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The Right to (Not) Appear: A Conversation on Institutional Obligations and Ethics of Care in Researching Illiberalism

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Abstract

As other papers in this special issue highlight, researchers of far-right movements have always been faced with the need to carefully balance visibility and invisibility to protect both their academic and personal selves. In this conversation, we share our experiences of what happens when preoccupations with dissemination and impact occlude the need for the right of research and researchers not to appear. This right touches upon a series of ethical questions and obligations that extend beyond simply our formal legal obligations to funding agencies and employers. As scholars arguing for a situated and participatory ethics have argued, ethical obligations must always be attuned to the affective entanglements that impact (in every sense of the word) both research subjects and researchers themselves, and that unfold often in unexpected fashion. How, then, can we reconcile such situated ethics and an ethic and culture of care with institutional obligations, and the requisites of an academic career? The conversation forum presented here draws on multiple exchanges the four authors had over the course of 2023 to 2024, edited for continuity and clarity.

Keywords: visibility, outreach, neoliberalism, intimidation, gender, ethics

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LBI: The initial impetus for this conversation piece came from a feeling of discomfort with the expectations placed upon us by our funders and our university in making our research visible. The project that brought us together into this conversation is a multi-country EU-funded doctoral training network: Larissa and Marija are doctoral researchers on the project, Sarah and Luiza are two of the supervisors; I (Luiza) also act as the institutional representative for the University of Amsterdam. The project brings together 11 universities across Europe and beyond, along with a series of non-academic partners. This background is relevant as it shapes the expectations and obligations the four authors of this piece have had to negotiate with the European Commission as the network's funding body, but also with the wider academic community of the network that must deliver certain outcomes and research milestones. It is important to emphasize that our comments here should in no way be taken as a critique of the network, or of our project colleagues. The microcosm of the network is simply the context in which these challenges have manifested themselves, and where all four of us, albeit in different ways, have had to face them.

The expectations we have had to negotiate are, by now, part and parcel of all large, funded research. While the network has been very conscientious in abiding by European Commission and national ethics approval requirements, and has been careful to specify protections not just for the intellectual property rights of the researchers, but also the right to object to the dissemination of their individual or joint findings (a standard legal provision in EU grant agreements), these contractual rights of researchers clash in practice with the Commission's requirements to showcase in ongoing fashion the demonstrable impact of the research, confirming the completion of the project's necessary deliverables and milestones. It is increasingly difficult to negotiate such tensions: we hope that the reflections presented here can help initiate a discussion not just on the dangers of forced visibility for researchers engaging with illiberal actors, but also open a conversation on the possibilities of doing potentially perilous research *differently*. When researching perilous actors, the speed of delivery and speed of appearance required by funders' obligations can be a peril in and of itself, compromising not just the research process but also researchers themselves.

There is by now an extensive literature critiquing the ways in which research is increasingly produced for institutional audit purposes, with priority given to fast outputs that are quantifiable and visible, that which Öhman has characterized as the move from "content to counting."¹ We would like to argue here, rather, for the sort of "slow scholarship" described by Mountz et alia,² grounded in an ethics and culture of care—care for the subjects and objects of our research, but also for us as researchers, individually and collectively. In doing so, we are inspired by our own experiences as four female researchers working on the far right and on migration and border governance, and by the work of feminist scholars on participatory ethics and cultures of care in research.

¹Annelie Bränström Öhman, "Leaks and Leftovers: Reflections on the Practice and Politics of Style in Feminist Academic Writing," in *Emergent Writing Methodologies in Feminist Studies*, ed. Mona Livholts (New York: Routledge, 2012): 27–40.

² Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Lloyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, and Winfred Curran, "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 14 no. 4 (2015): 1235–1259, <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/1058>.

Visibility, First, and above All

LBo: My work looks into the ways in which far-right parties contest liberal democracy and transnationally disseminate ideological alternatives to it. It aims to uncover party-political drivers of democratic erosion through the study of the propagation of illiberal ideas. The research project is founded on the belief that understanding the nature of democratic backsliding is crucial to counter it. With increasing numbers of citizens living in illiberal regimes, it is important to disseminate my research to the broadest audience possible. Nevertheless, my relationship with visibility is a complicated and manifold one.

One of my main concerns with being visible is that researchers can also be harmed when studying hostile actors, such as far-right parties and activists. Studies have highlighted that universities are increasingly under “surveillance” from the far right,³ with female, queer or nonwhite scholars being especially vulnerable to various forms of online intimidation, harassment, and abuse.⁴ These risks increase significantly when scholars in the field have a public profile, for example by engaging with the media, or being active on social media. Hence, a tension exists between outreach and the need to protect oneself against emotional and physical harm. This tension is exacerbated, on the one hand, by the fact that visibility is required by funders and increasingly important for professional success, and on the other hand, by the fact that female academics have been invisible for centuries and are often still less visible than their male counterparts in the public arena.⁵ In this regard, visibility also becomes the realization of the right to appear.

Striking a balance between the importance of being visible, while also protecting myself as a researcher is only possible when I have full control about the information that is being published about myself and my research, including when it is published, and by which means it is disseminated. This allows me to monitor and probably even remove content that is available online and protect my personal self and my accounts against unwanted attention. So far, this type of control has not been fully granted to me in our European Commission-funded network. Since the beginning of my PhD project, the requirement of visibility—institutionalized in the form of a series of deliverables to be produced during my research—curtails this autonomy. Most of the deliverables are supposed to increase the outward impact of our research through visibility; these include academic publications, but also blogpost entries, a podcast, a video-recorded interview, and maintaining a publicly accessible profile with rich information about the individual fellows and the group activities. Especially the latter are extensively documented and showcased on both social media and the project’s website. In various instances, it felt like the project was speaking on my behalf, with information being disseminated without prior consent. This concerned preliminary research results, with a summary of the main findings and figures of my first paper being shared on Twitter/X, but also personal information, such as a biometric profile picture (highly problematic, as it concerns sensitive information

3 Adrienne L. Massanari, “Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the ‘Alt-Right’ Gaze,” *Social Media + Society*, 4, no. 2 (2018): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118768302>.

4 Iris B. Segers, Tamta Gelashvili, and Audrey Gagnon, “Intersectionality and Care Ethics in Researching the Far Right,” *Feminist Media Studies*, (online first 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2280884>; Antonia C. Vaughan, “Success as Antithetical to Safety: Researching the Far Right in an Academic Context,” Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, Dublin, Ireland: AoIR, <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2022i0.13099>.

5 Hans Jonker, Florian Vanlee, and Walter Ysebaert, “Societal Impact of University Research in the Written Press: Media Attention in the Context of SIUR and the Open Science Agenda among Social Scientists in Flanders, Belgium,” *Scientometrics*, 127 (2022): 7289–7306, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-022-04374-x>.

that I would not want to be available online). Such unwanted exposure becomes even more problematic when researching far-right parties, as it increases the risks of harm associated with this object of study. Within the project, these risks are not taken into consideration when determining which deliverables should be produced by the fellows. The deliverables themselves constitute contractual obligations with the European Commission, based on a one-size-fits-all approach to a diversity of research topics, with little room for flexibility.

In addition to my concerns regarding safety and sensitivity, I am generally skeptical towards dissemination activities that precede the actual empirical research. The focus on visibility and impact sometimes feels as if it is prioritizing the creation of deliverables over our development as autonomous researchers. Rather than encouraging a critical reflection on how to make our research accessible after generating meaningful output, we are asked to produce deliverables and cultivate an image of high productivity, even prior to the research. This contradicts my understanding of societally impactful research; it feels like a box-ticking exercise that produces output for its own purpose.

To provide an example, one deliverable involves a video-recorded interview, discussing our research and its impact. The first recording occurred just five months into the PhD program within the context of media training, before many of us have started our actual data collection. While the training itself might be beneficial, its primary aim was to produce a video for public dissemination, enhancing the visibility of our research. We had the option to decide whether this particular video would be uploaded, yet we were actively encouraged to publish it. This really made me wonder about the priorities of such training activities, particularly as the production of visible output and its dissemination preceded the actual research.

MP: As you rightly pointed out, visibility is not inherently undesirable, and I, too, recognize its benefits as an early-career researcher. However, to fully appreciate the positive sides of visibility, a reflexive approach is required that also acknowledges its potential risks. In my opinion, the most fundamental flaw in the approach to visibility within the training network stems from its neglect of the diverse nature of our individual research projects. In my research, I focus on actors working within the border security industry, a domain where essential information is not publicly accessible, and decisions are often made in informal and secretive settings. Issues of limited access to information and actors in the border security industry contribute to limited academic freedom on a topic that has substantial societal implications. I am concerned about the European Commission's requirement to make our research question and plan publicly available on the network website before conducting our research, and how this may affect my work. Given that my research takes a critical stance on border and immigration policies, I worry that being compelled to publicize this online could potentially jeopardize access to the actors I aim to study. They may be discouraged from interacting with me after finding information about the nature of my research online. Consequently, I find myself navigating a delicate balance, fulfilling the program's visibility requirements while addressing my concerns about how visibility may impact the feasibility of completing my research project.

Consent for Whom?

MP: As you nicely highlighted, Larissa, while adopting a standardized visibility approach certainly permits the European Commission to audit projects, and to assess if they meet certain impact metrics, it can also create risks for researchers.

This brings me to the critical issue of informed consent. In academic research, informed consent is paramount, as it upholds ethical standards, respects individual autonomy, and ensures that participants willingly contribute to studies with a clear understanding of potential implications. Unfortunately, these principles are not consistently upheld in relation to researchers themselves. In the precarious and competitive terrain of academia, it can be difficult for researchers to assert their rights and maintain their autonomy, especially for those early in their careers. Many, me included, feel pressured to conform to established norms rather than challenge the status quo, fearing it could hinder career advancement. This struggle becomes even more complex when it comes to researcher visibility, as there's often confusion about what rights researchers have. While GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] regulations offer strict guidelines for research participants in university settings, similar considerations are not applied to researchers themselves. Within this context of unclear rights, coupled with the fact that visibility is considered a mandatory deliverable tied to the completion of our PhD, the question naturally arises: can informed consent by PhD researchers truly be provided in such a situation—particularly, when we lack precise knowledge of what we are consenting to (i.e., how our information will be made visible) and the potential implications this may have?

Although the program has obtained consent to use our information through various informed-consent forms we have been required to sign, it is important to highlight that opting out or refusing to sign these consent forms was not possible. This lack of agency in declining to consent to our information being used, or determining how our information is made visible by the program, raises significant ethical concerns, even if they may not necessarily manifest as legal ones for the university. To navigate this perplexity, Sara Ahmed's 2017 work on feminist theory proves insightful.⁶ Ahmed's work delves into the issues of agency within institutional structures, emphasizing the performative nature of consent and stressing the importance of considering the institutional context that both shapes and limits agency. She argues that true consent cannot exist without agency, thereby questioning the very possibility of consent when agency is constrained.

Considering Sarah Ahmed's analysis, an uncomfortable reality is brought to light: our visibility within the project lies largely beyond our control, and our agency in addressing concerns or negotiating changes receives little consideration from the institutions involved. This is despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that they have our formal informed consent. I attribute the initial breach of our agency within the program to the lack of transparency regarding the obligatory visibility conditions prior to its commencement. This situation led us to enter the program without awareness that we would be compelled to confront the risks associated with being forcibly made visible by the program. Having this information before the program's start might have prompted us to explore alternative PhD opportunities offering greater autonomy in terms of public exposure. Subsequent to the program's commencement, our control over how the program has chosen to publicize us and our research has also been severely limited, further curtailing our agency in navigating the associated risks. In other words, our agency has been confined to handling the risks posed by mandatory visibility only *after* we have been made visible. As such, a crucial aspect of managing visibility effectively cannot only involve obtaining signed consent, but also respecting a researcher's agency to decline visibility, asserting, as we have put it, "the right to not appear."

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

Another crucial point to emphasize is that the discourse on researcher visibility and consent extends beyond our individual cases. It encompasses not only the microcosm of our particular training network, but also extends into academic institutions and funding agencies on a broader scale. There is a compelling need for academia to grapple more comprehensively with the profound implications of visibility, acknowledging not just touted benefits (such as impact), which are frequently emphasized, but also the intricate challenges and risks it poses to individual researchers. To mitigate these risks, an approach to visibility that prioritizes both the consent and agency of researchers is indispensable, especially for those immersed in sensitive and higher-risk research. Such researchers face distinctive challenges that necessitate institutional flexibility and adaptability concerning what can be expected to be in the public domain and how [or] by whom it is placed there. From my perspective, this accentuates the urgency of revisiting the project's visibility approach, aligning it with feminist principles that give precedence to the safety, agency, and autonomy of both researchers and research subjects,⁷ the reason (if not already obvious) being that decisions on how researchers are made to appear have consequences that affect them significantly more than they affect the program or institution.

LBo: I think the points you raised are really important, and I would like to address two of them. First, it strikes me how much Sara Ahmed's critique of performative consent resonates with our project. We were asked to give consent once, at the very beginning, but the question was subsequently never revisited. This shows that its primary purpose is legal protection and box-ticking, rather than ensuring genuine consent. The latter would require at least an informal request on a regular basis to renew the approval of our information being used. Secondly, I fully agree with your claim regarding competitiveness and precariousness in academia preventing consent. In the absence of true choice due to structural pressures, full consent cannot be guaranteed. When scarce professional opportunities are tied to productivity and efficiency, which is usually related to visibility, the choice to not appear goes along with a considerable professional disadvantage. This also leads me to another point I would raise, concerning the need for visibility within an increasingly neoliberal academia. Certainly, making research visible and accessible, both through publications and through teaching, lies in the nature of academic activity, as we are hoping to produce knowledge and evidence that is useful not only for the academic community, but also valuable for society. However, the importance of impact and visibility has dramatically increased, predominantly assessed through quantitative metrics such as academic citations or a piece's reception on social media, in blog posts, or newspaper articles. Holistic and qualitative approaches tailored to individual research are often overlooked in favor of these metrics.⁸ On top of the need to cater to such metrics in an insecure work environment, we are encouraged by our institutions to function as public intellectuals,⁹ which disregards the sensitivity of some projects, as previously emphasized in this conversation. Impact and visibility are also increasingly important to attract third-party funding that plays a crucial role in modern academia, well illustrated by the rise of the impact agenda in the UK following the Research Excellence Framework from 2014.¹⁰

7 bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

8 Thorsten Gruber, "Academic Sell-Out: How an Obsession with Metrics and Rankings is Damaging Academia," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 24, no. 2 (2014): 165–177, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2014.970248>.

9 Massanari, "Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the 'Alt-Right' Gaze," 7.

10 Emma Sophie Sutton, "The Increasing Significance of Impact within the Research Excellence Framework (REF)," *Radiography* 26, no. 2 (2020): 17–19, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.radi.2020.02.004>.

Taking this into account, our concrete experiences are not a singular example of poor conduct of one institution or granting agency, but manifestations of the structural conditions of doing research within neoliberal academia, where visibility becomes mandatory. It seems to be the considerable pressure put on institutions receiving third-party funding that leads to infringements in autonomy and personal agency. The requirement to generate impactful research is institutionalized by contractual obligation to the funder, where research output is treated as a business product that is supposed to react to market dynamics and create new demands. Visibility then becomes some sort of sales metrics that indicates how well a researcher sells their product on the academic and policy market. As a consequence of this, the contribution to academic knowledge production and acquisition of certain skills seem to only play a subordinate role compared to the fulfillment of certain impact metrics. This binds resources and shifts the focus away from doing innovative and high-quality research and towards the promotion of us and our “research products,” turning the academic into a “salesperson.”¹¹ It further incentivizes unethical behavior by individual researchers, both regarding their research and towards their colleagues and students.

A good example of the focus on impact and visibility in our project is the nature of the training we receive and how the deliverables to the European Commission are structured. While we were trained in giving interviews and interacting with the media at a very early stage of the PhD, our contractual obligations do not formally involve teaching, even though this would be a very valuable experience to many of us. Most deliverables center on the production of visible and quantifiable output and the abundance of those obligations next to our doctoral projects also makes it difficult to find time for additional activities.

MP: As you pointed out, within the current university environment, where competition and efficiency are ingrained in the neoliberal ethos, and universities are constantly vying for prestige and funding, the emphasis on visibility is quite understandable. What is more ambiguous is whether this uncompromising focus on visibility is desirable, and if so, for whom? To put it another way: who actually benefits from this paradigm? Like you, I worry that the essence of academic pursuit risks being overshadowed by a pursuit of external validation (i.e., the will of funders). It concerns me that in an attempt by universities to appease funding bodies, quantifiable metrics related to visibility are taking precedence over knowledge-based pursuits. This has had a number of consequences, both personal and collective, that you have already touched on, and I will continue to discuss.

From the start, the European Commission’s training schema has specified visibility as a crucial aspect of securing a job in academia or in the policy realm, framing the network’s deliverables not just as requirements of the funding, but also as something which is ultimately for our own benefit. Consequently, we have been urged to maintain public profiles on platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter/X and engage with the network’s activities through social media. This is in addition to the obligatory visibility deliverables that as you have mentioned, include writing three blog posts per year, participating in a video interview which will be uploaded on the website, producing a podcast, and updating our website profiles with details of our work. However, while these requirements are portrayed as essential for future career prospects, several other factors undermine this goal. Firstly, the program’s three-year duration,¹² which imposes a superhuman timeframe to complete our thesis,

¹¹ Gruber, “Academic Sell-Out.”

¹² The current funding rules for all European Commission-funded PhDs specify a three-year completion window.

is impossible. The pressure to produce quality work within such constraints raises doubts about quality, which might consequently impede our chances of securing employment. Secondly, as you have already said, PhD fellows in the program are discouraged from engaging in teaching roles—a skill that in many universities is considered crucial for getting a job. Therefore, while the visibility requirements are portrayed as essential for future career prospects, I can't shake the feeling that their main purpose is to serve as a form of publicity work for the European Commission, our project's funder. This leads me to question whether my research which explicitly critiques the Commission's border and migration policies is being leveraged by the same institution to present an image of openness to critique, without genuine intent to implement changes. Navigating this contradiction and the concern of being instrumentalized by the funding institution, which demands I be put on show (for my own benefit) poses a constant ethical challenge.

On a broader level, my concern is that the existing forced visibility structure molds not only researchers to align with funder expectations, but also research agendas. As we have already discussed, forced visibility carries risks for researchers, who often find themselves adapting rather than questioning and challenging conditions set by their institution. The current paternalistic and inflexible stance on visibility set by the European Commission not only poses risks to researchers, but also places them in an ethical dilemma, feeling compelled to either adhere to external visibility expectations placed on them (and so exposing themselves to risks) or withdraw from researching certain critical subjects that require a more nuanced approach to visibility. As a result, forced visibility may inadvertently shape research agendas by creating conditions that deter researchers from engaging with certain controversial or politically sensitive topics. The reliance on third-party funding and the emphasis on impact could also influence future research priorities, as critical projects deemed to have little perceived or measurable impact may no longer qualify for funding.

These questions cause me to wonder if, just as early-career researchers cautiously navigate the academic landscape and refrain from challenging the conditions set by their employers (i.e., universities), do universities also hesitate to challenge the demands or directives of external funders, fearing the loss of financial backing? And more importantly, if this is the case, what collective action can we take to address it?

Building a Culture of Care and a Situated (and Evolving) Ethics

SdL: When it comes to collective action, senior scholars that do not find themselves in precarious positions should lead the way. They have [a] duty of care vis-a-vis the researchers (e.g., PhD researchers, postdocs, research assistants) they supervise that has both an individual and an institutional dimension. Key elements of such a duty of care have been outlined by Massanari.¹³ She has pointed out that those in privileged positions have an obligation to support researchers, especially those belonging to vulnerable and marginalized groups, publicly and privately, and to set up resources, such as research networks and mentoring schemes, to help them navigate the risks of being visible. They also have an obligation to advocate for institutional reform, making university management aware of the challenges faced by researchers, when engaging in outreach and informing them of best practices to support them. Such reforms can be practical in nature, such as educating management about the risks involved in automatically publishing professional contact details of academic staff on university websites, the necessity of hiring security officers, and having an emergency contact number for staff. However, they also include instigating more

¹³ Massanari, "Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the 'Alt-Right' Gaze."

fundamental debates about the responsibilities of universities vis-à-vis their staff when they are being targeted in the public sphere, and the need for them to stand behind and in front of them, especially in times of growing polarization, increasing support for populism and nativism, and the emergence of science skepticism. These developments have made universities more vulnerable to attacks from hostile opponents that not only seek to silence individual scholars—their long-term objective is to weaken the academic community and to curtail academic freedom, amongst others, by putting pressure on universities through accusations, often echoed by the media, of so-called wokeness.

Luckily, some institutions are adjusted to the changing environment. When I experienced a sustained period of intimidation and harassment by the Dutch far right in 2021, the support that I particularly appreciated included the assistance from the Communications Department of the University of Amsterdam, which assisted with monitoring social media; and its Legal Department, which advised on filing police reports and sending cease-and-desist letters. Moreover, moral support of the higher-ups was indispensable, not only to endure the attacks, but also to return to the public debate once they had subsided. More recently, the establishment of *Wetenschap Veilig*, or Safe Science,¹⁴ by the Universities of the Netherlands, the Dutch Research Council, and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences has been a milestone in acknowledging and remedying the visibility challenges faced by researchers. It consists of [an] extensive support system for scholars working in the Netherlands, providing scientists, managers, and employers not only with practical tips, but also with a reliable and secure system of reporting incidents. Knowing that my PhD students can rely on these facilities if I am accidentally unavailable is an important assurance when encouraging them to engage in outreach.

However, the first line of care for the well-being of my PhD students when engaging in outreach remains my responsibility. Through their experiences in this Commission-funded training network, I have become more aware of the importance of discussing outreach and visibility with them prior to the start of their research. It is something that should already be addressed in job interviews, both in terms of expectations and in terms of taking stock of what information is already out there that could make the prospective PhD research vulnerable. Moreover, it is important to adopt practices that are already common outside of academia, such as in the think tank world, including debriefings after interventions in the public debate to assess what PhD researchers have experienced and how this has affected them, and making professional psychological support available in the case of incidents that might have long-term impact.

LBi: The question of the responsibility of senior scholars in building a research culture of care is crucial—most obviously because we have the capacity to do so, as academics with permanent positions (and often also in positions of institutional responsibility as heads of departments or research institutes). And yet we are often the worst enforcers of the research auditing and accounting systems, encouraging our junior colleagues to “make their research count.” As the Faculty of Humanities’ nominated confidential advisor for academic integrity over the past couple of years, I can confirm that the number of complaints from junior scholars regarding the push to showcase their work by supervisors has been significant. In most cases, the encouragement to “make the work count” is well-meaning—or driven by the expectations of European or national funding bodies to which supervisors are themselves also bound. This does not excuse the behavior, since those in more secure

¹⁴ WetenschapVeilig (website), <https://www.wetenschapveilig.nl/en/>.

positions should be the ones speaking up against these obligations. Obligations that become particularly fraught when researchers engage with topics that can pose risks—and here we see another problematic dynamic, because research on “hot” topics such as migration and the far-right is seen by universities as especially worthy of highlighting in assessment reports for research centers and departments as a marker of doing societally relevant work. In all of this, the researchers themselves are often forgotten, and their concerns minimized.

Just as the impact and visibility of our work become reduced by funders and institutions to a necessary and quantifiable measure, so too ethical and safety concerns become simply a box-ticking enterprise, to be taken care of at the start of a project, simply to ensure compliance. As Hammett, Jackson, and Bramley have argued, in such an optic, “research ethics remains perfunctory, formulaic, and procedural,” with ethics “reduced to a bureaucratic hurdle, a singular moment of approval that overlooks the dynamic, messy, and complex realities of the research journey”¹⁵ In fact, as they and others have suggested, questions of ethics (including questions of researcher safety) become reduced “to a risk management exercise ... [rather than] adequately address[ing] the ethics needs of qualitative researchers.” As they argue, quoting Tolich and Fitzgerald, this produces “a dangerous disconnect” between [the] box-ticking process of the ethics approval process, and “the everyday, messy realities of the research process, wherein ethics are a negotiation and dialogue, with and between participants”—participants that may, at a certain point, also pose a danger to the researcher.¹⁶ As Larissa and Marija have highlighted in their comments, the pressure to make their work “appear” prior even to the conduct of their empirical research is one glaring aspect of such a disconnect and of funding agencies’ prioritization of counting over content.

Part of building the sort of “research culture of care” that feminist scholars have long called for is recognizing the embedded and shifting realities of our research journeys.¹⁷ It means understanding that the ethical and safety challenges of our research cannot be summed up in a single moment of box-ticking, in an initial contractual specification, but, rather, require ongoing engagement and conversations. A research culture of care also requires an appreciation of the spaces and temporalities of our work that spill over the limited boxes of consent forms and ethics approval processes: understanding that our research cannot always be translated to immediately visible outputs, but also understanding that the personal impacts of our work may extend well beyond the institutional webpage.

15 David Hammett, Lucy Jackson, and Ryan Bramley, “Beyond ‘Do No Harm’? On the Need for a Dynamic Approach to Research Ethics,” *Area* 54 (2022): 582–590, <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12795>.

16 Martin Tolich and Maureen H. Fitzgerald, “If Ethics Committees Were Designed for Ethnography,” *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 1, no. 2 (2006): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jer.2006.1.2.71>.

17 Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship.”