one member reflects:

I joined the Lab at the time of its founding. The Lab served critical roles in my development as a scholar. It is a place where I was able to get the mentoring I needed to develop the skills to carry myself as a scholar. It was a space which ignited curiosity in me and provided the intellectual nourishment I desperately needed. It was also a place of community for me, especially during the lockdown

phase of the COVID pandemic. The Lab became necessary for my mental health as we retreated into our homes to quarantine. Weekly affirmations of what gives us life at the beginning of each Lab meeting sets the stage for a welcoming, joyful, and caring environment. Further, while we are in Lab to work, it always felt a little like play. It was joyful work, energizing work which lifted my spirits when they were at their lowest. As such, the Lab has always been a space of refuge in an anxious world. The members of the Lab, the connections and practices we developed provided a site of care and repair that was sorely needed.

Entering the Lab means stepping into a narrative that intertwines past, present, and future—a continuous story of innovation, care, and mutual support. This space encompasses physical, digital, social, and metaphorical dimensions, shaping our collective identity. We do not just theorize about space; we actively create a place where memory and care coexist, fostering a sense of belonging that goes beyond mere concept (Massey 1993; Tuan 1977).

Our examination of the Lab as a space of care transitions from theoretical to practical. The Lab embodies a space where we co-create a sense of belonging, redefining care within the academic realm. This approach transcends mere form and function, cultivating a community where stories and identities come to life (Massey 1994). When we ask the 'question of space' (Tschumi 1994), or how we create community within this unique container - a community, where memory and care intersect - a familiar sense of belonging is created (see: Tuan 1977). These lines of inquiry and creation not only challenge conventional notions of physically embodied spaces but also invite us to reconsider the relationship between form and function, through reframing by turning inward and outward. Whether form follows function or function follows form (Sullivan 1896), the space of the social science lab highlights this dilemma as it invents and reinvents itself, priming the forming of identities of belonging and functioning with care and growth in the ongoing processes of becoming. As one lab member recalls:

I joined the Lab in fall 2020 when I started my PhD program amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Coming from a scientific background, I was intrigued by the concept of the Embodiment Lab and its approach. I started my PhD journey when everything was virtual and being an international student I didn't have a community so Lab became a space where I can connect and grow both personally and professionally. Lab meetings vary between reading papers, offering peer support and feedback on each other's research and writings to professional development discussions and everything in between. Becoming a member of the Lab has allowed me to think outside of the scientific research box and widen my research approach. The concept of all of us Lab members as co-facilitators really broke down the barrier between mentors/mentees as it encouraged every one of us to participate and contribute to discussions and ideas without the fear of not being knowledgeable enough. Lab continues to show how we can belong to a space that goes beyond a physical space.

In essence, the Lab's space becomes vibrant and meaningful through our collective efforts. The Lab serves as an example of the transformative and living power of space and how we co-create a sense of place (no matter what 'container' we find ourselves in). On making connections in the space of the lab, one testimonial offers:

I joined the Lab in Fall 2022 in my first semester as a faculty member in Geography & Spatial Sciences. The Lab quickly became, and continues to be, a space of connection in a new place, new role, and new discipline (having not been trained as a geographer). It was a welcome opportunity to build relationships with students and faculty. While I felt like a stranger in many meetings as a new faculty, I did not in the Lab, despite being new. It was clear that the community formed in the Lab was not limited, rather, the Lab continues to include, grow, and welcome as new members enter the space. At that time there were multiple students and faculty in attendance, both in person and virtually. We met on a weekly basis, with topics decided on as a group. There was always space to acknowledge our joys, stressors, and sadness, to connect again to our humanity—"what is giving you life" question that opens every Lab feels like a respite, a deep breath, in the midst of the weight of the day.

By drawing inspiration from each other, we challenge preconceptions and redefine the boundaries of thought, innovation and care within the academic landscape - all while breathing life into our intentions and reminding us that space is a medium where we can shape form, function, stories and identity(ies), fostering a profound sense of belonging and the art of caring for both people and place (cf. Bawaka Country et al. 2016). The space we create becomes a sanctuary within the neoliberal university, where the sense of belonging is further nurtured. The Lab's space becomes a place as we gather, through processes of embodiment and belonging imbued with care, something that may seem out of place in the neoliberal university (Cresswell 2004; Massey 2005). Revisiting our sense of place through a feminist ethic of care -challenges dominant structures and fosters more inclusive practices (Massey 1994). Thinking about how the lab is facilitated in such a way, a lab member remembers:

I returned to the University as a MA Candidate in the summer of 2021, working as a research assistant with Naylor. Throughout the summer, we had a few conversations about "Embodiment Lab" and all I had to look forward to at the start of the fall semester, but I was not entirely sure what to expect. At the start of the semester, our community was basically split in half due to schedule conflicts, which required two sessions to be facilitated each week. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to participate in both sessions. One half gathered in what can best be described as a conference room. There may have been six of us in the room that first day. Each Lab member in attendance sat around the conference table and I was under the impression we were all graduate students. We went around the room to introduce ourselves, and I am not sure if the faculty member who was attending even identified as a faculty member until the second or third meeting. However, there really was no need for such identification as we were, and still are, all co-facilitators of our Lab space(s).

Through examinations of our individual positionalities and trajectories, we aim to connect our personal experiences as scholars in the space of the Lab and its ongoing development as an embodied practice, emphasizing the challenges of creating a care-full space within the context of the neoliberal university.

## *Embodiment*

We use embodiment here to describe how the Lab materializes though lived experiences, and the idea that human experiences, knowledges, and behaviors are shaped through the body and interactions with the world, which are socially and culturally constructed (Bourdieu 1977). Likewise, the neoliberal academy at its core embodies (as a structure) a fundamental lack of empathy and care. While the academy is presented as a meritocracy, exclusionary spaces still exist within its confines. Attentive to these dynamics, the Lab works to establish a space for different embodied experiences, which situates folks in intricate power dynamics and shapes skill development and knowledge production in academic space. The following testimonial reflects on situatedness in the Lab:

I joined the Embodiment Lab space when I started my PhD in Geography in Fall 2021. As a scholar coming from the global south, the Lab helped me find out my positionality by giving me a platform to always think about boundary spaces and limitations of scientific categories. I started questioning how our knowledge is embodied in our day to day lives by actively engaging in conversations around our frustrations, expectations, emotions, happiness, sadness, and everyday mundane tasks that become an interpretive and interactive process of research itself. It is by these interactions that I am interactively co-producing knowledge through the mode of interpretation from different backgrounds and positionalities. I see Lab as a collective space. It is our collective minds and bodies and everyday situations we go through that keeps us going with this lab. We are challenging our assumptions, and our research positions that make us aware of different ways of knowing and being.

The outcomes of academic labor are physically manifested in specific spatial contexts, which are shaped by both individual and collective practices within the academy. The production of space is preconditioned by the constant production and reproduction of the body, which constructs and is constructed by space simultaneously (Merleau-Ponty 1962). As Lefebvre (1991), notes the human body can be recognized as the boundary between the self and others, a distinct place for experiencing emotions and building self and social identities through lived experiences. Building on the work of feminist scholars, it can further be understood through phenomenological approaches (see: Kinkaid 2020; Longhurst 1997), where we encounter difference. Distinct functions of the body demarcate and sign their own space, generating traces in social networks, making place, and setting boundaries while also countering exclusions. Hence, the living body is successively linked to social space, crafting the concept of the 'spatial body' (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Lefebvre 1991), which is the spatial position and situatedness of embodiment in space and time, and depending on our projects and practices, our relations with each other (cf. Longhurst and Johnston 2014). Therefore, the embodiment of academic labor reflects the intricate relationship between body (i.e. individuals or institutions), time, and practices. Our inhabiting of the Lab space insists on attention to embodied experiences. As a lab member reflects:

I joined Lab in the Fall of 2020, after Naylor and I were told by many of our shared students that the two of us had a lot of alignment. In many ways, the Lab that Fall became a space to support our experiences through the pandemic, which I understand as being a central function of Lab in general. It is impossible to separate our embodied context of life (in that case, our physical isolation due

to the pandemic) from our work as scholars. It felt like the impacts of the pandemic were taboo in other academic spaces. Alongside that, we shared projects-in-progress, read articles, thought about theory. As a disciplinary “outsider” (I am an anthropologist, with heavy human geography leanings), it was a breath of fresh air to be involved (and invited into) an intellectual community working within the framework of “embodied” scholarly life. I’ve never felt like I didn’t belong because I don’t have “geography” explicitly in my academic credentials. Which I think speaks to the purpose of the Lab in creating an inclusive community.

As such, a theory of care-full engagement cannot be isolated from the different social processes operating at varying spatial and institutional scales, the neoliberalization of the university, for example. A growing body of literature emphasizes educational spaces as related to bodies and embodiment as both physical spaces that follow function, as well as mental and cultural spaces, which develop through ideas, representations, images, emotions, and symbols and how they emerge and change through time within social relations (Cook and Hemming, 2011). The challenges, opportunities, and growth of physical, mental, and cultural spaces influence neoliberal institutions attempting to produce ‘professional pupils’ (ibid), and indeed such framing often denies peoples’ embodiment in professional spaces. In Lab, we engage with a world rich with emotions, aspirations, inspiration, imagination, and countless processes shaping and being shaped by our cultural identities, practices and social interactions rather than being molded into the professionalization demanded by our institution. Our approach to embodying both the processes and the space of the lab is simultaneously personal and collective, shaped through shared experiences. Together, we foster a sense of belonging that navigates, challenges, and sometimes conforms to societal norms, or the expectations of a neoliberal university, its specific processes and spaces. In this way, our embodied space of the lab transforms from the abstract into a personification of our experiences. Cultivating and shaping these emotions, and intertwining embodied experiences in meaningful ways, requires deliberate nurturing. This includes encouraging both individual and collective efforts to foster personal and professional growth.

### ***Mentoring***

How we are trained and mentored is important and is imbued through all aspects of our processes of becoming geographers. In a care-full lab space, we can potentially break the negative cycles of carelessness that exist in large measure across the academy and provide a space not just of positive and affirming peer-to-peer mentoring, and one where we refuse neoliberal structures that suggest that in order to exist in the academy that you are part of a pecking order and counting culture (see: Caretta and Faria 2020; Oberhauser and Caretta 2019). We are all in a process of becoming scholars (see: Dufty-Jones and Gibson 2022). Mentoring in an ethic of care in research, teaching, and professional development is crucial work as we attempt to make care-full spaces of belonging. In considering mentoring, this testimonial suggests:

My PhD journey started with the Embodiment Lab in spring 2022. Unlike prior experiences, this Lab emphasized holistic research and learning. As we shared what was giving us life, I realized I was happy to be around this supportive and diverse group of people. The Lab has not just been an academic endeavor but

a personal growth catalyst. I've learned the art of self-compassion, especially in academia. Where I once berated myself for research setbacks, I now view them as growth opportunities. The Lab has honed my skills in critical thinking, writing, discussion moderation, and effective presentations. Furthermore, it's taught me to relish the small, everyday moments intrinsic to the PhD journey. This environment celebrates individual narratives, achievements, and even hobbies, fostering a holistic balance between work and personal life, aiding in stress management, and fostering resilience. My relationships with fellow Lab members have enriched my perspectives, filling me with inspiration. This Lab has not only molded me academically but also emboldened me as a scholar passionate about both creating and living knowledge. With the support of my mentors and peers, my confidence has surged, making me believe in my voice and potential.

Mentoring is not easily defined in this case as there is not one 'right way' to mentor. However, we draw from a suite of ideas about mentoring practice to suggest that it comes from experience. Drawing on the work of Moss et al. (1999), we suggest that mentoring is a practice of sharing experience, asking questions, providing support, making space, giving feedback, listening. Many note that much of the so-called mentoring that happens in the academy is not very effective or can be explicitly harmful (cf. Fem-Mentee Collective et al. 2017; Singh and Mathews 2019). Thus, there are increasing calls in geography for different approaches to mentoring, such as the collectives discussed in the introduction and also those that explicitly call for feminist approaches (cf. Caretta and Faria 2020; Naylor, forthcoming; Oberhauser and Caretta 2019).

To facilitate care-full practices in our lab (cf. Hawkins 2019), mentoring is an 'all of the time' consideration that is not only top-down but is also peer-to-peer. This statement is not to suggest that we are always available or that we have no boundaries in our mentoring relations. What we are suggesting is that we mentor at all levels starting from a foundation of care, while also continuing to receive mentoring at all levels—in this case we are all peers as scholars in the process of becoming. Here we are reminded of the way the neoliberal university actively marginalizes and otherizes—we see that it was not built for us—and we are mindful that everyone does not have the same background and experiences and so we need multiple mentoring approaches, including those in a lab space. On the experience of peer mentoring a lab member offers:

I enrolled as a Ph.D. student in Geography in 2022. I heard about the Embodiment Lab from the graduate director. I was excited to join the Lab because the concept of a social science research lab was new to me. However, I could not join because of conflicting schedules of TA responsibilities. I joined the Lab in the Spring 2023, and it gradually turned into a space for learning, sharing, caring, and growing for me. For example, I attended the 2023 AAG Annual Meeting and presented a paper on my research. It was my first time attending AAG and I was anxious about presenting my findings in front of so many scholars. The Lab saved me with practice sessions before the conference. The feedback from labmates, different perspectives on my research, and encouragement helped me communicate my research, resulting in my winning a doctoral research award. Within this short, shared journey with the Lab, I

realized how it could become a space to ease discomfort, diminish dilemmas, and develop the confidence to overcome hurdles. I started to feel a trusted relationship with this Lab and want to depend more on this mentoring space for learning, sharing, caring, and growing.

Giving feedback on talks is a regular practice, or taking mentoring 'moments,' where a question or activity can be 'teachable.' For example, we might discuss how to respond to revisions for any paper, while also assisting with revisions on a specific paper and so on. These are practical ways in which we make every effort to support one another. And maybe such practices do not seem so wildly different than in other lab spaces, but it is how we enact these practices. In this form of mentoring practice, it can be peer-to-peer and collaborative, ultimately undoing a tendency within the neoliberal university that encourages and rewards only transactional mentorship of up and coming 'proteges' (Malmgren et al. 2010). Mentorship that values only those deemed 'worthy' or who come to the university with a 'valuable' skill set to a potential mentor is no more than a reproduction of exclusive structures of power and privilege. Reflecting on establishing a formal mentoring relationship, a lab member offers:

In Fall 2020, I connected with Naylor after she participated on a virtual AAG panel on "Positive Steps Toward Tenure," which I attended. We were in the height of the pandemic, and everything was remote. It was also my second year as a postdoctoral fellow at Colorado State University, a position I started just one semester before everything went online during the pandemic. Early career activities - networking, building relationships and collaborations, attending conferences, building out a research program - were infinitely harder during that time. I reached out to Naylor because she embodied a welcome (and still rare) feminist approach to mentorship. In turn, she invited me to the Lab, also fully remote back then. I was lucky in that regard because I entered into the Lab on the same footing as everyone else, even though I was far away from Delaware. I found the Lab to be a wonderful space - joyful, caring, generative - where faculty, students, and visiting members could bring their full selves alongside their passion for discussing the newest scholarly articles or concept mapping the history of critical theory in geography. Starting each Lab with a time to share what is bringing us life says it all.

Mentorship is not an honor bestowed upon a mentee, but rather, a caring, community practice that has the potential to establish and normalize alternative forms of intellectual and social relations. In cases like the Fem-Mentee Collective (2017) approaching mentorship with care at its center can be understood as a political project in its own right. And so, in the Lab, we provide a multiplicity of mentoring opportunities, whether it is a mentoring moment or otherwise. It is permeated through space to weave a web of care and belonging.

### *Belonging*

Developing care-full practices in our labs opens the door to building more inclusive spaces where a sense of belonging can be fostered. Belonging, a complex, multidisciplinary concept, is a mode of "feeling-in-common" (Wright 2015: 398) which represents a mix of personal, intimate feelings and attachments to people and places, and wider social processes of inclusion/exclusion (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2016). To belong is to feel seen, and



supported in the spaces you inhabit in both professional and personal spheres. Spaces of belonging can serve as a powerful antidote to the negative and toxic dynamics that often plague academia, offering a refuge for healing from abusive or neglectful hierarchical structures. As one lab member notes:

I discovered the Lab before I enrolled in my Ph.D. program at the University. I stumbled upon the Lab's website through a faculty member's CV, who is not only a co-founder of the space but also my PhD advisor today. I was thrilled to be invited to be a part of this 'lab' of social sciences made up of individuals eager to share free and critical thoughts and predominantly consists of like-minded human geographers from various stages of their academic lives. As I joined as one of the newest members of the Lab in Fall 2023, I was immediately encouraged to dive into thinking collectively and contributing to the construction and reconstruction of this space of belonging. Here, faculty and students are equals, fostering care without judgment. From joint papers to 'Theory Extravaganza' discussions and mock presentations, the Lab encourages collaboration. The question 'What brings life to you?' had never been posed to me before. This regular practice at the beginning of Lab meetings now compels me to reflect each time I must respond, and in that moment, I answer with openness, knowing I have a supportive cohort as I move forward in my academic journey.

Building community – of which collaborative work and collective support are part of – is intrinsically tied to belonging (Wright 2015). As Wright (ibid) notes, building a sense of belonging to groups and places shapes how we learn to live and work with one another. Further, fostering spaces which actively encourage belonging works against currents in our discipline and workplaces which seek to firmly locate us out-of-place. Reflecting here:

I joined the round table in 2017 as an international PhD student and graduated in 2023. After the Lab founder invited me to the Roundtable, I felt relieved because I had found a place to discuss my research projects. The Roundtable was a place to read papers or book chapters, peer-review each other's papers, and prepare conference presentations. It was an excellent place to improve my academic performance. As the Roundtable changed into a Lab and the outbreak of COVID-19, this meeting became an even more important place for me. The Lab gave me 'inclusion' as a scholar, friend, and member of society. Some colleagues used to question why we added "Lab" to the name of our meeting - "You guys don't conduct (scientific) experiments together, do you?" - many don't understand how a scholarly community like ours exists, where we think, discuss, and solve problems but we're not working on the same project. This is also a sign of discriminatory opinion due to the focus given to Science and Engineering in academia. Making an inclusive scholarly community is a big task and requires sacrifice, but students in social science need rights to have careful research environments.

Belonging in a lab space is critical especially for people from marginal identities in higher education because of the neoliberal character of the university and expectations to accept the notion that they are racially and culturally marginal and therefore 'less than human' (Gayeles 2023). The field of geography, alongside academia more broadly, has long centered

white, able bodied, cishet scholars (Kinkaid et al. 2022; Oliver and Morris 2013) and BIPOC scholars continue to be underrepresented in the discipline (AAG 2023; see also: Mahtani 2002; 2006). Work by Kinkaid et al. (2022) illustrates the ways cisheteronormativity and whiteness shape our institutions and knowledge production (see also: Gieseking 2023). Attempts to belong in academic spaces, then, are often reflective of the same exclusions. One lab member offers:

I started working with Naylor in 2017 after being introduced by my advisor. Initially, I was unsure of my place in the Lab, as I was in a different department, and geography felt foreign to me. However, the Lab ended up being a place of community at a time when my own department felt somewhat inhospitable. The Lab ended up being a space of refuge for me and my work. In the Lab, I experienced a type of engagement and critique that took my research as it was, on its own merit. No one tried to change my research or move it down a path that fit neatly into my discipline. I soon realized the Lab was my intellectual community. This was especially true during the pandemic, when I was feeling isolated as I was completing my dissertation and on the job market. I ultimately left the Lab in 2021 after graduating, but joyfully returned in 2023 as an alum. The Lab, for me, serves as a blueprint for the work that I do now. It is a model that I try to replicate, if only to ensure that my students have the kind of mentorship I had.

The sense of marginality and the feeling of 'out-of-place' in the neoliberal academy is often dealt with as a pathogenic problem that needs a cure—much like building resilience to adapt to a dominant culture (Butler 2022)—which is problematic because it places responsibility on the individual, not the system that creates academic barriers in the first place (ibid). Butler (in studying higher education in the UK) further argues that the feeling of 'out-of-place' and 'less-than-human' in an academic space is not located in the individual, rather it is a product of a sense of unbelonging, alienation, or disconnect in that environment (2022: 40). And so, we have to think through not just creating a haven for shared resilience within these systems but using Lab as a space for collective action that visibly and loudly pushes back on the academy.

Making a space of belonging thus becomes a site of intention, where we work to empower researchers as producers of knowledge and such intentionality is ingrained in the Lab. We create a sense of belonging by acknowledging the embodied experience of being a scholar. As another member of the lab reflects:

I joined the Lab in spring 2023, and am one of the newest members. This semester we had the goal of starting a collaborative journal article. Aside from a few weeks spent preparing for AAG and discussing qualitative research methods, we have mostly discussed what we would like this paper to be about and which topics to focus on. Meetings are generally led by faculty members and senior graduate students, but in my experience, all input is welcome. It is a place for us to share what is happening in our lives, ask questions, and collaborate. On Mondays this semester, every time I come to Lab I feel a bit more grounded. The practice of sharing "what's giving us life" always gives me something to look forward to. We get to know each other better, and I enjoy taking a moment to share a bit about what's going on with me, and listening to what others are up to. Sometimes we don't have anything positive to share.

That's ok. Those of us who are having a tough week can release some tension, and appreciate just being in the room and seeing each other's faces. Post-covid, this is really a blessing.

Centering on our connections to one another, respecting where each of us sits at any given moment, and recognizing that our work is not disconnected from our personal lives and lived experiences is foundational for creating a space in which we can belong in-common with each other. Our Lab works towards this praxis of acknowledgment, care, and support because we are concerned about our embodied relations within our own research and academic relations. The Lab is not only a space for building processes of belonging and mentoring within us, but also across departments, multiple universities, and geographic distance. We attempt to blur delineations of who is considered a mentor, where knowledge comes from, and how research is conducted, and we do so collectively.

### *Time*

In this journey to challenge the constraints of the neoliberal academic system, time remains a site of resistance in both the experiences of Lab members and the space we have created. The academy at large (in the United States as elsewhere) is structured around temporal regimes that are fast-paced and metric-oriented (Meyerhoff et al. 2011; Mountz et al. 2015). More than just emphasizing speed, the neoliberal academy implies a certain capitalist linearity: that is, that with 'enough' work and productivity, a scholar will eventually be rewarded for their waiting with some level of job security. However, in many cases the waiting period is indefinite, and instead scholars are shuttled between temporary contracts and different places often at the expense of their relationships, mental health, and personal goals (Hughes 2021). In the face of this reality, we make time for each other, as one lab member reflects:

I joined the Embodiment Lab in the Fall 2022, when I was a second-semester Ph.D. student in Geography. I still remember the first time I arrived half an hour late (which is a lot as each session is around 1 hour), and I expected some remarks about punctuality or at least a disapproving look to make me feel embarrassed, but in contrary, I was welcomed warmly. As a new member, I introduced myself and everyone else did too. Then I felt that I am officially a group member- a precious feeling for an international student distanced from her social and scientific circles. Each semester, we set lab goals early on try to support each other and collaborate. In fall 2022, each member chose a date, shared files, and discussed ideas. The Lab values flexibility and reschedules if someone needs urgent support with some writing or interviews. In Spring 2023, our goal was to write a paper together about "Embodiment Lab," so we are experiencing and practicing collaborative work in a big group (we are more than ten people) as well as supporting each other in our academic journey.

The collaborative effort of writing this paper with a group of sixteen people was an exercise in *slower* scholarship, where our lab prioritized creating a collective environment for sharing knowledge and experiences over focusing solely on publication and productivity, pushing back on the time/productivity metrics we are often compelled to uphold (see also: Hawkins and Kern 2024). As discussed in Johnson et al. (2021) in writing about feminist and anti-colonial spaces, incorporating personal perspectives, rather than following common

expectations of so-called 'objective academic writing,' was something we challenged through active participation and mutual understanding.

The toll the neoliberal academy takes on our bodies, careers, and relationships demands that we provision time to care for ourselves and others, to rebuild our worlds to be more livable (McDowell 2004). Recognizing that the conditions of the neoliberal university are at largely unreasonable and unsustainable, feminist geographers argue for "slow scholarship" (e.g., Mountz et al. 2015). Slow scholarship "represents both a commitment to good scholarship, teaching, and service and a collective feminist ethics of care that challenges the accelerated time and elitism of the neoliberal university" (ibid: 1237). We recognize that there are some "temporal privileges" assigned to slow scholarship, and so we emphasize that is not just about changing pace but about re-making the conditions of the academy as a whole and resisting its romanticization (see: Meyerhoff and Noterman 2019; Naylor, forthcoming). Simultaneously, the pace at which we think and move and act in the academy is an embodied experience that suggesting a fast or slow approach does not fully capture. So, for us and others this slowing is "not just about speed" (Fent et al. 2022: 183), or even time. Changing pace opens up new moral landscapes and scales of scholarly engagement, encouraging researchers to cultivate meaningful relational conditions for scholarly inquiry rather than productivity (Grandia 2015: 304). Without consideration of pace and time, scales of engagement and relationality remain limited.

The ever-increasing demand on our time as scholars distracts from our time as people, and thus the Lab allows members to reconsider their relationship to productivity and the pace of their scholarship. When time is not consumed by constant academic progress, and inevitable burnout, opportunities for reflection and care become more possible, as the founding lab member suggests:

As a founding faculty member of the Lab, I do not think I fully understood the impact of the Lab for myself or students until I was faced with being the only faculty member present during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Previously, Lab had been a fall and spring semester in-person gathering only. But in the summer of 2020, the student members asked if we could have weekly Zoom Lab over the summer. At one point-drawing from *Code Switch*, where hosts asked guests, what songs were giving them life-I suggested we go around and find anything positive to remark on that was "giving us life." It is a practice that saw us through the worst of the pandemic and we continue it today. The way we structure the Lab is undergoing change as members at all levels work to co-facilitate. Advances in technology allowed us to go hybrid and across time zones to maintain long-term mentoring relationships. Presently, most Lab members are in the early stages of building their research programs. It is, for me (tenured faculty), a space of enrichment and where I can interact as a scholar in the process of becoming, watching others flourish.

The Lab represents one space of relational engagement where the pressures of the neoliberal university are not the central factor that organizes our time, presence, or relations.

The Lab is a space where scholars share ideas and cultivate networks amongst each other that transcend time and space. Thus, it is a space where creativity and playfulness are encouraged through interactions and activities between scholars, including those who might

not otherwise have worked together because of sub-disciplinary siloing or physical distance. Spaces where scholarly interactions are structured around reflection, creativity, and care without a temporal imperative are also crucial to opening up spaces where scholars can become attentive to points of political solidarity and collective action, which are the basis of challenging working conditions that are oppressive (McLean and de Leeuw 2020).

## Concluding thoughts

There is no single framework or guide to creating a care-full lab. It is a messy and dynamic process. Our Lab is just one example of how this process may take shape; and yet, we constantly reshape and remold our space. Since 2015, the Lab has been renamed, forced online by a global pandemic, and, when needed, split in half due to scheduling conflicts. No matter the circumstance, we adapt, accommodate, and care for one another. The space we created is one which allows for a reconsideration of our relationships to space, time, mentoring, belonging, and embodiment. Ultimately, what we hope to have accomplished here is something that is both a public-facing attentiveness to how we can all work together in academic geography to build more caring spaces, and a inward-looking and reflexive document that we can carry through our continuous processes of working in this lab space and taking it with us wherever we go.

The reflexive character of the Lab, or our commitment to be reflexive, is foundational to our work as critical social scientists. Critical reflexivity implores us to consider our biases, identities, and perspectives, which inform, but also challenge, the way we each look at the world, institutions, labs, and one another. In this light, our meditation of 'what is giving us life' brings reflexivity to the forefront of each meeting. Some weeks, it is a challenge to call attention to what is giving us life, but that question opens the space to acknowledge these challenges. Through this group 'meditation,' we are vulnerable with one another. This vulnerability reminds us that we are more than academics. We have complicated lives and face challenges outside of our lab and university—hence the need for a care-full lab space.

We do not know what the future holds for this Lab. Every few months or so, members come and go, but members come and go on a weekly basis as well. Our co-facilitation allows us to adapt to change, which is partly why we do not aim to offer an exact prescription to reform social science labs. However, this effort, of which the Lab is just one example, unsettles the neoliberal university and the neoliberal conception of the Lab. If a lab's primary purpose is understood to further a grant or a research project, the grant or project takes precedence over members of the Lab; members are reduced to researchers, and connections are temporary. In the case of our Lab, this community of care is not bound by essentialisms, time, space, or some monolithic purpose.<sup>2</sup> Whether the Lab as it exists today will function in the same way is uncertain, but the feminist ethic of care we co-created in this space will no doubt endure in our future relationships inside and outside the academy.

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<sup>2</sup> Instead, as I—as the main architect of this section of our paper—write approximately 350 miles from (most of) my co-facilitators, I find that we are adaptive, reflexive, and timeless.

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