Recalcitrance and feminist pedagogy
Autoethnographic reflections on anti-gender mobilisations at the university

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Abstract

This article discusses an anti-gender mobilisation at the University of Amsterdam that sparked a widespread media and political debate about the perceived threat of 'wokeness' to academic freedom. Our analysis draws from a range of experiences, including classroom dynamics, institutional hearings, meetings, and informal discussions among colleagues. We examine the challenges of care and feminist pedagogy considering allegations that gender and sexuality programmes contribute to 'a concerning radicalisation' and endorse 'woke ideology'. Specifically, we explore how the conflation of an individualised notion of academic freedom and potential hate speech became plausible in the neoliberal university, and how we responded by reclaiming academic freedom as a justice-centred collective right and duty. In the face of institutional silence and ongoing denial of the legitimacy of non-binary persons, we engaged in recalcitrant acts of resistance. These

actions, which included discussing and critically analysing the allegations in some of our classes, underscored the university's inadequacy in safeguarding marginalised students and staff, as well as the academic disciplines we represent.

Introduction: 'An acute and fundamental threat to academic freedom'?

In December 2022, the executive board of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) received a whistleblower report from a lecturer in the social sciences alleging institutional wrongdoing.[1] The lecturer claimed that 'woke culture' and diversity initiatives negatively impacted academic freedom, teaching efficacy, and research quality (Stoker, Stolker, & Waaldijk, 2023, p. 7). He described this as a 'concerning radicalisation', asserting the propagation of 'woke ideology' (Stoker et al., 2023, pp. 17–18)[2]. In response, in January 2023, the UvA's executive board commissioned an external and independent committee, the Stolker committee, to investigate the issues raised. This committee defined 'woke' as promoting awareness about pervasive racism, inequality, and social justice, but noted that the term has also been used pejoratively to dismiss or undermine arguments, thereby infringing upon free speech (Stoker et al., 2023, p. 11). The debate, initiated by the lecturer's op-ed in the university newspaper in January 2023 and culminating in the committee's findings in July 2023 (Stoker et al., 2023), garnered significant media and political attention, particularly on social media platforms such as X and in mainstream media. The case reached national politics, with right-wing members of Parliament asking questions about the alleged clash between diversity and academic freedom (Dijkgraaf, 2023; Bracke, 2023).

In 2015, prior discussions surrounding diversity at the UvA gained renewed momentum, marked by student-led protests and the occupation of the university's main administrative building. The student's demands linked university democratisation efforts with the need to address and dismantle colonial legacies within its structure and curriculum. In response, the university installed a research committee. The committee reported a lack of diversity among students and staff and revealed that 42% of international employees with non-Western backgrounds had experienced discrimination, especially women (Wekker et al., 2016, p. 6). The university formulated a

diversity policy and established diversity committees in all departments from 2019 onwards. However, in 2023, these committees, policies, and related practices were perceived by some as a threat to academic freedom.

A significant development in Dutch universities involves increased attention to social (un)safety. Over the past decade, studies, reports, and media coverage have revealed various forms of inappropriate behaviour, ranging from exclusion, intimidation, discrimination, sexual misconduct, and scientific sabotage (KNAW, 2022; Naezer, Van den Brink, & Benschop, 2019). This awareness prompted a focus on improving workplace culture, leading to the mandated appointment of an ombudsman at every Dutch university in 2021. The UvA complied and appointed a coordinating confidential counsellor the same year, while revamping its code of conduct and complaint procedures. The case discussed in this article is situated within this broader framework of initiatives to address misconduct and enhance social safety. Although the UvA had implemented a whistleblower regulation in 2007, this case marks the first time it has been invoked.

A third and final relevant context concerns anti-gender sentiments. In his op-ed, the lecturer criticised non-binary gender identities and gender-neutral pronouns, calling it a scientifically unfounded trend that endangers the development of young people and society. Although he acknowledged gender variance, including masculine women, feminine men, and transgender individuals, he argued against recognizing identities outside the gender binary (Stoker et al., 2023, p. 18). This article identifies the lecturer's assertions as part of an anti-gender rhetoric that aims to challenge post-structuralist research in the social sciences and humanities (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017). Such anti-gender discourses attempt to invalidate the discipline's insights by appealing to the so-called objective 'truths' of the natural sciences, thereby promoting a binary and essentialist view of gender.

The term 'woke' is often used in these discussions, suggesting that certain individuals' and communities' experiences are strategically leveraged as mere identity politics for social or political gain, rather than being recognised as genuine and significant realities. This notion of 'wokeness' is critiqued for prioritising 'political correctness' and identity politics, potentially at the expense of more conservative, traditional values. The term 'can cause emotional distress, as illustrated by a non-binary student who described the pain of justifying their existence against allegations veiled under the guise of academic freedom' (Stoker et al., 2023, p. 19). Furthermore, such rhetoric undermines and targets the legitimacy of gender studies, a topic elaborated upon throughout this article. We refrain from describing the case as an 'anti-woke' action, as we believe this artificially constructs an

opposition between the so-called 'negative' aspect of woke culture and its often glorified 'anti-woke' counterpart. Using 'anti-woke' would implicate us in perpetuating highly populist debates without critical detachment.

This article examines how the whistleblower accusation, and the ensuing debates, contested and misrecognised central precepts of gender and queer studies. The issue extends beyond overt attacks on the field, revealing subtler contestations that appear supportive of the field while covertly undermining fundamental contributions. Additionally, we explore how we delineated or appropriated space to analyse and address these challenges. The article is positioned within the scholarship on anti-gender discourses, which addresses opposition to queer, trans, and reproductive rights by churches, social movements, right-wing political parties, and governments (Mayer & Goetz, 2023). It is crucial to expand our analysis beyond the usual suspects, acknowledging the increasingly *blurred boundaries* of these contestations even within feminist and LGBTIQ+ circles (Beck, Habed, & Henninger, 2023). The lecturer who filed the whistleblower report self-identifies as a left-wing, gay man supportive of binary transgender identities. He expressed concerns regarding non-binary identities, arguing that they contribute to a significant confusion and ambiguity, which could lead to the 'LGBT' community's alienation from mainstream society. He suggested that non-binary identities might inadvertently foster societal detachment – a development that would be detrimental to the 'LGBT' community's quest for acceptance and equality.

The lecturer's assertion that non-binary identities contribute to confusion and risk alienating the broader 'LGBT' community underscores the internal conflicts and complexities of integrating non-binary identities into the LGBTIQ+ movement and feminist scholarship. This reflects the historical tension within feminist theory regarding the acceptance of transgender individuals, with some segments sidelining or denying transgender identities (Pearce, Erikainen, & Vincent, 2020; Isenia & Steinbock, 2022). A significant shift towards inclusivity and acknowledgment of transgender experiences is reshaping these academic discussions. This shift is part of a larger trans-feminist critique aiming to dismantle and redefine traditional transgender frameworks (Bey, 2021). Non-binary identities challenge long-standing essentialist notions of gender, marking a crucial element in recognising the fluid and constructed nature of these concepts. These developments have ignited debates in feminist scholarship, underscoring its evolving dialogue on identity and inclusivity.

In our analysis, we explore how neoliberal values in academia have inadvertently favoured an individualised understanding of academic freedom

over collective and socio-political engagement, thereby facilitating the rise of anti-gender sentiments within the university. By examining classroom dynamics, we contend that the normalisation of anti-gender discourses is a nuanced process, manifesting more in the subtle privileging of certain critical approaches over others rather than an explicit endorsement of conservative ideologies. We discuss how we tried to remain true to our commitment to critical and feminist pedagogies. We finally explore distinctive forms of resistance – quiet recalcitrance – manifested within the silence demanded by the institution.

Method

This article employs autoethnography to critically examine our personal experiences in relation to broader social and political issues (Musariri et al., 2024, p. 9). As scholars of queer and gender studies and as assistant professors in the programme under investigation, we analyse how, during the 2022–2023 academic year, our field became contested in debates within and beyond the university.

   During the unfolding of the case, some of us were actively teaching, while others were involved in discussions with management at various administrative levels and on diversity boards. Some of us combined both responsibilities. Our research interests cover a broad spectrum, reflecting different insights and areas of expertise, yet all share a commitment to gender and queer studies. We draw on our experiences as scholars within the interdisciplinary social science BA programme that was under investigation; among us, two identify as non-binary.

   Autoethnography enables us to provide an account of how a highly publicised whistleblower case was experienced from within the university. This method is especially well-suited to study 'the demands placed upon employees within an organisational culture' (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2012). We found ourselves caught between organisational demands (such as the request that we participate in hearings and refraining from public engagement), and the urge to defend our field of study and our non-binary students, as well as to correct the many factual mistakes and omissions apparent in public reporting on the case. This tension prevented us from contributing to the framing of the case publicly, although within the university, we did offer our analysis of the case as a manifestation of anti-gender mobilisation. This article is one response to the requested silence: a documentation of our analysis of the case's impact.

Autoethnographies are inherently complex, and this one is no exception. Methodologically, the complexity partly arises from our lack of foresight in keeping diaries or notes before realising we would be writing about our experiences. As Catherine Lee (2018) argues, memory serves as both a valuable resource, granting access to a wealth of data, and a limiting factor, as it is inherently selective – shaping, distorting, and constraining recollection (2018, p. 313). Therefore, while striving to present the essence of our experience, we acknowledge the limitations of memory and the selective nature of storytelling in autoethnographic research.

The decision about what to include and exclude from our analysis was not motivated by a desire to focus on what one might call a 'perpetrator' – a perspective beyond the scope of this article. Our focus is primarily on how we navigated the situation. From an ethical perspective, we selectively draw on our experiences to safeguard the privacy of all involved. Thus, we rely mostly on information already in the public domain, such as court records or the Stolker Committee report. This is not because we believe these sources reveal the complete truth, but because they prevent the unnecessary exposure of private information and protect the privacy of individuals.

This autoethnography is inherently complex because it involves being immersed within the very site being described and analysed. The collaborative nature of our writing shapes our analysis and intertwines knowledge production with our lived experiences. We write collaboratively and shift between the pronouns 'we' and 'I' to differentiate between collective and personal experiences as subjects and researchers who share partially connected experiences with the case (Mann et al., 2011). By writing collectively, we have tried to move beyond the immediacy that autoethnography might suggest – collapsing presentation and representation or 'telling it like it is'. Writing together became a form of mediation, a compound analytical lens to closely read and discuss each other's contributions.

Anti-gender mobilisations and the focus on non-binary gender identities

Since the publication of the lecturer's op-ed on the threat of 'woke culture' to academic freedom in the university newspaper in January 2023 and the establishment of the Stolker Committee, an animated debate ensued on social media, especially on X, where the lecturer quickly amassed 40,000 followers. Mainstream media also focused on the issue, featuring interviews and reports about the case. Initially, university administrators requested

that staff refrain from engaging in public or internal debates, a request that was later retracted. However, in the public discourse, our students and particularly our non-binary students, our bachelor's programme and director, our field of study, our colleagues, and ourselves came under attack. This section argues that the case exemplifies anti-gender mobilisation, and reflects the current political landscape in which critical scholarship and activism on gender, sexuality, and race are under attack.

As Graff and Korolczuk (2022, p.6) assert, 'anti-gender mobilisation comes in different shapes and forms, depending on the local cultural and political dynamics'. We identify three elements of anti-gender mobilisations that were present in this case. First, anti-gender movements reinforce traditional binary gender norms, rejecting the idea that gender exists on a spectrum and insisting on rigid categorisations of male and female (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Corrêa, 2022). Second, anti-gender mobilisations are tools for political mobilisation, with politicians and political parties leveraging anti-gender sentiments to rally support and advance their agendas (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Third, scholarship on anti-gender movements shows that these movements often target gender studies, portraying the discipline as a source of perceived societal decay, attempting to discredit its academic legitimacy and influence (Corrêa, 2022).

In this case, the public and internal debates following the lecturer's complaints about 'wokeness' and academic freedom zoomed in on non-binary gender identities. The lecturer asserted that there is no solid scientific proof for the existence of non-binary gender, dismissing it as 'empty hype'. He appealed to 'common sense' about the binary nature of gender, suggesting that gender studies scholars have lost this sense. Such statements on non-binary gender identities were often repeated in the ensuing public debate. The appeal of such thinking might seem surprising in a country with a strong record of LGBTIQ+ rights and positive attitudes toward LGBTIQ+ persons. However, research finds that positive attitudes pertain especially to gay and lesbian groups and less to transgender and bisexual groups (Huijink, 2022). This contrast is evident in the discussion surrounding non-binary gender prompted by the lecturer. It highlights a difference between merely 'protecting minorities', which often receives favourable assessment in Dutch society, and the challenge to the gender binary and heteronormativity in public spaces that non-binary individuals raise, provoking feelings of antipathy and fear (Warner, 1991). The lecturer's spectrum of speech ranged from unsubstantiated claims to outright aggression (see Rechtbank Amsterdam, 2023), sparking concerns for the social well-being of our colleagues and students and for the broader climate and discourse surrounding gender diversity in the Netherlands.

In their scepticism towards gender studies and appeal to 'real, ordinary people', anti-gender discourse aligns with populist political parties in the Netherlands. Like other European countries, these parties increasingly incorporate anti-gender sentiments into their political programmes. They oppose progressive politics, the knowledge underpinning these politics, and the institutions producing this knowledge (Verloo, 2018). It is thus unsurprising that two populist right-wing parties in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) and Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy (FvD) embraced the lecturer and his complaints, defending him and raising questions in parliament. For them, the lecturer's claims reinforced their argument that the social sciences and humanities, including gender studies, threaten society (Verloo, 2018). In their programmes leading up to the November 2023 general elections, the PVV mentioned 'gender madness' and the FvD referred to 'woke propaganda' as issues to counter (Van den Berg & Sedee, 2023).

Anti-gender campaigns figure gender as opposite to science and position transgender and queer populations and activist mobilisations as counter to biological 'facts' and moral values (Butler, 2024), thus framing them as threats to societal stability (Engebretsen, 2022; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Adding a layer of complexity to the case is the fact that the anti-gender rhetoric, articulated as forcefully as that of FvD and PVV, emanated from within the university itself. Anti-gender discourse often relies on pseudoscientific arguments to challenge scientific findings related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and equality (Verloo, 2018). It targets academic disciplines such as gender studies, painting them as ideologically biased, seeking to undermine their credibility, and casting them as a threat to academic freedom (Mayer & Goetz, 2023; Paternotte & Verloo, 2021). In this case, we repeatedly had to counter these assertions, both inside and beyond the university, due to questions posed by the lecturer. Colleagues from other fields often queried whether we believed in 'at least *some* biological basis for gender', seemingly testing our alignment with the perceived image of our field – a discipline seen as threatening academic freedom, and as having lost touch with the real world and 'ordinary people'.

Reclaiming academic freedom

To be accused of forming a threat to academic freedom as gender and sexuality scholars was frustrating for many reasons, not least because we perceive the claims of the lecturer as academically unfounded but also

because we see our field of study as one that is in fact particularly engaged with academic freedom. This engagement includes both the protection of academic freedom as a *collective* endeavour and ongoing critical reflections on academic freedom as a site of conflict about who and what should be taught by whom (Scott, 2022). However, ironically, in some of our classrooms social constructionist insights that are foundational to our field of study became grounds for legitimising the conflation of academic freedom with the individual right to free speech. While this conflation has been aptly debunked elsewhere (Bracke in this issue and 2023), we argue that its emergence in the context of the classroom could be explained through its intersection with another development, namely the rise of the neoliberal university (Readings, 1996).

We will describe and analyse how, in the context of the classroom, a volatile interpretation of insights from our field of study created a sense of confusion about the difference between academic freedom and the individual right to free speech, and how the interpretation and the resulting confusion are not surprising given the saturation of higher education by market rationality. Our goal is to illustrate the subtle ways in which our field of study became contested in our daily work practice, and how we attempted to push back by reclaiming academic freedom instead of accepting the proposition that we would form a threat to it. In the following, we focus on an autoethnographic account that reflects the experiences of one of the authors, at times shifting the pronoun from 'we' to 'I'.

A few weeks after the investigation started, students in one of my Interdisciplinary Social Science classes were reflecting on their own experiences with power relations in the classroom. In class discussions they asked questions such as: 'Is it true that the UvA is an overtly leftist university?' and 'Do leftist teachers and students impose their political views on other teachers and students?'. I noticed a sense of confusion among the students after the lecturer, one of their teachers, had left the university and no further information was communicated about the incident due to the ongoing investigation. 'Why is he gone?', 'What does that say about academic freedom at our university?', they wanted to know.

The confusion was partly caused by the institutional silence and resonated with a popular narrative that emerged in that void: that the lecturer was a victim. But it was also informed by what the students had learned about social constructionism and, more specifically, 'situated knowledge' as conceptualised in feminist scholarship: the idea that knowledge is situated rather than emerging from a 'view from above, from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988, p. 589). The students in my class wondered, 'If knowledge

is situated, why isn't the lecturer entitled to having his own position? Is he being cancelled?'. As such, situated knowledge became associated with the individual freedom of a scholar, teacher, researcher, or student to express any opinion. This appeared from students' inquiries, such as: 'Shouldn't academic freedom ensure everyone's right to say what they want?' and 'Isn't everyone's position academically legitimate?'.

Inspired by feminist pedagogical work on knowledge production as a collective and ethically constrained endeavour (Rooney, 2004; Spivak, 2004), I responded by inviting the students to take their own questions and concerns seriously and to make them into research projects – an invitation some of them accepted. At the same time, I felt conflicted about their questions. On the one hand, those questions seemed to blur the boundary between what could be considered hate speech targeting non-binary people and situated knowledge. It was striking and painful to see how a concept that lays the groundwork for a link between knowledge and in/justice by asking epistemological questions about whose knowledge is excluded/included could be used to imagine the possibility of justified hate speech. On the other hand, I realised how the students' questions could be interpreted as what has been called 'epistemic democratisation' (Hall, Heck, & Godrie, 2022). Epistemic democratisation emphasises the social construction of knowledge to investigate how it can be used to 'challenge inequalities and strengthen social movement capacity' (ibid., p. 28). It assumes inequality in the access, recognition, and production of knowledge to instead present complementarity and non-hierarchical relationships of knowledge as core values. Rather than embracing an 'anything goes' argument, epistemic democratisation aims to produce knowledge that is more empirically ac-curate. Academic freedom is closely related to epistemic democratisation through its principle of protecting the right to question the status quo, including concerns of epistemic in/justice. Seen in this light, the students in my class understood the departure of their teacher as potentially a case of epistemic oppression.

Yet, what also characterised the students' concerns was an understanding of academic freedom as an *individual* right. Instead, Scott argues, academic freedom 'is a *collective* right, referring not to individuals, but to us as mem-bers of particular groups (researchers, teachers, students) located within the space of the university' (2022, pp. 3–4; emphasis in original). Adam Sitze (2017) describes this collective take on knowledge production as a commitment to 'truth procedures'. By accepting to think and work together, academic work requires disciplined collective forms of reasoning as well as relentless questioning (by teachers, peers, and anonymous reviewers).

This is not to say that such academic 'truth procedures' are power-neutral and cannot be questioned. On the contrary: the history of feminist, queer, and decolonial scholarship has shown the necessity of questioning exactly such truth procedures to investigate their epistemologically exclusionary mechanisms (Anderson, 2020; Harding, 2004). The point is, rather, that this questioning should still contain a *collective* practice of thinking and arguing, which is a form of relationality that is discouraged in neoliberal thinking.

The students' inclination towards an individualistic understanding of academic freedom, however, is not entirely surprising. Both Wendy Brown (2004) and Chris Lorenz (2012) point to the saturation of higher education by market rationality. They argue that because of the dominance of neoliberal ideology, successive policies aimed at ensuring that the university efficiently contributes to the economy have resulted in higher education becoming a personal investment in the individual's future. Students have increasingly become 'customers', the university a 'corporation', and education a 'product' (Morrall & Goodman, 2013). The commodification of education has shifted the relationship to knowledge production among scholars, teachers, students, and university officials (Archer, 2008), creating an academic culture where what counts is what can be counted (Ball, 2021). Within this context, how can one expect students to embrace a collective approach to academic freedom?

The neoliberal instrumentalisation of education and the devaluation of a collective mode of knowledge production, Scott (2022) argues, go hand in hand. This instrumentalisation 'replaces something like the collective pursuit of truth [...] with the exchange of individual opinion as a self-affirming exercise' (ibid., p. 7). Free speech is made synonymous with academic freedom, a conflation that strips students of the ability to assess the value of a claim, including possible hate speech as part of a broader anti-gender sentiment that we described in the previous section. Any framework for assessment becomes suspected of endangering individual freedom. In short, the neoliberal instrumentalisation of education creates the conditions for the individualised notion of academic freedom to seem more credible.

Anti-gender politics emerges beyond explicitly hostile and radical right-wing discourses. It gains a foothold in our daily (work) life in ways that are hard to pinpoint and that go beyond a perpetrator's space of influence. The self-evidence of an individualist approach to academic freedom in the classroom is one way in which this happens. Although explicit anti-gender sentiments are generally frowned upon at our faculty, their underlying logic seems to take precedence: the accusation that gender and sexuality scholars and activists are imposing their will and way of life on others (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017) resonates with students, staff, and officials. The intellectual

and socio-political underpinnings of a collective understanding of academic freedom are either dismissed as a threat to individual freedom or questioned in ways that appear innocent but are in fact insidious. Albeit implicitly and indirectly, the neoliberal university as such paves the way for anti-gender sentiments to appear less controversial. Yet, we choose to fight back by reclaiming academic freedom and arguing that our field of study, contrary to the general sentiment during the investigation, is especially equipped to protect this important right and duty by emphasising its collective nature, which, in fact, is threatened by the neoliberal university. As such, neoliberal university does not preclude resistance. We will discuss more glimpses of resistance in the next section.

Recalcitrantly moving with/in the testimonial void

The UvA case prompts vital inquiries into the efficacy of whistleblower protocols. In this scenario, these protocols ostensibly shielded persons who, instead of fostering ethical conduct, contributed to a hostile environment. Through personal attacks on colleagues and managers, along with offensive expressions both directly and on social media, the lecturer breached fundamental behavioural norms as per the Amsterdam Court (see the judgment of the Rechtbank Amsterdam, 2023). Additionally, he posted demeaning comments alongside portraits of his so-called adversaries and disclosed the identities of students who petitioned against him. The UvA opted for a legal approach, hastened by the whistleblower case, which plunged the situation into a state of suspension. Most attention and energy were channelled into legal proceedings, rather than adequately addressing the persons whose identities render them vulnerable in an academic environment that can be hostile to their lived experiences.

While the insistence on suspense and silence may be understandable from a managerial perspective, it inadvertently gives rise to what Carmona (2021) defines as a 'testimonial void'. A testimonial void is a specific kind of epistemic injustice, which arises when epistemic information is held back due to a flawed belief, both in terms of knowledge and ethics, that the recipients would not be able to process or use the information in a productive way (Carmona, 2021, p. 577). Students were exposed primarily to the lecturer's derogatory remarks rather than to other perspectives, and were thus denied access to other relevant 'epistemic input' (ibid., p. 583). Such epistemic neglect runs the risk of making already marginalised students feel 'increasingly marginal and insecure, possessing less and less epistemic

self-confidence' (ibid., p. 584). This was especially true in this case, as an authoritative figure used his position to pathologise their existence. Within the institution's focus on following the correct legal procedures, we struggled with respecting this choice while also addressing the epistemic injustice inherent in such an approach.

While the creation of a testimonial void constitutes a form of epistemic injustice, the void was not solely restrictive. Indeed, some of us met in the void where we found recalcitrant ways of gathering and interacting together. Hence, our way of resisting this kind of epistemic injustice became a form of quiet or under-the-radar resistance: recalcitrance. Recalcitrance is about relating and resisting; it is the resistance that is produced when being asked to align. In a very different context – that of information systems and management, and their objects under scrutiny – Sørensen et al. (2001) argue that recalcitrance refers to the way in which objects under study are uninterested in the questions they are asked. 'Recalcitrant objects provide answers on their own terms, rather than those of the authorities studying them; they can object' (Sørensen et al., 2001, p. 301). While we became objects under scrutiny, we rejected the frames and questions imposed on us: that we were potentially threatening academic freedom in our efforts to include non-binary identities in our curricula and that we had to keep our mouths shut until a legal decision had been reached. Rather, we provided answers on our own terms by changing some of our curricula and we looked for moments to break with the call to calm and silence, in muffled tones and with a sense of (painful and joyful) companionship.

Recalcitrance manifested in sharing information with uninformed colleagues and friends, and in expressing anger and frustration together – but only after closing our office doors. It was also part of how phone calls and text messages were exchanged to warn each other about the lecturer's violation of his restraining order, as he was moving around the building with cameras and sound recorders. Finally, writing this article is another act of recalcitrance where we, collectively, offer a different frame for what happened at our institution. Hence, in modes of recalcitrance, we, including our direct managers, cared for one another, as the institution at large focused on following the right legal procedures.

While we found companionship together in our refusal, some of us continued teaching and felt that the testimonial void and epistemic neglect had to be challenged. In what follows, we shift again the pronoun from 'we' to 'I', as this part reflects one of the author's specific recollections of that time of teaching.

As both the programme in gender and sexuality studies and my queer and non-binary sense of self – which I shared with several students at that

time – were explicitly attacked, I felt I had to take an explicit position against hate speech. I wanted to break the testimonial void and the injustice being done to students who were confronted with the lecturer's derogatory points of view. During some of my classroom interactions, I openly discussed some of the allegations and the (sadly familiar) attempts to pathologise non-binary people. I shared pieces of information about his publicised claims and how they were circulating, as it had to be made explicit that instead of debating the legitimacy of non-binary existences, we would be studying universalising claims about 'the binary' and its assumed health. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asked: 'Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible [...]?' (Butler, 1999 [1990], p. ix). In our course, this question was met with a collective and resounding 'no', one that, again, refuses the anti-gender or 'gender-critical' terms that were currently circulating beyond but also within our institution.

By making explicit that in our class we would follow feminist and critical pedagogies by, among other things, reading potentially transformative works – those under open attack – I tried to stage some grounds from which our further discussions would potentially flourish. With such premises, we could care for and acknowledge non-binary students, as well as ask analytical questions about the way anti-gender campaigns are gaining ground, including within our own learning environments.

These were generative classroom interactions by which we – teacher and students – interrupted both the testimonial void and the normative anti-gender frames we were dealing with. For Emily Gray, this is a pedagogical classroom moment of reflection, allowing us to 'ruminate upon our queer lives' (2019, p. 153), which is a way to reconfigure the status quo collectively, with both queer and non-queer people affected by the normalisation of anti-gender frameworks.

Therefore, despite – and, even more explicitly, *because of* – what was going on within the institution, there were also moments where we got to co-create classroom atmospheres of care, empathy, worry, (queer) joy, and other kinds of embodied knowledges in relation to the attack. Feminist and critical pedagogies centre collectivity and ethics, and resist the temptation of simplistic objectifications, striving for an emancipatory culture of schooling (Darder, Hernandez, Lam, & Baltodano, 2009, p. 10). With the critical feminist pedagogical call for an unapologetic centring of multiple 'voices and lived experiences associated with issues of gender inequalities and heterosexual domination' (ibid., p. 213), we were able to discuss and undo the truth claims about the 'dangers' of non-binary senses of self of several queer and/or trans*

students within this specific classroom setting. As bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*, teaching is 'a performative act' (hooks, 2014 [1994], p. 11), and it is in the feminist classroom that we potentially find a space for radical change as well as a place where, in this case, non-binary students could potentially 'experience education as the practice of freedom' (ibid., p. 15). This is a practice in which we – students and teachers – refuse and resist claims that pathologise non-binary students' existence.

The call to stand behind an institution that investigates whether discrimination could be a potential expression of 'academic freedom' is a way to *uncare* for marginalised students and employees, who are made to care for the institution. Our only possibility seemed to be a quiet, recalcitrant moving with and within the testimonial void, breaking it in subtle ways, and in semi-private moments and relative safe spaces. While our need for recalcitrance reveals a painful situation of suspense required by a focus on following legal procedures – being put on hold and asked to keep others in a void – it was also a powerful way of quiet resistance by which we cared for one another and actively and urgently resisted the anti-(non-binary)-gender frames that were gaining ground within our institution.

Conclusion

Our reflections in this article on navigating the university amidst an external investigation into the threats of 'wokeness' to academic freedom serve as an effort to reclaim the narrative. We argued that the case can be read as an anti-gender mobilisation given its criticism of non-binary gender identities, ideologically driven accusations against gender studies, and political mobilisation beyond the university. The debates and investigation we discuss in this article were often not explicitly anti-gender, making them appear 'innocent' ('We're not attacking people's gender, we're just worried about academic freedom!'). Consequently, they were never held to account for what was, in fact, an anti-gender stance.

Our autoethnographic reflections on how social constructionist insights from our field of study were misinterpreted in the classroom illustrate the importance of thinking anti-gender sentiments and the neoliberal university together. Within this specific entanglement, a self-evident, individualised understanding of academic freedom made the individual right to gendered hate speech seem plausible. While the conflation between academic freedom and the individual right to free speech has been noted and criticised by others, we show that this conflation is particularly probable due to neoliberalisation of

higher education. Moreover, we argued that the utilisation of social constructionist insights from feminist scholarship to justify the conflation between academic freedom and potential hate speech can be seen as an opportunity to reclaim academic freedom. Feminist work, and feminist pedagogy in particular, is well-situated to provide a horizon of hope in neoliberal times by fostering a justice-centred collective notion of academic freedom.

Despite the neoliberal university's tendency towards individualisation, our feminist classrooms at times became sites of solidarity. The feminist classroom was the space where pockets of hope, joy, and care were created by recalcitrantly refusing the legal advice to remain silent. We explicitly voiced our position against hate speech in classrooms and in our offices, provided information about the case to uninformed colleagues and students, supported one another in the face of hostility, and sought joyful moments to recuperate. Within the testimonial void resulting from the institutional prioritisation of the legal procedure, semiprivate moments and relatively safe spaces emerged to care for marginalised students, our field, and ourselves.

Noten

1. In this article, we have opted not to disclose the name of the lecturer. We choose to focus on the broader dynamics at play rather than rekindle discussions surrounding individuals. While we do not disclose the lecturer's name, it may be possible to identify this person, at least in the near future. We emphasise that this decision was made with the utmost care and in consultations with multiple actors. The publication of this article is essential due to its intellectual and social significance within a larger debate. This decision aligns with Catherine Thompson-Lee's (2017) understanding of power dynamics within academic settings. Thompson-Lee posits that autoethnography empowers those marginalised or silenced by more dominant forces. Ethical standards sometimes necessitate protecting the identity of the accused, thereby perpetuating the power imbalance, and continuing the silencing of the victim. We argue that preventing someone from narrating their personal experience constitutes an oppressive act. In some cases, seeking permission is neither possible nor advisable, requiring authors to proceed without consent from those who oppressed them. Nonetheless, these experiences significantly advance academic understanding of these issues and provide invaluable insights, particularly in autoethnographic studies exploring mistreatment within academic environments (Ahmed, 2021; Essanhaji, 2023).
2. This article refers to the Stolker Committee, named after its chair, Carel Stolker. However, the first author listed on the committee's report is Jana Stoker.

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