

# Care-full friendships: Resisting the neoliberal university through solidarity collectives

## Place + Space Collective

*Simon Fraser University*

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### **Abstract:**

The Place + Space Collective is an interdisciplinary academic solidarity collective at Simon Fraser University that leads with solidarity for each other and works within a non-hierarchical model of consensus, friendship, empathy, and care. In this paper, we think through our experiences of the collective, and ways that our disciplines of geography and urban studies have brought us together to attempt to understand the world of the neoliberal university. We draw upon the work of feminist geographers to argue that facilitating our collective through an ethic of care, friendship, and slow scholarship is an opportunity to forcibly create spaces within the academy that enable collective recharging, support for one another, and solidarity work beyond scholarly spheres, contrary to the atomizing and individualizing environment that the academy reproduces so very well.

*“I do not believe that people become friends. Everyone in the audience, I believe that we are already friends, and it just so happens that we met today. That's because we are already a collective. We are united by a collective future affected by our actions. We are already friends, but sometimes we forget. Today though, we remember.”*

-Place + Space Collective member

In the Place + Space Collective, an interdisciplinary academic solidarity collective, we think a lot about friendship. We think about what friendship means, and the role that it plays in our lives. We think about its radical potential as a transformative process in the face of the uncaring, competitive neoliberal university. When one of our members articulated the above sentiment, they were speaking to a group of interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate students at the collective's first conference taking place at Simon Fraser University in 2017, on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples. The conference, called *Strategies for Solidarity: forming collectives in the neoliberal university*, brought participants together for an afternoon spent practicing care, forming friendships, writing poetry, and strategizing ways to resist the individualizing tendencies of the neoliberal institution.

The value of friendship can be further expanded on through Professor Gillian Rose's quote that: "...One of geography's greatest strengths – one of its greatest pleasures – as a discipline, is the way that it gathers together very different talents and skills, and puts them to work together in the task of understanding the world we all share." Our membership is made up of both geography and urban studies students, and this bringing together of interdisciplinary talents and skills is at the core of our ability to work and organize as a collective. As scholars, we are each conducting research that is wonderfully diverse. As individuals, we hold different backgrounds, life paths, personalities, and identities, and perhaps because of those variations, we

are able to organize around, and within, this collective. Together, we are working to understand the neoliberal academy, to challenge it, and to use care to support each other as we exist within it.

The neoliberal university is isolating and individualizing, privileging the output of a product, rather than a process. From the beginning, we have been deeply inspired by an article by Mountz et. al on slow scholarship, and their paper continues to guide us in our work. They argue that, “Slow scholarship cannot just be about making individual lives better, but must also be about re-making the university” (2015:1238). Taking this, the collective is currently a space for members to reflect on our geographies, engage each other and our departments, and present and publish as a collective. The collective leads with solidarity for each other and works within a non-hierarchical model of consensus, friendship, empathy, and care. Collective members are able to rely on each other to navigate interdisciplinary challenges working across campuses and communities. To rely on our fellow members is not only an opportunity to help one another, but is a sign of trust. We rely because we trust, and this is itself a demonstration of our work to overcome institutional individualization.

By committing to the collective model, members have the opportunity to navigate competitive neoliberal policies and experiences in academia. We believe that forming collectives and working in solidarity across disciplines, intellectual ideas and diverse backgrounds can build important groundwork for emerging academics. We came to realize that working as a collective body in solidarity with each other was something both we needed, and wanted.

Since our conception, we have also been thinking, working, and approaching our collective methodology in a way that draws inspiration from the work of feminist scholars and other academic collectives, including the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective, as well as the work of carla bergman and Nick Montgomery in their book, *Joyful Militancy*. As part of this process, we began to explore what it meant to operate within a framework of feminist care ethics. As Lawson describes: “Care ethics begins with a social ontology of connection: foregrounding social relationships of mutuality and trust (rather than dependence). Care ethics understands all social relations as contextual, partial, attentive, responsive, and responsible” (2007:3). Further, care ethics challenges these neoliberal notions of individualism and competition (Lawson, 2007).

We now work to bring a care ethic to our dynamic and how we function as a collective. We meet twice a month. Our first meeting is a social with the only goal of spending time together and developing our relationships. We think of these relationships as *deep* friendships, that grow and intensify as we open and build space for them. Our second meeting is for work, where we discuss projects or solidarity campaigns we want to work on together. Rather than focusing on creating products aligned with the neoliberal university model (in the form of conferences, papers, presentations—although we do that, too), the crux of these meetings are our verbal check-ins with each other. During these check-ins, members take as much space as they need, and we accommodate and provide that space. Creating this openness for people to express themselves builds on the relational components of ethics of care, recognizing that, “We are all vulnerable and dependent on others at numerous points throughout our lives” (England, 2017:6).

In some ways, it is through our check-ins that we are reminded that we need to forcibly create spaces within the academy that encourage collective recharging, offering support to one another, and that embolden real solidarity work beyond scholarly spheres. We need these spaces so that we do not accede to the atomizing and individualizing environment that the academy reproduces so very well. And as Mountz et. al articulate, “Care work is work. It is not self-indulgent; it is radical and necessary” (2015:1238).

Grounded in our belief in the power of friendship, the Place + Space Collective follows a “flexible but fixed” ideology: we are fixed in our commitment to solidarity and friendship for one another, but flexible in how we facilitate this non-hierarchical space of empathy and care. This fluid approach means that the Collective can evolve and shift, together, as we ourselves grow and change as academics—and perhaps this transformation is everything. As one of our members once said: “When I think of all the things we can do together, I imagine the future of the present, which in my mind is much better than the history of the present. We’re always working towards a horizon, and at least we’re in it together as a collective, right?”

*The work of the Collective takes place on the unceded, ancestral territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the xʷməθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətał (Tseil-Waututh) Nations. We recognize the many ways that Indigenous resistance and dedication to the land has deeply informed our own activism, both within and outside the academy.*

*The current members of the Place + Space Collective are Kate Elliott, Katie Gravestock, Diandra Oliver, Natalia Perez, John Pickering, Samantha Thompson, Alex Thumm, Steve Tornes, and Trevor Wideman.*

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