(Dis)Assembling the Neoliberal Academic Subject: When PhD Students Construct Feminist Spaces

Elizabeth Ablett, Heather Griffiths and Kate Mahoney

Introduction

This chapter is about how feminist PhD students based in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can both unmake, and be implicated in making, the neoliberal academic subject. It explores what happens when PhD researchers construct feminist spaces of support within the doctoral community at a UK HEI. The PhD is often viewed as an 'apprenticeship' for students hoping for an academic career (Peabody 2014). But the narrowing academic job market has implications for how PhD

E. Ablett (✉)
Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
e-mail: E.Ablett@warwick.ac.uk

H. Griffiths
Oxford Brookes Business School, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK
e-mail: h.griffiths@brookes.ac.uk

K. Mahoney
Department of History, University of Essex, Colchester, Essex, UK
e-mail: k.mahoney@essex.ac.uk

M. Breeze et al. (eds.), *Time and Space in the Neoliberal University*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-15246-8_4

students experience the time over which they complete their degrees, and how that time is presented and perceived within the academy (Jaschik 2017; Thwaites and Pressland 2017; Wolff 2015). The neoliberalisation of UK HEIs has normalised an ever-expansive definition of what 'successful' or 'productive' PhD time looks like. Doctoral researchers have experienced intensification of their workloads, while still being expected to complete their degrees in three to four years if full-time students, and six years if studying part time. PhD students ensure their employability by fulfilling tasks that extend beyond their thesis. On job or postdoctoral applications, they are asked about publications, the number of conference papers they have given, their teaching experience, awards and funding, and their contributions to public engagement and impact agendas.

Whilst these additional activities may be professionally rewarding and even enjoyable, we are concerned about the exclusionary effects that are produced when this mode of doctoral study becomes normalised. Many PhD students decide that this way of working is incompatible with their caring responsibilities, relationships and wellbeing, involvement with activism and other personal interests. As a result, they choose to leave academia (Anonymous 2014; Kadir 2017). For those who decide to stay, the PhD has arguably become the time when ontological insecurity and imposter syndrome is normalised (Ball 2003; Breeze 2018). This way of relating to academic work persists throughout many individuals' careers (Gill 2009). Furthermore, funding cuts to Higher Education have constricted university resources, intensifying competition between PhD students (Belfield et al. 2017; Shepherd 2011). As current and recent doctoral researchers, we believe that PhD students can respond to these developments in two ways. We can accept such developments, rendering the issues that they raise as individualised concerns, ensuring that the unanswerable question 'Am I doing enough?' will continue to dominate PhD time and reinforce students' insecurities. Alternatively, we can resist these implications by building collegiality within the doctoral community.

In this chapter, we reflect on our experiences as feminist PhD students living and working with and within the contradiction of (re)producing neoliberalism in UK HEIs. Our analysis draws on the

time we spent co-creating a 'feminist workshop space' at our home institution, the University of Warwick. As funded doctoral students, we were encouraged by our institution and funding bodies to access pots of money reserved for PhD researchers organising conferences. We were told that doing so would look good on our CVs. We chose to utilise these funding streams to host a day that would, conversely, create a space for PhD students to share their experiences of working and studying in the neoliberal academy, and to consider how we might (or might not) resist modes of neoliberal performativity, logic, and practices. The workshop was held in October 2016 and included academic speakers, discussion workshops and a creative zine-making session. Early career researchers (ECRs), the definition of which we have deliberately expanded to include PhD students, provided fascinating reflexive papers that explored their experiences from a variety of intersections and institutions.

We will use the workshop as a springboard for considering how various aspects of event organisation both disrupt and reaffirm neoliberal academic practices. Creating spaces of support and resistance for PhD students within UK HEIs can be a paradoxical endeavour. By facilitating a workshop, for example, students acquire an aspect of administrative experience that helps them to 'stand out' in the increasingly competitive academic job market. Furthermore, the extra-curricular nature of event organisation means that students seeking to resist neoliberal practices simultaneously enact the expansive and unboundaried working patterns that define neoliberal subjectivity in an 'academia without walls' (Santos 2014; Pereira 2016).

Our chapter begins by briefly outlining the casualisation, intensification and performativity that occurs at PhD level in the UK, with recognition of how these impact doctoral students differently according to (dis)privilege. We subsequently analyse the various stages of workshop organisation, including our inspirations for the event, our thoughts and feelings as it took place, and our reflections once the workshop had occurred. We discuss how we took up space in the university, the affective dynamics and language of the sessions, and the ways in which solidarity and critique were performed. In doing so, we draw out some of the key lessons we learnt when organising and hosting our event,

examining how critical feminist workshop spaces can be constructed and how paradoxical implications might be negotiated. Taking inspiration from all our speakers, our chapter concludes by considering the ways in which such ruptures, solidarities and acts of resistance can continue to have reverberations beyond temporary space, serving to disrupt institutional norms in collective, creative, and powerful ways.

Methodology

The content of our chapter serves as a conceptual tool; we use the experience of organising a workshop to consider the paradoxes involved when using feminist practices to instigate change within the neoliberal university. We draw on Henderson's (2015) assertion that the 'highly conventionalised context of a conference is also a site that resists the traditional constructions of academia as rational and systematic' (2015: 915). She argues that conferences enable the examination of the social and emotional 'microprocesses' involved in event organisation, as well as the broader concerns within Higher Education that influence these interactions (2015: 914). As such, the chapter takes a chronological approach to consider the impetus for the workshop, the day itself, and its after-effects.

Part of our feminist approach to disrupting the neoliberal academic subject in this chapter is through unsettling 'the' neoliberal, authorial voice. During our workshop, we were inspired by a presentation given by a member of feminist academic group, The Res-Sisters (2017). She argued that collective writing can enhance collegiality and has inspired us to work collectively on a number of projects where individual authorship may be indicated but downplayed. In this chapter, we partially obfuscate our authorship to maintain our commitment to a feminist politics that encourages the collaborative and supportive generation and expression of ideas.

Writing collaboratively, however, forms part of the paradox of engaging in critical scholarship within the neoliberal academy. Collaborative writing fosters vital scholarly comradeship. By sharing risk, we can communicate experiences that we may not have the confidence to do

when writing alone. This chapter, for example, incorporates our individual personal reflections, which are indented and italicised throughout. These accounts illustrate our commitment to a feminism that politicises personal experience. By distinguishing typographically between our collective analysis and individual accounts, we also engage in a form of feminist bricolage. Weaving together different reflective threads serves as a 'materialisation of multiple voices, which…disrupt assumptions about form and linearity' in normalised academic writing (Handsforth and Taylor 2016: 629). We wrote these accounts individually but deliberately left them anonymous. As junior scholars, we want to begin our careers by taking intellectual and political risks, and acknowledge our relative privilege in being able to do so. However, we are also mindful that junior scholars may pay a higher price for undertaking such risks; be that through critical scholarship, organising collectively or exposing discrimination and harassment on campus. Therefore, as we navigate through the neoliberal UK HEI landscape, writing collectively simultaneously enables critical scholarship *and* constitutes us 'playing the game'. If 'the paradoxical precondition for [feminist] dissent is participation' in 'the academic "game"' (Hark 2016: 84, cited in Pereira 2017: 207), then we are unavoidably implicated in this.

In embarking on this reflexive project, we recognise Mazzei and Jacksons' (2012) concerns that the 'voice' in qualitative research is sometimes erroneously assumed to 'speak the truth of consciousness and experience'. We also acknowledge Bhavnani's (1993) concept of feminist accountability. She argues that feminist research 'cannot be complicit with dominant representations which reinscribe inequality' (1993: 97–98). With this in mind, our account of the workshop is presented in a thematic and semi-fictional manner, as based on our observations on the day, and should not be read as direct representation of what was said or done. This approach is aligned with feminist research that uses semi-fictionalised accounts as analytical material (Inckle 2010). It also ensures participant confidentiality. We recognise that any direct quotations from our workshop speakers would not be reflective of their experiences, but rather our interpretations of their contributions.

Living a Feminist PhD Student Life

The intensification of PhD workloads has resulted in the blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries in doctoral students' everyday lives.

> *I submitted my doctoral thesis in September 2017. After returning home on my submission day, I sat on the sofa with a copy of my thesis on the table beside me. It felt then as though my thesis was more alive than I was. No longer simply a few hundred paper pages, it had become something organic and beating, an object that reflected the time and energy that I had spent attempting to bring the subject of my thesis to life. My very sense of self had been consumed by the production of this work. The time I had used to produce it, and the space that I had taken up to while doing it, was now reduced to the ream of paper next to me. Throughout the process of completing my PhD, I often considered why it was, at times, such a painful and all-consuming process. When I started my doctoral research, the work that I needed to do in order to complete my degree seemed easily manageable. If I divided the research and writing that I proposed to do equally over the three years for which I was funded, adopting a professional routine that replicated a nine-to-five working day, then I would be able to finish my PhD on time. I soon became aware, however, that if I wanted to not only complete my thesis but embark on an academic career at the end of it, then my carefully laid out research plan, and routine that reflected 'normal working hours', would be insufficient.*

PhD students are often informed that if they want to pursue a career in academia, then the completion of their doctoral thesis is not enough. They must also teach, publish, attend conferences, give papers, organise events, and perform administrative duties. In doing so, they demonstrate their dedication to the academy, and their ability to perform tasks associated with permanent academic posts. The range and breadth of work now associated with the successful completion of a PhD, however, has been aggravated by the increased casualisation of academic work. The neoliberalisation of Higher Education, defined by Mudge (2008) as the privileging of the market above all else, has led to a proliferation of fixed-term contracts that reflect universities' aims to reduce costs and increase flexibility (2008: 704–705).

This precarious employment is largely carried out by ECRs, who work under increasingly poor conditions for diminishing pay. Teaching diaries and surveys collated by anti-casualisation campaign groups in the UK indicate that many fractional tutors are not paid for the administrative and preparatory tasks that they perform (Warwick Anti-Casualisation 2016; Fractionals Fighting for Fair Play 2014). Some tutors are paid below the living wage. The failure to recognise the work completed by hourly-paid tutors has financial and emotional implications for PhD students. One tutor interviewed by the anti-casualisation campaign group Fractionals for Fair Play stated: 'The fact that I run around so much teaching, and for very low pay, means I am not stable for my PhD work, financially, in my living conditions, in my personal life' (2014: n.p.).

> *I would often laugh with my friends in the latter stages of my PhD that I had become a living, breathing version of my thesis. I think that these jokes provided me with a means of recognising the sense of displacement, foreboding, anxiety, and guilt that I felt when I headed out to socialise in the knowledge that my work remained incomplete.*

The absence of a work-life balance is bolstered by the unstructured nature of independent doctoral study. The hours that students are supposed to be working, and the number of days that they can take as annual leave, often remain unspecified.

These indeterminate temporal parameters are echoed in the spaces that PhD students work. Many university departments do not have the resources available to provide students with permanent office space. This means that they often 'hot desk' in open plan, shared offices. Desks are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis and students are unable to personalise their workspaces, bolstering their sense of impermanence and insecurity. Alternatively, PhD students work from home. Merging personal and professional temporalities and spaces with an expansive workload can often mean that everyday tasks become overwhelming. Personal concerns become enmeshed within the work that students produce, and it becomes impossible to decipher the causes of certain feelings and emotional responses. The nature of being a 'good' neoliberal

subject at a doctoral level is such that you may feel identifiable only by the work that you have completed, and the work that you still need to do. This is influenced not only by the need to complete ongoing daily tasks, but also by a concern for the future, associated with the precarity and competitiveness of early-career academic posts. These feelings can instigate and aggravate symptoms of mental illness. A study carried out in Belgium reported that half of all PhD students experience psychological distress, whilst one in three is at risk of common psychiatric disorders, such as depression (Levecque et al. 2017).

Sexist, ableist and racist discrimination, and an absence of diversity in many university departments, further intensifies the precarious and future-focused tenets of PhD time. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are underrepresented at PhD-level in the UK. This underrepresentation negatively affects the 'quality of knowledge and the research process itself, which derive from diverse viewpoints and experiences' (Wakeling 2016: 4). Writing of his experiences as a black PhD student at graduate school in the United States, Grollman (2017) documents his time and effort taken to foster a supportive circle of friends outside his institution. Because racism is the 'norm in academe', he felt obliged to create a support network where he could discuss the discrimination he experienced as a student 'without fear that your actions or words will get back to your colleagues' (Grollman 2017: n.p.). Bradbury (2013) recalls her elation when she realised that she wanted to be an academic, but also her disappointment when she realised how 'white and male' university departments can be. She argues that limited funding opportunities and an 'overwhelming lack of role models' mean that there are few Arts and Humanities PhD students from Afro-Caribbean backgrounds in the UK (Bradbury 2013: n.p.). As argued by Kwali (quoted in Hall 2017: n.p.), a 'university culture driven primarily by targets that contribute to league table status or funding success' means that institutions often have 'no apparent incentive to address the ethnic profile of staff or doctoral students'.

Academics have published numerous accounts detailing their experiences of being 'critical of yet trapped within the same logic of individual solutions and techniques of self' promoted within neoliberal HEIs (Gill 2009: 236). Many of these narratives, whilst successfully articulating the

personal and institutional implications of neoliberalism, are produced by senior academics. At the same time, PhD students' voices are not always incorporated into volumes that examine the experiences of early-career academics. In recent years, however, doctoral researchers have played a significant role in campaigning against neoliberal practices, including the casualisation and precarity of ECRs and the perpetuation of inequality and discrimination through university syllabi. We therefore argue it is important to incorporate PhD student experiences into broader discussions about the paradox of working within and against the neoliberal academy.

Workshop Impetus and Inspiration

As Pereira (2017) observes in her ethnography of academia, one strategy that feminist or critical scholars have used to fend off vulnerability or marginality in the performative academy is to embrace accelerated and intensified forms of work productivity. Pereira acknowledges a productivity paradox which may allow some academics to gain the legitimacy and space to do other critical or more collegiate work on the side, albeit on a 'contingent and conditional basis' (Pereira 2017: 207; Hark 2016). Resisting this, for Pereira, means moving beyond critical writing or informal engagement with the issues, and instead building on the feminist politics of anti-work (Weeks 2011) and the slow academy (Berg and Seeber 2016) to slow down or refuse work, creating alternative working environments and normalising alternative 'care-ful' (Lynch 2010) working practices.

Some doctoral students may occupy too vulnerable a position in relation to practising a politics of anti-work, as the earlier discussion on forms of (dis)privilege, precarity and casualisation intimates. This is not to say PhD students do not, will not or cannot refuse or slow down accelerated and intense productivity. PhD students, professional staff and ECRs may also encounter the negative consequences of senior colleagues' refusal to work, when this work is passed on to others. We argue it is vital for PhD students to have access to a range of spaces where they can come together collectively, with and without more

senior colleagues, to confront the risks associated with vulnerability, productivity and anti-work, and to organise effectively. The workshop we co-organised is just one example of how we might do this. Another is through broader collective political action, as some of us experienced during the 2018 University and College Union strikes across some British universities. The strikes also represented a rupture to the usual academic temporality, presenting us with different spaces in which to come together with colleagues and students in more creative and collegial ways. On a sustained basis, engaging in the 'productivity paradox' is a path to overwork and exhaustion, as we found out when organising the workshop.

> *In the first year of my doctorate, figuring out what was expected of a 'good' PhD felt overwhelming. I knew I had to finish the thesis in four years (in line with my funding), but there seemed to be so much more that was encouraged and expected during that time. Trying to deal with this uncertainty, along with anxiety over my academic ability, I busied myself with other projects. There was some reassurance in this busyness; I felt at least I was working towards 'something' tangible, be that delivering a conference paper or organising events. It also fitted with patterns of intense work and balancing multiple responsibilities that I had grown accustomed to in my working life prior to the PhD. I could do that. I didn't like it, but I could do it, and there was some security in that. But I felt deeply uneasy about how normalised this way of working seemed in academia. Had I just left my job for more of the same?*

When PhD time is filled with accelerated and intensified forms of productivity, there is less time to read, write, and think about our PhD projects; a loss which has potentially fundamental implications for the nature of academic knowledge production and for the sustainability and quality of our respective fields more generally (Pereira 2017). We argue that we therefore need more spaces that can foster some 'breathing space', where the focus is not to produce 'more' academic outputs but to reflect, think, engage, and create. This is not simply about re-energising in order to return to our usual productive selves, though helping one another to replace lost energy and being buoyed up by sharing experiences is both political and necessary. It is rather to discourage or

disrupt constant productivity as the norm, which has become necessary for many to survive and thrive in academia. A challenge for the workshop was how to negotiate the ways in which we are implicated in reproducing this norm, however much we desire to subvert it.

Preparations

As our relationship to one another was of co-organisers, colleagues, co-authors and most importantly friends, our mode of organising often involved late night personal messages to one another, blurring these categories and complicating our relationships with one another. Whilst this was mostly positive and enriching, at times it reproduced some of the more insidious affective states associated with academic neoliberal subjectivities. Alongside the messages between us, organisation involved many emails back and forth with a variety of people, writing funding bid applications, publicising the event, and dealing with small crises, all of which interrupted the more usual temporal rhythms of a PhD. They were not the only interruptions to our 'PhD time', but were fitted in around teaching, fieldwork, writing papers and other project work, all of which could, at times, be resented as things which distracted us from our own work and made it suffer.

Carving up our time in such a way reflected the mode of working we saw from more senior colleagues; it didn't seem especially unusual to be balancing several tasks at one time, all the while being expected to continue our own studies at a (relatively) quick pace in order to complete within the three or four years that our funding provided for. At times, this meant that the emails and messages from one another, and from workshop attendees, produced a certain kind of annoyance among the three of us. As messaging services now generally include the function to view if the recipient has read your message, we also unwittingly became one another's surveyors, with a non-response coming to increase that annoyance. This was despite knowing that we had instigated the workshop ourselves, intentionally adding to our workloads and having set out to organise it with positive intent.

Creating (Alternative) Space

To tackle my uncertainties about the nature of the PhD time and the prospect of the future, I went to careers talks, PhD and ECR workshops, read PhD blogs, and signed up for other academic projects. Talking with PhD friends, I realised that living in doubt and uncertainty was a common experience. Doubts about the legitimacy of my doubts crept in; being white, middle-class, able-bodied, with English as my first language and not having to worry about visa issues, I was in a privileged position in relation to many PhD students. There seemed to be a lot of desire from fellow PhDs to address these issues in a space devoted to analysing and politicising the chats we were having over post-work drinks or in hushed tones in the PhD offices. Although workshops existed to address some of these concerns, it was often hard to escape dominant institutional discourses, which invariably just focussed on ways to increase productivity or promote yourself, without questioning the foundations of these principles.

To unmake neoliberal academic subjectivities, we needed to re-think our relation to the temporality of the PhD. We wanted to create a different experience within its temporal boundaries, a workshop that had critical reflection and creativity at its core. We built in time to rest, eat pizza and watch a feminist comedy act in the evening. But to do all this you need money, energy and time 'to spare'. In creating an alternative, feminist-inspired space where we could fill our time differently to the usual academic rhythms and activities, we needed to work long hours and juggle multiple tasks and responsibilities; in many ways, embodying the 'perfect' neoliberal academic subject (McRobbie 2015). Feelings of exhaustion, restlessness, inertia and irritability were also shared by participants who expressed how relieved they were to attend a *different* PhD workshop. This was the mood of the day; a palpable, collective outtake of breath, a sigh of relief and a nod of recognition that each one of us shared the desire for a space where we could reflect on our experiences in an alternative way. As organisers, however, we also breathed a sigh of relief when it was over.

We framed our event as an 'opening-up', a rupture of neoliberal space and time; a fracture where the possibilities for resisting the neoliberal productivity and personhood could be explored. Here, we consider how

the event attempted to do this, paying particular attention to the 'successes' and 'failures' of the space as a rupture; the awkward, unsettling and disheartening moments as well as the political possibilities we, and the participants, found. A common theme throughout the workshop was the sense of vulnerability that people feel when undertaking doctoral work; for instance in relation to a problematic supervisor relationship, precarious teaching contracts, or cultures of silence around institutional ableisms, racisms and sexisms. The workshop was described by many attendees as a 'necessary' space where we could learn about one another's experiences without fear of the usual risks, such as being considered too troublesome, or being heard only as a 'killjoy' or 'complainer' (Ahmed 2017). Participants feared not being heard or listened to due to the negative connotations and intentions of these labels, which can become attached and stick to those bodies who do speak out (Ahmed 2014).

There were periods during the workshop devoted to discussion of, and reflection on, our personal experiences of doctoral work, designed to identify both particularities and commonalities of experience. In doing so, we hoped to encourage thinking about these issues less as personal problems or failings, and more as structural issues whose effects are distributed unevenly across PhD student populations. As with any academic space, the workshop was an emotional place. We attempted to foster a specifically feminist space which disrupted any gendered dualism associated with emotional expressions and paid attention to the needs of a variety of bodies (Henderson 2015). In the following section, we problematise these attempts, exploring how emotions circulated within the workshop, and what this indicates about the complexity of trying to unmake academic neoliberal subjects in 'critical' academic spaces.

On the Day: Navigating Positive and Unsettling Moments

The day began with a powerful discussion about the embodied experiences of doing a PhD and the problematic practices that wear us out. In small groups, we explored questions that asked: who the feminist

academic community is, and what it takes to be part of it; who is worn out and left out; the feminist PhD students who choose not to pursue academic work; the ableist assumptions at the heart of contemporary academia; and institutional racism within universities. We shared our sometimes painful experiences of excessive demands, workloads and institutional frameworks, and how this contradicted our desire not to compromise on intellectual rigor or the quality of our teaching and research. Yet in some of the small break-out groups, there seemed to come a moment when the discussion reached an 'affective tipping point', where the accumulation of shared experience and critique seemed to make everyone feel a bit *too* disheartened.

When these moments occurred, someone inevitably felt compelled to comment on the privileges of academia or affirm the positive aspects of working in the academy. This relates, in part, to participants' impetus to avoid reproducing notions of academic exceptionalism in terms of precarious work. There was, however, another effect of this reorientation; the conversation faltered, and the momentum which had enabled critique was paused or lost. To balance out the weight of negative affect by reminding ourselves of the positive aspects of academia, we unwittingly pressed pause on the development of further critique. The tensions between positive aspects of academia, hopeful desires for the future, and contrasting painful, hidden injuries in the present, produce complex and conflicting emotions. Usually, as part of the individualising processes and responsibilisation logics of neoliberalism, compounded with the isolation that many PhD students encounter, we experience these emotional ambiguities on our own. The workshop enabled us to feel alongside one another, and therefore engage in collective feminist work (re)making the personal and professional as political. This constituted fulfilment to us as organisers, much more so than the formal 'successful event outcomes' we reported to our funders.

One presenter showed us images of an 'ideal type' of neoliberal academic subject in the country where they were from. The images were striking in their depiction of both the subjects' whiteness and extreme entrepreneurial endeavours; the women were not only successful academics, but variously built their own houses, started their own companies, and juggled motherhood. These images had an interesting effect on

everyone in the room. Initially, there was some astonished laughter at the seemingly caricature-like depiction of extreme neoliberal subjectivities. Participants also expressed shock, even a little awe, and disbelief. Then, some participants highlighted their concern at what it meant for academic feminists to be laughing at images of other women who were not there to speak for themselves. The laughter stopped, and the discussion seemed to falter once again whilst everyone digested this critique and reoriented themselves. Problematising the laughter had the effect of silencing the room.

What we want to highlight here is what the laughter and its problematisation did to the space, and what silences were produced as a result. After the morning sessions, where we shared some painful emotions and experiences, the laughter was welcome. It served as a relief valve, as laughter often does, collectively bonding those in the room by observing the more ridiculous or extreme forms of academic performativity. Laughter served to position the women in the images as 'other', as a form of neoliberal subjectivity that we, in the room, rejected. It therefore functioned to posit such ridiculous practices as occurring outside the room, in another place and time, and as other to our own identities as 'critical' PhD students. Laughter as an othering practice belied the fact that we are all entangled within neoliberal practices; that resistance and critique form constitutive parts of academic neoliberalism, extending even to the production of this chapter.

As with other activist spaces, by moving individually experienced problems into a more formalised space, we reconfigured the conversations. The workshop therefore operated within a kind of liminal range; working both within institutionalised spaces and temporalities and working against them. As we have noted, coming together in such a way has the positive effect of politicising shared issues. But by formalising this coming together in a workshop configuration, we stood to repeat patterns of institutionalised exclusion. Postfeminist or neoliberal subjectivities may affect each of us, but these subjectivities are shaped along racialised, classed and localised lines (Jolles 2012; Butler 2013; Dosekun 2015). We recognise that our workshop (re)produced some of the patterns of academic, institutionalised white and middle-class dominance, even where our intent was to be as inclusive as possible.

As Kelsey Blackwell (2018) notes in her defence of caucusing, patterns of white dominance are inevitable in integrated spaces because, 'the values of whiteness are the water in which we all swim. No one is immune' (Blackwell 2018: 3). Blackwell argues that these values may include behaviours and practices like, 'being legitimized for using academic language, an expectation of 'getting it right' (i.e., perfectionism), fear of open conflict, scapegoating those who cause discomfort, and a sense of urgency that takes precedence over inclusion' (Blackwell 2018: 3). As white, middle-class feminist academics, we need to support students and colleagues where and when they need to caucus. When constructing 'inclusive', integrated spaces, like our workshop, we need to examine and limit practices like perfectionism and act more decisively to ensure fear of open conflict does not silence or stop the development of critique.

Critical Creativity

Though we were conscious of resisting the desire to 'produce' something with or for participants, we were able to use the momentum of our collective feminist work to create something removed from the usual forms of academic production. Drawing on the feminist tools of the Riot Grrrl movement, the final session was devoted to creating a zine reflecting on the themes and emotions of the day. In small groups, we each created one page, joining them together to make a full zine. The zine-making enabled us to enact some of the crucial issues highlighted during the day; practicing self-care, working and fighting collaboratively, being creative and critical, but having fun whilst doing it. In an environment of seemingly ceaseless academic production, it felt liberating to make time for creativity and to permit ourselves space to collectively explore our thoughts and emotions outside the boundaries of our normal work. The end result was a beautiful expression of the day that participants could take home as a physical representation of the connections and solidarities fostered at the workshop.

The workshop zines articulated a feminist (punk) pedagogy, inspired by the British punk subcultures of the 1970s which were reignited by feminist activists as part of the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s

(Way 2017). Our zine-making session was hosted by participants from Edinburgh University who had been experimenting with zines in their teaching. The relationship with feminist anarchism and alternative forms of knowledge dissemination made zine-making a perfect way to conclude our workshop. Everyone in the room, us included, indulged themselves in the childlike freedom of cutting, gluing, and giggling at each other's attempts to draw. Rather than feeling like we were wasting time, it was a relief to step off the productivity treadmill. Contributors to the workshop said how good it felt to have a break from the normal expectations of the working day and come together with like-minded strangers to have fun. It was a chance to think freely and creatively, knowing that whatever the end result, it would be appreciated for what it was, with no feedback or reviews. The process of creating the zines became a metaphor for the workshop's message of creating individual strength through collectivism and collaboration. Zine-making is a collaborative process (Creasap 2014) and although each group worked on their individual piece, the finished article was a collection of everyone's work and the final zine was bold and evocative.

Maintaining Space

Organising the workshop was too much. It was arranged for October 2016 which was the start of my third year as a PhD student. I had lost direction with my research and filled the void by launching myself into the academic community around me, getting involved with all sorts of projects which I thought would entertain me and look good on my sparse academic CV. I joined numerous committees and studied toward a Postgraduate Award in Teaching in Higher Education. This was to support the teaching I was doing in the department, which I was juggling alongside another part-time job as a Social Media Correspondent. I enjoyed every one of these activities and they each taught me so much, but they also gave me something much darker. The following summer I was diagnosed with Depression and General Anxiety Disorder and the only activities I was able to manage were those prescribed by my CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy) advisors. Not wanting to admit that I was struggling, I continued with my PhD and did not confess the full extent of my problems to my supervisors. They could see exactly what I was

doing though. All these extra activities were a way to avoid the daunting task of producing 'original' research. I was lured into the trap of needing to make the most of my time as a PhD student to the detriment of my health, and my research. I am less than two months away from submitting my thesis as I write this chapter and precariously tiptoeing around burnout again. I don't regret finding my edge and tumbling right over it but I do regret that this has become a 'normal' part of many student's PhD experience.

Organising the workshop took considerable time and energy away from our doctoral work. We wanted the workshop to be the beginning of a small social movement amongst postgraduate feminists, but we soon realised that we were struggling to sustain the commitment required to launch something on this scale. We thought about virtual spaces for community building and resistance, even drafting a Facebook page that never went live. We briefly discussed a follow-up workshop but that did not materialise either. It soon felt like the energy generated during the workshop was only temporary and had faded as normal life resumed. We received some incredible feedback from the workshop and we knew that if we wanted to continue our mission we had to act quickly. However, none of us could find the time or motivation to so, or maybe it was a lack of time that fed the demotivation. As the months passed, we felt disheartened that the workshop had made no discernible difference to our postgraduate community. Our neoliberal voices were holding us to account, berating us for not doing enough rather than celebrating what we had achieved—that we had brought together a room full of inspiring people who had made a small difference to each other's lives and working practices. The following section will explore what we mean by this and how carving a workshop space to challenge the PhD experience has caused reverberations in our own lives and across the academy.

Collaboration

The benefits of collectivism and collaboration were amongst the most poignant messages to emerge from the workshop. When collaborating, the responsibility for completing that task is a shared one. As the Res-sisters argue, the act of collaboration becomes 'a political act

of refusing the hyper-individualised and competitive modes of working that academia encourages' (Res-sisters 2017: 269). By writing collectively, there is no lead author or self-promotion and the work that they produce as the Res-sisters is a conscious resistance against the competitive individualisation encouraged by the UK Research Excellence Framework. Collaborative writing is not unique to feminism. What makes feminist collective writing special, however, is its capacity to destabilise power inequalities. As Pearce (2018) reminds us, the unequal power distribution across the academy can often leave PhD students vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of their citation-hungry senior peers. As a result, respectful, egalitarian collaborations should be celebrated and treasured (Pearce 2018).

As authors of this chapter, we welcomed the opportunity to work together again, fostering exactly the kind of egalitarian collaboration we experienced during the workshop. Yet, once again, the act of producing this text created a paradox whereby we were required to become ideal neoliberal workers in order to complete it. The process of writing, revising and editing this chapter is pulling us away from our own research and the resulting busyness is reminiscent of co-ordinating the workshop. Yet we continue. We realised our motivations for writing this chapter resemble those we had two years ago when co-ordinating the workshop. It forms part of our collective commitment to carve space for a feminist critique of the PhD experience and support the work of our feminist peers who champion collections such as this one. But we are simultaneously moving our own careers forward with this publication. As we highlighted in the methodology section of this chapter, writing collaboratively is not a straightforward rejection of neoliberal academic practices. But we hope that, if we stay in academia, we can continue to expand on, trouble and disseminate collaborative practices amongst students of the future.

Mainstreaming (Punk) Feminist Pedagogy

Six months after our workshop, we were excited to see a zine making session at the British Sociological Association (BSA) Postgraduate Pre-Conference Day, facilitated by the Res-Sisters. Reflecting on the day,

one participant wrote how the collective act of zine-making fostered solidarity between PhD students from different disciplines because the exercise encouraged them to discuss their experiences and use imagery rather than words to explore their feelings (Käkelä 2017). It is also something that participants have since reported introducing into their own teaching practice. In this way, we notice the ripples of our collective feminist work extending beyond the temporary workshop time and space. Whilst Sociology PhD students were attending the BSA conference, second year undergraduates at the University of Edinburgh were finishing off their assessments for a core module on the fundamentals of Sociological concepts and research. The assessment was based on coursework students had developed throughout the module in the form of a handbook, and in line with the course ethos of 'learning through play and through making' (Moore 2016), the handbook took the form of a zine.

As an assessment method, zines could be thought of as occupying a 'middle ground' between traditional essays and other forms of media such as blogs (Creasap 2014: 154). As an alternative teaching resource, zines can help students facilitate connections between theory and everyday life, and provides them with a rare opportunity to 'tap into passion and creativity' (Creasap 2014: 166). In her autoethnograpic research into zine-making as a classroom pedagogy in Further Education, Way (2017) extends Creasaps (2014) claims by arguing that students become 'active creators and agents in their own learning' (2017: 152). Way (2017) considers the practice to be 'empowering' and 'liberating', especially for students who feel as though their voices are marginalised within the traditional classroom setting. However, Creasap (2014) warns that zines can become a labour of love and students can spend a lot of time designing, writing, compiling and publishing them. Here the paradox of productivity emerges once more. Whilst experimental feminist pedagogies can challenge the boundaries of contemporary knowledge production and make subjects more applicable to the everyday, creative tasks such as zine-making can take up more resources than traditional forms of assessment. Not only can this have an impact on the students that it aims to serve, but it can also have ramifications for PhD students who are increasingly (precariously) employed to support

the teaching on these experimental modules. The zine-making conducted in our workshop was an activity with defined temporal and spatial boundaries. Without these boundaries, creative pedagogies, and the activities they encourage, risk becoming another demand on the time of students across the academic hierarchy. The following section continues the theme of creativity to show how the workshop experience encouraged us to become more creative in our own lives.

Making Time for Creativity

As PhD students, the ability to be creative in our own work is limited but zine-making at the workshop encouraged us to rediscover our own creativity as an act of self-care during the doctorate. Between the three authors, we paint, embroider and crochet and one of us is even learning to glass-paint. The fact that these hobbies are stereotypically feminine is worthy of an entirely separate discussion, but for us they offer relief and distance from the chapter deadline or demoralising feedback from supervisors or reviewers. Yet, we often struggle to make time for these activities when we need them most. The time and energy demanded by the expanding PhD leaves little time or energy for art, despite evidence that these kinds of activities could actually help us in our academic work. Research by Eschleman et al. (2014) found that creative activities, from crafting to crosswords, can boost performance at work. These forms of deliberate rest (Pang 2016) encourage deeper and more rewarding relaxation, while practicing a creative activity promotes feelings of mastery and control over a subject. Eschleman et al. (2014) argue that creative pursuits can even help us discover new cognitive pathways to enhance the kind of creative thinking we need to work more effectively.

The paradox is that this research is promoted as a way to improve productivity in the corporate world. It suggests that what individuals do in their own time benefits both the employee and employer in work time. This economic manipulation of creative thought is an uncomfortable reminder of how far neoliberal expectations have burrowed into our everyday lives. By bringing non-productive, creative activities like

zine-making and watching a comedy show into an academic workshop, we were committing a small act of resistance against this narrative. For many, the doctoral process is a gruelling mental challenge where we struggle to prioritise our own cognitive and physical needs. It is therefore important to find time and space within the institutional setting to support deliberate, non-productive creativity. As academics of the future, we can think about how to promote creativity and relaxation amongst the postgraduate communities, and across academia more widely. If we can routinely harness just a fraction of the creative freedom and resulting relaxation we felt during the workshop's zine activity, future postgraduates may start to break the cycle of seductive productivity in pursuit of academic success.

Closing Reflections

In this chapter we have reflected on how we, as feminist PhD students in the UK Higher Education system, are trapped in a productivity paradox. By recalling our experience of organising a feminist workshop for postgraduates, we showed how we simultaneously disrupted and reaffirmed the problematic practices encouraged by the neoliberal academy. The workshop created a much needed space to critically analyse the postgraduate experience and develop strategies for resistance, support and change; but we found that the act of carving out that space only served to reinforce the academic neoliberal subjectivities we were trying to resist. Our hope is that by writing about the discomfort of this paradoxical experience, we are creating a small ripple of disruption that extends beyond the temporalities of the workshop space to the normalisation of doctoral productivity. As part of this reflective piece we foregrounded our emotional experiences, not only as a challenge to the formulaic linearity of 'traditional' academic texts but also as an attempt to recapture expressions of conflicting emotions we witnessed during the workshop.

Calls for greater (formal and informal) collegiality and collaborative working are one of the ways in which PhD students can learn to survive and thrive in academia. Sharing risk, or failing strategically and

collectively in relation to some of the neoliberal markers of academic success, are important ways of helping PhD students to imagine alternative academic futures. This is difficult work, not least because of the plethora of needs, feminist (and non-feminist) beliefs, priorities, citizenship statuses and identities that make up the UK's doctoral student population. Deciding when and where to strategically fail or resist, and whose voices dominate the collective that decides this, is an almost impossible task. It is why there was such diversity of views among ECRs in the 2018 UCU strikes. In building alternative, feminist spaces, issues of privilege and vulnerability are intrinsically entwined and often difficult to unpack, as we experienced in the workshop. Who is able to express or perform vulnerability or criticality? As white, middle class feminists from a Russell Group institution, the risk we took of being vulnerable in our personal reflections in this chapter are arguably less risky to our status and potential academic futures, though they felt risky enough for us to want to anonymise them. We have to continue to interrogate and refute a context in which some are able to gain forms of academic capital from performing vulnerability or criticality (as we do, with this chapter), when for others, similar exposure would afford too great a cost.

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