



Fantasy Spaces and Emotional Derailment: Reflections on Failure in Academic Activism

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Abstract:	<p>Against a backdrop of contentious political landscapes of Brexit and the Trump victory, we reflect on our own experience of an attempt to engage in an activist event for academics that failed. We contend that our experiences of failure in this event, revealed by fantasy spaces and emotional derailment, serve as lessons for reinvigorating possibilities for academic activism. To provide background, we describe an event designed to form a policy as a collective response to the populism of Donald Trump. We then reflect on our role as critical scholars in this event that failed to meet our objective, and taught us other important lessons. Our analysis leads us to address three orthodoxies: diatribes decrying the awfulness of Trump and his administration cronies create fantasy spaces that might 'feel' good, but are actually counterproductive; academia itself is a site for activism that has far-reaching implications; and that hiding failure is a form of collaboration with performativity. Our provocation is, in part, to resist the 'heroic' and grandiose success story narrative – both in academia and activism. We do this by foregrounding vulnerability through sharing our own story of failure and reflecting on some of the devices that derailed our attempt at academic activism.</p>

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“People become afraid of each other. They’re convinced there’s not a damn thing they can do. I think we have it inside us to change things. We need the courage. It’s a scary thing.” Bill Talcott, Organizer (Working by Studs Terkel, 1974, p. 355)

Against a backdrop of contentious political landscapes of Brexit and the Trump victory, we – as academics participating in a neoliberal higher education system – ask ourselves whether there is a damn thing we can do. These words echo Bill Talcott’s, but also reflect our own experience of an attempt to engage in an activist event for academics that failed. We contend that our experiences of failure in this event, revealed by fantasy spaces and emotional derailment, serve as lessons for reinvigorating possibilities for academic activism.

The boundaries of what constitutes ‘activism’ for academics have become contested and controversial (Martin, 2009; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010). The boundary that we use here for academic activism refers to internal efforts to change the systems and structures within academia in ways that can enable us to address more effectively the broader social change that Contu (2017) refers to as intellectual activism. While activism was once seen as the responsibility of academics who hold a unique privilege in society (Blomley, 1994), the increasing pressures of managerialism in higher education silenced much of the activism by academics (Burford, 2017). Nevertheless, despite the neoliberal corporatization of higher education, new academic activists are beginning to find a voice (Spicer & Böhm, 2007; The Autonomous Geographies Collective, 2010).

In finding that voice, however, academic activists face a crisis of lack of meaningful change because they too often fail to reflect on their actions (Martin, 2009). We take this

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3 opportunity to reflect and, more importantly, *share* our reflections, hoping that others will learn
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5 vicariously through our experiences of an attempt to respond to populism. Our provocation is, in
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7 part, to resist the ‘heroic’ and grandiose success story narrative – both in academia and activism.
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9 We do this by foregrounding vulnerability through sharing our own story of failure and reflecting
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11 on some of the devices that derailed our attempt at academic activism.
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15 We represent two perspectives for this activist event—one as an organizer and one as a
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17 participant. During the event, we sat across from one another and realized a tension that we both
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19 felt—this was not going at all how we had anticipated. In taking stock of the event we realized
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21 that we were: angry at what we felt were injustices in the populism we saw growing in our
22
23 respective countries; frustrated at the lack of response from our association when other academic
24
25 groups we were part of stepped up to condemn actions that marginalized their members; hopeful
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27 that we could create momentum to get the association to act; irritated with our colleagues when
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29 they veered ‘off-script’; and guilty that we each may have contributed to what we saw as the
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31 emotional derailment occurring in the event.
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35 Collectives engaged in activism are inevitably shaped by emotion; and a better
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37 understanding of the nature of that co-created connection can help us make sense of how we can
38
39 engage in change (Jasper 2014). From a systems psychodynamics perspective, those of us
40
41 engaged in the event were blinded by our own ‘fantasy spaces’ (Vince, 2011), which serve as
42
43 unconscious primers to ways of knowing, feeling, and being within a group. These fantasy
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45 spaces have both positive and negative implications; while fantasies can serve group members
46
47 very well in navigating complex political contexts, they can also be restrictive and prevent
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49 members from learning new ways of moving forward. Our experience with this activism event
50
51 mirrored Vince’s (2011) contention that fantasy spaces hold a paradox “within which learning is
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3 both desired and avoided (p. 336).” We saw both play out emotionally in the course of this event
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5 and in our journey of writing this reflection.
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8 We use the concept of fantasy space (Vince, 2011) as an analytic tool to examine both the
9
10 emotions associated with an academic activism event to challenge populism, and our own
11
12 motivations for writing this piece. To provide background, we describe an event designed to
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14 form a policy as a collective response to the populism of Donald Trump. We then reflect on our
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16 role as critical scholars in this event that failed to meet our objective, and taught us other
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18 important lessons. Our analysis leads us to challenge three orthodoxies.
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22 First, diatribes decrying the awfulness of Trump and his administration cronies create
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24 fantasy spaces that might ‘feel’ good, but are actually counterproductive. Second, the academy is
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26 not merely an ivory tower above the fray of populism (Martin, 2009); we argue that academia
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28 itself is a site for activism in which meaningful changes have far-reaching implications. Third,
29
30 and most importantly, we contend that the neoliberal pressure and practice of hiding failure is a
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32 form of collaboration with performativity.
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35 **Setting the Scene: Populism and Fragments of Pain, Fear, Anger**

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37 On 23 January 2017, the President of our professional association reached out to a
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39 number of women throughout the world that she knew had participated in the 21 January 2017
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41 Women’s March on Washington. Faced with strong opposition from historically powerful
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43 members of the Board of Directors, the President wanted to take some sort of action in the midst
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45 of an uncertain and hostile national context. She hoped there would be a special session at our
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47 forthcoming international conference in March that in some way tapped into the energy from that
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49 social movement and, as she shared in her email, would “provide a venue to share [our]
50
51 experience for others to learn from and be motivated by.”
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3 She left it open to those who were involved as to how and what we would choose to do.
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5 The organizing team wanted to gather insight from association members to develop a broad
6
7 policy addressing issues of the marginalized within our new populist context. Our response was
8
9 to create a workshop to stimulate dialogue around the Unity principles proposed by the Women's
10
11 March on Washington. To achieve that goal, the organizers ensured that we had a workshop
12
13 facilitator for each of the Unity principles: ending violence, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA
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15 rights, worker's rights, civil rights, disability rights, immigrant rights, and environmental justice.
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17 A ninth principle, racial justice, was added when it was brought to our attention that we had
18
19 failed to consider racial diversity.
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24 Participants in the session would break into small action groups around each principle to
25
26 collect ideas that could inform a draft policy on inclusion. The small groups would be formed by
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28 discussion around two key questions: 1. What does this principle mean to us as association
29
30 members? and 2. How can we respond as researchers and practitioners in our field? The idea was
31
32 to use these principles to find common ground, or create a new shared fantasy, around a policy
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34 for the whole of the association.
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38 The session did not originally appear on the conference program, so the organizers opted
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40 to generate more interest by holding a mini-rally march by the session facilitators leading to the
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42 session room. The intent was to create an event of emotional deviance (Sandlin & Callahan,
43
44 2009) to confront the routine of conference participants who were preparing to enter session
45
46 rooms. The idea was to disrupt their original plans and, perhaps, get them to follow us to our
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48 session instead. Each facilitator created a protest rally sign for their Unity principle and we
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50 marched through the hotel to our destination, chanting, "Tell me what democracy looks
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52 like... This is what democracy looks like!"
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3 The President of the association agreed to introduce the session and explain her rationale
4 for offering the space on the conference program before leaving to attend another session. There
5 were nine facilitators (one of whom was a man; one of whom was a woman of color), and seven
6 participants (four of whom were men; one of whom was a woman of color). As a result of the
7 small number, we collectively opted to remain in one larger group and hold a panel discussion
8 with each facilitator providing background on why their Unity principle was important toward
9 developing a unity policy before inviting dialogue toward generating policy ideas.
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19 We very quickly realized that we would fall short of the goal of collecting enough ideas
20 to begin developing a unity policy. First, two participants were vocal about their disappointment
21 that they saw women of color marginalized in virtually the entire progressive movement against
22 Trump, from the Women's March on Washington to our local attempt to develop policy. One
23 had chosen to not take part as an organizer to protest against the inequity against women of
24 color. Second, as the association President and the first facilitators shared the importance of their
25 Unity principle, they emphasized their pain, fear, and anger instead of focusing on the
26 performative session objective of identifying action toward creating a policy. Eventually, the
27 charged responses, underpinned by political values held, alienated several participants. Two such
28 participants were white men, unknown to the conveners and relatively new to the association,
29 who had come to the room to hear what we had to say. They challenged the speakers'
30 perspectives on the issues.
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47 Six months later, the initiative had fallen completely silent and those in positions of
48 institutional power, some of whom were part of the session, had not pursued attempts to create a
49 unity policy for the association. Our reflection on the experience suggests that our failure to
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3 address the emotions of our fantasy spaces contributed to derailing the positive energy generated
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5 from the original social movement that catalyzed the conference session.
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7 8 **Competing Fantasy Spaces and Emotional Turmoil** 9

10 Amongst the characteristics of spatial psychodynamics is the effect of fantasy in learning
11 space (Vince, 2011). The fantasies individuals and organizations create about good and bad, and
12 right and wrong, help to construct an ‘architecture of the invisible’ (Issacs, 1998, p. 68), which
13 “help[s] to generate self-imposed limitations on behaviour and action” (Vince, 2011, p. 336). In
14 our case, participants brought with them shared fantasies from multiple roles, responsibilities and
15 expectations to a temporary organization space, located within the temporary organization space
16 of a conference, where the architecture of the invisible was in formation. Where most
17 organizations create narratives that serve to construct a particular image of themselves to protect
18 them from damage, the temporary group that gathered did not share a fantasy that allowed it to
19 coalesce and mobilize for action.
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33 No matter how space is conceptualized, it influences collectives (Vince, 2011). Space is
34 tangible through physically-framed boundaries and artefacts (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004); space
35 is also intangible through cognitively- and emotionally-framed social constructions (Taylor &
36 Spicer, 2007). Our experience with our fledgling activist event showed that shared fantasies
37 emerged, and competed; the common thread was the force of emotion that wedded participants
38 to their fantasies. While everyone had come together in a shared physical space to ostensibly
39 discuss the populist movement and what to do about it, the room was nevertheless split into
40 separate and oft competing fantasy spaces that prevented possibilities for action (Brown &
41 Pickerell, 2009).
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3 Our competing spaces created distance between us that prevented collaboration.
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5 Compromise is critical when politically oppositional forces interact (Lefebvre, 2001), but we
6
7 were unable to realize our fantasy of finding common ground amongst our different perspectives.
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10 Our failure to engage with people, behaviors, values, and ideas that were emotionally
11
12 uncomfortable (for all of us) is the likely culprit in the failure of the event to meet its intended
13
14 goal. In this way, uncomfortable experiences within the spaces we constructed became devices
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16 of derailment for our academic activism.
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19 **The Physical: Symbolic Silencing as a Derailment Device**

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23 The tangible arrangements of our work influence both the fantasy spaces that emerge
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25 (Vince, 2011) and the emotional decisions that affect outcomes of events such as ours. In our
26
27 event, the session did not appear in the distributed conference program; and, the space we were
28
29 allocated for the session was not conducive to our vision of the event. The shared fantasies that
30
31 emerged were reinforced by these physical spaces.
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34 The void in the conference program created some anxiety for the session organizers. The
35
36 session was not widely announced or publicized beyond an erratum sheet in the conference
37
38 welcome packet. Physically, the session essentially did not exist in the field of vision for
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40 attendees; it remained on the periphery. We were concerned about how to get people to come to
41
42 an event if they were not aware of it.
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45 Our response was to try to create a presence in the physical space of the conference by
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47 conducting a small-scale march with protest signs and rallying chants through the lobby of the
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49 well-heeled hotel in a deeply conservative state. In retrospect, that was perhaps not the best way
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51 to accomplish our goal since the hotel management called the local police. That the police were
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3 called but quietly left when the president assured them it was ‘just part of the conference’
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5 highlights the impotence of our march.
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8 The physicality of the march itself gave us a false sense of ‘doing’ something to actively
9
10 rally people. But was it really just the trappings of activism without substance? Several of the
11
12 organizers had not even remembered the session itself. So torn was everyone with engaging in
13
14 the performative activity of presenting conference papers and planning projects, they hurriedly
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16 constructed signs from material sourced on site.
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20 Once we arrived in the space reserved for our session, we realized that the physical set up
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22 of the room was counter-intuitive to our plans. The room was the only one that was empty for
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24 the time slot, and its intended purpose was as the venue for a keynote address at a banquet (10-
25
26 top tables scattered throughout a ballroom). We gathered chairs around two tables pushed
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28 together at the front of the room in an attempt to create an intimate space in which we could
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30 generate a discussion amongst people with whom we presumed to have common interests despite
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32 our diversity.
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36 This shape that we created by moving tables had consequences; we unintentionally
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38 created the male symbol (Vince, 2011), with our male ‘arrows’ symbolically throwing barbs. The
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40 two men new to the conference who had joined us were outside the larger group and resisted
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42 efforts to get them to join the larger group. What they did was to offer us an opportunity to find
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44 underlying values, but most of the members were too busy being angry. One, a labor relations
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46 specialist, tried to use facts and objectivity to, as she called it, engage in a courageous
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48 conversation to help them ‘understand’ the organizing team’s perspective. We were so afraid of
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50 being uncomfortable with emotions, we tried to ‘objectify’ them away. As a result, we lost a
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52 valuable opportunity to see where we could find common ground to achieve our ultimate goal.
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3 Our desire to create small group collaboration around the nine principles of the Women's
4 March meant we intended to split people up and then bring them back together, a strategy we
5 now realize that was bound to reinforce divisions. This did not work because in our attempt to
6 find rational 'solutions' to complex, emotionally-laden problems, we created a structure that
7 conveniently allowed us to bury our insecurity and helplessness about what to do, denied our
8 fears about the implications of the U.S. election and growing populism, and alienated us from
9 seeing our own complicity in replicating divisiveness. That same desire to create small intimate
10 work groups also led us to attempt to 'fix' the physical setting of the space, which paradoxically
11 facilitated an 'us-them' arrangement.
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25 **The Social: Implicit Homogeneity as a Derailment Device**

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28 Our failure to understand the socially constructed fantasy spaces of our colleagues was a
29 source of anxiety for the two of us. In trying to objectify away emotion, we overlooked
30 identification processes and falsely assumed our own idea of a common, homogeneous fantasy
31 space.
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37 The President's identification with her role allowed her to alleviate her anxiety about
38 what to do about her personal convictions by turning to other members to push back against the
39 board. With a diffusion of responsibility, she appealed to one fantasy space (the women who
40 marched) in order to disrupt another fantasy space (the Board that felt our work with learning in
41 organizations as a professional association was unrelated to the populism gripping the nation).
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49 We also overlooked the identifications that manifested within the group itself. We
50 assumed our association was more homogenous than it really was. The externally fueled
51 emotions that individuals carried with them created a space that reflected the dynamics of
52 external politics. The session, to an extent, replicated external social power relations (Vince,
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3 1996). The residual anger from individual experience interfered with our ability to collaborate
4 toward consensus during the session itself. Because some individuals had institutional power,
5
6 this personal experience carried greater import and the group's transient nature did not provide
7
8 the opportunity to organize reflection (Vince, 2006). The stuckness of the group's political
9
10 dynamic created a subsequent structural barrier to creating an inclusion policy.
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15 Those who had the institutional power to lead felt unable or unwilling to continue the
16
17 dialogue. In overestimating group homogeneity, we failed to recognize the latent capacity to
18
19 work with intersectional identities to accomplish our goal. Our organizing structure reinforced
20
21 isolation, denied intersectionality and replicated 'divide and conquer' mentalities and structures
22
23 we were trying to disrupt. We saw individual responses within the session echoing the wider
24
25 socio-political environment. One participant expressed her anger at the lack of voice African-
26
27 American women had in the protest in general, "Black women are given their voice through
28
29 white women; we DEMAND a voice. This is who I am, hear my voice." Her appeal to be heard
30
31 took place against the backdrop of the Women's March, which did not include racial justice
32
33 amongst its Unity principles, and an association established and dominated by white scholars
34
35 from the global north. Another participant, a gay white man, indicated that he stood in unity with
36
37 women of color who had been overlooked so far in the protests against populism. He was also
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39 coming from a space with historic lack of voice, but we were so caught up with attempting to
40
41 achieve our objective we failed to connect the relationship between our structuring mechanism,
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43 and the emotions being expressed.
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49 **Confronting Derailments**

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51 Our reflections on this experience highlighted our own emotion-laden assumptions about
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53 ourselves as academics, and aspiring activists, and how we presumed to be the voice of our
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3 association. In an era of divisive politics, it takes courage to have genuine conversations with
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5 people who believe strongly about things that may contradict your own positions and to hold
6
7 those conversations without the arrogance of believing that your position is the ‘right’ one
8
9 (Schreven, 2018). Furthermore, in an era of competitively corporatized universities where
10
11 success holds the ultimate exchange value, it takes courage to reflect publicly on one’s failures
12
13 (Harrowell, Davies, & Disney, 2017). To do these things, academics need to find ways of
14
15 legitimately expressing vulnerability, emotion, and dissent and to show some courage to speak
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17 out, as we do here.
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22 First, rants denouncing the Trump administration might temporarily appease our anger,
23
24 but they are actually counterproductive fantasy spaces because they fail to capture the real power
25
26 of emotion to effect change. To practice activism within the academic space requires a reframing
27
28 of physical and socially constructed spaces in order to hear everyone’s deep stories and how
29
30 those stories intersect with ours in order to find a mutual way forward (Schreven, 2018;
31
32 Hochschild, 2016). We had hoped to create spaces to have meaningful conversations in our
33
34 conference session; our fantasy was to assume we could, through our identification as critical
35
36 scholars and experienced facilitators, ‘heroically’ mobilize for policy change. Our desire to foster
37
38 a constructive debate about issues at stake within a populist American context in order to
39
40 generate a policy on inclusivity quite simply failed.
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45 The neoliberal performative and ‘constructive’ nature of academia has effectively
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47 sidelined emotions to the extent that we are (no longer) equipped to deal with them in
48
49 professional settings. As a result, when emotions arose in our session, our quest to quell them in
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51 order to achieve our objective also contributed to derailing the event. Despite that ‘failure’, other
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3 successes emerged. We recognize that, for activism to be effective, we must challenge this
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5 emotional disavowal and learn to appreciate and elevate emotion.
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8 Second, we write this from an emotional space of wanting to collaborate and still want
9
10 something to happen for and with our professional association community. However, our biases
11
12 to this regard have colored how we see the way emotions unfolded and how they informed the
13
14 mechanisms through which this anti-populist social movement intersected with the creation (or
15
16 lack thereof) of an organizational policy (Hochschild, 2016). Our reflections have led us to
17
18 believe that successful interventions must acknowledge the power and privilege of how, where,
19
20 and why emotions intersect with social movements if change is to be realized. Our interpretation
21
22 of the spatial psychodynamics of the session has developed our appreciation for how to generate
23
24 learning from this event—and that shift is based upon understanding and allowing space for the
25
26 emotionally-laden conflicts inherent to a group experience.
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31 Third, the inherent performativity of traditional academic spaces, including conferences,
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33 renders them discordant in relation to engagements with praxis. In conforming to the strictures
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35 imposed by a conference program, and by structuring a session that served to divide rather than
36
37 to seek common ground, we reinforced oppositional tensions. Yet, learning from failure is
38
39 important; if we continue to wallow in the echo chamber, we cannot make the change we seek.
40
41 The nature of the performative turn in higher education has rendered reflection on failure a
42
43 precarious pathway (Gill, 2014) which is rarely addressed in the literature (Harrowell et al,
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45 2017). Our act of sharing about our failed attempt at activism is, in itself, a form of activism
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47 (Harrowell, et al, 2017).
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52 Our failure has cultivated awareness of the inherent conservatism of our academic
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54 professional association (Spicer & Böhm, 2007), and emboldens us to ask for much more than a
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3 change to association policy. The ties between the neoliberal academy (Gill, 2014) and our
4 association's objective to protect its disciplinary boundary are much clearer. In attempting to
5 create a collective space of organizing (Haug, 2013), we overestimated the ability of an
6 organization (founded during a relatively stable political era) to respond to the rise of far-right
7 populism. Our fantasy was that we could use the organization's tools to challenge tensions
8 between the organization (professional association), governing institutions (Academia/HE/US
9 Govt-Trump) and the network (meeting participants).

19 So, how do we fight populism within a professional association that is using management
20 techniques to block responses to populism? Organizational technologies developed during
21 relatively stable periods are inadequate to the task of fighting populists' disruption of public
22 space. A starting point for academic activism is to dissociate from our professional association to
23 practice in ways that 'suspend' (Schreven, 2018, p. 1485) the boundary between what we do and
24 political society. Our experience has sensitized us to the university as a site of production (Casa-
25 Cortés and Cobarrubias, 2007). To practice academic activism requires a physical and emotional
26 space apart from the performative politics of conferences and knowledge production practices
27 that divide scholars (Autonomous Geographers Collective. 2010). We propose returning to adult
28 learning's emancipatory roots to re-learn how to acknowledge and celebrate failure as a
29 foundation upon which to engage in academic activism. Mechanisms of performativity have
30 blunted our critical thinking as we labor to produce another output while disregarding the neo-
31 liberal shift of the university (Autonomous Geographers Collective. 2010).

49 The unity we seek is one that actively uses the democratic principles and practices the
50 participants of this session claimed to want, but did not necessarily grant toward others who
51 believed differently (Schreven, 2018). It was all too easy for us to criticize those who challenged
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3 the space we had created, to turn them into ‘the enemy’, by using terms described by De Cleen et
4 al. (2018) as ‘unreasonable’, ‘irrational’, ‘uneducated’, or ‘stupid’ while engaging in the “often
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6 al. (2018) as ‘unreasonable’, ‘irrational’, ‘uneducated’, or ‘stupid’ while engaging in the “often
7 secretly self-aggrandizing gesture of identifying oneself as ‘reasonable’ and ‘realistic’,
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9 ‘enlightened’, ‘educated’ and ‘smart’ (p. 8). But to be truly prefigurative of a democratic society
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11 (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016), we would need to recognize more clearly “every individual’s
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13 equal right to freedom” (www.mellemeducation.org/betzavta-method). After reflecting on this
14
15 experience, we now believe we can make change possible only when we have the courage to
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17 open windows of reflection into our fantasy spaces, to communicate with brave vulnerability,
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19 and to explore our failures as well as our successes.
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24 Will sharing fantasy spaces, publishing our emotional vulnerability, and revealing
25
26 failures be effective tools for academic activists to resist populism? Will our approach of
27
28 revealing failure and showing the vulnerability of being touching, raw and honest be understood
29
30 as a form of resistance to managerialist doctrine? Damned if we know...but it’s worth a try.
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