



## Feminism is dead? Long live feminism! A reflexive note on the FAW! workshop

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### abstract

How to live feminism within academia? What are the tools required to enable this process? With these questions in mind, and with our experiences as researchers, activists and friends, we participated in the two-day workshop 'Feminism, Activism and Writing!' (FAW!). Whilst conferences are often dialogic spaces replicating patriarchal dynamics of power, we experienced the FAW! workshop as a space that challenged patriarchal regimes, encouraged, and enabled scholarly encounters through feminist practices. In this collaborative piece, composed as a collective rather than as individuals, we offer an overview of our reflections developed during and after the workshop. In particular, we focus on three areas informed by the themes explored in the workshop: the concepts of affect, solidarity and the politics of care in academia, the positioning of scholars as feminists, and the issue of precarity in academia. In our reflections, we argue that these three areas ought not to be explored nor dealt with separately, as intertwined and informed by the neoliberal, patriarchal practices. We therefore suggest these areas as starting points for a radical transformation of academia, through the lenses and practices of feminism. Through the learning(s) of the FAW! workshop, we 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.

### Feminism is dead? Long live feminism!

Is it feasible to explore, dissect and live feminism within academia, a system that contributes and feeds into the very discrimination and violence denounced by feminism itself? And if so, what are the *tools* necessary to dismantle the *master's*

house to paraphrase Lorde (1984)? What is the role of activism and writing, and how can we incorporate these practices in feminism?

When we first found out about the workshop, our attention was caught by the association of feminism with writing and activism, a decision which could be associated with one of our feminist heroes, Audre Lorde: feminist, writer and activist. The second element of interest was the proposed format for the workshop: two days of interactive and cooperative learning and sharing, divided in four streams of focus ((post)feminist discourses, affective activism, alternative feminist organising, and powerful writing), and fuelled by a rich reading list circulated ahead of the gathering, to allow prior engagement and reflection. Crucially, the workshop's invite stressed the desire for the gathering to be interdisciplinary in its nature, not only from a discipline perspective but also in terms of modes of engagement with feminism. This element seemed to reflect how, although having academic careers stemming from quite different disciplines (Elisa's initial studies were in Philosophy and Francesca's in Psychology), over the years we have always found in feminist theory an element of encounter and synergy. We both work in academia, although in different fields and under diverse circumstances, and we are both activists. We live in two different countries, within different politico-economic contexts; we come from different families, but we have read the same books. On skype we discuss the events and news of our countries, Italy and the UK, and we send each other the latest book that has challenged our thinking.

The openness of the workshop's scope also felt as a fitting reflection of our diverse ways of combining scholarly activity with activism, informed by our professional affiliations and geographical locations, but also by our conversations and shared reflections. Thanks to its nature, the workshop therefore functioned as an opportunity to gather as friends, sisters, feminists and colleagues. It constituted an opportunity to reflect upon, identify and further develop awareness of both the issues that need addressing and the tools that need (re)forging to advance, reshape and experience feminism. For the two of us, the workshop functioned as an opportunity to come together and discuss *our* topics with other people, gazing at each other across the room, remembering our last conversation on that exact matter. We decided to participate in the workshop together, and this provided us with the unique opportunity to reflect on our individual and collaborative activities and work, and on how our affective relationship conditions our work. Under this light, affect became a resource and not a limit, as we will try to explain in these pages. As a kinship gathering, the workshop presented us, and all participants, with the opportunity to meet as both people and scholars, encouraging contributions of both emotional and theoretical knowledge. The kind of sisterhood we developed during this workshop has its

roots in feminist activism and its way of producing knowledge. Sisterhood is a strategy to resist patriarchy that permeates the academic world; it is a strategy that substitutes collaboration for competition, a horizontal relationship with a vertical one.

The patriarchal encompassing nature of academia has been extensively discussed, within and beyond feminist scholarship (Rose, 1994). Conferences are often dialogic spaces replicating patriarchal dynamics of power. Female, queer, precarious and scholars of colour are mostly absent from keynote speeches, confined to less prestigious roles/panels, conditioned to lower engagement and marginalised due to the expensive nature of most conferences (Hinsley et al., 2017). In a chapter of the edited volume 'Speaking out', Mills (2006), for example, explores the impact of performance anxiety on female academics in conference settings, suggesting that women are more likely to experience this phenomenon as a result of the influence of stereotypical beliefs on gender and public speaking. Unhelpfully, female scholars are also faced with the existence of a body of literature policing their outfit choices and attitudes at conferences (see e.g. Stavrakopoulou, 2014).

The promotion of conference spaces that challenge patriarchal regimes and encourage affective practices is most certainly a step forward towards the '*alien future*' introduced in Xenofeminism (Hester, 2018). This '*alien future*' stems from a challenge to the linear, traditional conceptualisation of future/time, of production, and of kinship. In FAW! we recognised elements of this '*alien future*' in the circular discussions (the four themes were re-proposed during the two days and discussed in alternated sessions and through sharing/collective moments), in the replacement of sessions as paper-driven moments of production of knowledge with non-formal gathering including multimodal practices of sharing, and in the encouragement to create a kinship-like space. Through this format, the FAW! workshop offered space, time, and opportunities for discussing, exploring and practising innovative expressions of scholarship and activism. The shared respect for each other's thinking enabled friendships to arise, and the desire to share knowledge with friends stimulated impulses to write common papers, creating new opportunities for conversations. This section of *ephemera*, and its articles, stem exactly from this: collaborative, shared labour informed by friendship, passion, solidarity and a specific interest in feminism.

### **A note on our writing process**

To create cooperative thinking, we reflected and discussed our experiences, notes and memories from the FAW! workshop. This dialogic process led to the

identification of three key areas, which we decided to explore in written format separately, partly due to different schedules and locations, partly as an exercise to juxtapose individual thinking into collectivity. We wrote this final piece through a composition method inspired by the Dada cut-up technique (Tzara, 1920), confining it to paragraphs rather than to word level as in its original form, and manipulating slightly the sequencing to ensure a certain level of coherence in the development of our arguments. The aim is to eliminate the individuality of our voices and experience, to embrace co-production of our knowledge.

### **Affect, solidarity and the politics of care in academia**

Affect develops in being in between, in transition, between the capacity for action and the capacity to be acted upon (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Affect offers the body to a reality of encounters: affect is performative, as it pushes the body to action, to a situation of infinite becoming.

Academia is in many ways an emotionally demanding, if not draining, field of labour (Butler et al., 2017), in which the *marginalised* frequently are conditioned to wearing a mask (Fanon, 1952) to fit in, to play the game, and to avoid drawing undesired attention.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the incessant shift towards neoliberalism in universities has pushed women, particularly early career researchers (ECRs), into an even more marginalised and precarious position; not only in financial terms but also with regards to visibility, opportunity, and capacity for presence and expression. The ‘myth of the individual merit’ as discussed by Bagilhole and Goode (2001) is inheritably connected to patriarchal systems of academic progression. The patriarchal bias is prominent<sup>2</sup> in impacting preferences for certain modes of socialisation and in shaping stereotypical performative routines (Heilman, 2012). Certain behaviours, attitudes and skill sets are therefore identified as contributing to the formation of the perceived ‘individual merit’ (*ibid.*). Becoming skilled at wearing a specific mask (Fanon, 1952), exhibiting certain attitudes and withholding undesirable emotions/responses become necessary elements for recognition and *success* in academia. At the heart of these processes is the art of regulating and expressing emotions, a subjective art, informed by many factors such as race, generation, class, culture, religion, and of course gender (in the stereotypical representation of it). Using this acknowledgment as starting point, we attempt to untangle some of the fundamental knots in the connection between academia and activism, and

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1 See Stavrakopoulou (2014) for tips on how to dress appropriately for a conference if you are a woman.

2 Please note patriarchal systems are only one of the forces creating privilege in academia.

between academia and feminism. In this process, we have come to realise that the social networks surrounding this area of research are mostly of affective nature (Borghi, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

FAW! offered numerous opportunities to discuss and experience the issue of gender-stereotypical expression of emotions. In one of the plenaries during the workshop, we discussed how women frequently withdraw or hide affect and emotions in scholarly environments. Meyers (2013) defines this act as ‘disciplining of the self’; a performative series of actions self-inflicted and aimed at limiting and shaping women’s experience of academia so as to fit within neoliberal, patriarchal standards of behaviour, presence and production. Affect<sup>4</sup> as cultural practice, conversely, is linked to allowing oneself to feel and engage and therefore is capable of bringing bodies together, of creating contact with other bodies. Emotions are not a private matter, they move between subjects, bodies and symbols and develop realities, they align individuals and communities, or bodily spaces and social spaces, through the intensity of attachment (Ahmed, 2004).

In completing the application to the conference, we agreed to perform an act of disciplining of ourselves. We opted to omit that a reason for attending the workshop was our friendship and desire to share a scholarly encounter on the topic that links our research interests: feminism. On the very first day of the conference, we quickly realised that our disciplining was not necessary. The format, the conversations, the participants, the methods: every element of the workshop allowed, enabled and promoted the honest sharing and communal experiencing of emotions otherwise *forbidden: friendship, affection, anxiety, frustration and even anger*. Working through and within these varied and explicit emotional states felt like an enabler for a more cohesive and supportive space for learning, planning and thinking.

We believe affect and emotions are crucial initiators and sources of inspiration and action in academia as much as activism. Inspired by the histories of

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3 Once again it is necessary to remember the use of sisterhood as a strategy. These affects not only create a web of material support, they also function as reminders that expressing one's emotions is a crucial element of the creative process (in the scholarly sense).

4 We follow here the definition of affect by Sara Ahmed: ‘I actually wanted to disrupt the idea of emotion coming from within and then moving out towards objects and others. Some people use the word affect to describe how you’re affected – to affect and to be affected – thereby expressing a bodily responsiveness to the world that the word is used to denote. I rather use emotion because that word took me further in not starting with the question of how we are affected by this. [...] I actually use affect as part of what emotions do’ (Ahmed and Schmitz, 2014: 97)

genealogies of women in Italian feminist groups in the 70s (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and De Laurentis, 1990), and by present actions of activist groups such as Sisters Outsiders, we recognise the need for more opportunities for inclusive and affect-enabling interactions and thinking. Affect, bodily meetings, creates knowledge in the moment produced by bodies and the movement of affect between bodies, in a sort of affective circle.

## **Precarity**

Affective relations must be considered within the socio-economic context in which they have developed. Precarity constitutes a crucial element and experience in academia at present. It was therefore of great importance that the workshop engaged with this topic in various ways and under different lenses.

Whilst the general discourse seems to point towards individualisation, with a push towards the private initiative to deal with the precarious nature of academic labour (and beyond); in the workshop, we explored precarity as a diffused phenomenon which requires a communal urge for change. It was firstly noted that it is unhelpful to assume that all participants would have the same economic means to attend a conference. Secondly, it was discussed that, particularly as feminists, we cannot entrust the resolution of financial disparity and problems to scholarships, which are often insufficient and adding to the already existing amount of labour.

It was therefore positive that participants could not only apply for financial support, but were being offered the possibility to be hosted in a local attendees' home. Aside from contributing to building a community of affect and care, this practice enabled the participation of colleagues who would have otherwise been marginalised by neoliberal consumerist conference practices. We would argue that it is thanks to these practices that we create opportunities to reconsider radically all forms of solidarity, taking into consideration the existence of affective-relational practices developed to cope with the challenges of precarity. We have friends in different cities that host us during a conference for which we have not received any scholarship, and we return the favour when we host these friends to attend activist events we have organised. New typologies of affective networks exist and continue to develop, with groups with different generations, origin and typology, all of which are translated into original relational practices and into original forms of knowledge, contextualised and bottom-up, fundamental to survive in the present.

A second interesting aspect of academic precarity is the ambiguous and controversial relation with the publishing business. There are two core problematic aspects of the current publishing model: the unpaid labour of scholars (writing, reviewing, editing, etc.) and the costly subscriptions which limit access not only to individuals, but also institutions (Fyfe et al., 2017). At a recent workshop for ECRs, the senior colleague presenting admitted to the problematic nature of the contradictory practices currently entertained by scholars and institutions alike. On one hand academics share awareness and frustration at the exploitative system in place, on the other hand they contribute to the system, offering themselves to self-exploitation for the purpose of career progression and survival.<sup>5</sup> As denounced by Fyfe and colleagues (*ibid.*: 16), the possibility for change is 'stymied by the inertia of the academic prestige culture'. It is in practices such as Guerilla Open Access (Penn, 2018) that we recognise a feminist action, promoting fair and equal access<sup>6</sup>, peer to peer sharing, and destabilisation of models promoting status quo and prestige above knowledge, activism and cooperation. As other alternative practices, we download articles for each other to secure equity of access; we peer review each other's articles with the grace often missing in other peers' anonymous reviews. In the same spirit, resources in preparation to the FAW! workshop were shared in advance, ensuring materials enabling equal participation were fully accessible.

A third aspect of precarity is the concentration of employment and the derived limited accessibility to secure employment for ECRs. The precarious nature of academic positions has been widely explored and discussed in recent years as an outcome of academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000; Clarke, 2012). Nikunen (2012) explores the imaginative and resourceful coping strategies of precarious scholars in Finnish academia. Of particular interest is the identification of positive aspects of academic employment, such as personal satisfaction and interest and the opportunity for multiple identities, to compensate the anxiety caused by time-limited and hard to get contracted roles (*ibid.*). The emphasis on this specific defensive mechanism is in relation to our initial question: is academia a context for feminism and activism? Are these possible when we, scholars, are so embedded in self-deprecating forms of acceptance and subjugation? Awareness, acceptance and exploration of our own selves as scholars/activists, alongside the recognition of our privilege and limitations, become therefore a crucial element in developing practices of

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5 We recommend Brienza's study (2016) of a MA course in self-publishing as representation of this inconsistent approach towards publishing industry and practices.

6 *ephemera* is not only open access, but also run by a collective and dependent on the 'free' labour of academics.

collective solidarity. It is through knowledge of our own positioning that we open opportunities for shifts and changes.

## Positioning

Positionality is a core element of research; in teaching research methods, we, as scholars, emphasise the importance of reflexivity and awareness of existing, shifting, and emerging power relations (Holt, 2004). It is necessary to recognise and acknowledge that the experiences, conflicts and problematics explored during the FAW! workshop are typically white, European, situated in a defined geo-political and historical context, although enriched by internal differences brought by the individual experiences.

The concept of positioning revolutionises the distinction between subject and object of research. It eliminates absolutes and neutralities, shedding a light on the multiplicities in the privilege of authors, or conversely their subaltern status, or their agency. To unpack this concept and its importance, we recommend a reflective analysis of three elements: categories (understood as generation, gender, race, age, etc.), context and the elements of relationality between these. This process enables a more open exploration of the idea of privilege, which is at the heart of the process of self-contextualising and positioning. The workshop as context is not uniform, and the privileges, categories and the positionalities were not the same across participants, as containing many forms of subalternities within themselves. Through the workshop, we collaborated and shared awareness and knowledge of positioning and/or situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). We all started from a shared theoretical position, feminism, and through gathering we reflected on the feasibility of its practice and its limitations, in our everyday lives. In particular, we reminded ourselves of the importance of awareness in self-positioning in practising feminism. The readings proposed in preparation to the workshop contained a number of points of inspiration with regards to self-positioning within the feminist discourse(s) and practice(s).

Positioning is a space of spatial and temporal nature in which the subject is co-produced, the opposite of a relativist instance. (Braidotti, 2017: 55, our translation)

Within the context of feminism, we find it particularly challenging to situate ourselves in discussions on motherhood and child-centred futurism. Informed by readings of feminism's second wave, first hand witness of maternal absolute dedication melting into self-elimination, aware of being privileged middle-class educated white cis-gendered woman, we struggle to accept and reason with female associations with procreation, maternal, guardianship, and futurism.



Yet, do we qualify as queer in sense of ‘*violent undoing of meaning*’ (Edelman, 2004: 132)? Edelman (2004) discusses the idea of *sinthomosexuality* as act of dissociation from heteronormative behaviours and practices, as ‘*undoing the meaning*’ of society as filtered through heteronormativity. As individuals, is our struggle with (and ultimate rejection of) heteronormative ideas of female as child-centred future, maternal, and care, enough? How can we position ourselves and ‘female’ within feminism? What happens when this positioning becomes a collective action? When each individual contributes with their own positioning to the group dynamic and discussions? The FAW! workshop has created a space to discuss our privileges, avoiding speaking for others and encouraging others to contribute, whilst also being mindful of those realities missing and not represented. During the two days, the collective space allowed for reflections on our own and beyond our own positioning, for acknowledgement of privilege, and for identification of necessary areas of action to eliminate discrimination, *violence* and exclusion.

### Activism and academia

The debate on the positioning of feminist studies within academia started in the 70s and is still ongoing. What is the meaning of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ academia? Were we inside or outside academia during the workshop? A clarification is hereby necessary to avoid confusion between activism and the neoliberal-informed conceptualisation of academia as *situ of production* (Nikunen, 2012). We were undoubtedly hosted by an academic structure, which materially supported the workshop, however not all participants belonged to the world of academia. Most importantly, not all the knowledges introduced to the workshop had been developed and produced in academia. What constitutes feminist activism in academia, and beyond? In light of the issues discussed in relation to the precarious nature of academic labour, and the already saturated workload of female academics, often ‘burdened’ with caring responsibilities, would we expect also activism to fit within academic labour or should it be situated outside of it? Lynch (2010) warns against the fallacy of promoting and idolising the ‘care-full’ academics, being responsible for an overload of caring responsibilities (be it in relation to colleagues, students, activism or else). The discussion on the typology of relation (of care?) that should be established with institutions of political, academic and cultural nature is still ongoing: should this be a matter of integration, assimilation or independent autonomy?

The urgency of raising awareness of the embodiment of mental pain and struggle into physical form is discussed in various forms and contexts<sup>7</sup> (Do Mar Pereira, 2016), most importantly as bodily outcomes of internalised and accumulated daily lived experiences of discrimination and violence (Wortham, 2016). In relation to raising attention to the issue of burn-out, Lynch (2010) identifies the demand for activism in academia as a possible element of exclusion of scholars with personal caring responsibilities.

On the one hand, it is necessary to adapt analytical tools and objectives in the passage between activism and academia; on the other, this adaptation requires a certain level of compromising. There is an alternative route which enables to retain one's views and position as autonomous, but taking this route may lead to isolation. This separation of activism and academia is situated within neoliberal, heteronormative understandings of care, research and production.

Since the 70s, different theories and strategies have been developed around this inside/outside discourse, informed and shaped by different socio-cultural contexts and financial resources available. The risk here is to reduce activism to gendered versions of care, research and production. In the context of the current political climate and the reforms affecting Higher Education, precarity rarely informs the configuration and dynamics between the inside and outside of academia. In this format, the act of caring is confined to women, as maternal figures and protectors of the future (Hester, 2018), whilst research and product sit primarily within the male experience and performance of academia. The risk of gendered activism is to confine women's possibilities within a future, care oriented role replicating that of mothers.

Researchers shifting between the inside and outside of academia have enabled activism, with its practices and knowledge, to infiltrate academia. Some of the most important theoretical advancements originated outside academia, as deviations of the disciplined and disciplining academic thought. If rigorous, positivist, immaculate science sits within the reign of stereotyped male academia (Heilman, 2012), then it is the task of feminist activism to infiltrate and occupy the academic space with infectious affect, imperfect and situated knowledge (Haraway, 2016; Hester, 2018). The very nature of feminism requires the uneasy task to reconsider the concept of discipline. In this form, activism responds to the definition of 'contamination of the academic practice' (Do Mar Pereira, 2016: 102) through 'everyday acts of defiance' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000: 283). Whilst feminism as a field benefits and needs to slip in and out of different

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7 See interview with Hasmig Tatioussan [<https://youngfeministfund.org/2017/08/tracing-young-feminist-activist-selfcare-journey/>]

disciplines, current academic systems and practices, both in teaching, research and publishing, impose rigidity and belonging to a specific discipline. The current structure and articulation of disciplines and sub-disciplines poses the necessity to choose between universities as neoliberal businesses, with learning as investment, and universities as new spaces for public learning, with different meanings of learning, thinking and political engagement. This dichotomy is connected to Foucault's concept of disciplinary practice as a form of modern knowledge, normalised and normalising, with the aim to produce experts and administrative forms of governance.

Moten and Harney's (2004) manifest 'The university and the undercommons: Seven theses' further explores and analyses this concept. The authors suggest that the professional critics of Higher Education systems are not in fact critics, in the sense of resistance and reaction to the professionalisation of knowledge, but are themselves part of this very process. Is this the case for feminism? Is it avoidable? Conversely, subversive scholars create resistance through the rejection of academic regulations and metrics of excellence and production, inciting to take from and use academia as opportunity for new knowledge, occupying its spaces with other thinking (Moten and Harney, 2004).

In 'Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed', James C. Scott (2004) explains how the modern concept of state has marginalised non-discipline specific knowledges, related to local traditions, with the aim to simplify and rationalise social and political practices. This process defines the normal and natural, in other words it shapes us as natural repetition of norms. The correlation to gender dynamics is evident. Scott privileges practice-based forms of knowledge identifiable with the Greek word *metis*, emphasising reciprocity, collectivity, mutuality, diversity and adaptability (Scott, 2004: 183). These alternative forms have a rooted tradition in feminism, having been treasured by women excluded from male forms of ratio (reason). Interpreting and cultivating these alternative forms of knowledge might offer a solution to the disciplining of knowledge. Is it, however, possible to produce and teach an un-disciplined knowledge?

This idea of activism as an act of pollution of the immaculate knowledge production process correlates to Hester's (2018) and Edelman's (2004) discussion of heterosexual interpretations of queerness as agents of pollution of social norms and practices. Why should we fear this act of pollution? Is this pollution in fact death?

Of course not; feminist activism is not a wish for regulation of reproduction (although articulated as such in certain forms, see Haraway, 2016), it is not a

renunciation of the future, and it is not a mere act of challenge to neoliberal capitalist living. It is acceptance of our mortality, our fallacy, our limits and, ultimately, of a future:

when human exceptionalism and the utilitarian individualism of classical political economics become unthinkable. Seriously unthinkable: not available to think. (Haraway, 2016: 57)

Gaining awareness and learning to 'grieve with' (Haraway, 2016: 38) we might learn to 'transform silence' (Lorde, 1984: 41) into resistance, WORDS and activism.

The issue of disciplining of knowledge is in fact not confined to research, but also to teaching. As teachers, we are confronted with gruelling challenges. What texts should we adopt? How do we design learning spaces that encourage horizontal and equal participation? How can we support the development of criticality? In academia, activism might be an opportunity to reconsider the value of teaching as an act of struggle aiming to develop new 'theoretical journeys', formulating 'theories from lived experiences' (hooks, 1994: 73-74), shaped by our affective bonds, friendships, positioning and mortality.

The unique case of Italy, perhaps in its extreme difference from the rest of Europe and the USA, emphasises the importance of moving between the boundaries of inside and outside academia. Numerous Italian scholars are in fact exploring matters related to gender and feminism, regardless of the complete absence of departments dedicated to these specific areas of study. Many of them feel out of place. Then again, this experience of not belonging, being out of place is familiar to the female. Nevertheless, even in the role of outsider, elements and memories of belonging remain. The concept of nomadic subject of Braidotti is of help in further untangling this point. To be out of place does not prevent the possibility of being inside, or even outside the norm. Whilst the subject out of place has no belonging, as it belongs to nowhere and everywhere simultaneously, it is this status that allows for it to move and migrate, to be a xenofemist subject: permanently outside and beyond the norm, an eccentric and precarious subject.

Queer and gender studies share their status as ontologies of the present. They investigate the present (more specifically the contemporary, as per Deleuze's distinction) through the historical reconstruction or the various normative discourses, with the aim to comprehend how to manipulate the contemporary. They stand as critique of our contexts and of ourselves, as both subjects and objects produced by context-specific dynamics.

The role for scholars is therefore that of interpreters of the now, contemporary, to be in the position to develop practices of resistance and enact a critique in the form of voluntary disobedience to heteronormativity. It is in this process and context that research is activism.

The hope is for these theories to connect with practice, for academia to embrace activism, for texts to infiltrate bodies and vice-versa. At the FAW! workshop this hope became provisionally present, indicating possible futures.

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