



Feminism, activism, writing! Introduction to the special section

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Invitation

Feminism seems to be undergoing yet another public revival as persistent gender inequalities and the absence of basic rights and freedoms, e.g. the right to equal pay and the freedom of bodily integrity, are becoming apparent and being called out – also in the supposedly ‘equal’ Nordic welfare societies (e.g. Holck and Muhr, 2017). On these basic grounds, feminist activists fight against gender pay gaps, gender segregated labor markets, sexual assault, domestic violence as well as for access to contraception and free abortion. In other words, equal rights on the labor market as well as in the personal sphere are still central to a feminist agenda. At the same time – and as always when women’s rights find public points of articulation – anti-feminist as well as postfeminist arguments are blooming. The former rejects and opposes the need for addressing gender inequality while the latter claims that gender equality has already been achieved. Despite evidence to the contrary, then, some argue that the feminist project is no longer relevant because it has succeeded (this is a particularly popular discourse in the Danish media; see Muhr and Plotnikof, 2018). Others question the very foundations of feminism as e.g. evidenced in the US political debates surrounding Donald Trump (see Just and Muhr, 2018). The contours of social conflict, then, are looming large, but cracks are also appearing within feminist circles. Thus, claiming the right to be (and relevance of being) feminist and emphasizing the unremitting importance of feminist projects (Harding et al., 2012; McRobbie 2009, 2011, 2013; Redfern and Aune, 2013) does not ensure feminist harmony. To the contrary, debate about the role of feminism as it intersects with other topics of concern in a largely neoliberal political climate has

flared up (e.g. Gill, 2016; Gill et al., 2017; Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al. 2017; Liu, 2018a; Ronen, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014; Sullivan and Delaney, 2017).

These tensions give rise to new complexities and issues, raising questions such as: what is the feminist struggle about (Thomas and Davies, 2005)? Who may speak as feminist and for feminists (Hearn, 2014; hooks, 2000; Rumens, 2017; Tienari and Taylor, forthcoming)? Whose rights to what freedoms do 'we' tend to fight for (Just and Muhr, 2018; Naples, 2002; Oyewumi, 2002)? And, adding pressure to a sore spot, does feminist emancipation come with an overlay of cultural appropriation and an underbelly of class privilege (Ferber, 2012; Mohanty, 1988)? Surely, feminism must be intersectional (Essed and Muhr, 2018; Liu, 2018b; Villeseche et al. 2018; Ulus, 2018), but what are the expressions, practices, and aims of feminist intersectionalities? How do queer studies intersect with a feminist agenda (Christensen, 2018; Dahl, 2011)? Do particular struggles sustain or suspend the common cause? How – and to what extent – do expressions of female sexuality promote a feminist project (Gill, 2008, 2012; Schuster, 2013)? May, for instance, pole dancing be conceived as a feminist act or does it embody the very power dynamics that feminism sets out to dissolve (Just and Muhr, forthcoming)? Do the answers to these questions, perhaps, depend on the specific context in which the particular body performs? Such questions call for new approaches to feminist scholarship implying new methodologies for doing fieldwork and conducting analyses (e.g. Ashcraft, 2018; Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018; O'Shea, 2018; Riach et al., 2016) but also new modes of writing and other ways of communicating one's findings and thoughts (Beavan, 2018; Boncori and Smith, 2018; Katila, 2018; Philips et al., 2014; Pullen, 2006; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008; Vachhani, 2015), all in the spirit of probing and promoting intersectional feminist resistance in and to an otherwise neoliberal regime.

Given the increased public attention to feminist concerns and the intensification of foundational debate within feminist environments as well as the fierce challenges from outsider positions, feminist scholars face the twin task of strengthening feminism conceptually as well as fortifying it in practice. That is, we must, today, promote feminist scholarship AND activism as inherently interrelated activities (Ackerly and True, 2010; Muhr and Plotnikof, 2018; Naples, 2003). This means asking how we persuasively raise awareness about feminist agendas while querying whose voices are heard in the current debate and who these voices do and can speak for (Ahmed, 2004, 2007; Spivak, 1985; Swan; 2017). If we claim to speak for all women, who suffers? And, conversely, when one recognizes the particularities of one's articulatory position, who listens? How can we as academics promote a feminist activist agenda? How may we heed questions of representation without losing political clout? We need to

continue to address the socially awkward issues concerning the persistence of gender inequality while becoming better at addressing the conceptually problematic issue of what it might mean to speak for or as ‘a woman’.

Wishing to facilitate conversations on some of these many and varied questions, we decided to organize an event at Copenhagen Business School. In the spring of 2017, we therefore sent out a call for participation in a workshop that asked participants to bring together (feminist) activism and (scholarly) writing in order to discuss the future of feminism in academia. With this workshop, we aimed to discuss how we can develop a viable research agenda for social change and what the means of advancing such an agenda – within disciplinary communities, in activist networks and to society at large – might be. To allow for creative practices of (feminist) writing, we abandoned the traditional workshop format of paper presentations. In this spirit, we did not ask prospective participants to submit conventional paper abstracts, but instead to provide a motivational letter stating their interest in and ambitions for feminist activist scholarship. Further, the workshop was free of charge, and PhD/junior scholars could apply for travel grants. Thus, we sought to put feminist and activist ideals into practice at the outset of the call, hoping this would attract many participants and open up a space for creative and caring discussions.

Participation

As it turned out, the interest was, indeed, overwhelming, and in November 2017 65 participants began a two-day conversation on the future of feminism in academia. In the course of these two days, we held four thematic sessions in smaller groups (three parallel tracks) with subsequent plenary sessions at which the groups presented their results – ideas, texts, drawings and more. There were no plenary speakers or other authoritative voices; instead, conveners who did not promote their own academic stands in any conventional way facilitated each thematic session, inviting open dialogue and discussion based on short presentations of what they perceived to be a main current challenge.

The four themes were:

- (Post)feminist Discourses
- Affective Activism
- Alternative Feminist Organizing

- Powerful Writing

For each theme, we suggested a few texts that might frame the discussions, and we provided the conveners with facilitation guides, asking a series of questions about the participants' understandings and practices of the thematic issues. Beyond the initial pointers, we left the format as well as the content to the conveners and their groups to establish and/or challenge – hopeful that each group would develop its own dynamics and that the discussions would branch out in many different directions. Thus, one convener asked participants in her group to use the five senses to explore what feminism means to them (see Baxter et al., this issue). Another suggested to her group that extra-discursive affectivities might become articulable by drawing collective mandalas. Personal stories and collective experiences were shared in several groups. Post-it notes and flip-overs as well as digital notetaking and brainstorming tools were some of the material and technological ingredients of the different processes. Indeed, the themes were explored in many different ways, based on the following common starting points:

For (post)feminist discourses, we asked participants to reflect upon their own understandings of and relationships with feminism. We suggested texts such as an interview with Angela McRobbie (2013) on the illusion of equality for women and Abby L. Ferber's (2012) explorations of the connections and similarities between color-blindness, postfeminism and christonormativity as starting points for conversations on the definitions, discursive regularities and social practices of feminism. Further, we struck an activist cord by inviting participants to articulate their 'one demand' to feminist practice. This first session set the scene for lively and heated, yet friendly, caring and constructive discussions of the multiple ways in which feminism claims its presence in our scholarly work as well as private lives. The contribution by Baxter et al. (this issue) is an example of the feminist methodologies developed in one of the parallel sessions on (post)feminist discourses.

The theme of affective activism was influenced and guided by Sara Ahmed's work. For this session we had suggested her article 'Not in the mood' (2014) as well as some excerpts of more explicitly activist writing published on Ahmed's blog. Here we found particular inspiration and encouragement in the figures of the feminist killjoy¹ and the feminist snap². Visible in the contributions to this section (particularly Antonakaki et al., this issue; Basner et al., this issue; Munar, this issue), the participants quickly turned to Ahmed's more feminist work,

¹ <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/08/26/hello-feminist-killjoys/>.

² <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/05/21/snap/>.

exploring in particular the feminist snap in both theoretical, personal and embodied ways.

Alternative feminist organizing asked participants to consider activist and academic modes of organizing. This theme invited discussions of the meanings of 'alternative'. Alternative to what – alternative forms, alternative content or alternative aims? How may feminism inspire vibrant and viable alternatives to current realities, within and beyond academia? One source of inspiration here was Gibson-Graham's (2008, 2010) work on feminist belonging and diverse economies.

Finally, for powerful writing we provided examples of some of the texts and performances that have touched and inspired us the most. From the book chapter 'Eating the "Other"' (hooks, 1992), through an excerpt from Maggie Nelson's novel 'The argonauts'³ to Andrea Gibson's poem 'Letter to white queers' (if you haven't seen it already, do yourself the favor of watching Gibson performing this poem⁴). With these various texts, we wanted to ask how academic and activist forms of writing might merge. We hoped to inspire conversations about and experiments with one of the strongest disciplining powers of academia: that of the peer reviewed journal article. The results of this session went beyond talk to actual experimentation with alternative forms. In the plenary session following the parallel discussions of powerful writing, we came together to witness an amazing materialization of feminist activism. As Christensen et al. (this issue) and Amrouche et al. (this issue) both beautifully exhibit this final plenary provided an affective (and effective) culmination of two intense days of feminist activist solidarity and care.

In sum, the participants engaged with energy and enthusiasm, immersing themselves in the discussions, drawings and writings of each group session and bringing solutions, suggestions and agendas together in the plenary sessions. Thus, several groups produced texts, visuals and other forms of documentation just as all sessions were audial recorded. All participants got access to all documentation after the workshop through digital platforms. Further, many of the participants continued their conversations on various themes and ideas after the workshop, expanding on material produced during sessions or producing new documents. These different sources and processes have resulted in – or, perhaps more accurately, turned into – the texts of this special section.

³ <https://harpers.org/archive/2015/04/in-the-pain-cavern/>.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpBUenMIe8U>.

Documentation

The Feminism, Activism, Writing! Workshop is documented as a collection in this special section of *ephemera*. All together, they provide indications of and, perhaps, affinities for what happened during those two days in Copenhagen in November 2017 – and they present some of the conversations and aspirations that have continued to grow after the workshop. The articles can be read separately, but to get the full affective experience of the personal journeys, the thought-provoking discussions and the care put into developing each other as scholars and our scholarly (activist) community, we recommend reading the issue in its entirety.

The FAW! section starts off with a paper by Lynne F. Baxter, Carole Elliott, Deborah N. Brewis and Jhilmil Breckenridge (acknowledging the input of all the other participants of the ‘What is Feminism?’ Group A workshop at *Feminism, Activism, Writing!*). In this paper, ‘Sensing feminism’, the authors develop a sensorial methodology for enabling inclusive participation in group discussion. Drawing on ‘the five senses exercise’ used by clean language practitioners, this method creates the potential for a space of equality as it doesn’t require scientific knowledge or experience, but instead draws on sensorial experience. If facilitated sensitively, it holds the possibility of subverting hierarchical power structures. The authors demonstrate how this happened in the FAW! session, bringing out a great variety of experiences, opinions and perceptions about feminism and constructing a strong-because-multiple basis for further discussion and development of thought.

The next paper, ‘Powerful writing as writing “with”’ is written by Jannick Friis Christensen, Sarah Dunne, Melissa Fisher, Alexander Fleischmann, Mary McGill, Florence Villeséche and Marta Natalia Wróblewska. The paper starts out by asking a series of questions, among others ‘what makes writing powerful?’, ‘is the academic genre a powerful one?’ and ‘can it [academic writing] be feminist *and* powerful?’ Through three vignettes about different forms of academic feminist writing, the authors demonstrate the act of powerful writing, showing that academic writing can be both feminist and powerful in and of itself and as documentation/inspiration of socio-political activism. The paper ends in a reflection about the personal voice in collective writing, showing how powerful writing can make use of multimodality as a disruptive force.

The third paper, ‘Powerful writing’, is written by Charlotte Amrouche, Jhilmil Breckenridge, Deborah N. Brewis, Olimpia Burchiellaro, Malte Breiting Hansen, Christina Hee Pedersen, Mie Plotnikof and Alison Pullen. This paper provides detailed documentation of how two texts were produced during one of the

parallel sessions as well as of the participants' reflections before, during and after the production of these two texts. Hence, the paper demonstrates a method of producing text, but also gives the reader a sensorial experience of how texts can be produced in feminist collaboration. While the methodological contribution of this paper is important, the texts themselves, the poems that came out of the sessions, are affective feminist interventions in their own right.

Paper four, 'Snaptivism: A collective biography of feminist snap as affective activism' by Kai Basner, Jannick Friis Christensen, Jade Elizabeth French and Stephanie Schreven, takes one of the authors' personal snap moment as point of departure for theoretically and empirically discussing Sarah Ahmed's concept of the feminist snap. Through careful – and caring – collective rewriting of one personal narrative, the collective of authors combines the words snap and activism and develops the method of snaptivism. They encourage us all to become snaptivists and snap allies by collectively and supportively voicing and critiquing heteronormative and masculine structures so as to leave no one alone in – and with – their feminist snaps.

The fifth paper, 'Realising Sara Ahmed's 'feminist snap': Voices, embodiment, affectivity' is written by Melpomeni Antonakaki, Jade Elizabeth French and Cansu Guner. Based on detailed recordings, transcriptions and notes from one of the FAW! workshop's parallel discussions, the authors empirically analyze Sara Ahmed's concept of snap experience and propose a distributed and rearrangeable model for opening up questions of snap subjectivity. The authors analyze in minute detail what feminist voices embody and how collectivity rearranges experience in relation to two categories of the feminist snap: feminist pedagogy and feminist genealogy. Based on their findings, the authors propose the workshop format of Snap.tivism.

In paper six, 'Dancing between anger and love: Reflections on feminist activism', Ana María Munar narrates her own feminist story – of coming out as openly feminist. While this process may be read in parallel with Ahmed's account of the feminist snap, Munar develops her feminist identity in relation to the writings of Martha Nussbaum. In theoretical conversation with Nussbaum, Munar voices, confronts and debates some of the most pertinent and productive – as well as damaging – feminist feelings, anger and love, and the way they are constantly intertwined in feminist activism.

The FAW! section ends with the paper 'Feminism is dead? Long live feminism! A reflexive note on the FAW! Workshop'. Here, Elisa Virgili and Francesca Zanatta discuss how to live feminism within academia. They describe how conferences are often dialogic spaces replicating patriarchal dynamics of power,

but how they experienced the FAW! workshop as a space that challenged patriarchal regimes, encouraged and enabled scholarly encounters through feminist practices. They argue that the politics of care in academia, the positioning of scholars as feminists and the issue of precarity in academia are starting points for a radical transformation of academia. Through the learning(s) of the FAW! workshop, they call for a radical reconsideration of all forms of collective solidarity, based on the acceptance and celebration of affective-relational practices developed to cope with the challenges of precarity and requiring the acknowledgement of the value of both positions, as scholars and activists.

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