Prefiguring a feminist academia: a multi-vocal autoethnography on the creation of a feminist space in a neoliberal university

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is a reflective piece on a PhD workshop on "feminist organising" organised in November 2017 by the three authors of this paper. Calls to resist the neoliberalisation of academia through academic activism are gaining momentum. The authors' take on academic activism builds on feminist thought and practice, a tradition that remains overlooked in contributions on resisting neoliberalisation in academia. Feminism has been long committed to highlighting the epistemic inequalities endured by women and marginalised people in academia. This study aims to draw on radical feminist perspectives and on the notion of prefigurative organising to rethink the topic of academic activism. How can feminist academic activism resist the neoliberal academia?

Design/methodology/approach – This study explores this question through a multi-vocal autoethnographic account of the event-organising process.
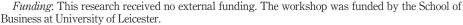
Findings – The production of feminist space within academia was shaped through material and epistemic tensions. The study critically reflects on the extent to which the event can be read as prefigurative feminist self-organising and as neoliberal academic career-focused self-organising. The study concludes that by creating a space for sisterhood and learning, the empowering potential of feminist organising is experienced.

Originality/value – The study shows both the difficulties and potentials for feminist organising within the university. The concept of "prefiguration" provides a theoretical framework enabling us to grasp the ongoing efforts on which feminist organising relies. It escapes a dichotomy between success and failure that fosters radical pessimism or optimism potentially hindering political action.

Keywords Feminist organising, Academic activism, Neoliberal university, Organisational theory, Autoethnography, Collaborative writing, Prefiguration, Feminist academia, Neoliberal academia

Paper type Research paper

Society and Business Review
Vol. 15 No. 4, 2020
pp. 325-347
© Emerald Publishing Limited
1746-5680
DOI 10.1108/SBR-06-2019-0084

Introduction

August 7th, 2017

Dear Léa, dear Lidia,

I'm writing to you because you volunteered/got roped into organising an event on feminist organising in Midtown in November.

May I introduce the two of you:

Lidia, this is Léa. She's working in and on a feminist collective in Paris and would be our guest for the workshop in November.

Léa, this is Lidia from Midtown. Lidia is working on feminist Internet groups. We've been in a self-organised PhD "reading group" turned solidarity group together in Midtown.

I would be very happy to organise the event with the two of you. I was hoping we could do a skype call with the three of us sometime soon, but holidays and submissions.

How about 29th/30th of August? If we can't do that, we might have to do individual conversations.

Warmest,

Claire

This is a reflective piece resulting from organising a PhD workshop on "feminist organising" in a little English town, in November 2017. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss the topic of "feminist organising" among feminists. Scholars, activists and artists were invited to narrate their experiences of organising in various localities (Pakistan, France, Italy, Germany, Argentina and England). The workshop participants talked about different projects ranging from community building to social media activism to direct action and music collectives.

This writing is a reflection on the tensions we, as organisers, authors and PhD students, have experienced during the various phases of the organising process. We use a multi-vocal autoethnography (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012; Johansson and Jones, 2019) to capture our experiences of the organising process, which developed across three different European countries, with Lidia living in Midtown, Claire in Hamburg and Léa in Paris .

The motivation to organise such workshop came from a state of discomfort the three of us experienced as feminist doctoral students within neoliberal universities (Rhodes *et al.*, 2018). In spite of our different backgrounds and affiliations, we all observed the effects of the neoliberalisation of academia characterised by managerialisation (Anderson, 2008) and performance-oriented practices (Kallio *et al.*, 2016), which marginalise non-profitable disciplines and sideline non-neoliberal feminism [1]. Neoliberal "feminism" is known to represent "only the interests of white, middle class, heterosexual women under the guise of representing all women" (Calas and Smircich, 2006, p. 290) and is "perfectly in sync with the evolving neoliberal order" (Rottenberg, 2013, p. 2).

As PhD students, we suffered from the lack of active collaborative learning spaces where to meet, discuss and produce knowledge outside a culture of impact and measurability (Herrmann, 2017). Organising this workshop therefore was an attempt to create such a space while joining the voices of critical scholars who increasingly highlight the need to engage in some form of resistance to the neoliberalisation and managerialisation of academia (Anderson, 2008).

Feminist scholars have elaborated discourses and actions to challenge these transformations within academia (Liu, 2019; Johansson and Jones, 2019). While some of these endeavours echo what we have been trying to do with the workshop we organised and

discussed in this paper, their scope is often very moderate (e.g. Athena SWAN; see Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019). It can be argued that many "feminist" scholars are playing by the rules of neoliberal academia, with their successful careers reinforcing rather than challenging the exclusionary effects of academia. The political relevance of white neoliberal academics' "feminism" has therefore been long challenged by those who continue to struggle to find their place in academia, especially non-white feminists (see, for instance, Ahmed, 2012; Verbos and Humphries, 2012).

Engaged in feminist and anarchist collectives, the three of us share a view of feminism as a project of radical transformation of society that starts with the identification of the close connection between patriarchy and capitalism (Federici, 2004), and of the interlocking of systems of oppression, especially sexism and racism (Liu, 2018; Lorde, 1984). We position ourselves critically towards neoliberal feminism, which advocates the advancement of a few privileged women and fails to recognise and tackle structural inequality in a given society (Liu, 2019; Ulus, 2018). With activist backgrounds in grassroots social movements, we were already familiar with prefigurative organising, and the idea that political – feminist– values are produced by everyday practices rather than pre-existing political actions.

The overall purpose of this paper is therefore to discuss the possibilities of prefiguring a feminist academia by engaging in radical forms of feminist activism at the margins of the university. While organising our workshop and writing this paper, we have searched for a space for collective care and listening in what we define as the neoliberal university. This work was a process of envisioning spaces for learning based on mutualism, solidarity and empowerment rather than on self-commodification and competition. We saw the creation of such a space as either incompatible with the academic profession we were training for as PhD students or, under the threat of being commodified as academic careerism. In this paper, we attempt to respond to the question we asked ourselves since we first started organising this workshop: how can feminist academic activism resist the neoliberal university? More specifically, how can we, as feminist PhD students and "early career academics", resist the neoliberal university?

To place our experiences into context, the first part of this paper reviews recent studies on the neoliberalisation of academia and the rise of postfeminist discourses within it. We define postfeminist discourses as ones that "suggest that sexism has already been defeated and thus feminism is no longer needed in a new meritocratic world order" (Liu, 2019, p. 23). We then expose needs and rationales for engaging into more radical forms of feminist activism. We illustrate how other researchers have tried to resist the neoliberal university (Anderson, 2008; Rhodes *et al.*, 2018), and in particular point towards traditions of marginalised feminist research, which for decades critiqued academia as an oppressive and exclusionary institution (Medina, 2012). Regarding the organisation of our workshop, we then introduce the principle of prefiguration (Maeckelbergh, 2009), the practical creation of utopian spaces, as feminist organisational practice that helps us analyse the political meaning of our experience.

The second part of this paper presents the autoethnographic tale (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012), i.e. our PhD student workshop on "feminist organising", and explains how we analysed this experience through a multi-vocal autoethnography (Johansson and Jones, 2019). We used this method to tell a collective story of what happened on that day.

This paper provides three critically positioned contributions to the fields of prefiguration, collective writing and organising against neoliberal academia. Our first contribution lies in the interpretation of our experience through the lens of prefiguration, which insists that the political values of emancipatory organising are produced in its everyday practices. We believe that such a concept enables us not to assess our feminist organising in terms of success or failure to actually transform the university, but rather

emphasises the political importance of the process, the way we decide to engage with and work within academia. Resisting the neoliberal university requires finding theoretical tools that encourage us to take action rather than fall into despair.

Our second contribution consists in the elaboration of a multivocal analysis of our feminist organising efforts and collective writing process. This provides us with the opportunity to highlight the empowering aspect of feminist organising, to present a reflection on the possible tensions of such an endeavour and to better understand the collaborative character of feminist research. We highlight that engaging in such a process of feminist organising is the only way for us to keep our "sanity" and survive within the postfeminist neoliberal academia. The need to find such ways is the rationale for our engagement.

Finally, we attempt to document some of the many attempts to resist neoliberal academia, and by doing so, we highlight the need to pay specific attention to feminist experiences of self-organising. We hope this will be of help for other early career researchers attempting to initiate spaces for learning and for the sharing of knowledge of what feminist research and practice entail.

Neoliberal university and postfeminism
Working in the neoliberal university

While writing their PhD theses in the same university in the UK, Lidia and Claire, saw their respective departments being 'restructured' multiple times with waves of redundancies. Supervisors left, funding was cut, performance meetings were scheduled. Feeling overworked and undervalued, exposed to precarisation and inequality of labour conditions, academic and professional staff organised various waves of strike action. In France, one of the first things Léa heard about publication and the "job market" is: "well, to get a job you have to publish in the best journals, especially with the international scholars competing for the same jobs as you. Of course, if you do critical stuff, you have less options, but still you have a few good journals. For feminism, mmm I am not sure. I don't think there is any feminist research published in the top journals, at least not the sort of feminism you do".

A vast scholarship in recent years documents the neoliberalisation of universities characterised by managerialism (Acker and Wagner, 2019), defined as "the introduction of private sector management practices to public sector institutions" such as "the development of a market-orientation, a focus on securing non-government funding, increased concern with issues of efficiency and economy" (Anderson, 2008, p. 251), high attention for productivity and new forms of performance management (Kallio *et al.*, 2016) and an increase in administrative workload for academic staff.

The move towards managerialism, accountability, productivity and performance auditing is defined as "academic capitalism" (Ferree and Zippel, 2015; Herrmann, 2017). Researchers are pressured to publish for impact factors rather than to engage in critical thinking and to compensate for cuts in governmental funding with private sector money. This has been analysed as a direct consequence of "New Public Management" policies, which lead to universities having to compete for external private funding and ultimately to a "strong tendency toward uniformity and conformity to established standards of research" (Münch, 2014, p. 2). Teaching is often delegated to casual or early career staff with precarious contracts, therefore PhD students like us at the time of this research. In this "corporatisation of the university" (Contu, 2019, p. 6), "the nature and purpose of the contemporary university is being radically transformed by the encroachment of corporate imperatives into higher education" (Butler *et al.*, 2017, p. 467).

While incorporating the corporate jargon of "diversity" and "equality" (Humphries and Grice, 1995), the neoliberal university stands in stark contrast with these concepts, as critical

diversity literature has shown (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). Precarious contracts and work intensification push out marginalised academics – women, queer, racialised and working-class people. Academic capitalism reproduces capitalist violence and exploitation, transforming the reality of most academics, with some being more affected than others. As capitalism relies on the exploitation of the working class, women and non-white people (Federici, 2004), the neoliberal university is a "gendered neoliberal university" (Lund and Tienari, 2019) as well as a racialised one.

Neoliberal feminism and postfeminism in the university

"Is there really still a need for feminism in academia?" (Male keynote speaker, at an academic workshop after presenting a draft of this paper).

Rather than being a single incident, this comment corresponds with a diffused tendency to discount the need for feminist research. The idea that "gender equality has already been achieved" (Just *et al.*, 2018, p. 841) is a hallmark of postfeminist discourses. In a postfeminist university, initiatives that assume that the institution is already on the right track to achieve gender equality are favoured over grassroots feminist organising aiming at radical change.

At the same time, neoliberal feminism informs various universities' policies: "collective struggles towards social justice are ignored by this mode of feminism defined by a market rationality that encourages all people to see themselves as autonomous, self-reliant actors" (Liu, 2019, p. 23). In this perspective, women's empowerment is defined in terms of individual economic success and career advancement: "the neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (Rottenberg, 2013, p. 3). Women's success enables universities to become more competitive in the "global struggle for excellence" (Münch, 2014).

Indeed, gender equality top-down initiatives such as *Athena SWAN* [2] or HeForShe [3] are used by universities to improve their international prestige. The *Athena SWAN* award is obtained by universities or departments in the UK through the formation of a self-assessment committee, which evaluates and quantifies various factors that are thought to contribute to gender equality. The idea of "equality" itself has been analysed as a way to focus only on the interests of white cisgender straight women, in so far as it brings equality for them with white cisgender straight men (hooks, 2017). Those initiatives towards "equality" then can erase the variety of situations experienced by women and trans people, and the intersections of the oppressions they face. Additionally, the majority of unpaid and emotional labour needed to apply for *Athena SWAN* awards mostly adds to the workload of women, people of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals involved in the self-assessment committee, with consequences on their work/life balance and mental health. While moderate feminist practices such as Athena SWAN, might help raise awareness on gender inequality, support women's career advancement or facilitate transformative interventions as they are not "resisted" by the university, they can also limit the potential for structural change (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019).

Feminism, activism and academia

The transformations within the higher education sector that we have highlighted "compel us to think about possible expressions of critique and forms of action within" it (Butler *et al.*, 2017, p. 467).

To counterbalance individualism and managerialism within universities, Bergland (2018), for example, explains how a feminist slow scholarship and an ethics of care could be fruitful strategies of resistance. Acker and Wagner (2019) document how, in spite of an

increase in expectations and workload, feminist researchers might still work around obstacles to create occasions for meaningful research. Weber (2010) suggests that while feminist academics cannot eradicate neoliberal or postfeminist culture within universities, they can still develop strategies of feminist pedagogy and keep exposing unequal power relations. Askins and Blazek (2017, p. 1101) encourage us to think about what is the role of emotions in an increasingly neoliberal academia where individualism and competition are considered central. They call for a "politics of care grounded in embodied, emotional and thoughtful perspectives, rendering emotions visible in process and relations [...] that helps us view and practice an academia centred around values of generosity, collegiality and the communal".

Going beyond the ethics of care calls for a resistance to managerial and neoliberal pressures, particularly within critical management studies. The neoliberalisation of academia has led to various reactions from academics: with some leaving their institution (Ahmed, 2016; Parker, 2014), their work-motivation being affected (Kallio and Kallio, 2014) as well as their academic identity (Ylijoki and Ursin, 2013). Overall, "the acceptance of academic capitalist discourse" has placed "financial burdens on students, stress upon faculty" and lead to "the obliteration of trust between faculty and administration" (Herrmann, 2017, p. 347).

Yet, "academics are seeking to resist, ameliorate or neutralize managerial change and related practices" (Anderson, 2008, p. 252). This translates into calls for "engaged scholarship" (King and Learmonth, 2015) and "resistance" to "academic capitalism" (Butler *et al.*, 2017). The forms of resistance are various: from encouraging tenured scholars to get involved in university management, to creating a more emancipatory environment for both staff and students (Butler *et al.*, 2017). Some academics focus on changing the way to conceive of critical research, stressing that it has to engage more with transforming the social world through becoming more critically performative (Spicer *et al.*, 2009). Militant research or activist research aims at fostering social change through engaging with social movement organisations, fighting against neoliberal capitalism and all its devastating consequences (see, for instance, Maeckelbergh, 2009; Juris, 2014; Graeber, 2009). Universities might also be transformed by practices of critical management education, teaching management students to think about the social and economic impacts of their future work practices (Huault and Perret, 2011). Overall, there have been calls for scholars to become activists, to avoid the "individualism and instrumentalism" (Contu, 2019, p. 7) incentivised within neoliberal universities.

Feminist scholars have dedicated a lot of attention to finding paths for resisting and transforming higher education. While some contributions have criticised the dichotomies between academia and activism that the notion of "academic activist" presupposes (McGregor and Knox, 2017), feminism, as a social movement and a corpus of theory, has always relied on the entanglement of academic and social movement practices (Clair, 2012). Most feminists who have published academic papers were also involved in some sort of non-academic activism (see, for instance, Butler, 2005). Feminist texts are thus both theoretical and political gestures at once, and question the dichotomy between theory and practice, or the need to identify either as academic or activist (Knights, 1997; Parker, 2002). The idea of an "academic feminism" disconnected from the feminist movement is very much criticised as hindering the pursuit of feminist goals towards the ending of patriarchal oppression and exploitation of women (Lamoureux, 2006; hooks, 2017).

Feminist academic activism is produced by people who endure social and epistemic oppression within academia (Medina, 2012; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). As explained before, not all women and feminists have the same experience of academia. While some relied on their various privileges – being white, wealthy or able-bodied for instance – to conduct their

careers and their research in a way that does not question the exclusionary and oppressive grounds and effects of academia, others already had to engage in activism to ensure their survival and legitimacy within university. The struggle here is not only against the neoliberalisation of the university as a manifestation of the ever-expanding influence of capitalism, it is against university as intrinsically oppressive space. Western universities have always been sites of struggle, criticised by feminists for reflecting the exclusive interests of privileged parts of the population and producing colonial, gendered, racialised and classed inequalities (Ferree and Zippel, 2015). The main institutional methods to make universities more inclusive, diversity management and trainings (e.g. *Athena SWAN*) do not offer spaces to elaborate critical or intersectional perspectives concerning teaching or research and often fail to fundamentally question the ways in which knowledge and power relate.

The many feminist critiques of science (Haraway, 1991; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012) have shown the epistemic side of domination and the role played by knowledge production standards in the production of oppression, and by universities as spaces of such production (Fricker, 2007). This is why scholarship for women, non-white people and non-straight people is intrinsically an activist practice.

Building on the work and thought of black feminist thinkers from the 1980s, some have stressed the importance of becoming "intellectual activists" (Contu, 2019). In 1990, the black feminist Patricia Hill Collins highlighted that intellectual work had to make a difference to people's lives, and that this emancipatory commitment was rooted in the fact that some people were "outsider-within" academia (Hill Collins, 1990). Researchers who experience oppression have a dominated epistemic standpoint and thus produce theories that have little relation to those produced mostly by white Western male academics and this is part of a "healing" and empowering process (hooks, 1994). This is what "intellectual activism" refers to: it is "not a theoretical/normative, abstract, disembodied framework since "disembodiment" is actually possible for those whose body is not always already marked by a history of subjugation, marginalisation and oppression" (Contu, 2019, p. 6).

Intellectual activism necessitates the use of "intersectionality" as framework to engage into academic praxis, whether it is in doing research, teaching or administrative work (Contu, 2019). The concept of intersectionality was offered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw and Bonis, 2005), and stems from black feminism that since the 1970s highlighted that "oppression cannot be reduced to one axis of gender and race, but is produced through multiple, intersecting axis" (Liu, 2018, p. 82). Unlike many contributions on intellectual activism that are blind to the interlocking of oppressions within academia, the use of an intersectional lens calls for critiques of cursory attempts by universities to conduct politics of "inclusion" or "diversity" (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010).

Feminist scholarship – intellectual activism, is thus dedicated to "promoting intersectional feminist resistance in and to an otherwise neoliberal regime" (Just *et al.*, 2018, p. 842), as feminist scholarship and activism are "inherently interrelated activities" (Just *et al.*, 2018).

Prefiguring a feminist academic space

Feminists within academia have started organising amongst themselves, to survive academia and provide collective support to each other, and to change the way academia works and pushes its members to adopt individualistic practices. These more radical feminist organising endeavours might change academia by simply existing. One might wonder how exactly are feminists self-organising within academia resisting its neoliberalisation. We are aware that some "feminist" academics might use such spaces for individualistic purposes and to build their careers, gaining material and symbolic privileges

at the detriment of others who might not have access or voice within such groups or workshops. It is difficult not to assess such initiatives in terms of success or failures to actually change the rules of the game within academia. We argue that such an assessment should not lead to either hopelessness or hopefulness, and it should not entail either a pessimistic view that academia cannot be changed, or an optimistic perspective that these initiatives are revolutionary. Following the concept of joyful militancy, we conceive of:

> [. . .] optimism and pessimism as two sides of the same coin: both try to remove uncertainty from the world. Both foster certitude about how things will turn, whether good or bad. (. . .). They can drain away our capacity to care, to try and to fight for things (Montgomery and Bergman, 2017, p. 33 in reference to Rebecca Solnit).

These organising endeavours aiming at making academia more feminist can be better understood through the anarchist notion of "prefiguration" (Milstein, 2010). Within organisation studies, prefiguration has been understood as the political principle to focus on the political implications of the organisational process, instead of placing ends before means. This means creating and experimenting with social arrangements in any kind of organising process to bring about the social reality one wants to politically achieve. Prefiguration "refers to the attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present, either in parallel with, or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest" (Yates, 2015, p. 1). An organisation can be considered prefigurative:

> [. . .] when the process and the goals [are] intricately entwined; the goals emerge out of the process and the creation of an effective set of structures for redefining collective goals [is] a goal unto itself (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 313).

Prefiguration has also been used by feminists (Breton, 2012) who contributed to diffuse the concept within the 1980s social movements through a critique of the bureaucratic left and the creation of feminist consciousness raising groups (Cassell, 1977; Cornell, 2011). This tradition of prefiguration strongly pursues inclusiveness, mutual empowerment and a reflection on relative privileges.

Prefiguration enables one to grasp the meaning of an organising process without seeing it through the dichotomous lens of success/failure or pessimism/optimism. Indeed, the ends do not pre-exist the organising itself, and the political values are constantly produced in the organising practice itself.

It is with this tradition that we most strongly connected when organising our workshop, intended as a prefigurative experiment to implement feminist organising within academia. The idea was not only to organise a workshop *on* feminism, but to organise a workshop *in a feminist way*: not making a distinction between the content of the topics discussed, and the organising process, respecting activists' experiences as valid knowledge and creating a space for personal connection instead of academic professionalism.

As it will become apparent in this paper, starting out from the organising process, we were unclear on how such a space would look like. However, as we do not understand feminism as a clear set of pre-conceived values, but as a continuous process of finding spaces for resistance and sisterhood, we perceive prefiguration not only as a way of placing feminist principles in practice, but also as an ongoing process of creation (Farias, 2017) and learning (Luchies, 2015).

Setting the scene: organising a feminist PhD workshop

These reflections centre around a PhD workshop we organised in November 2017. The workshop took place during work hours on a weekday in a little English university town.

The workshop was titled "feminist organising" and brought together experiences of feminist organising from Pakistan, France, Italy, Germany, Argentina and England. The projects ranged from community building to social media activism to direct action and music collectives. The format combined PowerPoint presentations with group discussions and a visual art exercise. Most of the 40 attendees were female [4] PhD students of the local university business school or the social science college, except for a few local community organisers who were invited as speakers. Other exceptions were a male university professor who had supported the organisation of the event and the male partner of one of us, who attended the event to care for another speaker's baby.

When the three of us started organising the workshop, we were still getting to know each other and we were mostly separated across three to four different countries, so most of the preparation meetings were held online. Besides organising funding and practicalities, the preparation consisted mostly of discussing how to make the event accessible and how to manage eventual power dynamics in the room. We aspired for the workshop and the organising process to reflect what we knew as feminist practices outside academia and to reduce the dissonance between talking about and practicing feminism and organising academically. Therefore, unusually for a university-funded event, the workshop was held at a local coffee shop in the city centre 20 minutes' walk from university campus and advertised publicly on social media. The speakers were invited through personal contacts and chosen for a balance between academic and non-academic story telling. Non-academic speakers were paid a reimbursement for their time.

A feminist multi-vocal autoethnography
Starting from our experiences as feminist PhD students
Our exploration of the event relies on the use of autoethnography (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012; Poulos, 2010). Autoethnographies produce thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experiences by identifying patterns in experience. They are:

> [...] a reflexive use of autobiographical material provid[ing] a valuable resource for exploring, presenting and representing the self, encapsulating a personal, intuitive knowledge deriving from a knowing subject situated in a specific social context (Haynes, 2011, p. 134).

Knowledge, therefore, derives from the subject's experiences of the world. Autoethnography follows feminist standpoint epistemologies, which underline how knowledge is situated in our own experiences of the world (Harding, 2003; Hill Collins, 1990; Hekman, 1997; Hartsock, 1987). Feminist epistemologies (Olesen, 2011; Harding and Norberg, 2014) distort the dichotomy between subject and object of knowledge. Using this methodology, we create a double positioning of us as objects of the study (i.e. workshop organisers) and as subjects of knowledge (i.e. reflective researchers). Autoethnography has been criticised for its subjectivity and focus on the researchers (Ellis, 2009), but in this case, our experiences as feminists PhD students are the entry point. This sort of critique of personal experience as an illegitimate source of knowledge has long been challenged by feminists (Hanisch, 1969) and autoethnography has been used by many researchers to discuss the topic of academic capitalism (see, for instance, Herrmann, 2017 or Poulos, 2010).

Through the *multi-vocality* of this autoethnography, we made sense of shared, but distinct experiences of organising the workshop. The writing and analysing processes enabled us to voice experiences which would usually be "ignored, distorted or silenced because of the discomfort they cause" (Doloriert and Sambrook, 2012, p. 85). Doing so, we were careful to leave spaces for disagreements between the three of us, settling each decision after discussing the perspectives until we reached a consensual path of action. The decision

of not to work with a lead author meant that each person needed to review what the other two wrote and increased the workload significantly compared to singular or traditional academic collaborative writing.

The process of collaboration was a mutually empowering method allowing the three of us to listen attentively, provide feedback and establish a relationship of trust. We tried to set objectives together gradually throughout this process and share the work in equal proportions. This enabled us to provide a balanced multidimensional perspective on the event mirroring the perspectives we had during the organising process. These perspectives stem from disciplinary profiles (critical management, sociology and media studies), experiences of the British neoliberal university (students, previous administrator), growing up in Italy, France and Germany, organising in transnational anti-femicide feminist movements, on lesbian and trans* people collectives or as feminist bouncers.

Because of the gradual shift from personal reflections towards a paper as well as to practical limitations, we have not asked other attendees of the event to join the writing process. We were careful to protect their anonymity and confidentiality in the excerpts presented here. Putting ourselves into the focus of this process, which was larger than just ourselves, does present some ethical challenges of appropriating the knowledge production process. However, speaking about ourselves allows us to reflect on the organising process without speaking about others without them (Lapadat, 2017).

Writing processes

The writing began through an initial reflective essay each of us wrote after the workshop and shared by email as we travelled again. Two months later, we met again in the same town and decided to write and reflect as exercise. We gathered for one week, two hours every day, in a library room and wrote about our experience of organising the workshop, focusing on themes such as "the room" or "the people". These themes were chosen pragmatically to remind us of the many aspects of the event. We would write for some time, and then share our writing by reading it out loud to each other. The initial aim of this reflective writing was to achieve a deeper understanding of what had happened on the day and to relate with each other through this. We organised our writing into larger themes – materiality, body and voice – which came up in the writing process to sort the multi-vocal material, the triple amount of usual fieldnotes. After separating back to different countries, each of us wrote a preliminary analysis, summarising across the three different voices, each of us focusing on one theme.

In the writing process, we applied different theoretical concepts as the theories behind feminist organising, including anti-bureaucratic organising (Ferree and Martin, 1995) and organisational dissonance inherent to organising as feminists in a patriarchal world (Ashcraft, 2001). We also applied Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the assemblage and the war machine (Jordan, 1995; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) identifying lines of flight and control in our experiences. These concepts contributed to our understanding of what we experienced and provided us with an interesting focus on how materiality played out in the workshop but were then discarded together with the initial writing structure of materiality, body and voice. They helped us to understand where political ideals and practicalities of organising within a university clashed and where our feminist activism faced the danger of being commodified as neoliberal work ethic. However, we also recognised that during our initial drafts, these theories started covering up our experiences and did not support the understanding of readers. Although we enjoyed working with these theories, we were hiding behind them as if using the work of Karen Ashcraft or Deleuze and Guattari would provide us with a sufficient "academicness".

Balancing commodification and giving account of prefigurative organising within academia strongly influenced our decision to publish these reflections. As our initial reflections developed from a writing exercise to "maybe a blog post" to a journal article, we discussed if publishing in an access-restricted academic journal was in line with our feminist practices. Did we want to commodify our experiences? Our decision to publish was finally based on the hope that our story might support other feminist PhD students or academics trying to do things differently. Although the usefulness of academics writing about being an academic can be debated, we decided to share our stories as young female PhD students, including honest difficulties, but also encouragement. This is rooted in the feminist emphasis on what can come out of exchanging one's own experience of life: an understanding of the shared difficulties and strengths. Telling our stories in this article hopefully will echo the ones of other feminists entering academia, and contribute in one way or another to our collective empowerment and to resist one of the most detrimental effects of neoliberalisation: isolating individuals and establishing competition between them, a process that is all the more violent for marginalised academics.

The decision of writing this article was also not taken once and for all. Every step of the process of submission and revision, we started by having a discussion about whether we still wanted to work together on the article, trying as much as possible to create a space where it was possible for any of us to say "no". While discussing whether we wanted to go through with the first round of review, we realised that one of the most important reasons why we wanted to continue was that it enabled us to keep working together, regularly talking and supporting each other in the academic world in spite of the difficulty of living in three different countries. While this probably is a very common reason why authors work together, in our case, it also highlighted that the writing process is a continuation of the feminist organising we started getting involved in to prepare for the workshop.

A multi-vocal autoethnographic tale of a feminist workshop
Organising a feminist space in academia
The intention in organising the workshop was to create a space where we could talk about feminist organising among feminists. Motivations were partly to find people to engage in conversation on the research interest of feminist organising, but also to find some kind of community. The process of organising was less to create connections, which were not there, but to make the existing network of feminist organisers around the PhD community visible:

> *Léa:* When Claire offered me to co-organise a workshop on feminist organising I agreed immediately, and my first motivation was to meet people with whom I could speak about feminist organising [...] I believed it was the first time I met someone I could speak to of my research interests within academia.

> *Lidia:* I loved the idea of having this conversation outside the confined space of the university, even though the majority of participants were in some way linked to the university, those who were not also had a chance to come together for once. Freedom to speak simply about what really matters.

We took special concern to invite speakers and participants who were neither university staff nor students. This was facilitated by friendships that we and another PhD student already had, who contacted them, invited them and supported their presentation. Two PhD students presented on their feminist activism unrelated to their research projects. Although we talked about empowering people from outside academia to speak during our planning, in our reflections, we found that the dynamic was rather reversed.

Claire: The narrative of empowering [...] usually suggests that academics empower non-academics. [...] I aimed to create a space for PhD students [...] to socialise and to maintain a space for critical thinking in the management school, but also privately for my own sanity within academia. Without [...] those we might consider 'at the margins' we probably would have been unable to broaden out or partially withdraw from academia.

Feminist friends from outside the university had come in on a weekday to support us in building a feminist space within our work institution. One speaker took unpaid leave from her work at a feminist NGO. Conscious of this problem from the beginning, we eventually managed to use university funding to reimburse all non-academic speakers for their attendance, in spite of the initial lack of administrative process for this at the university.

The point of the workshop was to give feminists a space to express their experiences, in front of an audience, creating the opportunity for these experiences to be heard. It is not only about creating a space where people can talk, but also a space where to be listened. This interplay between the talking and the listening is what allows us to keep our sanity. This word is salient in our field notes, as it unpacks why building feminist spaces is necessary: to remind ourselves and one another that we are not "crazy". Aware of the fact that as academics we might have more opportunities to speak about things that matter to us than "non-academic feminists", we wanted to fight this imbalance. In the end, however, we realised we were also very much in need of feeling heard and exchange ideas with people who share our political commitments.

Knowledge production
We had invited speakers and participants to share their experiences, and after some initial hesitation, people were sharing. Between us, we had different perceptions on the outcome:

Léa: I was really upset as I realised that I sometimes tended to consider these experiences as data. I mean that from time to time, I thought: oh, we could do something so interesting with these stories. [...] When I realised that I was mad at myself, I thought I was being a hypocrite. In my PhD, I claim all this stuff about deconstructing the dichotomy between theory and practice, experience and reason, science and politics, personal and politics, etc. But really I am just a bad feminist that objectifies experiences of non-academic women as something that is not theoretic enough to be knowledge.

Claire: There were only few moments were knowledge was summarised in little quotes with references you can note down in three words. I think there is something wonderful on knowledge not always being attributed or traced back to some absent author but to be placed in the embodied person in the room talking about her experience. When we talk about feminist knowledge production, yes, this should be it after all.

What we confess here is that, to a certain extent, we thought that the sharing of experiences was not enough. The feminist emphasis on experience, on situated and embodied knowledge, seems not to weigh that much in comparison to the knowledge production criterion that we have obviously internalised. We were worried about putting experiences in boxes and abstractedly connecting them to theory. This led us to experience mixed feelings and to voice different opinions about how the workshop went.

What is interesting in this last remark is that, we did not know what feminist collective knowledge production could look like in academia, because it so rarely happens, and we had never experienced it before. Outside the university, the three of us are part of activist collectives, which produce lived knowledges, but not as primary focus. But in the course of a "workshop" with "presentations", and a sort of "call for papers" that we jokingly called the "academic blurb" – knowledge production was somehow expected.

Through our fieldnotes and discussions, we found that we might have been able to create abstract knowledge from personal reflections, had we prepared and facilitated the day differently:

Léa: During the workshop, we had limited time for presentations, and for discussion after the presentations. Consciousness raising groups did build knowledge based on shared experiences, but it implied ongoing discussions between participants during a long period of time.

Claire: As organisers, we should have planned in more time and assistance for participants to process the shared experiences. It probably would have been better to be more strict on the time keeping of presentations and to reserve more time for group discussions and questions. This might have led to people sharing their analyses and besides horizontalizing knowledge production to engage in more new ideas and fun.

The workshop showed that our conception of horizontality in the knowledge production process was somehow a vain wish: some of us were not satisfied with our reactions to the sharing of experience. It is only when we reflectively talked and wrote about it that we allowed ourselves to express these feelings, including the criticism, the disappointment and the anxieties that we tried to suppress to be satisfied and happy about the day. Expressing and reflecting them was, however, important to understand our limitations of facilitating collective feminist knowledge production. The voicing of our mixed feelings was necessary to have a better grasp of the different extent to which we have interiorised the university and its knowledge production system and requirements and how this – unwanted – presence was responsible for our discomfort.

However, communicating these feelings also gave us moments of strength when we realised that in some ways we might have already created something different and facilitated exchanges between like-minded women:

Lidia: So what if we still haven't found an answer "to what is feminist organising"? Feminism is questioning, realising that there is not one answer but many different ways of seeing reality. What mattered was making sure everyone who wanted to express herself had a way to do it, through spoken word, through a drawing, a collage, or maybe just through a close and attentive silence.

Relating back to academia as PhD-student organisers
Claire: [There was] a feeling of pressure and unease to make the event neat and academic instead of the chaos in content I planned for and which was irreversible on the day. I didn't spend enough time preparing key thoughts which then could be discussed! [. . .]. Although based in a literature where activism and academia are often brought together and even sometimes used as sign for excellence, suddenly blurring the lines at my first organised university event seemed like a dangerous thing to do. I had yet to establish myself as an academic, was this whole thing not endangering my 'academicness'?

A concern of us, and especially of Claire as she expresses here, was to understand how to create an event outside academia, while at the same time being at a moment in our academic career when we have to prove that we belong there, somehow. Wanting to step outside academia while we are not fully inside of it seemed like a tricky endeavour.

This was strongly embodied in the only attending professor, male, white and senior in Claire's and Léa's PhD fields of alternative organising. As PhD director of Claire's departmental program, he had supported the workshop by offering the funding for it and supporting us to work out our unusual demands – hiring a space outside campus, paying non-academic speakers and more. His body brought the university and its abstract demands

into the café. Léa and Claire felt the strong tension between the desire to present ourselves as researchers and condemning the embodiment of authority in the room. The university is first and foremost in our heads: he embodies it because we acknowledge the academic hierarchy. This is clear from the different ways the three of us experienced the presence of the professor in the room with Lidia, not feeling directly accountable to the professor, being less concerned about his presence:

> *Lidia:* before starting my PhD I had worked in university administration, [. . .] I learnt a lot, particularly about the 'class war' between admin and academic staff in the UK. [. . .] I did not feel much pressure knowing that a professor was in the room.

Arranging the material space

We chose a local, independent coffee shop for the event. Moving the workshop location away from campus had been an administrative challenge because the university funding was tied to campus rooms. Not using a university room was one of our main concerns during the early organising stages. Not only were we offered a room in the campus which we perceived as much too dark and narrow, but we were also concerned that campus by itself would be too intimidating for some non-academic speakers and participants and prevent them from speaking freely or attending at all, within the strongly classed divide of Midtown.

Together, we went into our event venue, a basement with stone walls:

> *Lidia:* The room was lit with fairy lights creating what I felt was a much more relaxing atmosphere than the usual sterile neon of the university buildings. There were bottles of liquor working as candleholders, frames and pictures all around the white painted brick walls.

> *Claire:* The mixture of different old-fashioned designs created a contemporary fashion of 'vintage', 'second-hand', 'alternativeness', 'DIY'. I associate this with West-European styles of the white middle-class, often seen in cafés and clubs where students or professionals would go for leisure or to work by themselves.

The space was designed to correspond with white-middle class notions of "creativeness" and cosiness. This affiliation made it easy for us to orientate and organise ourselves, and even to recognise it as familiar and semi-professional. Together we made fun of two armchairs with a large headrest calling them: "proper professor chairs".

Besides the type of furniture, the room arrangement was signalling the university presence:

> *Léa:* In the beginning of the day, the chairs were put in a very nice line in the front raw, clearly marking out the stage area, which was distinct from the audience area. But towards the end of the day the line was not there anymore, people were seating chaotically in the entire room whereas we were only about fifteen people in a very big room. During the last presentations, the presenters were leaning against the side walls, which contributed also to the progressive disappearance of the delineation between the stage and the audience.

The location's staff had already set up the seating in rows as we had discussed it with the venue's manager beforehand. It showed that ours' were clearly not the first university event to be held here. The neat seating rows gradually unsorted as we moved through different set-ups. When we changed from presentations to discussion groups, the neat lines started to be lost.

In the knowledge of how difficult it is to make participants interact during academic events, we had planned different set-ups to favour interaction each 30 min:

Lidia: Claire and me discussed in detail how to organise the various activities before the day took place. [. . .] We tried to figure out what type of spaces would have been appropriate for each activity:

Claire: – presentation: facing the back, sitting at sofas and chairs.

   – having tea: front of the basement, standing, close to the toilettes.

   – eating lunch: upstairs, side room, standing.

   – small group discussion: downstairs, re-arranging of the sofas.

   – art exercise: front of the basement, tables and wooden chairs.

   – final round up circle: front of the basement at the sofas.

This planning was abandoned after a certain point because workshop groups re-organised the space to their needs and we did not interfere to re-organise according to our premade plans. Instead, multiple little actions, moving chairs, hanging art on the walls, leaving cups around and sorting them back shaped the room into a cosy chaos that allowed possibilities. In this way, the group gradually took ownership of the space. A large role in that was played by a wall separation in the middle of the room:

Léa: There was a wall that separated the room in half, but not completely, so that people could withdraw a bit from the talks or activities, without leaving the room entirely. Children could walk or draw without constituting an interruption to the continuity of the workshop.

The space between this wall and the stairs was a convenient in-between space. Noises from upstairs and the workshop mixed. The room allowed people to chose to stay at the margins, perhaps hidden behind the separation wall without a feeling of them being excluded as participants knew each other. The wall separation allowed two different dynamics to co-exist: the discussion focus on one side with attention directed towards the speakers and the more interactive focus on the other side with two kids, their care-takers and whoever else wanted to withdraw. As the seating unsorted during the day, these two foci dissolved.

Arranging the vocal space

Claire: The sound of coffee grinding, people talking, at one point a man carrying a beer barrel down the stairs, two men coming downstairs to discuss a location. This chaos might have been conductive to allow chaos to happen, bringing kids, doing art, feeling more sociable instead of formal, but it was very counterproductive to actually listening the speakers.

We wanted a place outside the university that would look less tidy, neat or cold than a class or conference room. The sound messiness of the café was replacing the sometimes-heavy silence of university classrooms. The chaos that happened during the day allowed a certain degree of freedom to move, to talk or to remain quiet, but it also hindered the clarity of the presentations:

Lidia: We wanted people to feel free to talk for how long they needed but we were also conscious of the time so in the morning, when I was in charge of letting people know whether they were running out of time, I was really anxious [. . .] didn't want to interrupt spontaneous chats but also I didn't want things to run for too long and people to get bored [. . .].

The difficulty of finding balance between letting people be and controlling the course of the event is salient in Lidia's explanation of her difficulty to manage time during the presentation. Handling the distribution of speech is a common issue within feminist groups. Anticipating this problem, Lidia had prepared printed sheets of paper with "5 minutes" and "1 minute" signs, as it is common practice in the feminist assemblies she participates to and in academic conferences. As usual, seeing these sheets stressed the speakers and we later opted to interrupt and tell the speakers or to let them carry on over the time.

Adding academic technology

Besides the minute sheets, we had brought other university material to the room: a projector borrowed by the audio-visual service, our laptops and more paper. We put an academic poster of another PhD student and the day's schedules upon the wall. Although we were setting up the room for "our" event, we arranged it as we have learnt to set up for a formal event such as a classroom, a conference or a professional meeting: focused on a central speaker and inviting little interaction between the audience:

A rare moment of playfulness was when we realised that although there was a projection screen, there was no designated space for the projector:

> *Léa:* We put a book beneath the projector so that the power point would be visible on the screen. It was not very pretty, or neat, and I believe it created a bit of stress for us and for the presenters. The book was not holding still, a lot of cables were lying around, and I almost stumble on the whole thing several times. But I feel like it made the moment less formal: since the technical arrangement is very messy, it means that neat presentations are not expected.

Once the event started, technology became a focus as it introduced moments of chaos. Léa, as the first speaker, presented without a microphone trying to have an unmediated communication with the participants but the noise of the coffee machine upstairs interrupted her voice. We had prepared a microphone, but a musician from the audience had to switch the amplifier on for us. While we thought we were well prepared, we did not realise the meaning of using a microphone during public speaking:

> *Léa:* The presenters were using my computer. I brought a clicker, because I personally feel more comfortable using one. [...] But some presenters felt really uncomfortable with [using the clicker and the microphone at the same time. [...]. But it also contributed to a kind of chaotic organisation. The screen, the speakers, the computer, the mike, all of this was a bit messy.

Whenever a speaker spoke without the microphone, someone from the audience or one of us would ask or signal her to use it, in spite of it being overwhelming to have both hands full of technological equipment. Our desires to make participants understand the speakers through technology interfered with the usual way non-academic speakers would present themselves. It forced them into a specific format. Although most of them had worked in professional jobs, few of these jobs included public speaking using a microphone. The nervousness was further accelerated by their perception of the event as undoubtedly academic. This perception mirrored the classed and racialised boundaries that existed between the local population of Midtown and the international academic community of the University of Midtown.

Interactions

Lidia and Léa met for the first time in person at the workshop as our organising meetings had been mediated by emails and Skype calls. After 15 min of interactions between us while preparing the room, the first speakers arrived. Different cultural norms about hand shaking,

hugging, cheek kissing or waving led to some chaos in these first meetings. While most people did not know each other well or at all, these first interactions were still shaped by tentative offers of support:

> *Lidia:* One of the speakers was extremely nervous as she kept saying she had not done this before [. . .]. I tried to comfort her for what I could, not knowing her really well [. . .].

Gradually, as we shared experiences, participants built up relationships through the small group discussions, art exercises and breaks. As almost all presentations contained personal stories, this made it easier to share similar personal experiences with near strangers or colleagues. As we talked about our lives, we were personally committed to what we were saying, and an atmosphere of intimacy was definitely a hallmark of the day:

> *Léa:* During the day, the women that presented talked about their practice of feminism, the different collective, organisation or project that they were a part of. We all shared a lot about our lives, and I believe that each person that presented displayed intimate, personal stories. We shared experiences. [. . .] It was very warm, I met a lot of women, not only through mandatory academic networking, but during conversations when I actually felt committed to.

The intimate nature of our conversations would not become an injunction to display everything to everyone. The personal nature of the conversation was the main positive feedback we received from participants: they enjoyed connecting honestly with other PhD students, learning about each other's feminist backgrounds. Talking at a location off-campus rather than the library was easier and freeing for PhD students, who perceived it as a non-university space. Because of the 30-minutes' walk between campus and the café, the group was relatively stable as participants stayed for most of the day, instead of popping in for just one presentation between other meetings.

Discussion
Prefiguration as process
Our multivocal autoethnographic tale can be understood through the notion of prefiguration: to what extent did we prefigure a feminist space in academia by organising the workshop?

Although we used the word *feminist* a lot, we had difficulties pointing out precisely what was feminist about the organising of a workshop, besides the theme. It was a feminist intent of engaging in a prefigurative process that made us pay a lot of attention to how things unfolded. As the reflective notes show, these tensions were visible during the whole organising process, peaking on everyday practices such as showing the "5 minutes" sheets to the presenters. Overall, we were torn between what we knew as feminist practices and academicness. Similar "irresolvable tensions" (Kuschinski *et al.*, 2018, p. 207) were experienced by academics trying to create feminist spaces within academia, and these tensions are particularly relevant "due to our own status as so-called 'early career researchers' and the vulnerability of this position" (ibid., p. 208). This was also one of the points of connection with the themes explored in this special issue. Our paper attempts to highlight some of the unexpected difficulties and tensions that might arise when trying to "organise" differently within institutions such as the university while at the same time placing ourselves at its margins.

Prefigurative values are not fixed but rather produced in the course of the organising process; therefore, they do not pre-exist political action (Yates, 2015). Our reflections on the organising processes highlight the difficulties of identifying feminist values produced through them. The multivocality of our paper sheds light on the many contradictory ways in which we experienced what happened, both in our minds and with each other. The vast majority of the literature on feminist organisations rests upon a shared and clear

understanding of what feminism is (see, for instance, Ferree and Martin, 1995). Starting out, we were just getting to know each other and had no explicit consensus on what feminism was. In spite of our different histories of feminist activism and shared feminist epistemologies, we shared an implicit consensus that enabled us to organise. Using prefiguration enabled us not to analyse the implicitness of our different feminisms as limitation, but as inherent to a prefigurative process, where feminist values are continuously enacted throughout the process.

Prefiguration is exactly this process of negotiation between two spaces – academia and feminism. When we pushed for a radical feminist workshop within the university, this is what came out of it. Prefiguring a feminist space is a practice, not a utopian feminist organisation without problems. It reflects the messiness of feminist organising, stepping away from a sort of purity that characterises previous research on feminist organising and building on existing work on its dissonant nature (Ashcraft, 2001).

Our case clarifies that prefigurative organising is always struggling with dominant norms to produce alternative spaces. Our reflections focus on the multiple tensions in the organising process because of our internalisation of academic hierarchical habits and our will to replace them with democratic decision-making in our organising and research practices. We have highlighted how the institution and its norms are internalised and embodied in figures of authority or expressed through the arrangement of space and time in spite of our attempts to create something different. These themes connect to previous research on prefiguration as organisational practice in activist movements (for example, Maeckelbergh, 2009). Our case adds another perspective on this topic by exploring prefigurative organising processes explicitly embedded within the dominant, hierarchical, neoliberal and patriarchal organisation that is contemporary academia. The type of feminist values the prefigurative process produces is shaped by this embeddedness.

Self-organising feminists and neoliberal academia
A critical point in our reflections was the extent to which we were not simply self-organising a workshop as academics very often do. In the age of neoliberal work ideals, academics often engage in self-organising practices that, while appearing similar to social movements and grassroots organisations practices, are not necessarily emancipatory forms of organising (Kokkinidis, 2015). Similarly, it can be argued that three PhD students voluntarily organising a workshop on their research fields on top of their contractual work, somehow "proving" their conference organising and networking skills to improve their employability, mirrors a form of neoliberal self-exploitation academic career progression is based on. We thus wondered whether we simply organised a workshop whose "theme" was feminism, but otherwise not so different from academic labour. We took on additional efforts to create a workshop space that was accessible and comfortable outside campus and to break academic conduct with art exercises and personal group discussions. These efforts could also be viewed as creating an exceptionally good academic event, aiming to go "outside the box" of the university. These reflections drew on the well-known criticism of feminist endeavours within dominant institutions as "reformism" in the danger of betraying grassroot ideals (Riger, 1994).

However, we believe that our event was different from traditional academic self-organising in many ways. One of the aspects that differentiated our event from other more "reformist" initiatives (such as *Athena SWAN*) is that it tried to escape the culture of "accountability" to the institution and rather focus on accountability towards one another and to those attending the event. We manage to build a space for solidarity and sisterhood, learning and empowerment among young feminists.

Creating a space for sisterhood and learning

When thinking about how we experienced the workshop and what were the outcomes of the whole organising process – what type of feminism it prefigured – two elements stood out: first, the bonds of solidarity and sisterhood created among the three of us and with some of the participants, and second, our learning processes, about academia and academic labour, feminist activism, writing with theory, our own roles and problems. The organising process prefigured feminist academia in so far as it created a space for three female PhD students to create an empowering space for themselves and hopefully for some other participants.

The workshop initiated a space for learning that exceeds the boundaries of the workshop itself. If we build on Bell Hooks's conception of theory as a healing process (Hooks, 1994), as something that is not disconnected from our personal experiences of the world and from our political understanding of it, we can understand better to what extent the learning process we have engaged in is empowering. Not only did we circulate references and concepts among the participants during the day and among the three of us since, the process also contributed to further deconstructing what we mean by knowledge (as explained by the struggles we faced with the distinction between data and knowledge). The workshop and the writing process for this article created a space for the three of us to learn more about how to do feminist research. We experienced first hand how through a work of repeated recollection of events, collective reflection and writing, subtle themes can emerge which would otherwise remain unexplored.

The alliances we formed as organisers on the shared desire to resist the neoliberalisation of academia and its attempts to incorporate feminist discourse without offering radical alternatives to patriarchy, contributed to shape a sense of political solidarity very quickly. This progressively turned into affectionate and caring connections between us, resisting the individualisation of our professional selves. This feeling of sisterhood reinforced self-confidence, but also accountability to one another.

We resist the tendency of evaluating what we experienced and narrated here in terms of "outcomes". Assessing the success or failure of what we did and are still doing not only leads either to optimism or pessimism, but also mirrors a capitalist way of assigning value. We cannot say that our workshop changed academia or rendered it more feminist, because this would require criteria, scales to assess such criteria, etc. Measuring the value of what we do in terms of *how much* it changed academia is to be resisted. The only thing we can do to resist the neoliberal (isation) of academia is engage in, value and encourage collective action, experience the many tensions it creates for us and persist while navigating those tensions. One of the main damaging effects of dominant institutions such as academia "works in part by making us feel impotent, corroding our abilities to shape worlds together" (Montgomery and Bergman, 2017, p. 33).

Notes

1. We have decided to use neoliberal feminism and not liberal feminism following the work of Helena Liu (2019), that distinguished between the two as follows: there have been "a shift from classic liberal feminism towards a new neoliberal feminist subject who may be aware of the social, cultural and economic forces that reinforce gender inequality, but focuses almost exclusively on self- regulation and self-care" (p. 23).

2. www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/athena-swan/

3. www.heforshe.org/en

4. This is the assumed gender, to the best of the authors' knowledge, and might not reflect the gender identity of individual people.

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