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

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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

opportunity to reflect and, more importantly, *share* our reflections, hoping that others will learn vicariously through our experiences of an attempt to respond to populism. 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.

We represent two perspectives for this activist event—one as an organizer and one as a participant. During the event, we sat across from one another and realized a tension that we both felt—this was not going at all how we had anticipated. In taking stock of the event we realized that we were: angry at what we felt were injustices in the populism we saw growing in our respective countries; frustrated at the lack of response from our association when other academic groups we were part of stepped up to condemn actions that marginalized their members; hopeful that we could create momentum to get the association to act; irritated with our colleagues when they veered ‘off-script’; and guilty that we each may have contributed to what we saw as the emotional derailment occurring in the event.

Collectives engaged in activism are inevitably shaped by emotion; and a better understanding of the nature of that co-created connection can help us make sense of how we can engage in change (Jasper 2014). From a systems psychodynamics perspective, those of us engaged in the event were blinded by our own ‘fantasy spaces’ (Vince, 2011), which serve as unconscious primers to ways of knowing, feeling, and being within a group. These fantasy spaces have both positive and negative implications; while fantasies can serve group members very well in navigating complex political contexts, they can also be restrictive and prevent members from learning new ways of moving forward. Our experience with this activism event mirrored Vince’s (2011) contention that fantasy spaces hold a paradox “within which learning is

both desired and avoided (p. 336).” We saw both play out emotionally in the course of this event and in our journey of writing this reflection.

We use the concept of fantasy space (Vince, 2011) as an analytic tool to examine both the emotions associated with an academic activism event to challenge populism, and our own motivations for writing this piece. 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 challenge three orthodoxies.

First, diatribes decrying the awfulness of Trump and his administration cronies create fantasy spaces that might ‘feel’ good, but are actually counterproductive. Second, the academy is not merely an ivory tower above the fray of populism (Martin, 2009); we argue that academia itself is a site for activism in which meaningful changes have far-reaching implications. Third, and most importantly, we contend that the neoliberal pressure and practice of hiding failure is a form of collaboration with performativity.

Setting the Scene: Populism and Fragments of Pain, Fear, Anger

On 23 January 2017, the President of our professional association reached out to a number of women throughout the world that she knew had participated in the 21 January 2017 Women’s March on Washington. Faced with strong opposition from historically powerful members of the Board of Directors, the President wanted to take some sort of action in the midst of an uncertain and hostile national context. She hoped there would be a special session at our forthcoming international conference in March that in some way tapped into the energy from that social movement and, as she shared in her email, would “provide a venue to share [our] experience for others to learn from and be motivated by.”

She left it open to those who were involved as to how and what we would choose to do. The organizing team wanted to gather insight from association members to develop a broad policy addressing issues of the marginalized within our new populist context. Our response was to create a workshop to stimulate dialogue around the Unity principles proposed by the Women's March on Washington. To achieve that goal, the organizers ensured that we had a workshop facilitator for each of the Unity principles: ending violence, reproductive rights, LGBTQIA rights, worker's rights, civil rights, disability rights, immigrant rights, and environmental justice. A ninth principle, racial justice, was added when it was brought to our attention that we had failed to consider racial diversity.

Participants in the session would break into small action groups around each principle to collect ideas that could inform a draft policy on inclusion. The small groups would be formed by discussion around two key questions: 1. What does this principle mean to us as association members? and 2. How can we respond as researchers and practitioners in our field? The idea was to use these principles to find common ground, or create a new shared fantasy, around a policy for the whole of the association.

The session did not originally appear on the conference program, so the organizers opted to generate more interest by holding a mini-rally march by the session facilitators leading to the session room. The intent was to create an event of emotional deviance (Sandlin & Callahan, 2009) to confront the routine of conference participants who were preparing to enter session rooms. The idea was to disrupt their original plans and, perhaps, get them to follow us to our session instead. Each facilitator created a protest rally sign for their Unity principle and we marched through the hotel to our destination, chanting, "Tell me what democracy looks like... This is what democracy looks like!"

The President of the association agreed to introduce the session and explain her rationale for offering the space on the conference program before leaving to attend another session. There were nine facilitators (one of whom was a man; one of whom was a woman of color), and seven participants (four of whom were men; one of whom was a woman of color). As a result of the small number, we collectively opted to remain in one larger group and hold a panel discussion with each facilitator providing background on why their Unity principle was important toward developing a unity policy before inviting dialogue toward generating policy ideas.

We very quickly realized that we would fall short of the goal of collecting enough ideas to begin developing a unity policy. First, two participants were vocal about their disappointment that they saw women of color marginalized in virtually the entire progressive movement against Trump, from the Women's March on Washington to our local attempt to develop policy. One had chosen to not take part as an organizer to protest against the inequity against women of color. Second, as the association President and the first facilitators shared the importance of their Unity principle, they emphasized their pain, fear, and anger instead of focusing on the performative session objective of identifying action toward creating a policy. Eventually, the charged responses, underpinned by political values held, alienated several participants. Two such participants were white men, unknown to the conveners and relatively new to the association, who had come to the room to hear what we had to say. They challenged the speakers' perspectives on the issues.

Six months later, the initiative had fallen completely silent and those in positions of institutional power, some of whom were part of the session, had not pursued attempts to create a unity policy for the association. Our reflection on the experience suggests that our failure to

address the emotions of our fantasy spaces contributed to derailing the positive energy generated from the original social movement that catalyzed the conference session.

Competing Fantasy Spaces and Emotional Turmoil

Amongst the characteristics of spatial psychodynamics is the effect of fantasy in learning space (Vince, 2011). The fantasies individuals and organizations create about good and bad, and right and wrong, help to construct an ‘architecture of the invisible’ (Issacs, 1998, p. 68), which “help[s] to generate self-imposed limitations on behaviour and action” (Vince, 2011, p. 336). In our case, participants brought with them shared fantasies from multiple roles, responsibilities and expectations to a temporary organization space, located within the temporary organization space of a conference, where the architecture of the invisible was in formation. Where most organizations create narratives that serve to construct a particular image of themselves to protect them from damage, the temporary group that gathered did not share a fantasy that allowed it to coalesce and mobilize for action.

No matter how space is conceptualized, it influences collectives (Vince, 2011). Space is tangible through physically-framed boundaries and artefacts (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004); space is also intangible through cognitively- and emotionally-framed social constructions (Taylor & Spicer, 2007). Our experience with our fledgling activist event showed that shared fantasies emerged, and competed; the common thread was the force of emotion that wedded participants to their fantasies. While everyone had come together in a shared physical space to ostensibly discuss the populist movement and what to do about it, the room was nevertheless split into separate and oft competing fantasy spaces that prevented possibilities for action (Brown & Pickerell, 2009).

Our competing spaces created distance between us that prevented collaboration. Compromise is critical when politically oppositional forces interact (Lefebvre, 2001), but we were unable to realize our fantasy of finding common ground amongst our different perspectives. Our failure to engage with people, behaviors, values, and ideas that were emotionally uncomfortable (for all of us) is the likely culprit in the failure of the event to meet its intended goal. In this way, uncomfortable experiences within the spaces we constructed became devices of derailment for our academic activism.

The Physical: Symbolic Silencing as a Derailment Device

The tangible arrangements of our work influence both the fantasy spaces that emerge (Vince, 2011) and the emotional decisions that affect outcomes of events such as ours. In our event, the session did not appear in the distributed conference program; and, the space we were allocated for the session was not conducive to our vision of the event. The shared fantasies that emerged were reinforced by these physical spaces.

The void in the conference program created some anxiety for the session organizers. The session was not widely announced or publicized beyond an erratum sheet in the conference welcome packet. Physically, the session essentially did not exist in the field of vision for attendees; it remained on the periphery. We were concerned about how to get people to come to an event if they were not aware of it.

Our response was to try to create a presence in the physical space of the conference by conducting a small-scale march with protest signs and rallying chants through the lobby of the well-heeled hotel in a deeply conservative state. In retrospect, that was perhaps not the best way to accomplish our goal since the hotel management called the local police. That the police were

called but quietly left when the president assured them it was ‘just part of the conference’ highlights the impotence of our march.

The physicality of the march itself gave us a false sense of ‘doing’ something to actively rally people. But was it really just the trappings of activism without substance? Several of the organizers had not even remembered the session itself. So torn was everyone with engaging in the performative activity of presenting conference papers and planning projects, they hurriedly constructed signs from material sourced on site.

Once we arrived in the space reserved for our session, we realized that the physical set up of the room was counter-intuitive to our plans. The room was the only one that was empty for the time slot, and its intended purpose was as the venue for a keynote address at a banquet (10-top tables scattered throughout a ballroom). We gathered chairs around two tables pushed together at the front of the room in an attempt to create an intimate space in which we could generate a discussion amongst people with whom we presumed to have common interests despite our diversity.

This shape that we created by moving tables had consequences; we unintentionally created the male symbol (Vince, 2011), with our male ‘arrows’ symbolically throwing barbs. The two men new to the conference who had joined us were outside the larger group and resisted efforts to get them to join the larger group. What they did was to offer us an opportunity to find underlying values, but most of the members were too busy being angry. One, a labor relations specialist, tried to use facts and objectivity to, as she called it, engage in a courageous conversation to help them ‘understand’ the organizing team’s perspective. We were so afraid of being uncomfortable with emotions, we tried to ‘objectify’ them away. As a result, we lost a valuable opportunity to see where we could find common ground to achieve our ultimate goal.

Our desire to create small group collaboration around the nine principles of the Women's March meant we intended to split people up and then bring them back together, a strategy we now realize that was bound to reinforce divisions. This did not work because in our attempt to find rational 'solutions' to complex, emotionally-laden problems, we created a structure that conveniently allowed us to bury our insecurity and helplessness about what to do, denied our fears about the implications of the U.S. election and growing populism, and alienated us from seeing our own complicity in replicating divisiveness. That same desire to create small intimate work groups also led us to attempt to 'fix' the physical setting of the space, which paradoxically facilitated an 'us-them' arrangement.

The Social: Implicit Homogeneity as a Derailment Device

Our failure to understand the socially constructed fantasy spaces of our colleagues was a source of anxiety for the two of us. In trying to objectify away emotion, we overlooked identification processes and falsely assumed our own idea of a common, homogeneous fantasy space.

The President's identification with her role allowed her to alleviate her anxiety about what to do about her personal convictions by turning to other members to push back against the board. With a diffusion of responsibility, she appealed to one fantasy space (the women who marched) in order to disrupt another fantasy space (the Board that felt our work with learning in organizations as a professional association was unrelated to the populism gripping the nation).

We also overlooked the identifications that manifested within the group itself. We assumed our association was more homogenous than it really was. The externally fueled emotions that individuals carried with them created a space that reflected the dynamics of external politics. The session, to an extent, replicated external social power relations (Vince,

1996). The residual anger from individual experience interfered with our ability to collaborate toward consensus during the session itself. Because some individuals had institutional power, this personal experience carried greater import and the group's transient nature did not provide the opportunity to organize reflection (Vince, 2006). The stuckness of the group's political dynamic created a subsequent structural barrier to creating an inclusion policy.

Those who had the institutional power to lead felt unable or unwilling to continue the dialogue. In overestimating group homogeneity, we failed to recognize the latent capacity to work with intersectional identities to accomplish our goal. Our organizing structure reinforced isolation, denied intersectionality and replicated 'divide and conquer' mentalities and structures we were trying to disrupt. We saw individual responses within the session echoing the wider socio-political environment. One participant expressed her anger at the lack of voice African-American women had in the protest in general, "Black women are given their voice through white women; we DEMAND a voice. This is who I am, hear my voice." Her appeal to be heard took place against the backdrop of the Women's March, which did not include racial justice amongst its Unity principles, and an association established and dominated by white scholars from the global north. Another participant, a gay white man, indicated that he stood in unity with women of color who had been overlooked so far in the protests against populism. He was also coming from a space with historic lack of voice, but we were so caught up with attempting to achieve our objective we failed to connect the relationship between our structuring mechanism, and the emotions being expressed.

Confronting Derailments

Our reflections on this experience highlighted our own emotion-laden assumptions about ourselves as academics, and aspiring activists, and how we presumed to be the voice of our

association. In an era of divisive politics, it takes courage to have genuine conversations with people who believe strongly about things that may contradict your own positions and to hold those conversations without the arrogance of believing that your position is the ‘right’ one (Schreven, 2018). Furthermore, in an era of competitively corporatized universities where success holds the ultimate exchange value, it takes courage to reflect publicly on one’s failures (Harrowell, Davies, & Disney, 2017). To do these things, academics need to find ways of legitimately expressing vulnerability, emotion, and dissent and to show some courage to speak out, as we do here.

First, rants denouncing the Trump administration might temporarily appease our anger, but they are actually counterproductive fantasy spaces because they fail to capture the real power of emotion to effect change. To practice activism within the academic space requires a reframing of physical and socially constructed spaces in order to hear everyone’s deep stories and how those stories intersect with ours in order to find a mutual way forward (Schreven, 2018; Hochschild, 2016). We had hoped to create spaces to have meaningful conversations in our conference session; our fantasy was to assume we could, through our identification as critical scholars and experienced facilitators, ‘heroically’ mobilize for policy change. Our desire to foster a constructive debate about issues at stake within a populist American context in order to generate a policy on inclusivity quite simply failed.

The neoliberal performative and ‘constructive’ nature of academia has effectively sidelined emotions to the extent that we are (no longer) equipped to deal with them in professional settings. As a result, when emotions arose in our session, our quest to quell them in order to achieve our objective also contributed to derailing the event. Despite that ‘failure’, other

successes emerged. We recognize that, for activism to be effective, we must challenge this emotional disavowal and learn to appreciate and elevate emotion.

Second, we write this from an emotional space of wanting to collaborate and still want something to happen for and with our professional association community. However, our biases to this regard have colored how we see the way emotions unfolded and how they informed the mechanisms through which this anti-populist social movement intersected with the creation (or lack thereof) of an organizational policy (Hochschild, 2016). Our reflections have led us to believe that successful interventions must acknowledge the power and privilege of how, where, and why emotions intersect with social movements if change is to be realized. Our interpretation of the spatial psychodynamics of the session has developed our appreciation for how to generate learning from this event—and that shift is based upon understanding and allowing space for the emotionally-laden conflicts inherent to a group experience.

Third, the inherent performativity of traditional academic spaces, including conferences, renders them discordant in relation to engagements with praxis. In conforming to the strictures imposed by a conference program, and by structuring a session that served to divide rather than to seek common ground, we reinforced oppositional tensions. Yet, learning from failure is important; if we continue to wallow in the echo chamber, we cannot make the change we seek. The nature of the performative turn in higher education has rendered reflection on failure a precarious pathway (Gill, 2014) which is rarely addressed in the literature (Harrowell et al, 2017). Our act of sharing about our failed attempt at activism is, in itself, a form of activism (Harrowell, et al, 2017).

Our failure has cultivated awareness of the inherent conservatism of our academic professional association (Spicer & Böhm, 2007), and emboldens us to ask for much more than a

change to association policy. The ties between the neoliberal academy (Gill, 2014) and our association's objective to protect its disciplinary boundary are much clearer. In attempting to create a collective space of organizing (Haug, 2013), we overestimated the ability of an organization (founded during a relatively stable political era) to respond to the rise of far-right populism. Our fantasy was that we could use the organization's tools to challenge tensions between the organization (professional association), governing institutions (Academia/HE/US Govt-Trump) and the network (meeting participants).

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

The unity we seek is one that actively uses the democratic principles and practices the participants of this session claimed to want, but did not necessarily grant toward others who believed differently (Schreven, 2018). It was all too easy for us to criticize those who challenged

the space we had created, to turn them into ‘the enemy’, by using terms described by De Cleen et al. (2018) as ‘unreasonable’, ‘irrational’, ‘uneducated’, or ‘stupid’ while engaging in the “often secretly self-aggrandizing gesture of identifying oneself as ‘reasonable’ and ‘realistic’, ‘enlightened’, ‘educated’ and ‘smart’ (p. 8). But to be truly prefigurative of a democratic society (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016), we would need to recognize more clearly “every individual’s equal right to freedom” (www.mellemeducation.org/betzavta-method). After reflecting on this experience, we now believe we can make change possible only when we have the courage to open windows of reflection into our fantasy spaces, to communicate with brave vulnerability, and to explore our failures as well as our successes.

Will sharing fantasy spaces, publishing our emotional vulnerability, and revealing failures be effective tools for academic activists to resist populism? Will our approach of revealing failure and showing the vulnerability of being touching, raw and honest be understood as a form of resistance to managerialist doctrine? Damned if we know...but it’s worth a try.

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