Demystifying the academy: Resistance, ethics and abuse of power

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to examine academia and the abuse of power based on auto-ethnographic research. I draw on my experiences across 12 universities in different locations in Spain, the UK and the USA that expose the way power is embedded in institutions of higher education and how it is maintained. This article analyses the exploration of inequalities which concerns particular social divisions, for example, gender, social class, ethnicity, non-national status and the intersection of these categories in particular sociocultural and historical contexts where I conducted my studies, research and teaching for more than 30 years. Employing auto-ethnography has allowed me to examine multi-layered lived experiences in the three countries intertwined with axes of inequality. Thanks to the dual focus on individual experiences and social contexts, this article shows how different systems of domination have shaped my experiences as a student and as a member of faculty in a transnational context. This heuristic approach has challenged me to generate meaning within a framework of ethics and social justice, recognizing that academia often excludes and marginalizes. Thus, this qualitative research enables marginal voices and the articulation of silenced narratives, hence expanding our knowledge of the relationship between power and academia.

Keywords
Academia, abuse of power, gender, class, ethnicity, non-national status, ethics, Spain, UK, USA

Introduction
The purpose of this article is to examine academia and the abuse of power. I draw on my experiences across Spain, the UK and the USA that expose the way power is embedded in institutions of higher education and how it is maintained. This auto-ethnographic analysis aims to explore the ways multiple axes of social power influenced social relations across diverse universities where I studied,
taught and researched. All my academic life, I have examined power relations in other areas, I have used theoretical frameworks that explained unequal power relations intersected by core issues that had to do with gender, social class, racialization processes and the nation of belonging.

However, this theoretical knowledge did not equip me to deal with the power relationships in the university, which were penetrated by the same issues that I studied in contexts outside the academy. The 12 universities where I studied, taught and researched for more than 30 years, regardless of the geographical location – five in the UK, three in Spain and four in the US – and the prestige these universities held in the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), showed me that the abuse of power was rampant in most of them.

**Theoretical and methodological underpinnings**

Given that the purpose of this study is to examine the abuse of power in academia, the theoretical framework draws upon auto-ethnographic research (Anderson, 2006; Bochner and Ellis, 2016; Adams et al., 2014). Auto-ethnography ‘refers to a particular form of writing that seeks to unite ethnography (looking outward at a world beyond one’s own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of one’s self) intentions’ (Schwandt, 2015: p. 21). Employing auto-ethnography allows an examination of complex, multiple and intersecting identities thanks to the dual focus on individual experiences and social contexts. Bochner and Ellis highlighted the possibility for auto-ethnography to be used in this manner when they defined it as a ‘genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (2017, p. 563). Auto-ethnography engages well with my dispositions as a researcher, since it advocates for social change through ‘evocative stories’ (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: p. 77) and welcomes readers into my stories (Schwandt, 2015). According to Holman Jones, auto-ethnography uncovers the emotions that ‘are important to understanding and theorizing the relationship among self, power and culture’ (2005, p. 767) by revealing the ways in which these stories are produced, closely aligning with feminist principles and claiming a transformative or interventionist political stance (Harding, 2008; Madison, 2010). On the other hand, the theoretical perspective of situated intersectionality (Hill Collins, 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007; Haraway, 1991; Lorde, 2017; Harding, 2004; Mohanty, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 2015) compels us to consider multiple factors that are at play when analyzing the power relations that exist in academic contexts.

This intersectional analysis aims to study the ways various axes of social power constitute particular social positionings and identifications, which are constantly fluctuating and under challenge. Intersectionality combines the exploration of inequalities: the inter-categorical approach (McCall, 2005), which concerns comparisons between the distributions of inequalities of particular social divisions (e.g. gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and non-national status) in different locations; and the intra-categorical approach, which focuses on the meaning of these categories in particular sociocultural, economic, political and historical contexts. This analytical method is highly sensitive to the geographical, social and temporal locations of the particular narrative examined in this article.

The paper is organized chronologically starting from my origins and adding layers of experiences intertwined with social contexts that correspond to periods of my life in Spain, the UK and the USA. First I analyze my stage as a student in Madrid and postgraduate student in London, later as a young and senior academic in London and Spain, and my visits as a scholar to the USA. I end by examining the multi-layered, complex, relational lived experiences in the three countries intertwined with multiple axes of inequality that fuelled relationships of abuse of power.
**Origins**

I come from a working-class family, I was the first of my family to go to university. My paternal grandfather was assassinated at the end of the Spanish Civil War by the fascist side under the Franco dictatorship. My grandmother was left a widow with six children and my father was sent to a state orphanage. At the age of 18, he emigrated to Germany and worked as an irregular immigrant for a few years, until his citizenship status became a problem and he had to move to Belgium. He was self-taught, an avid reader of history and literature – Cervantes, García-Márquez, Proust, Joyce, Stendhal, Yourcenar, Dostoievski, Sartre – and I became fascinated by his knowledge and pedagogical abilities. My mother was born in the difficult times of the Spanish post-civil-war period; she had to start working at the age of 14. My grandmother, a solo mother, had no money to pay for her daughter’s studies. Though my mother’s teacher insisted that she was very intelligent and that she should continue in school (my mother would have loved to become a teacher), instead she became a seamstress for factories that would not pay her social security contributions. Neither were they paid by her new employers when, at the age of 21, she emigrated to Belgium to work in feminized occupations. As a consequence, when she reached old age, she was refused the right to a retirement pension.

My parents and grandmother instilled in me the importance of education, of carving out a future for myself: ‘everything was possible with effort’. When I was a child, every time we drove past one of the most important universities in Madrid, my grandmother would tell me: you will go there to study a degree. I would stare at that building with curiosity; its walls seemed to contain all possible knowledge. What my family, due to historical, political and economic circumstances, could not become professionally, they converted into passionate support for my education. I studied my first degree at a public university in Madrid with the help of a grant for economically disadvantaged families that was contingent on my not failing a single subject, otherwise the grant would be withdrawn.

After I graduated, I moved to London (UK) and studied my postgraduate degrees, funded partly by an Erasmus grant for one of my master’s degrees. Then, I was awarded a very competitive ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) full scholarship to study my doctoral degree in London. I also taught and researched at three public universities in London for a total of 16 years. In Spain, I have been an academic for a further 16 years, at a private research institute and at a public university. Finally, in the USA, I have been a visiting scholar at three public research universities and at one Ivy League university for a total period of 1 year. In the next section, I recall memories of when I was a high school student and later as an undergraduate in Madrid, and how I encountered abuse of power, sexism and sexual objectification before I knew how to make sense of what I was experiencing and give it a name.

**As a local student in Spain**

Some of my first memories of unequal power relations in the educational context go back to the secondary school where I studied in Madrid. Here, the Latin teacher, a Jesuit, used to call the girls to write on the blackboard so that he could lasciviously devour us with his gaze; while the Religion teacher used to call the girls who sat at the back of the class, ‘pelanducas’ (“sluts”). We were 15 years old. Later, at the end of the first year of my bachelor’s degree in philosophy in Madrid, the professor of Logic called me into his office to discuss my exam. There, he told me that he preferred to fail me so that he could see me again in September. While he was saying these words, I was
opening the door to leave his office, I looked back to see his face and make sure that I had heard correctly. I felt once again sexualized by a man in a position of power.

Two years on, another professor phoned my house where I lived with my parents. My mother picked up the phone, he introduced himself by his first name and since I did not know who he was, he said he was my professor, and that he wanted us to go out for a drink. Transgressing and violating the professor-student relationship went unpunished. No ethical code was applied, neither in the educational institutions where these experiences took place, nor to the teachers who turned me into a sexual object of male sexual desire (Bartky, 1990). Patriarchy at micro-social (i.e. interpersonal) and macro-social levels (i.e. sociocultural and institutional levels) prevented some of the responsible actors, teachers, education authorities and policy-makers, to address the intersection of sexism, sexual objectification and imbalanced power relationships such as the age difference between an adolescent student and a teacher that contributed to gender and age inequality. None of the responsible actors in education engaged in social justice advocacy to challenge the sexual objectification of female adolescents and women at individual, interpersonal, institutional and sociocultural levels (Szymanski et al., 2011).

Franklin argues that sexism continues ‘to be denied a name, it is ignored as a force, and persists as a problem to be tolerated, excused and perpetuated through neglect, lack of effort and a refusal to take stronger measures to eliminate it’ (Franklin, 2015: p. 30). In the next section, I discuss my experiences as a foreign postgraduate student in London and the English social context. I explore the relationship between discourses on racialization of the population of the former British colonies in the UK, and my identity as a foreigner, a Spaniard, whose distinctive characteristic is not phenotype but rather my accented English and the history of Southern European immigration in London.

**As a foreign student in the UK**

A few years later, in London, when I was studying for a master’s degree in Women’s Studies and Education, the two professors responsible for the course condemned us with the following value judgement: ‘You are sleeping with the enemy’. Both professors had introduced themselves as lesbians, both had divorced their respective husbands and had children. One of them was white British and the other white South African. We, 12 students from Pakistan, Black South Africa, Scandinavia, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and Europe, sitting around an oval table presided over by the two professors, were stunned. They had asked us to introduce ourselves, and our sexuality, to the group. We were all heterosexual. These two professors behaved in a hostile way due to our sexual orientation, and in the case of the students from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan also because of their Muslim religion. I witnessed these professors commenting on why did these veiled students enrol in this (feminist) master’s degree? 25 years later the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, compared Muslim women wearing face veils to letter boxes and bank robbers (Tellmama, 2019).

By contrast, these professors supported and facilitated the academic career of a student from another group who was a lesbian, who is currently a professor at a prestigious public university in London. Some authors in their enthusiasm to explore social dynamics of difference and inequality have focused on the influence of one social dynamic at a time: sexual orientation or nationality or religion or ethnicity. Nevertheless, the intersection of our (hetero)sexuality, our foreign status and the Muslim religious beliefs of some students translated into social relations of unequal power which produced recreated social practices. The following year during my doctoral studies at the same university, one of these professors (the white British one) was assigned to me as a doctoral supervisor. After coming to the conclusion that she never read anything I gave her, I decided to change to another doctoral supervisor. When I informed her of this, she threatened to write a
negative report on my academic progress so that my ESRC doctoral scholarship would stop paying me. My very presence in that London university challenged the unspoken and often unconscious intersection of ethnicity, class and national status logic of privilege and power that had been woven into this institution of higher education throughout centuries. Nevertheless, thanks to the fact that my new thesis supervisor helped me manage her anger by demonstrating with reports signed by her that I was making adequate progress in my studies, I was able to free myself from her. My new doctoral supervisor was a white British male professor, who proved to be a model of excellence, professionalism and rigour that I never found again in my academic career. The next section will examine the power relationships in academia in Spain.

As a local junior academic in Spain

After my first stint in London, I returned to Spain because I had gained funding for my research project, through a contract as principal investigator under the Ramón y Cajal program, in which a maximum of 200-year grants per year are awarded. The contract ensured my work as the principal investigator and gave me the option of undertaking little teaching, if I so wished. However, although I had been granted the funding, I had to find a host institution. I wished to return to the public university in Madrid where I had graduated, but they put many obstacles in my way: I represented competition for those who were already in the department and yearned to make tenure. They saw me as a threat because I would enter into the race for the few places that were under offer.

I enquired at another university in Madrid, and they told me that they would only allow me to be with them for the 5 years stipulated in my contract, but they would not offer me the option of continuing in the university. I searched in Barcelona, where a prestigious public university tried to blackmail me by saying that if I wanted to join their department, I would have to teach like everyone else – in other words, they refused to accept the clause in my contract that protected me against the compulsory teaching of classes. Therefore, despite having obtained a very competitive grant for my research project, I found myself without a host institution.

The four universities that I had contacted in three different regions were all alike in fearing that I would leapfrog their department members in their race for tenure. Every one of these departments already had internal candidates who had most likely done their PhD there, and would have nurtured a nepotistic relationship with the relevant professor in charge and forged alliances to which I would not be ‘loyal’, but rather critical and independent. In Spain, 73% of all faculty obtained their PhD at the university where they are appointed, and 95% of professors obtaining new positions already had a position in the same institution (Alvarez and Marín Yarza 2014). There is abundant literature on the corruption that grips Spanish universities (Asociación para la Transparencia en la Universidad, 2021; Domínguez, 2016; Jump, 2012; Martín-Arroyo, 2017; Matthews, 2018; Torralba, 2007). Finally, at the fifth university I contacted, one of its departments saw benefits (prestige and funding from the grant) in my forming part of their staff.

However, my initial joy at having found a host institution did not last: not long afterwards, 12 of 18 members of the department decided by a show of hands to axe me because I refused to give in to the demand, in violation of my contract, to teach classes. When this took place, I was in the U.S. as a visiting scholar, and I only found out because a research intern informed me of this ploy by email. I rang the vice-rector to alert him to this injustice, and the university ombudsman had to intervene, declaring the department’s decision to be null and void. Jump (2012) argues that:

The power structures in many universities in Spain are dominated by nepotistic networks that promote all manner of non-meritocratic and unethical practices among members, while coming down hard on
those who dare speak out against them. This means that only the more intellectually and politically servile get posts.

I was subordinated within multiple systems of power, for example, the hierarchy of the university that divided permanent and temporary academics, I was then on a 5-year contract, therefore in a vulnerable position. There was also the hierarchy imposed by the professors’ power networks which included their PhD candidates and acolytes who had nurtured a nepotistic relationship for years, and I who was an outsider. Collins points to ‘the multiple systems of power that work together, each having their own power grid, a distinctive matrix of intersecting power dynamics’ (2017, p. 23) that were shaping my experiences.

Subsequently, during my career, there have been many occasions when I have been faced with sexist, discriminatory and unfair relationships. Cases abound of both male colleagues who alluded to my physical attributes to obtain sexual advantages, and female colleagues who have not ceased to try and hinder my academic career. One such experience occurred when I was pregnant. A female colleague in Spain, a self-declared feminist, noticed that I was 5 months pregnant when I was leaving a meeting. It was windy and my flowing dress outlined my belly. Suddenly her hands reached out to touch me, exclaiming the obvious: that I was pregnant. She communicated the news to the head of department. Bypassing me and trying to score points with the head of department, she did not care that it was my private life and that it was my prerogative whether I wished that information to be shared. The next link in this chain of sexism was that another senior male colleague proposed that since I would give birth in the second semester, I should change my teaching to the first semester. This would never have been suggested to a male colleague who was going to be a father.

The third sexist episode occurred at the end of that same meeting, when another senior male colleague told me that my husband could take paternity leave so that I could dedicate myself more to my teaching, assuming that I had a partner. That is, he offered a suggestion that I did not request, setting himself up as the expert on how to manage my maternity leave.

A different episode occurred at a faculty board meeting with the dean, whom I asked if I could teach one of my subjects later in the morning in order to balance my work and family life (my daughter was then 8 months old and the nursery did not look after babies in the early mornings). The dean replied that all academic staff had raised their children and that they had managed without having to change schedules. What she did not mention was that in her home there were two salaries, hers as a tenured professor in sociology and her husband’s, as a member of the regional government, with which they paid a woman to do the household chores and to take their children to and from school.

The dean was not accommodating of work-family conflicts, she had absorbed the values and practices of the patriarchal system where she had succeeded, and perpetuated it in demanding that others make it the same way, discounting gender, social class and solo motherhood, in this case, as factors that obstruct equality. Only 22.5% of women are full professors despite the fact that 49.8% of women are lecturers on temporary contracts in public universities in Spain (Ministerio de Universidades, 2020). Recent studies of gender discrimination suggest that in addition to inequalities in pay, women experience discrimination in terms of workload and the kinds of work available to them and in terms of the inflexibility of working hours (European Union, 2018).

Women suffer more from wage inequality and part-time work after the age of 35, when many of them choose to be mothers. This phenomenon is what experts call “the maternity penalty” (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007), which carries with it a series of labour consequences for women: the request
of practically all leaves of absence for reasons of family care, at 90.6% in Spain (INE, 2017). The role of social inequalities, that is, class, gender, juggling motherhood and paid work within women’s lives and “the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political” (Lorde, 2017: p. 16). The next section deals with my experiences in the USA context as a visiting scholar where I went during my periods as an academic in Spain.

As a foreign visiting scholar in the USA

A few years later I received a scholarship as a visiting scholar to the USA. The professor who invited me, a Puerto Rican, whom I had heard in one of his conferences adamantly defend the decolonial and anti-patriarchal social transformation, signed a letter inviting me to visit his department for 3 months. I landed with my three-year-old daughter, and when to my surprise he did not answer my emails, I went to his department with my daughter, and showed his signed invitation letter to the administrator. After checking and photocopying the letter, the administrative officer replied with annoyance that this professor was not in the country and that he frequently invited foreign professors and disappeared, ignoring his invitations. I was resolute that I had not flown more than 9000 km with my daughter for this. So I got the department to tell him to call me.

When he telephoned me, he blurted out in Spanish that I had not told him I had a daughter. What was the relevance of my having a child? I wondered. He forbade me to show his invitation letter in his department. Too late. He threatened me, saying that if I did not write a letter explaining that it had been my misunderstanding, he would not give me access to the university library. I answered I would not write such a letter because: “you and I know that what you want me to write is false”.

The Puerto Rican professor called me again, pressuring me to write the letter or deal with the consequences. Again, I refused to write such a letter. Then I wrote a letter to the chair of the department, a Filipino-American, whose scholarly specialities included gender and race inequalities, she refused to get involved and became accomplice to her colleague’s lack of ethics and abuse of power. She turned into a bystander: a person who avoided taking action against unethical practices, thus strengthening them: ‘those who do not report the witnessed unethical practices are reproducing the power of the oppressor as well as the power of unethical culture’ (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020: p. 407). The chair of the department turned a blind eye, and refused to affirm that I was, de facto, in the USA. I was not able to receive any funding and had to pay for the visa, flights, accommodation, meals and medical insurance out of my own pocket, even though I had been competitively awarded a scholarship.

I wrote to the Ethics Committee of the university, they registered the complaint, and did nothing. When I shared with a colleague how the professor, who invited me, behaved she told me he had been accused of sexual harassment by some of his female students. Educational institutions are not only a microcosm of society, but can play an active role in perpetuating prevailing hegemonic societal attitudes through their unethical practices. Edwards (2017) refers to the ways in which sexism and sexual objectification turns into oppression through silencing. The fact that I was a foreign visiting scholar favoured him and his university, I could not stay in the USA to fight my case.

My university in Spain continued to invite the decolonial and anti-patriarchal ‘expert’ to seminars. One professor told me that she had seen several members of my department ‘kiss his ass’ every year that he came to give a seminar. His university symbolized ‘prestige’. Marx Ferree and Zippel, argue that: “Transforming universities is a project that lays bare the broader contestation over how power-knowledge is to be organized, and feminist successes will demand more than simply adding more women and stirring” (2015, p. 577). Years later, when I was a visiting scholar at a private Ivy League university, I wrote to the director, a woman, of the Centre that had invited me. I
had obtained a competitive grant from my university that had an inter-university exchange agreement with this university.

During my stay, I never saw any of the six white Americans who comprised the Centre that had invited me. Nevertheless, I know that the deputy director of the Centre was in the city, but he never made an attempt to speak with me, aside from a brief email. Of my own accord, I contacted a professor of my area of knowledge, from another department, and he told me that he could only spare me a few minutes, 12 to be precise, as he was very busy. So I went to his office, and he acknowledged that the academics in his university did not tend to bother themselves with spending time with academic visitors, unless they were working on common projects. I had flown 6000 km, paid 1800 dollars a month for a studio on the university campus, and 1300 dollars a month for a summer camp for my daughter, all in exchange for unlimited access to the library. Not one thing more.

My attempts at networking with other scholars were in vain. I met up with some of the members of the administrative and management part of the university, people with business rather than academic acumen. I mentioned the situation to them, but they could only show surprise and offer commiseration. In the meantime, I observed how on that campus – so wealthy, green and clean – guided tours of families with teenage children marched around frantically, soaking up all the information from the guides and from the glossy university brochures. Sipping a coffee in the spotless university cafeteria, looking at those families through the large window and reflecting on the contradiction of my invisibility for the Centre that specialized precisely on the Teaching and Research on Women, an article I had read in the New York Times came to mind (Delbanco, 2012):

It is a good bet that the dean or president will greet freshmen with congratulations for being the best and brightest ever to walk through the gates. A few years ago, the critic and essayist William Deresiewicz, who went to Columbia and taught at Yale, wrote that his Ivy education taught him to believe that those who did not attend ‘an Ivy League or equivalent school’ were ‘beneath’ him.

At the same time, by way of contrast, my reflection was invaded by thoughts of the corruption (Amour, 2020) that had been uncovered in the Ivy League universities:

A lawsuit focused on race-conscious admissions at Harvard has added fuel to a fiery debate about wealth and privilege at elite institutions in the USA. According to court documents filed in support of the lawsuit, among white applicants who were accepted to Harvard, 21.5% had legacy status. Only 6.6% of accepted Asian applicants, and 4.8% of accepted African American applicants, were legacies. Elite colleges take more students from families in the top 1% of the income distribution than from those in the bottom 60% combined (Gross, 2019).

I cut my stay short as it was not worth the bother: the financial cost far outweighed the gains I had obtained from my visit. I informed my university of the pointlessness of this exchange, and suggested that in the future it should perhaps choose another university with which to exchange scholars. Nothing changed. According to two colleagues from other universities who were also visiting scholars, what was important was the mention of having been a visiting scholar at this Ivy League university, for it added a great deal of ‘prestige’ to one’s CV. The neoliberalization of academia opens up universities to the process of adiaphorization (Bauman and Lyon, 2013; Castañeda, Flores and Flores Niemann, 2020). Adiaphorized organizations proclaim that organizational practice is morally irrelevant and not exposed to ethical scrutiny, making it difficult for academics to contest current practices from an ethical standpoint.
My experiences at a public research university and a private Ivy League university were in contrast to another stay of mine, at another public research university, in California. This deserves a mention due to the excellent experience I had as a visiting scholar. I contacted a professor because I was particularly interested in his work in my research field. He invited me to visit and I obtained a grant from my university. This professor’s heritage was Mexican, and he was proud to be fifth-generation American. He was an exceptional host: a brilliant academic generous with his knowledge, his time and his considerate nature, in short, a man of integrity. He also invited me to social events with his academic friends and internationally recognized experts. He was willing to share his knowledge, his expertise, and he also cared about our professional relationship. As Dillard argues: “A transformative academic life asks us to subjectively engage ourselves through direct experience with people, places and phenomena. It becomes a way and a means to both serve humanity and to become more fully human in the process” (2007, p. 116). The next section deals with my experiences in London as a senior researcher and the social and political context that informed them.

As a senior foreign academic in the UK

Being in a particular department at a London university showed me that standing in a different milieu provided me another way of being and becoming against the backdrop of ethnocentrism, classism and other ‘isms’ that by their very nature were limiting about who I was, versus who I was not (Dillard, 2007). Discrimination was rampant at this university where I worked in a department dedicated to family studies, and whose ‘staff get-togethers’ were scheduled in the afternoons, ignoring the fact that school hours ended at 3.30p.m. and that I could not attend (nor other members of the department who were mono-parental families) unless I found a child-minder and paid her 12 pounds an hour. However, after less than 8 months, my daughter had already been looked after by five different child-minders, women for whom their studies and other jobs were more important than babysitting a few hours a week. One of them made my daughter accompany her into the bathroom of my home when she was menstruating to ‘teach’ her what it meant to have periods. My daughter was 7 years old.

I had assumed that the fact that this department focused on family studies, in particular, would mean that it would have work-family balance policies as one of its priorities. I wrote to the head of the department, a white British professor, about it; but I was wrong: she did not reply and nothing was done.

During my time at this department, the fact that I had competitively obtained funding for my research from a very prestigious body did not protect me against the biases of academics in that department. My mentor, a full professor and a feminist, was a black woman who came from a former British colony. When I attended a department seminar for the first time, she introduced me to the rest of the department members as a ‘post-doc’, even though I had completed my PhD 20 years earlier. I had had tenure in Spain for years: this was not a question of hierarchy but that she had not bothered to read a two-page summary of my CV to learn that I was no longer “a post-doc”.

In that first seminar, when I introduced myself and mentioned my geographic origin, my mentor added that I had obtained my PhD at that same London university where we now found ourselves, not in Spain, stressing the difference and significance of having attained it in a British university rather than a Spanish one. At that moment I began to notice a certain ethnocentrism in this department. I was one of the few visiting researchers whose mother tongue was not English, but rather my third language.
By the time I started working at this department I had lived in London a total of 14 years. Both these factors—linguistic and geographical origin (from southern Europe)—fed prejudices, including the assumption that a speech accent meant inferior intellectual capacity. The data show that being a foreigner and speaking accented English intersects to the disadvantage of individuals in the labour market across social classes and different levels of formal education (Fuertes et al., 2002). On the other hand, colonizers often branded their languages as superior, and even went on to manufacture a local ‘elite’ who were also educated in the motherland, perpetuating the inferiority of other languages (Fanon, 1961).

In the same way, belonging to a country in southern Europe is, for some British nationals, synonymous with backwardness, corruption, ‘siesta’ and ‘sangría’, which, for some, coloured their ethnocentric perception of my abilities. Britain has taken in a large number of workers from overseas, from the countries of the Commonwealth, and from various foreign countries, particularly those of Southern Europe. Southern European immigrants have not usually been marked out by ‘race’ or colour. However, the degree of prejudice and discrimination they have encountered has been remarkably similar to the experience of other racialized immigrants in Britain (Fernández-Reino, 2020).

In an interview for my fieldwork in London (UK), Amelia, a Spanish immigrant who arrived in England in the sixties remembers Spaniards’ reception more than 30 years later: ‘They called us (Spaniards) “bloody foreigners.” They looked at us in a depreciative way’. Nowadays, many ‘Remain in Europe’ British voters see Brexit as a sign of a ‘deep, inherent xenophobia and racism among white British born’ (Gough, 2017).

Fox, Moroșanu and Szilassy argue that the British government immigration policy: ‘exhibits features of institutionalized racism that implicitly invokes shared whiteness as a basis of racialized inclusion. The tabloids, in contrast, tend toward cultural racism by explicitly invoking cultural difference as a basis of racialized exclusion. These processes of racialization reveal degrees of whiteness that give ‘race’ continued currency as an idiom for making sense of these migrations’ (2012, p. 1). The colonial legacy persisted in this department, which boasted that many of its long-term academics came from ‘Oxbridge’, the mecca of elitism: ‘In 2015, Oxford and Cambridge granted 82% of offers to students in the top two social classes. Both universities are the recipients of more than £800m of taxpayers’ money each year’ (Lammy, 2017), without the British government demanding fairness in access to these universities. According to Friedman et al. (2017), medicine, journalism, law and academia are dominated by the children of well-to-do parents not because they are the brightest, but because they have the financial means to access the experience and education required by these professions in the UK. The Conservative governments reflect this profile in their cabinets: 23 of the 27 ministers in the first Conservative cabinet of David Cameron were millionaires (Owen, 2010), while two-thirds of Boris Johnson’s cabinet went to private schools (Walker, 2019).

The department I had joined lacked a self-critical and reflective view to be able to examine its own ethnocentrism and classism, which placed its scientific heart in Oxbridge and in themselves, and above Europe and the rest of countries from the Global North that were not English-speaking. This was an Anglo-centrism that oozed from academic articles, such as one which declared that, “no scholars have yet emerged to publish empirical studies in English-language journals” (Inhorn and Gürtin, 2011: p. 669), excluding all those who publish scientific studies in other languages.

This department also set themselves up as examiners of my research proposal for future European funding, despite the fact that the European Commission (EC) does not require it, since it is the EC that is responsible for the approval or refusal to finance research projects, not the universities. This behaviour reinforces the British colonial ideology that forms part of a wider discourse. This discourse sought to confirm British intellectual superiority over others on the assumption of the
superiority of their culture, history, language, political structures, and social conventions, and the assertion of the need for others to be ‘raised up’ through contact with their institutions (Bhabha, 1994). In this case, there could only be one possible validation on my research proposal, their own, despite the fact that the funding came from the European Commission. These are the circumstances that I had to deal with when conducting my work as a researcher and about which I wrote to the department head. Yet again, she never answered me. “Statements that contradict the colonial discourse cannot be made either without incurring punishment, or without making the individuals who make those statements appear eccentric and abnormal” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007, p. 38). Twale (2018) argues that human resources departments at universities, and other units such as ethical committees tend to support organizational rather than individual interests. They may seek to trivialize or normalize the unethical behaviours as being neither unethical, hostile, nor harassing. I assumed naively that because my mentor was a black woman from a former British colony, a mother, a feminist, and a researcher in education, those interconnected ways of intersectionality and unequal power relations would inform a synergy linking scholarship and critical praxis towards social justice in academia (Collins and Bilge, 2020; McCall, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2015).

I also assumed that because this was a department focused on family studies they would honour work-family balance policies implementing an intersectional feminist praxis that foregrounds the ways in which experience shapes knowledge, an insight that is usually lost when theoretical approaches are institutionalized in the academy (Harding, 2004).

**On ethics and abuse of power in academia in Spain, the UK and the USA**

Back in Spain, it occurred to me that, with my research knowledge and experience, I could contribute to the teaching of a master’s course financed with European funds at a Spanish university. However, here I came up against the coordinator of the master’s degree, the department colleague whom I have already mentioned, who had touched my belly to check whether I was pregnant. She told me that it was impossible for me to teach in that master’s degree in the future, allowing no further discussion and giving no reason apart from the fact that the course was already set up. She also contacted the Institute for Women’s Studies to tell the secretary, a former student of hers, not to accept me as a member of that Institute. I understand that she may have felt that it would be better to keep me side-lined to avoid my research projects from receiving funds from that Institute. In this regard, Brian Martin (1996), a professor of social sciences, has written:

> The trouble with the academic status system is that a general improvement in everyone’s status is difficult, since status depends most of all on comparisons with immediate colleagues. When one person’s status goes up, the (perceived) relative status of others goes down. As a consequence, the successes of colleagues are often resented rather than welcomed.

Most of the universities where I worked or visited looked the other way: reputed centres of knowledge, whose interconnected domains of power, – structural, symbolic, cultural and economic – were made up of layers of bureaucracy, norms and ethical codes that, in theory, could correct any ethical failure, that is: abuse of position, relations of patronage, nepotism, racism, sexism and breaches of confidentiality. Nevertheless, I experienced first-hand how top-ranked universities in the UK, the USA and Spain were eaten away by corporatism, with scholars turning a blind eye because they benefited from an alliance with a colleague, or protecting cronies because revealing their unethical practices would threaten their positions.
Thus, the answer by different departments and their universities’ ethics committees in different countries was silent violence: the withdrawal of the greeting, the exclusion from departmental decisions. “University education far from teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity, makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions ... That they will use not force but much subtler methods than force when they are asked to share them. And are not force and possessiveness very closely connected with war?” (Woolf, 1929: p. 30).

Alliances are crucial to the mechanics of perpetuating the abuse of power: covering colleagues by the tacit principle of ‘you scratch my back and I will scratch yours’; or because they have supported someone in obtaining the position. I witnessed how one doctoral candidate, whose supervisor and lover was working for the university in London where I was studying my doctorate, got her position at that university. The supervisor threatened to leave and take his important research grants elsewhere if his student-lover did not get the position. She got the job as a lecturer over all her competitors – both national and international – who had flown in for the job interview.

Publicly funded universities publish their employment opportunities, but my experience is that in many cases, at the universities that I worked, it was already known who would be chosen for the job. Perlmutter (2016), a professor and dean of the College of Media and Communication at Texas Tech University, argues that:

People — ranging from the final administrator (dean, director, chair) in charge of the hire to the entire department — may have already made up their minds about whom they want to hire (either an internal or external candidate). As a consequence your presence in the pool or even as a campus visitor is simply a fig leaf for HR demands. There are many poker tells — including unusually specific job ads, hostile treatment, and rushed hiring processes — but it can still be difficult to detect if it is all for show.

In the case of Sweden, the Association of University Teachers and Researchers (SULF) report, published in May 2018, sparked a strong public debate about rigging of academic positions, endogamy and the culture of ‘friendship corruption’ in Swedish universities (Myklebust 2019). Research has shown in France that local applicants are 18 times more likely to obtain a position than external applicants. Research has also established an astonishing clustering of the same last names in Italian university departments, suggesting widespread recruitment of people from the same family. A National Bureau of Economic Research paper reports that during the mandate of the former chancellor of the University of Bari, ‘two of his sons, one daughter, the wife, and a son-in-law were hired or promoted, all in his own department’ (Afonso 2016).

I witnessed in Spain how one of the most senior professors got one of his children employed at that department, the merit being the DNA. At least six of his female doctoral students were employed at that department, some with permanent jobs and some with constant renewals of their contracts. In this story, paternalistic relations became a weapon used by this professor to cherry-pick those who were useful, to exclude those who resisted, and to ‘win’ the hearts and minds of junior academics as a trophy in the symbolic war between the academic power holders (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020).

The aim of this colleague was to have as much control as possible over the result of the decisions made in the department, the more people who felt in debt to him, the more they would accept what he ordained. His way of interacting with others was manipulative, hierarchical and menacing. He tried to compel me to take doctoral students who were writing their theses in another Romance language that I did not speak and so had to interpret through my knowledge of other languages.

When I refused, his anger caused him to speak ill of me to my own doctoral students, who told me of his poor behaviour. His fury also manifested itself in a cascade of threatening emails that included
reporting me to the university services inspector for not accepting to supervise PhD students, without mentioning that neither their research areas nor their language coincided with my areas of expertise. At that moment, it was I who called the inspector to report his threatening conduct that was typical of a bully.

This is how Tortella (1994), a Spanish full professor, described the academic career in Spain:

A principle that the best universities have is that a good academic career involves mobility. A person who earns their PhD at a university of prestige will not be teaching in that university until they have demonstrated that they can work in another or several others. However, the most ferocious academic endogamy exists in Spanish universities, they need no more than a preschool and a funeral home to offer services ‘from the cradle to the grave’ to their students-professors. The universities want autonomy, not to select the best, but to shelter their own people.

Relations of power are not something that operate outside of other relations, on the contrary, they are rooted in non-equalitarian and mobile interactions. Thus, all power relations are relations of inequality regardless of where they arise, in this case in educational institutions in different countries, where my being a woman and an outsider (as a foreigner in the UK and the USA or as a local non-protégée in Spain) created interdependent and intersectional systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Reflections

From the first experience represented here until the last, and many others that I do not have the space to describe, several decades passed. Today these experiences come from a position of relative privilege within the academy. I am currently in a tenured post at a publicly funded research university located in Europe. As such, this is an important consideration in the contextualization of my voice. As a feminist committed to social justice, I recall Woolf’s view that the independence of women’s voices as writers relied on transforming the university’s hierarchical and patriarchal values (1929). Almost a century later, I aim to further that transformation and champion a space for honest writing against the practices of academics who label themselves feminists, anti-patriarchal and decolonial yet perpetuate sexist, patriarchal and colonial systems. As Ahmed stresses in reference to the university: “we need to create shelters, refuges, pockets in institutions in which we can breathe” (2017, p. 27).

This article has examined my experiences at the crossroad of multiple axes of social power across different universities’ worlds framed in diverse national historical settings that have shaped conceptions of social class, gender, ethnicity and foreign status idiosyncratically. Yet, reflecting on my experiences that cut across multiple universities and countries, representing different times in my life, I see themes emerging from my narrative that are ubiquitous.

To assume that, due to the simple fact of sharing gender, ethnicity, skin colour, language, national origin, educational level, social class, or being a mother, common ground would be found that would obviate power relations, competition for economic resources, corporatism, relations of nepotism and patronage, among other ills of the university, is a fallacy. That the universities have ethics committees is not enough, because the ethics committees can choose to remain silent, becoming accomplices to injustice, inequality and therefore to systemic violence. To call oneself a feminist, anti-patriarchal and decolonial is not enough. Most of the so-called feminist, anti-patriarchal and decolonial academics I met were more concerned with keeping their power in academia, and their university ethics committees were more concerned about maintaining their
university brands than doing the work required to address inequality (e.g.: sexism, classism, ethnocentrism and work-life balance policies).

Nothing guarantees that universities, their ethics committees or their faculties will behave ethically and apply the feminist, decolonial and anti-patriarchal knowledge that they impart in their teachings to their personal practices towards their colleagues and students. Nor does it guarantee that the deans or heads of departments will apply the very work-life balance policies that the universities boast about. It is precisely the silence and fear that have a grip on our voices, along with the complicity and denial of these institutions that allow impunity. Ultimately, academics need to act, for this reason, it is necessary to make explicit the abusive power relations that are established in academia, to become aware of and make these experiences visible with the hope that there is change, envisioning research and teaching as an ethical responsibility and praxis instead of merely indulge in academic rhetoric (hooks, 1994; Lorde, 2017). I try to prevent these forms of violence from being passed over and to give voice to silenced spaces as an act of resistance. In this view, this autoethnography is mainly concerned with ethics and advocacy of critiquing oppressive and unequal institutions that involves the situated intersectional self in that critique and intervention.

Author’s contributions

I, Ana Bravo-Moreno, am the sole author of this research article. Therefore I have designed the study, prepared the material, collected and analysed the data and I have written the manuscript.

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Ethics approval statement

Prior to the commencement of my research study I obtained university (University College of London) ethical approval.

Availability of data and material

The data have been anonymised with the purpose of privacy protection. Thus, I have removed personally identifiable information from data sets, so that the people whom the data describe remain anonymous.

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