feral feminisms
issue 18
fall 2026



ALL WORN OUT IN THE ACADEMY:
DREAMING FOR SPIRIT-HEALING EDUCATION

Edited by Lindsay Cavanaugh, Claudio Jaramillo-Yanquepe, and Siva Thangeswary Sivarajah

feral feminisms
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issue 18 · fall 2026

Credits

Feral Feminisms

Issue 18 · Fall 2026
www.feralfeminisms.com

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Thank you

Thank you to Jin Lee, Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, Ada Jaarsma, Jason Whitesel, Michelle Meagher, Kate Cushon, Lorna Weir, Jonathan Allen, and the Gender and Women's Studies Program at Brandon University for financial support of the journal. Thank you to the Department of English at Illinois State University for providing funding to hire one graduate student annually.

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Dreaming Homeplaces into Academia: A Love Letter for Those Who Are All Worn Out

Lindsay Cavanaugh, Claudio Jaramillo-Yanquepe, and Siva Thangeswary Sivarajah

Dear scholars, dreamers, and advocates who have found themselves here,

We have compiled these articles and creative pieces as an act of care and love for ourselves, for the authors, and for you, who we imagine to be fellow graduate or early career scholars trying to figure out whether you want to stay in academia. We see this writing as weaving together multiple movements for survival and resistance in the university.

Like many of the people in this issue, we are here, *still* in academia (for now), writing to you today because of friendship. A bond forged through pain, anger, relational resistance, creating homeplaces together, and experiencing moments of fugitive joy. We met five or so years ago; it was the beginning of our doctoral journeys at an "elite" university in Tkaranto (so-called Toronto, Ontario, Canada). Lindsay, a former high school teacher, had moved from the west coast of Canada to Toronto, to invite multiply-marginalized 2S/LGBTQIA+ educational advocates to create and analyze art about how K–12 schooling systems could be re-imagined (Cavanaugh 2023). Claudio had received a scholarship from Chile's National Agency for Research and Development (Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo, ANID), under the Ministry of Science, Technology, Knowledge and Innovation (Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología, Conocimiento e Innovación), to move to Canada and complete a PhD focused on English as an additional language literacy through a decolonial and anti-imperial lens. Siva, who worked in student services, decided to pursue a PhD focused on BIPOC, mad, disabled and neurodivergent post-secondary students that drew on his ancestral Tamil onto-epistemology and Thinai-based storytelling pedagogies. At that time, we each came with varying degrees of eagerness, discernment, hopefulness, and disillusionment with the alluring glow of "social justice education." To each of us, Black feminist, decolonial, critical queer, trans, and disability theories looked like medicine, like a bridge to our own ancestral onto-epistemologies, and where we could realize and enact our collective land responsibilities. Our doctoral programs, in comparison, seemed like a transitional space: a place for us to collectively theorize our lives and hopefully enact a world we wanted to see. After all, we pursued PhDs related to social justice education for a similar reason that bell hooks came to theory; we were "hurting" (1991, 1) because of injustices we witnessed and/or experienced in education systems. We "want[ed to] comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within [us]" (hooks 1991, 1).

Movement I: Pain

While all of us had different passions and reasons for pursuing a PhD, we found our way to each other because of pain.

First, there was the pain of wanting to make sense of and challenge the violence and injustices we saw in education systems, which led us to seek PhDs. Lindsay could articulate that first pain when she was training to become a teacher. She felt like her queerness was being framed

as incompatible or dangerous for working with children/youth. That second pain continued when she taught in schools and witnessed how colonialism, whiteness, and cis-heteropatriarchy manifested in the curriculum she was expected to teach and left little room for expansive visions of care and justice. For Claudio, the first pain came through his experiences learning English and later while training English teachers in Chile. In that work, he felt an absence around how imperialism and colonialism shape opportunities for students. For Siva, the first pain began in early childhood, long before he had access to the language of autism to understand his experiences. Entering preschool as a Tamil-speaking child who did not yet speak English, he was framed as "inattentive," "anti-social," "shy," and developmentally delayed. He told elaborate stories in Tamil, but the educators around him could not understand them. Their inability to understand his language became an assessment of his capacity: They could not hear his storytelling, so they could not recognize the knowledge, imagination, and relational possibilities he was already bringing into the room. Racism and ableism met in this misrecognition, making English proficiency and normative ways of communicating the measures of his development. Diagnosed as autistic later in life, he would come to revisit these early experiences and question the interpretations that had followed him through schooling. The pain was in being understood through deficits while so much of what he could express remained unheard. These experiences propelled us to research how education systems could be re-imagined.

Then, came the second pain. The pain of the supposed "medicine:" the shared realization that while researching educational injustices and cozying up to critical education theories, we would experience those very injustices we were critiquing in our program. We would feel a disconnect from theories. We would read about relationality, solidarity, delinking, decentring whiteness, monolingualism, plurilingualism, critical access, access intimacy, and challenging carceral logics in education, but we would not feel these practices being enacted or embodied in our "social justice" classrooms. We would instead experience and witness financial precarity, isolation, hyper-individualism, competition, lateral violence, gatekeeping, resource-hoarding, hierarchical relationships, and assumptions that graduate students, "especially here at this institution," wouldn't need support because they are "excellent."

the deficit you are never enough
reviewer 2 dislikes your writing. unclear. non-english.
rewrite yourself.

When we tried to name this disconnect, we were met with gaslighting (Sarkar 2024; Zembylas 2024).

Finally, there was the third pain. One perhaps worse than the other two, an intrusive stream of thoughts: We should have known better. We should have predicted this pain would arise. We were naive for thinking that because our school had the "right" social justice words, we would come out unscathed, or that we could avoid the institutional violence, that our past numbness to it might shield us this time.

the grief of cruel optimism. being duped
by shared words and experiences, a new loneliness

We knew that education systems often reproduce carceral, colonial, white supremacist, ableist, and classist logics like hierarchical and binary thinking (Dolmage 2017; Khúc 2024; Price 2024; Wilder 2013), yet somehow each of us came in with a bit of hope mixed with discernment.

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academia is a traumatizing place. another
displacement
from land from community from family from
language, our bodies.

academia tells us of medicine: tyrannies to swallow

but this will not make us better

For Lindsay, that second and third pain came when her initial advisor said he did not believe in doing anything for his students that did not directly benefit him, while also coaching a new faculty member to do the same. He said that if Lindsay needed more from him, this program was perhaps not a good fit. Her heart broke. She sank into a deep depression—thoughts of sleeping and not waking up. She considered dropping out of her program and life. A deep shame took hold. This conversation, which was perhaps a passing interaction for her advisor, opened a gash, a deep attachment wound connected to her past experiences of emotional neglect and abuse. A wound that Lindsay thought she had tended to years before, but one that became infected: the idea that she herself was too much, a burden. Lindsay had witnessed other early PhD students receive mentorship from their advisors. These advisors responded promptly to their students' emails, set up meetings with them, and even encouraged them to apply for grants. Lindsay started asking herself: Was there something about her that wasn't worthy of relational care—of her advisor's time and guidance? When she started mentioning her worries in private to faculty she trusted, one professor told her to just toughen up and just take whatever she could get from this "brilliant" scholar. Another professor said he couldn't wrap his head around the idea because that person was always warm with him; perhaps Lindsay had misread the situation and should be cautious to not bring this up with other faculty. After these conversations, Lindsay continued to feel doubt and shame around the dynamic. It was only through conversations with other students, including Siva, that she realized she wasn't asking for too much. Lindsay wasn't too much. Whatever had caused this initial advisor to act in this transactional way was not okay. She deserved more, and so did other students who might be experiencing the same thing.

academia is antirelationality, a sickness, an authority

For Claudio, the second and third pain came as a festering realization—or a *lesson*, to put it academically—that not all English(es), and thus, not all its varied speakers, are equally welcomed in academia, even in spaces committed to questioning linguistic power. The second lesson came while forced to learn academic English, where certain linguistic practices could still be positioned as inadequate, measured against institutionally legitimized forms of what counts as appropriate, competent, and scholarly (Flores and Rosa 2015, 2017). Realizations came while researching precisely what it is that we learn when we learn and teach the English language: its imperial syntax, its colonial morphemes, its insidious phonemes. The master's tool I teach with (Lorde 1984). I see myself standing in the unsettling recognition that even the language of our becoming carries the architecture of our subjection (Lorde 1984; Wa Thiong'o 1986) The third lesson came while exploring how English language teaching might become decolonial and anti-imperial, only to find himself mired in the very contradictions his research sought to unsettle.

This lesson came through the quiet persistence of raciolinguistic hierarchies (Alim et al. 2016; Flores and Rosa 2015), through the unsettling realization that linguistic legitimacy was never simply a matter of language itself. A contradiction lived rather than merely studied. An identity conundrum. A wound that not even C2 CEFR language (C as in carceral) could (ever) *heal* (hooks 1994).

> *Dear author: English or perish. Language is never simply the vessel through which we make ourselves intelligible. Decades of academic prose prove it)the good academy, though.(Gloria Anzaldúa's insistence that "I am my language")Anzaldúa 2012(refuses the separation of language from body, history, and belonging. Yet, here we are, writing in English, through the conventions of academic publication, attempting to trouble the very structures that make this language authoritative; will we ever dismantle the master's house with his own tools?)Lorde 1984.(*
>
> *knowledge of the oppressor*
> *this is the oppressor's language*
> *yet I need it to talk to you*
> *)Rich 2024(*
>
> *Adrienne Rich makes us feel and remain with this contradiction rather than resolve it.*
>
> *Dear editors: English or perish.*
> *Perhaps refusal does not require linguistic purity.*
> *What is the colour of your English?*
> *Perhaps it means inhabiting the language differently: bending it, interrupting it, and making it carry what it was never intended to hold.*
>
> *Dear academy: English or perish. Your culture of*
> *linguicide.*
> *Perhaps it is not named languages, it is about tongues, wild tongues, tamed tongues.)Anzaldúa 2012.(*

For Siva, that second and third pain came while he was experiencing verbal shutdowns brought on by prolonged personal grief. Within a classroom that spoke the language of social justice, a faculty member and former thesis committee member humiliated and repeatedly targeted him in front of his peers for his verbal shutdowns. The harm was sharpened by their overlapping social locations: he had hoped their shared experiences might make reciprocal care possible. Instead, he came to recognize how competitiveness, hierarchy, and institutional power could prevail over relationship-building, even among multiply-marginalized students and faculty. The heartbreak was not only in the harm itself, but in realizing that speaking the language of justice did not mean people would practice it in relationship.

> *academia asks us to exist through white ontology and epistemology*
> *but we need to rip it open, bend its will to our kin*

That second pain, the institutional betrayal, and the third one, the shame of being duped by our own "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), both contributed to psychological, emotional, and spiritual grief. It led to an imprint on us that we recognized in each other—what some scholars have called "spirit" or "soul murder" (Love 2019; Williams 1987; Wing 1990; Yep 2003). Yet, despite the name of those concepts, we did not let these experiences deaden us. Through coming together, we were able to enliven ourselves. Through coming together, we resuscitated one another, through transmuting our pain into anger, our grief into collective care.

Movement II: Anger

The anger through which we resuscitated one another was also an anger the white supremacist academy often frames as threatening, irrational, or violent, particularly when expressed by Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. Audre Lorde (1984) theorizes anger as carrying information and energy that, when recognized and directed toward action, can facilitate meaningful disruption and change. Anger is not merely a reaction to oppression but an embodied form of knowledge and self-defense, grounded in collective memories of oppression, struggle, and resistance (Doyle-Wood 2019). Our collective anger at the racist, colonial, imperial, cisheterosexist, patriarchal, ableist, and classist injustices we experienced moved us, alongside others, to remain in academia, at least for now, and to resist the conditions that sought to wear us out.

here we will always be
keeping time learning to not hold ourselves back

we bruise but this is a fight for something better
we choose this stubborn devotional love

In our case, anger moved Lindsay to start a care collective for graduate students in our program, a space that Claudio and Siva later joined and helped sustain for four years. Anger led the care collective to host drop-in social and support spaces for students who were feeling what we were feeling. Anger also led the care collective to generate a "survival guide"—first a Google Doc we circulated amongst ourselves, and then a website we shared with more students—as a form of peer mentorship. We shared practical tips, tools, and examples of work that had helped us and others secure funding, jobs, and opportunities, so hopefully other students did not need to struggle like we did to find this information. Anger also moved the care collective to create a series of professional development events and workshops to help us and other graduate students make sense of academic publishing and career pathways. Overall, our coming together through this care collective enabled us to navigate and survive our doctoral programs. In the wake of many of our members graduating, that care collective no longer exists; however, the anger that propelled us to care for one another collectively lives in this issue and our ongoing relationships with one another. Our call was an invitation for graduate students and early career scholars who had limited experience publishing. For some of the authors featured in this special issue, this is their first time publishing their work. Centring these voices is a political act of care—a way for us to support each other's growth while honouring our collective anger. Together, our anger led us, and the authors in this issue, to not only stay in academia, but to show up differently.

to make archives of friendship
bound by want, by reading, by work, by chaos

to refuse the anti-Black subterfuge that breeds complicity
in a world undergirded by anti-Black hatred

to learn to be in communion, a method and ethic
a relational form of feminism

to wield this solidarity like wind
like rhythm keeping crip time

to set fires with the stories
of Queer Trans BIPOC people, survivors, Black disabled mothers

While many of our experiences as graduate students wore us down, we found ways to enliven and sustain one another through coming together. Our pain and grief sat alongside our anger, laughter, and collective care. We could speak about what hurt, recognize one another's anger, and, through this love and care, generate our own type of homeplace, even as the conditions that exhausted us continued. *Another academia is possible.*

Movement III: Fugitive Joy

The joy that emerges through this love and care is what we understand as fugitive joy: the reclamation of pleasure, embodiment, relationships, and self-determination within and against carceral structures and institutions organized to deny us these experiences (Camp 2002). Cultivated through collective resistance, this joy moves through the homeplaces we create together: relational and spiritual sites of care where other ways of knowing, listening, being, and valuing can be sustained and brought into collective life (Brant 2023; hooks 1990). Within these homeplaces, the three movements of pain, anger, and fugitive joy remain in relation. Pain can be spoken and held, anger can move us toward refusal and collective care, and joy can emerge alongside grief and the ongoing conditions that wear us down. We understand these homeplaces as enactments of survivance: active presence, continuance, and creative refusal of the conditions that seek to contain or erase us (Vizenor 2008). The creative and scholarly pieces in this issue show how these scholars theorize and practice homeplace in academia, bringing solidarity movements into relation through friendship, storytelling, art, embodied knowledge, and everyday acts of care.

To begin the issue, Cara-Julie Kather's "Theory As a House: Fieldnotes on Academic Abuse, Healing in Traumatizing Spaces, and Inhabiting Theory" reminds us, in its words and creative form, that "being on the run is a practice of survival" that can enable survivors of sexual violence to exist within traumatizing spaces, like academia. Kather, who was sexually abused by a university teacher at age nineteen, does not shy away from trauma and pain, but models movement for survival. She imagines theory as a house, a homeplace, that she and other survivors can build through everyday movements of refusal, running, and frenetic writing, in and against academic spaces. Healing then is not at odds with chaos; it does not require

stillness; healing and building a "house" can exist alongside the messiness of surviving the traumatizing spaces of academia.

Similarly, exploring grief and joy side by side, Siva Thangeswary Sivarajah's "Devotional Love: Abolitionist Ethics of Care and Eroticism in Survivor Community Care in Higher Education" teaches readers that chaos is instrumental for creating homeplaces in academia. In this piece, abolitionist care is less about harmony and more about repair: knowing how to embrace inevitable ruptures and the chaos that arises. Drawing on Tamil Saiva Bhakti traditions, Sivarajah names devotional love as a type of erotic beingness that is grounded in displaced/unrequited, platonic, and sexual love. Sivarajah calls for honouring devotional love—the stubborn and chaotic affect that flows through and beyond pain—to move us through the anti-relationality of academic spaces.

In similar ways to how Kather and Sivarajah show us that homeplaces are not simply found but built, Gwendolyn Berumen and Alexandra Thomas's "Communion: Notes on Feminist Study, Radical Friendship, and the Art of Elizabeth Catlett" illustrates how a homeplace can be generated through critical encounters with friends. Berumen and Thomas's meditation on their radical friendship, anchored by Elizabeth Catlett's art, theorizes communion as an intellectual, affective, and spiritual practice of friendship through which knowledge is created across racial and disciplinary differences. Their friendship becomes a place where each can speak what the academy compels them to silence, be held accountable without being abandoned, and develop interpretations that neither could produce alone. Catlett's images of women studying together extend this communion across generations. Learning is sustained by loving and labouring hands: women share domestic and childcare responsibilities; move between the roles of caregiver, student, and teacher; and create the material conditions for one another to study. Maternal care is not individualized or confined to the private sphere; it circulates collectively, allowing knowledge inherited from women who came before them to remain alive. Their acts of reading, writing, arguing, laughing, and wondering together form an archive of friendship and a homeplace within an academy that fragments collective knowledge.

The value of friendship, sitting with art, and sharing knowledge creatively are also explored in Brenna Pinckard, Alyson Renaldo, and Stephanie Lurch's "Black Joy Vibes: Freedom Dreaming Through Collaborative Playlist Creation." Unlike Berumen and Thomas, who focus on visual art, Pinckard, Renaldo, and Lurch draw on music; they curate and share songs in a playlist first with classmates and then with us. Recognizing that music is an important site for survival, resistance, and futurity in the Black Radical Tradition, Pinckard, Renaldo, and Lurch are not just curating songs but are sharing them as a subversive form of knowledge sharing. Like many of the contributors to this issue, their work starts by acknowledging pain they have experienced within academia: despair, exhaustion, alienation, and neoliberal pressures. They give Afro-pessimism "a formal, chaste nod," but turn their gaze firmly toward joy. They write that joy and optimism are not just ideas, but practices for resistance. Moreover, their work teases out how pessimism and optimism are not binaries but interconnected projects related to dreaming for more. Their curation of "Optimistic" by Sounds of Blackness, "Broken Clocks" by SZA, "What the World Needs Now" by Luther Vandross, "I'm Here" by Cynthia Ervivo, "Saturn" by SZA, and "Ah Feel to Party" by Black Stalin moves us through grief, reminding readers that—as the authors articulate—"the most radical, subversive, and disruptive thing[s] that we [can] all do is maintain our proximity to joy."

Sound, music, and listening are also anchors in Medomfo Owusu's "Towards a Sankofa Listening Exercise of Intersectionality and Marginalisation." Her writing invites readers to

generate spiritual and ancestral homeplaces through what she calls the Sankofa Listening Exercise. Sankofa, "to go back and fetch it," asks listeners to encounter sound not as a consumable object but as a living relation among people, histories, spiritual practices, and places. By centring culture bearers, communal memory, and intergenerational transmission, the Sankofa Listening Exercise attends to the knowledge carried through gospel music, African proverbs, prayer, testimony, dance, and worship. These sonic practices connect diasporic communities across time and geography while preserving forms of knowing that colonialism, enslavement, and dominant institutions have attempted to silence. Hush harbours, churches, concerts, and everyday acts of listening become spiritual homeplaces where ancestral memory can be retrieved, embodied, and remade. Across Owusu's article and "Black Joy Vibes: Freedom Dreaming Through Collaborative Playlist Curation," collective meaning-making does more than preserve knowledge: It creates the relational conditions through which maternal care, spiritual connection, and ancestral knowing can continue to flourish. Owusu likewise teaches us that the Sankofa Listening Exercise refuses the fantasy that listening or scholarship is neutral. What we hear is shaped by the positionality, power, memory, and histories we have been taught to recognize. Deconstruction therefore becomes a long-standing question of narrative authority: who gets to tell the story, and who grants them that authority? This question also troubles academic English. If English determines what becomes legible as knowledge, listening otherwise requires more than adding marginalized voices. It requires unsettling the terms through which we have learned to listen to them.

Next, Prilly Bicknell-Hersco's "In My Soft (Black) Girl Era: Rest, Radical Possibility, and Reimagining Academia for Black Disabled Women" also evokes music and sound, when she writes out Doechii's breathing exercise.

> Uh-uh-ooh, uh-uh-ah, uh, uh, uh, ah,
> Uh, uh, uh, uh, ah,
> Uh, uh, uh, uh, ah, whoo-sah.

This pause in her text parallels the invitation in her theorizing: to slow down, stop overworking, and stop self-surveilling; to come back to the body in academia. Speaking specifically to herself and other Black disabled mother-scholars, especially those with non-apparent disabilities who are expected to perform normativity, Bicknell-Hersco makes a case for softness. She describes softness as a crip-feminist strategy that re-makes "legibility through Black disabled aesthetics of breathing and pace." Softness then becomes a practice for cultivating fugitive joy against the ongoing pressures of overwork and performativity in academic spaces.

While the previous pieces all focus on ways to cultivate homeplaces with other humans in and outside of classrooms, Ayesha Menezes and Ari Para's "Syllabi of Care: Dismantling Ableist and Anthropocentric Models in Education" draws our attention to care ethics between humans, the land, waters, and the more-than-human world. Focusing on the classroom, their work draws on common worlds theory and crip theory to offer practical strategies for instructors to assess if their syllabus: positions access as a collective responsibility, co-constructs knowledge with students, cultivates non-hierarchical communication, acknowledges human-non-human interdependences, and rethinks assessment in care-centred ways. Their work reminds us that a syllabus can reproduce the university's demand that bodyminds bend themselves toward institutional time, or it can itself be bent. In this second sense and reimagined as relational and unfinished, the language of a syllabus can make room for

interdependence, changing capacities, and collective responsibility. Educators and students alike can find fugitive joy in pushing back against the ableist and anthropocentric norms of the university classroom.

Together, through writing, art, and sound, these creative and innovative pieces move us in and through our bodyminds. They model how anger and despair can be challenged into running: frenetic, chaotic, generative movement. Stories of friendship, study collectives, and creative forms of knowledge sharing show us diverse pathways to homeplaces. Collectively, these stories honour a type of joy that is running away from pain, but still anchored in grief, and oriented toward futurity. This fugitive joy is radical and perhaps a necessary component for spirit-healing education.

because we dream, not abstractly but as an embodied practice
to deconstruct to listen
to inhabit to heal

because theory has always been a house
and it can be a home if we build it

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