

Executive Summary – The Case of Lieselotte Viaene and the Defamatory Chapter published by Routledge

This document analyses the contradictions and ethical lapses in the chapter co-authored by **Lieselotte Viaene** and published in the book *Sexual Misconduct in Academia* (Routledge, 2023), which indirectly refers to the **Centre for Social Studies (CES)** and Professor **Boaventura de Sousa Santos (BSS)** with accusations of an institutional culture of sexual harassment. The key points are highlighted below:

1. **LV was the main author of the chapter ‘The walls spoke when no one else would,’** together with Catarina Laranjeiro and Miye Nadya Tom. The text uses “autoethnography” to accuse anonymous figures such as the ‘star professor,’ ‘vigilant woman,’ and ‘apprentice’ without evidence, easily identifiable by the reader as members of the CES, and especially BSS.
2. **The text was heavily criticised for its lack of rigour and ethics**, including a letter sent to Routledge by feminist professors **Gay W. Seidman and Linda Gordon**, who warned about the publication of accusations without factual evidence, without the right of reply, and with serious reputational consequences (*evidence 1: letter dated 11 May 2023*).

De: GAY W SEIDMAN <[REDACTED]>

Sent: Thursday, 11 May 2023 8:37 PM

To: [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]>; [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]>; [REDACTED] <[REDACTED]>

Subject: Preocupaciones sobre "Los muros hablaron cuando nadie más lo hacía"

Dear Dr. Pritchard, Dr. Edwards, and Routledge editorial board:

We are writing to express our deep concern about the ethical issues raised by the publication of the article ‘The walls spoke when no one else would: Autoethnographic notes on sexual-power gatekeeping within avant-garde academia’ by Lieselotte Viaene, Catarina Laranjeiro, and Miye Nadya Tom, in *Sexual Misconduct in Academia: Informing an ethics of care in the University* (Routledge 2023).

As you are aware, the article denounces a culture of harassment at a research centre at the University of Coimbra, referring to individuals who are labelled as ‘star professor,’ ‘clock woman,’ and ‘apprentice,’ without naming them. Using an approach known as ‘autoethnography,’ none of the authors actually claim that they themselves experienced significant harassment. Instead, they claim that an anonymous ‘star professor’ and ‘watchdog woman’ were responsible for creating or allowing a culture of sexual harassment throughout the institution.

Although the article did not identify the location of the alleged harassment, readers could instantly identify, and did so, the only institution the three authors have in common: the University of Coimbra in Portugal. Readers were thus able to identify the ‘star professor’ as Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Furthermore, within days of the book’s publication, several press articles named the three individuals and repeated

and expanded the accusations against Professor de Sousa Santos and others at the institute. Thus, the article's claim that it did not accuse anyone in particular was, to put it bluntly, insincere.

Apart from repeatedly referring to an anonymous graffiti, the article offers no concrete evidence that any sexual harassment was observed.

By claiming to use 'autoethnography'—an approach that certainly has value—the authors seem to believe that they are entitled to rely on rumours, anonymous graffiti and their personal discomfort to support their accusation that the Coimbra Social Sciences Centre fostered a culture of harassment and rape.

Furthermore, as the authors explicitly acknowledge in the chapter, no attempt was made to obtain a response from either the accused individuals or the institution. This means that none of the accused had the opportunity to respond to the authors' allegations prior to publication, a fact that should have prompted the book's editors or the press to ensure that both the institution and the individuals were anonymous.

We consider it unprofessional, to say the least, and dangerously unethical to publish allegations without evidence and without effectively anonymising the accused. The impact of the chapter on both the accused individuals and the institution is potentially devastating.

Given Professor Santos' international visibility, the chapter has provided ammunition to conservative media in Portugal, which immediately began using the allegations to question a public intellectual who has long defended and supported feminist and indigenous rights. We have both known Boaventura de Sousa Santos for many years and have never seen any indication of the type of behaviour described in the article; we fear that, despite the lack of evidence to support it, the chapter may undermine the work of Santos and his institute, as well as harm the careers of younger academics who have been affiliated with the centre.

Of course, we understand that too many universities have turned a blind eye to sexual harassment; indeed, we ourselves have witnessed harassment and unfair treatment of women at many universities around the world. We therefore recognise the importance of the work that this volume aims to accomplish.

But the allegations contained in this chapter, directed at an easily identifiable institution and specific academics, clearly require more evidence than the chapter provides. We would like to be able to count on academic presses such as the distinguished Routledge to scrutinise, even minimally, the reliability of what it publishes.

While we are aware that it is the authors of the article who make these unfounded allegations, it is clear that the editors and publishers of the volume have a responsibility to ensure that attacks on individuals' personal reputations and professional careers are substantiated or completely anonymous, and to give them the opportunity to respond.

Unfounded accusations such as these do not help women in academia in their struggle for equality and respectful treatment, but rather serve to support attacks on academia and thus undermine respect for feminist academics. They also blur many lines between ethical and unethical approaches to addressing institutional cultures that enable harassment.

We are aware that the book is now available worldwide, but we hope that you, as the editors and publishers of this volume, will seek ways to address the problems that the chapter has created, both for identifiable individuals and for institutions. At a minimum, we urge you to provide some avenue for those whose reputations have been permanently tarnished to offer some form of response to the allegations in the chapter; we also hope you will find a way to clarify that the allegations in the chapter are just that: unproven allegations.

Sincerely, Gay W. Seidman, Catedrática de Sociología de la Universidad de Wisconsin-Madison

Linda Gordon, Catedrática de Historia (jubilada) de la Universidad de Nueva York y de la Universidad de Wisconsin-Madison

1. **Routledge officially withdrew the chapter**, acknowledging that it violated ethical and legal principles, including the right to anonymity and the obligation to substantiate serious allegations.
2. **LV never reported harassment while at CES**; on the contrary, she sought to become a permanent researcher, project collaborator and even contributor to publications edited by BSS (evidence 2: email dated 7 October 2016, in which she proposes joint articles to BSS).

WORKING TOGETHER:

PROPOSAL FOR A CO-AUTHORED ARTICLE

UPDATE: Proposal to write together an article for the Call Special Issue International Journal of Transitional Justice (Social Science Citation Index (SSCI): A1

Title Special Issue: **"Transitional Justice from the Margins: Intersections of Identities, Power and Human Rights"** deadline for submission 1 July 2017 (see details in email)

It seems to me an ideal opportunity to make a more radical diagnosis of this field from the abyssal lines, epistemologies of the south combining your theoretical framework with empirical data from my own research and other empirical studies.

I share with you an article which I co-authored with my PhD supervisor Eva Brems (UGent University) published in 2010 *Transitional Justice and Cultural Context: Learning from the Universality Debate, Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp 199-224. (Web of science/social science citation index)

I would love to go more radical in the analysis ;-)

Further, I have published in 2010 about the indigenous voices on the Guatemalan National Reparation Program (see text in attachment), and I'm also an occasional reviewer.

LV's difficulties at the CES were administrative and professional, stemming from poor institutional adaptation, personal conflicts and a demanding attitude towards the institution. **There was never any mention of harassment** in her official reports or in her extensive correspondence with BSS and other CES members (evidence 3: email dated 5 December 2017, in which BSS tries to help her comply with the Marie Curie contract).

“As for your plans for the coming months, I am pleased to see that you have planned activities to disseminate the results in both Guatemala and Colombia. However, you should complement the dissemination with activities that go beyond publications and conferences, as initially planned in the project. In this regard, you propose a film series that you should try to organise (including PhD students in this activity is a good idea – you could discuss this with Paula and/or Bruno). If not a film series, then a seminar or workshop that I can organise when you return to Coimbra in June/July. Send me your ideas on this. Regarding the seminar, the alicia-epistemologias do sul group is organising a series of seminars and I would like you to accept our invitation and find a date that suits both of us.

And are you still planning to draft policy recommendations as planned? Regarding your research stay in Mexico, it will increase the time you spend outside the EU legal framework on your project. GAGEP tells me that you will have to submit an amendment. I understand your reservations about signing the professional development plan now, but it is a reflection of your original project attached to the grant agreement. And it is important to sign it so that the rest of the project can go ahead. If not, please suggest changes for me to approve. If you are available, we can meet on Skype tomorrow. My Skype: [REDACTED]. Given the time difference (six hours ahead here in Coimbra), I would suggest late afternoon or evening in Portugal.

Let me know.

Best regards”

LV was subject to disciplinary proceedings for breach of contract, following which CES and the European Commission decided to close the case definitively without penalty (evidence 4: official letter from Brussels – REA, declaring the matter closed, dated 2019).

Brussels, REA A2/JBV/SD/CMM

Mr. João Paulo Dos Santos Dias

Executive Director

Centre for Social Studies

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Coimbra

PORTUGAL

Subject: Horizon 2020 Framework Programme

Grant agreement: H2020-MSCA-IF-2015-708096 - GROUNDHR

Closure of the information request procedure

Dear Mr Dos Santos Dias,

*Thank you for your reply to our second request for information (ares (2019)244269).
We have no further questions and consider the matter closed.*

*The project manager will contact you again if they have any questions regarding their
assessment of your final technical report.*

Kind regards,

e-signed

 VEYRET

The defamatory chapter is based on subjective logic without factual verification, validating 'half-truths,' rumours, and anonymous graffiti on a wall as the basis for serious institutional accusations.

LV seems to have always been obsessed with CES. Her first attempt to enter the institution was unsuccessful. LV did not give up and, with the support of CES, she finally entered the institution. During her time in Coimbra and at CES, LV was always more concerned with self-promotion than with doing the work she was supposed to do. LV believed she had the right to teach at CES. She believed that CES should include studies in its program that were her specialty. She believed that CES had everything to gain from her work. As those responsible at CES were not receptive, LV immediately complained about the institution to Marie Curie (the entity that funded her scholarship). In fact, a feeling of superiority shines through in her scholarship reports, particularly in the "Report for REA" of March 5, 2018. This report reveals her ill will toward the host institution, about which she has not a single good word to say. On the contrary, in the section on "Risk management," she states that the host institution did not "provide sufficient support" for risk mitigation strategies.

LV is certainly very descriptive and critical in this report, and there is no reference to any kind of harassment or anything similar to what she reports in the chapter of the Routledge book. LV was already critical of the institution. Why did it take her five years to write what appears in the chapter? Why did she change her version? Because this justifies her failure.

It is important to note that LV wanted to attack CES and, to do so, she needed to attack BSS. But it is clear that the target is the institution. LV accuses João Paulo Dias of controlling judges, prosecutors, and lawyers and accuses the feminists at CES of covering up all the wrongdoing that took place there and, ultimately, of contributing to LV not becoming a lecturer at CES

There are multiple testimonies from indigenous researchers against LV, denouncing abuse of power, epistemic extractivism and mistreatment during the RIVERS project LV coordinated, which contradicts the principles she supposedly defends (evidence 5: public letter from Kelly J. Quilcué Vivas dated 12 December 2019 and evidence 6: letter dated 11 April 2023 from another indigenous researcher to the Independent Commission's archive).

Public letter from Kelly J. Quilcué Vivas:

Madrid, Getafe, 12 December 2019

Academic colonialism

My experience as an indigenous researcher in the ERC's RIVERS project

By Kelly J Quilcué Vivas

As my history precedes me, I would like to start at the beginning. I come from an indigenous reserve in southwestern Colombia called Piçkwe Thă' Fiw, and we

identify ourselves as Nasas or Paéces indigenous people. My story is not only mine but that of a

people. We have experienced so many atrocities since the conquest, as well as events of a, such as the 1994 tragedy in Tierradentro, that we have nothing left to lose. We have been stripped of our possessions, killed, raped, confined, threatened, but even at the height of extermination, we have found the physical and spiritual strength to continue surviving. It has been this way for as long as I can remember. The Nasa identity never bows down to the enemy.

With the help of many people to whom I owe what I am, I understood that the struggle of my people depended not only on physical, political, cultural and strategic survival in our territories, but also had to be fought in the academic sphere. I have been reinforcing this perspective in recent years, taking into account the gaps and inconsistencies I found in the specialised literature, particularly that dealing with indigenous peoples.

Along the way, I graduated with a degree in sociology with a thesis that received special mention, and I studied a master's degree in International Studies of Peace, Conflict and Development, from which I graduated this year. After this cycle, I applied to the Rivers project, funded by the European Research Council, and was selected as a pre-doctoral researcher. To get here, like many of my indigenous colleagues, I experienced culture shock and had to work harder to understand certain Western ways of thinking. I had to read and reread, lose my fear, and set aside ways of doing things that make sense in my community but are unfortunately not appreciated in their material and spiritual dimensions in the academic world. I am telling you all this so that you can understand the context of my relationship with academia, not to victimise myself but to continue resisting.

The Rivers project was just that for me, an opportunity to express what I wanted, as it is an epistemologically sound initiative and I identified

completely with the idea of not separating the theoretical from the practical. However, I found that, although its aim is to seek structural changes in the social realities of the most marginalised sectors of society, the hegemonic logic that drives the project is the same as that of a normal, everyday project. I make this statement because I expected the theoretical foundations of the project to be reflected in interpersonal relationships and in the everyday life of the workplace.

However, the working environment of the Rivers project was characterised by constant abuse of power, reflected in the hierarchical management of team and bilateral meetings, the assignment of tasks outside the project's objectives, and verbal abuse of team members, especially through repeated shouting.

Despite this, I am grateful to the Rivers project for giving me the opportunity to see in academic reality the enormous gap between what is wanted, what is done, and what really is. Being on the margins does not mean that we are making change, nor

does talking about decolonising thought mean that we are doing so. We live in times of demands for affirmative action, but it is important to point out that if

indigenous peoples enter academia by competing publicly with members of the majority society, it is not necessary to talk about historical reparation, much less when labour relations continue to perpetuate the colonial and capitalist logic of discourses disguised in alternative forms of education.

Amid all these contradictions, I tried to give the academic system time and also give the Rivers project the opportunity to compensate for the pressure of finding myself in a field to which I had committed myself. Therefore, in line with the work required by an international research megaproject (Colombia, Nepal and the United Nations System) and with a commitment not only to my people but also to the construction of lines of research that strengthen indigenous thought, I decided to leave the Rivers project.

I carried out my work with commitment and rigour, as required. However, the project management decided to terminate my contract as support technician/pre-doctoral researcher without providing any written justification.

It is incomprehensible that this should happen two weeks after the launch of the Rivers project, in the presence of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, and the Chair of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Anne Nuorgam, who highlighted the importance of taking into account the views of indigenous peoples in this type of initiative. In this regard, I feel that my presence at the event was used to “decorate” a postcolonial critique that, at the end of the day, remains embedded in market logic.

Finally, I would just like to emphasise two points. First, although legally my contract was terminated during my probationary period, which gives the project coordinators the legal opportunity not to justify their decision, this behaviour contradicts the ethical codes of a project dedicated to defending human rights from an anti-colonial perspective. In fact, this is a dismissal where the reasons are not evident and which, in my opinion, can only be justified by my refusal to perform duties outside the project and to question the mistreatment. Decisions such as this can damage the professional lives of researchers who are starting their careers, especially if they are foreigners, and even more so if they come from indigenous communities. Secondly, I hope that my case will be taken into account by indigenous and civil society organisations in Colombia and Abya Yala, because at the end of the day, we are allowing the logic of hegemonic research to perpetuate itself in our territories.

With the strength that my elders have given me, we continue and will continue to fight.

Dear Professor, it is a pleasure to greet you.

My name is X. I am K'iche' from Guatemala and, unfortunately, I was part of the Rivers team led by Lieselotte Viaene during her time here in Guatemala. We spoke with our colleagues from other countries, and most of us were victims of the same person. Y and Z have shared their experiences with us, and we all wanted to see if we could talk to you. It is a long and sad story, this project in my life and in the lives of my colleagues, so we would like to talk to you. I am writing to you today because I am moved by your envious

*hysteria... It is all my indignation. By the way, it is also a great day, as I am writing to one of the thinkers I have most admired in my life. It is a great pleasure to greet you, Professor. In conclusion, we showed you your management and ethical model... informing you that more than 80% of the staff have experienced situations of violence. At the same time, they will also inform you that they are aware that 80% of the staff claim to have been victims of violence. None of the staff members took legal action because they did not have the financial resources and emotional costs that a legal process requires. This is mainly because all those affected are from other countries... We are looking at other ways to denounce epistemic extractivism and this. But it seems that it remains unpunished, which is frustrating, while we search for paths of hope to achieve justice. **And you, teacher, do you have any plans to denounce this woman's madness?** Let's see if we can support the situation, maybe our colleagues will be encouraged. I sincerely hope that you manage to expose this woman's madness. I look forward to hearing from you.*

3. **Even former Guatemalan LV collaborators contacted BSS to report systematic mistreatment and their explicit intention to 'take revenge on the CES' through an article**, confirming the personal motivation behind the chapter.

*The case of Lieselotte Viaene shows a clear pattern: **strategic use of accusatory discourse without factual basis**, motivated by personal resentment, institutional failures, and frustrated desires to remain at CES. A review of the documents indicates that **the author never reported harassment while she was part of the institution**, and that the subsequently published chapter constitutes an act of **deliberate defamation** masquerading as autoethnography.*
