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From Love to Complaint: Haunted Archive of a Clown-Mother-Buffoon in the Ivory Tower

Del amor a la queja: archivo embrujado de una payasa-madre-bufona en la torre de marfil

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Melissa Lima Caminha
Investigadora independiente
melcaminha@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7713-5929

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Abstract

This paper performs an autoethnographic and arts-based inquiry into what it means to teach, mother, clown, and persist within the university—a space where the embodied pedagogies of care and love described by bell hooks (2000, 2003) encounter institutional hierarchies that shape who is allowed to belong. Drawing from a personal experience, the work unfolds as a feminist creative critique in which the clown-mother-bouffon becomes the keeper of a haunted archive, gathering the affects, violences, erasures, and relational labours that institutional documents may fail to capture.

Guided by Sara Ahmed's (2017, 2021) thinking on the feminist killjoy and complaint, bell hooks's (2000, 2003, 2009) work on love, pedagogy, and belonging, and Avery Gordon's (1997) theorisation of haunting, the research presents the university as a haunted structure in which unresolved histories and relations of power—including coloniality, gendered labour, and epistemic injustice—continue to shape the present. Through autoethnographic and arts-based inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Holman

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Jones, 2005; Leavy, 2015), contemplative witnessing, poetic inquiry, and clowning and bouffonery, I gather fragments of a long lived and documented institutional experience and transform them into living ghosts that can return to haunt university life.

Contemplative practice operates here as a methodological disposition of sustained attention and presence rather than as the primary theoretical framework of the inquiry. It supports the recognition and gathering of traces that are subsequently revisited through complaint, archiving, poetic inquiry, and artistic transformation. Through these recursive practices, the paper develops the killjoy loop as a way of understanding how returning to memories, documents, complaints, and artistic traces can resist disappearance while producing different forms of recognition. The resulting poem, hip-hop manifesto, and prayer-spell mobilise the shifting energies of the clown, mother, and bouffon to transform institutional traces through vulnerability, laughter, exaggeration, care, and refusal to be silenced. Moving from love through complaint does not entail abandoning love; rather, complaint becomes one of the practices through which a politics of love can refuse domination and demand accountability. From this movement, radical tenderness emerges as an ethical and affective possibility: a tenderness capable of remaining vulnerable without disappearing.

Keywords: Arts-based Research, Complaint, Feminist Killjoy, Clown-Bouffon, Haunted Archive, Poetic Inquiry, Radical Tenderness.

Resumen

Este artículo desarrolla una investigación autoetnográfica y basada en las artes sobre lo que significa enseñar, maternar, payasear y persistir dentro de la universidad: un espacio donde las pedagogías encarnadas del cuidado y del amor descritas por bell hooks (2000, 2003) se encuentran con jerarquías institucionales que condicionan quién puede pertenecer. A partir de mi experiencia personal, el trabajo se despliega como una crítica feminista y creativa en la que la payasa-madre-bufona se convierte en guardiana de un archivo embrujado, reuniendo afectos, violencias, borramientos y trabajos afectivos y relacionales que los documentos institucionales no llegan a registrar.

Inspirada por el pensamiento de Sara Ahmed (2017, 2021) sobre la aguafiestas feminista y la queja, por los trabajos de bell hooks (2000, 2003, 2009) sobre el amor, la pedagogía y la pertenencia, y por la teoría de Avery Gordon (1997) sobre lo espectral, la investigación presenta la universidad como una estructura embrujada en la que historias no resueltas y relaciones de poder —incluidas la colonialidad, el trabajo generizado y la injusticia epistémica— continúan configurando el presente. A través de la autoetnografía y la investigación basada en las artes (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Holman Jones, 2005; Leavy, 2015), el testimonio contemplativo, la indagación poética, la payasería y la bufonería, reúno fragmentos de una larga experiencia institucional vivida y documentada y los transformo en fantasmas vivos capaces de regresar para embrujar la vida universitaria.

La práctica contemplativa opera aquí como una disposición metodológica de atención sostenida y presencia, y no como el principal marco teórico de la investigación. Sostiene el reconocimiento y la recopilación de huellas que posteriormente son revisitadas

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mediante la queja, el archivo, la indagación poética y la transformación artística. A través de estas prácticas recursivas, el artículo desarrolla el killjoy loop como una forma de comprender cómo el retorno a recuerdos, documentos, quejas y huellas artísticas puede resistir la desaparición y, al mismo tiempo, producir formas diferentes de reconocimiento. El poema, el manifiesto hip-hop y la plegaria-hechizo resultantes movilizan las energías cambiantes de la payasa, la madre y la bufona para transformar las huellas institucionales mediante la vulnerabilidad, la risa, la exageración, el cuidado y la negativa a silenciarme. Poner el amor y la queja en relación no implica abandonar el amor; por el contrario, la queja se convierte en una de las prácticas mediante las cuales una política del amor puede rechazar la dominación y exigir responsabilidad. De este movimiento emerge la ternura radical como posibilidad ética y afectiva: una ternura capaz de permanecer vulnerable sin desaparecer.

Palabras clave: investigación basada en las artes, queja, aguafiestas feminista, payasa-bufona, archivo embrujado, indagación poética, ternura radical.

Introduction

For many years I have worked in higher education. During this time, I carried out the expected duties of a scholar — teaching, researching, community weaving — while performing the impossible choreography of precarious contracts, multiple jobs, early motherhood, and the emotional labour that institutions never count but always demand. My teaching was grounded in what bell hooks (2000) understands as an ethic of love: I taught with love, built programs with care, collaborated with my students with tenderness, and kept showing up even when sleep was barely a rumour and the demands of breastfeeding and motherhood intertwined with working days, meetings, and academic responsibilities. This love ethic should not be understood as sentimental attachment or the avoidance of conflict, but as a practice inseparable from struggles against domination. As hooks (2003) writes, "I began to think about the relationship between struggles to end domination and love" (p. 130). Within education, this ethic brings together care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, orienting teaching towards forms of relation that resist rather than reproduce domination.

But behind the bright curtains of the Ivory Tower, another script was quietly being rehearsed — a script that, as I lived it, was stitched with hostility, gendered inequality, and the penalisation of motherhood (Llorens et al., 2021; Samper-Gras et al., 2021). Over the years, I came to experience what I recognised as a sustained pattern of hostility: precarious and unequal working conditions, the sense that teaching evaluations were being used against my credibility, and the feeling that my academic profile was valued mainly to satisfy accreditation ratios, as if I were a decorative sticker, a stopgap, a plug-in body rather than a scholar.

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The peak of this pattern erupted during the pregnancy, childbirth, and return from maternity leave. In that fragile time, I experienced pressures that I perceived as placing my professional integrity, my wellbeing, and my health at risk, and I felt discouraged from seeking institutional support. The experience exposed the distance between institutional commitments and what institutions actually do when someone asks those commitments to be enacted — a contradiction central to Ahmed's analyses of institutional diversity work and complaint. As Ahmed (2021) writes, "A policy can create the illusion of doing something without doing anything" (p. 59). In such circumstances, the distance between institutional promises and lived experience becomes a space in which bodies are left to absorb the consequences.

The harm I experienced was not the work of a single person or body. It was sustained by an institutional climate of omission, sideways glances, and silence — of looking away — which I came to experience as a form of complicity. Here, Gordon's (1997) understanding of haunting becomes important: what has been suppressed, concealed, or rendered absent does not simply disappear. It continues to make itself felt. Silence and omission therefore became part of the spectral life of the institution, traces through which something unresolved kept announcing its presence.

And I, a clown-mother-bouffon, found myself performing survival: juggling care, complaint, and resistance; a choreography painfully familiar to those whose bodies resist the norms of institutional belonging.

Throughout this long process, I sought protection and accountability through the official channels available to me within the university. My complaint wandered through corridors, committees, and commissions, suspended in the bureaucratic air like a lost red balloon drifting inside the Ivory Tower —visible enough to be noticed, never enough to be held.

This experience also unsettled my sense of belonging within the university. Belonging, as hooks (2009) suggests, is not simply a matter of inhabiting a place, but of finding the conditions in which one can be fully present within it. I had inhabited the university for years — as a teacher, researcher, colleague, and mother — yet increasingly found myself questioning whether I could still belong to an institution in which parts of my embodied and political existence seemed to become a problem.

The account I share here is one of the ways I have been unfolding, through artistic autoethnography and arts-based research (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Holman Jones, 2005; Leavy, 2015), the facts, affects, and traces of this institutional maze in careful, lived detail. It forms part of a broader chronicle — an embodied, haunted archive of what happened and how I lived it. Some of these experiences affected me professionally and academically; others cut deeper, touching my safety and health.

This narrative is therefore not merely personal testimony. Following autoethnography's commitment to making the personal political (Holman Jones, 2005), it becomes an embodied archive: a haunted record through which individual experience can be read in relation to the institutional structures and relations of power that produced it.

And so I tell it here, through my clown-mother-bouffon voice: not as vengeance, but as a way to take my space of enunciation, survival, and an experiment in radical

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tenderness. I tell it as a way of refusing to disappear, of keeping the archive alive, and of giving form to the ghosts that refuse to be silenced within academic life and the university system.

Methodology

This study is situated within Arts-Based Research (ABR), understood as an umbrella methodological approach in which artistic processes do not merely illustrate or disseminate research findings but operate as modes of inquiry, interpretation, meaning-making, and knowledge production (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). As Leavy (2015) argues, the development of ABR entails more than incorporating artistic techniques into conventional research; it involves methodological practices and ways of knowing that constitute a broader "paradigm shift." Within this framework, the present inquiry brings together autoethnography and poetic inquiry through clowning.

Autoethnography provides the movement through which personal experience becomes a site for examining cultural, political, and institutional relations, making the personal political (Holman Jones, 2005). Here, the autobiographical "I" is inseparable from the embodied clown-mother-bouffon who experienced, witnessed, documented, and now artistically revisits the institutional events explored in this paper. The body is therefore not incidental to the inquiry but one of the sites through which experience is remembered, interpreted, and transformed.

Poetic inquiry provides a means of working with the traces of lived experience. Poetry can operate not simply as representation but as a way of producing, exploring, and analysing research material, particularly the tensions and complexities of lived experience that may escape conventional academic writing (Leavy, 2015). As Neilsen (2008) writes, "lyric inquiry creates a place for the knowing of felt experience" (p. 95). In this inquiry, memories, affects, documents, silences, and fragments of institutional experience are condensed and reconfigured through poetic language, allowing analytical and affective forms of knowing to remain in conversation. Poetic writing thus participates in the inquiry itself rather than illustrating findings produced elsewhere, bringing fragmented memories, embodied sensations, documentary traces, and affective residues into relation without forcing them into a single explanatory narrative (Leggo, 2008).

Within this arts-based framework, the inquiry unfolds through two interconnected movements. The first gathers the traces through psychotherapy, contemplative witnessing, complaint, and archival practice; the second transforms these traces through poetic inquiry with the embodied energies of the clown-mother-bouffon. These movements are recursive rather than sequential: documentation provokes interpretation, artistic creation can return me to the archive, and poetic or embodied experimentation can make previously unnoticed meanings perceptible.

For this reason, the two methodological sections that follow do more than describe how the inquiry was conducted: they also attend to what became knowable through conducting it. Rather than separating creative process from analysis into a subsequent

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discussion, I approach interpretation as immanent to the arts-based inquiry itself. The methodological account therefore moves between process and reflection, making and meaning-making, tracing how lived experience is witnessed, documented, artistically transformed, and returned to the university through poetry, clowning, and laughter-based resistance.

Ethical considerations. Autoethnography inevitably implicates others who have not chosen to appear in the researcher's story (Ellis, 2007). For this reason, institutions and individuals have been pseudonymised, identifying details have been removed, and no person is named or described in a way that would make them recognisable. None of the documents or testimonies in my personal archive is reproduced or quoted in this article. The account presented here is my experience and interpretation of events; it does not claim to establish facts in an administrative or legal sense (Tolich, 2010).

1. Contemplative Witnessing, Complaining, and Archiving: Gathering the Traces

The first movement of this inquiry begins not with artistic creation, but with the difficult work of becoming able to face, recognise, and narrate what happened. The institutional experiences explored in this study were not lived as a single, clearly bounded event. They accumulated over years through fragmented gestures that I lived as discrimination, humiliation, erasure, exclusion, silence, and pressure. Experienced at different moments and across different institutional spaces, these fragments did not initially constitute a coherent story. Their connections became perceptible gradually, through sustained processes of remembering, revisiting, attending, and integrating.

Psychotherapy has been fundamental to this process. I do not treat psychotherapy as a research method, nor do I use therapeutic sessions, clinical material, or the therapeutic relationship as research data. Rather, it provided a supported relational space in which I could face painful experiences, work through their traumatic effects, revisit events that had remained fragmented, and gradually integrate them into a narrative that could be spoken and written. In this sense, psychotherapy became one of the conditions that made this inquiry possible. This experience resonates with Ahmed's (2021) attention to the difficulty of giving testimony from experiences of complaint and trauma: complaint narratives do not necessarily arrive already coherent or chronologically ordered, and remembering can make past experiences affectively present again.

This process of psychological integration had concrete consequences for documentation and testimony. As connections between experiences became recognisable, I became increasingly able to reconstruct chronologies, return to emails and other records, identify repetitions and contradictions, and put events into words.

Alongside psychotherapy, contemplative witnessing names another dimension of this process. I understand contemplation here not as withdrawal from institutional conflict but as a practice of sustained attention and presence: remaining with an experience, memory, document, silence, contradiction, or bodily response long enough to perceive

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what might otherwise be normalised, minimised, or forgotten. The conjunction of contemplative and arts-based practices is significant in this regard, as Walsh, Bickel, and Leggo (2015) locate in their interrelationship possibilities for awareness, care, and personal and social transformation.

Witnessing does not imply that I stand outside these experiences as a detached observer. As an autoethnographic researcher, I am simultaneously the person who lived them and the person who now returns to them, attends to their traces, and attempts to understand their meanings. I therefore use contemplative witnessing as a form of self-witnessing: the difficult practice of becoming sufficiently present to what happened to me to recognise, name, document, and eventually transform it. Psychotherapy and contemplative witnessing are not equivalent practices, but they operate alongside one another in this inquiry. The former provides a supported relational space for working through experience and its effects; the latter describes a disposition of sustained presence and attention through which I remain with its traces and allow previously obscured connections to emerge.

From this movement between presence, attention and integration, complaint and archiving emerged. Drawing on Ahmed's (2017, 2021) work on the feminist killjoy and institutional complaint, I understand complaining here as more than the activation of bureaucratic or legal procedures. Complaint requires returning to what happened, putting experiences into words, producing and preserving evidence, insisting on connections, and refusing to accommodate what has become perceptible as wrong. What could be recognised could begin to be named; what could be named could be documented; and what could be documented could be placed beside other traces.

Throughout this process, I gathered a personal archive of institutional experience composed of emails, documents, notes, timelines, images, written testimonies, memories, and other traces of encounters and harm. These materials allow particular events to be revisited, contextualised, connected, questioned, and remembered. Artistic autoethnography allows me to approach them not only as documentary evidence but as affective traces of how institutional relations were lived and registered through a particular embodied and situated position — that of an artist, educator, researcher, complainant, clown-mother-bouffon.

Archiving and complaining therefore became, for me, practices against disappearance. But institutional records do not necessarily preserve everything that matters. Gestures, affects, feelings, emotions, silences, omissions, informal pressures, bodily experiences, and the cumulative effects of apparently disconnected events can easily escape or exceed official documentation. Producing my own artistic and academic archives became a way of leaving traces: of insisting that these experiences happened, that they can be returned to, and that their absence from an official administrative or legal account does not make them absent from lived history. Across administrative, legal, academic, and cultural spheres, I have generated different forms of documentation, testimony, complaint, and artistic record. In constructing and preserving these archives, I also refuse to leave institutions with exclusive authority over what can be recorded, remembered, and narrated about my experience.

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Returning consequently became an important part of the inquiry. Reading again, listening again, remembering, reorganising, documenting, complaining, and returning once more formed what I call a killjoy loop. Drawing on Ahmed's feminist killjoy (2017) while extending it into my own artistic and autoethnographic practice, I use the term to describe the recursive movement of returning to what institutional procedures attempt to close, contain, or leave behind. This resonates with Ahmed's (2021) account of complaint as work that is rarely completed through a single action: complaints often have to be made repeatedly and in different forms in order to be heard. The loop refuses the institutional assumption that what has been administratively closed, ignored, silenced, or left unanswered has therefore ceased to exist. It is contemplative and disruptive at once: the persistence of the clown-mother who keeps attending, the sharp eye of the bouffon who notices contradiction, and the feminist killjoy's refusal to smooth over a problem so that institutional life can comfortably continue as it is.

Such continuity can be sustained precisely through what Ahmed (2021) calls "strategic inefficiency," where "inefficiency is not just the failure of things to work properly but is also how things are working" (p. 94). Complaint, then, becomes a practice of interrupting this reproduction by noticing, naming, and leaving traces of what the institution might otherwise allow to disappear. As Ahmed reminds us, "you have to record what you do not want to reproduce" (p. 288). For Ahmed, then, complaint can be understood as a form of nonreproductive labor within the university: the work undertaken by those who refuse to reproduce an institutional inheritance and who struggle, instead, to transform the institution.

The significance of the loop is not repetition alone, but the possibility that return produces difference. Repetition can also become a practice against forgetting. As hooks (2009) writes, "hearing the same story makes it impossible to forget" (p. 3). The killjoy loop works through such recursive return: revisiting memories, documents, complaints, and artistic traces not simply to reproduce them, but to resist their disappearance and allow different relations to them to emerge. A remembered experience can send me back to a document; a document can alter my understanding of a memory; psychotherapy can enable previously fragmented experiences to be connected; contemplation can sustain attention to what might otherwise be overlooked; complaint can generate further documentation; and placing traces beside one another can make relationships between apparently isolated events perceptible. Ahmed's (2021) description of collecting as bringing together material from different places and periods of time is particularly evocative here: to collect can involve going back in order to bring something back. Each return therefore carries the possibility of recognising something that could not yet be recognised before.

Together, these practices constitute what I understand as the gathering of traces. They allowed me to preserve what might otherwise disappear, but preservation alone is not the purpose of this inquiry. I refuse to let my experience remain contained within institutional archives. The documents, memories, silences, contradictions, and complaints gathered here become materials for further transformation.

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The archive insists: this happened.
Complaint insists: this matters and demands acknowledgement and accountability.
The artistic gestures that follow add another insistence: this is not finished.

It is at this threshold that archival traces become materials for haunting. In the next movement of the inquiry, I transform my spectral fragments into artistic presences — living ghosts that can leave the institutional archive and re-enter the university imaginatively and symbolically. If archiving and complaining are practices against disappearance in the institution, artistic haunting becomes a refusal to remain confined within its archive.

2. Clowning Around with a Poem, a Manifesto, and a Prayer-Spell: Haunting and Laughing at the University

The second movement of the inquiry begins with a return to the traces gathered through the first. Documents, memories, complaints, silences, contradictions, bodily responses, and fragments of institutional experience are revisited, but no longer only in order to reconstruct and document what happened or to register a formal complaint. They become materials for poetic inquiry. Through writing, rhyme, rhythm, repetition, humour, exaggeration, and the embodied imaginaries of clowning and bouffonery, I ask what these traces can become when they are allowed to leave the documentary register and enter artistic form.

This movement does not follow a linear progression from data to analysis and then to artistic representation. Artistic creation is itself part of the complaint process. A phrase encountered in a document may return as a rhyme; a remembered gesture may become comic exaggeration; an institutional contradiction may acquire another meaning when spoken through the voice of a bouffon; an experience of vulnerability may become perceptible differently through the wobbling body of a clown. Transformation is therefore not what happens after interpretation: it is one of the ways interpretation takes place. In this sense, the creative process described in this section is simultaneously a process of inquiry into what the gathered traces can reveal, disturb, and make newly perceptible.

This recursive transformation of autobiographical experience through artistic personae has precedents in feminist performance practice and also continues a trajectory developed throughout my own artistic research. In Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being* (1973 – 75), autobiographical material drawn from personal journal entries was repeatedly reworked through a performative alter ego, allowing private experience to enter public artistic space. Other feminist artistic practices offer important resonances for this transformation. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), for instance, turns familiar domestic signs into feminist critique through parody, repetition, and exaggerated gesture, while the Guerrilla Girls have mobilised humour, visual exaggeration, statistics, and irony to expose inequalities within cultural institutions.

These practices differ substantially in context, aesthetics, and political histories, but they share an understanding of humour and performative transformation as capable

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of making relations of power perceptible by rendering their codes strange, excessive, or absurd. They provide artistic interlocutors for my own attempt to return institutional experience through forms that refuse the supposedly neutral and serious language through which universities frequently represent themselves. My previous arts-based research has similarly explored the clown body as more than an object of study: as a situated and embodied site through which autobiographical experience, feminist and queer inquiry, humour, and artistic experimentation encounter and transform one another (Caminha, 2016; Caminha & Vidiella, 2019). The present inquiry extends this trajectory towards institutional complaint, asking what happens when the mother-clown-bouffon-researcher returns to an archive of harm.

Laughter is central to this return. In my previous work, I have used the term laughter-resistance to think through laughter as a feminist practice of resistance rather than as an escape from political seriousness (Caminha, 2020). Here, that practice is redirected towards the institutional space itself. Clowning and bouffonery allow me to exaggerate its contradictions, disturb its claims to seriousness and neutrality, and return institutional language in altered forms. Laughter changes how I can approach and transform the traces of this archive. The clown-mother-bouffon can mourn and laugh, remain vulnerable and become disruptive, carrying complaint beyond the administrative and legal forms through which institutions attempt to receive, process, and close it.

Within this process, poetic inquiry became the principal compositional practice through which the gathered traces were artistically transformed. The inquiry generated three interconnected poetic outputs: a narrative poem, a hip-hop manifesto, and a prayer-spell. These are not three separate methods, nor do they correspond to three discrete or stable identities. Rather, they are three manifestations of the same embodied artistic inquiry, each foregrounding a different energy within the composite figure of the clown-mother- bouffon: the poem is animated primarily by the clown, the manifesto by the bouffon, and the prayer-spell by the mother who holds clown vulnerability and bouffon resistance together. These energies remain porous, contaminating and transforming one another across the three pieces.

The first piece, the poem *The Wobbly Mother Clown and the Big Ivory Tower*, works primarily through clown energy. Its rhyme, repetition, playfulness, fragility, and deliberately unstable movement allow me to revisit the university through a figure who enters the Ivory Tower carrying love, enthusiasm, creativity, and a desire to belong. As institutional relations are perceived as increasingly hostile, however, the clown begins to wobble. Her comic instability becomes a way of approaching vulnerability without resolving it into either victimhood or heroic overcoming. The clown does not become invulnerable in order to resist. She resists while wobbling. Her cracked laugh, persistence, and repeated adjustments make perceptible a form of survival in which vulnerability and resistance are not opposites.

The second piece, *The Bouffon Mother's Killjoy Cypher*, shifts the dominant energy from clown vulnerability towards bouffon confrontation. Written as a hip-hop manifesto, the piece works through rhythm, rhyme, repetition, exaggeration, accusation, and refusal. If the clown exposes instability through her wobble, the bouffon deliberately

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enlarges what institutions would prefer to minimise. She speaks too loudly, repeats too much, points at contradictions, refuses decorative inclusion, and interrupts expectations of gratitude and institutional politeness. In this sense, the bouffon gives another body and another voice to the feminist killjoy (Ahmed, 2017): she refuses to smooth over the problem so that institutional comfort can be restored.

The manifesto also transforms the complaint process developed in the first movement of the inquiry. There, complaint required collecting traces, reconstructing events, documenting, returning, and insisting upon what had happened. In the cypher, those practices are translated into rhythm, repetition, and public-facing speech. Complaint moves from documentation towards declaration. The bureaucratic complainant who must repeatedly explain herself becomes the bouffon who deliberately repeats, amplifies, and performs what was not heard. The killjoy loop therefore enters the artistic process: repetition no longer serves only to produce evidence or seek institutional acknowledgement but becomes an aesthetic strategy capable of returning the complaint in another form.

The third piece, *A Short Clown-Mother-Bouffon Killjoy Prayer-Spell*, foregrounds the mother while holding clown and bouffon energies together. Its register shifts from the accusatory force of the manifesto towards care, protection, transmission, and address to the "little ones." Yet the movement towards tenderness does not undo what the clown and bouffon have learned. The mother who speaks here has witnessed harm, recognised it, documented it, complained, resisted, and returned. Her care therefore carries vigilance and boundaries alongside gentleness. When the prayer asks the little ones to be sweet but not silent, gentle but still seen, tenderness is no longer synonymous with accommodation or disappearance.

This movement is significant to the wider argument of the inquiry. The trajectory from love through complaint does not necessarily culminate in the abandonment of love. Instead, complaint changes what tenderness can mean. The tenderness that begins to emerge through the prayer-spell is less innocent than the loving disposition with which the clown first entered the Ivory Tower: it has memory, boundaries, recognition, and a voice. I understand this emerging configuration as pointing towards radical tenderness — not as a methodological principle imposed in advance upon the inquiry, but as an ethical and affective possibility becoming perceptible through the creative process. Its fuller implications are taken up in the final considerations.

The movement among the three pieces is consequently neither a progression from weakness to strength nor a replacement of one persona by another. The clown is not left behind when the bouffon appears, and the bouffon does not disappear when the mother begins to pray. The clown's vulnerability remains within the bouffon's refusal; the bouffon's capacity to recognise and confront harm remains within the mother's tenderness; and motherhood provides a relational and protective register through which both can coexist. Clown-mother-bouffon therefore names a composite and shifting artistic position rather than a fixed character. Moving among these energies enables different aspects of the same institutional experience to become perceptible without requiring them to resolve into a single emotional or analytical register.

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It is through these artistic transformations that the living ghosts introduced at the threshold between the two movements of the inquiry begin to take form. They are not ghosts discovered waiting inside the archive, nor straightforward representations of past events. They are artistic presences produced through acts of return and transformation. In this sense, artistic haunting is not the reproduction of the archive but its transformation.

This understanding resonates with Gordon's (1997) account of haunting as the troubling persistence of what has been suppressed, unresolved, or made absent. Yet the living ghosts produced here are specifically an arts-based response to that persistence. Through poetic and prospective performative inquiry, I give artistic form to traces of institutional experience so that they can return differently. The archive insists that something happened; complaint insists that it matters and demands accountability; artistic haunting insists that it is not finished. What institutions might file, close, forget, or leave unanswered can re-enter the university through poetry, laughter, exaggeration, vulnerability, and embodied imagination.

The clown-mother-bouffon therefore returns to the Ivory Tower not simply to reproduce the story of what happened there, but to trouble its closure. She returns wobbling and laughing, complaining and exaggerating, mourning and caring, transforming traces into artistic presences capable of moving beyond the institutional forms that first contained them. If the first movement of this inquiry gathered the traces, the second gives those traces bodies, voices, rhythms, and comic forms through which they can haunt.

Artistic Outputs

The three poetic works presented below emerged from the arts-based process described above. Together, they constitute interconnected expressions of the clown-mother-bouffon, moving across vulnerability, complaint, resistance, care, love and tenderness. Presented here in their current written form, they function both as artistic outputs of the present inquiry and as poetic scores for future public performance. They are reproduced now without further analytical commentary, allowing the poetic forms themselves to carry the traces, tensions, affects, and transformations generated through the inquiry.

Piece I - The Wobbly Mother Clown and the Big Ivory Tower

Once there was a mother clown with shoes that went *pip-pip*,
who carried love in every step and joy upon her lip-lip.

She came to the Big Ivory Tower with colors in her hair,
not knowing that its hallways hid a cold and ghostly stare.

"Oh look, a funny clown!" they said, "so squishy and exotic!"
They clapped their hands with sugar smiles — so sweet, so patriotic.

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They put her on their posters, they paraded her around,
they loved her silly sparkles… as long as she stayed *their* clown.

She taught breathing, love and tenderness, the wisdom of the heart,
while shadows crept behind her, slowly tearing her apart.

They whispered, "She's too wobbly… too motherly… too soft.
Let's place her in the attic room — the one far up the loft."

The doors began to shrink on her, the hallways grew too tall,
smiles slipped beneath the floor; the lights flickered in the hall.

The greeting voices vanished and the air turned tight and thin,
and sometimes she could swear she heard the walls breathe from within.

They pushed her to the corners where forgotten things decay,
they used her warmth and tossed her out when they had had their day.

Her nose grew dim and shaky like a candle losing flame,
her laughter, once so bubbly, felt too fragile to reclaim.

But tiny clowns have secrets — yes, the kind that monsters fear:
their courage grows in silence when the bullying draws near.

So when the Big Ivory Tower tried to swallow her in gloom,
a trembling sound escaped her throat and echoed through the room.

And though her voice was squeaky-small and wobbly in its fight,
it carried all her children's dreams and burned a stubborn light.

So here she stands — still tender, still brave, still profound —
for even hunted mother-clowns can shake the coldest ground.

And every time they try to crush her colors into dust,
she laughs a tiny clown-laugh saying, "I'm still here. I adjust."

A laugh so cracked, so brave — so fragile and so dear —
that even monsters in their suits lean close enough to hear.

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Piece II -The Bouffon Mother's Killjoy Cypher (*a hip hop manifesto*)

HOOK
I rise, I speak, I break your mold,
I'm done being your patch, your plug, your hold.
You tried to use me, bruise me, keep me controlled
But I'm the mother-clown-bouffon,
and I won't do what I'm told.

VERSE 1 — "I'm Not Your Clown Prop"
Nah, I ain't your decoration,
your poster-child vibration,
your cute exotic addition
to your Tower reputation.

I ain't your stopgap clown
filling holes you won't fix,
your hollow celebration
for political optics.
I'm a worker, a thinker, a mother with heat
respect my craft,
respect my beat.

VERSE 2 — "My Shaking Voice Still Cuts Through Stone"
Yeah, my voice shakes
but it slices like steel,
every tremor is truth,
every crack is real.

You call it noise?
I call it proof.
You call it drama?
I call it roof
the ceiling I hit
when I tried to speak,
the silence you fed
week after week.

So I rhyme, I repeat,
like a scratched-out track
if you didn't hear the first time,
you'll hear me on the back.

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VERSE 3 — "I Protect What You Tried to Break"
My kids - born and taught -
my name, my art, my history,
my breath in the classroom,
my research, my mystery.

These are my creatures
and I guard them with teeth,
you tried to shrink them down
but they rise beneath.

I'm the mother-lion clown,
the bouffon with claws,
protecting every child
from your institutional jaws.

VERSE 4 — "My Softness Is Fire You Can't Extinguish"

Yeah, I was wobbly,
yeah, I was sweet
but don't get it twisted,
I can bring the heat.

My tears are tactics,
my laughter is blade,
my tenderness triggers
the systems you made.

I rise from the cracks,
I spit from the pain
you tried to break my body,
but you sharpened my brain.

VERSE 5 — "Justice Is Not Optional"
I'm not asking for favors,
I'm calling for repair,
for truth that's spoken,
for wounds laid bare.

For safety.
For dignity.
For stories made clear.
For the next ones who'll enter
without trembling in fear.

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Justice ain't a whisper
it's a beat, it's a flame.
Write it down, Tower:
remember my name.

FINAL HOOK
I rise, I speak, I break your mold,
clown-mother-bouffon, fierce and bold.
You tried to crush colors,
turn my story cold
but I flip the script
and reclaim control.

Yeah.
I'm here.
I resist.
I unfold.

Piece III – A Short Clown-Mother-Bouffon Killjoy Prayer-Spell

Hush now, little ones,
come closer, take my hand.
Tonight I teach a tiny spell
to help your hearts withstand.

Be sweet,
but never silent.
Be gentle,
but stay seen.
Let kindness walk beside you,
let courage keep you keen.

Listen like a dreamer does,
speak when truth must land.
Be curious,
not careless,
and learn where lines must stand.

If harm comes near your footsteps,
may your eyes catch it first,
may your voice rise like a lantern,
may your bravery come first.
Little ones, you carry light

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that no one else can claim.
Keep it close,
keep it shining,
keep it steady in your name.

And remember, little darlings,
as the tall tower sways above:
a tiny clown can shake the world
when she breathes her truth with love.

Final Considerations

This arts-based inquiry began with the difficult work of gathering traces of institutional experiences that had remained fragmented across memory, documents, bodily responses, silences, and complaint. Through contemplative self-witnessing, archival practice, poetic inquiry, and the embodied imaginaries of clowning and bouffonery, these traces became available not only for documentation but also for artistic transformation. The movement from archive to complaint and from complaint into poetic forms does not resolve the experiences explored here. Rather, it allows them to return differently: as words, rhythms, laughter, exaggeration, vulnerability, care, and what I have called living ghosts.

One methodological contribution emerging from this process is what I call the killjoy loop. Drawing on Ahmed's feminist killjoy (2017) and her work on institutional complaint (2021), the killjoy loop names the recursive practice of returning to what institutions attempt to close, contain, ignore, or leave behind. Its significance lies not in repetition alone, but in the possibility that return produces difference. Revisiting a memory after encountering a document, placing apparently disconnected traces beside one another, rewriting an experience through poetry, or returning to a complaint through artistic form can make previously obscured relationships perceptible. The loop therefore describes both persistence and knowledge production: a refusal of disappearance and a way of recognising differently through return.

The inquiry also extends a trajectory developed through my previous arts-based research with feminist and queer clowning. Here, the clown-mother-bouffon emerges as a shifting epistemic and artistic position through which institutional experience can be approached from different embodied registers. The clown brings vulnerability, permeability, failure, play, and the capacity to wobble without disappearing; the bouffon brings exaggeration, confrontation, irony, and refusal; the mother brings care, protection, memory, and transmission. None supersedes the others. Their coexistence makes it possible to hold vulnerability and resistance, grief and laughter, tenderness and confrontation within the same inquiry. Through their encounters, archival traces become living ghosts: artistic presences that refuse to remain contained within the institutional forms through which experience may be documented, processed, filed, or closed.

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This inquiry also brings bell hooks's politics of love into conversation with Sara Ahmed's feminist politics of complaint. For hooks (2000, 2003), love is not reducible to affection, softness, or harmonious relations. It is an ethical and political practice inseparable from care, commitment, responsibility, respect, knowledge, and the demand for justice. Such an understanding of love does not require overlooking conflict or preserving harmony at the expense of truth; rather, it demands opposition to domination and accountability for harm. Ahmed's (2017, 2021) feminist killjoy and her work on complaint approach these ethical demands from another direction, attending to what happens when harm is named within institutions: when speaking about a problem becomes disruptive, when the complainant is treated as the problem, and when persistence is required because institutional procedures fail to provide acknowledgement or repair.

Read together through this inquiry, love and complaint therefore do not represent opposing ethical positions, nor does complaint provide a political toughness absent from love. Complaint can instead become one of the practices through which a politics of love refuses to accommodate harm. The movement from love through complaint names a passage from an ethical commitment to care, justice, and relationality into the difficult practice of insisting upon those commitments when they are violated. Complaint, in this sense, does not necessarily mark the failure or abandonment of love. It can emerge precisely because love, understood politically, requires truth-telling, accountability, and resistance to domination.

It is through this passage that radical tenderness emerges as one of the situated propositions of the inquiry. It names something that became perceptible through the embodied and artistic trajectory of the clown-mother-bouffon: a tenderness that has passed through harm, recognition, complaint, and resistance without relinquishing its relational orientation. Radical tenderness holds care and boundaries, vulnerability and discernment, love and truth-telling, tenderness and refusal together. Complaint does not make tenderness political; tenderness, like love in hooks, is already political. What complaint does in this inquiry is transform the conditions under which tenderness can continue to be practised.

The maternal dimension of the clown-mother-bouffon gives this transformation a further pedagogical orientation. In the prayer-spell, what has been learned through witnessing, recognition, complaint, and resistance is addressed to the "little ones": *be sweet, but never silent; be gentle, but stay seen*. Survival becomes, therefore, not only resistance but also transmission and pedagogy. The mother does not teach invulnerability. She transmits the possibility of remaining open to care while learning to recognise harm, establish boundaries, and speak when something is wrong. Radical tenderness becomes, in this sense, not only a way of surviving institutional harm but an embodied knowledge that can be carried forward and offered to others.

These propositions also raise questions about academic institutions themselves. What might change if complaint were approached not as irritating noise to be managed but as knowledge about institutional relations? What forms of university life might become possible if vulnerability, embodied knowledge, motherhood, artistic inquiry, laughter, and care were not positioned against academic seriousness? The present study cannot answer

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these questions institutionally or universally. It offers instead the situated knowledge produced through one clown-mother-bouffon's encounter with the Ivory Tower and an arts-based practice for staying with what institutional procedures may fail to resolve.

Finally, this inquiry remains deliberately open. The poem, hip-hop manifesto, and prayer-spell presented here are artistic outputs of the present research, but they are also poetic scores for future public performance. Their passage through voice, gesture, rhythm, costume, comic timing, space, and encounter with audiences may produce meanings that cannot yet be anticipated and are therefore not claimed as findings here. The living ghosts remain capable of transformation as they acquire bodies and enter other spaces. In this sense, incompletion is not simply a limitation of the study; it is consistent with its methodological proposition that return can produce difference.

To move from love, through complaint, then, is not to leave love behind. It is to follow some of the difficult practices that a politics of love may demand when care, dignity, and justice are violated. Complaint becomes a way of remaining with those demands rather than surrendering them for the sake of institutional harmony. And what emerges on the other side is neither the restoration of an earlier innocence nor the hardening of the vulnerable body against the world. Radical tenderness is not a return to the tenderness with which the clown entered the Ivory Tower. It is tenderness that has passed through complaint and learned how to remain tender without disappearing.

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