

## Wayward academia—Wild, Connected, and Solitary Diffractions in Everyday Praxis

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### Abstract

In this article, I study the everyday conduct of pedagogies in the wild in contemporary academia by means of an analysis of modes of attention in random “thicker ‘moments’ of spacetime-mattering” (Barad, 2014, p. 169). These modes are discussed with the help of the notion of diffraction. I identify three modes of attention—the solitary, the connected, and the wild—that manifest themselves mainly as tensions between several modes. The study leads me to suggest that critical feminist scholarship explicitly aiming to disrupt and trouble normative academia often reproduces competitive, nervous practices, linear onto-epistemologies, and the commodification of both scholars and scholarship. These scholarly practices occur among students and supervisors alike, often in the name of necessity and even survival. Yet, despite the anxiety-inducing aspects of contemporary academia, diffractive moments have a powerful presence, too. In such moments, a wild and responsible otherwise is imagined and diffracted.

### Keywords

Pedagogies in the wild; everyday academic praxis; habit; diffraction.

## Introduction

Pedagogies in the wild encompass diverse aspirations to imagine and practice academia so that the current neoliberal, capitalist, and largely positivist drivers in universities across the world are radically challenged, and alternative avenues for academia are explored and articulated (Cielemęcka et al., 2020; Geerts & Carstens, 2019). How such reconfigurations translate into actual practices, habits, and routines in everyday engagements within universities, has, however, received less attention. For example, both Deleuzoguattarian philosophy and various feminist new materialist debates have been theoretically ambitious yet startlingly thin in their engagement with the empirical details on how academics sharing these ethico-onto-epistemologies practice their craft, and how these academics are able to survive—let alone thrive—within institutions. In some of the most powerful contemporary accounts, exit is the only credible choice (Ahmed, 2017; Halberstam, 2019), creating a new genre of “quit lit” (Rogowska-Stangret & Cielemęcka, 2020, p. 27). I will suggest here that we need a discussion of how to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) and practice feminist ‘wayward lives’ (Hartman, 2019) in academia. The focus on waywardness is a tribute to Saidiya Hartman’s (2019) analytical lens that carefully avoids a false choice between an appreciation of beautiful experiments forging new ways of life and an acknowledgement of hardship and injustice.

In this article, my gaze is on ephemeral events that may have consequences. I will study random “thicker ‘moments’ of spacetimemattering” (Barad, 2014, p. 169) in seminar rooms. I use my autoethnographic notes to analyse how the politics of knowledge production in contemporary academia manifests itself as advice and discussion modes, plus embodied sensations and gestures. This addresses the habits (Aldrin Salskov, 2020; Love & Peltonen, 2017) as well as desires of academics and their publics (Berlant, 2011; Wiegman, 2016). With this autoethnographic reading, I join others who analyse exclusions as mechanisms of ontological and epistemological access (Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019; Winberg & Makua, 2019).

Diffraction is here used figuratively, as a pluripotent potentiality of multiple differences and indeterminacy, emerging in a pedagogical situation (see Haraway, 2004, p. 103 for such figurative usage; Juelskjær, 2020, p. 58 for the pedagogical context). The concept is difficult to define without losing the richness of how it addresses worlding and ontology. “We can understand diffraction patterns—as patterns of difference that

make a difference—to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 72). The practices and habits of academic knowing affect not only the type of knowledge that is possible and responsible—the knower emerges through academia’s devices, techniques, protocols, seminars, and reading practices as well (Barad, 2007; Snaza, 2019).

## **Autoethnographic Notes as Data**

The study presented here is based on my own diaries during an autoethnographic fieldwork period (inspired by methodological thinking of Ettore, 2017; Lapina, 2017; Widerberg, 1995), designed to identify and understand academic practices among feminist academics. My method involved assembling random experiences, moment by moment, to detect how a collective feeling or mood emerges in an institution (Wiegman, 2016). For a period of one month, I took notes on the themes of knowing and pedagogy, noting small incidents, conversations, body language, and my own embodied feelings both during and after events that were part of my ordinary life that month. Methodologically, my work aligns with Springgay and Truman’s (2018) orientation beyond proceduralism; towards inventive practices that enable a heightened sense of the potentiality of the here and now.

My notes taken at two seminar series form the basis of the discussion that follows. The first seminar consisted of two separate meetings. They are part of the formal, obligatory Gender Studies PhD training. The second event was a one-off research seminar with international guests. Both events shared a commitment to feminist academic practices. As people present were not asked for their consent to be included in the research diary, I will mainly focus on my own embodied reflections in what follows. I selected close analysis moments that, in my experience, frequently recur in academic life and are largely unconnected to specific individuals. The events and those who took part in them are anonymised to avoid recognisability. My personal positionality matters here and cannot be anonymised: being a professor and a cis-female, white, middle-aged person hierarchically positions me in a very specific way. The situations that are analysed were not organised by myself, nor was I specifically invited as a speaker. I was not the focal point at any of these events.

To situate the study geographically, I take my cue from theoretical physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad's (2003) proposition that we are not "simply located at places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity" (p. 828), combined with an uncomfortable awareness that universities tend to universalise, thereby allowing the capitalist logic of sameness to enter all of their cultural spaces (Holmwood, 2016). It is, however, instructive to describe the specific place where my notes were taken, and to be accountable for characterising the geopolitical location, that is, a rather typical university context in Northern Europe; an institution that moreover ranks among the 100 best universities in the world but is unknown and unexciting to most outside its small host country. It is not interesting in any of the fashionable ways and does not represent any particular stance, whether postcolonial, indigenous, or that of the old elite. The institution is thus marginal in most fields, with possibly a few exceptions when it comes to natural sciences and medicine. While it is aligned with, and thus a part of, the normative power-holding academic community, scholars at this institution share a concern of not being visible or influential in the academic world. The lingering disappointment of being never recognised enough, is, of course, the main driver behind competitive cultures everywhere.

As is typical of contemporary parochial, minor institutions, this particular university harbours an exhausting demand for excellence and international (read: Anglo-American) recognition from its academics. Typical of Europe, the local languages are dominant in social situations, and most staff are not native English writers. While 74% of the research and teaching staff are locally born nationals, international recruitment is growing. In the situations described here the majority, but not all, of the participants are likely to identify as white Europeans. A specific feature of this setting is historical: Aspirational whiteness, or a melancholic longing to be part of 'proper' Europe and the 'West' that has never been quite accomplished due to anxiety about perceived connections to an imagined 'East' or the 'far North,' leading to defensive attempts to claim Nordic exceptionality (Oinas, 2018; Vuorela, 2009). Universities are prime sites for the performance of national investment in aspirational Western modernity, alongside the high arts, classical music, IT and mobile technology, and an exclusionary welfare-state democracy with an intensive border regime (Maury, 2020).

## Relational Knowing, Modes of Attention

When analysing the data, I identified three modes of attention, namely, the solitary, the connected, and the wild. What I call a mode of attention, subsumes ideals about the known, the knower, and the process, including embodied and affective aspects of methodology. These three modes and their differences are central to my analysis. In the examples I discuss, however, the events always manifest a tension between several of these modes.

Of the three modes, the solitary quest for knowledge indicates science as a craft conducted by an individual. Often it was referred to as something outdated, but a positive version of the solitary played a role too, especially in passing comments made by busy professors longing for a sabbatical. The isolation of a quiet library is not only an ideal of a masculinised genius but has a feminist version inspired by Virginia Woolf's *Room of One's Own* (1929). The exhaustion due to hectic, shredded days cut into slices of administrative and bureaucratic chores and teaching, and an anticipation of critique, underpins the romantic notion of solitude.

The mode of attention that challenges the solitary ideal is that of the connected scholar. Here, knowledge is constructed in collaboration and findings are negotiated and debated as contested, temporary claims. The object of knowledge is performative and relational, and therefore can never be settled once and for all. In connected scholarship, researchers are supported as well as challenged by colleagues in a constant negotiation over the value of their work.

The connected mode of attention, again, differs from the radical onto-ethical stance of the wild in its assumed stability of the knower, the known, the tools, and the textual representations; an orientation to the wild destabilises all of these. In the wild mode of attention, the phenomena studied are not seen as entities; rather, the task is a speculative, oddkin conversation (see Haraway, 2016, p. 2)—witnessing of fluid, dynamic co-constitutions together with multiple human and non-human others. The following examples will hopefully shed light on what precisely is meant by these three modes of attention while focusing on the tensions between them. The theoretical discussion is moreover embedded in my readings of practical examples. The discussion of diffraction must, out of necessity, follow after the examples, to make sense.

## **Warm Embrace and Icy Push: The Connected yet Solitary Modes of Attention in Seminar Practices**

The first examples illustrate pedagogical-epistemic practices as they came to the fore in two PhD seminar situations. They depict the tension between the feminist ideals of connected and wild learning and the constant return to the solitary mode of attention. Furthermore, the examples show that the connected mode of attention can also generate anxiety, competitiveness, and uncertainty. While the feminist pedagogies involved in these seminars explicitly work against the idea of mastery as an ideal knowledge practice, this ideal is implicitly invoked in the form of concrete advice when it comes to research and publications. In a mood of frustrated resignation both junior and senior participants seem to take for granted that there are only limited options available if one is to succeed in contemporary academia.

These seminars are formal components of the PhD program at the university in question. Students and their supervisors from several institutions gather here twice a year, meaning that most of the people attending do not know each other well. Many of the professors are acquaintances but work in different units, and they comment on the work of students they have not previously met. I participated as one of the supervisors, but as I was not the main organiser, I mainly was there to listen. The seminars are supposed to be comfortable, feminist environments where the students can receive feedback and advance their work. After one of the seminars, however, several students commented on the rather uneasy atmosphere, mentioning their own nervousness, detecting a vague tension between participants, most notably between the supervisors. The students seemed to regard nervousness as a given; as something they expect from these seminars.

In the first seminar, two students presented papers framed by feminist epistemologies, reflecting open-ended, processual conceptions of collective knowledge production in which connectedness and relationality were the assumed, idealised principles. The second seminar introduced similar themes of shared, collective ideals of knowing. It started with everyone addressing the question: 'Why am I doing a PhD?' The answer round was filled with enthusiasm, mentioning the pleasure of exploration, opportunities to exercise one's curiosity, learning and going deeper, and critical thinking. Many mentioned collective learning involving experienced researchers and peers, and

working in a community of scholars, thereby underlining the ideal of a relational, collective mode of knowledge production. Wild quests for the unknown and the connected ideals of collective learning thus emerged as themes. The political took centre stage as well, with many students mentioning ‘learning about inequalities,’ ‘going against power structures,’ and ‘precarity,’ although one commented with hesitation in relation to activist scholarship that she was ‘not sure if one can do that here.’ Some pointed to the importance of scholarship for earthly survival and the importance of working with ‘something that really matters.’ The chair concluded that most participants had said ‘something about learning, and enjoyment.’

Against a background in which the connected and the wild were explicitly favoured modes of attention, it is striking that when the seminar proceeded to discuss papers and projects in more concrete ways, the solitary mode of attention was the taken-for-granted means of knowledge production. In the following section I therefore show how responses to students’ actual papers and projects addressed the student as a solitary agent and depicted research as a lonely journey.

Four remarks from a seminar capture this preference for the solitary mode of attention in which both the scholar and her publication become commodities, and the research process is calculated to minimise certain risks. ‘What is your research question?’—a standard question in any seminar—appeared in my own notes, followed by a scribbled ‘Narrow down!’ A second set of recurring comments, ‘Read more!’ and ‘There is a whole tradition...,’ equally sound innocent, yet are also packed with frustration. Lastly, with the addition of ‘What is your contribution?,’ I argue that the PhD student is driven into a specific solitary-connected mode of attention wherein the textually present element of the wild is flagged yet suppressed.

### **‘Narrow Down!’**

The request that students narrow down their research question is meant as an encouragement to be more practical; to think about their study’s feasibility. ‘Within the confines of PhD research, one must find a question one can answer with the data,’ was my own advice, attempting to think about the project outside the norms of temporal linearity. The goal is to design a study that remains within the boundaries of the material at hand, where all the elements fit nicely together. The design should be

doable in three years not only because the university requires results, I noted to myself, but also for the sake of a sense of coherence. As I felt I sounded harsh and managerial, the need arose to add that this practical attitude also benefits the mental well-being of a PhD student, and probably is also wise in terms of funding. In ethico-onto-epistemic terms, however, recommending that a student narrows down their research focus and seek more feasible, publishable research questions, is essentially a demand to disregard potential avenues of thought and lines of flight; to close-down possible diffractions (Springgay & Truman, 2018). While a more practical, risk-averse attitude is meant to support students' mental well-being, it may suffocate the adventurous wild spirit that was initiated by the discussion of what inspires one to start with PhD research. Even though I was initially one of those who uttered this kind of advice, I also noted in my diary that 'these types of support normalise depression.'

Early stage 'Narrow-down!'-seminar rhetoric constitutes an outside that is disregarded by the clever scholar. The admired scholar establishes a story in which the known is already charted; what does not get asked and answered, is not accounted for. The seminar encouraged authoring lists of disclaimers of what a text had not addressed, stated in a matter-of-fact manner that avoids a defensive tone. These are rhetorical signposts that mark territories where exploration should not be demanded. Such a rhetoric makes known that what is not mentioned is wilfully not discussed, and the reader should respect this choice. This cultivates acceptance of a refusal to see beyond; a wilful ignorance glorified in the name of a publishable product. The seminar's rhetoric insists that the focus can and must be limited to what can be established within a given research project. While this 'narrowing down'-procedure may be a psychologically comforting way of proceeding when it comes to doing research, it suppresses uncertainty and curtails leaps into the wild, even in cases where the empirical data may suggest other, more novel directions. The procedure pre-empts the joy of discovery.

## **'Read!'**

The second remark, 'Read!,' is another apparently well-meaning suggestion made by fellow students and supervisors (also see St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4). At first sight, the request to read more seems to go against the modality to publish as efficiently as

possible. More often than not, this injunction, however, is not about enjoying reading more but about reading strategically. Similar remark expressed by a supervisor was the frustrated sigh of ‘there is a whole tradition.’ It indicated not only the academic demand that the student masters the literature of the field in question, but also exclaimed that the paper did not delineate the territory of chosen previous literature decisively. As supervisors are aware that the number of publications keeps expanding, the request to read more, but in a strategic manner, also relates to feasibility. The combined advice on feasibility ends up keeping references and theoretical framing within the realm of the familiar and fashionable; reaffirming the status quo of citational politics of race, class, and geopolitics.

The need to find and demarcate a territory, and then cover it all, reinforces the trope of the classic solitary scholar that, in isolation, could eventually master not only a specific library shelf but a to-be-objectified phenomenon, read everything relevant about it, and create and own a product. The idea of solitary reading until one has attained saturation implies the idea of ‘true’ knowledge that can be found and held as a possession. This kind of knowledge ownership marks a ‘proper’ scholar. What is remarkable in these seminar situations is that even those who otherwise root for radical, wayward scholarship, harboured the desire to have read all the theoretical classics in their original versions, as well as the minor literatures of alternative and activist contemporaries. The alternative-leaning scholars were far from immune from longing to master the latest should-already-have-read lists, and this was expressed surprisingly openly. The ideal of diffracted knowledge pathways suddenly disappeared and gave room to mastery in these discussions.

‘Read more!’ could suggest that the scholar is not alone, but could potentially receive ideas, guidance, and companionship from other authors, indicating the connective mode. ‘Read more!’ could be a diffraction to unknown wild openings. Yet, when such remarks as ‘Read more!’ are brief and the content that one is missing when not familiar with the ‘whole tradition’ remains unarticulated, the gesture merely indicates that there is something the solitary student or scholar should have figured out already. In response to ‘there is a whole tradition’ remark a few bold students insisted on being told the names of authors and books, but more often the reaction was a humiliated murmur of ‘thanks’ and bodily withdrawal.

Perhaps the bodily gesture of avoidance of eye contact and withdrawal could be read as a form of diffraction where open-endedness remains a possibility. Barad (2014) describes such diffracting moments as follows: “[T]his moment, like all moments, is itself a diffracted condensation, a threading through of an infinity of moments-places-matterings, a superposition/ entanglement, never closed, never finished” (p. 169). A moment of frustration might arise by the irritating tension of the being-with in the now, and it also carries a condensed past—perhaps a reminder of an earlier situation of feeling cornered in a classroom. A withdrawal of eye contact and leaving future readings at one’s own discretion is a diffraction to solitary and wild scholarly work. The student’s body language signals that this wild diffraction is defiantly not shared with this crowd, the discussion is over. It is important to note, however, that such quiet diffractions, with one’s gaze down at one’s laptop, are not collective engagements where alternative academic practices emerge, however important they may be for one’s survival, integrity, and creativity.

### **‘What Is Your Contribution?’**

The third remark that kept recurring, is the request to formulate the contribution made by the study in question. The intent behind this is respectful: every study is a relational gift to the wider academic community, and the gift/contribution should therefore be articulated clearly. The contribution remark brings together the solitary and the connected modes of attention. The contribution of the solitary, knowledgeable author who presents and explains clearly defined objects of interest in a convincing document is brought to an audience acting as a jury. The audience confrontation is, of course, planned well ahead, connecting the jury to the solitary quest throughout the project. In this specific solitary-connected mode of attention, the scholar is attuned to the critique of colleagues, as both the object of knowledge as well as the value of the contribution is open to interpretation. In theory, open-ended collective knowledge production holds the beautiful promise of collegiality. Yet, in many of the discussions witnessed during my fieldwork, comments were taken as judgements. Replies were furthermore often defensive in nature.

Given the pressure to perform one’s role of the brilliant scholar before an audience, the critique of the text easily got conflated with that of the author as a person, inevitably

and understandably provoking various emotional responses. One example of author/text/general discussion conflation happened in the following seminar moment where I commented on the way in which a student paper positioned the author in question as a self-defined white scholar interrogating whiteness in academia. Unfortunately, I did not write down my original question, but I do recall saying that I wished to discuss the issue at stake as an important, *shared* concern. How to write about one's privileges as a scholar, and how to verbally position oneself as a racialised 'white' subject were the questions I had in mind. These are emotionally charged topics without easy solutions at hand. A more general discussion, however, was not even possible. The student's reply was so hostile and arrogant that an uneasy silence filled the room, until her supervisor decided to come to her rescue in such a blunt manner that it underlined the impression that the student indeed had been heavily accused and insulted. My critique was impossibly about a general problem, but in this praxis critique identifies a weakness in the student's contribution/product.

The tension felt at that moment was enhanced by the phenomenon under discussion, whiteness in academia, that is seen as something personal and politically contentious. Another student later recalled that the entire group seemed to have responded to the aggression that was in the air and had assumed that there was a chain of events happening: a hope of being appreciated by the student, a rejection by a supervisor [me], and thus a signal of failure, taken personally, and therefore a defensive response, followed by denial and rejection [by the student], supported by another, more caring supervisor. The caring here was oriented more toward the person than the discussion itself, though. A connected mode of attention that was first established by the student's text on her self-positioning discussion as white was seen as spoiled by my remark that asked for further elaboration, interpreted as a jury-like verdict. The quest for a general academic discussion was not heard due to a conflation of the person and the work. The student and her supervisor both reacted by refusing further discussion. The student was reassured by the other supervisor that her written product was fine—even though I still argue that it is difficult to perfectly cover how 'privileged position of whiteness in academia' works under any circumstances; let alone in the colour-blind context of Nordic institutions.

Overall, these seminars ended up supporting a publication culture that required a combination of the solitary and connected modes of scholarship, but in a very specific

sequenced way. In this sequence, the solitary scholar produces a quality product—within the parameters of pre-existing theoretical frames and intelligibility—that has potential value on the market in a process that commodifies both the worker and the end-product. Meanwhile, the connected mode references little more than subjection to the assumed interests of the market/jury/audience. Students who otherwise oppose neoliberal projects of selfhood often mentioned that they assume that this marketing-focused, publication-machine self is the only way of having a career. Thus, while explicit diffractions into the wild and transversal contaminations did occur in these seminars—and that particularly in the written theory sections and in private conversations outside the room in which participants expressed a longing to conduct seminars otherwise—they were nonetheless silenced out of an assumed necessity while partaking in the formal seminar praxis.

I would like to argue here that the solitary-connected mode of attention acts as an engine of anxiety when the modes of attention co-exist in this sequenced way. The neoliberal academic market apparatus is inevitably commodifying and turning everything into a product or personal capital, despite the students' explicit wishes to do radically meaningful work. This element of neoliberal competitiveness could actually be a by-product of a deeper problem, namely, the assumption that any goal besides personal academic success is ridiculous, naïve, or pompously old-fashioned. Not discussing the broader significance of one's academic work fuels the anxiety-inducing aspect of contemporary academia. There are nonetheless, as I also discuss in the following section, many diffractive moments when a wild and responsible otherwise is in the process of being imagined.

## **Wild Encounters with Critters**

So far, the examples used have illustrated the entanglement of the solitary and the connected modes of attention, but little has been said about the wild. In the following I will suggest that there is an aspect of the wild that academia already nourishes and idealises, but which could be expanded upon more. The wild is potentially present in both solitude and connectedness; it is always already there. It is both a bold leap, a political cut, and a mode in the now that does not entail abandoning academia (but perhaps requires a certain preparedness to do so).

My first, somewhat superficial example of the presence of the wild is a conversation I had with a natural science professor, who feared her costly experiment would result in negative results and public shaming, as the project had gained a lot of visibility in popular media and among academic colleagues. Laughingly, however, she took her words back, exclaiming that she did not exactly *fear* this; in fact, she considered the risk of failure had been worth taking. ‘If I lose it all now, I still would have a good life; I don’t need this career,’ she said, as if she was prepared to quit academia altogether. She seemed convinced that this insight—that she did not depend on her professorship and its projects to lead a happy life—had made it possible for her to conduct her bold experiment in the first place. This letting go of the need to excel was her way of having the courage to excel. This example suggests that such forays into the wild are happening all the time, even in the most mainstream of settings. Being protected by being able to use a positivist methodology and having secure employment of course also helps.

Pedagogies into the wild go further than relinquishing one’s career goals without challenging the epistemic mainstream model of science, as illustrated by the attitude described by this particular scientist. While doing the fieldwork for this study, my strongest personal sensation of the presence of the wild mode of attention co-existed in tension with competitive connected solitude. In order to explain this tension, I will discuss one particular seminar that included such wild practices—both literally and figuratively—although other instances, such as specific moments during boring staff meetings, were also good candidates to be diffracted into the wild. I will be referring to this particular seminar as the ‘critter’ seminar, because of its attention to the more-than-human (Haraway, 2016). This seminar basically attempted to create new forms of being-presence and being-in-becoming in research practices, and did so successfully, thereby exceeding the participants’ expectations. It demonstrated that an into-the-wild sociality in academia is possible in such experiments, meaning that, by the logic of diffraction, the wild is also potentially present everywhere.

This so-called critter seminar was an international 3-day workshop, consisting of mostly European and US colleagues, as this is what is typically denoted as ‘international’ in Nordic settings. The 15 participants were early to mid-career scholars, mainly in semi-secure positions, and included only a few PhD students. In my diary, I mention the pleasure of debating with the participants for hours, but the recurring

theme of affective inadequacy appears as well. One element creating the unusually joyful spirit of the seminar was the sense of being attuned to the more-than-human in a politically conscious way. The connected mode of attention created a sense of relationality that is wider than the competitive human-centred one, as I will touch upon now.

### **More-Than-Human Relationality, Co-Created Knowledge**

My first example is a moment during which the calm pleasure of listening to a discussion about more-than-human methodologies was interrupted by a familiar gut punch feeling. In the middle of an enthusiastic but chaotic discussion one of the participants restored the order by reminding us of the book to be written and by telling us that we should not waste pages on well-trodden tracks. She, somewhat impatiently, had already mentioned the familiar phrases of 'that has been done already,' 'there is a whole tradition on this' along with a reference to 'low-hanging fruits.' But, remarkably, the next speakers ignored these comments and continued the conversation about said methodologies. To me this was a relief, and a stubborn act to remain with the chaotic and wild. The urge to be novel and outshine earlier work felt less urgent in the light of the discussion, and even slightly silly. Our discussion did not need to be evaluated against a competitive search for newness. We continued the wild roaming in what we together, here and now, trusted to be of interest to us. Such a decision was not explicitly expressed, but I felt the continued discussion created a sense of decisive confidence and creativity in the group.

Within the context of this seminar, the difference between the earlier described competitive, publication mode discussions where newness is an end in itself, and genuine dialogues containing existing literature in a positive, connected mode of attention, became apparent. The participants resisted the competitive mode collectively. The interruption did not manage to shift the original discussion about new, genuinely transdisciplinary, and undisciplined ways of theorising more-than-human encounters, where speaking across and beyond literatures is necessary. The novelty remark was never explicitly discussed; as in meditation, the habitual disturbance we all are so familiar with was accepted and allowed to pass on. But the habit of obsessing about novelty itself was discussed on a meta-level.

In hindsight, I think the discussion kept on going because of the theoretical approach used and the subject matter, namely, the centre stage that was given to these critters, as Haraway (2016) calls these non-human companions like dogs, mushrooms, and bacteria. The critter presence allots the human scholar a humbler positionality to begin with. The awareness of the more-than-human co-existence toned down the urge to flag one's primary commitment to collegial, human-only competitiveness. If scholarly efforts to grasp worlding co-existence—where the abundance of critters always outnumbers us—is viewed as a collective, shared participation in an evolving, unpredictable whole, the individual contribution to earthly survival and co-existence is not commodified. I believe that the open-ended, wild mode of attention did not arise out of the collegiality, niceness, or good humour of the humans in the room, as the group did not have time to learn to know, let alone, trust, each other—this wild mode of attention rather happened because of our continuous efforts to bring back a joint commitment to the ethico-onto-epistemology of more-than-human social science, despite our usual habits.

Modest witnessing (Haraway, 1997) brought about a more peaceful and humble mode of attention in the seminar. The aim of grasping a confluence of interacting multispecies interests decentres those of humans and, to some extent, enables individual anxieties to be seen in a large scale of things. When the approach to knowledge as contingent, emergent, sensory, social, and animated by multiple, unexpected, multispecies presences, is constantly discussed through concrete empirical examples, a less competitive and vulnerable relationality in human-collegial relationships may be a diffractive side-product.

The seminar explicitly encouraged sharing and explaining content in ordinary language, even though the academic habit of relying on jargon was also still present. In my seminar diary I noted that 'the collective form of thinking together gives a sensation that / know what is important in current literature. Usually the uncertainty-induced shame and fear is so hard to let go of. Now this does not appear to be the case.'

One of the reasons that these theoretical discussions were more open than in the other seminars was that they were always conducted with reference to empirical cases; another was the new materialist framework that in itself encourages a gentle approach to knowing, despite its cryptic language. Abandoning representationalism,

individualism, and the supposed separability of knower and known (van der Tuin & Nocek, 2019), introduces an interdisciplinary field where the idea of 'knowing it all' as a heroic researcher is not only impossible but absurd. This realisation allows for wild roaming that can be joyful rather than rivalry-inducing. "Concepts that activate thought instead of recapitulating what has already been decided" (Geerts & Carstens, 2019, p. 819) promise explorations of the wild.

### **Political, Responsible, Meaningful, Diffracted**

The commitment to wild openness does not necessarily indicate attention to responsibility and meaning, but political debates during analytical discussions may decrease individual anxiety. When attention is only bestowed upon the brilliance of the knower or known as a commodity, career anxiety can take over. When attention is redirected to the effects of knowledge, a more humble and responsible attitude becomes possible. A responsible-wild mode of attention indicated for me an unpretentious being in the now. The following somewhat lengthy passage from my diary hopefully casts light on the tension between struggling with finding the right words and my politically motivated willingness to participate:

I feel like I have early-stage Alzheimer's. I know there are words, I suffer as I know what I don't know, but words keep escaping my mind's groping attempts. My vocabulary is an empty box. My mistake perhaps is that it is not empty; here I just do not trust the ones [words] that are there. Emma [anonymised seminar participant] is different in this respect. Why? She is bold. She sees any situation as political, and her task, as a good leftist feminist and colleague, is to take the trouble to stay with the trouble. It seems she takes it as her duty always to point out the importance of interpreting the political dimensions and consequences of each and every paper. Not to exhibit her brilliant self but to do her share, as respectful with-ness to an important task, where diffracting the political context of each case is our duty. She speaks her mind as honestly as she can, does not say how others should do. I admire her calm, stubborn stance; she brings about the ethics of negotiation and open-ended consideration, insisting on the political whatever it then means. Each author can then do what they wish. But

collectively leaving the discussion on the political out, we are culpable of blindness, the narrowing down of the wild.

I admired Emma's way of acting in the seminar—it feels like a more responsible stance than my own silence, which was engendered by the feeling of not mobilising the right theoretical vocabulary during a casual chat. I interpreted Emma's courage as stemming from a sense of responsibility with regards to the task at hand. Her way of raising issues was more of a public commitment than an individual contribution. It did not demonstrate a moral high ground or even contained a claim to have the right answers. I felt Emma diligently raised questions about the political dimensions of the analysis at hand, while it was this political orientation that gave her the impetus to speak without agonising over whether her words were paraded in exactly the right canon, like I did. My analysis of her mode of engagement is that responsibility seems to free the speaker from the anxiety attached to the typical commodifying performance. Some discussions in this seminar also became familiarly filled with tensions and defensiveness, but the seminar included more occasions of open-ended peer critique focusing on papers rather than on individuals. Such moments demanded a certain open-endedness—not requiring the individual author to present a perfected text, but to join the shared quest for responsible being-with (Haraway, 2016).

Political responsibility, that includes a range of matters that now are captured in the notion ethico-onto-epistem-ology (see Barad, 2007, p. 90; Geerts, 2016) but in earlier feminist theory were encompassed by the generalising notion political, also emphasising the inseparability of ethics, ontology, and epistemology (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986), seen through Barad's (2014) new materialist perspective, is

not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness. Responsibility is not a calculation to be performed. It is a relation always already integral to the world's ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming. It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness (p. 183).

Traditions that look for the ephemeral, the emergent, the evanescent, the decentred, and the heterogeneous have often been claimed to risk being politically evasive. What I highlight here, is that a sense of scholarly responsibility and a larger, more open-

ended purpose is a more subtle orientation, and it may powerfully work against the compartmentalised, individualised commodification of knowledge.

This is where the dispersed methodology of diffraction is needed. Diffraction opens up a conceptual tool kit that removes the focus from the individual scholar's solitary brilliance. In the enterprise of wild knowing, the tools for engagement become the key site of interest. The focus shifts from both the knower and the entity to be known, to the "agential cut" (Barad, 2007, p. 348) or assemblage of knowledge production. The measurement, technology, technique, or surface on which the knowledge is collectively drawn constitutes the phenomenon itself. The focus is on praxis, processes, and effects. It is in the process that not only the phenomenon emerges, but the knower also becomes (temporarily) constituted (Xin, 2019).

The humanist, colonial, masculine, phallogocentric subject that controls its object is the ideal that the seminars try to resist, but it keeps sticking to us and seducing us (Ahmed, 2017). The comparison made between the different seminar situations shows that the wild mode of attention is more likely to present itself when participants are not the most institutionally precarious in the room, like PhD students, facing a hierarchically attuned environment with their supervisors. The critter seminar participants were mainly mid-career researchers, and thus less vulnerable than graduate students. The position of participants within the rigid institutional-political structures thus influences the participants' approach to ethico-onto-epistemological questions. This has consequences for the practices that are available to individual participants. Drawing on the example of Emma, however, I argue that anyone can, at least momentarily, practice politically relevant, responsible diffractive scholarship (cf. St. Pierre, 2021, p. 7). These moments matter, in the meaning of spacetime mattering.

The diffractive methodology resembles Deleuze's notion of assemblage (see Deleuze & Parnet, 2007), where a series of heterogeneous elements are organised and held together through temporary relations. Assemblage shifts the emphasis from an authentic human individual to the formation of a collective body where individualised human elements do not take precedence. Instead, all proximate and co-participating elements are of interest. Assemblages are provisional and able to transform into something else, being both contingent and structured (Ong & Collier, 2008). In my fieldwork, during those moments where a participant's work was framed as part of an assemblage, commodification, and the cut-throat, competitive gestures

that we habitually employ, became slightly ridiculous, or simply unnecessary. By shifting agency away from a capacity that resides within people, assemblage refers to relationality as a wider and less predictable concept than the competitive-connected mode of attention. One example of a potentially diffractive moment in the PhD seminars discussed above was the emotional withdrawal of the student who was instructed to read more; her attention turned to her notes, and her mind wandered away—from the discussion, possibly to wild diffractions of her own. This kind of solitary diffraction is valuable, too, and could be brought back to a connected mode of attention and fruitful assemblages in later moments.

## Concluding Remarks

This article suggests that by studying moments that matter as diffractions we learn something crucial about everyday practices in academia, where wayward alternatives and leaps into the wild are present as ideals but hard to sustain in the everyday praxis in the face of pressure to present knowledge in commodified ways. The methodological choice to study social situations as diffractions, as I have claimed in this piece, is to enable an analysis that is appreciative of the dispersed and the evasive; of open-ended knowing, while remaining reflexive about the political in research practices. Moments are seen as *constitutive* in the meaning of the diffractive social science proposed here: The adjective constitutive charts potential and follows hope and desire-in-the-making. In constitutive diffractions something shared matters and happens in and to those involved. Diffractions go in unexpected ways. Diffractive social science analysis does not attempt to exhaust a diffraction. It proposes potential outcomes that hopefully matter, that make a difference, causing new diffractions. The described diffractions here include the knower, the phenomenon to be studied, colleagues, and other audiences for the knowledge produced. These are all entangled with one another and co-constitutive of each other.

My analysis developed in this article suggests that the addressed three modes of attention—the solitary, the connected, and the wild—are worthy of attention, even if they only tend to appear as tensions between several modes and never in their pure, actualised forms. I have presented situations in which participants were committed to an understanding of research as a relational practice, often idealising research into

the wild. In most of the situations studied here, people approach research in a manner that I characterise as connected: the researcher sees the object of her/his study as emerging out of collaboration. Representation brings about the phenomenon itself; matter comes to matter in the measurement. The scholar is subjectified into being in relational terms.

What is remarkable, however, is that the connected scholar in many situations is also a very nervous scholar. My analysis indicates that this is due to the competitive spirit and lack of support in contemporary neoliberal academia, but also because of the onto-epistemological modernist sensibility itself (Marcus & Saka, 2006), with an emphasis on the individual knower. Relational connectedness could imply supporting, caring, holding, and nurturing a thinker to grow, but it is also potentially a judgmental, competitive co-existence. In the situations described here connectedness often meant surrender to the brutal arbitration of others. The notion of the connected self in such academic circumstances is an anxiety-producing one, as a self is seen as a collective accomplishment in the process of research. The competitive ways in which the university is organised, as well as the ethico-onto-epistemological tradition of metaphysical individualism and knowing as mastery, affects all scholars, including those who aspire to wild, connected, and collective knowledge practice rather than solitary production.

Even in the practice of the seemingly open-ended feminist social sciences, where the epistemic ideal of mastery is heavily criticised, the competitive connected-solitary mode of attention resurfaces in seminars. There is an outspoken resistance to this on paper, but not in pedagogic or publication praxis. One possible reason for the occasional romanticisation of the solitary mode was its promise of a less anxious, nervous existence, given the exhausting and risky nature of the connected-competitive mode. Solitary work, paradoxically, allows the escape of the lonely performer into a romantic moment with oneself and the unthreatening calm of the library. In the most brutal connected-solitary mode of attention, tremendous uncertainty and laborious normalisation is tolerated due to the cruel optimistic (Berlant, 2011) promise that one's position as a convincing, successful academic of brilliance will become self-evident when rules are followed and one's curiosity is disciplined to deliver a focused, narrow, predictable paper at a time. Any trust in this promise is, however, likely to be fragile and easily dashed.

My suggestion here is that recognising the modes of attention—the solitary, the connected, and the wild—as temporary orientations or commitments may help individual researchers better see what they do in their everyday praxis and engagements, however entangled these modes are; perhaps even precisely because they are ever-changing tensions rather than clear cut categories. The wild is both connected and solitary. Wild-solitary signals courage and freedom but also potential loneliness and isolation when daring to go not only against but beyond the assumed normal. Wild-connected is being heard and cared for in an ephemeral, collective quest, yet also challenged to undertake responsibility and negotiation. The wild, thus, is as contingent as the other modes of attention.

The ethico-onto-epistemological stances of the pedagogies into the wild, the new materialist (Barad, 2007) and Deleuzoguattarian philosophies (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), and other minoritarian knowledges suggest that enthusiastic, responsible moments and encounters do happen. Diffractions, moments of doing, participating, letting some forces shape and others shatter, in each specific encounter are worlding, already in the now (Haraway, 2016). Wayward academia happens in random “thicker ‘moments’ of spacetimemattering” (Barad, 2014, p. 169). When exploring the diffractive potentiality in everyday pedagogical moments I have found Hartman’s (2019) analytical take on waywardness useful. Wayward academia describes everyday, moment-to-moment insurgencies, where dictates of respectability and success are challenged in daily praxis, despite/within an awareness of a specific, cruel career structure. Wayward academia is a modest proposal that exit is not the only option for alternative pedagogies into the wild, if diffractive moments are taken seriously, and practiced playfully.

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