



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

AUTOFICTIONS IN CO-LABOURING

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when the text is done, that's it. It'll be the end of the project.

Co-labouring is a critical approach to working together in difficult times that demystifies the neoliberal, saccharine fantasy of collaboration. Across institutions—particularly those institutions which continue the logics of coloniality that shaped their development—collaboration has become synonymous with precarisation, that is, as Isabell Lorey so aptly argues, an instrument of normalisation through governance (2015). Forms of contemporary work have strayed far from dignified, responsible work, and instead we experience collaboration as the invisibility of essential social reproduction. This entering of collaboration into the institution is another example of capitalist accumulation, erasing commons-oriented practices and modes of work in favour of enforcing a governable subject. Collaboration has become entangled within institutional mechanics, replete with a moralisation that romanticises institutional processes through the lens of performance management. The 2022–2023 wave of collective industrial action across many sectors of work in the United Kingdom is a lawful escalation in the class warfare that has been fought in its newest guise since the 1980s. A class war fought on several fronts: disempowering unions, redistributing wealth toward the 1%, rewarding managerialism, increasing precarity through casualisation and pay gaps, and more. Labour has been depoliticised to a degree that working is transcendent and, as a result, politically abstracted. And the realms where affective labour dominates—the spheres of passion and care (Ridout 2013, Gotman 2021)—are often

redeployed towards a cynical and facile colonial logic of expansion and growth at the expense of the worker, who should be sustained by their passion—as Bojana Kunst (2015) has expertly argued in her analysis of artistic labour in the post-Fordist world. The transcendence of work even obscures the collective aspects of labour by focusing the individual on a ‘career’. What critical political traction might be gained in reclaiming work as a site of difficult collectivity? And collectivity itself as a productive and constant process of negotiating and caring for difference? What might be offered by making visible the forms of labour and the alliances—even temporary—that emerge between the administrative and bureaucratic logics of creative and educational work?

Is this what we’re doing?

I’m seeing it as a kind of... not oral history, but like history, writing like a kind of documentation of working conditions for the future.

Our hybridised critical/creative practice, an enquiry on co-labouring, searches for the political in relation to collaborative work in order to occupy the working conditions in a particular site and its expounding relations: higher education in the United Kingdom, especially in the field of theatre and performance. In claiming the political potential of our thinking and writing together, we are aware of the dissenting, already othered, already plural, positionalities we occupy through our own personal histories of migration and border crossing. We move towards an investment in thinking about the language of an emergent class consciousness shaping creative education at a time of intersecting crises, from war, economics, climate, and politics.

for me annotation is like comments or footnotes.

Work in the theatre has always been collaborative, differentiated, and in a strange relation to visibility. Theatre is inherently multiple in its conditions of transaction between audience and performer, and is rarely an entirely solo endeavour. Labour in the theatre has a history of being divided into specialisms, which distributes responsibility and encourages working together. Different aesthetic approaches in theatre through geographical and historical location hold different values. Values that are not always reflected in the visibility of the labour. Work in theatre practice can be a site of contestation that illuminates exploitation. In theatre and performance education, teaching and learning are too easily depoliticised, and yet also dismissed as superfluous. Neoliberalism dismantles public luxury. As in many parts of the world, the structural threat of theatre and performance in higher education resonates with many and often more severe struggles in places where its institutionalisation has been less linear. Colleagues are being made redundant, departments are closing down, and infrastructures supporting learning and teaching are becoming increasingly functionalist and reductive. These are times in which survival of the subject of performance is questionable.

Students perceive fewer possibilities to study theatre and performance before university and decreasing employment prospects for graduates. Labour is therefore doubly important to understand in this particular context of arts education because of the crisis of opportunity (and futurity) in theatre and performance (Solga 2019). Whilst we caution the exceptionalism and

privilege of the debates around the futurity of a field inherently in tension with itself, we want to pay attention to the ways in which navigating this shifting terrain reconnects with the multiple forms of resistance that have always shaped and informed both collaboration and performance para-institutionally.

This research therefore approaches the documentation of this moment as historical work. The scope of this work is to expound on the intersections between conditions of work and broader politics of collaboration beyond legible ecologies of work. Asking such questions from the perspective of theatre and performance is a hunch—thinking with Paolo Virno (2004), Miranda Joseph (2002) and Kunst (2015)—that both performativity and theatricality, as well as collaboration, are crucial factors necessary to understand the current conditions of production. Now that work is so immaterial and yet fully embodied, so knowledge-based and yet wilfully ignorant of the creativity that secures its integrity and undermining of epistemes that are overtly anticolonial, the conflicts of production are a chaos beneath a surface of calm. The theatricality necessary to conceal difficulty and the performativity that is set to work on maintaining fictions make the problem of working together all the more intelligible through the lens of theatre and performance studies.

you bring up the material reality in relation to our work.

This research into co-labouring returns to the crisis of visibility concealed within the facile championing of collaboration by taking up the tools used against workers—fiction, anonymity, creativity and, most importantly, sustained collective commitments. The writing is both a product of and adjacent to non-individual work. While the 'I' appears throughout, this multiple-authored text resists any unmasking of the particular individual. This opacity, to reference Édouard Glissant (1997), permits an authorship that uncovers the guarded secrets of work in contemporary life—the difficulty, the harm, the confusion, the impossible contradictions. In order to fully invest in these truths, fiction is utilised as a tool of persuasion that is however explicitly articulated at the outset. But fiction also emerges as the hidden tool of administration—sustaining myths that continue to uphold and centre violent pasts and futures. The reader must accept that some degree of what is read is not a report on fact but rather a record of partly speculative experience. Such singularities divorce the author of any ability to be secure in their own subject position but instead ask that creativity and criticality operate in this exchange. Rather than searching for testimonial authenticity, co-labouring autofictions displace the 'I' into a site of experience in order to uncover the effects of systemic forces on lived experience. Autofiction sits uneasily with autotheory; as Lauren Fornier argues, autotheory becomes a 'way of understanding works of art and literature that integrate autobiography and other explicitly subjective and embodied modes with discourses of philosophy and theory' (2019:3). Resonating with the works of Maggie Nelson or Paul Preciado, autotheory pushes for modes beyond the personal whilst maintaining the possibility that the personal too can act as a site for theoretical and philosophical articulation. Autofiction sits in the literary mode, toying with the relation between the fictional and the lived. In this collective nexus, co-labouring itself becomes embroiled with fictioning on the one hand, and criticality on the other. Except we want to hold the bodies present.

to what extent these are objections, and then to what extent they should be their own things, or to what extent we might think about how to hold them on the page in different ways next to each other.

The 'I' becomes a problematic 'we', investigating the difficulty of shared conditions which are nonetheless experienced with radically different singularities and positions.

Autofiction is a critical nudge towards the speculative rather than the truthful; the work presented here is written by multiple people: dis/embodied stories without an identity to anchor them. Actors portraying situations. This writing is a collective theatre of audiences attending to the conditions of work in particular sites, especially the backstage of knowledge production. This work is multiple: multiple authors, multiple layers of fiction and critique, but also more than one in the sense of its relevance. This work addresses the audiences of the present, those who are able to attend, as well as those at work backstage, and those at work in the multiplying backstages necessary to enable the fiction that occurs inside the proscenium. The maintenance work, the exclusions, the invisible colonised sites of waste that sustain the conditions of work and life as we know them. Co-labouring is an ongoing conversation that defends working together not as a story of success but as a mode of resistance—often imperfect, inevitably incomplete, but nevertheless doing the resisting.

temporalities that are overlapping and going back and forth on themselves.

And the fiction begins as it continues

This text, this writing, has been forming in my head over the past many weeks, perhaps months. I can't exactly say it's been shaping, as I can't see or feel its shape. It's appeared in dribs and drabs over the multiple times a day when I find myself doing the washing up, or during my twice-daily walks with my dog. It's popped up and stayed with me, a silent voice in my head, until something made it disappear again (an interruption, a distraction—a parcel delivery, a child needing help with a school project, a squirrel on our path which has made my dog pull on the lead and prompted me pay more attention to her and her needs). I'm almost fearful to have found—to have made—the time to sit down and write 'it' (or write with it) now. Not surprisingly, it's past my official working hours. I have an out-of-office on. I don't need to worry about emails coming in.

Microsoft Viva sent me my monthly digest a few weeks ago. It's been sitting in my 'deleted items' folder. I retrieve it. It says that over the previous month I have had three quiet days. It tells me that 'these are days without interruptions of meetings, emails, chats and calls outside your working hours'. I wonder if Microsoft Viva knows I work part-time. I look at the breakdown and my quiet days last month have been a Sunday, a Thursday and a Friday, all of which are outside my contracted hours. Should I be pleased I at least managed one Sunday over four? The digest has calculated my 'collaboration' time at 22% of my overall time: 'this is the percentage of your time spent in meetings, emails, chats and calls.' I wonder what happens when I'm teaching? Am I collaborating then? The digest doesn't seem to include teaching in its calculations. It says I have

had 69 active collaborators: 'these are people you have recently contacted through meetings, emails, chats and calls.' Easy definitions. Anyone I have had a meeting with or sent an email to is a collaborator, we are co-labourers.

An email to one of them returns this reply:

I'm on strike. There are at least four big reasons to strike: precarious employment (around 50% of teaching staff are on insecure contracts), equality (the race, gender and disability pay gaps are shocking), pay and workloads.

I am not on strike. I feel uncomfortable about this, as those four reasons are big for me too. HR has been relentless in sending emails about how the strikes will be dealt with by the institution, outlining 'the University's policy and likely implications of taking strike action or action short of strike': I am being asked to tell them of my 'intentions in respect of the industrial action using this online form as soon as possible'. Emails outline the 'impact on pay of taking strike action':

The position of the University is to withhold a day's pay from staff for each day of strike action in which they participate. If you confirm your participation or, in the absence of confirmation, we subsequently have evidence that you did participate, your pay will be withheld for each day you participated. Line managers will also be monitoring attendance on the strike days. There may be an impact on your pension if you take industrial action and pay is deducted.

Following the strikes, the university expects teaching to be rescheduled, and that priority be given to:

Activities that support the teaching and assessment of students.

Activities that support the recruitment and admissions of new students.

Management activity in support of staff e.g. staff appraisals.

Support for student graduation.

The message includes words of regret at 'having to write to staff in these terms', but these terms are justified as necessary in order to provide clarity about the university's position in relation to industrial action and 'make plans to mitigate any impact on students'. 'We do hope that staff will consider carefully before following the Union's current course of action, due to the disruption it will cause to our students.'

I did consider all the above carefully. I actually agonised over it. The decision boiled down to a list of reasons why I can't financially afford to join the picket lines. And I feel deeply embarrassed saying this, writing this.

I remember reading in Mark Fisher's *Capital Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (2010) a critique of what the unions can and cannot achieve through their practices. I look for the book on my shelves. It's not there. Did I borrow it from the library and return it? How annoying. Somehow it seems

important to find further justification for my choices, to be able to quote arguments that can explain why not taking part in strike action is not a betrayal. But I don't have the book and I can't remember the exact argument. I also don't want to look for it just to save my face, to protect my ego.

We had a team meeting yesterday. We discussed students of concern. I reported that a student had emailed me at 10:59am the previous day to let me know that they hadn't finished their essay which was due at 11:00. They had decided the day before that they would abandon their plan to submit a part-practical project that was supposed to include a documentary and a contextual essay as they hadn't been able to do any filming. They were going to submit a full essay instead, which however they hadn't had time to complete. They wanted to know whether they would fail the module if they didn't submit their assignment, worth 80% of the grade. They wanted to know whether they would fail the year—the third and final year of their degree. They wanted an extension. I replied saying I wasn't in a position to grant an extension, as extension requests are received and managed by the student office. I said they could contact the office, who would want to see evidence of what had caused the delay (e.g. a doctor's note), and that my recommendation would be to focus on finishing the essay and submitting it as soon as possible, as a late essay was better than a non-submission. A colleague was unimpressed by my account—especially by my response to the student. Had I sent them the link to the extensions and mitigating circumstances policy? No, I hadn't, because the link is readily available to students anyway and it didn't seem to me that there would be ground for mitigating circumstances (the student had changed their mind about what they were going to submit at the last minute; they hadn't been unable to submit); instead, it seemed wiser to encourage them to focus on the essay than to distract them with an application for mitigating circumstances, which had slim chances of being successful. According to the colleague, the correct answer would have been a one-line reply: 'information about the extensions and mitigating circumstances policy can be found at this link.' I sensed their frustration towards me, this 'rebellious' colleague who writes email replies to students which say more (and at the same time less) than just reminding them of policies.

I suspect a long email to the team will follow in the next couple of days, reminding us all of 'best practice' in student communications.

Is best practice also a form of fiction?

You can almost tell any story with any set of data; it depends on how you arrange the numbers.

How do I collaborate in this environment?

But then I share this writing with a colleague who is also a friend. She writes back immediately and sends me love—'huge huge love,' she says. I lap it up. I need this love right now. I need to read the words she writes back, about how important it is to write about this, however vulnerable it feels. 'The issue of the strikes is so huge,' she says. 'It's necessary to write when there is not the time.' She says my words 'articulate exactly where that gets co-opted, extracted, demolished, used up,

shorn of spirit, by the institution.' She says she's committed to finding strategies 'to go with one another where it matters most.' I think this is a wonderful definition of collaboration, co-labouring. I like that a lot: 'to go with one another where it matters most.'

An autofiction on collaborating with students

A repeated question: 'How do I collaborate in this environment?'

This environment is one of strike, of exploitative working conditions, of digitisation, of colleagues and students, of projects, of home life. The 'I' in this context an embodied but fictionalised character, dispossessed of actuality while simultaneously subjected to the constrained agency of a consciousness embedded within institutions and structures. Collaboration as the watery mundane fact of working with and within networks of harm.

This strike is an old-fashioned performance of collective action that seeks to redistribute the real. Strikes escape the machine of capture in which only numerical evidence carries weight. In the UK, league tables drive up and down the application numbers that universities require to be sure that courses will recruit fees. Part of league tables are scores from the UK National Student Survey. The most important number here is overall satisfaction. Increasingly league tables will also look at graduate outcomes in terms of the acquisition of labour as a measure of how well a course is doing. Marketising education means utilising the values of measure to define a university degree as an investment that must bring returns. On returns, if three years of £9250 returns even minimum wage until retirement, then forty years of work might net three quarters of a million pounds over a whole working life. By another way of looking at it, going into debt might prevent the possibility of property ownership and well-being of security that a home makes real. The current government seems to think that arts and humanities are bad returns on educational investment. Sceptics see this as a culture war of right against left. The fashion for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics complements the dismantling of institutionalised progressive power, as scholars such as Jen Harvie (2019), Johanna Linsley (2013), and Bill Readings (1997) have suggested. The kind of power that was previously consolidated in trade unions, and now precariously clinging to fortifications in universities. The measure of professional work for postgraduates can be seen to target the kinds of study that might create citizens without immediate access to well-paying supposedly comfortable work. Those without work are some of the unspeakable members of society, especially if they have education. They are dangerous. They might refuse the logics of shame and individuality that run amok in the worker. The university is a supplicant to the power of the policy maker who can create abstract instruments to dismember the institution. Consider fees as another bottom line alongside the league tables. UK students were asked a decade ago to pay more for university. They attempted refusal through widespread protest. The fees have been fixed at £9250 since then. Inflation suggests that number is now worth close to £3k less, while universities have given modest pay rises each year to staff. Pay is often a university's most significant expense. Inflation also means that the modest pay rise for staff is in real terms a pay

cut; one of the issues addressed in the strike. Lecturers are asking institutions with increasing deficits to pay more. The government's response is to ask the student to pay more, but not every student, only those who earn less. There is a vicious delegation of fiscal irresponsibility at nearly all levels.

A scholar at a research event suggests that there is violence in travelling between scales. Is the delegation of fiscal responsibility an example of this? Or is a better example the idea that an individual action can have a meaningful collective political outcome?

Here I am, in an argument with students of drama and musical theatre over the state of the profession they will enter after graduation. This argument is taking place in a seminar that follows a lecture on Materialism. It is the first time these students are thinking with these terms about the idea that much of life is to some degree determined by how they work. There is an overwhelming need to vent the frustration at the inequality of hiring practices. There is a real sense of disenchantment, or even depression, in relation to the perceived impossibility of the realisation of their dreams. We discuss expectations and the negotiation of goals. There is more frustration. It is as if they have caught me in the lie. I told them their degree would give them transferable skills, and they see graduates working in the same pubs the current students work in. In the market of courses, I do sell our degree on admissions day as one that provides graduates with transferable skills. I do believe that even this argument equips my students with the ability to communicate, persuade, pitch, propose, critique, and create. So? They want agents to represent them, they want to be on a stage that is big enough that their family and friends will recognise as legitimate. I cannot give them that. This is not a conversation we have on admissions days, so am I culpable as an agent who knowingly deceives? Or is this a time-worn process of education, where the outcome and the value are distributed with a range of differences? I think I can give them an understanding of the real with which they might consider adaptations to find their own degree of agency within larger structures of difficulty. I can encourage them. I can tell them that I care about them, that I support their work, that I take seriously the professional contract between us as teacher/student. They do not seem at all interested in this. It is not something that their friends and families can measure. It is not guaranteed to make them money. But who are they? I can see within this seminar quite a few different people who are coming into this conversation with very different backgrounds and goals. My writing has homogenised them, but there is disagreement between them too. There are the international students who laugh at the importance that the British students invest in the West End. There are the performatively politically engaged students who find moments to express popular opinions. There are the entrepreneurial students who are already finding paid work in all aspects of the theatre profession, shaking their heads in disappointment at the complaints of the others. There are the students who are frustrated at the world, and those that are frustrated with the industry, and those that are frustrated with me. There are students who are frustrated with themselves. There are also many who silently listen. Some learning the art of the excuse from those trained in knowing how to monopolise the conversation in the territory of what the outside world withholds from them, unwilling to reconsider themselves as a matrixed part of that world. And there are the ones not here today. Physically ill, depressed, hungover, sleeping, working, or those

who only attend 'practical' and not 'theory' classes. Those of us who are here, are we doing what we are supposed to be doing? Is this the work? I shift my response. I suggest that they are not outside of the system. That they have a part to play in it, and that their actions can to some degree alter the fundamental shape of their material conditions of labour and consciousness. I warn them that only expressing frustration at the disembodied scale of the macro/structural can become a poisonous excuse to absolve oneself of the responsibility to live. I also reconsider my sense of unease and let them vent, securely diminished in the comfort of knowing that if I think I can help these students, especially if I think I am the only one who can, then I am part of the problem. How gloriously and sickeningly righteous is it to imagine that through lecturing, in this educational environment, I possess the capability to materially improve these peoples' situations? How limited and short sighted to think that a single seminar might be the time and place to address all of this? In the last half hour of the seminar, I say less. The students' frustration continues, but without being egged on by my unwillingness to accept that they understand all this better than I first thought they did. Next seminar we will pick up on the presentation that was missed. One of the students who was to give the presentation did not turn up anyway, so better to do it when they are back. I say the seminar is soon to end and try to sum up how the conversation we have had is relevant to the assessment. I use their language and connect their examples to technical terms, and reference scholarship on related issues. They have more points to make and return to their discussion. They return to an earlier question: 'would this seminar feel different if the fees were paid for by taxpayers?' I tell them we must finish. One student who has more to say follows me out of the room, continuing to talk while I walk down the stairs mumbling an apology about needing to go.

This environment is one of fear and beauty, of relief in the stretch of time, of horror, of love, of distance. The I here is breathing in the fumes and vapours of someone else's superyacht. The striated nature of selfhood and its attachments. A lightness exists. It is sometimes distant, and sometimes overwhelming. But the work escapes. The problems vanish. At a remove, I dance within the lightness. It is not me that is collaborating. It is collaboration that anoints activities of exchange with the continuation of responsibility. A space of desire with the time of fulfilment. The co-labour of internal violence. Shreds of sense. An unravelling.

Another question in response: At work, when is a problem between two parties an ending?

Coughing and debility (after Puar)

How do I collaborate in this environment? Or at work, when is a problem between two parties an ending?

I have been coughing incessantly over the past few days. There's a softness to spring's arrival this year, but it feels early. I check on the current debate on the Anti-Refugee Bill. I read about the devastating effects of climate change on the temperature at Earth's poles. My phone buzzes with messages from friends and acquaintances supporting their friends and acquaintances in or leaving Ukraine. War is waging very close to home. Over the past weeks, mutual aid has come back into

my diasporic life, folded into the madness of a difficult term. I am asked to feedback on statements in solidarity. I try to hold complexity but there's no space for it. 'By absorbing the colony politically and culturally, the metropole subjects itself to a creeping takeover from within by the very alien forces it incorporated' (Radynski 2022). I cough. I sit on a committee. I try to pace myself for a day of tutorials. I resign as External Examiner in solidarity with an ongoing local dispute. I start another job application. I reassure one of my exhausted parents that managing to find dialysis support for twenty refugees is action.

What is in fact, held by language?

'Shreds of sense,' you say.

What is the difference between collaboration, cooperation, co-labouring? These are not the same structures for the distribution of labour; these are not always about labour, either. When there is so much labour too that is invisible, or rather, illegible, what is held in our language?

We are living in dissonant times, but dissonant times also have fissures; in these fissures, we might call out differently what is upheld or appropriated in the language we deploy daily. Or rather, how collaboration *performs*. Its unevenness. Its violence.

After all, the multitude is, as Paul Preciado reminds us, part of a commodified pharmapornographic market.

There's an article Preciado wrote in *ArtForum* (2020) that I've been returning to again and again during the pandemic, 'Learning from the Virus'. 'Tell me how your community constructs its political sovereignty,' Preciado says, 'and I will tell you what forms your plagues will take.' We cannot talk about collaboration without talking about community. And we cannot talk about community without making explicit that which is systemically normalisation. Collaboration often then reproduces highly abnormal and often violent politics. At the centre of the debate during the Covid 19 crisis and beyond are modes of understanding community and immunity. 'The body, your individual body,' says Preciado, 'as a life space and as a network of power, as a centre of production and of energy consumption, has become the new territory where the violent border politics that we have been designing' are expressed. Containment is selective, though. Preciado calls us to de-alienate ourselves.

We must gather, of sorts.

I have increasingly, like many of us, seen the cynical ways in which seemingly democratic institutions appropriate and recenter politics that obfuscate on the basis of a homogenised equality, in which collaboration is deployed as a form of governance, of sorts. A kind of spectral presence of 'or else'. 'Consider that this may or may not be the container to hold what you need to bring' (N'Tanya Lee in brown 2021, 63). I am thinking: committing to abolition movements whilst accounting for mistakes. I am thinking: the structures of governance of higher education have merged into wider structures that perpetuate collaboration as a de facto system for the reproduction of racial capitalism.

Cough, cough, cough.

The other day once more the institution, that is, a network of people and processes internally and externally governed, sought to 'manage a situation'. Increasingly, we are 'collaborating' in order to 'manage situations'. It seems that we do not have time to discuss the legibility and frameworks that render 'the situation' in need of 'management'.

Cough, cough, cough.

I think of Jasbir K. Puar's *Right to Maim* (2017): 'a disability justice movement [...] as a movement that is demanding an end to so many conditions of precarisation that debilitate many populations' (xx). I am inspired by the insistence of the entanglement of biopolitical production of precarity and (un)liveability, and the insistence on an intersectional struggle that demands livable lives. The refusal to position disability as anything other than a register of biopolitical control. Debility as the ultimate institutional fantasy.

In what ways do the current systems and ecologies we are embedded within think and weaponise collaboration?

Or

In this governed or weaponised collaboration, what or who is being redeployed?

What is abundant collaboration?

Cough, cough, cough.

What happens if we centre interdependence and abolition? How are these entanglements already performing new systems that language might capture differently?

We must gather, of sorts.

Scenes (over time)

Scene

Our bodies are carrying too much, so much so my colleague leaves the meeting, and we share tears in the office.

Often, my eyelids are heavy and I do not know if this heaviness is produced by what feels immovable and our bodies hit again and again, or by other atmospheres and energies—my heart is back home, so close to war, and my heart is here, with the slow dismantling of public good, and my heart no longer feels reform is sufficient.

Scene

I sit with a colleague to plan a doctoral transfer—we hold each other for a while as we reflect on collective grief and finding moments of rest and holding hope; shall we do this together, they ask? We hold space and a beautiful thing emerges, a piece of research on the failures of reform, on the need for rituals of release and rehearsals for change. They bring up Audre Lorde—what happens after we have told our stories? I think about autofiction as a theoretical lapse. What is the *problem* of co-labouring?

What co-labouring happens in the act of rehearsing other ways of being together? I am co-labouring with Ruth Wilson Gilmore and adrienne maree brown, I am thinking—how can we be flocks of birds, adjacent yet in movement, when there's no air?

Scene

We are in an archive room in central London, surrounded by boxes of radical struggles for labour justice. Outside, builders are protesting safety conditions. We gather around food. Someone offers the thought that although we are always in the archive, together, we are never wandering the archive together. We notice labour in the archives of organised grassroots struggle. We notice the agency of a non-linear temporality of change. We notice we have all convened around a number of items whose interest feels slippery. Someone recounts their experience of working in a colonial institutionalised archive and we talk about ways of categorising labour, of noticing what happens when porousness and ambiguity leaves space for something to happen.

We sit on the side and talk about difficult alliances, or small moments of harm in collective efforts.

And I think about this a lot: space, for something to emerge.

Scene

I am in a staff meeting, looking at contracts for colleagues due to expire. A management representative talks about optimisation and cost per square footage. There is complexity here, another says. The right people are not here to speak and I walk out, deciding that this is not a way to allow for something to emerge.

Months later, I am part of a recruitment process. I take note of how much of the harm happens through administrative processes—filling out paperwork, negotiating legibilities. I am exhausted at the impossibility of it all. So I break something down to try and build something with others amidst it all.

You know it doesn't really matter whether the problem is solved, but it does matter enormously that there is plenty of evidence that it's been addressed, and according to all of the processes that have been approved, and so on.

Scene

My daughter writes a letter to the faeries late at night; she is six. She asks if the faeries might be so kind as to offer some of their magic, and she would like to offer some coins, as she's aware coins

are what faeries often offer in exchange for teeth. We talk about what is an exchange, and capitalism. I sit with this for a long time.

I think about an archive of disorganised co-labouring and fugitive study.

An autofiction on working

Where does *more* come from? Academics work between students and management. Both ask for more at any opportunity to do so. Neither group ever asks for less. In a meeting on research, academics are told to put in more funding bids. To generate more research income. We also need to publish more outputs, do more practice research, organise more events, and supervise more research students to completion. Students want more opportunities to network. More industry events. More public-facing performances. More social outings to celebrate their accomplishments. More support for their wellbeing, more examples of good and bad assessments, more guidance on how to write an essay. Where does more come from?

I ask management how removing sabbaticals will affect our research. I am told that we are given 20% of our working week to spend on research. I accept the gift of this work as a child who does not know what the object is that he holds in his hands. He is confused but knows he should say thank you. He takes it into the other room and hides it under his bed. Days later, he hopes it has vanished. He takes deep breaths to fake the courage necessary to look. He is inhaling more than exhaling and has to sit down.

I ask the students if they think that the studio is a social environment and whether the performance assessment can be a celebration. They tell me that when something is marked it is not very fun. They want to enjoy being students. They say that learning should be celebration, but marks make that impossible. They want learning to be a gift that can be put on a shelf and exhibited to their friends and family.

Students and management are pleased that I have never asked these questions. Where does more come from? They don't care where it comes from, and they don't want to hear my questions. There is time for their demands, but not mine. Except for when I am assessing them on learning criteria that are mystified beyond comprehension or attempting to disseminate knowledge that is different from the kind they asked for. We got into this situation, each of us with our own intentions and planned outcomes. Management imagines these exchanges between academics and students as if none of them are mystified or enchanted. The data that is produced by teaching and learning is the most important reality that exists at management's level of scale. They are enchanted by more and mystified by the idea that there might not be more in the space or time within which more is supposed to be generated.

I look for someone else to ask questions to. My partner isn't interested. I say things to my dog. I consider what friends or family might say. I wonder if colleagues might be interested. I imagine

them having similar questions. I think of the questions that I have heard them ask. I think of how things run late, and I am afraid we only have time for one quick question.

On some level, more does come from less—from slowing down, from pausing, which make space for practices of reparation, ecologies of care, politics of solidarity and coalition. How can we do more by doing less when co-labouring? Is someone's doing less the cause of someone else's doing more—to make up for lost input, to maintain a balance dictated by the dominant logic of performance and accountability?

I look for more to do and volunteer to be the media contact for my local union branch's picket line. I express some worry that I do not know all the facts and would appreciate some information to be able to communicate. The regional union representative tells me that I shouldn't feel as though I need to speak in general terms, but rather to talk about how conditions affect me personally. I nod to signal that I agree. I hope my gesture was visible on the screen. The last time I spoke to the media, it was on radio, and my interview followed the song 'Hero' by Enrique Iglesias. I accidentally used the phrase 'took my breath away'. Now I realise that I was becoming Iglesias. His breathlessness became mine. I articulated my speechlessness, my dead voice, my lack of ability to say anything more. The best version of more I can offer is someone else's. Any more will require the subtraction from some place. More will also mean less. More comes from less; until there is abundance.

Abundance—this word connects with questions raised by the overlapping crises of the current times: the social and ecological crises typically analysed in terms of scarcity and abundance

It will rain the first day of the strike. The picket line will be wet and grey. Will that be a more fitting symbol? Will the weather contribute to the meaning of the political gesture? Or, has the strike lost its potency? Will the weather symbolise the ineffectiveness of old politics? Surely management will respond by saying that there is no money to raise the pay of staff. How can staff respond to that? What good is a strike at a company with a growing deficit? Until something more powerful is suggested, this action is the best option because it is lawful and so has a foot in the radicality of truly meaningful political action as well as another foot on the side of a belief in the possibility that institutions can be places of justice, equality, and solidarity. Maybe even care.

Aiming for abundance does not exclude compromising for enough. This fascination with abundance comes from another interruption in conversation at an event, where a question on how to make reading lists be less colonial was answered by rethinking reading lists as abundant.

On the other hand, so many institutions are propped up by violent extraction. In this line of thinking it is only unlawful action that makes historical correction possible. The laws themselves entertain the powerful. Striking against systematic oppression might by necessity break current law by calling for new and better legislation.

When is abundance too much?

Is there a point at which it tips over to the other side, or does the logic of abundance already imply an excess that rests on structural injustice?

An autofiction on striking

I am standing in Kings Cross listening to Jeremy Corbyn, ex-leader of the UK Labour Party, speak to the Union about the theatre of politics in parliament versus the actual politics here on the streets. I am listening and thinking though that all this feels quite like theatre. Listening as Corbyn moves on to discuss the importance of education, and being interrupted by stupid tears that remind me how much of my heart is in this business of working. I want to be calm but I am furiously weak at the knowledge that the work I find so meaningful is being undervalued. I have seen colleagues retire, be made redundant, and these are the working conditions that have become unsurvivable for so many. My body is interrupting, feeling the physical strain of chronic stress, the dominant affect of an economy that exploits the majority for the benefit of a minority. All of this listening to a politician who lost elections by large margins. The tears of my body interrupt the smooth flow of capital even as it is the same body surfing along the waves of the economy.

More speakers take the stage. Representing the various unions on strike this winter. Nurses, ambulance workers, teachers, postal workers, train operators, and civil servants. A news article reports that the Prime Minister hopes that these unions will call off their strikes before Christmas is ruined. Pink smoke gives me an excuse for my teary eyes. Pink hats. A barking dog. A driving-by car honking its horn. The photos I take of the speakers also capture the logo of a fast food chain in the background. Next to me colleagues. Some are not here. The context includes that which is absent. The colleagues who are not striking. The ones who have left higher education because the working conditions were not worth the pay. The ones who are still working today, who also stand to benefit from the strike. It at first seems that there is a clear distinction between being here and not being here. But then I find out afterward that there are people here that I didn't see at the time. Absence is not a lack of solidarity. I speak to a colleague at another university who is tired of pointless strikes. A neighbour discusses the miners' strikes in the 1980s as a pointless performance for a dying industry. Because of so many reasons, the strike may only make things worse. It causes disruption and some might even say it causes harm. What about the students who miss opportunities to learn? The speaker from the national union of students says the strike is a learning opportunity that is potentially more meaningful than a lecture. I am not sure that this is the kind of learning I hoped to be a part of. Whose side are students on? If none, is their ambivalence a learning opportunity? The contexts of this rally keep interrupting my ability to listen to the speakers. Whose words make me weep. Or is it the experience of standing among so many? Do the tears have anything to do with recognisable media faces, or just the mundane sharing of space and time, the instrumentalisation of increasing number, the multiplying pain? More speakers take the stage and say more words and more tears fall and we make sure not to block the entrance to the station. Someone close to me puts a hand on my shoulder and explains that she is not emotional because she sees strikes as just a normal part of life, nothing to get too excited about.

We have elsewhere in this writing encountered the inability to strike; and here we ask whether this inability to strike is but one example of the impossible pain of co-labouring? How can we share space and time within a collectivity in which we experience every moment as one of absolute difference? I thought that co-labouring was signing up to participate in an institution that has forced the people who taught me so much that they cannot exist within it. One of them warned me that the institution would take more from me than I would be able to get back. Just as I stand here at the union rally while other colleagues do not strike, I still work in the university while other colleagues do not. Co-labouring is the abomination of how we each are always doing our best.

I support a student having a panic attack during an information session given by a colleague from the university's career service.

Suspension and/as falling

This morning I woke up half an hour or so before my alarm and was met by a sensation that I recognised from a nightmare I used to have as a child (*the* nightmare actually, as there weren't any other recurring ones). I was perhaps eight or nine or ten and there was one summer in particular when I had this nightmare several times. It came back later as well, but only occasionally. I used to find it very difficult to describe the nightmare (still do) because there were no images as such, or none that I could summon clearly. I would wake up sweating and in total distress, full of dread, crying, perhaps screaming too. I don't remember exactly. I do remember my mother didn't know what to do. She became very worried and, at some point, wanted to take me to see a therapist. I don't think she ever did. Trying to explain what was going on, I started to describe this nightmare as 'the world feels too big for me'. It still sort of fits as a description, but maybe more than size it's a matter of grasping, i.e. not being able to grasp—the world, its meanings, its forces, my place in it.

The sensation of the nightmare was of a bulk of matter overwhelming me; not squashing me as such, but being there with me (around me and inside me) and yet not being definable, graspable. I couldn't see or feel the edges. I couldn't see the matter either. It was just present in and around my body as a sensation. I also remember there was a sensation to do with my hands, as if trying to reach out but failing, and the shape that contained my hands and fingers was expanding but also dissolving. I've never really spoken about this to anyone, and it feels a little odd to try and find words to explain this.

So this morning I woke up to this sensation (not the hands bit, but the rest). I hadn't had this nightmare in years. I actually don't remember ever having it as an adult. This morning it didn't feel scary like the other times though. I was met by this sensation when I woke up, and I was able to simply acknowledge it, recognising it as belonging to my old childhood nightmare: 'Hello you, what are you doing here today?'

I talk to a friend about this experience and, as the conversation unfolds, it becomes apparent that their reading of my account includes an image of falling. I am surprised because there's no falling in my childhood nightmare. The sensation is that of suspension, of hovering in an unknown space—which feels even more terrifying because it implies I'm in some sort of vacuum, which, rather than feeling empty, feels full of unknown and ungraspable 'stuff'. I talk about this with the colleagues I'm co-labouring with to produce this piece of writing and they also understand my nightmare as being about falling. I feel puzzled by this coincidence. I'm sure I never mentioned falling when describing the nightmare, on either occasion.

One of my co-labouring colleagues shares a piece of writing by Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective' (2011). It opens with this image: 'Imagine you are falling. But there is no ground.' I'm intrigued. In the article, Steyerl considers the condition of 'groundlessness' that—as she puts it—several contemporary philosophers have identified as characterising our times. It looks like this: 'We cannot assume any stable ground on which to base metaphysical claims or foundational political myths. At best, we are faced with temporary, contingent, and partial attempts at grounding' (Steyerl 2011).

Steyerl argues that without a stable ground, we're in a state of 'free fall', whether we're aware of it or not. Noticing the fall is actually made harder by the lack of ground. This in turn leads to a conflation of falling with floating and hovering—which seems to explain why the state of suspension in my nightmare was understood as a fall.

Paradoxically, while you are falling, you will probably feel as if you are floating—or not even moving at all. Falling is relational—if there is nothing to fall toward, you may not even be aware that you're falling. If there is no ground, gravity might be low and you'll feel weightless. Objects will stay suspended if you let go of them. [...] As you are falling, your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you. The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and after, of yourself and your boundaries. (Steyerl 2011)

Yes, this sounds like my nightmare. Steyerl goes on to discuss how falling has the potential to disrupt accepted ways of seeing things, opening the space for 'new types of visibility'. As 'terrifying' and 'deterritorializing' as it is, falling gives the opportunity to let go of precise coordinates, navigation instruments and familiar perspectives. It opens up the possibility that we may learn to abandon the need for control and accept and even embrace instability and ungroundedness as conditions that make new experiences of freedom possible.

Yet, in my daily life, I strive for groundedness. I aspire to be a balanced individual, who can in turn be a responsible parent, a stable partner, a loyal friend, a reliable colleague, a dependable neighbour. I engage in movement practices that help my body stabilise around its centre, in breathing techniques that enhance my groundedness; I devise and implement strategies that allow my home and my family life to function steadily. Stability, balance and core strength are what I strive for, so that I can withstand the unexpected, including the curveballs life throws at me, so that I remain solid enough to be able to provide care for others, so that I can hold things together.

Where does the groundlessness I read and write about in my academic work (here and elsewhere) meet the groundedness I strive to achieve in my personal and family life? If instability and uncertainty are the conditions for new possibilities to emerge, to what extent can I embrace them in my relational existence? Does the responsibility of being in relation require a more cautious approach, founded on solid roots and stable behaviour? Does the requirement to be dependable for others stifle the possibility that new ways of thinking, being and doing may emerge? Is this also the contradiction of co-labouring? To what extent is groundlessness compatible with ethics of care and ecologies of collaboration? Silvia Federici (2019) writes of how people's capacity for cooperation is rooted in their interdependence, in relations of reciprocity and in established rules and decision-making structures. These are some of the characteristics of the commoning politics she theorises—they seem to speak of a common ground. Can groundlessness have a productive function in the commons? If 'regaining a sense of wholeness in our lives' (Federici 2019, 189) is the path towards 're-enchanting the world', perhaps there is a way to make room for both uncertainty and stability, for both deterritorialising and grounding practices in our modes of working together.

We speak on Zoom. This is how we meet and come together to think—and to feel a form of togetherness that has become rare in our working practices.

An autofiction on borders

You could open the wooden school benches upwards, I remember. Underneath you could store your backpack or pens; but you could also store notes—secret correspondences. The school knew there was this fugitive space for the kids who were usually quiet in class to leave each other notes in the dark gaps of the wooden benches. It's hard to leave notes if there's no underneath; but it takes a group to create a network.

During a Zoom meeting, I draw a parallel between processes of border administration and those present in a university structure. I think of the choreographies of legibility, permissions, privileges. I think of the structures that render certain forms of labour visible. I think of borderisation as a military process of development of border infrastructures. I think about South Ossetia and Abkhazia. I hark back to the university; I share stories of passport and identity checks, contract refusals. We talk about witnessing and silence. We exchange border stories. I think of Swati Arora (2021), who reminds us that 'borders that determine the coordinates of movement and belonging to territories are not just tangible [...], they are also intangible and invisible, as is the case of recruitment processes for students and staff at universities' (12). Recalling the affective learning at the picket line unfolding during periods of strikes, and the legacies and learnings of Black study as thinking with others, Arora invites us to consider that perhaps the university, 'with its histories of colonial exploitation and racialised violence, was never meant to be transformed' (18). What forms of co-labouring can happen across borders—not just physical, but those borders that divide and expose the margins of what might otherwise blur outwards?

Later at home, I pick up my copy of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987): 'I am a border woman. [...] I have been straddling that *tejas*—the Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to be, this place of contradictions' ('Preface'). Border crossing in the institution. By being here, along with all other border crossers, we also extend the institution to vantage points it does not want to see or confront. In some ways, administration is the key colonial operative of the university. The Life in the UK test as it stands was introduced in 2005, and became a vital organ through which to shape speculative articulations of Britishness by the Home Office (Riley 2023, 271). Some of our journeys through academia involved firstly noticing where borders emerge—then learning to navigate them; always temporary constructs in the confines of shifting hostile environments.

In the post, I receive a copy of Gargi Bhattacharyya's *We, the Heartbroken* (2023); it opens by speaking of heartbreak as an elastic pain: 'the imprecise sense of unease that can swirl around a life, stealing joy no matter what you do' (3). I think of where heartbreak sits and where it cannot find a space. The affective ecologies of navigating co-labouring in a university that constantly seeks to re-articulate place; its place; or maybe, its communities.

Recurrence

Take this recurring affect.

Several folks in my classroom are exposed by a particularly insistent student intent on exposing the classroom as a partisan space; it is unclear what is partisan about it, save for the fact that the student feels like the political emerges too spontaneously and with too much commitment on an art degree where we should be learning about 'Kant, or someone like that'. Due to repeated harm, a disciplinary is triggered but no one is clear what the process is for, given that the only effect of this disciplinary is a kind of performance that tries to establish the legitimacy of experiences of harm—which of course, do not require legitimation because they are already seen and collectively held. 'When you are involved in a complaint, you are still at work; you are still doing your work,' says Sara Ahmed (2021) in her work on complaints. 'What you hear in the room comes to fill that room' (8).

We talk about how fiction enters or is naturalised within processes of co-labouring. In the work we do within our institutions, there is a layer of administrative fiction, which we all have to engage with: we create narratives in appraisal processes, in promotion applications, in reporting cycles.

At the picket line rally, someone mentions Tony Blair and the rumble stops, for a second, we all want to hold that silence for what it exposes. I feel physically sick.

So writing auto-fictional texts here is a way for us to think critically about the fiction that already exists in institutional work, and a way for us to make it visible and de-naturalise it.

At the recent team meeting we are asked to collaborate more to ensure the effective delivery of a series of inter-related processes with no clear infrastructure which *is being developed* and *is in progress*, and once again I am reminded that, even though pedagogy and research are always in progress, the only thing that is allowed to be in progress is *the department*, the *meeting*, the data collection.

On some level, an annual review or a monitoring process are fictional processes. They are supposed to refer to and evidence something true or real, but they produce data, which is very easily manipulated and thus becomes fictional.

I have been thinking—of late, again, as a kind of recurrence—that the ways in which the logics of administration permeate my (our) working life/lives, and the ways in which they are wrapped up in the affects that motivate us to collectively work towards change, create a very particular kind of dissonance. Preciado talks about this as a particular state-sanctioned virality but Puar talks more explicitly about this in ‘Crip Nationalism’ when discussing the relation between the production of ‘disability’ against debility as produced by war. ‘The biopolitical distribution between disability as an exceptional accident or misfortune and the proliferation of debilitation as war, as imperialism, as durational death’ (Puar 2017, 68). Puar’s articulation of crip nationalism comes to mind here because it exposes the multidirectional investments that nationalism creates in erasing particular forms of belonging and interdependence, further reproduced by particular—even liberal—logics of support. This relation between disability and debilitation echoes recurrently in this strange fantasy that we sustain through the logics of administration. And the logic itself, of course, emerged from a colonial matrix, as Walter Mignolo (2023) has proposed.

The fiction that our institutions produce has become our reality. We have to treat it as real because we haven’t found a way to escape it. Unless we create spaces of solidarity (‘to go with one another where it matters the most’), which enable us to break through the curtain of that fiction that has become our reality.

I look at Jack Ky Tan’s brilliant occupation of a budget spreadsheet in *performing borders* (2022). Tan proposes that this engagement with the spreadsheet become a ‘live-in conversation’ seeking to pin down budget items like ‘ambitions, emotional labour, public duty, experimentation/failure, the weight of guilt from taking time away from family/children,’ and other entanglements. It is, in a sense, impossible in that the budget—like many embedded institutional processes of capture and seeming transparency, render many forms of labour and knowledge inexistent; as Tan says, ‘embodiment, flux, pace, relationality, care, dignity, instinct, praxis, human rights, more-than-human rights’ cease to exist. I think about: the failures of equality and diversity in institutions, the carceral—and inherently punitive—logics of productivity always staked against the need to perform functionalism in a restrictive, bordered state infrastructure, the empty logics of administration as a high-end late capitalist functionalist tragedy. The disciplinarity of administration that shifts everyday conditions so that care, time or fluidity seem excessive—any difference in process seems excessive.

Some of the ideas that inspire this text are answers to questions after presentations at research events. I don’t know how to reference those statements.

I might have misunderstood. The person might not stand by what they said.

So some sources remain anonymous. We attempt to at least take responsibility for
the collectivity of knowledge.

Sometimes what people say sticks in the imagination
as deeply as published pieces of research.

Should we take a bit of time to do some writing with each other's texts?

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