



Collective writing as survival tool: Mechanisms of reflexivity against neoliberal academia

Simon Campbell^{a,b,c,d,1}, Elisa Floristán Millán^a, Otto Wolf^b, Rich Thornton^{c,*}, Sara Riva^d

^a Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

^b University of Portsmouth, UK

^c ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow, SOAS, University of London, UK

^d Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow (CSIC), Spain-University of Queensland, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Affect
Feminist
Positionality
Critical
Collectivity
Research methodology

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces an innovative method for enhanced researcher reflexivity: the use of synchronous collective writing as a space to collaboratively reflect on experiences of subjectification within the contemporary academy. We explore how, despite its apparent importance to contemporary research, the neoliberalisation of academia leaves little room for meaningful reflexivity. The authors in this paper – ranging from Master's student to postdoctoral researcher – wrote collaboratively in real-time to organically develop a method of collective reflexivity. Through auto-ethnographic vignettes that act as raw data, and a critical analysis of how we came to experience the events showcased in these vignettes, we analyse how our positionalities shape both our subject to, and perpetuation of, systems of symbolic violence in neoliberal academic institutions. Through this method, we explore experiences of the contemporary university as patriarchal, intensively marketised, and as a space where the prevalence of 'weak' reflexivity has negative impacts on research ethics. We argue that the affect of collaborative writing spaces acts as a resistance against our experiences of loneliness, competition and individualism. We also argue our new approach fosters research that is more responsive to the socio-material conditions to which it attends, and enables a deeper engagement with affect-led methodologies and slow-research.

1. Introduction

In this article, we experiment with a mode of collective writing as a way of using reflexivity to survive the neoliberal academy. While collective writing as a practice of solidarity within neoliberal academia has been suggested elsewhere (The Res-Sisters, 2017), we reformulate the experiment by adding a new dimension of intentional synchronicity to collective writing. We write within a feminist/queer epistemology to frame our contribution to knowledge production, one that validates intuition, group consciousness, and arts-based methods (Davies and Gannon, 2009; Haraway, 1991; Braidotti, 2013; Boal, 1995).

Our experiment of collective writing has been a small step in easing our alienating experience of the academy's individualisation of both labour and knowledge production. We aim to find resonance with others experiencing similar conditions in academia and visibilise a shift towards group reflexivity, and centre researcher discomfort as an

embodied manifestation of critical reflexivity. We argue for research processes which are carried out collectively, produced in service to social movements and that resist the pressures of neoliberal academia by prioritising slow research. We conclude with a discovery: that synchronous collective writing alerted us to the value of 'affect', and how a focus on the body can act as a guide to deeper reflexivity.

In our reading, neoliberal academia can produce a certain subjectification of the academic self that impedes the possibility of reflecting on the impact of our investigations (Skea, 2021). Reflexivity exists but may be poorly performed in a context where the focus is on producing publications and not the impact that those publications have on our research participants. Guided by autoethnographic vignettes that display our subjectification as neoliberal researchers, and the methods, tactics, affects, and theories that help us resist and challenge this subjectification, we present some of the implications of this experiment of collective writing as a resistance practice, a survival tool that allows

* Corresponding author. SOAS, University of London, WC1 0XG, UK.

E-mail addresses: sf_campbell@outlook.com (S. Campbell), elisa.floristan@uam.es, elisaflostanmillan@gmail.com (E. Floristán Millán), otto.wolf.95@gmail.com (O. Wolf), rt39@soas.ac.uk, thisrichthornton@gmail.com (R. Thornton), sararguezriva@gmail.com (S. Riva).

¹ Independent researcher.

reflexivity in this pressured context.

We choose to be honest about the complexity and complicity of working as neoliberal researchers in a neoliberal economy of higher education where material outputs are perceived to be the salient barometer of value. However, we do think that knowledge and information are important in order to transform societies and people's lives. In that sense, we believe that there are ways of mutating the engine of knowledge production that breeds competition to maintain social order – and writing this collaborative paper is one small act towards this. The experience has helped us feel mutually respected and encouraged us to embrace the process as much as the 'output'. Additionally, it has allowed us to challenge the idea that our future careers in academia will be 'better' when we gain more prestigious jobs and acquire roles which can enable domination over others through the possession of high symbolic capital. Through this framing of oppression within the neoliberal academy, each author reflects on the ways in which they are both impacted by and complicit within these mechanisms of neoliberal reproduction.

This paper has four parts. First, we discuss collective writing as our methodology and object of study. In an organic process, this collective method became the subject of this paper, as the 'pop-outs' – autoethnographic vignettes – suggest. Second, we contextualise the neoliberal academy within a broader ideological framework. Collective writing would not have been a survival tool if we were not in this political, social, subjective and economic context. Third, we engage with our own experiences of reflexivity within the neoliberal academy. We explore the contradictions, failings and challenges we faced at differing points in our research process. Finally, we conclude by arguing that collective writing enables a deeper reflexivity, where 'affect' shapes and enriches our research.

Note on tone: the writing moves between different registers, some highly academic with specialised lexicons, and some more informal in style. We lean into this eclectic register, as it is, as remarked by one reviewer, a 'legacy' of our collective writing method.

2. Collective writing as an experiment: methodology as our object of study

We are a group of social 'scientists' frustrated and disillusioned by the current academic system. We are all inspired by collective spaces of improvisation outside the academy. Activism, music making, theatre: all modes of collective consciousness and consensus building that have inspired us to experiment with collective, intuitive work in academia. We first came together to host a series of roundtable discussions at various academic conferences along the themes of reflexivity, positionality, and abolitionist approaches to research as we all had been struggling with power dynamics in our fieldwork. Although we are in different stages of our respective careers, ranging from Master's student to postdoctoral researcher, these panels opened a space where we could each discuss our frustration at the academic system we were contributing to. The roundtable structure provided a freer space in which we established personal relationships and began to develop our framework informed by the discussions between panel members and attendees who shaped the conversation.

Later, we began holding weekly online meetings to discuss these issues and write a paper. The basis of our experiment started with the agreement of writing synchronously on a shared document. We wrote this paper through the creation of a collaborative writing space, echoing similar methodologies (Mountz et al., 2015; Bhattacharyya et al., 2021; The Res-Sisters, 2017). The collective synchronicity of this process felt unique. We wrote simultaneously, often editing and negotiating with one another at the precise moment of writing. The process began in a dialogue that started from an 'I' and a chaotic collage of different colours, fonts and comments to a continuously discussed 'we'. Together, we typed and edited the 'main' body of text that you find in this paper, but our first online gatherings emerged through writing small reflections

that voiced our particular experiences of neoliberal academia and its reproduction. These reflections would later be retained as the vignettes/pop-outs that sprout up throughout the paper, but were used initially as a place to explore ideas, differences and resonances between our experiences. These different strands of collective writing informed each other, posing questions on the different power dynamics being negotiated through reflexivity and how writing alongside, with and for each other, could offer a method that differs from the individualised one. For us, collective writing became an affective intervention, guided by the shared negotiation of our frustration and anger with the neoliberal academy, as well as the potential of forming something different/transformational.

This fluid writing process required us to be patient, trusting and collaborative throughout. One of the implications of this experiment involved the creation of not only a space of academic production but also care and support, and helped us produce 'mutual security' (see PyGyRg, 2012). As academics we are encouraged to write single-authored publications to advance our careers. However, we decided to engage in the feminist praxis of writing together (Davies and Gannon, 2009; The Res-Sisters, 2017) to, among other things, fight the loneliness and competition of academic spaces – as Otto's pop-out shows.

Another implication regarding co-writing is that it enables reflexivity and visibilises the multiplicity of experience that facilitates the practice of empathy and learning (El Kotni et al., 2020). Similarly, co-writing promotes solidarity, accountability, and commitment, facilitating the creation of a safe space to share ideas – as Simon and Rich's pop-outs show – against extractivist practices. Mistakes are visible, disrupting the imaginary of the perfect researcher. Moreover, in our case, we resisted individualisation to a point where we no longer remembered which ideas were ours in the first place. Even though the pressure to produce remains, it feels better when it is 'carried around' in the company of colleagues and friends – as Elisa's and Sara's vignettes illustrate. At the review stage, often one filled with anxiety and insecurity, responding collectively allowed us to take a reflective, consensus based approach which meant the responsibility of decision making was shared. Ultimately, dividing the emotional and practical labour of responding to the reviews eased the negative affects associated with the review process.

The intersection of dimensions of our identities – such as gender, age, and class – have led us to experience different oppressions such as precarity or patriarchal violence. In our weekly meetings we realised how our different experiences in academia had shaped us. These discussions led us to decide to use pop-out sections that emphasise the diversity of experiences inside our collective dialogue. The pop-outs are intentionally raw and emotive. They were written in-situ, in the moment, and just as research subjects interviewed might say something audacious, arrogant, unsubstantiated, or just plain 'wrong', we quote ourselves authentically and refuse to rework them as part of our 'argument'. Even though the pop-outs might at times look similar to the main text, or use similar reflections, or address similar topics, they are unprocessed and unrefined, and have been intentionally left so. The pop-outs are the spontaneous result of the gambit of our process, that we experiment writing and reflecting together and see what comes. The argument of our paper exists outside the pop-outs, and so any 'unqualified' statements made by individual authors in the pop-outs should not be scrutinised under a peer-review style lens.

These pop-outs disturb the content-methodology dichotomy of traditional papers and complicate the conceptual category of 'findings' by placing 'data' in all sections. Writing together became a way of visibilising these tensions in academic work, rather than consigning them to a positionality statement which individualises experiences of structural oppression. Collective writing presented itself as a way of sensing out a collective reflexivity.

We begin the following section on reflexivity and the neoliberal academy with the first pop-out of this paper.

3. The neoliberal academy

This section highlights key intersections of neoliberalism and reflexivity. ‘Reflexivity’ - which we define more fully below - is proposed by the academy as a kind of antidote to potential violence caused by researchers who don’t acknowledge their subject positions and positionalities of power. But despite the prevalence of the term, neoliberal academia continues to be structurally racist, patriarchal, and individualist. Here, we name a selection of ways neoliberal academia perpetuates structural violence so as to make clear the need for new methods of reflexivity.

Neoliberalism is a political, economic, and social system that imagines all human and non-human interactions to be managed through capitalist market-logic. Free-market ideology is supported by several practices and policies, including privatisation, deregulation, flexibility, elimination of tariffs, fiscal austerity and so on (Harvey, 2011). One of the material effects of neoliberalism is its encouragement to privatise public goods, including education. The rise of neoliberalism with the retreat of the state and its institutions in the provision of services has meant that private corporations come to fill the vacuum left by public institutions (Pyles, 2011), or public institutions internally marketise, such as in academia. Values such as freedom and choice, entrepreneurship, consumption, individualism, and meritocracy are attached to neoliberal ideology (Oliva et al., 2018) and have come to influence subjectivities (Brown, 2015). In particular, ‘choice’ and ‘personal responsibility’ are two of the primary tenets of neoliberalism that connect subjectivities with an economic vision (Duggan, 2014, 12). Joan Pujolar (2020) claims that expressions such as ‘projects of the self’, ‘choice’, and ‘self-improvement’ reveal the extent to which economic relations of production have permeated our contemporary lives.

The logic of neoliberalism produces subjectivities of the homo-economicus (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2011; Kmak, 2015) which influence higher education, both in policy and practice (e.g. Vingaard Johansen et al., 2017; Skea, 2021; Urciuoli, 2012). According to Wendy Brown, whose reading of neoliberalism we follow in this article, neoliberal reason ‘shrinks the value of higher education to individual economic risk and gain’, and instead of ‘cultivating a broadly educated citizenry, higher education now produces human capital’ (2015, p.23-24). This positioning of researchers as purely rational actors valued on their ‘outputs’ leaves little space for reflexivity that necessitates emotional connection with both our research and ourselves.

In regard to universities, as well as other public institutions, neoliberal orthodoxies promote an incorporation of intensive managerial control practices (metrics to measure efficiency, accountability, excellence, etc.) combined with a free-market rhetoric (Lorenz, 2012)

and flexible contracts (euphemism for firing someone easily). In short, neoliberalism has increased precarity in academia (see Loher and Strasser, 2019). The introduction of these practices has forced academics to increase their individual knowledge production with publications, conference presentations, internationalisation, and heightened levels of competition among peers. The authors in this paper are writing from different academic contexts in Spain and the UK. In each of these settings the processes of academic neoliberalisation have manifested in particular but connected ways (for instance how one third of all academic staff in these countries are on temporary contracts, see UCU, 2022, Silió, 2023). This job uncertainty has profound impacts on our physical and mental health (e.g. Grove, 2021).

We are aware that the concept of neoliberalism has been overused, sometimes with little to no social analysis (see: Rodgers, 2018). However, we argue that neoliberalism as described above is a necessary context to centre our analysis. The link between the neoliberal academy and weak reflexivity, we find, is located in the individualised ‘project of the self’ which allows the tokenistic handling of structural power relations, with their eventual demotion beneath the urge to produce ‘new knowledge’. One example of this misuse is how historically knowledge has been produced as neutral despite its colonial roots (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

Even as we write collectively and reflexively to destabilise normative structures of knowledge production, by publishing as five white academics, we continue to reproduce the white supremacy of the neoliberal academy (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). The excessive focus on small gains made by women, LGBTQIA + collectives, and racialised people inside academia masks the fact that the academic apparatus continues to enforce patriarchal (Matamala, 2023) and racist structures. For instance, white men still publish more in virtually all disciplines (Fox Tree and Vaid, 2022).

Patriarchy inside the academy has been extensively studied, but its consequences continue to be threatening to women, as illustrated in the pop-out above. Women continue to hold the most precarious positions in universities, as well as dealing with administrative work, organising meetings, translating interviews, preparing classes or mentoring students (Arday, 2021; Zheng, 2020).

Our, and others’, experiences in academia expose some of the many forms of oppression it reproduces, including its links to neoliberalism, patriarchy and colonialism. But sharing ‘out of place’ encounters also highlights cracks in the system which allow for moments of love and solidarity to form through shared moments of anger and despair. As Gargi Bhattacharyya writes, ‘broken heartedness thins our skins so we become open to others’ (2019). When we shared our stories with each

Cruel optimism of neoliberal academia

In *Cruel Optimism*, her magnum opus on affect and capitalism, Lauren Berlant explains that ‘a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’ (Berlant, 2011:1). For the characters in the novel which Berlant analyses (pp 36–49), it is their removal from the lifeworld of capitalism and the market which produces their ennui and disorientation. They get rich, but lose all social meaning because all the social relations they have ever known or learnt to negotiate are structured by capitalism, money, and the market.

We, academics in a different system, have also suffered cruel optimism in our diverse attempts to break out of our neoliberal subjectivity. To release ourselves from the precarity of short-term contracts we must publish single authored articles in high-ranking journals. But if we achieve this, we become ensconced within our ego and self-importance, isolating ourselves from the collective of other researchers who have yet to gain fame. This is something that we have often experienced.

We long to be released from neoliberal conditions, but the only escape is perfecting neoliberal subjectivity. We have tried to find salvation from precarious contracts that induce competition but produce competitive angst in others when we publish and gain tenure. Hence, we feel like we are trapped in relations of cruel optimism: where the very thing we desire hinders our flourishing.

The methodology we use in this paper is an attempt to dance with the neoliberal social relations that structure us. We are still writing, producing; still doing something that gets our ‘name’ out there and aids our career but we share the ‘weight of the sovereignty’ and avoid ‘psychotic loneliness’ (Berlant, 2011:43).

Academic struggles

As I began to get involved in the research activities of the various institutes and departments through which I have passed, I started feeling uncomfortable. On the one hand, my inexperience, youth and the fact that I was a woman always played against me. My arguments were not listened to if my interlocutor was a man and his position within the institution was that of a titular or chair professor. Although at first my feminist consciousness comforted me, I began to accept that my arguments were not of quality and that I probably had no idea what I was talking about. I went from being a good student recognised as such in the Master's programme, by professors and peers, to being a shadow in reputable institutes and departments. My body and mind ended up disciplined to the point that my characteristic outgoing personality was hidden under the façade of a frightened child in academic spaces.

During the process of writing this paper I struggled about how to call the mistreatment I suffered from the professor. I discussed it with my colleagues. Should we call it 'violence' and, in this case, 'symbolic violence'? Was it a process of producing myself as a researcher inside academia and, in this sense, was it a process of subjectification?

In my experience, I sensed this treatment as violence. For me, gender is what makes the domination of the director and chair professors over me violence. It produces submissive behaviour and the learned helplessness which leads to other more explicit violence, such as, workplace and sexual harassment.

Even though I have always been in so-called feminist departments, it was difficult to talk about those experiences and I always felt that it was something that just happened to me. It was the process of starting to talk, working with more women that have felt the same way, which helped me disarm not only all the subjectification of neoliberal academia, but also of the patriarchy inside it.

'Out of place' encounters

Back in 2019, Sara went to give a talk on gender and asylum to a public research institution in Spain. Most of the attendees were men in stable positions inside public research institutions in the country. There were only four women in the room including Sara as the keynote speaker.

When the talk was over, the moderator, who not only happened to be a man, but also held a position as the director of a research group, started critiquing the talk without giving other attendees the opportunity to participate. The theme of the talk was not something he had expertise on, but he nevertheless continued talking without letting other people share their thoughts. Although the situation was uncomfortable, nobody did anything to call it out or stop it. After all, a powerful white man monopolising a discussion is nothing new to anyone. Given that her expertise was being questioned, while knowing that as a female early academic any kind of reaction to the director's 'masculine exercise of power' from Sara would have been read as 'emotional' (see [Bono et al., 2019](#)), gave her a feeling of loneliness that made her feel 'out of place'.

When the talk finished, one of the women attendees asked Sara her questions on the side, saying that she had not felt it was a safe space to talk after the moderator's intervention. The sexist academic environment had also made this attendee feel like she wasn't legitimised to ask questions and so she had had to ask them privately. Days later, Sara received an email from Elisa asking for some of the references from her talk. In her response, Sara shared her concerns regarding the working environment and gender inequalities occupying the academic space. Elisa agreed upon them. This academic space made all the women who attended the talk feel like they were 'out of place'.

Through making contact and space for this shared frustration and anger, this created a sense of sorority and solidarity from which a close friendship formed between Elisa and Sara.

other in the synchronous collective writing time, new solidarities were built. This collective sharing produced reflections that enhanced the reflexivity of the authors. In the next section, we explore more explicitly how the 'reflexivity' we have been taught is revealed to be inadequate.

4. Navigating reflexivity through the neoliberal academy

'Reflexivity is a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes.' ([Chaturvedi, 2022](#) p.1; see also Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019). Our central contribution to debates on reflexivity is our experiment with synchronous writing as a continuous and collaborative practice.

Through the process of writing together we gained clarity on how exactly we became disillusioned with reflexivity, and in return, we realised how it was these disappointments that induced us to host and search for conference panels that explored critical reflexivity. As we held the online space for each other, specific autoethnographic reflections on reflexivity emerged. These reflections were crafted into vignettes which, left largely unedited, appear in the pop-out sections throughout. With these vignettes in place as our 'data', we stood back and analysed how these experiences fit within existing critiques of neoliberal academia.

The below section showcases three pop-out anecdotes that all relate to the problem of practising 'reflexivity'. In turn, the pop-outs explore (i) reflexivity as a form of socio-professional capital, (ii) reflexivity's potential to mask extractivist research practices, and (iii) university-endorsed reflexivity as an instance of Sara [Ahmed's \(2006\)](#) 'non-performativity'.

Reflexivity, alongside positionality, is found within almost all academic writing and discussions, but it focuses predominantly on the individual identity of the researcher. In the introductory text, which may be an early academic's first encounter with reflexivity, the *SAGE handbook Qualitative Organizational Research: Core Methods and Current Challenges*, reflexivity is described as 'the process by which research turns back upon and takes account of itself' ([Symon and Cassell, 2012](#), p.72). However, this practice of 'reflexivity' often becomes an empty act of signalling one's positionality and identity before going on to present an argument unaffected by this positionality. This underdeveloped process of taking 'account of oneself' is presented as enough to remove accountability from the writer. Furthermore, by nodding to one's entrapment within 'structural' relations, these discursive acts can actually disguise the responsibility that researchers have in regards to their agency.

4.1. The trap of reflexivity

Whilst the reflexive turn has led to researchers re-termining individuals in their study as ‘participants’, ‘collaborators’ or ‘interlocutors’ as opposed to ‘research subjects’, these substitutions can mask the subjectification that occurs within our field notes and publications. If James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) launched a debate on how authoritative writing ossifies people into subjects, we question how ‘reflexivity’ is being employed to disguise the researcher’s scientific intentions. Weak reflexivity and the lazy deployment of softer euphemisms hides the power and desire of the researcher to transform them into ‘perfect’ subjects.

Our epistemic authority as members of elite institutions continues to afford us the right to decide and dictate the representation of experiences of those in our research, with reflexivity often only solidifying this power. This dynamic, as we have argued in section 2, works to both prevent challenges to neoliberalism, and due to the excessive workloads of the neoliberal university, further restricts the potential for proper reflexivity to be achieved.

4.2. Extractivist practices and (mis-)translation

Some of us work in contexts where individuals are facing societal marginalisation to various degrees and in multiple forms. This marginalisation also works to block access to particular channels (academia, media etc) where people’s experiences could be heard, thus to a certain extent, sharing information on these contexts is exactly the reason why the research is important. Whilst our research can force recognition of issues that were previously hidden by processes of state violence, it is increasingly clear that research itself can sustain a paradigm that removes agency from those being researched.

Throughout our discussions as a group, we tried to look at what it means to actually respond to and work against this injustice that occurs in relation to access to research (Fricker, 2007). We recognised that parts of our research approaches were reproducing extractive uses of voice (Castillejo Cuéllar, 2005, 2007). We were disappointed that

orthodox types of reflexivity do not question this injustice and still lean on methods of translation which foreground the linguistic hegemony of the white researcher.

By our mere involvement in anglophone academia (Christou, 2011), which systemically leverages and silences subaltern voices (Spivak, 1988), our words benefit from a hierarchy of audibility. This comes out in the practical methods of interviews and data ‘extraction’, but also the way in which voices are positioned textually by researchers. We can see this when we look at the standard formatting of a lot of research articles, in particular the way oral knowledge is transposed and made ‘data’ by hovering between paragraphs. Ethnographic testimonies play shifting roles in validating academic work, sometimes at the forefront as token nods to subject voices, while also being thrust to the background amid jargonistic analysis.

4.3. The non-performativity of reflexivity

Reflexivity, in many of our experiences, is something which is rarely actually taught and, if it is, space is not allowed for it to truly be practised. From personal experiences of supervisors who speak of their research participants in dismissive/derogatory language to those who argue against compensating participants for their time on the grounds that it may ‘impact the results’, it is hard to unlearn the implicit and explicit lessons we are taught about the inherent superiority of the researcher. Beyond this dismissal, both material and temporal barriers present further difficulties in reflexive processes. We read the neoliberal university’s insistence on practising ‘reflexivity’ as an example of an institutional ‘nonperformative’ speech (Ahmed, 2006). For Ahmed, it is not that institutions state their commitment to political or ethical ideals – like ‘antiracism’ – and then fail to achieve them, but that the ‘[non-performative] “works” because it fails to bring about what it names’ (Ahmed, 2006, p.105). It is in the very act of publicly stating dedication to an ideal practice that the conditions for the enactment of that practice are erased. In the case of the non-performativity of reflexivity, it is precisely by circumscribing the definition of reflexivity into individual, personal reflection – and separating reflexivity from ‘real’ knowledge production – that the university blocks the realisation of reflexivity in its

Self-reflection as socio-professional capital

I (Rich) want to reflect on the ethical and political problems of presenting myself as a self-reflective and reflexive ethnographer in the field. My research focuses on social entrepreneurs of education in India. I explore how notions of leadership are colonised by entrepreneurialism and how socially-oriented educationalists learn to view their own self-development as contributing to social change. In the Indian Education Reform Movement (Ball, 2016) that I study, self-reflection has high cultural value.

As an anthropological researcher funded by the UK government, I was paid to complete a Masters’ in Social Research Methods of which researcher reflexivity and reflection were a part. During fieldwork I was keen to quickly build relationships with potential research subjects to gain their trust and gain access to their lifeworlds. By performing self-reflection during NGO meet-ups, and by facilitating workshops on arts-based self-reflection, I gained cultural value in this community and became respected and accepted.

At the same time, I sought examples of ‘entrepreneurial’ educators who were by-passing historically- and culturally-informed self-reflection and instead paying lip-service to this method while they focused on the more pragmatic task of building a social enterprise. I wanted to identify educationalists with extreme levels of ‘neoliberal subjectivity’ so I could present them in my thesis as examples of how the corporate world and the global development sector are influencing education reform in India. I wanted to find the ‘ideal’ neoliberal social entrepreneur of education and so, in some way, I produced one.

In a kind of lightning ‘biographical’ method (see Beatty, 2018), I became fascinated by one entrepreneur, and ‘subjected’ him to my authority as a researcher by playing on his desire to be associated with a ‘self-reflective’ white man from a UK university. The entrepreneur, in turn, revealed intimate details of his childhood and family life that helped me theorise about how entrepreneurship is fuelled by patriarchal family systems and the need for approval.

The main twist is that I now write with a collection of ‘self-reflective’ academics uncomfortable with their powerful positioning as ‘knowledge producers’. In the desire to present my experience of fieldwork with a wider audience, and ultimately find paid employment by bolstering my profile, I serve up another ‘reflection’ on my fieldwork as a token of my status as an ‘ethical’ researcher. Through this process, I become the very ‘ideal’ neoliberal subject I sought in the field, a veritable ‘entrepreneur of oneself’ (Foucault, 2000) who mobilises self-reflection as socio-professional capital. In short, the more I ‘reflect’, the more neoliberal I become.

Lost in academic translation

Migrant-led experience should be at the forefront of activist research against borders. However, in the current academic system, I've seen how this positional commitment is not always carried out. Rather, migrant epistemologies are often extracted, used, and situated within convoluted texts, including my (Simon's) own writing. Subject voices get centred, but by the researcher, not migrants themselves. This feeds a system in which the experiences and words of people are required, but represented through academicised means, as if there are certain voices which are unintelligible without many layers of abstraction, 'contextualization' and rewording.

I see this as a process of academic translation. Translation is not just the movement from one language to another (often through the hegemony of English), but from one register or tone to another. Power is inscribed in translation. Testimonies and interviews used in academia regularly bear this out. Their role as methods of data collection are often legitimated by the impetus to 'centre lived experience', lauded as a tenet of good inductive ethnographic work. But the very process of transcribing 'something said', into 'something written in a technical way', reproduces the notion of subject voices as inferior 'vernaculars', ways of articulation which become nuanced only through the ears and hands of a researcher. In practice, quotes and reflections of people crossing borders, (as well as other people subject to research), get pushed through a jargon generator that converts the supposed 'inchoate', 'non-expert' and 'subjective' into texts which become 'legible' through exclusive types of social capital. My reflections here are no exception. Our deference to this generator renders and sustains the supremacy of white-liberal individualised vocalities over the actual situated insight and agency of people being interviewed.

I caught myself writing rubbish like:

'They said this [insert quote], which underscores the bla bla, hyper-bla, inter-bla, incommensurate bla of bla ... belying a crucial aspect of bla-bordering'

When in fact the quote was more explicitly saying:

'I'm frustrated with this situation'

This jargon generator actually moves us away from accessible ways of (un)learning and meaning-making, conferring 'knowledge' to a set of linguistic codes and cyphers often because they gatekeep, and not because they say anything. So what would it mean to rethink research beyond academic translation?

Listening to Discomfort

Reflexivity, in my (Otto's) personal experience, was a process through which the embodied reflexivity I experienced went on to preemptively influence my research design. When producing my original research methodology, I began to battle with the complexity of producing research that I felt justified to do.

The research originally aimed to look at the everyday acts of resistance by people seeking asylum in the UK. Whilst reading around the ethics of research participation, looking at approaches such as Participatory Action Research, I began to feel a deep discomfort and anxiety around the steps required to formulate a research project which did not fall into tokenistic or exploitative research paradigms. This discomfort came from the realisation that, as a PhD student conducting an individual project with only three years of funding, it may be impossible for me to carry out the steps needed to form a project that was genuinely participatory and emancipatory. At first, it wasn't easy to identify and understand this embodied feeling of discomfort but it stuck with me, pushing me to continue thinking and adjusting my research to something which removed these feelings of uneasiness. The eventual change was one which shifted my research away from individuals to whom I had little responsibility or accountability towards a new focus which looked to understand the experiences of individuals who I was more closely related to. I changed my research to look at activists who I had campaigned alongside. Whilst some were still asylum seekers and refugees, the shift from individuals I would have contact with in settings of power imbalance to individuals I stood alongside on picket lines and met with in settings of mutual decision making changed these feelings of discomfort towards something of excitement and joy.

Years later, when analysing the transcripts I had from interviews with these participants, I began to explore the importance and power of negative affective responses to moments when individuals had recognised their own behaviour as problematic or oppressive (Wolf et al., 2023). Exploring these themes alongside a deeper dive into affect theory, I began to recognise that the discomfort which I had experienced was similar. Through my affective response to my own research methodology, I had been forced to reckon with the aspects of it that were problematic and oppressive. I would not have so easily identified and pushed towards this analysis if I had not gone through an experience that was so similar to the ones my participants described.

This moment represented something which felt like embodied reflexivity, much the same as some of the participants in my study, who were not able to immediately recognise why or how they could rectify their behaviours. With time and space given to this process, I was able to understand what changes I could make so that instead of trying to suppress this discomfort, I allowed it to influence how I engaged with my research.

My experience was one which showed that reflexivity can move beyond systematic, cognitive functions to something embedded within our corporeal lived experience. Importantly, my experiences in the field needed time to be understood, time that is seldom afforded to academics placed into a neoliberal institution that sees time without a material outcome as something wasted, not an essential part of the research development process.

cohorts.

For many of us, it was only after our fieldwork was finished, or too late in the process, that we were able to recognise the elements of our research we felt uncomfortable with. The significant time pressures we

faced in producing research led to a situation where reflexivity became exactly what it shouldn't be: a box-ticking exercise, instead of a process through which we allowed our research to truly turn back on us (to the extent where it can impact and change our work). For us, reflexivity was

something not only conceptual but also lived corporeally through feelings of shared frustration and discomfort at the institutions and research projects we were a part of. By discussing these experiences as we wrote this paper, we began to unpick the ways in which we were complicit or responsible for producing and forming our research participants in ways which felt problematic and disingenuous.

The trap that many academics may fall into is to ‘regard an academic commentary as a political act or the critique of texts as a feat of resistance, and experience revolutions in the order of words as radical revolutions in the order of things’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p.2). If we believe our research focus is worthy of the extensive energy, time and money that we expect ourselves and others to put into it, then it should also be something we are materially engaging with in our everyday lives. By being involved politically and socially within our areas of interest we are not only respecting the limitations of our academic work but also helping to ensure that our research is grounded within the material conditions it is analysing, and useful for those we are politically organising alongside. Indeed, this proximity to the movements we study may well show that academic research is not the most useful intervention for furthering a movement in a positive way. In situations where academic research does feel like a useful intervention then embedding ourselves in other communities – beyond the academy – while we continue to conduct research ‘with’ the academy, we can perhaps practise a reflexivity that holds the non-performative reflexivity produced by universities to account.

5. Discussion: affect and collective writing as a tool of reflexivity

This discussion is split into two sections. First, we review the specific reflections of reflexivity that are contained in the previous sections that developed from our experiment in collective writing. Second, we reflect on what we learnt from the process of collective writing and what implications it has for resisting the neoliberal academy.

Through the analysis of our auto-ethnographic vignettes, we reflected on our own experiences of the neoliberal academy and its intersection with practices of reflexivity. Elisa and Sara spoke about their gendered experiences of the neoliberal academy in connection to symbolic violence and ‘out of place’ encounters within the academic spaces. Simon, Otto and Rich spoke about their experiences as researchers in which they recognised, or were forced to recognise, moments in their research process where reflexivity failed, and how this failure was linked, in part, to the conditions they were placed into as researchers navigating the neoliberal academy.

Talking through these experiences together raised some of the ways in which critical or collective approaches to methods and positionality can move us beyond the confines of neoliberal academia. Our main discovery was collective writing itself. The space that we created in the process of writing felt, in its own way, to be an act of resistance against many of the issues we had identified within our work. By writing together, and forcing ourselves to slow down, we co-produced a nourishing social space that acted as a pre-emptive antidote to feelings of overwork, anxiety, and stress. This was also an experiment in collective reflexivity, learning how to sit together and engage with our embodied experiences, sensing ways our research practices can reproduce problematic power structures, and sharing tools to resist this.

This paper has been a reflection on reflection. By writing synchronously, we rediscovered the importance of affect in doing good reflexive research. The pop-outs display our feelings of discomfort, disgust, shame, anger and love. Their creation has allowed us to reflect on how our ‘feeling bodies’ influence our ‘thinking minds’, and the realisation that better reflexivity is attentive to embodied feelings throughout. Critical reflexivity is a process that takes time, and our intervention on collective writing seeks to join up with wider calls for slow academia (see Coburn and Gormally, 2017; Mountz et al., 2015). Slow academia for us also means creating processes of care, nurturing relationships, and

considering our positioning within activist struggles.

During our research we have experienced a range of affective states: discomfort, in Otto’s case, disgust, in Simon’s pop-out, shame, in Rich’s relationship with his interlocutor, anger, in Elisa’s position in her department, and love, when Sara and Elisa met. By revealing these emotional states in the presence of listening to others we came to realise how writing jointly melded ideas and made us think differently about them. If E. M. Förster famously wrote, ‘how do I know what I think until I see what I say?’, to show how the act of expression leads to self-knowledge, we might say, ‘how do I know what I feel until I share it with others?’. It is when we embrace such feelings and intuitions – in light of our positionality – that reflexivity can be recuperated. This is how we found each other, created a bond that goes beyond our professional life, and looked to ways in which reflexivity could speak through and transform our research, writing and activism. This is how we started this collective writing method and why we think it is a resistance practice to neoliberal academia, and to the modes of reflexivity which had thus far isolated us.

Centralising affect as we negotiate neoliberal academia feels intuitively right because it was a sense of discomfort and anger with the state of the world that led us into academia in the first place – we were first activists and artists, later, academics. It was by being guided by our affects that we started writing this piece, reflecting on reflexivity in collaboration – and we follow other academics who centralise emotion as essential to critical and political research (Askins and Swanson, 2019). We wanted to put a spark of happiness in our life with this methodology. It both helped us to take ourselves less seriously and apply ourselves more seriously to write. As neoliberal subjects (which we can’t deny we are) we feel the need to produce and be productive. Instead of resisting neoliberal subjectification we turned it on its head and stirred together our collective anxiety into a soup of collective writing.

Leaning into neoliberal subjectification, this collective process also gave us freedom. The weight of the text was spread on all our shoulders, giving each of us room to manoeuvre between sections, pruning and fertilising while another tended to the seeds we’d sown elsewhere. By only working on the text while in session, we felt no shirker’s guilt; if we felt blocked, we could retreat to the reflective diary which we kept at the bottom of the document, and babble.

Reading Hannah Arendt’s (2018 [1958]) terms against the grain, this writing has been labour, not work. It has been an essential life process – like cooking or sleeping – offering us a curious form of solace. Like preparing a meal and eating it, this writing has both taken and given us energy. Perhaps under neoliberalism, (collective) writing production – necessary for one’s economic and psychic survival – is a new form of ‘labour’ as self-care within academia.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Simon Campbell: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Elisa Floristán Millán:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Otto Wolf:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Rich Thornton:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sara Riva:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of interest

None.

Acknowledgements

All authors have contributed equal amounts of work. We have chosen to list authors in order of least experienced researcher to the most experienced.

The authors would like to thank Ed Thornton and Lili Schwoerer for

their comments on our initial draft. Also, Vicky and John Thornton for hosting a retreat space where we could complete our initial submission. We also want to thank the anonymous reviewers for their generous and insightful feedback.

Elisa Floristán Millán was funded by Formación al Profesorado Universitario fellowship (FPU).

Sara Riva. This research was financially supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the grant agreement No 839191 (Humanitarianism and Refugees at the Border: A Transnational Feminist Analysis of Nonprofit Organizations [HARBOR]).

Rich Thornton was funded by an ESRC Studentship for his doctoral research, and is currently funded by an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellowship award.

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