



Powerful writing

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abstract

Writing. Writing against. Writing for.
Together, in part, with difference.
Collaborative. Desire for change.
Disrupting mainstream ideologies and practices.
Resistance. Activism. Against neoliberalism.
Feminism in its multiplicity.
Fragmented. Moving forward. Rupture.
Writing for social change. Writing for life.

Preamble – Alison Pullen

During 2017, I was Otto Mønsted Visiting Professor at Copenhagen Business School and was delighted when the organisers of the *Feminism, Activism, Writing!* workshop asked me to facilitate a session on ‘powerful writing’. The workshop’s 65 participants had been divided into four groups: the group that I would work with was randomly allocated and I had no idea who would attend. Our purpose was to discuss the relation that writing can have to feminism and activism. My broad aim was to move from ‘discussing writing’ to ‘writing’. It was important to me that I didn’t offer too much direction to the group, and I definitely didn’t want to influence the group with my own epistemological and methodological approaches to writing which has to date been broadly housed within an academic ethos of writing: dirty writing (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008), feminine writing (Sayers and Jones, 2015), writing as labiaplasty (Pullen, 2018), writing as love

(Vachhani, 2015; Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018), and writing differently (Grey and Sinclair, 2006).

The task in our session was simple: I asked the group or the participants to collaborate on a piece of writing. I had no idea how big the group would be before the session started, and asked the participants to divide themselves into two groups along the left and right sides of the boardroom table at which we sat. I asked each group to complete one sentence. I asked the left side of the room to address 'I write against'; to use the sentence as a 'trigger' for thinking and writing; and the right side of the room to think about 'I write for'. I gave each group some paper and asked them to write. From my perspective, there were no pre-session expectations, and I felt that this was a risk. Most of the participants were unknown to me and to each other – What if they say 'no'? What if they change the task? Would it matter if they resisted? But the group didn't, and the groups formed. One group moved to another space and I moved between the two spaces to watch how they worked (this had not been my intention initially). The two groups approached the task differently. Once the groups were reconvened, it became apparent that two pieces of collaborative writing were created and read aloud in our small group. The pieces were then presented to all workshop participants in a plenary session. This collaborative writing can be read below.

'I write against' – a co-produced text read aloud by Olimpia Burchiellaro

Every Christmas becomes harder and harder to endure. Lights on Regent Street – and fake snow starts flaking from the end of November. Shops and people go mental because they have to buy presents for themselves, families and friends. The repetition of sameness. Aren't people bored of listening to the same songs over and over again? Why am I one of the few to feel this hatred? The family gathers in the same house, with the same people, who smile at each other and pretend to care about each other's lives. Relatives that always make the wrong present choice, and that despite you telling them what you like and what you don't like, they still get you that tacky t-shirt brand that is so popular on TV. I haven't had a TV since I was 18. Every year they pretend they're fine with you not having a family and a proper job, but just for a few days... what about the rest of the year?

I write,

I write against,

I write against time,
I write against
Eurocentric conceptualisations,
seriousness and discipline,
the presumed neutrality of social science,
dichotomies of gender, male privilege, white privilege, privileges of power,
Injustice.

I write against
paradigmatic coherence,
the public/private divide,
methodology as a tool,
heroes, saviours, role models and leaders.

I write against the need to make knowledge marketable, coherent, true and useful.

I write against established mainstream thinking regarding gender,
against patriarchy.

I write against trans-exclusionary feminists, heterosexual feminists, white feminists,

Western feminists. Hillary Clinton/Emma Watson/Angelina Jolie-type feminists.

I write against measuring the value of an individual based on their number of publications and their productivity.

I write against homophobes as well as those who unproblematically embrace
LGBTQXYZ identity politics.

I write against nationalistic symbols in the public space,

I write against the friends of women who are not really friends,

I write against those who celebrate female pain, those who know what's best for
us,

or so they claim,

Most of the time I write in vain, and I despair.

But I continue,

I write again,

I write against,

I write against despair,

I write against patriarchal oppression and the subordination of women in
organisations and society at large,

against nationality, purity and linearity, and the dominantly disembodied ways in
which organisations are usually approached and portrayed,

against masculinity, certainty, domination and heterosexuality, aiming to give
voice to

the multiple subject positions that inhabit organisations.

I write against the ancestry of patriarchy that masquerades as tradition and
authority,

against the force that insists that we keep quiet, the voice that says you are not an
authority, the insistence that some things should remain unsaid.

I write against the culture that insists by its privilege that oppressions we see are just

hallucinations,

against patriarchy's assertions and their claim over that which is mine too,

against assumptions, and lazy stereotyping, against tropes that are old and boring.

I write with my back against a wall of self-governance. I write against the I that writes against...

being, in opposition.

I write against.

Wanting to write for...

'I write for' – a co-produced text and a collective reading

Speaker A: I'm writing for liberating (my) our writing.

Speaker B: A psychophysical vibration released into words.

Speaker C: I write because I want to change what I find – injustice.

I write for justice.

Speaker D: I'm writing for opening up myself and places for in-betweenness.

Speaker E: I write for the possibility to take up space.

Speaker F: I write for the radical potential of space – of words – for the individuals caught inbetween. I was once, too, without words to explain my being in the world.

Speaker G: I write for a future without cultural, racial, class, or gender-based oppression. I write for free bodies. I write for undoing your privilege. I write for equality, community and support. I write for her and his future.

Speaker H: I write for always being curious and ready to listen to and read normative understandings and for always being ready to destabilize their construction and effects – including my own part. I write for nuancing our understandings and questioning our taken-for-granted concepts that make us see, hear and feel certain things while overseeing, overhearing and neglecting others. I write for a more nuanced version of our everyday life.

Speaker I: My writing is traces of myself behind.

I am here, and I matter.

I write for myself but for others to read.

Speaker J: I write for mutuality;

to feel my existence,

to connect; in relation.

Write for change, for transformation.

Stop the stiling of my body in the everyday.

I write to stop,

to flow – to stop to *allow* flowing

to allow bleeding,

Write to see my mortality, yours too.

See yourself refracted.

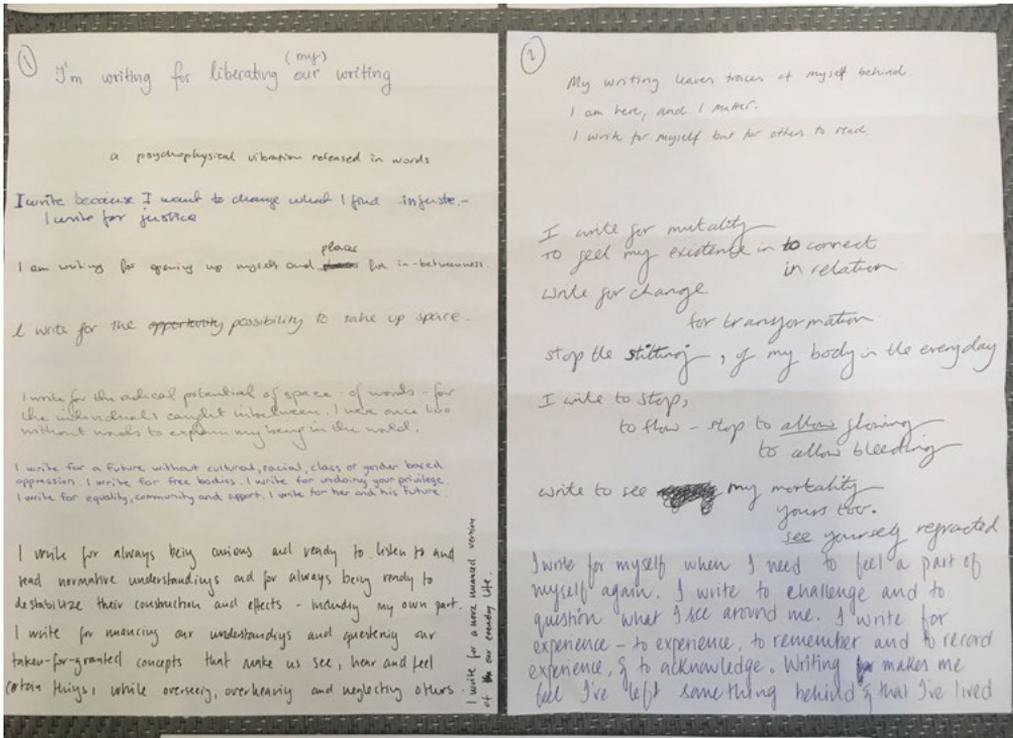
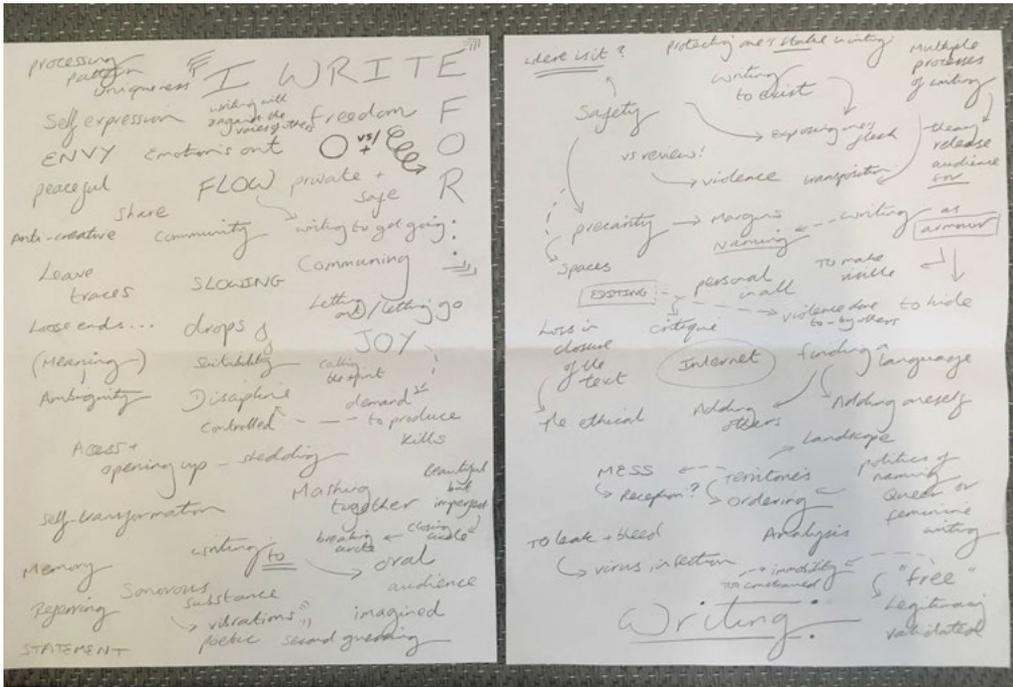
Speaker K: I write for myself when I need to feel a part of myself again. I write to challenge and to question what I see around me. I write for experience – to experience, to remember, and to record the experience, and to acknowledge. Writing makes me feel like there is something behind and that I've lived.

Two processes

After a period of discussion around the issues that the idea of ‘writing for’ and ‘writing against’ brought up for individuals, Alison asked the ‘I write for’ group to start to write from a single piece of paper: in turn, each member wrote their contribution, folded the top of the paper down to cover it, and handed it to the next person along to produce a single text. After all members had added to the text, the paper was unfolded, and the text was read by passing it again around the group. The reading began at a new spot around the table, so each member of the group read the words of another. All participants seemed surprised and delighted by the writing, and the experience of reading it aloud. As a group, it was decided that this practice would be brought to the plenary, again assembling in random order and reading the words of another member for the first time. The presence of the group was deeply affective and the submission to reading each other’s writing anew conveyed a vulnerability which was powerful to both be a part of and to watch.

The ‘writing against’ group started writing straight away, constructing their own segments of text. They wrote quickly and shared their writing with each other by reading them aloud. Then they discussed what aspects of each person’s text could be used in the collaborative effort. Olimpia read the group’s co-produced text aloud with much affect and it carried a powerful force.

What is powerful writing? Perhaps the question doesn’t matter. But, being in the plenary room, and hearing these words delivered by the participants, was to be witness to what powerful writing could be. Not always in the text, not always in the words used to convey the powerful, but in the practice of writing honestly and openly; writing with as much trust as the process enabled. The room applauded. It was a charged environment where the writers, readers and listeners were affected. To be affected; perhaps this is the importance of powerful writing. To leave a mark, a trace...not only on paper, but under the skin.



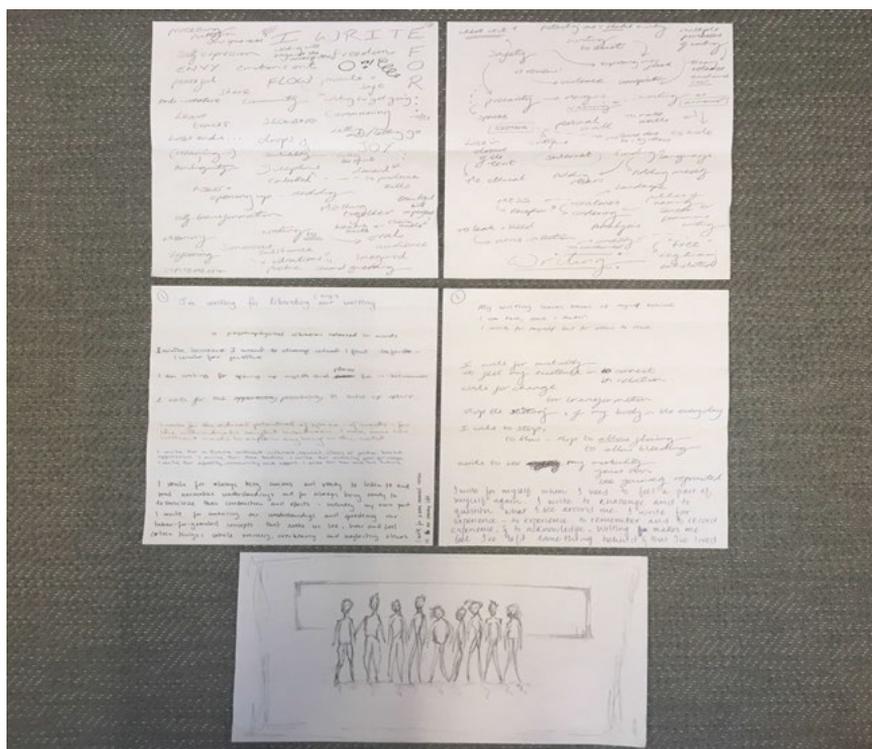


Figure 1-3: Images of the 'I write for' group's collectively produced material

Reflections from group members

Jhilmil Breckenridge – 'I write for'

The reason I went to this powerful workshop on Feminism, Activism, Writing! was because I have been using writing in my work for so long. A voice to speak for the marginalised, for the disenfranchised and for the possibilities to be treated as equal. Even though I always say my feminism takes a more humanistic approach, I think it is vital to acknowledge the years of patriarchy, colonialism and white feminist culture. These will take years of concerted effort to change and, thus, I write for.

I write for women who are told to choose between a career and having children. I write for the labourer in the street in India, sitting on her haunches, sari pulled up, breaking stones, while her baby sleeps in a sling made from an old sari under the mango tree. I write for the girl child waiting to be born, often her breath doused before she is even born. I write for the boys who don't know they are being inappropriate because they are told this is what boys do. I write for all the women raped, the ones struck with acid, the ones whose genitals are mutilated

and the ones being stoned in countries with unequal laws. I write for queer women, gay women, women who are not sure they are women. I write for us all.

Because if I don't write, it hurts too much. The world is an unfair place, a cruel place, and has made these rules about what is womanly, what is feminine, what is 'allowed'. It is time to start unshackling minds and bodies and hands and legs. It is time to start soaring. The time is now, and the clock is ticking.

Just like the #MeToo movement which took 2017 by storm, we need to keep empowering our sisters to move, to start looking beyond the hypocrisy of current neoliberalism, to get our brains working again, to get out of the drug that is social media, to create powerful grassroots movements that are real, achievable and sustainable.

In this workshop, there was a yearning, a collective power that seemed alight with hope. I hope we can garner and tap into some of that magic. Because a collective sisterhood of women, from our knowledge of ancient covens of witches, can be powerful magic. The time for this alchemy is now – the world needs our collective call to action.

Charlotte Amrouche – 'I write for'

At this workshop we were asked as a group what we write for. I wrote 'I write for the opportunity to take up space', then scribbled out 'opportunity' and replaced it with 'possibility'.

As students, researchers, academics, we are required to produce a great quantity of writing. To write 15,000 words. 3,000 words. 10% over and under guidelines. A conference paper. A chapter. A report on our progress (read: how much we've written). We are taught exercises to write easier, without fear, faster, longer. In these spaces I write to propel my work, my research, my career.

This kind of academic writing is so very different to what we created together. Being asked to write on an A4 page with ten to fifteen others was to be asked to write little. To synthesise. To take up space and also to make space. To collaborate.

We went on to read each other's words aloud, twice. In doing this we gave voice to the very things that drive each other's work and our passion for feminist theory and writing. Since this conference I've reflected on what it means to take up space with our writing. I have gone back to Susan Bordo arguing to take up space in our bodies, with our bodies. As I write this, a historic referendum debate is going on in Irish society on whether we will decriminalise abortion. Part of this debate is a project called *In Her Shoes* where women are telling their stories about how Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion has affected their lives. They write in order to take up space in this public and political debate that is taking place. Writing our words and stories stakes a claim for space.

I remember the collective silence around the table as one at a time we wrote what we write for, the only sound was the pen on the paper. There was so much respect in that exercise, to make sure that each of us was heard, that each person had the time to collect their thoughts and write them down.

Malte Breiding Hansen – 'I write for'

My first thought is that writing 'against' somehow seemed more appropriate for a cisgendered gay man in a workshop on Powerful Feminist Writing. Because what is 'powerful' and what is 'feminist' about a man writing on gender and feminist issues? That is certainly a position I would normally never allow myself to indulge in. Writing 'against' something, seemed at least to hold the promise and possibility of writing in solidarity or assumed synchronization with my own queer struggle. To write 'for' something, on the other hand, assumes my ability to find links and pathways in which feminists, of all sorts, – queer feminists included – might find something in common. A common enemy and vision on a shared battlefield. Recollecting Haraway (1988) and the situated knowledge of researchers, how can anyone write 'for' anything but themselves? And how might we find flows and energies that in certain moments, spaces and times follow parallel routes?

As Alison introduced the task, and in my subsequent reflections, I have wondered if feminist writing is powerful in this exact conjoining of egocentric and social aspects of writing. That we all represent exploited and hurt islands in our unique ways. Our calls for feminist change are carried from island to island by lonesome ships, following political and academic streams of knowledge. The message is powerful if it brings up new inspiration, new solidarity, new courage and new scholarly insights and reflections in the inhabitants of the other islands – not least the reader.

If that is so, Alison's task is a way to bring the islands closer together for the sake of producing one single message in which powerful feminist writing for a moment creates a single voice of multiple visions. The 'power' being in its multiplicity.

These are my thoughts as I add to our powerful piece of feminist writing that I write for 'the radical potential'. My radical potential. Not equating the two, but hinting at the connection between the personal and the social. Just as I afterwards share my reflections and background stating that feminist and queer writing always have been a way for me to become intelligible; to make my struggle real and tangible by listening to messages of other feminist and queer writers from other islands. The ones that resonated my reality were the ones that were powerful to me.

This writing task was therefore powerful, in the sense that it held the potential of creating multiple resonances with the realities of multiple voices, in one single powerful piece of writing. To make the lived experiences of each island become visible and intelligible in their shared – and singular – character. That is powerful feminist writing to me, and I thank Alison for letting me be a part of it.

Deborah N. Brewis – 'I write for'

I look forward to this workshop. I look forward to it knowing that it will necessarily open me, that the power it will generate may wound me. I look forward to it without hesitation. I have picked my group allocation at random and seen that Alison will be leading the session with us. I find her writing powerful. She has sought to channel power in my writing. The very concept of her helps to sustain the power in me.

As we begin, I look around the room. I see some faces I know, and some that I don't. In each of the waiting faces I see a yearning, barely suppressed. Pressing up at the surface. Yearning, or rage. Where glances meet, we are bound together in anticipation, in a desired recognition.

It is proposed that we split into two groups, to write for and to write against. I feel this deeply as a rupture. The yearning and the rage that for me are so closely intertwined are splintered, alienated from one another.

But as we write, I feel a liberation. Liberated from rage. Yearning flows out; I write about the desire to flow open onto the page. An opening has been plugged, perhaps by that rage working in the room next door? I imagine it there, achieving a fiery flow of its own.

The focusing in on ‘for’, on that imagined future, is meditative. I try to sink into it. I want those around me to see me, to see an us.

We are sometimes asked, ‘but what are you for? what are you *for*?’ So much of what I am for, what I write for, is defined by that which I am against. This exercise of powerful writing heightened my awareness of that fact, and, reflecting on it now, I was met with a struggle that this againstness can produce: I am against simple; I must be/write complex. I am against constraints; I must be free. I feel a power in rejecting this opposition; rejecting an engagement with this force that is pushing (back) at me, defining my cause. The master’s tools (Lorde, 2003). I want to side-step: to hop outside of the binary reactionary force. The power diffuses throughout me, Audre infuses – I am taken up by a desire to recognize the binds that seek to ‘include’ me, to write myself out of them.

In the writing that emerged I saw this desire in others too, and the writing was nurturing. I realize more and more that side-stepping must necessarily be achieved as a collective act – my opposing force is not your opposing force, nor theirs. We achieve sideways together.

The reading of our text produces immediacy, intimacy, of relation: the invitation for one to inhabit the force of another. Forces, ‘fors’, are compiled in our mouths. They jostle. I feel your words jar as they pass by my teeth; I hear my words catch on yours. I try to give up ownership of them. This is the necessary discomfort of striving for community. The striving is key. I try to sink into it.

It was the power of this striving that hit – it hit us in the first round of reading, and then those of larger room in the second.

We have released our words to each other, and now to others beyond our rooms. I can’t own my ‘for’ any more than you can, not in the seeking of a power as us. For again meets against, but is perhaps no longer so defined by it. We have given part of ourselves to each other, made an offering. There will be new rounds of striving.

Christina Hee Pedersen – ‘I write against’

A decision

The three words made my day. *Feminism, Activism, Writing* – such lovely assemblage.

So much what I have strived for all my years in Academia. Did not have time to go to the conference at CBS, though. Too much teaching, writing, reviewing, too much pressure.

Signe, my feminist university friend, my old redstocking ally, grabbed my arm and insisted: Let's go together – we never have the chance to talk anymore, it seems such a good opportunity to share what seems like a feminist uprising, a strong revival. A sense of community. So, we went.

A poem

I know only one of you in the group beforehand. I enter the group with open curiosity. As an equal and as different. Senior, second wave, lesbian – rebel and conformist – for and against simultaneously.

Wanting to get acquainted with Alison's approach to – and take on – feminist writing, curious to meet young feminist rebels from different places – wanting to enter conversation. Treasuring Australian feminists and their scholarly work. Identifying Alison with that tradition.

I bring with me an immense longing for meaningful communities in academia. I look for moments and places where feminist voices are at the center, legitimate and strong. Contexts with trust, far from object – and strategic thinking.

It so happened that I got together with the 'writing against' group of women.

We made quite different individual texts arching from the very concrete, to politically programmatic, to storytelling to carefully analytically elaborated texts. Bending and folding in and out of individual and collective perspectives, in and out of academia, individual and social movement. Reflecting longings and belongings in 'the against'. We made a powerful text, I wrote it down, – inhabited it and shared it with other feminists later on.

A process

Curiously, I don't remember much about what the 'writing for' group did.

But, I can recall our own process of doing the collage of text with each other around the table – producing through a quick, dynamic dialogue, performing freedom, a lovely parenthesis. Feminist desires – the driver.

There was 'power over' in the decision making – of course, but a strong will to include. I recall a strong sense of being included and including all texts.

A memory

‘This is the kind of text I would love to be able write’, my son said to me when I read out aloud the poem after the conference. What is left is a vague memory of joint effort and strong engagement, and a strong text that still lives and can be used by any of us and others to start encounters, conversations writings about feminist politics at the universities. The framing of collective writing processes is alpha and omega – as is trust.

What three words can do – feminism, writing, activism.

Olimpia Burchiellaro – ‘I write against’

Writing against. I am looking forward to this activity. Writing Against. I think I am good at writing against. I can think of plenty of things I am against. We sit down and we are writing against. Our pencils poised. Our laptop keys pressed. We are all writing against. I am pointing fingers on the keyboard as I write against. ‘And U and U and U!’ I am comfortable writing against.

We share what we are against. Our writing merges, mixes, moves, mingles, melds, and meets in the places we recognise – together – as the places where inequality breeds. Our writing is more than the sum of our individual voices. It is more than one. It is less than many. We share a moment of belonging, a wink of an eye as we perceive the commonalities between our (writing) againsts. I read the text out loud. I forget what it is I wrote against. I wrote against. And, to some extent, I still do. The collectivity of the exercise becomes a form of belonging. I am that. I am not that.

But what does it say about the kinds of investments I have made that I am comfortable writing against? Isn’t writing against, as a form of critique, supposed to be uncomfortable? Isn’t that its purpose? What if critique, or indeed, being against, becomes so comfortable, so normal, so ordinary, so common, to lose this very purpose? I am scared by the ease with which I find myself writing against.

Don’t get me wrong. The exercise was helpful, I found it liberating, empowering. But upon reflection, what intrigues me is why writing against made me – and still does – feel powerful. So much of my self is invested in writing against. Against positivism. Against the unproblematic embracing of neoliberal understandings of what academia, or what the world, can and could be. Against the discrediting of queer and ethnographic methods in Business Schools. Against heteronormativity. And homonormativity. Against the Business School itself. A feminist lesbian anti-capitalist killjoy seduced and empowered by the simplicity with which writing against narrates the world. It should be harder to

write against. I should feel my limbs and fingers stiffen and hesitate in remembering and documenting the persistent injustices of the world. Not in a powerless way either though. Just, you know, in a this-should-not-be-normal kind of way, in a this-should-still-really-baffle-me kinda way. I should also have learnt by now that the world is messier than any writing against – or for – will ever convey.

I remember, I wrote that I write against Hillary Clinton/Emma Watson/Angelina Jolie-type feminists – by which I meant white liberal feminism, that feminism that tells you that WOMAN is a thing, a global phenomenon, that we are all sisters, that #HeforShe doesn't reify the gender binary, that the War in Afghanistan was a war for women. I wrote against Hillary Clinton/Emma Watson/Angelina Jolie-type feminists. But what have they ever done to me? Are we even supposed to be writing against individuals? And if we are (I did), is that a reification of the myth of the coherent self? Are we writing against structures (whiteness, capitalism, heteronormativity)? And if we are, isn't the performativity of our language inadvertently but necessarily reifying these structures? In writing against, are we, as Gibson-Graham (2009) warn us, constituting inescapable monolithic monsters? Would Eve Sedgwick (1997) think I am paranoid?

Writing against. I find comfort in writing against. I make critical feminist queer investments in writing against. We need writing against. But we also need uncomfortable writing, alternative writing practices, a writing that cannot be encapsulated by the for/against binary, unpredictable, messy writing.

Mie Plotnikof – 'I write for'

When I hear of the task, I'm thinking about the dichotomy that it takes as its premise. But then I wonder if it is a dichotomy, or maybe rather a tension? A tension that saturates most of our academic being, doing, writing, living: any research account is positioning itself in tensions of working for/against something, someone, somehow. When we construct research questions, we attend to something rather than other things. When we design methods and collect data, we co-construct specific thoughts, conversations, interactions, events, documents rather than others. When we write papers, we also play the inclusion/exclusion game via references, citations, theorizing and analyzing. But because the kind of research we do is about people, life and society; it is a very basic requirement that we reflect carefully on the ways in which we work through this tension of for/against, and the effects that this has on our research.

Thinking further about my current idea of writing for, I'm struggling a little. And I'm struggling with finding myself struggling. Shouldn't this be easy? Do I not

have a clear storyline to voice here? Why is my research purpose not rushing from my heart and head into my arm and through my hand out on paper right away? ... Come to think of it, I actually do have a pretty firm idea of my own research purpose, but I'm not used to having to tell it out loud. I'm much more used to strategizing and considering how to argue my point in relation to audience, to other scholars, to other studies. But once I get that this is not a strategic research exercise its actually easy. It's actually exciting.

The room is quiet. People are busy, minding themselves. The atmosphere is not tense but concentrated. People are thinking so loud that we can almost hear it. I'm sweating a little. But I'm also getting this feeling of being part of something. Of taking over something that somebody else had embodied and now I am embodying it, to then pass it on and somebody else is embodying it. Not because I'm giving it to somebody else, but because we are all helping each other to create and carry this piece of paper of writing for. It's not heavy although the content is heavy. Explosive. Troubling. Touching. Powerful. I realize that a few of us have tears running down our faces.

Reflections 3 months later

After reading Alison's e-mail today, I still remember the power of this shared writing experience. I'm still thinking about the performativity of this little piece of paper and one simple question – what do I write for? I'm still curious as to how and why the quiet room, the solo-writing, the handing over of paper, the extreme concentration accumulates into not just a piece of paper with a lot of heavy and important idea(l)s for the necessities of writing, but also a textual, material, bodily and social manifestation of something more than each of us. Than each of our words. Than a momentary feeling of care or consensus. Actually, to me it seems, it is almost the opposite of consensus – it's the multiple voices of all of our purposes, of all of our struggles, of all of our working through this tension of writing for/against. And this intense feeling of being a voice amongst many other important, different voices is giving feminism a new meaning and matter to me. It may come across as a banality, but nevertheless an important one.

Collaborative ending

Writing differently in the neoliberal academy poses many risks – these are risks that feminists have been talking about, and have been taking, for decades now. Feminist research has always transcended disciplinary divides: sitting around one table, engaged in one single task, we challenge the ways in which we and our

writings are 'disciplined'. Our politics, whilst manifesting across different projects and struggles, unite from a politics of transformation, and it is here that our daily struggles take on renewed energy as we see the bigger picture... Whose voices count? Whose bodies are legitimate(d)?

Listen. Hear. Here in the spirit of listening we gain strength from each other; we gain solidarity between each other. We experience solidarity and common ground in the doing. It is a something that sustains us, each of us, and the 'us' itself.

I write against the culture of burnout, I write against the misogyny that threatens my existence, I write to breathe, and I write for those women who can't. I write against those that judge. I write against those that hide behind the words of the academic review process. I write for others to have different spaces to breathe and work within. I write because I don't know how not to. I write for disruption, I write because I erupt. Writing differently exposes the patriarchal forces that determine whose work is deemed 'excellent' in a culture of biased metrics and surveillance. Our challenging of and emancipation from these forces starts with working differently and writing together and alone is part of the process. It is our writing that travels, that others know of us and that may inspire new writing. Writing is how we come to be in the academic sphere, we become. Writing is a small part of the picture – the text is not all that we are, and the text only does so much – and yet we write with our bodies every day and in every relation: we write with our love, our care, our sacrifice and our joy.

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