

## Anti-Oppression and Academia

Applying critical methodologies to study identity and student experiences in university settings



*Human Ecology*, by Lucie Bardos

Degree of Master of Science (Two Years) in Human Ecology: Culture, Power and Sustainability  
30 ECTS

CPS: International Master's Programme in Human Ecology  
Human Ecology Division  
Department of Human Geography  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Lund University

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Spring 2015

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Title and subtitle:	Anti-Oppression and Academia: Applying critical methodologies to examine identity and student experiences in university settings
Authors:	Lena Weber, Anna Hermanson
Examination:	Master's thesis (two year)

Term:	Spring Term 2015
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### ABSTRACT

With increasing frequency we hear calls from activists and academics alike to tackle the structural roots of the current global social-ecological crisis. For those of us situated within academia, this provides an opportunity to critically examine how underlying processes related to the roots of this crisis manifest in and are perpetuated by our own institutions, and how to make academic programs within the 'pipeline' into environmental work more attractive and accessible to diverse voices. Traditional academic research often reinforces negative power structures, and so it is necessary to explore anti-oppressive research methodologies to tackle these structural roots. Thus, this thesis examines how identity shapes student experiences, including our own, in the context of Lund University's master's program in Human Ecology - Culture, Power and Sustainability (CPS), with an eye to the development of an activist-academic research collective. Via a methodological and epistemological foundation rooted in feminist theory, critical race theory, anti-oppression, queer methodologies, and participatory action research, we conducted 17 open-ended interviews and two focus groups with current and former CPS students while emphasizing ongoing consent, collaborative participation, and constant methodological self-reflection. Our results reveal a number of themes in student experiences that we connect to broader phenomena. We identify perceived institutional mis/mal-recognition of CPS due to the program's critiques of the status quo and leftist environmentalist perspectives, but increased positive recognition of activist/leftist/politicized identities within our program's community. Interpersonal dynamics in the classroom tended to reproduce broader power structures (such as sexism, racism, classism and ableism), which some respondents attributed to the unstructured nature of class discussion. There is a strong desire amongst respondents to engage with non-university communities and for opportunities for environmental justice-oriented practical research. We conclude by identifying potential focuses for an activist-academic research collective and recommendations for the Lund Human Ecology division with relevance for academic institutions in general. The thesis also includes considerable methodological reflections - relevant for anyone interested in conducting anti-oppressive research within their own community.

### *Acknowledgements*

My years in university coincide with my growing self-identification as an activist. They have been years of immense growth and engagement as well as sadness, frustration, and distress about the world. I am deeply thankful to those friends, teachers, fellow-activists, mentors, and movements who have supported, inspired, and challenged me.

To Mom, Dad, Ginny and Julia – thank you for your love, patience, and wisdom. Even these last years when you’ve been far away – you motivate me every day. And to Jeppe and Molly, my newest family members, thank you for everything.

–Anna

This topic was hugely inspired by my years working in McGill University’s residence system and with the Quebec Public Interest Research Group. There are too many inspiring and impactful individuals to name drop everyone, but in many ways this paper is a continuation of the conversations you all started with me, so thank you. In particular, I’d like to thank Professor Michael Hoover (alias Prof Mike) for first opening my eyes to—and supporting me through—the wild world of student well being in university settings, and for always having ‘breakfast coffee’ and wise words at hand.

Most of all, thank you Mom, Dad and Rainey for your never-ending support and love, for not thinking it was super weird for me to move to Sweden for grad school, and for motivating me to follow my heart.

–Lena

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To Doctors Vasna Ramasar and Anna Kaijser: thank you for your bluntness, insight, encouragement, mentorship, and for being so cool in general. We look up to both of you and could not have done this without your help.

Also, not to be super lovey-dovey, but we’d like to acknowledge each other! We’ve come a long way (sort of) from the halls of Solin (shout out), and have been so lucky to grow together through adventure after adventure, including this thesis. I love you (said to each other)! Thanks for making research fun.

Finally, we are so grateful to our ‘CPS family’ for all of your support and collaboration. We learned so much from each of you, not just through this thesis process, but also in general over the last two years: out dancing, starting drama in (and out) of class, spending time in the sauna, in parks, grabbing a coffee or beer after lectures, cooking, eating, roaming through the streets of Lund, Malmö, and Copenhagen (and Falsterbo)...

In summary, we’ll miss you all a ton, especially our (in)famous CPS potlucks ;). Thank you.

*Dedication*

We dedicate this thesis to the CPS 2013/15 batch: for your integrity, passion, and commitment to boundary pushing.

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## Acronyms

AARC: Activist-academic Research Collective

CPS: Culture, Power and Sustainability (international master's program in Human Ecology)

EJOLT: Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities & Trade

CRT: Critical Race Theory

CURE: Community-University Research Exchange

QPIRG: Quebec Public Research Interest Group

PAR: Participatory Action Research

LUMES: Lund University International Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science

IIEEE: The International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics

EU: European Union

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Context and Justification

There is growing consensus amongst activists and equity-concerned academics that we find ourselves in an imminent global crisis of environmental and social injustice. While within mainstream discourses climate change and environmental degradation are sometimes framed as ‘problems’ to be solved in isolation, critical theoretical works and activist movements alike continue to identify and challenge the social structures and systems of power at the root of this crisis (e.g. Plumwood 2002, Di Chiro 2008, Harvey 1996, Correa Bernier n.d., Walia 2014, Appadurai 2014, Schlosberg 2007, Klien 2014, Hornborg 2001).

Anjali Appadurai (2014), in a panel discussion on Naomi Klien’s 2014 book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, explains the value the book had for putting “into a mainstream discourse [...] perspectives that [environmental activist] groups have been talking about for a long time now. Namely, that we are in a planetary emergency no less, that is fed and exacerbated by a colonial, neoliberal, consumerist and extractivist system that replicates systems of oppression from centuries ago.”<sup>1</sup> Appadurai draws attention to diverse movements against dirty energy, movements for housing rights, and Indigenous movements for recognition of territorial rights that are not identified as addressing climate change or environmental degradation as such, but do tackle root causes of the social-ecological crisis. By imagining diverse movements as necessary for ecological and social justice, climate change and environmental destruction are reframed as consequences of broader structures of power, illuminating the root causes of environmental injustice as processes of (neo)colonization, capitalism, racism, and other systems of oppression (Walia 2014, Appadurai 2014, Correa Bernier n.d., Schlosberg 2013)

Movements addressing the multiple root causes of the social-ecological crisis can be categorized as environmental justice organizing (Di Chiro 2008, Schlosberg 2004). The environmental justice movement has unified diverse experiences of injustice while avoiding uniformity (Schlosberg

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<sup>1</sup> The panel discussion was recorded and is available online. In this recording, the quoted text runs from 4:30 to 5:05: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gZo2cBJfJc>.

2004). Mainstream environmental organizing, on the other hand, is often criticized for being inequitable, uniform/homogenous, exclusive, and ineffective at mobilizing grassroots support, particularly from communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis (Mock 2013, Shackelford 2012). Other critiques of mainstream movements call into question alliances with corporate interests and the tendency to direct funding toward band-aid/non-essential sustainability projects (Klein 2014).<sup>2</sup>

Because environmental justice organizing is poised to address the root causes of the global social-ecological crisis, academics concerned with addressing this crisis should look to environmental justice movements for direction, while aiming to avoid the pitfalls of mainstream environmentalism. If environmental justice is an ultimate goal with regards to combating climate change and environmental inequity, a central concern becomes how to *achieve* environmental justice. In order to address this concern we must heed calls to fight against “the fundamental underlying processes (and their associated power structures, social relations, institutional configurations, discourses and belief systems) that generate environmental and social injustices” (Harvey 1996, 400-401) made by activists, and academics alike.

These underlying processes manifest at multiple scales and act to (re)produce social privileges and oppressions in many contexts. Thus, they are important to examine in relation to academic institutions and their surrounding social contexts, as the academy plays a critical role in the reproduction and continuous re-entrenchment of social privilege, both within and outside of university walls (Peake & Kobayashi 2002, Kobayashi 1994, Farahani 2011, Rönnblom 2005, Potts & Brown 2005, Mahtani 2006). For example, the tendency of academia to exclude and marginalize diverse voices via misogyny, racism, homophobia (and heteronormativity), and other forms of discrimination (including marginalization of perceived left-wing/radical political ideologies) is well documented on a global scale (Rizvi 2013, Haberkorn 2011, Maher & Thomson Tetrealaut 2001), including a strong presence in Swedish universities and civil society (Farahani 2011, Eliasson et al. 2000, Rönnblom 2005, Carlson 2012, Khemiri 2013). In particular, Farahani (2011) explores the marginalisation of racialized academics in Swedish

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<sup>2</sup> A concrete example of mainstream environmental organizing could be preservation-based land conservation campaigns of The Nature Conservancy funded by major oil companies (Klein 2014).

gender studies departments and beyond, while Eliasson et al. (2000) and Rönnblom (2005) examine gender inequity, privilege, and the challenges presented by norm-breaking within Swedish university settings.

Tobias Hübinette addresses the issue of racism in Sweden and Swedish universities particularly eloquently. In a speech at the *No Border Camp 2012* in Stockholm, Hübinette drew attention to the ironic fact that Sweden is often considered one of the world's most anti-racist countries, yet it also tops the charts for being one of the most racially segregated countries, both geographically and in the labour market (Hübinette 2012)<sup>3</sup>. This brand of self-identified anti-racism often manifests as colour-blindness and an unwillingness to engage with critiques of seemingly racist behavior (Hübinette 2012, Hübinette & Räterlinck 2015). Furthermore, Sweden and Scandinavia's reputation for being very progressive with regards to gender equity risks hiding the notable gender discrimination in academic settings (Wennerås and Wold 1997, Keisu et al. 2015, Berg et al. 2012, Husu 2001 and 2005). The risk of colour/gender/sexuality-blindness resulting from the (mis)perception of equity levels in Swedish institutions is that "when culture and gender are considered irrelevant, and the organization is believed to be equal and free from sexual harassment and discrimination, then any occurrences of these issues become difficult to measure and can be considered an imposition of responsibility" (Carstensen 2004 in Keisu et al. 2015, 74).

However, as already discussed, academics concerned with environmental justice must find ways to examine and resist systemic oppression and power structures associated with academia. Symptomatic of these broader phenomena within academia is the exclusion of diverse voices in graduate programs focused on environmental issues. Marcelo Bonta (2008), the founder and director of the U.S.-based Young Environmental Professionals of Color network and the Center for Diversity and the Environment, argues that "diversifying the environmental movement is one of the greatest challenges we face this century." Bonta sees this diversification as necessary in order to build successful strategies to tackle the environmental crisis. Referring specifically to race, he explains that a lack of diversity reflects the "root cause of the [mainstream] movement's diversity crisis - a homogenous, unintentionally exclusive culture that pervades most

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<sup>3</sup> The full transcript of this speech can be accessed here: [http://www.tobiashubINETTE.se/anti\\_racism.pdf](http://www.tobiashubINETTE.se/anti_racism.pdf)

environmental institutions” (Ibid.). However, in order to diversify environmental organizing, Bonta argues that we must make environmental organizations and the movement as a whole attractive places to work, and that this focus should start with educational ‘pipelines’ into the environmental/sustainability field, including graduate programs.

Beyond internal issues of exclusion and marginalization, traditional processes of academic research also (re)produce systems of oppression and structural power dynamics between researchers and researched peoples and communities (Strega and Brown 2005). Therefore, participants in the academy have an opportunity to respond to Peake and Kobayashi’s call to broaden research agendas while extending “academic activities in the form of critical and theoretically informed activism” and strengthening “community-academy linkages” (2002, 58). Many networks of allied academics and activists<sup>4</sup> already answer these calls. For example, The Community University Research Exchange (CURE)<sup>5</sup> based at McGill University and Concordia University in Montréal, Canada connects undergraduate researchers with partner community organizations to carry out practical justice-oriented research. CURE is organized by the Quebec Public Interest Research Group (QPIRG), an umbrella organization resisting systemic oppression as it manifests within and outside of the University.<sup>6</sup> EJOLT – Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities, and Trade – is a European Union (EU) funded program that “supports the work of Environmental Justice Organisations, uniting scientists, activist organisations, think-tanks, policy-makers from the fields of environmental law, environmental health, political ecology, ecological economics, to talk about issues related to Ecological Distribution (ejolt.org).<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by these activist-academic alliances, we see the establishment of a similar activist-academic research collective (AARC) situated in the Lund University master’s program in Human Ecology (Culture, Power and Sustainability-CPS)<sup>8</sup> as having potential to address

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<sup>4</sup> We do not wish to make this a strict binary, many people (including us) identify as both activists and academics.

<sup>5</sup> For more on CURE see their website: <http://curemontreal.org>

<sup>6</sup> See their detailed description at: [www.qpirgmcgill.org](http://www.qpirgmcgill.org)

<sup>7</sup> See a full project description of EJOLT here: <http://www.ejolt.org/project/>

<sup>8</sup> In 2013 the Human Ecology master’s program, Culture, Power and Sustainability, was in its fifth year. The program is one or two year thesis-based master’s of science in the department of Human Geography at Lund University. Typically the program involves one year of coursework (Human Ecology specific courses organized by our division and general methodology courses coordinated the Faculty of Social Sciences), a one-semester long

systemic oppression associated with our particular institutional context.<sup>9</sup> This collective could heed the overarching calls by activists and academics to examine power structures connected to roots of the social-ecological crisis, including systems of oppression as they manifest in our own institutions. As outlined above, addressing oppression in Swedish institutions is particularly important due to the prevalent ‘blindness’ concerning social privilege in Sweden. Further, our master’s program certainly fits the bill of a graduate program situated in the educational pipeline towards work with environmental organizations. Therefore, we also see an opportunity to heed Bonta’s (2008) call to examine the ‘attractiveness’ and accessibility of our program in order to better understand which aspects of our program are already strong and which areas need to become more attractive, equitable and accessible. Finally, this collective could help our program better reach its goal to improve global human-environmental relations.<sup>10</sup>

One purpose of this research is to contribute to the design of a collective within the CPS program and, in particular, to collaboratively identify priorities for advocacy within the academy. As the imagined collective would have a dual focus on resisting systemic oppression both outside and within academic institutions, it is important to understand how oppression manifests within the academy and how to resist these manifestations. Structural oppression often manifests in interpersonal interactions, and thus the impact individuals’ (perceived or actual) identities have on their everyday experiences can shed light on broader structural/systemic power dynamics (CHIWOS, n.d.). Once these dynamics are identified, they become easier to measure and resist (Carstensen 2004). Thus, another overarching purpose of this thesis is to examine power dynamics within academic institutions, focusing on our master’s program as a case study, in order to better understand the reproduction and continuous re-entrenchment of social privilege in academia while testing anti-oppressive research methodologies as a strategy to resist oppression associated with traditional academic research processes.

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internship, and one semester of residency at Lund University to complete our master’s thesis. Our batch has 24 students in it currently.

<sup>9</sup> For a full proposal of AARC see Appendix 1.

<sup>10</sup> As described on the Human Ecology - CPS master’s program website: <http://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lubas/i-uoh-lu-SASAM-HUEK>

## **1.2 Research question**

Due to constraints of time and resources, we chose to center our project on student experiences, as students would be the main participants in this imagined collective. Our research question was refined to investigate:

What should an activist-academic collective advocate for within the institutional context of the Lund University CPS master's program?

- a. What should the focus of this advocacy be based on the experiences of students and former students of the CPS program?
- b. How were student experiences shaped by their perceived or actual identities?

## **1.3 Structure of thesis**

Of course, countless scholars and activists (cited throughout this paper) have already identified a multitude of structural issues associated with academia, and so we were able to choose theoretical frameworks and methodology that are rooted in traditions of critically examining unequal power relations and challenging these within academia and through the research process. We begin, in section 2, to outline the theoretical frameworks shaping our epistemological perspective, methodology, and data analysis strategies: critical feminist theory (2.1), critical race theory (2.2), and the principles of social justice and anti-oppression and queer methodology (2.3). In our methodology section, section 3, we situate this research within the tradition of participatory action research (3.1), and detail our particular strategies of data collection and analysis with a focus on queer methodological tools (3.2). We position ourselves creatively in section 4 using portraits and statements about our identities. Finally, in section 5 we present our results. We entwine main findings and theory into four sections, thematically organized by the following headings: 5.1 Institutional recognition and support, 5.2 Interpersonal dynamics in and outside of the classroom, 5.3 Remoteness and community engagement, and 5.4 Suggestions based on results. In the last findings, section 5.5, we reflect on our research process, in the hopes of providing some methodological suggestions for researchers interested in conducting similar

projects. We conclude the thesis by offering some preliminary recommendations for creating more positive student experiences within the context of our CPS program, directions for future research, and next-steps for the creation of the AARC collective.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS SHAPING METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Throughout this thesis we employ a variety of theoretical frameworks from various disciplines to better try and contextualize, and then theorize on our research question. The following theoretical frameworks were integral to the development of our methodology and framed our epistemology throughout the writing and data collection process. While we intended to use some specific concepts from these theories in our data analysis, our results led us to different, but related, theoretical tools which we will elaborate on in our data analysis section. In the sub-sections that follow we first delve into an exploration of critical feminist theory, outlining intersectionality and reflexivity as key concepts. Then, we go on to elaborate on critical race theory, particularly the concept of microaggressions, as meaningful in our justification and methodology. Finally, we identify key principles of anti-oppression and social justice research and explain the way that queer methodological tools shaped our research process.

### **2.1 Critical feminist theory**

Feminist theory spans diverse disciplinary, theoretical, and topical foci. By naming a main theoretical framework critical feminist theory, we would like to emphasize our particular interest in feminist theorizing that intersects with critical race, postcolonial and poststructuralist analyses (e.g. Crenshaw 1991, Hill Collins 1986, Mohanty 2003, Hekman 1997). Because critical feminist theory also spans diverse theoretical ground, we will detail the specific tools important to this project below.

### 2.1.1 Intersectionality

Intersectionality emerged from critical race analysis within the field of legal studies, addressing the dominance of White, middle-class women's perspectives throughout the second wave feminist movement. Writing within the tradition of critical race theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the concept intersectionality, an important epistemological and analytical perspective for theorizing difference used across disciplines (e.g. Valentine 2007). Crenshaw (1991) drew attention to the failure of some identity-based movements (specifically citing women, people of colour, and lesbian and gay movements) to acknowledge differential experiences of people within social groups. One of Crenshaw's analyses focused on the way that violence against women, particularly in relation to legal status, is shaped by a woman's race and class – differences within experience that the hegemonic women's movement was not acknowledging. In doing so, Crenshaw (1991) along with other Black<sup>11</sup> feminist scholars (e.g. Hill Collins 1986, Davis 1981) critiqued the way that the mainstream women's movement participated in perpetuating other structures of domination, such as racism and classism (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality then, is the acknowledgement that our identities are constituted by identification with multiple, intersecting social groups that collectively shape different experiences in the world (e.g. Hill Collins 1986, Crenshaw 1991, Valentine 2007).

Critiques of some intersectional analyses which 'implicitly rank difference' in trying to 'add' or 'multiply' different kinds of oppression motivated theorizing on the way identity is 'done' and 'undone' in different contexts (Valentine 2007). West and Fenstermaker argue that "we need new models to rethink intersections of systems of oppression and how structures of power are organized around intersecting relations of race, class and gender to frame social positions of individuals ... [and] to produce social locations for us all" (1995, 9 in Valentine 2007). In relation to alliance building across identities and difference, Kaijser and Kronsell write that "[f]eminist theorists have pointed to the need for creating alliances based not on fixed identities but on common interests and solidarity, and with recognition of different positions" (2013, 423). The

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<sup>11</sup> We have taken cues from Tanya Katerí Hernández, writing in the tradition of critical race feminism, in our decisions to capitalize "Black" and "White". Hernández (2005) explains that "Black," "White," "Women of Color," and "White women," are capitalized (which we have throughout our text, as Hernández has), "in order to denote the political meaning of race and the social significance of racial classifications as something beyond just skin color." (1237)

importance of alliances based on solidarity, not necessarily shared identity or experience, will be used to frame some of our findings (e.g. Mohanty 2003, Di Chiro 2008). Further, these critiques, along with related concepts which we describe and apply in our queer methodology section, motivated us to conduct open-ended interviews without prescribing predetermined identity ‘categories’ that people had to relate their experiences to. Intersectionality is a useful way for understanding the interlocking character of systems of oppression, identity as multiple and shifting, and a way for analyzing power relations at the university level.

### 2.1.2 Reflexivity

Feminist theorists have been and continue to be imperative in critiquing positivist social research while emphasizing the subjective nature of knowing (Kobayashi 2003, Hekman 1997). Further, some critical feminist theory affirms the value of knowledge accrued by the lived experience of people systematically excluded from the academy and the necessity of studying systems of power through centering the perspective of those most marginalized (Crenshaw 1991, Herisung 2005). Concerns about power dynamics within the research process and the problematic idea of ‘giving voice’ through research have been elaborated by many feminist theorists, particularly in relation to reflexivity (e.g. Wasserfall 1993, Stanley & Wise 1990, England 1994). One definition of reflexivity is “self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher” (England 1994, 244). Reflexivity affirms the importance of explicit reflection on the position of a researcher within the context of their research and broader social dynamics, and the impact that different positioning can have on the research process (England 1994). This method was proposed within the general post-modern turn in social science research to try and address difference as it impacts experiences in the world, and power dynamics in the context of a researcher-researched dynamic (England 1994).

We have approached this research with a commitment to reflexivity and a belief that research is impacted by power structures, including power differentials between researchers and ‘the researched’. Wasserfall is critical of the assumption in some “post-modern ethnographic fieldwork” (1993, 24) that a commitment to reflexivity is sufficient to deal with negative power

differentials within research processes. Thus, we do not want to treat reflexivity as a panacea to unequal power relations - our power in shaping a narrative within the context of the research and writing process, and the power dynamics that were present within our community before the research began, persist and certainly shaped the research process.

Our commitment to reflexivity has inspired both our ongoing solicitation of consent from participants in the project in order to engage in “a continuous checking on the accomplishment of understanding” (Wasserfall 1993, 24-25). Our section 5.5 results - a reflection on the research process and on developing our methodology - was incorporated both because of the potential value of contributing methodological reflections for this kind of future research, and in an effort to self-reflect transparently on the experience. We also hope that this project affirms the need for reflexivity within academia, particularly if academics are interested in making meaningful contributions towards social justice, and that this research project constitutes a reflexive process on academia.

## **2.2 Critical race theory and anti-racism**

Critical geographers have proposed anti-racism and critical race theory as principles for challenging the racist, colonial history of geography and the continued marginalization of geographers of colour, as well as theorizing on intersecting oppressions (Pulido 2002, Peake & Kobayashi 2002). Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso outline the five guiding principles of critical race theory (CRT) as:

- (a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (b) the challenge to dominant ideology, (c) the commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano 1997, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, in press; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). (2000:63)

Critical race theory has motivated us to historicize academic complicity in structures of power in our introduction and justification. Using the CRT guiding principles and the principles of anti-

oppressive research, we reflect on the way that broader structures of power are related to student experiences within our particular program and the academy in general throughout our data analysis, particularly in our analysis of interpersonal dynamics (section 5.2). Further, Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2001)'s focus on student experiences impacted our decision to center this study on student experiences as our data source, in accordance with the principle of re-centering experiential knowledge.

Berg (2008) points out that both whiteness and race have been “a relatively silenced topic in feminist research” (213) in a Nordic context. Because of this, in spite of CRT's North American roots, we believe that this provides further justification for the application of CRT tools to analyze race relations and other unequal power relations within a Scandinavian context (there is some precedence for doing so, e.g. Carlson 2012). While our central focus of this text is not an analysis of racial dynamics, we hope by using CRT and anti-oppression we might make a small contribution to building literature that considers racism from a social justice perspective in a Scandinavian context.

### 2.2.1 Microaggressions

Microaggressions is a concept coined by a team of researchers theorizing on ‘commonplace’ experiences of sometimes covert discrimination, which they defined as “subtle, stunning often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of [B]lacks by offenders” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez & Willis 1978, 66). Inquiries into racial microaggressions have been conducted using critical race theory on university campuses in the United States (e.g. Yosso et al. 2009, Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso 2001). Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2001) examine racial microaggressions directed at Black students attending predominantly White, elite, research universities and found students experienced everyday discrimination of many kinds - including expectations of low-achievement from faculty and fellow students, social exclusion and racial segregation, overt hostility, and others. To give an example, one participant “recalled an encounter with a White faculty member:

I was [in the department building] and I was walking down the hallway... and one of the teacher's doors was open.... She's like “Oh, I should have locked the door. My purse.” I

was just [thinking to myself], wow... maybe [she] should have kept that to [herself] or something, like, oh, I reminded you that you should lock your door!" (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso 2001, 68)

These kinds of ‘everyday’ experiences endured by Black students in university settings resulted in students feeling “drained”, “unwanted”, “uncomfortable”, and “self-doubt [...] frustration, as well as isolation”, and were related to broader structures of racism in the United States (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso 2001, 65-69).

While we are aware that different power structures influence people’s experiences in different ways, there is precedence for applying microaggression theory to other structural forms of discrimination (for example, Keller & Galgay (2010) use microaggression theory to examine experiences of discrimination against people with disabilities). Thus, critical race theory, and theory surrounding microaggressions, helps us put specific, interpersonal examples of discrimination based on identity into a broader social context. Further, because of the topical similarity, the work of some critical race theorists exploring microaggressions on university campuses in the United States (e.g. Yosso et al. 2009, Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso 2001) have influenced our methodological decisions, specifically our decisions to conduct focus groups, and our data analysis strategy rooted in grounded theory. These decisions will be further elaborated in our methodology section, but we want to acknowledge the importance of theory on racial microaggressions on university campuses in developing data collection and data analysis methodology.

### **2.3 Social justice and anti-oppression**

Our third overarching theoretical framework centers on principles of social justice and anti-oppression. In *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, Karen Potts and Leslie Brown (2005, 255) propose a definition of anti-oppressive research as research centered on a commitment to challenging power relations via the research process. They further define anti-oppressive research as a “method of intervention” (2005, 257) that is “the art of asking questions, building relationships, seeking answers, and coming up with more

questions”(2005, 257-258). As a theoretical framework, anti-oppression stems from diverse critical traditions such as feminism, marxism, critical race theory, postcolonial thought, Indigenous theory, and poststructuralism with inherently practical implications (Potts & Brown 2005, 259). Anti-oppressive methods seek to challenge the motivations behind research, and the methods and methodologies used throughout research projects (Strega & Brown 2005).

A social justice theoretical framework simultaneously implies and justifies collaborative action-based research centered on principles of anti-oppression, which we understand as a toolkit for turning critical race and feminist theory into practice. Indeed, a social justice framework, which the Canadian HIV Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Health Cohort Study affirm can be used for research “connected to [...] emancipatory resistance with the objectives of confronting oppression” (CHIWOS n.d.), can build avenues for radical social change via collaborative and community-centered processes.

The Sierra Youth Coalition makes a strong case for why anti-oppression theory is necessary when analyzing human-environment relations, and why anchoring both our research and project design in a social justice and anti-oppression framework is important:

As folks committed to creating a more sustainable planet, it is our responsibility to examine how all forms of oppression are interconnected and how they correspond to the degradation of the physical environment. Historically, the leadership of the mainstream environmental movement - including SYC - has tended to be mostly white, and mostly people of affluence. This leaves out some of the groups of people most affected by environmental degradation, like communities of color, whose leadership in the struggle to create a more sustainable planet continues to be marginalized, as it has been for 500 years.

Furthermore, racism, sexism, classism, transphobia, ableism and heterosexism (among other things) are just as harmful to our human environment as is its physical degradation. Oppression separates us and prevents certain people's voices from being heard, ultimately limiting the scope of our victories in creating a more sustainable and just world (SYC, n.d.).

In this research project, we focus specifically on human relations because of the context of our program, and our agreement with SYC that oppressive social systems are at the heart of the ecological crisis. Complementing critical race theory, a social justice and anti-oppression

framework facilitated our ability to draw connections between historic/systemic structures of power and current interpersonal experiences of oppression. This framework allowed us to better analyze power dynamics and leadership regarding environmental justice work, and helped us to justify the necessity of providing more opportunities for Human Ecology researchers to engage in solidarity and accomplice-based relationships with frontline activist groups, as well as to examine interpersonal oppression as it manifests in our own program. In the next section we will outline in more detail how some tools of anti-oppressive research methodologies, specifically tools from queer methodologies like queer flexibilities and ex-centricity, informed our research process.

### 2.3.1 Queer methodology (with a little more theory)

Fairn herising<sup>12</sup> (2005) develops methodology within an anti-oppressive research framework while Haritaworn (2007) connects queer methodology to anti-racist feminism, and so we saw the potential to apply queer methodological tools as anti-oppressive researchers within our chosen frameworks of critical race and critical feminist theory. Therefore, we drew upon what we see as Haritaworn's (2007) and herising's (2005) development of queer methodologies as important frameworks in our methodological decisions.

Haritaworn (2007) explores *queerness* as a concept, describing the contentiousness of queering racialized heterosexualities (like that of popular singer MIA) and the historical shift of 'queer' as a self-identification term used by working-class dykes of colour to a term largely appropriated by middle-class White folks (especially in an academic sense). After a queer man of colour at an academic conference suggests 'Queer' exists as a contested concept signifying not necessarily (just) an identity but also a positionality and/or methodology and/or day-to-day survival strategy, Haritaworn reflects on their personal understanding of the term and goes on to connect Queer to anti-racist feminism and explore how Queer can work as a positionality, while questioning the power dynamics associated with speaking on behalf of others (Ibid.). Finally, Haritaworn proposes queer methodology as a way to critically redefine social relations, particularly through reframing difference with an eye towards social change (Ibid.). Haritaworn's queer methodology

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<sup>12</sup> In *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches* (Brown & Strega 2005), this is how Fairn herising chose to write their name, and we respect this decision throughout our text.

emphasizes positionality (adopted from anti-racist feminism) as a way to “reflect on where we stand, to define our speaking positions and how they relate to others, especially those whom we claim to speak for” (2007, 3).

herising (2005) centers their discussion of queerness and queer methodology on ‘thresholds’, proposing a queer critical politics of location as a research tool to understand power dynamics between researcher and researched as well as a way to see how our location shapes and is shaped by our interactions with people and places. herising historicizes the term ‘Queer’ as emerging in the early 1990s, becoming a politicized term via use by activist groups. They argue that queer theory, while rooted in feminist, gay and lesbian academic work, is transdisciplinary, and that “Queer challenges the assumed coherency and stability of chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire.” (2005, 140) Thus, queer methodologies push us to see identity as “neither fixed nor determinate, but socially constructed and contingent on time and context.” (Ibid.) herising highlights how queer theorists and activists alike see potential for transformative research that considers resistance in relation to the normative and a “responsibility to dissenting politics.” (2005, 142) Following herising, we see queering our methodology as a way to decenter our research project from “institutional and disciplinary requirements” and re-center it on our audience, voice, and subjectivities.

### 2.3.2 Positionality and reframing difference

Unlike Haritaworn (2007), we are not using queer methodology to conduct research on/with a queer community, but instead see value in the methodological implications of highlighting our positionality as researchers and working towards social change by reframing difference (a tool that motivated us to bring in politics of solidarity (Mohanty 2003) and ‘difference in community as strength’ (Lorde 1984) as theoretical concepts during analysis of our results). Further, Haritaworn’s insistence on using positionality as an anti-racist feminist tool within their queer methodology allows us to “directly ‘touch/interact/connect’ with our subjects, in ways which are less exploitative, less objectifying, and more politically relevant”, because the reader is better able to interpret our results with knowledge that research was conducted with a commitment to being as transparent, consensual, and self-reflective as possible (2007, 4). We do this by setting

aside space to position ourselves in a creative, eye-catching, accessible way in order to place particular emphasis on our positionality for the reader and consistently reflecting on power dynamics throughout the research process.

### 2.3.3 Reflexivity in the context of social justice and anti-oppression

While we have already outlined our commitment to reflexivity, we highlight it again here as a concept Haritaworn identifies as an important tool within their queer methodology. Haritaworn (2007) argues that “participants are not merely raw, pre-theoretical sources of ‘experience’, but active producers of their own interpretations, which compete with those of the researcher” (4), while clarifying that “this competition does not occur on a level playing field, and the researcher has the last word at the stage of analysis” (Phoenix 1994 in Ibid. 4). Therefore, it becomes important to make visible our role in the narrative as researchers (Bhavnani 1993 in Ibid. 4). We have adopted Haritaworn’s specific methodological suggestions on reflexivity, including spending significant time in this paper making clear to the reader how our participant group was formed, what questions they were asked, how they responded to these questions, and how we edited and interpreted our results.

### 2.3.4 Ex-centricity

herising’s explanation of ex-centricity has framed the way we think of ourselves as researchers within this project, and provides justification for our attempts to disrupt certain ‘typical’ processes within the production of academic texts. An ex-centric researcher starts from a point of “defiance of dominant sites of privilege” (herising 2005, 145), with a methodological obligation to recognize the value of subjugated knowledges and promote the epistemic worth of these texts. Our commitment to working as ex-centric researchers is reflected initially in and further justifies our decision to write this thesis jointly. The term “ex-centric” does not imply a disregard for academic obligations, processes, or methods, but rather pushes us to focus on the *process* of research as a way to “disrupt the processes that enable the academy to maintain its exclusion of ideas and knowledges that conflict with existing established knowledges” (2005, 143), which we seek to do throughout this text.

Ex-centricity makes space in methodology for building of solidarity and interpersonal commitments. Our desire to work against exclusionary tendencies in the academy motivated our methodological decisions to; seek ongoing consent from participants, provide opportunities for co-shaping our methodology and data analysis, and give participants a chance to read our findings (and confirm their comfort with the text, and the accuracy) before publication. Finally, we see ex-centric research as a to work from the meeting point of “contradictory and disagreeable discourses” where there might be “penalties to be paid”, but there also exists “transformational possibilities” rooted in social justice (herising, 145). Allowing participants to choose their own pseudonym (no matter the ‘seriousness’ of the name) reflect our desire to embody ex-centricity in our research. Further methodological decisions, such as working on research that is not only for our own personal gain as academics, but will also be useful for a community in relation to the principles of social justice, also stems from principles of ex-centricity.

### 2.3.5 Queer flexibilities

Queer flexibilities as a conceptual framework allows us to “challenge the assumed coherency and stability of [...] identity” (herising, 140), while exploring its social and spatial construction. This encourages us, as researchers, to view our position as flexible and constructed, which is in turn how we see our relationships with and the identities of participants. Methodologically, this motivated our decision to continuously reflect throughout the research process on our position as researchers and the power dynamics we noticed. This reflection is present throughout the text where we have tried to be as transparent as possible about the research process, and in our section 5.5 findings, which are entirely devoted to explicit methodological reflection. Further, by beginning the data collection process by interviewing one another, we attempted to reflect on the power dynamics that, in spite of our best efforts, still inevitably exist within our research relationships.

Queer flexibility affirms that methodology can be used as a way to “[disrupt] the normative, the naturalized, and the hegemonic”, because it implies a stance of opposition to the status quo

(herising, 141). A framework of queer flexibilities pushes us to view methodology as a potentially radical strategy to contest, decenter and challenge claims of knowledge (herising, 142). Ex-centricity and queer flexibilities both offer us an opportunity to stimulate dialogue about how relationships manifest between the researched and the researchers, and work towards research that is transparent, reflexive, and anti-oppressive.

### 3. POSITIONING OURSELVES

Art by Ann-Kathrin

When considering our position in relation to this research project, to the CPS community, and to other communities we have been a part of, we have reflected on different aspects of our locations and ourselves that shape both how we see the world and how others see us. Inspired by Fair herising's creative positioning, we considered labels and static identity categories, and how to avoid these, and also the sometimes empowering feeling of using labels, and how to best communicate our positionalities to the reader of this so that they get a better feel for who we are. Finally, we have considered anonymity and safety in numbers, even if that number is only two. Therefore, we have chosen to position ourselves together through a series of individualized reflections, though some statements apply to both of us and others to only one. We have included footnotes marking the broader phenomena that each statement refers to in order to more clearly connect this page to themes associated with structures of power and oppression, as our paper concerns itself with.

I think about my two passports—one European, one North American—that sweep me across borders so effortlessly, and that combined with my height and light skin and European ancestry make me blend in on the streets of southern Sweden, not just socially but in a way that makes policemen *smile* at me.<sup>13</sup>

I think about the childhood-shame associated with the name of my neighbourhood, the hours I have spent holding other women's babies, cleaning houses, and serving food so that I can be a student here. I think about how easy it is to find a service job when I need one based on my appearance and papers.<sup>14</sup>



I think about how I was born and raised a settler on Turtle Island and how little I really know about the histories of my home.<sup>15</sup>

I think about how happy I was when I found that I am going to become a mother. I feel lucky my partner and I were able to conceive easily and never face questions from doctors or friends about how we were able to do so. I fear being discriminated against for having kids in future studies and jobs.<sup>16</sup>



I think about the first man I ever kissed, and the first woman I loved.<sup>17</sup>

I think about how much pleasure I get from wearing nail polish, high-heels and short skirts, and how I can walk naked through the women's side of the sauna without fear of verbal or physical assault or criminalization based on how my body does or does not look.<sup>18</sup>

I think about paranoia and hours spent in university-sponsored therapy, how difficult it would be for me to find a space that was *not* physically accessible for me, and how glad I am that our masters program is in my native language<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Migration/legal status, whiteness, racism, police/state violence

<sup>14</sup> Classism, racism, white supremacy, migration status

<sup>15</sup> Colonialism

<sup>16</sup> Misogyny, heteronormativity, reproductive health

<sup>17</sup> Heteronormativity, queerness

<sup>18</sup> Body politics, respectability politics, gender norms, transphobia

<sup>19</sup> Mental health, physical abilities, language abilities

Finally, we would like to take a brief moment to explain to the reader our relationship as co-researchers, as this of course impacted how we worked together on this project and thus has slight implications for our methodological relevance. We became close friends in 2009 when, as undergraduate students at McGill University in Montréal, we lived in the same first-year student residence. Since then we have collaborated on multiple academic and non-academic projects, consistently working, living, researching and traveling together. This shared history motivated our decision to co-write this thesis and shaped the research process overall.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### **4.1 Framing our project as anti-oppressive participatory action research**

In addition to our guiding epistemological and methodological frameworks delineated above, we approached our research design considering anti-oppressive and participatory action research. As we have already described anti-oppressive research principles above, we will focus on outlining participatory action research (PAR), then go on to examine some of the tensions that exist within different kinds of PAR. We will finish this section by reconciling anti-oppressive research principles and our framing of this project as in line with participatory action research goals, before delving into our particular data collection tools.

PAR can be understood as a commitment to deconstructing researcher-researched power structures and embodying a “practice of researching with rather than on, participants” (Lykes 2000 in Cahill, Quijada Cerecer & Bradley 2010, 411). With a commitment to self-reflexivity and the goal of working towards social justice as understood by antiracist and critical feminists, in this project, along with many other PAR projects, echoing Guishard (2009) we seek to “do something’ within a context in which it is urgent” (Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, & Bradley 2010, 407). In this case, we hope to identify oppressive power dynamics at work within our university program, and through this, also identify potential focuses of the AARC collective within the academy. Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, and Bradley write that PAR “follows in the footsteps of

feminist and critical race scholars, who have shown how women and people of color entering the academy not only have an opportunity to transform themselves but also effectively transform the institution. (Hill-Collins 2000; Kelley 1998)” (2010, 410)

Rutman et al. describe some of PAR and anti-oppression theory’s similarities in that “[b]oth PAR and [anti-oppressive principles] share the understanding that researchers are knowledge producers and are located within a complex set of social structures” (2005, 156), an understanding which we also maintain. They go on to describe key differences between the two:

[Anti-oppressive practice] generally starts with those who are already in positions of power—those engaged in research, for example—and challenges the practitioner or researcher to continually question his or her “location” in terms of beliefs, values, identity, and power, as well as to identify ways in which he or she perpetuates those power imbalances. As such, the “location” of the researcher is continuously examined and recognized as an integral part of the research process.

Within PAR not as much emphasis is placed on the “location” of the researcher. Rather, there is an assumption that the researcher and the “researched” are closely allied—if not one and the same—and would not have engaged in this particular type of research without having developed a critical consciousness of power dynamics within society, including that of the researcher’s own position within society. (Rutman et al. 2005, 157)

Other scholars have criticized the co-option of PAR by researchers working without a social justice oriented framework (e.g. Rutman et al. 2005, Strega & Brown 2005, Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, & Bradley 2010). However, because of our positioning as students within the CPS program, as well as the assertion by some anti-oppressive researchers of the value of PAR as one tool of anti-oppressive research (e.g. Rutman et al. 2005, Strega & Brown 2005) we will continue to frame this research project as inspired by PAR, though always within the principles of anti-oppressive research. While we do not claim to share the same goals as all students in CPS, we began this research project with the knowledge (based on informal discussions and close relationships with classmate) that many other students were frustrated with institutional dynamics in our program and desired to engage in social-justice oriented research.

Anti-oppressive research principles and PAR provide both a justification for the potential value of an activist-academic research collective, inspiration for the design of the collective, and

inform epistemology, methodology, and the trajectory of our primary research. Though we acknowledge critiques and some co-option of PAR, given our desire and commitment to work towards implementation of the AARC collective, and our unique situation as members of our research group with some shared goals with our participants (e.g. making a more equitable, engaging CPS program), we believe framing this research as anti-oppressive participatory action research is accurate and appropriate.

## **4.2 Primary research methods**

In order to collectively identify priorities for advocacy within the academy through understanding underlying power dynamics at work in our program, we used a variety of research methods to carry out primary research. Via an email listserv sent out to all current and past CPS students, we invited students to attend focus groups, submit creative contributions, and participate in one-on-one interviews. Lena reiterated this invitation in person at an academic gathering of the two current batches of CPS students and at the first thesis seminar for our batch. We also reminded classmates we came into contact with outside of class about the invitation to participate while still trying to avoid creating a sense of pressure to contribute unless they wanted to.

As part of our desire to use this thesis to push boundaries within the academy, we sought to support methods of knowledge production that are not traditionally academic in our data collection (e.g. Clandinin 2007). In particular, we included sequences of unaltered text from narratives of both participants and ourselves, and actively tried to make our writing more accessible, interesting, and transparent for readers. Further, we sought creative contributions to allow people to express their experiences within academia in a non-interview format, and provided opportunities for participants and potential participants to shape our methodology and data analysis. We used four particular data collection strategies:

1. Creative contributions
2. Open-ended interviews

3. Autobiographical narratives
4. Focus groups

Each of these strategies is outlined below.

#### 4.2.1 Creative contributions

In the emails, presentations, and reminders mentioned above we invited creative contributions from current and former students of the CPS program. Our motivation for inviting creative contributions stemmed from a desire to validate non-traditional (in academic settings) ways of communicating experiences (e.g. Clandinin 2007). We hoped that by providing participants with opportunities to express themselves in any medium they chose we could further embody our theoretical commitments to challenge power dynamics. We received three creative contributions - one painting, one poem, and one free-written text. Because only three contributions were submitted, we allow them to speak for themselves and do not include any specific analysis of each contribution. We have pasted them at the beginning of each section – sorted by the contribution we felt most relevant to each. The free-write was too long to include in its entirety but has been included in Appendix 2 in its original format.

#### 4.2.2 Open-ended interviews

We conducted 17 one-on-one interviews with current and past CPS students who felt they wanted to share something about their experiences in university settings or could contribute to forming advocacy priorities for the collective through an in-person interview. The interviews were conducted in a flexible, open-ended narrative style (O'Reilly 2005, Kimpson 2005). The interviews were arranged upon the request of interested participants at the time and location of their choosing. All interviews took place one-on-one with either Lena or Anna (but not both)<sup>20</sup> participating depending on availability and the full interview was recorded. Whoever was not present at the interview took detailed notes on the recording so that we are both equally familiar with the content. Each participant gave verbal consent to be interviewed after looking over a

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<sup>20</sup> Based on informal conversations with classmates prior to the start of the data collection process, we decided that interviews with both of us present would increase the imbalance of power between the interviewer(s) and the participant.

previously received consent and project explanation form (found in Appendix 3). The interviews conducted were open-ended with only the first question pre-determined (approximately, ‘tell us about positive and negative experiences you’ve had in university settings’). General themes arose in the first few interviews, some of which inevitably impacted follow-up questions in later interviews.

The data collected provides answers to our first research question to identify needs for advocacy within the academy (within the particular context of the CPS program), using students’ experiences as the justification for suggestions. Narrative inquiry constituted an important part of our data collection (e.g. Kimpson 2005). Narrative inquiry - as a method of both data collection and analysis - has a long history within qualitative social science research generally and is one suggested strategy for anti-oppressive researchers (Potts & Brown 2005). We used this method of data collection, along with anti-oppressive and critical methodological tools of reflexivity, intersectionality, ex-centricity, and queer flexibilities, in order to organize, code, co-analyze (along with respondents), and eventually construct a narrative about what some students have experienced in the CPS program in order to identify ways the collective could focus its advocacy within our program.

#### 4.2.3 Autobiographical narratives

As a way to practice self-reflexivity and have a critical discussion on our positionality, but also as a means of research in itself, we include autobiographical narratives centered on our own experiences within the academy, particularly the CPS program. We followed the methodological style of autobiographical narratives employed by Kimpson (2005), interviewing one another in a style similar to that which we interviewed other people before integrating our responses with findings from other respondents. Our initial interviews with each other served as both an opportunity to test our interview method and reflect on the power dynamics that arose from being caught in an interviewer/participant dynamic (which was significant, even though we are close friends and co-researchers and know the project well).

#### 4.2.4 Focus Groups

We held focus groups as part of our data collection process in order to have broader participation and to facilitate collective knowledge production. All current and former students in the CPS program in Human Ecology were invited to two focus groups by the same means as the other data collection methods, including messages via listserv, reminders in class, and informal reminders. However, only two people responded to our invitation to participate in focus groups, presumably due to a variety of factors including time limitations (many current CPS students were also currently writing their theses).

This reality led us to conduct focus groups only with students currently taking part in the CPS thesis seminars, which mostly consisted of students from our batch (2013-2015). As part of our thesis course, students were assigned a seminar slot and discussant to present a section of their thesis and receive feedback. Since there are two of us, we were offered two seminar spots and chose to use the first one to present our data collection methodology, and the second one to present our data analysis strategy and preliminary results. We wrote to our classmates five days before each seminar to sent them a summary text and requested that our seminar function as a focus group, during which they could give us feedback on our methodological and analytical choices. The purpose of these focus groups was to solicit feedback that could be used to adjust our methodology and analysis, and to reflect on the research process.

Our first focus group took place on April 7th, 2015 and functioned in the standard thesis seminar style, in which we presented a brief overview of our text, a discussant summarized and critiqued it, and then we opened up the conversation for input from anyone in the class. As we moved along in the research process we heard more and more critiques of standard class discussions, so we decided to conduct the second focus group (held on April 23rd) differently. Instead of having a 'normal' class discussion in which anyone who raised their hand or spoke out would get to contribute, Anna (Lena could not be present) presented our results so far, then invited everyone present to spend ten minutes giving written feedback, which she collected at the end. We have included further methodological detailing from both focus groups below. The first focus group primarily concerned feedback on data collection, thus we have presented results in this section,

while the second focus group concerned findings and analysis, so the results are woven into our findings sections.

*Focus group #1: feedback on methodological decisions*

In the spirit of PAR, we decided to invite reflections on our methodological decisions halfway through the data collection process. Out of about 23 people present in the first seminar, six people offered substantial feedback in a discussion that lasted about one hour. Some classmates asked us about particular methodological decisions that, instead of discussing here, we were motivated to elaborate upon or further justify throughout our theoretical and methodological sections. Other comments, however, we have decided to discuss here because they seemed more significant in terms of assessing achievement of our methodological goals. These goals included the desire to make the research process as transparent and participatory as our context allowed for, for consent to constitute an ongoing process, and trying to ensure research participants felt comfortable in both the data collection process and about how their contributed information would be used.

Three different people present at the first focus group remarked that by including everyone in a discussion on our methodology we were raising awareness about research dynamics and ethics for the whole group. In reference to our research, two people used the term “course”, saying that they felt like we were helping provide space to deepen understandings of methodology and self-reflexivity as concepts. One person brought up (what they referred to as) a common problem in social science research: that so often the researchers benefit from information and knowledge produced by the researched without giving back. They then suggested that the participatory aspect of our thesis, the so-called ‘course’ (by other classmates) on methodology and self-reflexivity, could be seen as the “thing” we were “giving back”. This same person went so far as to suggest that this opportunity for collective learning about research methodology and self-reflexivity, particularly about our program itself, addresses a “gap in our [program’s] curriculum” and is thus a “primary strength” of our project. This motivated us to dedicate more

space throughout this thesis to outline our development and application of methodology, a process that we now see as a significant contribution of this project.

Another classmate, who had already participated in an interview, raised some concerns about our methodology. Annika spoke about feeling uncomfortable after reading our written methodological explanation, because she now felt like she had not fully understood what we had been ‘looking for’ in the interview. Further, she explained feeling uncomfortable that the information given to us would be fit into a theoretical framework resting on critical race theory and feminist theory. Annika understood our use of these frameworks as implying an interest in race and gender above other aspects of identity. While she expressed appreciation that the interview was shaped by her own viewpoint, Annika noted that our topic is very broad and she would have preferred if we had asked more directly about experiences we felt were relevant. This feedback highlighted our need to clarify our interview goals and communicate more clearly with participants. So, in consultation with Annika and two other classmates, we designed a follow-up question to send via email to all of our participants that asked more directly about instances when participants’ (perceived) identities led to positive or negative experiences in university settings. We included a range of aspects of identity that had come up so far in interviews as well as those we had been initially most interested in, including gender, race, language abilities, sexual orientation, physical abilities, mental health status, and political ideology. Two participants responded to this follow-up email.

Due to this feedback, in the interviews that followed we explained in more detail the theoretical frameworks we were using to shape our data collection process and why. In this explanation, we highlighted that we were using critical race theory, feminist theory, and anti-oppression not because we were only interested in race and gender, but because of the specific tools, perspectives, and concepts present in each of these frameworks that we felt could be applied to our research context. We also clarified that we were still unsure at that point about what theories we would bring in to support our data analysis, and that they would depend on the results from our interviews, creative contributions and focus groups. We see this focus group as a valuable part of an anti-oppressive PAR process, as it provided space for participants to shape the research process and address power dynamics in interviews.

*Focus Group #2: feedback on preliminary findings*

For our second focus group on April 23rd, we were interested in reflections on data analysis and our preliminary findings. We wanted to involve people in developing our data analysis strategy going ahead, and also wanted to give people an opportunity to reflect back on their perceived ‘accuracy’ of our preliminary results (since we are also a part of our research group, in the spirit of PAR, and within our goals of queering methodology).

Because one of the main themes in our interviews was dissatisfaction with classroom dynamics, we invited everyone to reflect on our initial results in a different format than a class discussion; after Anna presented our tentative results, she invited anyone who wanted to reflect independently for ten minutes in writing on whether they felt like our results were reflective of their personal experience, as well as their perception of our group’s collective experience. The full document available to our classmates prior to the focus group is included in Appendix 4.

We presented our findings as three major ‘themes’ (that were displayed in both PowerPoint and read aloud to the classroom, that now are our first three findings section headings), backed up by more specific content that arose frequently in our interviews. After these concepts were presented as preliminary results, the participants were asked to reflect on the following questions in writing:

- Do you feel like the results reflect some ‘truth’ about your experience?
- What about your perception of the group’s collective experience?

In addition to reflecting on our results, we asked people to identify whether they were interviewed or not, and which years they completed their coursework (because our interview respondents were so overwhelmingly from our batch). Each thematic slide was displayed for three minutes while people had a chance to respond in writing.

We analyzed the written reflections from our second focus group by first separating responses into those from participants and those who were not interviewed. Sixteen people were present at

the feedback session - eight had conducted one-on-one interviews, eight had not. Fifteen people chose to respond to our preliminary results, seven of whom had been interviewed. While we were still interested in everyone's feedback, we do not have enough information from those not interviewed to be able to contextualize their responses, thus they were not considered in re-working our findings.

Amongst those interviewed, the written feedback described a strong feeling that our results both reflected their perception of the group's collective experience *and* their personal experience. A number of people wrote that they felt that their interviews had been strongly considered in the formation of the preliminary results. Over all, six of the seven participants felt that they identified strongly with most points in all three sections, while one of the respondents felt partially represented in all three sections. We have interwoven more detailed results from focus group #2 into our findings sections, but for those interested in a more detailed summary of focus group #2 results, consult Appendix 5.

### **4.3 Data analysis methodology**

In order to reach the results presented to our classmates in focus group #2, we of course first had to analyze our interview transcripts. Inspired by Yosso et al. (2009) and in line with our previous methodological use of critical race theory, we were motivated to consider our transcripts from a grounded theory approach, specifically using constructionist developments in grounded theory (e.g. Charmaz 2008) developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is an emergent method used for analyzing qualitative social research. Charmaz uses "inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended" as a working definition for emergent methods, and describes it as a method that "begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold and knowledge accrues" (2008, 155). While we reject early grounded theorists notion that grounded theory erases 'difference' and allows for more 'objective' analysis of qualitative data (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967), grounded theory methods allowed us to challenge some of our preconceptions and broaden our theoretical frameworks for data analysis.

The more recent turn towards constructionist grounded theory “retains the original focus on emergence but does so in relation to the conditions of the research and the standpoints and interactions of the researchers” (Charmaz 2008, 160). In line with constructionist grounded theorists we affirm the possibility for grounded theory in that it might allow for our “perspectives [to] grow and/or change and thus permit the structure of inquiry, as well as its content, to be emergent” (Charmaz 2008, 161). Inspired by grounded theory, we fully transcribed, coded, thematized, and then categorized our interviews. The themes were identified, and changed, throughout the research process. The researcher who did not conduct the interview was responsible for completing the transcription and initial coding.

After coding was completed, we organized our codes thematically and discussed the results of each interview (after we were both familiarized with the full content of the interview, and the coded transcription). Then, we identified some key themes that, in different ways, seemed to have contributed to many of our participants’ positive and negative experiences in university settings. These key themes were organized into three categories, which we presented as our preliminary findings to our peers in order to receive feedback on perceived accuracy of our results (see section 4.3.6 and Appendix 3). Our categories and the findings from our second focus group were used to build the final findings sections that follow after our limitations. Our grounded theory approach motivated very open-ended interviews and necessitated finding new theoretical tools of analysis after the data collection for explaining phenomenon we did not expect of find.

#### **4.4 Limitations**

Our research project was constrained by several potential limitations. First, we applied theoretical frameworks largely developed in/about North America in a Swedish university setting to a group of largely international students. Each student therefore comes from a unique background, history of socialization, and culturally and geographically specific relationship to and understanding of issues of identity and structures of power and oppression. Nonetheless, we feel justified in these decisions due to the precedence of applying North American theoretical frameworks in Swedish and international settings (e.g. Carlson 2011, Kaijser & Kronsell 2013),

and were also interested in examining how these frameworks fit our current situation. Further, in an increasingly globalized society with highly international educational settings becoming more and more common (Gürüz 2001), it is important to understand student wellbeing and power dynamics within these international classrooms.

Since our research is focused around a very unique case, the broader applicability of these findings is somewhat limited. It could be illuminating to conduct a comparative study and either focus on students' previous university experiences, or examine student experiences and power structures across multiple university programs. Unfortunately, both of these endeavors were out of the scope of this project. However, we argue that there is both practical (in terms of working to address power relations as they manifest in this particular program) and analytical value (e.g. McCall 2005) in focusing on a particular case study.

This inquiry is also limited in that we are studying oppressive structures in the academy without being able to consider testimonies from people who have in fact been excluded from the academy. This is an important site of future research and we have tried to account for this by including reflections on power structures both within and outside of university settings in our context and justification, with the hope that some of the preliminary recommendations that come out of this research could help make the program more accessible in spite of this limitation.

While we argue that being a part of the community we are researching challenges some typical power relations in social research, we also recognize that our location within our research 'group' could have limited some of our findings. Some people may have felt uncomfortable coming forward to participate if they felt their answers might compromise personal relationships. Further, because of our embeddedness in this community some power dynamics may have gone unnoticed within the research process.

We identified several limitations of our data analysis and findings sections, as well, particularly in relation to analyzing identity, power, and well being. This is because of our research group – a small, tight-knit community of students and friends. While we do not wish to be reductionist in our analysis, it was impossible to consider each person's experience independently of one

another, particularly in relation to identity, because of issues of confidentiality. Explorations of people's experiences in relation to multiple aspects of their identity would have compromised anonymity. Because of this, where identity markers were concerned, we have chosen to identify only broad social categories in relation to the way that they tended to emerge in shaping positive and negative experiences in academia from the data collected in one-on-one interviews. Because of risks to confidentiality, we have also intentionally excluded pseudonyms in some cases if participants or we felt it might help maintain anonymity. This necessity to thematize more broadly has meant that we have excluded some data, and that we have not significantly used an intersectional lens in framing our detailed results.

In the sections that follow, we delve into findings from our qualitative data collection, which are interwoven with analysis. Sections 5.1 through 5.3 focus on aspects of student experiences in our program, while section 5.4 details specific ideas students had in interviews for improving experiences. In section 5.5 we reflect on the research process, and make the case that developments of and reflections on our methodological choices are an important contribution of this research.

## 5. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

### 5.1 Institutional recognition and support

#### **I Refuse**

A poem by Lucie Bardos

I refuse  
the challenge  
to thread my mind  
through the needle hole  
prescribed to me  
by this society  
today.

Neurons  
stitch together  
pathways for thoughts  
and tightropes for stories.  
My tales do not conform -  
- no, not to these norms;  
my electric storm is  
my own.

But,  
the outside  
wraps invisible  
tight and non-divisible  
bindings that are violent and  
intolerant and belligerent to me.  
Pugnacious, they tug at my neurons  
which struggle to break free.  
The contentious bindings  
worm their way  
into me.

In many of our interviews, participants described feeling unengaged and that they were not taken seriously by the university based on lack of contact hours, inconsistent professorial engagement,

lack of space dedicated to our program, and irrelevant research methods courses.<sup>21</sup> Another pervading theme in our interviews was appreciation for informal relationships to professors, opportunities for creative expression, flexibility, and general openness to critical discussions, as well as increased validation of non-mainstream political beliefs compared to outside of the program. We find the concept of recognition (particularly as articulated by Schlosberg 2004 in relation to environmental justice-related identities) as useful in understanding these dynamics.

Recognition, a concept stemming from justice theory, is the acknowledgement of differences between groups of people and is often spoken about in the context of differing privileges and oppressions (Young 1990 in Schlosberg 2004). It acts as both a social norm and relationship, and thus Young (1990) argues that it must occur not just institutionally but also in social, symbolic, and cultural realms in order to be effective. According to Young (1990) and Fraser (2000), a lack of recognition constrains people via devaluation, insults, and degradation at cultural and individual levels, resulting in a decline in an individual's active presence and participation in political and institutional spheres. Bauman (2001) in his article "The Great War of Recognition" differentiates between negative recognition and positive recognition, with the former being most easily characterized as 'tolerance', while the latter endorses the "intrinsic value of the difference and thus sustain[s] the dignity which it bestows on its bearers." (145)

Schlosberg (2004) argues that when groups (he focuses on environmental justice activists) experience disenfranchisement resulting from mis- or malrecognition, a desire is sparked for "authentic, community-based participation" in order to challenge cultural degradation, political oppression, and a lack of access to political decision-making (Ibid. 522-523). In particular, environmental justice groups often demand "procedures that encourage active community participation, institutionalise public participation, recognise community knowledge, and utilise cross-cultural formats and exchanges to enable the participation of as much diversity as exists in a community." (Ibid. 523) While CPS is not an environmental justice group in the sense used by Schlosberg, our research highlights similar processes taking place within our program resulting

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<sup>21</sup> In our preliminary findings, we described the sense the people were feeling 'unengaged', 'undervalued' and 'not taken seriously' by the university, but because of feedback in focus group #2 that 'undervalued' was a bit too strong a word for some people, we re-visited our coded transcripts and then decided to eliminate this word from our findings.

from a perception of what we will label as mis- or malrecognition at an institutional level, while many participants also seem to have experienced heightened positive recognition at the program level, with the recognized/unrecognized ‘difference’ being one of having non-mainstream political ideals. The sanction, penalization, and/or disenfranchisement of students and academics with explicitly left-wing/radically progressive political beliefs in university settings is elaborated on by Haberkorn (2011).

Some important critiques of recognition have emerged. Coulthard (2014) critiques the very possibility of emancipation and decolonization when it is predicated on colonial state ‘politics of recognition’ (Coulthard 2014). As long as it is the oppressors (in this case, the colonial Canadian state) giving, often shallow, measures towards increased ‘recognition’ of Indigenous communities, Coulthard argues that decolonization will not be achieved, as the power of ‘accommodation’ remains in the hands of the oppressor (2014). In this text, Coulthard primarily critiques recognition as delineated by Charles Taylor (a Canadian political philosopher who focuses on the concept of multiculturalism). We are not trying to posit positive recognition as a panacea for social injustice, and do not wish to apply the theory to broader systems of oppression outside of this institutional context and beyond leftist/radical/progressive political identities. However, we find Schlosberg’s understanding of recognition useful in understanding and explaining some of our findings.

Our research also demonstrates a strong desire amongst CPS students for communities full of *difference*. Audre Lorde (1984), when critiquing White American feminist theory’s homogeneity, argues that *difference* within a community is a crucial strength, sparking creative energy and knowledge production, and forging personal power. Further, she argues that community itself is necessary in order to resist systems of oppression, as “[w]ithout community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression.” (Ibid. 2) Important here is to avoid mere tolerance of difference, which Lorde claims denies “the creative function of difference in our lives”, but instead to strive to see difference as “a fund of necessary polarities.” (Ibid. 1) The importance of difference is related to Mohanty’s (2003) critiques of the mainstream, Western (White) women’s movement for erasing histories of colonization and perpetuating imperialist dynamics because of failure to engage with

difference within women's experiences. Instead, Mohanty (2003) advocates for 'strategic coalitions' based on solidarity, not homogeneity.

Our participants express their preference for this heterogeneous form of community through highlighting the importance of social bonding and a sense of 'community' within the program along with an explicit valuing of cultural differences, calls for increased diversity of voices participating, and a desire to increase contact and collaboration with non-university communities. This desire is present across all three of our main findings sections, and so we see Lorde's (1984) and Mohanty's (2003) theorization on the necessity and importance of difference and solidarity as overarching frameworks for our findings.

#### 5.1.1 Experiences of positive recognition at a program level

At the program level, many students seem to have experienced positive recognition with regards to having a (perceived or actual) identity of being 'left-wing'/radical/progressive, particularly with regards to environmental issues. For some, this 'recognition' has facilitated a sense of belonging, validation of political beliefs and identity, and an increased comfort voicing opinions. Penelope spoke to this sense of acceptance:

I think in general [the social experience of the program has] been really good. I don't know what the main reason for that is, maybe because *a lot of us feel marginalized in other settings because we're seen as believing things that may be quite radical and out of the mainstream*, but in Human Ecology we've kind of found a place where we feel like we can connect. And I still sense that we're all really different and we come with like such different perspectives and attitudes but we kind of fundamentally believe some things that are the same. (our emphasis)

Sara affirmed having similar experiences, and spoke to the implications the valuing of this aspect of her identity had:

I think [having a perceived identity as radical] made me feel a lot more anxiety talking up in class in my bachelor's, [...] but [...] in general the professors that I've had here have been [better]. Maybe it's because our program is in itself at a foundational level more radical? I think I still have some of that residual anxiety talking up or expressing my opinions, but I think it's, in general, much more accepted here, *I feel safer here having a perceived identity of being more*

*radical. Cause I think it's valued more and differently within the CPS program, I think it's valued a lot more... (our emphasis).*

Sara's description of feeling safer to express her opinions in class due to an increased valuing of her perceived radical political identity fits with Young's (1990) and Fraser's (2000) argument that recognition can lead to increased active participation in public and institutional spheres. Indeed, the opportunity to voice critical/political opinions without fear was a positive aspect of the CPS program for many participants. Abby mentioned how nice it was to not be perceived as 'radical' or 'odd' within CPS, and mentioned that "people [in CPS] were allowed to be really outspoken about their political beliefs." Flora described being perceived as the 'ecological one' within her group of friends in her home country, while here she does not feel like she stands out in the same way or is defined by her peers.

While for most of our participants, the perceived valuing of more radical political identities resulted in increased participation, feelings of safety, and sense of belonging, some participants mentioned that, within the context of classroom dynamics, the 'radical tone' impeded some people's ability to participate. This was related to people feeling like they didn't know the 'right' terminology or that their perspectives would be judged for not being 'radical' enough.

Many students appreciated informal relationships with professors, as it made some feel that they had more power within the classroom and that they, as Schlosberg put it, had "a place at the table" (2004, 522) participant's characterized this 'informality' as the ability to call teachers by their first name, have less hierarchical relationships, a sense that professors 'trust' them as students, and in general having more approachable professors compared to their previous university settings. Chuck highlighted more horizontal relationships with professors as a positive experience because, he explained, it allowed him to: "say 'no, I don't think so' or 'my belief is this' and hold a position where you can hold your ideas at the same level. And I felt respect from my teacher counterparts. [...] This pushed me a lot to be secure of my ideas, [...] to go in depth."

Altogether, the more 'radical' foundation of the program (expressed through course literature, syllabi, etc.), valuing of political beliefs by professors and classmates, informal relationships

with teachers, and opportunities to socialize with like-minded classmates all contributed to this sense of positive recognition.

### 5.1.2 Institutional mis- or malrecognition

While many participants seemed to experience positive recognition at the program level, there was a general sense of mis- or malrecognition at the institutional level<sup>22</sup>. For some participants, this perception was rooted in perceived structural constraints that reflected societal priorities and broader mis/malrecognition of the political ideals associated with our program. Participants pointed to the lack of professors' engagement, lack of contact hours, and perceived lack of funding as key reflections of these priorities. Hartley compared our program's contact hours to other programs to highlight the discrepancy, pointing out that IIEEE (an environmental economics master's program) and LUMES (a master's program in environmental science) both had what they perceived to be 40-hour weeks. Björn related funding, contact hours, and societal and institutional priorities (perceived particularly at the departmental level), saying, "in Sweden an engineer gets 40 [contact hours] a week, but we [in CPS] get 6. That says a lot about priorities that departments give and that society gives, for example related to money."

Money was brought up by other participants, as well, one of whom stated that, in regards to funding distribution in universities, "in the end it's money that talks, in the end it's [societal] interests that talk. It's frustrating, but it's real." Kermit went on to compare CPS to a previous Swedish university program that had been very well funded, saying that "[Having institutional support] won't happen in the Human Ecology Division. Yeah, we are talking about money here, we are talking about a huge staff [in my old program], that is, I mean we were based in our own building. [...] And [CPS] was very, very interesting, the discussion was interesting, the materials are very, very good. But as I said, it's the time, it's the funding [that constrains it]."

Thus, it appears that participants understood perceived distribution of funding as a manifestation of societal and institutional priorities, with more prioritized (and thus institutionally recognized)

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<sup>22</sup> We define 'institutional level' as anything broader than the level of the program, including the Department of Human Geography, the Faculty of Social Science, and Lund University overall.

programs receiving more funding. This perceived lack of funding was understood to translate into fewer contact hours, less time with professors, and less ‘commitment’ on the part of administrators. Looking back to the previous section highlighting how positive recognition increased participation in the public/institutional sphere at the program level, the opposite impact was observed here, with a lack of recognition at the institutional level resulting in, for some participants, less participation in the institutional sphere and weakened motivation and engagement.

Burt, referring to the lack of administration and consistent time with professors, explained that:

I feel that we were left a little bit hanging there with nobody taking responsibility and that was a disappointing feeling. [...] for me it’s really important that I feel some kind of personal [connection], that there is a chemistry with the professor. I think it means a lot to me that I feel safe and, in order to take part in discussions, I think I need a very safe environment in the class.

He went on to explain that “it takes some involvement” on the part of professors and administrators in order to build that safe class environment, saying that the lack of consistent contact with professors “made [him] feel like nobody’s giving a shit and I’m not going to give a shit then. [...] I feel like everybody wanted something to happen, but nobody was giving anything from the university. I don’t feel like we received a lot.” These quotes highlight the possibility of lack of recognition resulting in decreased comfort or motivation to participate in class discussions, part of the public/institutional sphere.

Four participants from two different batches of CPS all speculated that social dynamics outside of the classroom (in the private sphere) were improved due to a common sense of “indignation, or people wanting something else from the system than what we were offered” (Burt). This seems to fit with Schlosberg’s analysis that when groups experience a lack of recognition or perceive themselves to have a disenfranchised identity it can spark a desire for “authentic, community-based participation” (Schlosberg 2004, 522-523). It is important to note that in this case, while the desire for this to happen in the public and institutional sphere remains, it seems CPS students did build strong social ties outside of the classroom. Following many participants’ testaments (across four different batches of CPS) that the ‘CPS community’ outside of class was

quite strong, more comfortable than within university settings, and fostered a sense of shared values and beliefs, it seems that ‘authentic, community-based participation’ was at least somewhat achieved in social settings. The desire for this then transitioned into a vocal valuing of the CPS community, reflected in the fact that most participants labeled the social aspect of the program as the most positive part of their CPS experience.

### 5.1.3 Difference as strength

While we will elaborate on the social dynamic outside of the classroom in section 5.3, we wanted to spend a little more time exploring the high level of value placed on intra-program social bonds, sense of ‘community’, and the cultural and experiential diversity present within the group. These values, along with calls for increased participation of diverse voices via physical inclusion or course literature, fit Audre Lorde’s (1984)<sup>23</sup> assertion that difference within community is a strength from which power and knowledge stem. Participants consistently associated differences between people in our program with opportunities for increased knowledge, were concerned with the homogeneity of our program, and were interested in working towards a more inclusive environment. We also see these calls - for belonging, community, and inclusion without homogeneity - as related to Mohanty’s (2003) anti-imperialist critique of the mainstream Western (White) women’s movement for the movement’s failure to engage with difference across women’s experience.

Within our batch, participants referred to the CPS ‘group’ as “fundamental” (Chuck), and explained that “social context and the gatherings we did, all this informal stuff that we did outside of the classroom, that’s what shaped our CPS family” (Cheery). Kermit highlighted that the “main thing” he got out of the program “was friendship”. This friendship and social unity was characterized by Kermit as fostering a sense of ‘belonging’, which he defined as:

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<sup>23</sup> For the full transcript of Lorde’s talk “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House” at a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference see: [http://www.muhsen.org/media/contentassets/pdf/campus life/sdp%20reading%20lorde.pdf](http://www.muhsen.org/media/contentassets/pdf/campus%20life/sdp%20reading%20lorde.pdf)

I think [belonging is]...when you sense sympathy. Belonging to the group, or belonging to someone. I had an experience with everyone [in the group], I had a talk with them, [...] and I feel like yeah, we shared something. Belonging...we have one thing in common that is humanity. I don't think it's anything else. We have our things but I think that's the more valuable thing...that's a feeling that I had for the first time but it's very good. I like it so very much, and I feel that I count on it for the future.

While a sense of belonging appears to be a key component of positive experiences, never was this equated with homogeneity. To the contrary, while participants often vocalized appreciation for being around politically like-minded people, difference, whether cultural, experiential, or otherwise, was highlighted by most participants (across batches) as a very valuable aspect of the program and a characteristic to strive for, particularly due to a sense that it enriched our educational experience. Kermit spoke about the potential to learn from one another, saying that “the different experiences of our teachers, of our colleagues as well, of saying ‘this happened to me in Cuba, this happened to me in [another place]’” was key for recognizing common human ecological trends across the globe, while Chuck said that:

We are coming from completely different places, and we have really different stories, and I learn a lot from [my classmates] in a sense. [...] Classes were not over after two hours, you know, conversations afterwards, walking to the train, meeting while going, having a coffee together...everything was part of this [learning experience]...I found it incredible. This was what was stimulating.

Seiyia affirmed this sentiment, saying that “being surrounded by different people, which I thought you were all, all kind people with big hearts, [was] very inspirational, too. I very much liked the fact that people were so different”. Tree-hugger explained that “getting to know all these people [...], it was cool that people really had different backgrounds and you could compare experiences and viewpoints”. Yet, as outlined in detail in section 5.3, there was also frustration with the certain level of homogeneity and apparent inaccessibility/unattractiveness of our program. We heard frequent calls for inclusion and diversification, especially with regards to ‘western’-centrism amongst the student body and course literature. The valuing of existing differences and appreciation of the learning opportunities these differences facilitated is also reflected in the frequently mentioned desire for class discussions to be more inclusive, which we will delve into in the next section.

## 5.2 Social dynamics in and outside of the classroom



Lucie Bardos, *Human Ecology*

To me [this painting] symbolizes many things (and I don't believe too much in over-analyzing artwork), but one is how even though everything is changing so fast and we are letting go of a lot of "business as usual", we are still very much gripping onto the way we know how to do things already and the way we have been taught to express our agency, as students, professors, and people, and so unwillingly reproducing some of the same power structures we are trying to eliminate.

- Lucie Bardos on her original painting, *Human Ecology*

Social dynamics, both within and outside of the classroom, came up in all of our interviews. Many participants shared their frustrations about the way that a small group of people dominated class discussions, and how class discussions could have been more productive if more people had participated. Several factors, particularly those related to identity, were brought up that people thought contributed to who felt comfortable in classroom settings and who did not. Some of these

include: gender, language background, cultural background, physical abilities, academic background, racialization, past experiences, and personality. Amongst participants, there was a consistent call for directed facilitation of class discussion. Social dynamics outside of the classroom - while generally heralded as one of the most positive aspects of the program - were also a place where both negative and positive experiences were sometimes related to identity. Because of anti-oppression's explicit theorizing on the way that interpersonal relationships are connected to broader power structures, we use anti-oppression to contextualize and theorize on our findings in this section.

The anti-oppression network, a community collective in Coast Salish territory<sup>24</sup> dedicated to raising awareness about decolonization and anti-oppression practice and policy, defines oppression as:

The use of power to dis-empower, marginalize, silence or otherwise subordinate one social group or category, often in order to further empower and/or privilege the oppressor. Social oppression may not require formally established organizational support to achieve its desired effect; it may be applied on a more informal, yet more focused, individual basis.<sup>25</sup>

Anti-oppression, both in theory and practice, implies working to equalize power relations and eliminate oppression from a framework that affirms the connection between historical/systemic structures of power, and current interpersonal experiences of oppression. An anti-oppressive framework presents us with the opportunity to actively work to mitigate oppression within our personal relationships, while also striving for a less oppressive world in general.<sup>26</sup> We have mostly become acquainted with anti-oppression theory in the context of activist and community organizations we have been a part of, and have witnessed the impact that anti-oppressive theory can have when used to, for example, analyse and then change the dynamics in a group discussion. Anti-oppression theory is useful, in the context of unequal social dynamics in CPS to

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<sup>24</sup> Coast Salish territory, often referred to as Vancouver, Canada, is the unceded and occupied land of the Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh nations.

<sup>25</sup> The full description is available on their website, here: <https://theantioppressionnetwork.wordpress.com/>

<sup>26</sup> Our definition of anti-oppression has come mostly from involvement in community and activist groups that operate through the principles of anti-oppression. While anti-oppressive theory is an important guiding framework in social work practice, and many academic researchers, particularly in feminist and critical race traditions, have worked towards anti-oppressive research and research methodologies (Strega & Brown 2005), we wanted to acknowledge that we felt that our experiential knowledge regarding this particular theory seemed important to include within the context of this paper and also to affirm knowledge production that happens outside of formal educational institutions.

both identify unequal power relations that participants have brought up, and relate them to broader structures of power, and to elaborate on many participants calls for ground-rules for discussions or direction facilitation that help everyone in the classroom feel, to quote an participant, “safe”.

Many of the same factors that people have identified in our interviews, such as gender, class, physical ability, and race, are articulated in anti-oppression theory as factors that influence the way people experience the world related to broader power dynamics and structures of oppression. Many of our findings affirm the reality that within university classrooms, social settings, and within group work, broader power dynamics tend to reproduce themselves unless there is direct intervention. Our results - particularly students’ dissatisfaction with the unstructured class dynamics, seem in line with Andrea Smith’s (an Indigenous anti-racist, anti-colonial activist) warning about group dynamics, particularly in organizations or activist groups looking to be less hierarchical:

One problem that has tended to come up when we think about being less hierarchical is that we think this means being less structured, but the problem is actually the opposite. If you have a go-with-the-flow approach, then you tend to replicate the same hierarchies that already exist in society. If you want to change the hierarchies in your group, then you must have structures in place that address those tendencies. I think this helps with issues of privilege (Smith n.d.).<sup>27</sup>

This problem Smith identified is related to Lorde’s (1984) call to *acknowledge* difference, a sentiment which emerges explicitly in this section in relation to race. Throughout this findings section, we also noticed the value participants place on difference, echoing results in the section 5.1. In particular, we see this come through in the desire for classroom settings where conditions are created so diverse voices *can* participate, a desire emphasized by almost all participants.

Anti-oppressive thinking framed our analysis of power dynamics within and outside of the classroom, though we will not continuously refer back to anti-oppression theory in our findings.

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<sup>27</sup> The full transcription of the interview with Andrea Smith titled “Building Unlikely Alliances” can be viewed on the Upping the Anti website, here: <http://uppingtheanti.org/journal/article/10-building-unlikely-alliances-an-interview-with-andrea-smith/>

### 5.2.1 Classroom dynamics

A recurring theme in our interviews was dissatisfaction with classroom dynamics. Every participant touched on this, sometimes prompted by the question ‘how did you find the dynamics in the classroom?’, but often only motivated by our initial, open-ended question. Broadly, we have summarized our findings into four categories that people identified as having impacted classroom dynamics: gender, language abilities, other identity-based factors (including race, physical ability, political identity, academic background and cultural background), and structural dynamics within lectures. In addition to identity-based factors, many participants identified past experiences and personality as shaping whether people (in general) felt comfortable participating in class. Given the existence of international master’s programs, and increasingly international educational settings globally, (Gürüz 2011) we believe suggestions to creating more accessible classroom environments given diverse language abilities to be highly relevant to many classroom settings.

While we do not wish to participate in constructing identity as static or one-dimensional (heeding feminist and queer thinkers like Heriyan and Valentine), we struggled to consider people’s multiple and shifting aspects of identity because of the context of this research (a small group of students and friends), and for reasons of confidentiality have had to consider aspects of identity as they related to classroom dynamics by category. This is certainly a methodological limitation of this research, as we would have preferred to take a more intersectional approach to analyzing experiences related to identity.

#### *Gender*

Eight of our participants pointed to gender as something that they feel affects how and whether people feel comfortable speaking and taking up space in class. For people in two different years of CPS coursework, it seemed clear that men (who in the 2013-15 batch constituted about one quarter of the participants in classroom) dominated discussion time and the direction of

discussion-based classes. A few men brought up the dynamic, but all suggested that it was a woman classmate who had brought their attention to the unequal participation.

Many participants expressed feeling unsure about why these particular dynamics were present. In her interview, Alicia said:

I think in general perhaps I get the impression that, but I'm not really sure why that is the case, at least in my bachelors, but yeah I think probably in CPS too, the guys talk quite a lot more and [...] they feel very confident when they talk, for example, sometimes for ages and just keeping going, I mean, how can you just talk for that long without a break? (*laughter*) I mean, there must be, I don't know why, what that has to do or why that is the case, but, if it's coincidence or why it happens both in my bachelors and CPS [...] I'm not really sure I can give a really good answer to why, but it's really a feeling I get.

Some participants related the gendered division in speaking time in the classroom to broader structures of power. Flora talked about the absence of women on boards of student environmental groups at Lund University and related this phenomenon to gendered participation in class discussions. Participants also mentioned gendered differences within group work, social settings, and experiences in their bachelor degrees (specifically, a noticeable marginalization of women), pointing to more structural gender oppression manifesting as unequal participation and comfort in classroom settings.

### *Language background*

Most participants identified language ability as a potential barrier to participation in larger, unfacilitated classroom settings, and suggested that being a native English speaker was related to participation, comfort in the classroom setting, and ability to follow and respond to lecture topics with ease. Cheery, whose mother tongue is not English, described the frustration of feeling unable to share “authentic” thoughts in the classroom setting:

Sometimes in classrooms, I've [also] been talking with other CPS students who are non-native English speakers who apparently felt the same way, that sometimes they wanted to share something, some thoughts, but it only came out after the class because it took us longer to reflect, because we're not English native speakers. So it's kind of frustrating this

stuff and it makes a difference between us as classmates and people. And some people may talk more because it's just more easy for them. Language was really an issue.

Cheery went on to explain that she felt her frustration mainly stemmed not from a lack of understanding but from her difficulty expressing herself naturally and authentically in English compared to her native tongue, especially because she sees words as carrying history and politics, not just a simple concept. Whereas in her native language she may have been able to use jokes or particular terms to better embody the meaning she wanted to communicate, in English that was more difficult.

Other participants talked about the feelings related to being inhibited in participation and communication by language barriers. Some of the words used to describe people's experience include 'frustration', 'inferiority', and 'disadvantage'. Some English native-speakers also drew attention to the dynamic and noted that it may have impacted their experience navigating the CPS program. Hartley Winterbottom said:

Having the privilege of being a native English speaker, I believe I have to put in far less effort when reading, writing, and speaking, both in and out of class. Having talked with other students, I've discovered I'm able to start assignments far later than they were simply because I'm so much more comfortable with the language. This is an obvious unfair advantage - I didn't choose to be born into an English speaking family.

Language abilities definitely impacted comfort participating in the classroom and experiences in university settings. Non-native English-speaking participants identified smaller group discussions, informal settings, and accessible language as key components to facilitating their participation in discussions.

#### *Other identity-related factors and a caveat*

Identity in general, and a number of other specific identity related factors were brought up as affecting comfort participating in classroom discussions, however none with such recurrence as gender and language. We do not want to diminish the importance of any of the factors brought up below simply because they were not as frequently recurring in interviews - to the contrary, in relation to the sometimes exclusionary nature of many academic communities (e.g. Solórzano,

Ceja & Yosso 2001, Farahani 2011), we would like to heed Wildman and Davis' (1994) assertion that 'systems of privilege', which work to make invisible everyday maintenance of systems of oppression, are likely at play within the context of our program.

### *Race*

Race, particularly the 'whiteness' of our program, was brought up by a few participants. Some participants described disappointment because of the (White) Europeanness of our program and drew attention to the recent implementation of tuition fees for non-European Union (EU) students (by the Swedish state in 2010). It was speculated that this resulted in a demographic shift within the CPS program. A current CPS student wrote to us with her reflections on the impact of tuition fees on the accessibility of the program to non-white, non-EU students, saying:

In my view, the tuition fees for everyone without EU-citizenship is some form of institutional racism (because I think it is much more likely that a person from the US, Canada, Australia etc. can take a loan or has parents who are able to support them). So the composition of a university class is like a micro-cosmos that reflects and reproduces larger structures of inequality. This is always terrible but to me it feels particularly wrong for a program like CPS.

When talking about race dynamics in the classroom, another participant said:

I also feel like a lot of... I don't know if it's our class cause I don't know so many others, is also this [...] hippy-ish gibberish of 'we're all the same! and race and gender doesn't matter'... Maybe it's also hard for me to relate this ... because I used to be that way too, to tell the truth (laughs). Um... Because it's the easy way out in the end because you don't have to deal with a lot of things.

Another participant brought up her disappointment with the fact that all of our main professors (from 2013-14) were White Swedes, and commented that she knows that "other programs (development studies for instance) have a way higher percentage of non-white, non-European students. So could it be possible that the CPS program is set up in such a "Westernized" way that it mainly attracts students used to a very particular way of (Western) academic thought...?".

*Physical ability*

One of our participants described the way that having a physical disability affects many aspects of university life, including comfort and participation within the classroom. While Silvana found that administrators and professors within the Human Ecology division were generally supportive and accommodating, she mentioned that her disability still greatly shaped her experience in the program. As we elaborated above, we were not able to embody intersectional principles throughout this section due to concerns about confidentiality. However, in this case our participant did not mind that readers might be able to recognize her, and so we have included the following quote relating multiple dimensions of Silvana's identity to her experience in university:

Obviously [my physical ability] is not the only part of me in any way because we're all different, even blind people, of course the only thing we have in common is that our eyes don't work. So of course we are much more than just blind, but just in academic settings I feel still that that part of who I am seems to affect me so much more than all the others put together. I guess that it's difficult not to come back to it [...] me being blind affects [my experiences in academic settings] much more than me being a woman and me being from a non-English speaking country.

Silvana also recognized her privilege in some ways (such as her ability to access certain services because she comes from a European country) and explained frustration with the reality that the CPS program can be difficult to access for some (along with many university settings), and that so many people's voices are not heard in discussions we have:

There are many groups of people that need to be represented in any effort to create a more just and sustainable world. One example is people with disabilities living in poor countries, which are among the most vulnerable within their communities and particularly women with disabilities. I am a woman and I have a disability, but my living situation is still very different from that of women with disabilities living in poor countries, so despite the challenges I face on a daily basis, I am still extremely privileged and unable to fully understand the tremendous hardships they are going through every day. It is frustrating to realise that their voices are so seldom being heard.

Physical ability clearly has a significant impact on experiences in university and, in some cases, comfort in the classroom.

*Political identity*

When asked what identity means to them, Abby responded “[a] lot of things ... in this case what your opinions are, what your beliefs are, and what your ideals are.... what you eat, whether you have a car, can also be your identity, but mostly things you believe in.” This sentiment was reiterated by multiple participants, particularly as it relates to political identity. As discussed in section one, the perceived acceptance of more radical political identities within the context of both classroom and social settings was present in many of our interviews. Five participants described feeling that for the first time they shared similar kinds of understandings of ‘environmental justice’ and ‘social justice’ with peers, or that their ‘activist’ identity was validated, both by professors and fellow students, while it had sometimes been perceived negatively in other university settings.

Abby was positive about the way “[p]eople were allowed to be really outspoken about their political beliefs... and their opinions.” This acceptance of more left-wing/radical/progressive political identities was perceived to have also increased openness to more critical discussion within the classroom. The institutional dynamics that impacted this reality were elaborated in our first section but we think it is important to mention that some people felt like they were comfortable sharing their political opinions and beliefs for the first time. Some people suggested different lifestyle choices - such as vegetarianism - were welcomed in CPS social settings though they had sometimes been teased or drawn attention to in past academic settings.

A few participants had a different perspective on the very critical discussions we had in class. Two respondents described feeling that a very radical tone often took over the class discussion and sometimes lead people to feel ‘judged’ for holding perspectives that were seen as less radical than the dominant voices heard in class discussions. They also felt that the presumed understanding of certain perspectives prevented some voices from sharing in the classroom and in some cases contributed to a feeling of discomfort in class discussions.

### *Academic background*

Academic background was sometimes identified as a barrier to active participation in the classroom because of a lack of knowledge related to lecture topics and/or a perceived association (by fellow classmates) of certain fields of study with less politically engaged disciplines. Students with either more natural scientific or more humanities oriented backgrounds felt that there was not adequate introduction to social science jargon. Abby explained that “[c]oming from lots of different backgrounds, some people are more comfortable with certain theory than others, so it would be nice to break down what we’re talking about.” Hartley said, “I have really no idea what everyone is talking about. Like anarcho-feminism, intersectionality? Which are very useful, [but only] if you know what they mean.”

Two participants felt discomfort due to their personal academic backgrounds based on the way that people associated these disciplines with positivist tendencies or perceptions of less progressive political aims. In explaining the way we were often asked to introduce ourselves in relation to our country of origin and past education, Linda said, “[y]eah, I mean, I’m not uncomfortable sharing what I studied before because I mean, it’s the area of my interest, but it already created kind of this [impression that] ...it’s part of your identity.” She went on to explain that she felt her academic background had a significant impact on the way she was initially perceived by her peers. Overall, difference in comfort based on academic background was always related to comfort surrounding political identity, but also to unequal knowledge in terms of program content, particularly due to discipline-specific jargon.

### *Cultural background*

Cultural background was identified as a barrier to equal power relations within the classroom settings. A few participants suggested that because we come from diverse geographical locations, education systems, and academic traditions, we are not all acquainted with expectations and norms surrounding classroom discussions, and that it would be useful to come to a consensus about expectations and conventions at the beginning of our program.

When talking about a past university experience, Linda described being more comfortable in a cultural setting she was more familiar with:

I was more comfortable just because, I don't know, it was a different setting and I was more used to that setting. It was also closer to my home, so, I mean the whole culture and everything I was more comfortable in it because it was close to my home, I was more comfortable to speak because I knew how to talk to [my classmates] just based on [being from] similar cultural settings.

The same participant went on to recommend an 'evening of the playing field' within classroom settings at the beginning of our program to make sure people from different backgrounds all feel welcomed and are set up to have positive classroom experiences.

### *Other dynamics in the classroom*

The unstructured format of the classroom, often with a significant portion of the class dedicated to relatively unmoderated discussion, came under scrutiny from most of our participants. As we drew attention to in our summary, participants from three different batches pointed to a few voices dominating class discussion as a primary reason for general dissatisfaction with classroom dynamics. Some people noted the dynamics did not depend particularly strongly on the lecture content, the time we had spent together, or the professor - with some meaningful exceptions.

A few participants brought up the classroom set-up - rows of chairs facing one direction and a more comfortable chair at the front of the classroom for the professor - which reflected very non-radical institutional values in spite of the content generally brought up in our classroom. They implied that changing the very set-up of the class might impact the kind of interpersonal dynamics that manifested in the classroom.

The lack of facilitation and lack of long-term relationships with many lecturers was identified as impactful on classroom dynamics. Many participants suggested more 'structure' or ground rules for participation, to avoid perpetuating the same power dynamics that seemed to pervade many of our lectures. Some suggested explicit reflection on "how we want to discuss with each other" (Burt), rules about how much 'space' each participant should take up (Abby), and ways for

people who do not want to discuss in class to participate. We will elaborate further on possibilities for addressing these dynamics in section 5.4. Further, the desire for more inclusive class discussions that would allow for broader participation is related to our first results section (5.1), particularly Schlosberg's observance that groups who have experienced mis- or malrecognition often demand "procedures that encourage active community participation [...], and utilise cross-cultural formats and exchanges to enable the participation of as much diversity as exists in a community" (2004, 523).

### 5.2.2 Relating external dynamics to classroom dynamics

Many participants brought up dynamics outside of classroom settings, but within our academic community as important sites of both positive and negative experiences in university settings. Participants from three batches described feeling (in general) more comfortable in social settings than in the classroom. In particular, they described feeling like it was easier to speak up in small groups, that social settings were less judgmental than the classroom, and that the strong social cohesion present was a very positive aspect of the program.

Some of the identity-related factors, including gender, class background, cultural background, and physical abilities, also seemed to shape dynamics outside of the classroom. Kermit explained how his personality and background impacted his experiences in social settings, saying:

Socially speaking I am an insecure person, I don't like to be in groups much, it's a problem that I know very well. And just finding a big class of different nationalities, it was a bit, in the beginning it was hard for me. And the issue of trust as well...it was a bit difficult.

Another participant brought up the way that her class background sometimes meant that she was unable to attend social gatherings because of the cost. She thought that this impacted her experience in social settings, and influenced comfort and well-being negatively in the program in general. Again, we do not want to diminish the importance of this reality because the testament only comes from one participant. The prohibitive cost of studying and cultural dynamics in elite universities (such as those related to histories of universities being spaces for the upper-class) likely influenced people's comfort bringing up class (e.g. Archer, Hutchings & Ross 2005). Thus

classism likely represents a deeply ingrained ‘system of privilege’ within the university (Wildman & Davis 1994).

Positivity regarding the social aspects of the program, though, was consistently noted. It came up in three interviews that students who are not native English speakers felt like their voices were more readily heard in social settings than the classroom- particularly in one-on-one interactions and smaller group discussions. As we outlined in section 5.1, many participants described the social aspect, ‘sense of community’, and ‘CPS family’ as the most positive, motivating, and inspiring part of the program. In the next section, we will describe the way desires to broaden ‘the community’ we engage with through the program were identified by participants as a necessary step for more positive experiences.

### 5.3 (En)countering remoteness within CPS

"What is knowledge?" is such a central subject to understanding why the power structures of today are positioned and operated in the way they are. And the matter is simple enough. The moment we assume that knowledge is an objective entity reachable through mathematical-like models of inquiry we create a sudden distance between the subject and truth. Truth is not anymore accessible to the ordinary person with ordinary tools, and so a pedagogy or mode of instruction needs to be created to bridge that gap. The present institutional framework bridges that gap.

....

why do I want to lift my arm when I do? Why do I exist here as I and not as You? How I will I experience after-death differently from how my atoms will? And what is the single, unrepeatable, unmistakable reason for which I, unique expression of this universe in the entire universe today and forever, exist? I am all that you say I am through science, and yet none of those things you say actually speak of this unrepeatable experiment the universe is churning out.

....

your objective scientific knowledge and my subjective introspective knowledge are mirror images of one another and I have no time or desire to see them as antagonistic, because that leads us to neglect one or the other half of self. I am a unique chunk of the universe, and at the very same time, I am also representing the whole universe. I am the whole universe like every wave is essentially the whole sea. I am a law of the universe in motion, like I am the chirp of a bird that will never be sung again. I am a poem and yet the sentence you spoke of is my evolution. I am all the things you say, and yet I feel almost most importantly I, just, AM" (Excerpts from a classmate’s free-write, the full free write can be found in Appendix 3)

Many participants interviewed described feeling distant from the material realities of the topics we discussed in the program, disconnected from working towards change, and desiring more hands-on experiences. Furthermore, participants frequently expressed desire for more direct engagement with the communities and the issues we study – partly through a diversification of voices present in literature and classroom discussions – in order to feel more connected and engaged in practical efforts towards social and environmental justice. We interpret these findings in connection to communicative and epistemic remoteness, as described by Plumwood (2002).

Val Plumwood has posited the ecological crisis as one of relationships. Plumwood argues that there exists a denial of dependency within contemporary Western cultures that manifests as a “rigid barrier between subject and object which excludes relationships of care, sympathy and engagement with the fate of what is known” (Plumwood 2002 quoted in Stephens 2009, 58), and thus acts as “a repudiation of direct emotional relationship in the knowledge relationship” (Stephens 2009, 58). Ecological destruction (that is decidedly irrational, or premised on a false rationality rooted in capital accumulation, not survival) is enabled by ‘remoteness’ (Plumwood 2002, 2005). Remoteness stems from emotional, epistemic and moral distancing, and allows ecological destruction to be ignored, misunderstood, or displaced (Plumwood 2002, Stephens 2009). Plumwood outlines several different types of remoteness, including communicative and epistemic remoteness, which is “where there is poor or blocked communication with those affected [by ecological degradation] which weakens knowledge and motivation about ecological relationships” (Plumwood 2002, 72). In the following section, we will use remoteness to relate feelings and desires of participants to broader implications in relation to environmental justice and the ecological crisis.

Many of our participants seem to share the sense that the inclusion of diverse voices and discourses - in terms of students and professors within the program, reading lists, and the importance of building connections with people and communities outside of the program - would strengthen our program. The desires were articulated in terms of the importance of difference in many ways, including in terms of experiences, academic background, cultural background, and class, and were generally framed in an explicit critique of western-centrism. We see a link to

communicative and epistemic remoteness in that purely geographically speaking, low-GDP<sup>28</sup> countries tend to be those most impacted by the ecological crisis (DARA 2012). However, beyond calls for less western-centrism, increased inclusion of voices of people traditionally excluded from the academy due to systems of oppression could also decrease issues of epistemic and communicative remoteness. This is because people most marginalized by unequal power relations also tend to be those most impacted by the social-ecological crisis (e.g. Kaijser & Kronsell 2013, Paz Arauco et al. 2014). Thus, by decreasing remoteness from diverse perspectives, we would be better able to work to address the social-ecological crisis - a primary goal of program.<sup>29</sup>

Looking back to Lorde (1984), we also interpret this valuing of difference because of its potential to build strength and knowledge within communities. In the context of our program's emphasis on seeking a more socially and environmentally just future<sup>30</sup>, we link our findings to Lorde's (1984) assertion that "[w]ithin the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being." (2) Thus, the inclusion of diverse voices becomes imperative in order to achieve our program goals.

Based on our interviews, we believe our program often perpetuates communicative and epistemic remoteness and that this has impacted us in a variety of ways, including causing a sense of frustration, lack of motivation, discouragement, and lack of energy in some students. In particular, participant's framed this sense of remoteness in terms of euro/'western'-centrism and lack of diverse voices present both physically and in course literature within our program, and, in many participant's cases, a sense of distance from non-university communities and/or desire for increased engagement outside of the university.

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<sup>28</sup> We interpret the use of the term non-western by classmates to refer primarily to low(er) GDP countries, though of course there are also exceptions to this categorization.

<sup>29</sup> The Human Ecology - CPS programme's website reads that: "[t]he programme encourages critical scrutiny of the debate about sustainability, but also a serious commitment to improving human-environmental relations worldwide." Read more here: <http://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lubas/i-uoh-lu-SASAM-HUEK>

<sup>30</sup> See footnote 28.

Flora summed up the so-called ‘western’<sup>31</sup> focus of our program very succinctly:

We are such a European-centric batch, I think that’s such a shame. We’re always talking about culture, and how to make [the ecological crisis] better, blah blah blah, as if we’re talking about ourselves all the time. Even the lectures and the readings always focus on Europe, America, Europe, America... I think it’s a shame. I think the batch in general, the teachers, the readings, even the students, we’re super western focused so... it doesn’t help for the Human Ecology way of thinking. The readings are kind of shocking to me [...], we have no southern authors.

Alicia explained that the problem of “everyone in CPS almost com[ing] from the western world” is that only “the perspectives of the people that are involved will be in focus”, and “if CPS is going to be about social justice and ecological sustainability, these are very global issues and we need to hear the voices from people from different social backgrounds and different cultural environments...”

Some participants also framed the ‘western’-centrism of our program as an issue of privilege and exclusion/inclusion, identifying themselves as ‘privileged’ for being able to participate in this academic program, while referring to the western-centric reading list as “exclusionary” and calling for the master’s program to be more “inclusive”. Plumwood’s description of weakened knowledge about ecological relationships resulting from communicative and epistemic remoteness certainly seems present in our program, as the above quotes seemingly reflect a sense that the exclusion of diverse voices from our program weakens our ability to understand and discuss issues of global social and ecological justice from a ‘Human Ecology’ perspective.

Along with a lack of motivation, other negative emotions also have seemed to manifest in response to communicative and epistemic remoteness. Alicia reported that her identity as a person from a “privileged, Western society” makes her “*feel uncomfortable* [...] when [she] take[s] part in discussions on human and planetary well-being that do not to a great extent include the voices of people from different cultures or with different living conditions” (our emphasis), while Carla said that the “homogenous, kind of boring literature list” was

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<sup>31</sup> While we recognize that terms like ‘western’ and ‘southern’/‘global south’ are in some cases problematic and do not reflect diverse and complex power relations, we have chosen to maintain participants word choice throughout this text.

“exclusionary” and that reading more critical course literature, in particular Indigenous environmentalisms and radical perspectives, would have “motivat[ed her] more than a lot of the stuff we were reading”.

Some of the frustration expressed by participants also centered on issues of representation, particularly how the CPS program reportedly presents itself (as inclusive, global) versus the reality of the program as perceived by some participants (exclusionary, western-centric). Coffee Prince pointed out that “in the flyer that the university put up [about CPS], there was an Egyptian girl speaking (*laughs*), and I guess they picked the one female non-European student to represent this [program] to the outside which was totally not [representative]”. She went on to say that “[CPS] could do more when they present themselves as this interdisciplinary program, that attracts all kinds of people but then never, in any way addresses that for this concrete class”. Alicia noted that “if they’re going to talk about sustainability and all of that, they need to [...] make it possible for people from different backgrounds to participate, otherwise it won’t be inclusive like they talk about, like they want it to be.”

Several participants explicitly spoke about negative emotions resulting from feeling “distant” or “disconnected from reality”, which we also interpret as a form of feeling remote. This sense of remoteness was discussed with regards to not just CPS, but also previous university settings and academia in general, and so can perhaps be understood as a more general issue within academia. Cheery reported that “what is maybe lacking sometimes in academia is this connection to reality” and that “sometimes [in academia] we’re so far away from reality, we’re in this bubble...”, which she argued can result in decreased understanding between university and non-university communities, a “lack of tolerance” on part of university communities towards non-university communities, and personal feelings of disconnection, annoyance, and a lack of energy and motivation. While the concepts ‘reality’ and ‘real’ are quite subjective and likely have different connotations for every participant, Sara explained a bit more in depth about how feeling distant from ‘reality’ impacted her and what this ‘reality’ was:

[In academic settings and this program] I can feel very distraught, just deeply, deeply sad, um, and very far away from communities that I used to [be] a part of, but that now [I feel] distant from a lot of where I feel like I came from. And that can feel very lonely and very

disheartening and sad and make me feel angry because it shouldn't be this gap. [...] Sometimes [in class] it's so frustrating feeling like we aren't talking about anything real, like everything is up in the air and philosophical but we're talking about these really intense, heartbreaking topics but in this really abstract way, and, like, sometimes it feels like it doesn't *mean* anything, it's just talking in a classroom. And then sometimes it feels like the *most important* thing. Um, I...yeah...I think there's often a lot of anger. Anger, sadness, loneliness...

The internship experience came up in some interviews. A few participants felt that the internship was a positive experience in terms of gaining 'hands-on' experience and being able to interact with communities outside of the CPS 'bubble'. Three people, however, highlighted the internship in relation to the difficulty finding funded internships. One expressed their frustration with the expectation that we should, and were assumed to be able to afford to, work for free as part of our education.

It is important to note that several participants in our second focus group highlighted that theory and non-experiential learning were still very important to the program and should not be replaced just for the sake of increased 'practical' learning. We were motivated to include this sentiment after feedback from focus group #2, where participants who had been interviewed described their worry that expressing their desire for more hands-on learning in interviews had been interpreted in such a way that it diminished their appreciation for theoretical components of the program.

A desire for increased engagement with our surroundings, collaboration with diverse non-university communities, as well as opportunities for practical, hands-on experience for students, were proposed in multiple interviews as being ways to address this distance. This seemed to also stem in part from recognition of the need for broad collaboration to tackle the ecological crisis in general. This is in line with Mohanty's (2003) explanation of the necessity of solidarity between different groups, without falling into reductionist, homogenizing tendencies that can perpetuate hierarchies.

Seiyia spoke to the importance of "creat[ing] links to other groups", as "we are not going to find solutions without working with other people" outside of our program. Cheery reiterated this point, saying, "us as individuals, as colleagues, we cannot solve [the ecological crisis] just by ourselves. Because it's so big, so complex...". Cheery also specified that her desire to

“concretely act” grew out of feeling “fed up” and emotionally discouraged due to a lack of action within the program. Finally, Tree-hugger reflected on an opportunity she had to meet environmental justice activists through CPS, saying: “that was interesting because we got to meet people getting their hands dirty, working on the solution. And that’s something I think they could put in a lot more, a lot more working with activists, a lot more actually getting to know people, getting the network going with different organizations...”. In the next section, we further detail these and other suggestions for ways to improve student experiences in the CPS program that came up in interviews.

#### **5.4: Shaping the collective’s priorities: specific suggestions for improving and maintaining student experiences**

Many of our participants affirmed the potential of the CPS program, their commitment to the subject material, and gratitude for entering the social community they did within the program. Further, after bringing up negative experiences within the program, many participants had ideas for ways that these negative experiences could have been avoided or could be remedied in the future. In the section that follows, we have summarized specific suggestions for improvement, particularly as they relate to our three main findings sections. In this section, we have allowed our participants suggestions to speak for themselves, but in the conclusion relate some of the suggestions to particular recommendations we have in relation to general findings and our theoretical frameworks.

##### **5.4.1 Improving and maintaining institutional recognition and support**

At an institutional level, there was a general call for more organization at all levels of the program, methods courses that are specifically tailored to Human Ecology and relevant to human ecological research, and more institutionalized meeting-space for building an academic and social community within the context of the program. The possibility of more deeply embodying the interdisciplinary commitment of Human Ecology – by highlighting interdisciplinary research and research methods – was also identified as a way to improve the program. More contact hours

and more continuity within the subject material were identified as changes that positively impact the program.

A few students suggested that having at least one full-time professor dedicated to the program could impact continuity of material, allow students to feel more comfortable and 'safe' in classroom settings, provide a clearer channel of communication when there are concerns for students, and lead to institutional memory. Some students suggested that designating older student or professor mentors at the beginning of the program could have eased some institutional problems and contributed to a sense of community within the program.

Financial support was brought up by several non-Scandinavian students as a component that could make both the experience of studying and completing the internship much more positive. Penelope said that, "it would be really nice if there was more financial support in terms of living costs somehow. Because although most of us are getting it for free, the living costs are so high here that it's... it's really hard." Providing access to program specific bursaries or living stipends could be one strategy for the department to increase financial accessibility and positivity of student experiences.

#### 5.4.2 Improving/maintaining interpersonal dynamics in and outside of classroom

Consistently, participants suggested more directed, anti-oppressive<sup>32</sup> facilitation as an important component in changing negative dynamics within the classroom. Along with the feeling that directed facilitation from a professor (or potentially another trained facilitator) would have improved the experience in the classroom, many participants brought up other suggestions for dealing with unequal power relations as they manifested within our classroom. Penelope suggested that the assigned readings and course content could specifically address the way that

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<sup>32</sup>Based on responses from participants, people liked the informal relationships with professors and the way student voices were valued in class discussions - thus this kind of facilitation does not imply a move to more 'traditional' student/professor power dynamics. Instead, it would involve facilitation (by a professor, facilitator, or trained student) that seeks to mitigate (whenever possible) power dynamics that might be a part of classroom discussions, like addressing gendered speaking time, providing opportunities for smaller group discussions, and encouragement of active listening from other students.

classroom and interpersonal dynamics are related to the topics that we usually frame from a more global perspective:

Like reflections on privilege, power and stuff. 'Cause we focus so much on the global, world-systems perspective that we didn't focus so much on how [privilege and power are] being manifested in the classroom right now through the way that we're talking and the words that we're using and I think that's a really difficult thing to do when you don't have people who are trained or you haven't read literature about it so I think... somehow incorporating that... would be a good thing.

Abby thought that the unequal participation in the classroom could have been avoided by having group rules for participation, such as how much space each person should be able to take up (given the class size and the length of the class). Abby also suggested that there should be ways for people to participate who do not feel comfortable speaking up in the classroom. Further, Linda suggested that, because we come from different cultural backgrounds, some kind of explicit, mutual understanding of the way classes should run and expectations might help create “a more even playing field” at the beginning of the course. Pre-emptive training, ground rules for class discussion, and directed facilitation were all suggested as measures to be taken that could help diversify participation and comfort in class discussions.

#### 5.4.3 Decreasing remoteness and increasing community engagement

Many specific suggestions were illuminated by participants to try and address feelings of distance from ‘reality’ and a desire for meaningful community engagement. A number of participants suggested program-based support of communication and relationship-building with activist and community groups as a strategy that would help with feelings of disconnectedness and in building community connections. Some suggested that our coursework could be integrated with the operations of environmental organizations to increase the applicability of our academic work. Burt described appreciating the approach of some of our professors who saw themselves as both activists and academics, which reduced the distance between the concerns we discussed, and our day-to-day lives.

Concerns about the Euro/Western-centrism of the program - in terms of literature, student and professor composition, and the content of classroom discussions - were highlighted, and often framed within calls for more diversity in all aspects of the program. One interviewee explicitly suggested the importance of an updated, more radical, less Eurocentric literature list as being a concrete step in this process.

Suggestions for improving the practicality of the program came up in a number of interviews.

Cheery said:

It would be so interesting to work on concrete solutions together as CPS, maybe we could start in Östarp at the farm, but organized by the university, by our teachers, to do really concrete...practical solutions. I really felt this lack of activism. And even though I was engaged in [...] more practical issues I felt there was a lot of criticism, that all the energy was put in this 'problem side' and not much about the solutions. And I felt like, for us as individuals, we have to do both. We need both. If we just talk and talk and talk... we will just stay in this dark and pessimistic side.

Cheery elaborated that the constant focus on abstract and theoretical discussions became "tiring" and "psychologically tough", and that practical action could have helped "bring our words to life". She emphasized her belief that we could learn a lot by having a more equal division of time between theory and practice, and that education "from our hands" could be a way to gain knowledge outside of the university's walls.

Chuck suggested the concrete solutions of a CPS garden, a CPS-run community kitchen, and increased contact with grade schools in the area as potential ways to increase both practicality and community connections. Edward brought up an idea of basing the CPS program out of a house, or a physical meeting space, that would serve as a live-in hub for collective knowledge production as well as a social community for CPS students. Having a physical space could help us work on projects collectively, and increase social cohesion, aspects of the program that people felt were already positive and present but also important to maintain.

One caveat to this section is that within our interviews the topical and theoretical focus of the course as it is was not something people thought related to their negative experiences as such. People seemed to appreciate much of the theory we covered within the Human Ecology specific

courses - the desire for increased community engagement, practical, hands-on learning, and critical examination of the Euro/Western-centrism of our content might come *alongside* increased depth of and maintenance of some of the non-experiential learning and topical themes that exist in the Human Ecology courses as they are.

### **5.5: Reflection on anti-oppressive research process: challenges, limitations, possibilities**

For this section we employed a unique methodology in order to better understand our own experiences throughout this research process. We think it is important to reflect upon the research experience, as one of the main goals of this project was to facilitate and deepen our understanding of experiences in university settings, particularly our program, in order to understand how to build more positive research environments. As we have moved through the research process, a main contribution of our thesis has emerged as the development of methodology and application of particular methods given our research context and our desire to carry-out anti-oppressive research. Strega and Brown (2005) advocate for careful consideration of researchers motivations before entering a community that is not their own, and suggest considering research within their own community as potentially less-harmful. It is important to continue anti-oppressive methodological reflection and continue to build strategies to conduct anti-oppressive research, specifically research centered in one's own community. This thesis, while researching a very specific community, does have methodological implications that could be useful for other researchers looking to conduct anti-oppressive research in their own communities. This reflection on the research process thus specifically aims to elaborate on methodological implications for researchers interested in conducting anti-oppressive research in communities they are part of outside of the particular context of this project.

We decided upon four key questions we were interested in reflecting on, which were:

- 1) What were our motivations for conducting research in this way?
- 2) What was it like doing research within the CPS community?
- 3) What was it like co-writing a thesis?

- 4) In general, what were our personal experiences conducting this research project like in comparison to previous research projects we've been involved in?
- 5) How are our experiences applicable to people interested in carrying-out anti-oppressive research in their own communities?

We then recorded ourselves discussing each of the five questions, making sure we each had a turn to answer each question individually. Since we were both involved in this 'interview' we decided not to transcribe it, but instead relied on detailed notes taken throughout the discussion with references to direct quotes to be taken from the recording.

For both of us, a central motivation to conduct this research project stemmed from a desire to conduct research that felt useful and practical while avoiding some negative power dynamics in more standard academic research. Anna identified these negative dynamics as a tendency to ignore power differentials between the researcher and the 'researched', to extract knowledge from a place without 'giving back', and a lack of constructive suggestions connected to theoretical implications (similar to points made by e.g. Strega & Brown 2005).

While not a primary motivation, our experience being 'researched' also shaped this project and informed our methodological decisions. Several years ago we were both part of a group of women studied by a masters student conducting research on burnout amongst local activists. During our discussion reflecting on our current research process, Anna brought up feeling misrepresented in the thesis published by this other researcher and frustrated that we were never checked back in with about the results of our interviews to clarify/verify her findings. Lena brought up how this personal experience of feeling 'researched' was illuminating: she had never previously thought about the need to check back in with informants to verify or clarify their interviews until she read the final thesis and felt misrepresented and, at times, like information had been completely misunderstood or fabricated.

Based on this experience and the spirit of anti-oppressive research, we chose to build our current methodology around informed and continuous consent and check-ins not only because we think accountability to research participants is a key aspect of anti-oppressive research, but also

because we recognize that this constant feedback results in *better* and more *accurate* research, as well, and thus is beneficial for everyone involved in the project. These principles are also in line with the Swedish Research Council's Ethical Guidelines (FAR 2005), which maintain the importance of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality in research involving human beings.

### 5.5.1 Reflections on co-conducting research in our own community

Living, working, and spending time with people involved in the research project in our day-to-day lives opened up possibilities for checking in, co-developing methodology, and increased transparency in the kind of narratives we started building and theory we were thinking about employing throughout the research process. While these are not always strictly anti-oppressive methodologies, we do think these components of our research helped us embody our theoretical principles and commitment to less-oppressive research practices.

Centering this research project in our own community and 'on' one another also helped illuminate the presence of power dynamics in the research process. While doing research in this way definitely helped mitigate power dynamics present in traditional academic research, new power dynamics arose related to specific interpersonal relations. In our recorded reflection conversation, Lena brought up that in past research projects (in communities that were not our own) one might examine power in terms of more structural relationships and, in some cases, be able to see power manifesting more clearly. In this case, as we are friends with almost all of our informants, it was more difficult to see pre-existing power dynamics, particularly in relation to our own positions. In one case, a person who was going to be interviewed confided to Lena at a party that she was nervous about saying something politically 'incorrect' and disappointing us in her interview. This motivated the creation of an anonymous email account that all participants in the research had the login information to, and could write us from if they did not feel comfortable having us link their identity to their comments.

There may have been negative dynamics that the research perpetuated that we were not aware of, however. Follow-up research surrounding the way the project affected the community as a whole

would be necessary to draw conclusions beyond our personal relationships. Attentiveness to community-specific power dynamics (particularly in relation to the researchers' position(s) in those communities) was vital to working towards anti-oppressive research, and we found ongoing dialogue on methodology and data collection necessary in mitigating these whenever possible.

Doing research in our own community also illuminated the possibility for research to be a part of building and strengthening community, as noted by Potts & Brown (2005). One-on-one interviews opened up time for intentional listening, in a confidential setting, related to topics that could be sensitive for some people. This definitely contributed to building stronger relationships with a broader group of people in our community. In our discussion on methodology Anna said, "there have been really meaningful moments that have come through the research that are related to things I care about beyond my master's thesis. Being able to talk to people about things I care about, provide space for people to vent about things. I think this research was really good for my relationships."

The combination of doing research in our own community and working towards a very practical goal via the research process helped with feelings we have had in past projects that research is disconnected from 'reality' and does not have implications to the content it concerns itself with, and contributed to different dynamics than within past research. Based on these factors, Lena reflected, "I think I've done a better job as a researcher than I have in past experiences, in terms of embodying my values in my research. And it feels cool that it has practical implications. It's also a little stressful because of that." After which we discussed the way that in many past projects, after a paper is handed in or published, the 'researcher' has the possibility of distancing themselves from any real responsibility to the results. We think that this 'responsibility' to the community we were researching and to 'do something' with the results of our research is a reflection of using anti-oppressive methodologies.

We did face some challenges co-writing this paper. Anna noticed that sometimes it felt complicated to synchronize meeting and working times. She suggested this could have been even more complicated, "if we were at different places in our lives, making different choices, or

situated in less similar places in terms of broader structures of power, it could be difficult to manage a project like this.” This led to a discussion on the importance of trust, open communication, mutual respect, and consideration of power dynamics within research teams.

The typical institutional pressure placed on academics by deadlines imposed from those ‘higher-up’ within the academic hierarchy was replaced by social pressure to be accountable to our co-author, to contribute what we could, and to be flexible when circumstances for either of us changed. Lena identified the social pressure of being accountable to a co-author whom she cared about as being much healthier and more effective than institutional pressures. In our discussion, we both brought up that we feel the text will be higher quality - analytically, in terms of the breadth and depth of literature reviewed, stylistically, and in relation to how much time and effort we put into the final product, owing to our commitments to one another. Further, our difference in theoretical background contributed to a more interdisciplinary text that we think escaped some of the pitfalls of using highly discipline-specific jargon and also helped us notice theoretical connections we may have missed if we had written alone.

### 5.5.2 Methodological Relevance

There are significant methodological insights to be considered for researchers interested in conducting anti-oppressive research in their own communities. After this process, we reaffirm the sentiment (echoing Cahill, Quijada Cerecer & Bradley 2010) that co-writing can help challenge hegemonic, individualistic tendencies of the academy. Of the utmost importance to co-writing, however, is building trusting relationships, maintaining open and honest communication, and attentiveness to power dynamics that might arise within research teams. Flexibility and acknowledging difference (e.g. Lorde 1984) within research teams is key to successful collaborative research projects.

Ongoing consent and a commitment to allowing participants to shape our research project from start to finish definitely helped build trust through the research process and produce more analytically interesting results. We also suggest that the participatory, anti-oppressive research process which we sought to embody, was successful in some ways because we allowed the

project to permeate our everyday lives and did not force its relegation to formal interviews or data collection processes. This means, for future researchers, serious consideration of informal conversations and insights gleaned from interactions outside of the formal data collection process - a principle we tried to maintain as part of our attempts to queer methodology. While these were not a part of our 'findings', they were important in shaping our methodology, and dealing with unforeseen dynamics throughout the process.

Involving researchers as active participants in their own research project (as we did when we conducted interviews with one another) is one tangible strategy that can help illuminate power dynamics that are present within particular research contexts, particularly those that might be mitigated through alternative/multiple methods of data collective (such as the anonymous email account we set up). Our focus groups, which allowed explicit space for methodological reflection throughout the research process, were key in embodying reflexivity and ex-centricity in practice. The focus groups allowed for participants to shape our research, and they prompted our decision to send a follow-up email with more specific questions after open-ended interviews and to reconsider the way we had interpreted some results. Thus, we suggest that focus groups used for intentional methodological reflection could be useful for researchers interested in anti-oppressive participatory research. Consistently involving participants in research decisions, however, requires flexibility on the part of the researcher to adapt and take in criticism throughout the process. This flexibility and openness can be a part of breaking down power dynamics between researchers and participants.

Finally, we found that approaching this project as action research - advocating for establishment of the AARC and aimed explicitly at trying to mitigate oppressive dynamics in the academy through prioritizing AARC's advocacy - was both motivated by a desire to conduct less oppressive research and enabled less oppressive research practices. Thus, we suggest academics considering similar projects should consider if their research could be conducted in such a way that it directly challenges power dynamics through its process and not just in its results.

### 5.5.3 Concluding methodological reflections: fun and researcher well being

Both of us wondered, at the start of this research project, how to make research and academia in general more *fun*. While we often deal with serious topics and both believe that ‘seriousness’, rage, and sadness are important and productive emotions that motivate and shape our ways of interacting with the world, both of us have also struggled with feeling unhappy and unhealthy in university settings. We also have often experienced a sense that we are sometimes not *taken seriously* by the people within the academy, which we perceive to be particularly related to our identities as social justice activists and women, while recognizing that we are still often taken more seriously than others (which is also related to our (perceived) identities). In our past research, this has made us feel pressure to prove ourselves, in a sense, whether by writing in hyper-academic language, presenting ourselves and our results in a highly formal and traditionally academic manner, or seeking academic accolades and recognition. This has never felt true to our politicized understanding of academia and knowledge production, however, and we decided that if we truly care about making university settings more accessible for others and for ourselves a key component of that could be to investigate strategies of making academic research more enjoyable, both to conduct and to read.

Thus, we see immense value in supporting diverse methods of conducting and disseminating research so that individual researchers and potential researchers can feel supported and validated in methodological choices that feel right for them, whether or not they fit traditional academic norms (though we would still contend that it is of the utmost importance to push ourselves and others to choose methods that do not feel good or more comfortable for ‘us’ *to the detriment/at the expense* of the ‘researched’). This commitment to what we’re generally calling ‘fun’ has shaped our methodology quite a bit, from the incorporation of creative contributions, to focusing our research on a community we’re part of (and thus creating an excuse to spend more time with friends), to trying to write in less jargon-y language at times while also enjoying playing with highly theoretical concepts and terms, to allowing participants to pick whatever pseudonym they wanted, no matter how silly it may have been. For us, these decisions have certainly made the research process more fun, and we hope that the result is a written product that is also more fun to read, though still imparting important findings and analysis.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research responds to calls from activists and academics to view the social-ecological crisis as structural, to examine systemic oppression as it manifests in academic institutions (particularly in a Swedish context), and to engage in critical, anti-oppressive research. Inspired by existing activist-academic alliances, we proposed establishing a similar activist-academic collective within our own Human Ecology master's program. This collective would aim to address and resist systemic oppression within and outside of university walls. However, as Carstensen (2004) argues, these dynamics must be identified before they can be measured and resisted. Due to oppression's ability to manifest in interpersonal interactions, we understood that individuals' (perceived or actual) identities could impact their everyday experiences (CHIWOS, n.d.). Thus, we refined our research question for this thesis to ask:

What should an activist-academic collective advocate for within the institutional context of the Lund University CPS master's program?

- a. What should the focus of this advocacy be based on the experiences of students and former students of the CPS program?
- b. How were student experiences shaped by their perceived or actual identities?

To answer our research question, this thesis explored student experiences in the CPS master's program at Lund University as a way to examine underlying systems of power that shape dynamics in a community that we are part of, some of which we have related to the root causes of the ecological crisis. In particular, we have highlighted instances of mis-/malrecognition at an institutional level, epistemic and communicative remoteness, and interpersonal experiences of oppression and exclusion within university settings as related to negative student experiences. However, our work also reveals that community-building, learning from diverse experiences and perspectives, and the opportunity to be a part of a group with passionate and engaged political identities, all contributed to positive student experiences and, in some cases, related to countering structural power dynamics. As an answer to our research question, our results have identified priorities for advocacy within the CPS masters program that could be tackled by the development of an academic-activist research collective.

Our initial theoretical frameworks of critical feminist theory, critical race theory, and anti-oppression/ social justice shaped our methodology for data collection, our writing and presentation style, and our analytical decisions. We shaped our specific methodological choices based on participatory action research (PAR) and the principles of anti-oppression, particularly aiming to queer our methodology. Queer methodological tools, informed by all three of our overarching theoretical frameworks, provided us with the opportunity to see every step of the research process as a site for pushing boundaries within the academy and ‘practicing what we preach’; that is, practicing conducting research in a way that challenges the very same underlying processes of social and ecological injustice that we aimed to investigate. We based our analytical process on grounded theory and then applied three key theoretical concepts to help explain our results: the social justice theory of recognition (Schlosberg 2004), the environmental philosophy theory of remoteness (Plumwood 2002), and anti-oppression theory (e.g. Strega & Brown 2005). Lorde’s (1984) positioning of difference within communities as a strength and Mohanty’s (2003) call for a politics based on solidarity also provided overarching theory for our results.

As we conclude our thesis, we would like to draw attention to a summary of our findings, highlight suggestions for future research, and outline some ideas for next steps for development of the AARC collective.

### **6.1 Summary of Findings**

In section 5.1, while acknowledging critiques of ‘politics of recognition’, we interpreted that students in our program often experienced mis-/malrecognition at the institutional level and positive recognition at the program level, in both cases the (mis-/mal)recognition was understood as related to a perceived left-wing/radical/progressive political identity. Experiences of feeling recognized or not seemed to influence comfort when participating, or impede participation, in the public/institutional and private spheres. At an institutional level, a sense of mis-/malrecognition mainly stemmed from perceptions that our program received fewer contact hours, less funding, less consistent professorial engagement, and less overall structural support than it would if it were a more ‘mainstream’ program like an engineering masters. However, at the program level, many students felt more valued for having left-wing/radical/progressive political views and felt

more comfortable expressing those views than they had outside of the program. This contributed to a sense of being positively recognized, with informal student-professor relations, flexibility, and openness to critical discussions as key contributing factors. Finally, participants frequently emphasized the value of both strong social cohesion and opportunities to learn from peers *different* from them in some capacity (whether due to academic background, cultural background, life experience, etc.), which we interpreted as a valuing of difference-filled communities (see e.g. Lorde 1984).

Using anti-oppression theory to link interpersonal experiences to broader power structures, in section 5.2 we analysed the way classroom and social dynamics sometimes reproduced hegemonic power structures, and at other times shaped positive student experiences. Many people identified that a small group of people participated in and directed the majority of class discussions, and felt that the conversations would have been better if more voices were present. We found various identity-related factors - specifically, gender, language background, political identity, cultural background, class, physical abilities, academic background, and racialization - impacted whether people felt comfortable or not participating in classroom discussions. There were calls for directed facilitation of classroom discussions and opportunities to participate in other ways than large group discussions. Interpersonal dynamics, particularly the senses of 'community', 'family', and 'belonging', often cultivated through gatherings outside of the classroom, were highlighted as one of the most positive aspects of the program. Connected to our findings on remoteness and recognition, people described appreciating and feeling like they learned from the diversity that was present, while also noticing barriers to accessibility.

Section 5.3 theorized on the way multiple participants reported feeling distant from reality in our program, which we argue is due to the perpetuation of epistemic and communicative remoteness in particular. This remoteness manifested in our program as a perceived euro/'western'-centrism, a lack of diverse voices participating (physically and in course literature), and a sense of being distant from non-university communities and/or desiring increased engagement outside of the university. In some students, this sense of remoteness resulted in a lack of energy, decreased motivation, frustration, sadness, loneliness, and/or anger. Many students discussed wanting more opportunities for practical, hands-on experience and engagement with non-university

communities, a diversification of the voices present in classroom discussions and our course literature, and methods classes that equip us with appropriate tools to conduct human ecological research. However, some participants in our second focus group clarified that they did not think a more experiential/practical program structure should *replace* the current theoretical content we cover, but instead could perhaps complement it.

From a theoretical perspective, we find it useful to conclude by drawing links between the theories applied in our analysis. While we cannot explore these links in depth and do not suggest that these apply outside of our very specific research context, we propose that within CPS the issues of epistemic and communicative remoteness could be addressed in part via increased institutional support, by creating conditions where diverse voices can participate, and striving for difference-filled communities. Within the classroom, anti-oppression theory offers a framework to understand and address *how* to have inclusive and less oppressive conversations *with* diverse voices present and participating. Important here is to avoid what Lorde calls “the mere tolerance of difference” (1984, 1) (whether on a reading list or in the selection of which students to accept into the program), but instead to focus on developing spaces where solidarity could flourish (e.g. Mohanty 2003). In particular, specific recommendations on how to address different theoretical implications of our findings follow in this section.

In general, we think our findings provide further justification for the AARC collective and think that the Human Ecology division, apart from supporting the implementation of the collective, could also work towards a more accessible program that facilitates more positive student experiences based on the following recommendations. These recommendations are both a summary of our section 5.4 findings, and suggestions we want to highlight based on findings in other sections. Thus, we have compiled suggestions that are both potential focuses of advocacy/implementation by the AARC collective, and areas that should be considered by the Human Ecology division. Many participants gave specific suggestions about how their experience could have been improved; those are also included in this section.

Advocacy for increased institutional support could take many forms. While we know the Human Ecology division is already in the process of developing unique methods courses for the CPS

program, ensuring the methods courses are interdisciplinary and specifically relevant and applicable to Human Ecology is important. We also suggest that the Human Ecology Division (and the AARC collective, if it comes to be) take an official stance against fees for international students, and advocate for more financial accessibility within the program (in terms of tuition fees, living costs, funded internships, etc.). Participants also specifically suggested increased contact hours, more consistent professorial engagement and the implementation of a peer-mentoring program.

In order to make systems of privilege/oppression visible and help foster more positive classroom dynamics, we propose the implementation of an anti-oppression training at the beginning of the CPS course. This would help sensitize students to the relationships between classroom dynamics and broader structural power, help students develop a sensitivity to how much 'space' is taken up during class time, and give some ideas for ways to intervene when students feel that interpersonal oppression is occurring. A next-step to this would be providing training to professors in anti-oppressive facilitation - responding to participants' calls for more facilitated, structured, and intentional class formats. Other suggestions for improving/maintaining interpersonal dynamics in and outside of the classroom included connecting course content and readings on global structures of power to how power manifests on an interpersonal level and providing training on how to have more inclusive discussions. Remembering Carstensen's (2004) warning that 'blindness' of difference in Swedish institutions can impede addressing instances of marginalization, and our findings that difference in the classroom is often ignored or invisibilized, we feel an anti-oppression training could be particularly useful in this context.

Decreasing remoteness, we think, could be achieved through institutional support of the AARC collective. The collective could work to connect students needing to complete research for course credit with organizations desiring social justice oriented research - expanding the breadth of people included in considerations in our course and orienting the internship specifically towards social justice. Our findings suggest that AARC should work to challenge the Euro/Western-centrism identified in our program. Mohanty (2003) has theorized and provided suggestions to challenge Eurocentrism within women's studies faculties, and these recommendations should certainly be considered within the CPS program. We also think our findings show that AARC

should focus on connecting the class to the community through forging explicit connections with social and environmental justice organizations in the community. In what we interpret as ways to decrease remoteness and increase community engagement, participant's specifically suggested institutional support for networking/engagement with activists and community organizations, the creation of CPS-community projects like a garden, community kitchen, and collective living space, and in general increased opportunities for contact with diverse non-university communities.

In our final findings section, we proposed that our heavy focus on methodology throughout this thesis, combination of methodological theories and tools, and reflection process on our methodology constitute a central contribution of this project. While our methodology perhaps cannot and should not be followed step-by-step, we hope our exploration and application of anti-oppressive, participatory, action-based, and queer methodological tools can provide inspiration and direction for researchers interested in conducting boundary-pushing research within communities they are also part of. For both of us, our methodological choices not only made this research process more *fun* and accessible for us as researchers, it also improved the overall quality of our research from planning, to data collection, to analysis, to presentation of results. Central to this sense of *fun* were our decisions to work as co-researchers/writers, research a community we are part of, and explore critical and creative methodological tools.

## **6.2 Directions for future research**

As participants in the academy, we have a duty to examine and challenge the underlying systems of oppression perpetuating the ecological crisis as they manifest in our own institutions, while striving to make programs in the 'educational pipeline' into environmental work more attractive and accessible to diverse voices. We urge university programs to engage with critical research tools to actively reflect on power dynamics that may be reproduced within academic contexts. In particular, research into power dynamics related to race, class, and physical ability in universities is needed, as we have identified these as potentially invisibilized systems of privilege in our academic context. Further inquiry into facilitating anti-oppressive solidarity-based research in different academic contexts is also pressing. In the particular case of Lund University, reaching

out to community organizations and activists groups, and gathering as many non-academic, social-justice oriented voices as possible in further defining the AARC collective is necessary.

### **6.3 Next-steps for creating the collective**

Throughout the process of writing this thesis we have also been taking steps towards forming the collective, including exploring funding opportunities, securing structural support from environmental justice networks, and spreading the word to find academics/activists interested in forming and/or participating in the collective. Our research validates the need for a key component of AARC to be advocacy within the academy and has delineated some key focuses for this advocacy based on student experiences. Primary focuses of AARC, based on our findings, should include: advocating increased institutional support, providing training and recommendations to foster an anti-oppressive classroom dynamic, and building connections outside of the university to decrease communicative and epistemic remoteness. However, in order for the AARC collective to become reality, a great deal of work still needs to be done. Our next steps will be to continue holding informal meetings with interested folks, seeking funding for two internship positions to coordinate the construction and launch process, and to build a framework for continued participatory design of the collective.

### **6.4 Final words**

Throughout this thesis we have begun to collaboratively identify priorities for AARC's advocacy within the academy, theorized on the way systems of oppression are tied to the ecological crisis and permeate academic institutions, and, through conducting seventeen interviews, two focus groups, and accepting three creative contributions, we have illuminated some dynamics at play that shape positive and negative experiences in the CPS program. The ongoing ecological crisis is massive and the root causes of the crisis are interwoven with most aspects of our lives. However, when we look towards the incredible activists, boundary-pushing academics, survivors of social and environmental injustice, and everyone working towards dismantling systems of oppression at their roots, it all feels a little more manageable.

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## 8. APPENDICES

### **Appendix 1: Full AARC proposal**

#### *Envisioning the activist-academic research collective: preliminary motivations and development of research question*

For the past two years, we have been students at Lund University in a master's program in Culture, Power, and Sustainability coordinated by the Human Ecology division.<sup>[1]</sup> Increasingly, as we worked through our program, we were interested in investigating strategies to create spaces within the academy that challenge historical power dynamics while connecting academics to groups working to challenge structural inequalities at multiple scales. We imagine this space as allowing participation in building a more just and equitable world for and with others and ourselves. Based on a preliminary literature review, informal and formal discussions with activist and academic colleagues, and our personal experiences as participants in academic and activist communities, we came to believe that establishing an anti-oppressive research collective would be one viable strategy to address these desires. The potential collective, which for the purposes of this paper we have called the activist-academic research collective (AARC, from now on), could:

1. Provide training and opportunities for engaging in anti-oppressive research
2. Support environmental justice organizations and activists desiring research support
3. Challenge existing power dynamics within the academy that shape research processes
4. Foster awareness of and build skills in anti-oppressive practices within universities

The collective we envision would actively work on issues both *within* and *outside of* the walls of the academy. It would blur the lines between the academic and the activist, appropriating traditionally academic tools to further the goals of activists, and traditionally activist tools to break down barriers in the academy - which we consider to be both institutional structures and conventions within universities as well as the research produced by academic institutions - related to systemic oppression and identity-based discrimination. We are motivated to facilitate this project as a response to numerous calls that “insist that we critically examine structural and institutional domination” (Mahtani 2006, 24) and by the chance to consider our own academic communities as a potential site for revolutionary change.

Networks of allied academics and activist (without creating a strict binary, many people - including ourselves - identify as 'activist-academics') have emerged. At McGill University (where we both completed our bachelor's degrees) CURE – the community university research exchange –organized by the Quebec Public Interest Research Group (QPIRG) connects undergraduate researchers interested in carrying out practical, social justice-oriented research for partner community organizations<sup>[2]</sup>. EJOLT – Environmental Organisations, Liabilities, and Trade – that “supports the work of Environmental Justice Organisations, uniting scientists, activist organisations, think-tanks, policy-makers from the fields of environmental law, environmental health, political ecology, ecological economics, to talk about issues related to Ecological Distribution .”<sup>[3]</sup> We see the emergence of these networks, as well as the development of methodological strategies to do so, as indications that many academics are currently engaging in and interested in reflecting on possibilities for conducting research related to social and environmental justice that is useful for community and activist organizations.

The academy plays a critical role in the reproduction and continuous re-entrenchment of social privilege, and in order to challenge the academy's history, one must examine institutional power dynamics (Peake & Kobayashi 2002, Mahtani 2006). We, as participants in the academy, have the opportunity to respond to Peake and Kobayashi's call to extend “our academic activities in the form of critical and theoretically informed activism”, to broaden research agendas, and to strengthen “community-academy linkages” (Peake & Kobayashi 2002, 58). Thus, the purpose of this master's thesis is to conduct research that would further the goal of establishing AARC, a collective that facilitates solidarity oriented research, and challenges power dynamics within the academy.

However, we also hear warnings from activists that we must be aware of our privilege as academics and leverage it as part of an *accomplice* relationship. In the recently published *Revolutionary Solidarity: A Critical Reader for Accomplices*, Indigenous Action Media, a volunteer run collective of Indigenous media-makers who work within an anti-colonial, anti-oppressive framework to “provide strategic media support and direct action to address issues impacting Indigenous communities”, argue that:

Although sometimes directly from communities in struggle, [intellectuals' and academics'] role in struggle can be extremely patronizing. In many cases, the academic maintains institutional power above the knowledge and skill base of the community/ies in struggle. Intellectuals are most often fixated on unlearning oppression. These lot generally don't have their feet on the ground, but are quick to be critical of those who do. Should we desire to merely “unlearn” oppression, or smash it to fucking pieces and have its very existence gone? An accomplice as academic would seek ways

to leverage resources and material support [...]. An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for, and not be afraid to pick up a hammer. (2015, 39-40)

Thus, we see this project as also providing potential for us to be accomplices as academics, seeking to leverage resources and material support for research with, not for, environmental justice activists and organizations.

The purpose of this thesis is to *contribute to the design of this collective and, in particular, to collaboratively identify priorities for advocacy within the academy*. We hope to make the process of writing this thesis itself an exercise of activism within the academy in order to practice some concrete, if minor, examples of possible strategies of resistance. For example, by writing this thesis jointly we, in a small way, hope to challenge “the individual accountability model of research of the neoliberal academy” (Cahill, Quijada Cerecer & Bradley 2010, 412) while recognizing that “all knowledge is collectively produced” (407).

Given the mainstream environmental movement’s sometimes exclusionary tendency and academic institutions’ participation in maintaining hegemonic power structures (as we will detail in our justification), we believe that Human Ecology, a discipline concerned with the relationships between the social and ecological, is a discipline well-poised to engage in research related to social and environmental justice. Thus, it is pertinent to examine Human Ecology programs to ensure that programs are well-equipping students and supporting critical research surrounding environmental injustice.

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<sup>[1]</sup> In 2013 the Human Ecology master’s program, Culture, Power and Sustainability, was in its fifth year. The program is typically a two year long thesis-based master’s of science in the department of Human Geography at Lund University. For us and most of our colleagues, the program involved one year of coursework (Human Ecology specific courses organized by our division and general methodology courses coordinated the Faculty of Social Sciences), a one-semester long internship, and one semester of residency at Lund University to complete our master’s thesis. Our batch has 24 students in it currently.

<sup>[2]</sup> For more information on CURE, see their website: <http://curemontreal.org/>

<sup>[3]</sup> For a detailed description, see EJOLT’s website: <http://www.ejolt.org/project/>

## Appendix 2: Full creative contribution

My first instinctive reaction to your quest is to point to our definition of knowledge.

"What is knowledge?" is such a central subject to understanding why the power structures of today are positioned and operated in the way they are. And the matter is simple enough. The moment we assume that knowledge is an objective entity reachable through mathematical like models of inquiry we create a sudden distance between the subject and truth. Truth is not anymore accessible to the ordinary person with ordinary tools and so a pedagogy or mode of instruction needs to be created to bridge that gap. The present institutional framework bridges that gap.

"What gap?"

"The gap between you and your unknowing of the truth!"

"Which truth?"

"The truth we all know is out there and that is universally shared. The laws of the universe, of biology, of physics, of chemistry"

"So you are saying that to bridge the gap between me in my state of consciousness now and the consciousness that is aware of the why all that surrounds me exists I need to know the laws of the universe? Those of physics, of biology, of chemistry?"

"Clearly! Our planet was formed because of a gigantic explosion that occurred...and our planet is suspended in space and revolving around the sun because of a force called gravity in a net of space-time. The very fact that there is life on this planet is dependent on the particular distance and chemical composition of this planet. Not understanding this clearly furthers you away from answering some of the most fundamental existential questions in your life. Why are you here? What is the purpose of your (physical) existence? What is after death? (decomposition of

course). Wouldn't you agree with me that these are fundamental knowings that can aid you fulfilling what seems to be a universal need for knowing why? Why you are what you are?"

"Yes, I totally agree. Very important point. My life has been tremendously enriched by knowing how light travels through space, what the DNA structure in a molecule is there for, and how different organisms on earth have adapted differently, and developing different fantastic structures depending on their environment!"

"I bet you do, I do too, for me science has been amazingly fascinating!"

"Yes, I agree (moment of silence, I look down reflective, pensive, emotionally connected to the gratitude I feel for all this knowledge I am now almost drowned in...but then something awakens). You know what? You are right, this is phenomenal, look at technology, it is astounding! And yet, I can't help feeling there is something missing in all of this, don't you?"

"Don't know, maybe, what do you mean?"

"I mean, does answering your deepest concerns about why you are here on earth, what purpose is your existence responding to, and how your body will fit the universal project of expansion really make you feel like you have a grasp of why YOU are here? I mean, take light for instance, I now know that light travels a certain amount of kilometers per second, and that therefore the light I see in the sky at night is sometimes billion years old. I know that those dots I see are not actually sparkling dots, but balls of nuclear fissions sometimes billion times more powerful than those of the star in this solar system. I know how this speed of light is also influencing the biological motions of planet Earth, why a worm moves the way he does, and why I seem to fall asleep at a certain average time when what we call night descends upon us. It even explains why it takes me a certain amount of milliseconds to lift my arm when I wish to do so. But what all of this does not answer, is "why do I want to lift my arm when I do? Why do I exist here as I and not as You? How I will experience the after death rather than how my atoms will? And what is the single, unrepeatable, unmistakable reason for which I, unique expression of this universe in the entire universe today and forever, exist? I am all that you say I am through science, and yet

none of those things you say actually speak of this unrepeatable experiment the universe is churning out. That, science as we know it as an objective discipline, as one that studies the laws by which all move, does not answer, and now, science itself, is discovering, it will never answer"

"Science itself you say?"

"Yes, science itself. The world of quantum physics allow us to know this, but that is beside the point.

What interests me to say today, whether you are interested in the subject matter or not (sorry the pun), is that need to bridge that gap of consciousness between oneself in one's own present state of consciousness, and the oneself that holds the answers to those quintessential existential questions you mentioned earlier are given, cannot be fully fulfilled through an impersonal story of average pushes and pulls by forces as impersonal as a gravitational equation, or one that explains how matter equates energy. That is beautiful, but it does not reflect my subjective, psychological, philosophical experience of this, I repeat, unique experiment of life. That missing part that the science you refer to cannot fulfil, can be filled by a type of knowledge for which I need no external tool for. No microscopes, no telescopes, no hadron-colliders, nano robots, or even 3D C.G.I.s It is a kind of knowledge we have an amazingly ancient tradition of, from east to west and north to south, and one that has been revered as the greatest of all knowledge from time past to times present, from round the world this way and round the world that other way. It is a tradition so sophisticated that some call it today the technology of the heart, one so sophisticated that one can use it independently of any of their conditioning backgrounds, sex, religion, experience, level of I.Q., network, past relations, influence and what you may like to add. It is most commonly known as Self-knowledge and it is achieved through introspection, that is, pointing your brain's attention onto your own exclusive INNER subjective experience of your unique existence. All you need is you looking at You. And that knowledge is power, that knowledge today is to me that which we miss the most, and that which we need the most, perhaps not wrongly like you think people a few hundred years ago needed to know about the universe and its universal laws. Your objective sciences knowledge and my subjective introspective knowledge are one the mirror of the other and I have no time or desire to see them as antagonistic, because that lead us to neglect one or other half of self. I am a unique chunk of the universe, and at the very same time, I am also representing the whole universe. I am the

whole universe like every wave is essentially the whole sea. I am a law of the universe in motion, like I am the chirp of a bird that will never be sung again. I am a poem and yet the sentence you spoke of my evolution. I am all the things you say, and yet I feel almost most importantly I, just, AM"

"(startled, the wo-man whose sense of self was anchored on the exclusive notion of universal knowledge remains silent and unable to speak. "How could something so obvious have escaped me?" he and she thinks "And me who had thought to have answered the most important questions of life, how could I have missed the my part, all the while in so doing denying all the my part of every one else?)"

"Your whole network of institutions of knowledge is based on one pedagogy with a noble goal, that of bridging the gap between me and me universal, but until it will not leave me the space to bridge the gap between me and me unique entity, your institution is bound to collapse under the violent force of rebellion on the one hand, and the rising of institutions that complement much more effectively these two aspects of self-knowledge on the other. So who do you want to work for now?"

-Submitted in response to our call for creative contributions related to the themes of activism, identity and student well-being in university settings.

### **Appendix 3: Consent form**

*Human ecology, social justice, and anti-oppressive research: reflections on student experiences and the possibility of collaboratively developing an activist-academic research collective*

This consent form is regarding your participation in research for a Master of Science thesis through Lund University's Human Ecology department (course HEKM50). This project is being conducted by Lena Weber and Anna Hermanson under the supervision of Dr. Anna Kaijser and Dr. Vasna Ramasar.

The purpose of this research project is to develop a better understanding of how power dynamics within university settings shape research, and to investigate how research paradigms and training could be altered to encourage solidarity based research that follows the requests and direction of environmental justice activists. We want to investigate how to conduct less oppressive human ecological research and we think a key component of that is the well being of Human Ecology students and researchers. Thus, we will be conducting focus groups and interviews with current and former students in the MSc Human Ecology Program at Lund University. Interviews will take place in a location mutually agreed upon by both participant and the researcher or via telephone, Skype, or email according to the desire of the participant and will take no longer than 1.5 hours. Participants will also have a chance to submit anonymous comments or additional information.

If you agree to participate in this research you will be asked a variety of questions regarding your experience and background in academia, in activism, or both, and your views on and experience in university settings. Your interview will be recorded using an audio recorder and/or notes may be taken on password protected computers. Your name and any other identifying information (place of residence, employment, degree program, unique features, etc.) will not be used unless requested. Together, the participant and interviewer will discuss how the participant feels comfortable being portrayed and what they would like included or excluded from the final draft. The participant's comfort will always be prioritized and consent will be continually sought, not assumed. Mutually agreed upon pseudonyms will be used in all recordings, notes, discussion among researchers and for the final report. We are not aware of any serious risks of engaging in

this study, aside from personal discomfort in discussing sensitive issues. In order to reduce any potential risks, we will conduct the interviews in a respectful and confidential manner. Your interview is completely voluntary and you have the right to refuse to answer any question. You may also end the interview at any time without any form of penalty. If you have any questions regarding the purpose of a question, or the research itself you are encouraged to ask them at any time.

The goal of our research is to begin the process of designing an academic-activist research collective that connects and trains young academics wishing to engage in solidarity-based research with environmental justice activist organizations and movements that request the support of an outside researcher. In its initial stages of planning, this collective is being organized in collaboration and affiliation with the EJOLT network (Environmental Justice Organisations, Liabilities & Trade) and Lund University. By agreeing to be interviewed you will be contributing to the design of this collective and, if you like, you would be more than welcome to continue to take a leading or participative role in this project after your interview!

If you have any questions regarding the research project please feel free to contact us. Anna Hermanson and Lena Weber can be reached at AARCLund@gmail.com . You can also contact Dr. Ramasar or Dr. Kaijser, who are overseeing this research, at vasna.ramasar@lucsus.lu.se and anna.kaijser@lucsus.lu.se, respectively.

“I consent to being interviewed by \_\_\_\_\_ (name of researcher conducting the interview – to be filled in by the interviewer) for the purposes of their study.”

Signature of  
participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher  
performing interview: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4: Document submitted to CPS students for Focus Group #2

### Preliminary Findings and a chance for feedback

#### *Summary of findings*

We have outlined three preliminary section headings based on what people described as positive and negative experiences in university settings\*, particularly within the specific context of the Lund Human Ecology CPS program.\*\* These findings will be elaborated on, including significant sequences of unaltered text, creative contributions, and methodological and theoretical considerations in three sections in our final paper.

\* Not every participant identified feelings related to all three themes, but in all of our sixteen interviews, something related to at least two of these overarching themes came up

\*\*We are reflecting a lot on the kind of power we have in shaping a narrative about our program and would like to affirm, again, that there was discordance between participants - we could not include everyone's every answer. We hope that due to our grounded theory approach, combined with ongoing communication with participants, people will feel represented in our findings.

- Recognition and support of our program at an institutional level:
  - o People in our class are feeling undervalued, unengaged, and like they were not taken seriously by the university based on lack of contact hours, inconsistent professorial engagement, lack of space dedicated to our program, irrelevant research methods, etc.
  - o However, people appreciated informal relationships to professors, opportunities for creative expression, flexibility and general openness to critical discussions, increased validation of non-mainstream political beliefs compared to outside of the program.
- Interpersonal dynamics in and outside of classroom:
  - o There was a feeling among participants that a small group of people dominated class discussions and greatly influenced the focus of class time. Further, many people suggested that class discussions could have been more productive if more

people participated and there was directed facilitation of conversations. Some students, at times, felt alienated in social settings, and some people also felt that our program is less accessible to certain people.

- o Several factors, particularly those related to identity, were brought up that people thought contributed to who felt comfortable in classroom settings and who didn't. Some of these include: gender, language background, cultural background, physical abilities, academic background, racialization, past experiences, and personality.
- o Social gatherings and informal discussions were highlighted as one of the most positive aspects of the program, the cultural diversity that was present was very appreciated, most people said that the social dynamic outside of the classroom was much better than inside the classroom, but that the two influenced each other.

· Remoteness:

- o People described feeling distant from the reality of what's happening in the world, disconnected from working towards change, and like we were not equipped with practical skills to work to address the things we discuss.
- o Many people described desiring more practical, hands-on experiences, more personal engagement with communities and topics we are studying, a chance to apply what we're learning, and methods that are relevant and suited to Human Ecology.

*Theoretical framing of findings and analysis*

We have connected these recurring themes in our transcripts to three kinds of theory, which we have used to frame our analysis and serve as specific theoretical tools for understanding, in a broader sense, why some of these dynamics may have been at play in the specific context of our university program:

- a) The idea of environmental justice groups being 'mis- or mal- recognized' by mainstream institutions, as articulated by Schlosberg (2004), and the concept of 'recognition' in a

justice theory sense, as discussed by Schlosberg (2004), Bauman (2001), and Young (1990 in Schlosberg 2004) and Fraser (2000 in Schlosberg 2004).

- b) Anti-oppression theory, delineated by both scholars (ex. Brown & Strega 2005) and activist groups.
- c) Plumwood's (2002) concept of communicative and epistemic remoteness.

In our final paper, we will delve deeply into these theoretical frameworks in our discussion however, for now, we will just briefly familiarize you with the three main concepts framing data analysis:

### *i. Recognition*

Recognition, a concept stemming from justice theory, is the acknowledgement of differences between groups of people and is often spoken about in the context of differing privileges and oppressions (Young 1990, in Schlosberg 2004:518-519). It acts as both a social norm and relationship, and thus must occur not just institutionally but also in social, symbolic, and cultural realms in order to be effective. A lack of recognition constrains people via devaluation, insults, and degradation at cultural and individual levels, resulting in a decline in an individual's active presence and participation in political and institutional spheres (Young 1990 and Fraser 2000 in Schlosberg 2004:519). Bauman (2001) in his article "The Great War of Recognition" differentiates between negative recognition and positive recognition, with the former being most easily characterized as 'tolerance', while the latter endorses the "intrinsic value of the difference and thus sustain[s] the dignity which it bestows on its bearers" (145). However, Bauman emphasizes that recognition can only be productive within a social justice framework (Ibid.145-146).

In our final paper, we plan to make the case that the CPS program can be considered an 'environmental justice group' due to our emphasis on a politicized understanding of environmental degradation. Schlosberg (2004) argues that environmental justice groups often experience disenfranchisement resulting from mis- or mal-recognition, which sparks a desire for "authentic, community-based participation" in order to challenge cultural degradation, political

oppression, and a lack of access political decision-making (Ibid. 522-523). In particular, environmental justice groups often demand “procedures that encourage active community participation, institutionalise public participation, recognise community knowledge, and utilise cross-cultural formats and exchanges to enable the participation of as much diversity as exists in a community”. (Ibid. 523)

*ii. Anti-Oppression theory and social justice*

The anti-oppression network, a community collective in Coast Salish territory<sup>33</sup> dedicated to raising awareness about decolonization and anti-oppression practice and policy, defines oppression as:

the use of power to dis-empower, marginalize, silence or otherwise subordinate one social group or category, often in order to further empower and/or privilege the oppressor. Social oppression may not require formally established organizational support to achieve its desired effect; it may be applied on a more informal, yet more focused, individual basis.<sup>34</sup>

Anti-oppression, both in theory and practice, implies working to equalize power relations and eliminate oppression, from a framework that affirms the connection between historical/systemic structures of power, and current interpersonal experiences of oppression. An anti-oppressive framework presents us with the opportunity to actively work to mitigate oppression within our personal relationships, while also striving for a less oppressive world in general.<sup>35</sup> We (Anna and Lena) have mostly become acquainted with anti-oppression theory in the context of activist and community organizations we have been a part of, and have watched the impact that applying

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<sup>33</sup> Coast Salish territory, often referred to as Vancouver, Canada, is the unceded and occupied land of the Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh nations

<sup>34</sup> The full description is available on their website, here: <https://theantioppressionnetwork.wordpress.com/>

<sup>35</sup> Our definition of anti-oppression has come mostly from involvement in community and activist groups that operate through the principles of anti-oppression. While anti-oppressive theory is an important guiding framework in social work practice, and many academic researchers, particularly in feminist and critical race traditions, have worked towards anti-oppressive research and research methodologies (Strega & Brown 2005), we wanted to acknowledge that we felt that our experiential knowledge regarding this particular theory seemed important to include within the context of this paper and also to affirm knowledge production that happens outside of formal educational institutions.

anti-oppressive theory to, for example, analyse and then change the dynamics in a group discussion can have. Anti-oppression theory could be useful, in the context of unequal classroom dynamics in CPS to: 1) Identify unequal power relations that participants have brought up, and relate them to broader structures of power, 2) Elaborate on many participants call for ground-rules for discussions or facilitation that help everyone in the classroom feel, to quote an participant, ‘safe’.

This framework allows us to better analyze power dynamics within classroom settings and sometimes exclusionary social dynamics, while it also helps us to justify the necessity of providing more opportunities for Human Ecology researchers to engage in relationships with groups outside of the university (as will be elaborated in our next section).

### *iii. Communicative and Epistemic Remoteness*

Val Plumwood has posited the ecological crisis as one of relationships. Plumwood (2002, 2005) argues that the kind of ecological destruction (that is decidedly irrational, or premised on a false rationality rooted in capital accumulation, not survival) is enabled by ‘remoteness’. Remoteness can both be physical or mental, and is the distancing from the ecological harm of one’s actions. Plumwood outlines several different types of remoteness, including communicative and epistemic remoteness, which is “where there is poor or blocked communication with those affected [by ecological degradation] which weakens knowledge and motivation about ecological relationships” (2002:72).

Based on our interviews, we believe our program often perpetuates communicative and epistemic remoteness and that this has impacted us in a variety of ways, including causing a sense of frustration, lack of motivation, discouragement, and lack of energy in some students. In our discussion, we plan to argue that academic institutions in general are often both psychologically and physically remote from the communities and material realities that they concern themselves with, and that one way to counter this is to facilitate increased engagement with our surroundings and diverse communities (a proposal also frequently mentioned in interviews). Many people we spoke with used the term ‘reality’ or ‘real’ and said that in the

classroom they felt distanced from reality or that our discussions were not applicable to ‘real’ concerns. Thus we plan to argue that some negative student experiences were shaped by remoteness.

### **Preliminary Suggestions**

Based on many people’s experiences, we think the program would be more accessible and create more positive student experiences based on the following actions:

- a) Changing program structure, advocating for institutional recognition
- b) Facilitating/supporting positive social dynamics in both classroom and outside settings
- c) Reducing remoteness in the university context via increased external engagement

## Appendix 5: Focus group 2 full results

For our second focus group on April 23rd, we were interested in reflections on data analysis and our preliminary findings. We wanted to involve people in developing our data analysis strategy going ahead, and also wanted to give people an opportunity to reflect back on their perceived ‘accuracy’ of our preliminary results (since we are also a part of our research group, in the spirit of PAR, and within our goals of queering methodology).

Because one of the main themes in our interviews was the dissatisfaction with classroom dynamics, we invited everyone to reflect on our initial results in a different format than a class discussion. In the second focus group, after Anna presented our tentative results, she invited anyone who wanted to reflect independently for ten minutes in writing on whether they felt like our results were reflective of their personal experience, as well as their perception of our group’s collective experience. The full document available to our classmates prior to the focus group is included in Appendix II, as the preliminary findings differ slightly from our final findings thanks to feedback from the focus group.

We presented our findings as three major ‘themes’ (that were displayed in both PowerPoint and read aloud to the classroom, that now are our first three chapter headings), backed up by more specific content that arose frequently in our interviews. The slides were displayed for three minutes each while people had a chance to respond in writing. After these concepts were presented as preliminary results, the participants were asked to reflect on the following questions in writing:

- Do you feel like the results reflect some ‘truth’ about your experience?
- What about your perception of the group’s collective experience?

In addition to reflecting on our results, we asked people to identify whether they were interviewed or not, and which years they completed their coursework (because our interview respondents were so overwhelmingly from our batch).

We analyzed the written reflections from focus group two by first separating responses into those from interviewees and those who were not interviewed. Sixteen people were present at the feedback session - eight had conducted one-on-one interviews, eight had not. Fifteen people chose to respond to our preliminary results, seven of whom had been interviewed. While we were still interested in everyone’s feedback we do not have enough information from those not interviewed to be able to contextualize their responses. Because of this, we make note of them in the following paragraphs but

focus our analysis on the responses of those interviewed. The responses from people who were not interviewed were not considered in changing wording or reconsidering findings.

In the paragraphs below, we use ‘strongly represented’ to describe a reflection text where the respondent identifies with most of the results in all three sections, we use ‘partially represented’ to mean that respondent identifies with most of the results in two sections, or some of the results in all three, and we use ‘not significantly represented’ to describe people who identified with some of our results in one section or no sections.

Amongst those interviewed, the written feedback described there was a strong feeling that our results both reflected their perception of the group’s collective experience and their personal experience. A number of people wrote that they felt that their interviews had been strongly considered in the formation of the preliminary results. Over all, six of the seven interviewees felt that they were strongly represented in our findings, while one of the respondents felt partially represented.

A few specific notes that were made by people who had been interviewed about wording were considered in forming more detailed findings. For example, two people felt that the wording ‘not taken seriously’ and ‘undervalued’ was a bit strong, or inaccurate, for describing their disappointment in the program structure. Another interesting, recurring theme in the feedback was regarding our third theme in the findings: remoteness and a desire for more connection to the community and practical, human ecology relevant components to the program. While most respondents said this reflected their experience accurately, several people felt that they wanted to be sure that this might constitute an additional component to the program but not a replacement to existing content – they felt that the theory and content that is included in the course is appreciated.

Feedback from those who had not been interviewed revealed that non-interviewees felt slightly less represented in our results overall than those interviewed. Of the eight people who responded, four felt that our results strongly reflected their experience or the collective experience of the group, two felt our results were partially reflective, and two did not feel like our findings represented their experience in a significant way.

Some of those who were not interviewed also wondered about the strength of the wording in our first section, particularly citing the word ‘undervalued’. A few brought up examples of professors who

they felt were highly supportive (particularly those more recently active within the program) to disagree with feeling 'undervalued'. There was a feeling among of two of those who were not interviewed that the lack of structure and contact hours was more related to the nature of a master's program than our program in particular being institutionally neglected. It is beyond the scope of this project, but would be interesting nonetheless, to reflect on why those who were interviewed seemed to have a more consistent feeling about the program than those who were not. Part of this is likely related to the fact that only half of the non-interviewees who reflected completed their coursework in the same year as us, and could also reflect experiential factors contributing to who requested to be interviewed and who did not.