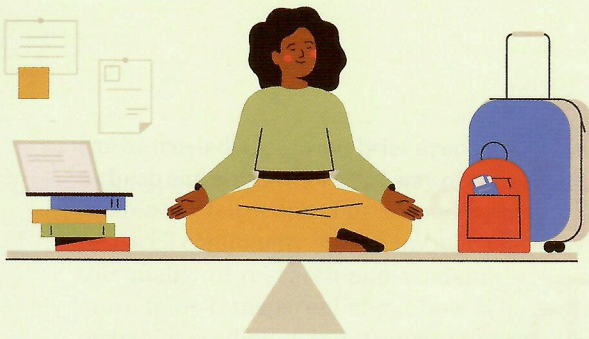


# Finding space for life outside the ivory tower with *Academic Aunties*

Ethel Tungohan, Harshita Yalamarty, and Genevieve Fuji Johnson

How can academics create community for themselves and others? How does that quest intersect with community-based research? Tungohan, host of the *Academic Aunties* podcast, talks to guests about the value of hobbies, activities, and skills beyond work.





The podcast *Academic Aunties*, produced by Ethel Tungohan, Wayne Chu, and Nisha Nath, centres the importance of community in academia. Created in March 2021 during the pandemic, the podcast was a way for us as producers and our guests—most of whom are women of colour and first-generation scholars—to have frank discussions about the academy’s “hidden curriculum.”

In close to 40 episodes recorded over three seasons, guests have talked about topics including what *really* happens when academic job search committees deliberate, racial microaggressions experienced by women of colour, parenting challenges for academics, and income precarity for contract academic staff and faculty. The core tenet of the podcast—take care, be kind to yourself, and don’t be an a\*\*hole—is born out of the conviction that academia’s tendency to prioritize individual markers of professional success at the expense of people’s health and well-being, their communities and their families, and personal lives, is corrosive.

Ultimately, *Academic Aunties* challenges listeners to build “dissident friendships” (to quote from the title of Elora Halim Chowdhury and Liz Philipose’s landmark 2016 edited collection). Dissident friends provide support, bear witness to each other’s journeys, and set the foundation for acts of resistance to academia’s many inequities.

Finding yourself outside of work is one such act of resistance. In the episode entitled “#MoreThanWork,” we, the authors of this piece, addressed the need to fight against the belief that academia should define *all* facets of our lives. By claiming our identities outside the academy, we pushed back against toxic academic work culture that venerates “productivity” above everything else. In our conversation, we defined who we are outside our day jobs as university professors, delving into activities such as boxing, surfing, and playing Dungeons and Dragons.

In this episode, we discussed what inspired us to pursue these activities, and what they mean to us. Academia can so often be isolating, competitive, and heartbreaking; it demands that we are efficient, productive, and the “best” at

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what we do. Being “more than work” is important to our mental and physical health, as well as our creativity and capability in facing academic challenges. By engaging our bodies and muscles, in nature or in our imagination, we nourish different aspects of ourselves with others who share in that creative pursuit. We talked about the necessity of unplugging and recharging, and about the joys of experimenting and failing. We shared our thoughts on how liberating it can be to participate and learn in these communities far away from the university. After all, academia is just a job.

Parts of our conversation are reproduced below, edited for clarity:

**Ethel Tungohan:** How many times have we seen colleagues congratulated for working during their vacations and for publishing and writing while on leave? Or how many times have we received emails about department politics or service obligations in the middle of the night or on the weekend or holidays? This is why it’s so important to try and find something outside of academia. So, on today’s episode, we want to talk about all the ways that we can be more than work. We’ve got my good friends, Dr. Harshita Yalamarty and Dr. Genevieve Fuji Johnson.

**Harshita Yalamarty:** Hi, I’m Harshita. I am a newly minted PhD and I’m currently teaching at Saint Mary’s University, Halifax. I dabble in many different things. I bake, I do origami, play Dungeons and Dragons and other role-playing games, and play other board games.

**Genevieve Fuji Johnson:** I’m Genevieve, and I’m based out here on the west coast of Turtle Island. I’m a professor at Simon Fraser University. Who am I outside academia? For me, the boundaries are really permeable. I do identify as a scholar, and we’ll talk more about the perils and pitfalls of that totalizing identity. But who I am inside and outside academia are the same. One feeds the other. In the professional context, as racialized women we’re constantly being bombarded with the aggression, right? As Joyce Green says, we have to have our elbows up. When I am in the water, surfing with others, it can be very intense and, at times, it can be aggressive. But typically, the vibe is pretty mellow. It’s pretty laid back and that’s who I become.

**Ethel:** I think that’s one thing that I love about boxing, cuz when I go to the boxing gym, no one [cares] about my publications or my work or who I am. And it’s a different vibe. It’s a supportive vibe. It’s a kinder vibe. We give each other

fist bumps, you know, and it's not about hierarchy. It's just about fun and joy. I think having these alternate spaces outside the academy is so crucial to me feeling that I'm tethered to something bigger.

**Harshita:** My recent passion is playing Dungeons and Dragons, which is a tabletop role-playing game. I got into it over the pandemic and found that it was engaging a creative, collaborative, storytelling part of me that was really precious and valuable at that time. Basically, you create a character and go into a fantasy world, and there's a game master who creates the worlds, sets the rules, and sets challenges. But as players, you have to work collaboratively. You have to tell stories, make decisions, and you have to roll the dice and whatever number comes up on it kind of determines whether your actions are successful or not, and whether you can swing a sword or not and things like that. I found that in the collaborative space of role playing, no one cares if you're smart or not. Within that community, you are relating to each other as people engaging in theatre of the mind together. As much as we battle dragons and explore dungeons, there's also times where we all end up in a tavern together and we are drinking mead and rolling the dice to jump up on a table and start dancing. So, it's a really lovely... explosion of creative energy together, which is very different sometimes from academia and what it offers.

**Ethel:** One epiphany I had as you were talking is that... when I started boxing it was right before I turned 40. It was my mode of resisting the intense stress I was feeling in my hyper-competitive academic world. It seems as though all of us, in different ways, were trying to carve out a different space and we were trying to kind of resist popular understandings of what proper academics should look like. What's interesting is that a lot of people that I've talked to seem ashamed to kind of admit their immersion in these non-academic worlds, right?

**Harshita:** I think when I got into the research life, I struggled very much against this idea that to be a good academic, I have to read everything all the time. And I just... I don't do that. I read fiction. I read a lot of sci-fi and fantasy. I watch a lot of bad reality TV. These are things we do for fun, to recharge, and we're not always critical and analytical all of the time!

**Genevieve:** One of the issues in academia is this emphasis on the life of the mind. It's a beautiful thing, but it's also really problematic, especially when the mind is prioritized over the body. Coming to an activity like surfing, which is totalizing in its own way, you need to be really, really with it. You need to be fully present. Often, you're getting tossed around

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by the current, by the white water of the breaking waves. It can be a struggle, especially on a bigger board, to make it through those breaking waves and into the green water. To do all of this necessarily requires letting go of all of the other stressors in your life, and really just focusing on the task at hand, which is making it out to the relative calm of the green water. There is something purely fun about being able to see a good wave, to get onto it in good position, and to ride it. It's pure joy.

**Ethel:** I think one of the most common pushbacks I receive from folks is how people simply don't have time or they don't think they have time. What would you say to folks who kind of resist this imperative, who think that they cannot actually spend time doing fun things because of the pressures that they feel?

**Harshita:** Those of us who are in this position as PhDs, we're already pretty shiny, we're super good at what we do. And there's so much pressure to keep being good. But the question of not having the time or how do we prioritize doing something creative or something outside of academia while being in this precarious position? I think for me, this speaks to the question of mental health. The stress on our bodies is unsustainable, but the stress on our mental health is also unsustainable because academia, as we know, can break your heart with the microaggressions, the everyday injustices for women, racialized women, for racialized non-binary folks. So, it's important to recharge.

**Genevieve:** We *have* to be efficient with our time. We *have* to be productive... I want to resist that. I love writing, I love researching, I love engaging with people on ideas. But it gets overwhelming, and I come up against these dead ends in my own thinking. To be able to disengage from that and to get into the water for a surf, I have these moments where I shift my perspective and see a problem in a more creative way.

**Ethel:** If there's one thing that you take away from this conversation, it's this: you should not be ashamed for having non-academic pursuits. We are all more than work.

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When reflecting on ways to establish ourselves as #morethanwork, we suggest that being part of communities outside academia brings deep gratification and joy. Whether

