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The Language of Dissent

A Conversation between a Researcher and Participant-Turned-Collaborator on Studying Domestic Violence

Dawn Moore and Stephanie Hofeller

Dawn:

This Is for You.

For all who research gender-based violence (GBV) and are committed to do so without enacting research violence. I want us to have this conversation publicly because, if we are to truly explore the embodiments and entanglements of researching GBV, we need to hear from and give voice to the people who are the subjects of our research. Before I met Stephanie, I only paid lip service to these convictions (cf. Mulla 2014; Petillo 2015). Now they embody me, and I am entangled in them.

I invite you to “listen in” as two willful women (Ahmed 2014), who are in many ways privileged but not always lucky, explore who we are to each other and what our work, intended or unintended, does to and for each of us as it challenges the scripted paths of research.

Stephanie:

This Isn't for You.

This is for my children. Everything I do is for them. I am their mother.

Don't worry, it is not for their eyes only. So, if you happen to be reading this and you are not my children, you aren't invading our privacy. But since, as of today, they're not allowed to even know that I am their mother, their once and future questions remain my priority. If I end up answering yours, too, all the better. Knowledge is power . . . knowledge of the truth, that is. Truth is what I swore to tell as part of the little quid pro quo with "fate" that brings me, alive and well, if not whole, to here and now and to this opportunity to "speak," more literally, to write.

But what is this I'm writing? Although the title is "A Conversation," it's actually an academic paper, specifically about our collaborative relationship, including my feelings about it, and feelings are complicated, feelings aren't objective.

Dawn:

Funnily I also don't know what I am writing because all my training, all of my methodological rigor, never prepared me for a relationship like ours. Even wandering into the more personalized methodologies of anthropology (where I am only a tourist and don't speak the language), I struggle to define who we are or what we do. I know we see the same deep injustices when the state enters into a woman's life with the

master key of “helping” only to wreak havoc, take control, and overthrow any sense of agency she might have. I know that we both read what happened to you and what happened to me in the same way, as grave and relentless acts of state violence, but I don’t know what this is called when researcher and subject become collaborators (or conspirators). So let’s focus on the actions, not the definitions. Let’s meander and discover, knowing we can’t bookend this because the story is constantly unfolding. To do anything else would suggest that we can define what we are only coming to know. Maybe when we are finished, I will know what to call us, but I don’t see anything that looks like “finished” happening anytime soon. I have given up on trying to finish and instead bought a one-way ticket on your wild ride.

Stephanie:

Excellent. Because innovation and creativity don’t only make moving works of art . . . they also yield paradigm-shifting scientific discoveries. Innovation is, by definition, unconventional.

And yet few but The Academy would call forefronting your subject’s point of view an unconventional method. In fact, it is the opinion of The Academy (being by and for the elite) that is unconventional, not the other way around.

Furthermore, by employing this “unconventional” approach (more accurately defined as “conventional”), you and I have found new answers to many important questions asked about the violence in our society.

From a point of view that is perhaps on the edge of convention, perhaps in the eye of the storm, we see the problems that are, at the behest of The State or The Crown, analyzed by the academy and, time and time again, find ourselves indicting as cause, not the victim, not even the perpetrator, but instead hierarchy itself.

Dawn, since you literally started the conversation that isn't a conversation but is, let's begin again as you began, with an introduction to the story of how we "accidentally" entered into our, as yet to be defined, collaboration.

Dawn:

In 2015, reacting to widespread concern over "no drop" policies and vigorous, "evidence-based" or "victimless" prosecution of domestic violence, Rashmee Singh and I began a study to explore the collection and use of evidence, particularly visual evidence, by the criminal justice system in order to examine the government's response to domestic violence and its effect, positive or negative, on its victims.

As substantiated in the literature (Bumiller 2008; Lemieux 2017; Thuma 2019; hooks 1995), our research revealed a considerable dissonance between the experiences and needs of victimized people and police responses. Police were trained to engage in a process of rapid evidence collection including pressuring victims into making sworn video statements that could, in criminal proceedings, be used against or in place of an actual victim on the stand.

Taking inspiration from Richard Ericson and Kevin Haggerty's (1997) work on surveillance, Singh and I thought this through as creating a data double, a victim of pure virtuality, more compliant than the actual victim and more predictable in their affect.

Singh and I published preliminary findings. One article, "Seeing Crime, Feeling Crime: Visual Evidence, Emotions, and the Prosecution of Domestic Violence" (2017), included review of a case from the United States, *State of West Virginia v. Peter Lizon* (2012). The case pivoted not on the noncompliant victim's testimony but on photographs taken of the victim's body. The scant portion of the record available, not including the actual photographs, was enough to reveal that the "victim" had been further victimized by unwanted state intervention.

Shortly after that first article was published, I received an email, the kind that makes a researcher's heart stop.

Dr. Moore,

My name is Stephanie Hofeller (formerly Stephanie Lizon). . . .

I am very curious to read your paper and also, if you're interested, discuss the case.

The worries that, as a GBV researcher, are always in the back of my mind rushed forward. Perhaps you felt exploited or misrepresented. With a rush of fear, I called; you picked up.

Stephanie, you, as always, had done your homework. You knew that I was a survivor of sexual assault and, more acutely, a survivor of the press and the police work and all the empty promises of help and justice that came quickly on the heels of my assault. I remember your words exactly: “I know that you’ve had your own experiences with this shit too.”

We had Tarana Burke’s moment of “seeing” each other on common ground of shared experiences of violence (Burke 2018). But still I was waiting for the judgment. Did you agree or disagree with what I had written about your case? Knowing I could never see through your eyes, did I at least fairly represent “your truth” (Mohanty 1988)?

Stephanie:

My life was profoundly and positively changed by the single, defining moment that I discovered, online, the abstract of “Seeing Crime.”

A search on “Lizon” had returned your resource list, which included “State of WV v Peter Lizon.” Because of the ridiculous amount of press on my “captivity” and “forced childbirth in chains” (A.P. Morgantown, WV, 2012, etc., etc., etc.), that is, the fabricated fiction of my “life,” I was used to reading about “me”—more animal than human, not even capable of opinion, a creature who had only the machinery of reflex and reaction, panic, fear . . . submission. But your abstract, alone, implied a different point of view. The theory of “data double” as antagonistic to victim was the first sentence I had ever read that even suggested the possibility that

anyone in the world might understand, much less share, my opinion.

In retrospect, that moment feels to me more like our first meeting than anything else because it was, in fact my moment of “seeing” common ground.

I knew enough about academic research to know that hearing from me might make you uncomfortable. How appropriate that it was the issue of ownership (I could only access the abstract online) that goaded me to reach out. Your name was first (hierarchy, again), so I knew that it was “your” paper. . . .

I sent that first email on the morning of October 9, 2017. Less than an hour later, I got a call from “Ottawa.” Thrilled, I picked up.

Your prompt reply by phone rather than automated email was already a demonstration of respect on a level to which I was not accustomed. It kinda got us off on the right foot.

You emailed me the entire article as well as notes on a paper in progress, “How She Appears.” By the end of the week, we had established a solid line of communication.

But phone and email were still terrifying weaknesses in my lines of defense. You offered to fly to the US, but I rejected that offer, explaining how political motives had driven my persecution and how my father’s powerful position had influenced it.

Although that assertion confounded you (not Rashmee, who was raised in the States), in late November, you brought me to Canada so I could speak freely.

It had been less than a year since I ran from my, then, only recently divorced ex-husband with literally nothing. Surviving meant hiding, not only from him but also from my influential and abusive father and, with him, my entire family, so I had very few resources. Adhering to my strict safety plan, you fought valiantly so that I could be compensated without records of my identity. Perhaps this was the first phase of the pushback that you experienced, stubbornly refusing to let this opportunity pass us by.

While attempting to answer your question about wrong-gotten story parts, I caught myself in the first, major, compulsive loop of redefining what, exactly, I wanted to say about our collaboration.

We eventually agreed that, from my lived experience and a four-thousand-page-plus record, no summary briefer than the modest sixteen pages of “Forty-Five Colour Photographs . . .” (Moore and Hofeller 2019) could possibly be worth writing, much less including in this piece. With that cut went the corrections, some of which, I’ll admit, I was surprised I had to make.

What remained was my question to you: “Dawn, I have yet to have a lawyer or friend or colleague or therapist that hasn’t at some point revealed that broad and/or critical elements of my story were missing or wrong in their recollection. What is it about my story that makes everyone get it not quite right? Is it empathy?”

You were quick to answer that. Early on, you were encumbered by disbelief, but still you (and I) wondered

what had fueled it. Was it your Canadian legal lexicon, white privilege, class privilege, a position of authority?

Dawn:

All of the above and maybe also the simple fact that your story is among the worst I have ever heard. And I don't mean the violence in and of your marriage; I mean the violence done to you by all the helpers and advocates, all the ones who promise justice and safety and another chance (Bumiller 2008; Mulla 2014). But as you told them, I checked and rechecked every detail of each larger-than-life chapter in your narrative. Not once did your telling fail to match the evidence. And everything I found out left me with more questions.

All justice systems are rigged, but the matrix of law that descended on you struck me as almost deliberately impenetrable; and there were so many moving parts that I still struggle to keep them all in view, regularly categorizing details as “not relevant,” only to have you correct me later.

Stephanie:

Whether or not you are aware, I assure you that the officers of the court are aware of how unimportant those small details seem. That is precisely why they labor them in secret (family) court. A victim of the court will spend some time, babbling about these details, telling a bizarre story about a finding based on them . . . until shame shuts them up.

But given what you've not only studied and witnessed but literally suffered, it seems odd that my story would surprise you. Are you sure you were that cynical?

Dawn:

Maybe not cynical but certainly skeptical—occupational hazard. That instinct to doubt is part of how the academy institutionalized me. Sure, I believe survivors; but belief is not rigor, and so I have to double check and check again. Disregarding the academy's standards is less available the less privilege you have, especially when your research is on/with women who have been victimized—considered an inherently untrustworthy bunch in so many circles (Epstein and Goldman 2019). In my world, even with the privilege of being white, born middle class, and having successfully navigated the academy's markers of progress, there always has to be proof. Researchers can never just believe, even when we say we do.

Thinking on it now, that skepticism lessened as I got to know you, not only because you established yourself as reliable but because you became more “real” to me.

So there is something about objectification here.

I spent weeks puzzling over your case with you positioned as an abstraction. Then you emailed, and I began to find you behind the infamous victim. The flesh made real—like an inversion of the data double. It was unexpected and staggering.

Stephanie:

Yes, I am not only living rather than dead but also stubborn in my refusal to be objectified. And this conversation is convincing me that my refusal to be objectified is the root cause of the aphasia-like phenomenon I've widely observed. I suspect that some of your "skepticism" was actually a subconscious effort to compartmentalize and quiet the dissonance of your accidental empathy. Knowing that I'm not an object, you can no longer objectify me. But, you see, none of us are objects, actually. And upon reflection, I am finally able to articulate why your telling of my story, details included, was so important, not just to my feelings, not just to the accuracy of your study, but to my literal fate:

Your authority lends you default credibility. Each time your telling of the narrative diverges from mine, it is my credibility that erodes in the eyes of the world, especially in the eyes of the court, with all of its awesome, destructive power (Brodsky and Pivovarova 2016).

My lack of credibility was the sum total of the "merits" of the case against my parental rights and was proven, to "reasonable belief," one small detail at a time as a host of authorities recalled and contradicted me, even contradicted each other.

But you knew that this had happened to me, even before I was "real." What's different now? How did your understanding develop?

Dawn:

When you came into the work, I had no model to follow for how to ethically develop a relationship like ours. I found myself maintaining the sort of distance that my training deemed imperative to guard ethics (and ultimately guard against liability). But this did not sit right with me in the long term. Anthropologists immerse themselves in studied communities (cf. Mulla 2014; Petillo 2015). Surely a researcher and participant can become collaborators.

I wrote to the president of my university explaining that I had to break all the rules of my granting council because I needed to send you money with no paper trail. My ethics office was helpful. My president was not entirely happy, and the administrators decidedly had their noses out of joint. I did not apologize for not following the rules. I insisted that the rules were the problem; and eventually, by the power of academic freedom or simply tenacious women wearing them down, they caved, and you were “hired” on as a collaborator. But always, we kept you on the down-low.

Stephanie:

I was and still am acutely aware of Carleton University’s ambivalence. Even as the revelations that followed my father’s death grew my fame and with it my credibility, it seemed to gain me nothing with your Academy . . . any Academy.

But “wearing them down” is how I, and in fact women in general, have accomplished anything in this interminable, intolerable patriarchy.

We are so often underestimated that we turned it to our advantage. We retreated into the mother mind that exists outside of chronological time, and we studied patience. Rather than exasperate and pace, we continue our efforts, long after a powerful man would have resigned or declared war.

Dawn:

Well, you are my model of tenacity—in every way and especially in sticking with this work. You started doing so much more than simply working on your own case. How would you define what you and I are doing now? And no, you can't just say "revolution"!

Stephanie:

Oh, but I *can* just say, "revolution," and I do.

I say "revolution" because it is our very survival. It is the only thing we can in good conscience say if we want the children to live, rather than die. The unsustainable hierarchy sustained itself for millennia by stealing from the future . . . but they are out of future. All along, the future they stole from was We, Here, Now.

I say "revolution" because it is already under way. If you look up and listen, remember . . . you can hear it now. It is a revolution for the truth of our existence, as only with truth can there be justice. That truth is equality.

What you and I are doing is pulling off a coup.

Dawn:

Okay, I am with you in the revolution. But I still get anxious when I wage my minirevolts, even with my golden handcuffs of full professorship. And that anxiety is important. I don't want to lose it. It keeps me vigilant, and because of the power dynamic, I need to be vigilant.

Stephanie:

Your anxious vigilance won't be necessary if you see that power dynamic for the illusion that it is. Faith in the power of their imposed hierarchy is what causes the empathy-dissonance tune-out. If you regard me as the equal you know I am, your conscience will quiet down, and you can just listen to me. That empowers me to defend myself.

And despite your anxiety, you did, from the beginning, want to do something revolutionary . . . I remember, you told me.

Dawn:

But the revolution I imagined here was more modest. Traditionally we academics are trained to extract information and claim ownership of it regardless of how "connected" we claim to be to our research participants.

What I most wanted to do was upend the proprietorial terms, to give you ownership.

Do you own this work? Does it feel like it is yours?

Stephanie:

It does feel like mine, yes, regardless of how the academy marginalizes me and prevents my ownership in more literal ways. But even more than mine, this work feels like ours. In truth, we share ownership. We “saw” each other, not only as survivors but as willful women, coconspirators against inequality.

The academy demands hierarchy; but instead, we give it anarcho-feminism (Kowal 2019), or more to the point, we give it Anarchy.

Objectivity, we see, will never find the truth about anything that isn’t an object. Anarchy, being equality, resonates as truth. And this work now belongs to everybody.

The Academy, the better to lay claim even to my condemnation of its existence, demands I summarize, knowing that with its blunt language in its narrow time, I cannot.

Instead, I summarize in the language of dissent: it is metaphor; it is myth, poetry, and song.

It is a poem we can memorize, a song we can sing.

It is a secret song like the ones that I sang to my children, while we played in front of the one-way mirror as they watched, assessing my capacity to be what I already was—their mother.

They were prayers so beautiful that the younglings knew that we did not sing to El, even though we called his name, Yahweh, Jehovah, Muhammad, the Christ. The oppressors recorded, hoping I would fear. They noted every word I spoke to my children and called all of it heresy. But the songs I sang . . . I sang of love and

revolution, so they wouldn't bother to listen, or if they listened, they would not understand.

Mojko, moj, they chastised me for saying it with words, but in song, they did not hear me telling you, my boy, that, someday, you would come home.

The system can't be fixed, and everyone knows it.

"How can I exit the script of the oppressed, within a structure whose foundation is built on my submission?" (Moore and Hofeller 2018, 87).

They forced our mother to her knees and, then, found her back so strong that they could build a tower upon it, up to the sun. Legend has it that their vanity cursed us to melodrama and babble. But the mother mind remembered, and so we all remembered, as there was never yet a living "man" who did not dwell within a mother, not even the "first" one (what a desperate lie).

I remembered, and then I remembered again. I remembered their deception, age upon age. And the vision of their blasphemous betrayal was everywhere, and I was enraged.

They dragged me to their court, to answer for my knowledge, like Eve . . . with that tree.

My rage was visible from quite a distance, it seems . . .

Because when you and Rashmee theorized that my attitude in *West Virginia v. Peter Lizon* was due not to "Stockholm," "Battered Wife," or any other syndrome but rather to my very own intelligent and willful plan

for my own and my own children's life, you were correct.

Those in the academy wondering about how we subjects feel about being observed but not listened to, I'll speak for myself and every one of those subjects I ever met:

We see you, and we loathe you, and we find your amateur-night-at-the-strip-club fascination with our sex lives disgusting (Doe 2004). We wonder how you can claim to be feminists, while encouraging victim blame in your thorough examination of victims and your shoulder-shrugging dismissal of the rehabilitation of abusers? Is it not "boys will be boys," implying some lack of consent?! Objectifying and fetishizing the abuser does the same to the abused . . . and worse.

How can you wonder if our attitudes are relevant but neglect to ever ask us what our attitudes are? How can you wonder about the ethics of involving us, when the very question itself is a demonstration of how the sexist oligarchs stratify us, exaggerating the difference between women of privilege and the rest? Speaking from a position of "privilege" regained after decades of "real life," I can tell you that advocating for all women involves exactly that, and advocating for all women means advocating for men as well.

It means advocating for equality, not "special" crimes for "special" people. How can anyone tell me that violence against my daughter is a greater crime than violence against my son?!

If you can't study the men who lay hands on me, then why are you studying me? Perhaps you don't really

want to help, just add to the expensive literature on a topic that, in truth, has a one-sentence answer: the problems you examine are your own creation.

But isn't it cute that y'all mistook me for a lab rat, just because I turned my back on abusive men, leaving my share of our wealth behind . . . temporarily . . . ?

Wealthy women do *not* have to stay at a DV shelter or find themselves at the mercy of angry social workers. They can set themselves up in a condo, hire a lawyer, and see a therapist of their choice. Confidentiality is something you have to buy.

Just as the kind of drug addict who can maintain the appearance of a normal life, the unseen victim is almost always, simply, a wealthy one. These are the victims who purposefully stay under your radar, so they don't appear in your research.

If y'all are truthfully worried about "taking advantage" of your position as professionals, then don't do studies in DV shelters that have control groups that work for free. Don't collude with the criminal state, with "funding" as a justification. Don't thrive in a society that favors greed and obedience and tolerance for the suffering of others, then adopt our children who live because nature favors traits that hierarchy distorts to preserve itself: courage into arrogance, stamina into cruelty, strength into violence, memory into hatred.

Halt your specious search for commonality among victims. How about looking for the commonality in abusers, instead?

Don't speak for me without my permission, please, especially if forced silence is the only reason I do not

speaking for myself. And please, don't pretend that you are unaware that criminalizing behavior only glamorizes it and that women have to be brainwashed before they become defenseless.

Dawn:

I want to take these paragraphs and make them mandatory reading for all social science methods courses. What you are saying about the assumptions made and violence carried out by researchers needs saying. Like racism, we see it, although we often don't realize what we are seeing, unless of course we are the ones experiencing the racism (or sexism or homophobia or transphobia or any other systemic or personalized target of hate in this world); then everything is crystal clear but unspeakable. Researchers like me who fashion themselves as anti-gender-based-violence advocates are capable of incredible violence and exploitation. We are directed to it. I pay you \$50, and you tell me about your suffering for a few hours, and then I walk away with weak offers that you can "give feedback" or read over your interview transcript or whatever, knowing that I will never see you again, probably never be able to find you again. That was my experience until I met you. It will probably be my pattern again; but you created a rupture, and now that I know it is possible, I will continue to seek out the weaknesses in prescribed "best practices" of research.

Stephanie:

Yes, research! The question is not, “In which conditions will a human thrive?” but, rather, “How much failure to thrive can a human withstand?”

The Academy teaches that “clients” are not entirely human. No matter who you are, no matter who I am, your title guarantees you the power . . . oh, I’m sorry, burdens you with the power that overwhelms my faculties, robbing me of the ability to consent.

But if I cannot give consent, I can’t revoke it, either. Now that is terrifying.

But I mentioned that being underestimated can become an advantage. Well, it has worked out rather well for me. They underestimate my children, too. It will only make it easier for them to find me . . . no bullshit court order necessary. Nature herself will compel them to find me. I sing to them in their dreams.

With me, alive or dead, they will find evidence of their stolen legacy and take it back.

Academy, tell the ethics board not to worry about taking advantage of me. It is I who took advantage of you. I can still count on the narcissism of the oligarchy to preserve its own product. What better record than “The Record”?

So, let The Record show I am mother to all the world’s children . . . I cry for all of them. I could not be left unsupervised to raise my own, two, living children?

So be it. So, instead, I will “corrupt” generations against your tyranny.

Instead, I will lead a revolution.

Dawn:

You have injected me with the spirit of revolution, and in that vein, I don't want to repackage you. What happens if you generate the words and I curate quietly in the background? We originally agreed that I was your witness, but I am not sitting by idly watching and taking notes. I'm in this with you—not just for research, though the research continues, but also for the humanity of using my power and privilege to try to help. We are rebuilding your case file, we are finding advocates, we are talking through problems and concerns. I worry with you about your abuser's new charges. I worry about you when I don't hear from you for a while, and none of that is rigorous research. It is friendship. And in declaring us friends, do I risk my own credibility? I guess the cat is already out of the bag, so here I am witnessing and listening and still on occasion disbelieving but also ready to be your credibility as long as our friendship/collaboration has not stripped me of mine.

Stephanie:

The quieter you are, the more likely that my name, sans initials, will again be misspelled (Moore and Hoffeler [*sic*]). Aphasia again.

But, if readers want to cross-reference my stories with my late father's exploits, they'll have to spell it H-O-F-E-L-L-E-R.

I'll endorse the *New Yorker's* piece (Bethea 2019) and leave the rest (including citations of another Dr.

Hofeller, my mother, Kathleen) to the curious and save my stories for another day . . . or another paper.

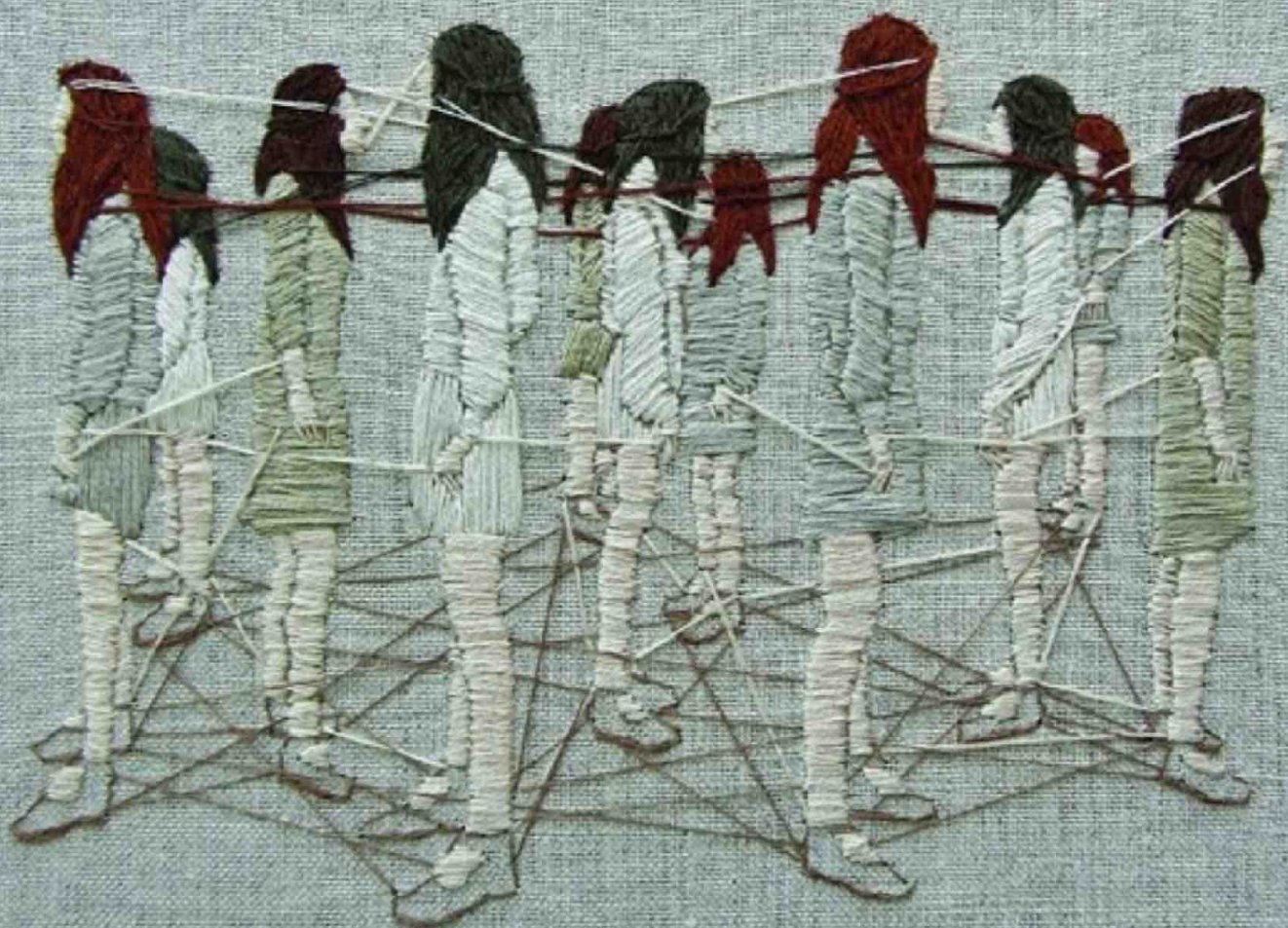
Peace, y'all.

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RESEARCHING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



EMBODIED AND INTERSECTIONAL APPROACHES

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Despite the growing interest in the subject of gender violence, surprisingly little has been written in recent years about the methodology behind this emerging field of research. This interdisciplinary collection seeks to fill this gap by empowering scholars to conduct gender violence research in ways that deconstruct rather than reinforce existing power structures and hierarchies.

The book argues for new approaches to research and activism on gender-based violence, grounded in the intersectional realities of individuals and communities. Each chapter discusses the role of reflective methodologies in recognizing institutional and intersectional inequalities, challenging the reader to contemplate the ethical considerations of an embodied feminist methodology. The volume grapples with how culture shapes academics and activists working on gendered violence, how they can best navigate that influence in their research methodology, and how they can avoid inadvertently normalizing damaging cultural tropes.

A powerful tool for conducting productive scholarship, *Researching Gender-Based Violence* provides recommendations for interrogating, practicing, and collaborating across fields, disciplines, and lived realities.

APRIL D. J. PETILLO is Assistant Professor of Public/Applied Sociology (Race, Gender and Culture) at the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Northern Arizona University.

HEATHER R. HLAVKA is Associate Professor of Social and Cultural Sciences at the Klinger College of Arts and Sciences at Marquette University. She is co-author of *Bodies in Evidence: Race, Gender, and Science in Sexual Assault Adjudication*.

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