

## **Crafting Solidarities, Crafting a Zine: Methods for Resistance and Recovery in Higher Education Amongst Doctoral Researchers of Colour**

### Abstract

How does the process of producing a zine contribute to resistance and action to create new spaces of solidarity? This paper reflects on such a process to account for the experiences of the 'Concrete Collective', a research collective of staff and PhD researchers of colour. The project was initiated to understand what 'belonging' can mean, or fail to mean, when inhabiting the spaces of UK Higher Education (HE). The zine became a means to express the collective's distinctive journeys through HE and experiences of (un)belonging within and beyond the university. In this paper we will reflect on how we worked to create a safe space within the institution and how arts-based making practices were central to the expression of experiences not easily communicated through more traditional methods. Using these collaborative and creative methods generated learning encounters, producing not only material for the zine, but a new sense of community beyond the institutionalized spaces available within a university. The act of crafting the zine went together with learning to imagine, understand, think and feel as a collective. We explore how the physical and political act of zine-ing provided a space for us to collectively critique and resist isolationist tendencies that create a sense of un-belonging amongst under-represented groups in universities. This act of creation allowed us to critically reflect on the dynamics of how solidarities may be produced. Finally, we reflect on possibilities of nurturing and sustaining solidarities, and collective spaces, while carefully attending to hierarchical relationships present within the university.

Key words: belonging; higher education; zine; solidarity; doctoral; underrepresented students

# **Crafting Solidarities, Crafting a Zine: Methods for Resistance and Recovery in Higher Education Amongst Doctoral Researchers of Colour**

## **Introduction**

Working and researching in a mainly white university and white university town, we question how we might (re)claim space and stake out a sense of belonging within the institution. This question becomes all the more important in the face of statistics that reveal contemporary exclusions within UK Higher Education (HE): in 2019/20, only 3% and 2% of doctoral students were Black African and Asian Pakistani, respectively (HESA 2021). At both doctoral and post-doctoral level, there is a stark under-representation of ethnic minority academics and researchers, particularly within senior management positions. Statistics from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), highlight that, currently, only 1% of professors in the UK are Black and 8% are Asian (Advance HE 2021), and that universities employ more Black staff as cleaners, receptionists or porters than as lecturers or professors. A recent report authored by Okoye (2021) noted the "relatively low recruitment, low funding and high withdrawal rates of Black PhD students across all disciplines" (2). We also recognise an uneasy, and even fractious climate in higher education: ongoing industrial action in UK HE that has centred the damaging effects of casualisation (Megoran and Mason 2020); the enactment of the PREVENT duty by universities (Dear 2018) that has laid bare the surveillance and monitoring of international students; the recent British government's devaluing of social science and humanities degrees; and the general trends towards neoliberalisation within higher education institutions (Shain et al. 2021; Miah 2017; Housee 2018; Berg et al. 2016). This collectively authored paper arises out of this moment and stems from our reflections on a funded project examining belonging within higher education in the UK, bringing to the fore our own lived experiences as staff and students from historically underrepresented and marginalised backgrounds.

Fortuitous connections with kindred-spirit colleagues led us to the development of a project that envisioned collaboration and co-production with doctoral researchers at its core. We were lucky that the funding body encouraged our sense of experimentation and playfulness, as we were keen to use arts-based methods to get at the heart of what belonging and experiences of time-space within the university might be, for doctoral researchers. We are aware that we write this paper in a moment when ‘decolonization’ is in vogue in university circles and are ambivalent about a trend in which institutions can appropriate 'decolonial' vocabularies and agendas without putting in the 'work' (see Doharty et. al 2021). We also write at a time when 'diversity' initiatives abound, but are hollow in their efforts, and not committed to remaking the university anew. Instead of proposing that this project -- and its related processes and outputs -- serve such initiatives, we take a step sideways instead to think about the commitments and futures that collective gathering, making, and creating can engender. Within this context of constraints and exclusions we ask: *how might zines and arts-based methods create and sustain care and respite within the neoliberal university? What potentialities are there for co-envisioning and instigating emancipatory futures?*

While our co-produced zine formed a core material document of our collective conversations over the course of the project, we also reflect here more broadly on our experiences of using collaborative arts-based methods. Following McLean (2022), the addition of participatory arts-based methods to a project alone cannot challenge power dynamics and disrupt privilege. We hold McLean's careful critique in mind given the composition of our collective: we were nine researchers in total, with two of us in permanent academic positions, and the rest, doctoral researchers at various stages. Three of us were formally employed as members of the original research team to organise and lead the project. Considering the different roles we held, and differential powers we had to shape and steer the project, we would like to clarify the ‘we’ that has emerged to produce the zine and author this paper: the authorial ‘we’ in this paper is fluid,

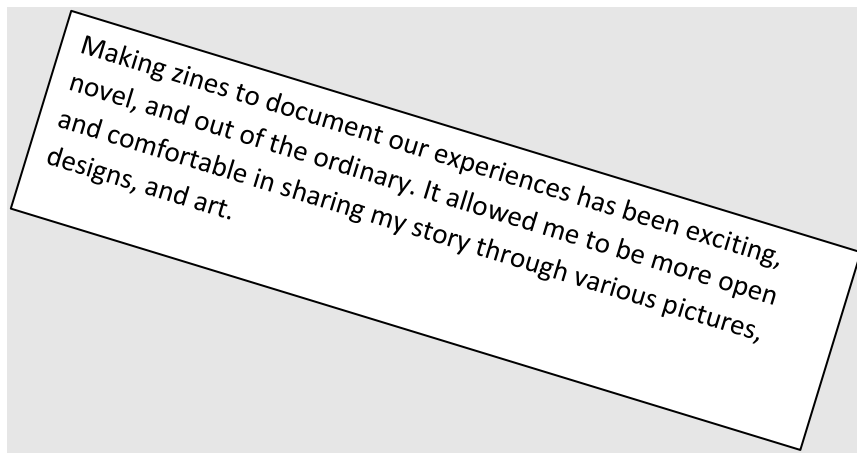
sometimes referring to the whole collective, and sometimes to the three original members of the research team. It reflects the changing shifts in our identity over the course of the project. The original research team desired and designed a project that would be composed of ‘partners’, who would each contribute to the co-production of knowledge, in their own distinctive way. We/they did not set out to create a ‘collective’. However, a sense of collectiveness emerged gradually over the time we spent together, a time devoted to hearing shared ideas, experiences, emotions, and the making-doing-crafting activities that accompanied their expression. The ‘collective’ emerged as a distinct identity when we sought an appropriate way of labelling ourselves in relation to the zine that we had created. One could say that the zine animated ‘the collective’ and brought this identity into sharp focus. In authoring this paper, we have taken care to share the labour between us, recognising the differences amongst us, with some of us being grant-funded researchers with dedicated time to spend on the project. However, we see the process of writing, editing, and revising as a collaborative one, shared amongst the collective. For instance, the paper was structured from all our reflections on the project, generated during a free-writing session at the end of the project. Extracts from these reflections are interspersed in text boxes throughout this paper, alongside extracts from the zine.

This paper is thus intended to acknowledge the special and specific contributions of all members of the collective, and hope that a publication such as this would usefully count towards all our academic identities as credible knowledge producers. Inspired by the call of Warnock et. al. (2022), to pay attention to the ethics of care in precarious contexts, the original research team always hoped to co-produce an academic paper as a way of acknowledging the collaborative process of knowledge production and as a suitable reimbursement for the contributions of time and effort (alongside and beyond monetary vouchers).

In the rest of the paper, we reflect on our considerations and experiences of arts-based methods to express our sense of belonging or unbelonging; our attempts to create an appropriate safe space in which to forge bonds; the many processes involved in creating material for the zine and its final composition; and finally, the ongoing effects/afterlife of the project and zine. Taken together, we hope this offers a sense of how these journeys generated solidarities that shaped us as a collective.

### **On Collaborative Arts-based Research Methods and Zines**

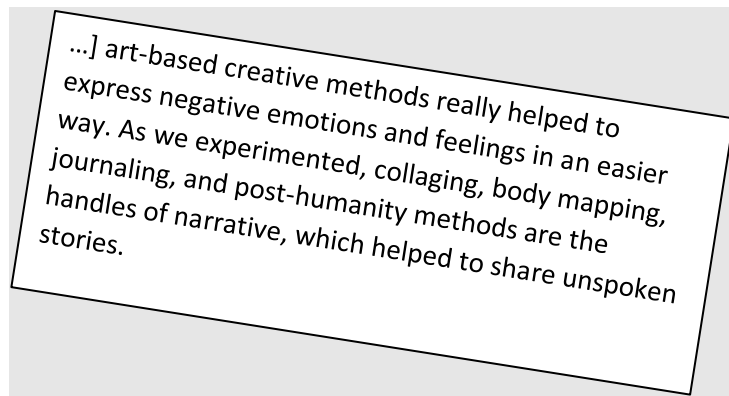
Our original intentions for the project were to ground it in participatory, relational, and reparative frameworks that centre students as co-producers of knowledge. The project was devised as a set of three workshops that would build on each other, in the hope that the iterative process would also deepen our ties with one another over the course of the year. The workshops themselves drew upon a portfolio of creative methods which we experimented with, in small groups. The use of creative, arts-based making practices we hoped, would be useful in the expression of affective elements of experiences such as hopes, fears, and imaginaries that are not easily expressed through text-based approaches that rely solely on language (Lyon and Carabelli 2016; Jewitt 2019). Hence the workshops centred around arts-related stimulus materials and group doing-making activities that would encourage participation in a variety of ways (Bayley 2018).



Making zines to document our experiences has been exciting, novel, and out of the ordinary. It allowed me to be more open and comfortable in sharing my story through various pictures, designs, and art.

*Figure 1: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

In the first workshop, we worked through collaging, body-mapping, and posthumanism-inspired ‘walking-with’ experiences on campus which drew upon ‘sensorial worlds’, using sights, smells, sounds, and touch to explore our relationship and ‘affective entanglements’ with the non-human (i.e., animals, plants, weather, water, and materials around us) (Malone 2019). Our intention was to engage all our collaborators through different means, in a critical examination of the meaning of their unique experiences, which may not be satisfactorily achieved through conventional methods. Body-mapping for instance, uses the drawing of symbols and selecting images to help “tell a story and at the same time challenge them [participants] to search for meanings that represented who they had become” (Gastaldo et al. 2012, 8). Subsequently, we worked independently, producing materials that expressed our experiences as artefacts, on paper, and on online collaborative tools.



...] art-based creative methods really helped to express negative emotions and feelings in an easier way. As we experimented, collaging, body mapping, journaling, and post-humanity methods are the handles of narrative, which helped to share unspoken stories.

*Figure 2: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

Across these workshops and the independent production carried out by the collective, the stories, experiences, and feelings we uncovered and discussed were deeply personal and moving, sometimes painful and traumatic, and other times, joyful and playful. One of the challenges we faced was how to share these complex stories and experiences with various stakeholders across the university beyond this safe and intimate space we had forged together. There were also the challenges and vulnerability that come with publicly critiquing the institution, particularly given the precarious position that many of the collective occupy as early career researchers. We were also wary of flattening out the diversity of our individual experiences and the richness of the creative expressions through a reductive analysis that would feed into a conventional report or paper.

It was through our collective discussions about how to address some of these challenges that the zine emerged (in the second workshop), as an organic way of embracing the multiplicity and diversity of experiences across our collective. We were inspired by zines produced by similar research projects in other HE contexts. The emphasis that zines place on centring counter-narratives and highlighting ‘the little stories’ of marginalised groups (French and Curd 2021) also allowed us to tell our own story of 'diversity' and what it means to experience the university as a

person of colour beyond the official, institutional rhetoric and narratives often endorsed and promoted by the institution.

Zines, because they tend to be self-published works, are a popular and powerful way of sharing ideas and in formats that might not fit into conventional publishing requirements (Ramdarshan Bold 2017). While zines have been more associated with activists, the exploration of zines within academic research contexts, and specifically within the university, is gaining momentum (Bagelman and Bagelman 2016; FLOCK 2021). Bagelman and Bagelman (2016) for instance, note the role zine production, particularly amongst students, can play in contributing to calls for slow scholarship (Mountz et. al 2015) -- or the wider movement that advocates an intentional slowing down to challenge the unrealistic timelines demanded by neoliberal practices characteristic of contemporary universities. By deconstructing institutional 'foodscapes' through zines, students, in the case illustrated by Bagelman and Bagelman (2016), were able to read closely the ways their university in Canada perpetuated colonial relations on unceded Indigenous lands. Similarly, Velasco et. al (2020) use zine-making as both a "reflective research tool ... and a powerful way to prompt and build critical conversations" (348), within the university setting to 'disrupt' mainstream classroom engagements with environmental racism. As a peer-to-peer tool, the zine created by Velasco et. al (2020), 'Across the Street', challenged ideas on race, toxins, and capitalism, thus speaking to bell hooks' call for developing a critical consciousness within the classroom. Elsewhere, the compelling zine created by The FLOCK Collective -- or Feminists Liberating Our Collective Knowledge -- confronted the ongoing persistence of racist ideologies and the reproduction of white supremacy within the campus of University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The ethos of The FLOCK Collective, namely: [being] "motivated by the need to continue to mobilize, to share past experiences, to connect people, and to form new visions" (534) resonated with our own goals.



In addition to deconstructing received knowledges, 'disrupting' the classroom, and challenging racist university politics, zines seemed to facilitate a non-standardised, non-academic way of expression that enables meeting 'students where they are', bridging academic writing and everyday vocabularies and grammars (Lonsdale 2015, 12). This ethos of 'bridging' is valuable to those of us who converse in 'World Englishes' and languages beyond English in daily life, allowing us to locate our colloquial lives and interests within academic endeavour. In this way, zineing for us, was, "...an inviting format for communication, an alternative to the traditionally valued forms of media and expression where they [students] do not see themselves represented" (Lonsdale 2015, 8-9).



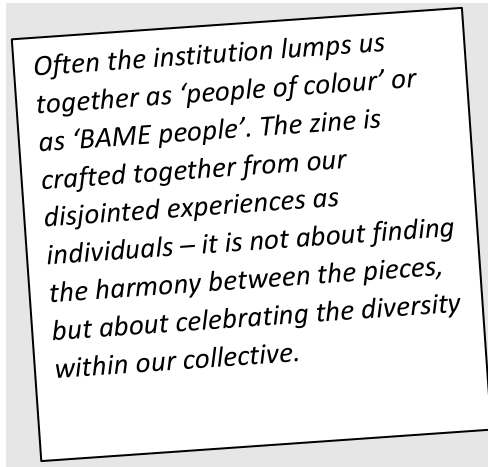
*Figure 3: Page from Zine*



*Figure 4: Page from Zine*

We shared our experiences on the project at the X conference (2022) session on zine-ing entitled 'X', which focused on "moving past capitalist notions of zine-making as a product towards a more process-oriented consideration of 'zine-ing'" (Jones and Bagelman 2022). We stay with this orientation in this paper to examine processes before, during, and after the creation of our zine. We have attempted to make sense of how our experience of creating the zine enabled us to strengthen our collective, contributing to creative ways of resisting and recovering within a HE context. As antiracist, feminist scholars across the disciplines of geography, social work, education, and global development studies, the collaborative elements of creating and crafting

were important to us and challenged the neoliberalised understanding of academic outputs as individual and as final products (Dufty-Jones and Gibson 2022).

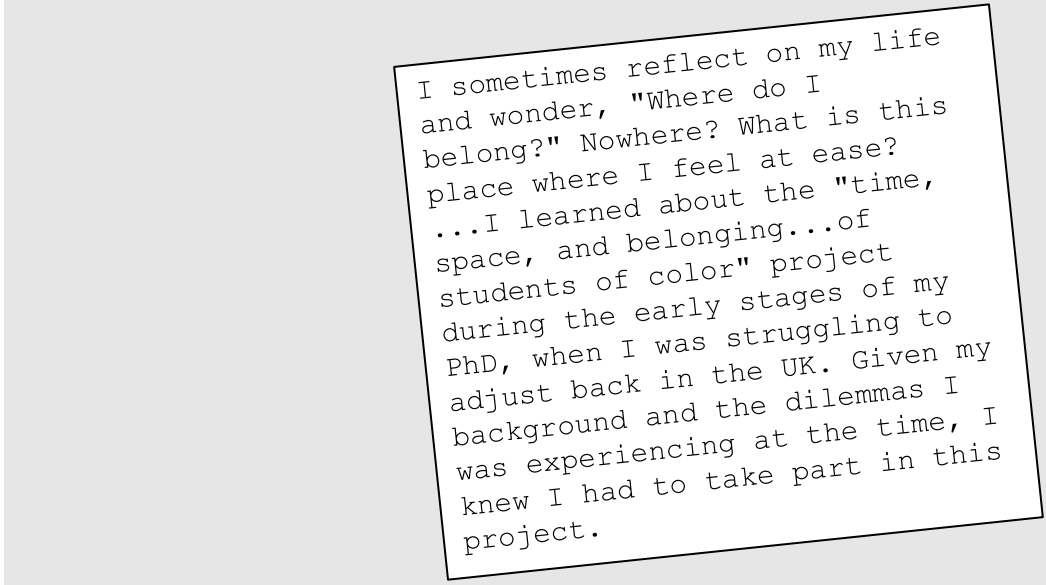


*Often the institution lumps us together as 'people of colour' or as 'BAME people'. The zine is crafted together from our disjointed experiences as individuals – it is not about finding the harmony between the pieces, but about celebrating the diversity within our collective.*

*Figure 5: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

### **Creating/Crafting a Space within the Institution: Forging New Bonds**

At the start, those of us who had initiated the project were concerned with how we could produce a space where we all felt safe, able to express ourselves, and produce work together as colleagues. As an attempt to flatten hierarchies between us, and to avoid falling into fixed roles as faculty versus learners/students, we highlighted how the project was not a research training programme, but rather, an experiment in which we were all engaged as fellow teacher-learners. In the invitations to PhD students to work as partners on the project, we focused on the importance of sharing experiences of belonging or unbelonging, rather than showcasing pre-existing skills or knowledge of arts-based methods.



*Figure 6: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

As initiators of the project, we were anxious for the usefulness and success of the project to all partners. Spaces that are collegial, free for us to disassemble, and free from contractual/extractive relations are not easy, for multiple reasons. We are inspired by the work of Allen (2020), who writes on 'places of respite' for Black university students in the US -- places that centre healing, but more importantly, are imbued with "creative geographies engaged in the production of rejuvenated identities and founded upon the celebration of marginalized lives" (1569). In terms of cultivating such spaces, we didn't know what to expect: who would respond to our call, and would doctoral students facing increasing precarity want to experiment with us?

*How do we create this alternative space within the bowels of the institution? We move to a location that is still within the institution's walls but which feels a bit different. The room feels open and airy with glass panels for a whole wall. The gardens*

*beyond create an ambience of a special place, not an everyday place bound up with everyday habits and rules. Perhaps we can escape our roles of 'PhD student', 'supervisor', 'lecturer' and draw from other constellations of being. We start with this hope.*

*Figure 7: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

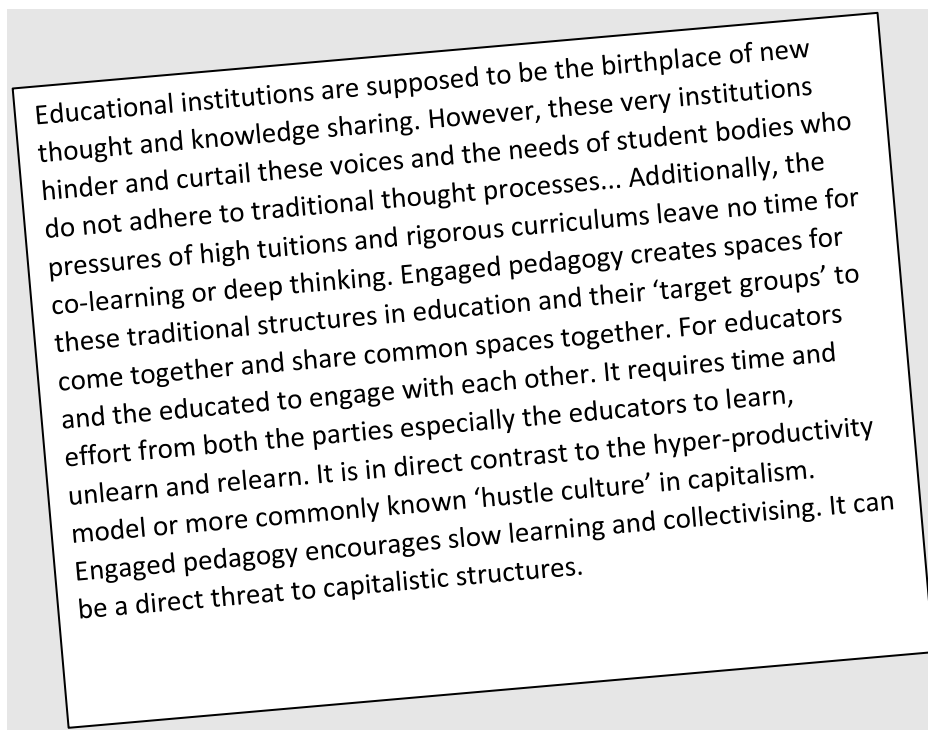
For the first workshop, we each brought an object/image or artefact with us to help us introduce ourselves to each other. From earlier experiences, some of us recalled how such introductions allowed us to open up about something that was meaningful to each of us. The objects were intriguing in their variety - a tattoo, hand-knitted gloves, a shawl, a wristband, an artefact from one's hometown, and so on. We began to reveal something of who we are, something that is not bound to our pre-established roles allocated to us by the institution. Snippets of lives were shared through these objects, some intense, others more light-hearted and each snippet itself seemed to build a new space. In making room for each story, a space where we could belong began to take shape.

Openly discuss the lacked belongings and the lost identity within a group of unfamiliar PGRs, is not what I expected at the beginning, but I felt 'the Concrete Collective' is a warm group that I can trust. When someone sharing a piece of self with sensitive stories, the rest others were really listening and carefully showed empathy. I still remember, we talked a lot about 'self', someone shared the feeling of 'could not fit in', someone described how hard they worked to 'escape from family and marriage', someone explained the loneliness in everyday life etc. and then we realised that we are 'not alone'. ...we share the feelings of un-belonging. This common experience helped us to open self and accept each other as a group/a community. The shared sensitivity and empathy also helped the group to build solidarity, the feeling of 'stick together' and do something was produced during the project. Compare to the traditional solidarity which refers to single background people ... the new solidarity we created are broader and more flexible. It broadens the community to all backgrounds, and the shared time are precious.

*Figure 8: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

Attempts such as these exemplify how the activities or objects are not significant or an end in themselves. But they help the process of becoming a collective, a collective whose parts are always moving and assembling. The initiators of the project did not know any more than the rest of the collective, as no one had prior experience of arts-based or creative forms of researching their own experiences. There were no 'teachers' or 'instructors' for these methods. We were all co-learners. In the first workshop, we laughingly trialled some of these creative methods, tracing outlines of our bodies during a body-mapping experience and agreeing that our intersectional experiences were both unique and universal – whether it was exclusions along caste/class, racial, gendered, or bordered lines, these became refracted through the neoliberal university, and affected doctoral and early career researcher journeys. And yet, there are small openings for us to belong – whether a particular tree on campus that we felt a special connection to, or the recreation centre as a space of sanctuary, or little nods of welcome from departments. We noted that left to themselves,

institutions such as universities would not be invested in creating these spaces of belonging; we needed to demand them and create them ourselves. The space of the workshops thus felt strangely counter-institutional, as we began sharing experiences and ideas in this space as credible knowledge producers. We accepted and validated each other's contributions. We recognised shared ground. We felt like we were creating the "undercommons" (Moten and Harney 2013) – a parallel space that can exist to create new, purposeful knowledge even within the inevitably neoliberal space of a higher educational institution.



Educational institutions are supposed to be the birthplace of new thought and knowledge sharing. However, these very institutions hinder and curtail these voices and the needs of student bodies who do not adhere to traditional thought processes... Additionally, the pressures of high tuitions and rigorous curriculums leave no time for co-learning or deep thinking. Engaged pedagogy creates spaces for these traditional structures in education and their 'target groups' to come together and share common spaces together. For educators and the educated to engage with each other. It requires time and effort from both the parties especially the educators to learn, unlearn and relearn. It is in direct contrast to the hyper-productivity model or more commonly known 'hustle culture' in capitalism. Engaged pedagogy encourages slow learning and collectivising. It can be a direct threat to capitalistic structures.

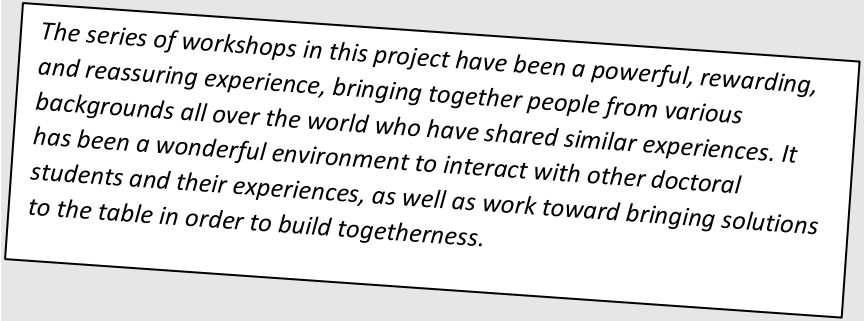
*Figure 9: Reflections from Writing Workshop*



*Figure 10: Page from Zine*

On reflection, the principles underlying the workshops on this project can be described thus: engaging with our experiences of the world; encouraging experimentation and risk-taking; not prioritising institutional or top-down agendas but starting from our experience; establishing that all are learners, and are part of a community of difference (with diverse interests); strengthening our sense of agency in co-creating futures; and encouraging learning that emerges in responsive performance (doing/making/acting). This was the enactment of a D-I-Y pedagogy that emphasised diversity and community (Gibbons and Snake-Beings 2018).





*The series of workshops in this project have been a powerful, rewarding, and reassuring experience, bringing together people from various backgrounds all over the world who have shared similar experiences. It has been a wonderful environment to interact with other doctoral students and their experiences, as well as work toward bringing solutions to the table in order to build togetherness.*

*Figure 11: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

### **Process: Making the Zine**

Once we had decided that a zine was the most suitable output to express our experience over the period of the project, we invited a local artist with expertise in creating zines for community groups, to lead a final workshop for us. At this workshop we learnt more about the history and tradition of zines, closely examined a range of zines produced by individuals and collectives, learnt how to create a ‘mini-zine’ with an A4 sheet of paper, and then discussed how we each could contribute to the final zine. We settled on the name of our collective – *The Concrete Collective* – partly in tribute to the concrete brutalism of our campus architecture, and partly to signal the qualities of being an amalgamated, bonded and enduring, if conflicted, material. We decided also that we would create a flip-zine with two volumes: one signalling ways in which we felt distanced and ‘unbelonged’ within the institution – the ‘unhomely university’ -- and when flipped over, another set of pages – ‘building togetherness’ -- would communicate our hopes and strategies for creating belonging for us and future generations of students and staff. One of the original aims of the project was to draw upon a speculative ethos to focus on “envisioning or crafting futures or conditions which may not yet currently exist and provoke new ways of thinking” (Ross 2017, 215), in order to tease out the alternative engagements envisaged and proposed for a more inclusive and diverse HE. The flip side of the zine on ‘building togetherness’ addressed this

speculative orientation. We generated a set of words that we associated with each half of the zine that would inspire us in the next step, which was for each of us to create a single A4 page of a collage, and to choose two images each to contribute to a middle page spread that would hold the two parts of the zine together.

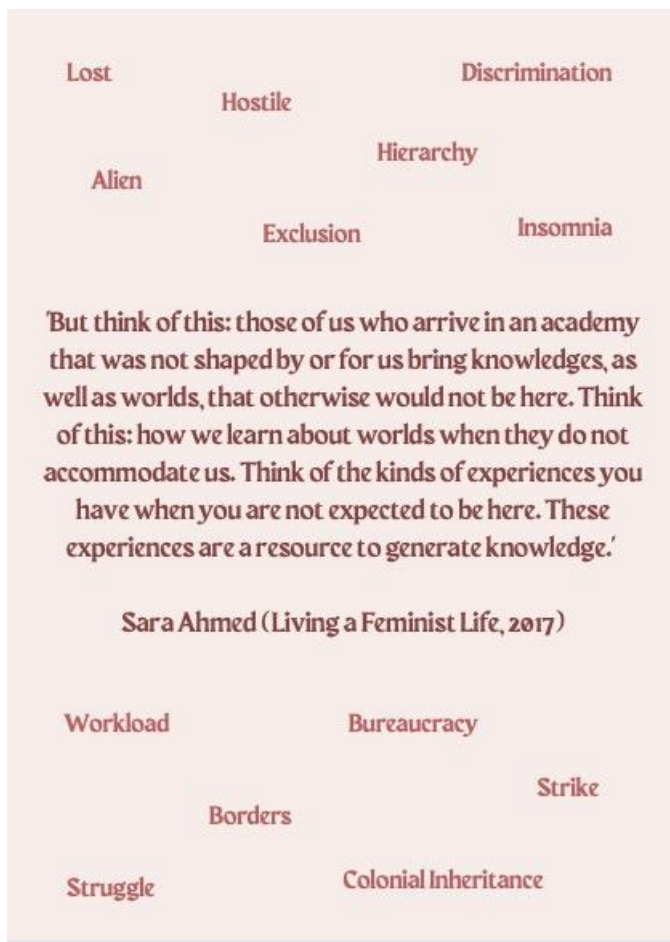
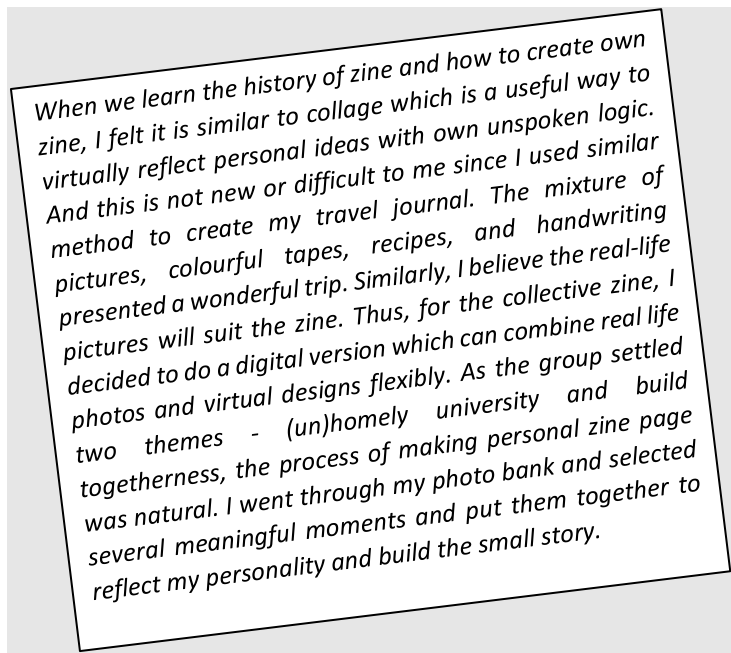


Figure 12: Page from Zine



When we learn the history of zine and how to create own zine, I felt it is similar to collage which is a useful way to virtually reflect personal ideas with own unspoken logic. And this is not new or difficult to me since I used similar method to create my travel journal. The mixture of pictures, colourful tapes, recipes, and handwriting presented a wonderful trip. Similarly, I believe the real-life pictures will suit the zine. Thus, for the collective zine, I decided to do a digital version which can combine real life photos and virtual designs flexibly. As the group settled two themes - (un)homely university and build togetherness, the process of making personal zine page was natural. I went through my photo bank and selected several meaningful moments and put them together to reflect my personality and build the small story.

*Figure 13: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

Although this next stage sent us out on separate paths -- each of us seeking images and words that would help us uniquely express belonging/unbelonging and deciding whether to make our individual zine pages by hand or online -- we felt the presence of the collective and the echos of conversations that had spread out over nearly a whole year. This was a phase where making processes offered each of us a reflective and meditative space from which to contemplate pasts and anticipate futures. This kind of ‘making’ goes together with imagining, understanding, thinking and feeling (Rousell and Hickey-Moody 2021). It became a making that allowed for embodied, felt experiences, and encompassed DIY traditions of learning through/with materials.

*The zine's first unhomely section depicts various forms of discrimination and exclusion faced by students of color based on class, caste, color, race, religion, creed, and language. In the zine, I included my own experiences of class and caste discrimination/exclusion that I encountered in some university spaces. I didn't feel like I belonged at university because there was still bias against people based on their identity. Similarly, I created another zine depicting building togetherness among students and working together to overcome these barriers in the coming years. The goal was to raise awareness and empathy among students about the various experiences they have at university, as well as the importance of peers being sensitive and unbiased.*

*Figure 14: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

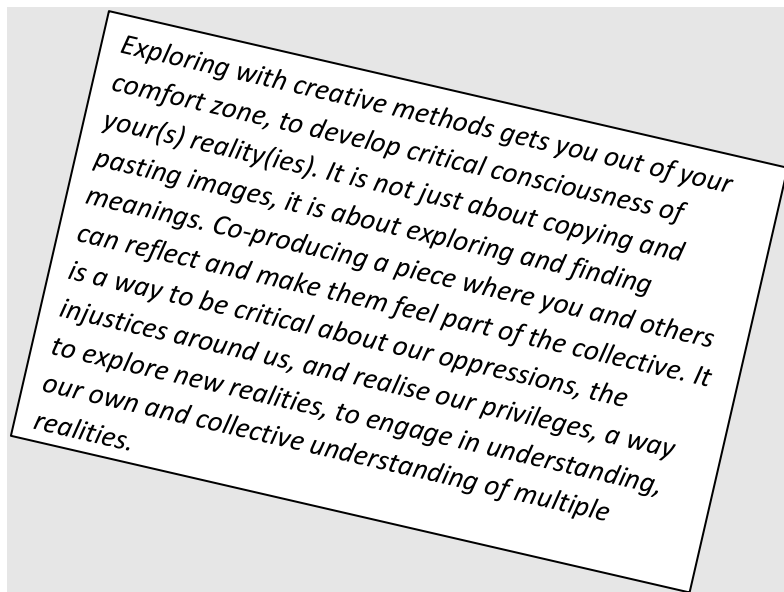
Collaging is a method that has been used as a form of inquiry to make visible existing, and alternative spaces (Kangas et al. 2019) and futures (Coleman 2020). The act of images being cut away from their conventional contexts and being re-assembled in new combinations is a creative process that requires little technical training and relies on simple resources. For us, collaging became a method to "examine, engage and invent ways for actualising futures" (Coleman 2020, 63) as much as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with the present. The materials and activities we experimented with in the two earlier workshops acted as 'mediators' - objects, stationery (glitter, glue, post-its, butcher block paper, pens, crayons, magazines, visuals/photo images), walks, maps, people, and so on – helping to create and 'fabulate' pieces or artefacts which open

possibilities outside the present terms of order (Deleuze 1995).



*Figure 15: Page from Zine*

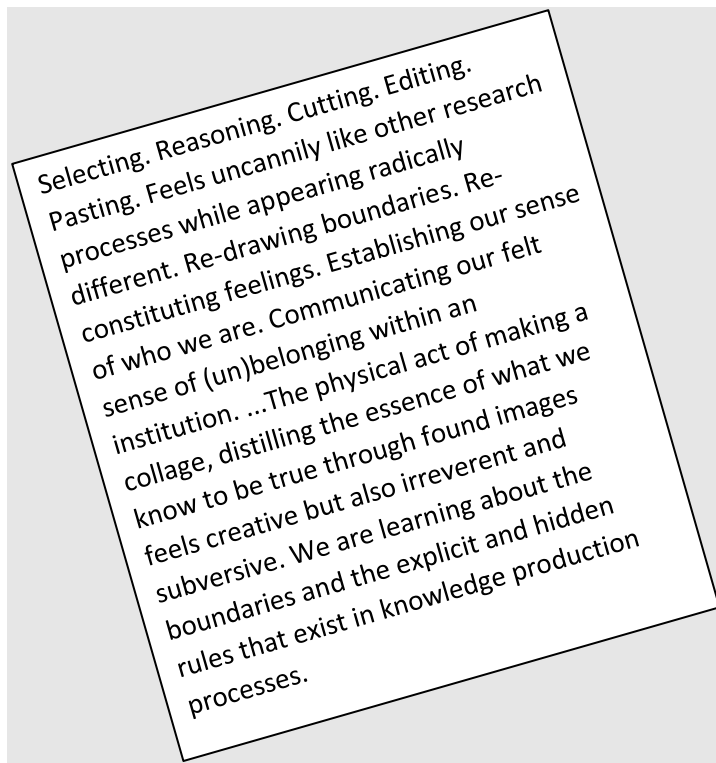
We were also reassured by the fact that acts of fabulation are always open-ended and unfinished, hence our focus was on a critical reflection on the year long process, rather than the quality of skill or 'art' in the collages themselves.

A tilted rectangular box with a black border, containing text. The text is written in a serif font and is rotated counter-clockwise. The background of the box is white, and it is set against a light gray background.

*Exploring with creative methods gets you out of your comfort zone, to develop critical consciousness of your(s) reality(ies). It is not just about copying and pasting images, it is about exploring and finding meanings. Co-producing a piece where you and others can reflect and make them feel part of the collective. It is a way to be critical about our oppressions, the injustices around us, and realise our privileges, a way to explore new realities, to engage in understanding, our own and collective understanding of multiple realities.*

*Figure 16: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

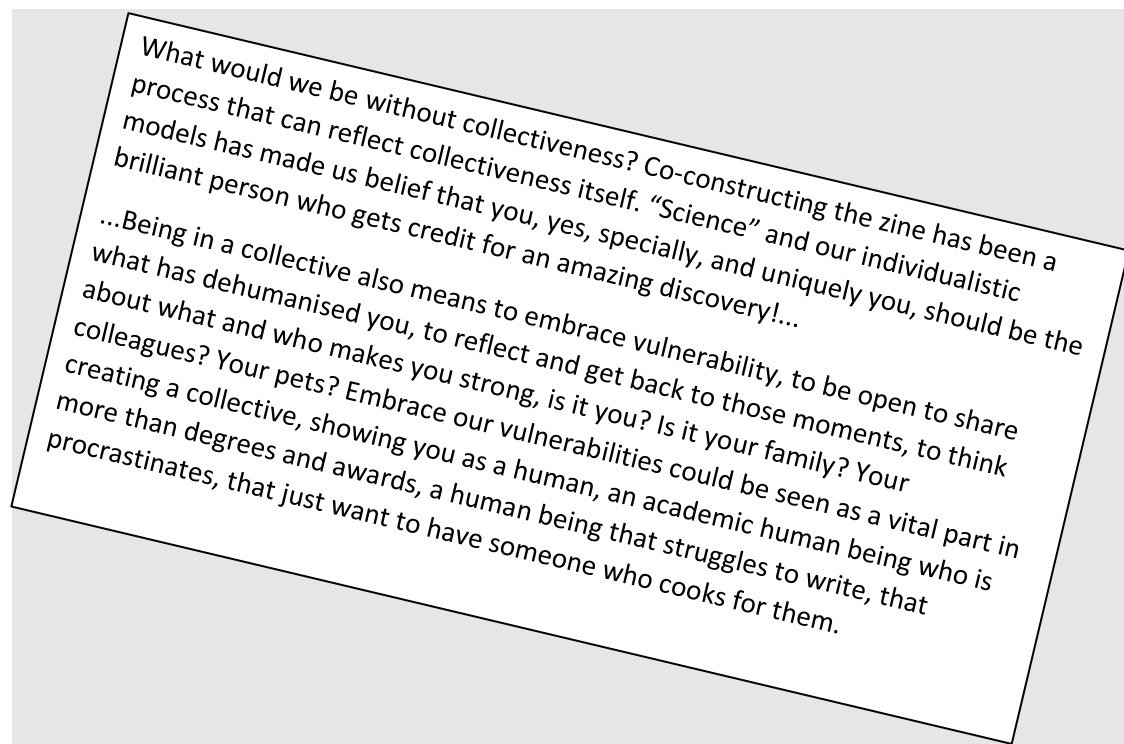
The physical act of collaging allowed us to cut up and cut ourselves away from older, more restrictive traditions that dog us within academia, particularly as early career researchers seeking to enter, or break through, into the academy. The creative nature of zine-ing, in which there is no right or wrong way of doing things, enabled us to play and create for the sake of creating, rather than feeling obliged to contributing to the rigid and often factory-like production of peer-reviewed papers. It allowed us to experience a slowing down of time, emphasising reflection, creativity and play rather than an oppressive productivity.



Selecting. Reasoning. Cutting. Editing.  
Pasting. Feels uncannily like other research  
processes while appearing radically  
different. Re-drawing boundaries. Re-  
constituting feelings. Establishing our sense  
of who we are. Communicating our felt  
sense of (un)belonging within an  
institution. ...The physical act of making a  
collage, distilling the essence of what we  
know to be true through found images  
feels creative but also irreverent and  
subversive. We are learning about the  
boundaries and the explicit and hidden  
rules that exist in knowledge production  
processes.

*Figure 17: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

Across the selection of collages, we can also see our outputs as strangely monstrous. We were in some way, researcher-Frankensteins cutting and pasting together queer reflections of our experiences. These creative acts felt appropriate as they allowed us to speak with distinctive voices even as we recognised so much of each other's experiences. Perhaps creative and arts-based research methods will inevitably appear queer or off-beat, as they embody attempts to "speak back to neoliberal and colonial university enclosures reinforcing heteropatriarchal and white supremacist understandings of knowledge production..." (MacLean 2022, 311). Thus arts-based research is more than just creative expression, and this is something that rang true through our own journeys.



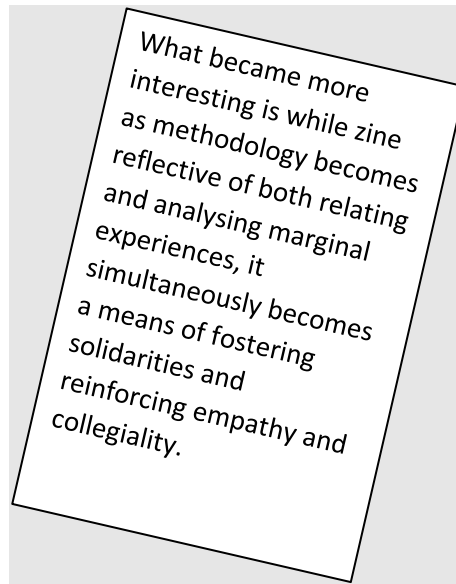
What would we be without collectiveness? Co-constructing the zine has been a process that can reflect collectiveness itself. "Science" and our individualistic models has made us believe that you, yes, specially, and uniquely you, should be the brilliant person who gets credit for an amazing discovery!...

...Being in a collective also means to embrace vulnerability, to be open to share what has dehumanised you, to reflect and get back to those moments, to think about what and who makes you strong, is it you? Is it your family? Your colleagues? Your pets? Embrace our vulnerabilities could be seen as a vital part in creating a collective, showing you as a human, an academic human being who is more than degrees and awards, a human being that struggles to write, that procrastinates, that just want to have someone who cooks for them.

*Figure 18: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

In the end, putting together the final version of the zine was akin to a stitching together – a giant collage of collages – itself both a physical manifestation of a social commitment; an expression of solidarity; and a means of building solidarity between the makers. Each of our pages was unique: some of us are more comfortable with images, whereas others of us felt the urge for text to be interspersed. Many of the pages were also imbued with the personal and intimate, for what is the collective if not an assembling of these varied experiences – of what it means to be isolated linguistically, or feel family pressures and/or live abroad, or experience the wounds of the UK hostile environment. Thus, the collective is necessarily composed of the intimate.

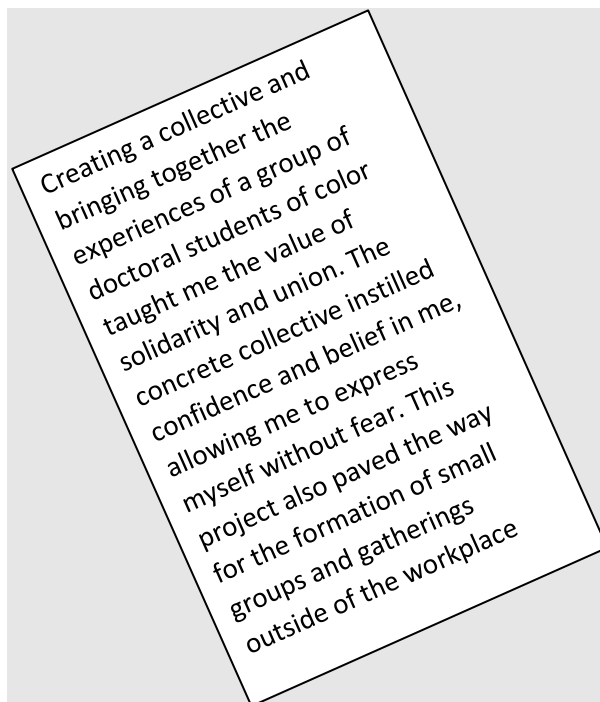


A tilted rectangular box with a black border, containing text. The box is set against a light gray background.

What became more interesting is while zine as methodology becomes reflective of both relating and analysing marginal experiences, it simultaneously becomes a means of fostering solidarities and reinforcing empathy and collegiality.

*Figure 19: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

### **Afterlife of the Zine**

A tilted rectangular box with a black border, containing text. The box is set against a light gray background.

Creating a collective and bringing together the experiences of a group of doctoral students of color taught me the value of solidarity and union. The concrete collective instilled confidence and belief in me, allowing me to express myself without fear. This project also paved the way for the formation of small groups and gatherings outside of the workplace

*Figure 20: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

When we consider the zine today, we do not claim that the experiences it contains speak to everyone, and nor were they meant to. But it is one of the tangible outcomes of the project and as such bears the burden of sometimes being mis-recognised for its purpose and use when it gets circulated. As Chidgey (2013) notes:

Beyond historical truth claims, zines are primarily memory texts, documenting, interpreting, sharing and archiving the current cultural moment. As zines are mobile, social, and shared documents, circulating within self-selecting networks, studies of these publications benefit from interviews and insights provided by zinemakers themselves... (669).

The tensions between the affects generated in the intimate spaces forged through the year, leading to the zine, and the imperative to share it with a wider audience within and beyond the university were therefore tricky to resolve. After all, we did want our experiences to be heard, picked up, and used in ways that we could not ourselves envisage. We deliberated on these tensions and our own anxieties about how the zine (and by extension, the collective itself) would be received and recognised. In the end, we held a public launch of the zine, inviting a group of carefully selected academics, students, our advisory board members, administrators, and university leaders with a responsibility for student welfare from across the university. We felt they would be accomplices, both supportive of the endeavour and open to learning from our experience. We held the event off-campus, in the heart of the city, taking the first tentative steps in opening up ourselves to those outside the collective.

Some of our hesitancy in boldly occupying public spaces to publicise our learnings were indeed because those learnings arose from intimate and personal experiences that needed mediating before sharing with a wider world. In many ways, the nature of the zine, its reliance on images and edited slices of our lived experience, the brevity of a single A4 sheet for each of us, a

list of words, all contributed to a certain enigmatic opaqueness that allowed this mediation between public and intimate content.



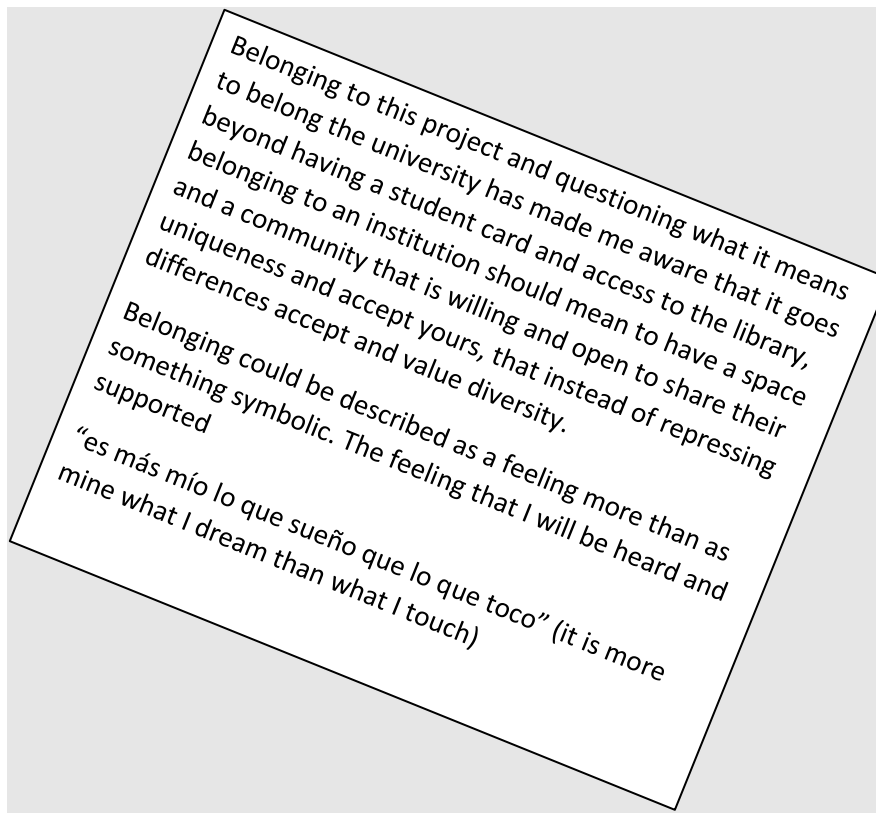
*Figure 21: Page from Zine*

Other reasons for our hesitancy arose from knowledge that initiatives such as these can and have been seized for different purposes that can be at odds with the critical or emancipatory agendas of grassroots projects. Often, when it comes to ‘doing’ diversity work within universities, the emphasis is on producing an official document (Ahmed 2007). This usually takes the form of a set of policies which are filed away in cupboards, referenced as proof that some action has been taken, with the document positioned as the final product, rather than the start of action that needs

to be implemented (ibid). As staff and students of colour, we are usually called upon to ‘do’ such work within the university – to lead presentations during Black History Month, facilitate training workshops, educate the wider university on the imperative of 'decolonization', and often share painful and difficult experiences of racism we have encountered both within and beyond the institution (Akhtar 2022). This labour is expected to be offered as ‘voluntary’ work even as it places both a physical and emotional burden on people of colour. We have ourselves had to refuse some well-meaning but not-quite-appropriate invitations to contribute to conversations and initiatives that were framed in ways that did not sit well with us and the ethos of our collective/project.

At the launch event for our zine, some commented on how beautiful the zine was, but how they wished it contained some text to explain what the pieces meant. In this instance, the deliberately ambiguous nature of the zine, open to multiple interpretations and readings, allowed us to be free from having to spell out the significance of every quote, visual, symbol, and sign. As Jazeel (2016) writes, "Moments of *untranslatability* are immensely productive encounters where incommensurate differences can productively encounter each other" (659). While speaking to linguistic translations, Jazeel's (2016) point on plural knowledges stretches to our zine. Thus, the untranslatability of our zine is something to be embraced by the reader: we responded that we hoped the zine would create curious and ethical readers who would have to piece ‘clues’ and move between registers to process associations and messages that may be less obvious. We invite readers to tap into their own experiences and knowledges to attempt more affective and embodied readings of the zine, allowing themselves to be moved in unexpected ways by the pieces (Lindhé 2021). That the abstract nature of the zine refused the format of neat recommendations was a relief – it was meant as the start of a conversation, rather than the end of one, yielding a list that could be

filed away. We felt freed from the burden of having to do this kind of diversity work or the emotional labour of having to explain explicit and implicit racisms and microaggressions.



Belonging to this project and questioning what it means to belong the university has made me aware that it goes beyond having a student card and access to the library, belonging to an institution should mean to share a space and a community that is willing and open to share their uniqueness and accept yours, that instead of repressing differences accept and value diversity.

Belonging could be described as a feeling more than as something symbolic. The feeling that I will be heard and supported

“es más mío lo que sueño que lo que toco” (it is more mine what I dream than what I touch)

*Figure 22: Reflections from Writing Workshop*

We have also struggled with sharing our collective experiences and the zine itself, on social media – we do not want to be simply consumed and celebrated by the world at large. We want to invite careful, thoughtful, playful, hopeful engagements that preclude neoliberal appropriations by the diversity industry. We know that these on-going experiments are not unique to us. Other zine producers in higher education have noted that there is a distinct afterlife to zines and the collectives that produce them:

As we strived to illuminate the ways student activists teach us about our university, making the zine became an educational process for us. It led to conversations and moments in which we sometimes addressed, briefly touched-on, or ignored tensions within our evolving feminist collective. Further, as our collective has shifted and sometimes stalled in the years after we first printed it, the zine has travelled outside our circle and served as a pedagogical object for others ... we reflect here on our collective commitments to creating and using the zine to subvert oppressive university hierarchies and also explore the difficulties in sustaining this collective work. (FLOCK, 2021: 531).

## **Resistance and Recovery in the Neoliberal University**

Over the course of our project, we found ourselves returning time and again to the theme of liminality – to the liminal spaces, identities, and timescapes we inhabit as people of colour within the institution, and the ways in which our experiences of un/belonging within the university cannot be divided into a simple binary. As a whole, the project sought to understand these complex moments and while we seek a greater sense of belonging, it is not through a simple ‘fitting in’: indeed, not fitting in was sometimes where we found ourselves and our sense of purpose. Below, we reflect on resistance and recovery through which zines and safe spaces potentially challenged oppressive relations and practices.

### *Resistance*

As May (2011) notes, not belonging can act as a powerful instrument for change by revealing ‘new possibilities’ of political action: individuals become aware that commonly trodden paths are not the only ones available. Identities constructed on the margins or outside of dominant belongings can be a positive phenomenon as "the questioning of borders and membership by groups [...] can be conducive to the development of “deep diversity” where identities are not predetermined or totalizing but rather flexible and open to multiple belongings" (May 2011, 373). Holding liminal positions allowed us to see differently and thus envision new kinds of educational institutions and relationships for the future. It also allowed us to explore non-dominant methods

of researching and writing about ourselves. These possibilities for introducing newness into our worlds perhaps would not have become apparent if we were fully comfortable within the university. By allowing us to explore ‘what could be’ rather than purely focusing on ‘what is’ (Duggan 1993, 373), the space created by our collective led to "new material possibilities and social positions", friendships, and networks in the process.



Figure 23: Page from Zine

### Recovery

The deeply experimental and playful nature of creating the zine also offered a space for us to daydream and imagine; in terms of the latter, to crucially, (re)imagine the institution, namely,

to (re)make it as we would like to see it. Creating and crafting the zine from the seeds of our imagination enabled us to reclaim a sense of agency and empowerment, of hope and optimism, when it came to thinking about some of the practical ways in which we could engender changes to the institution to make it a more inclusive, welcoming space for doctoral students and staff of colour. Experimenting with modes of expression beyond words, in the comfort of a collective allowed us to experience what a less individualistic mode of researching could feel like. Our own experience and the presence of other early career scholars and author collectives within academia (such as Owens and Green (2020) who are undertaking a joint PhD or Gibson-Graham (1996) who had collectively authored for years) gives us optimism that while this may not yet be the dominant way of functioning within higher education, perhaps collective, collegiate work may not be beyond its bounds.





what of our zine itself? If our zine was a political act, where and how does our critique of casualization, uncertainty, workload, and borders, for instance, go from here?

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At the same time, we recognize that our chances of securing future funding are intertwined with demonstrating the ‘impact’ that our project has had. Our grappling with these questions highlights the way in which the timescapes of higher education are tied to neoliberal norms of how we ‘ought’ to use time, and concurrently, how our time is ‘accounted’ for. As ongoing debates within critical human geography have highlighted, higher education research agendas are governed by a neoliberal emphasis on productivity and a demonstration of ‘impact’, often measured through rigid indicators (Sou and Hall 2023, Turner 2014). The ethics of care we learnt and practiced with/for each other during the project, however, meant that one of our biggest lessons was to resist a specific sense of time that envelopes us. During our project, for example, our focus on creating and experimenting together throughout our workshops allowed to centre fleeting moments in time as well as celebrate simply being in the moment together, focusing on the joy of creating for creating’s sake. Our positionality has been shaped by ongoing debates within critical human geography regarding the decentring and destabilising of neoliberal norms of productivity within academia (Rogers et al. 2014; Sou and Hall 2023; McClean 2022). Rather, we have been influenced by ‘the process of *doing* impact, by moving away from prescribed ideas of measurement and outcomes and instead towards an acknowledgement of the ethics, politics and praxis of these processes’ (original emphasis, Sou & Hall, 2023, 818).

We have continued to embrace this ethos beyond the formal ‘end’ of our project. Taking up recent calls to re-evaluate ‘impact as an outcome and end point’ (Sou and Hall, 2023, 819; Holdsworth and Hall 2022), our focus instead has been on celebrating ongoing spontaneous moments of conviviality and camaraderie fostered by our collective which remain irreducible to traditional, tangible markers and measurements of ‘success’. To this end, our zine – the material-digital form of it – has accomplished a great deal already. As Chidgey (2013, 668) notes, zines “are written in the moment; they are not necessarily meant for posterity”. They are memory texts that need to pass into archival traces if they are to become memory cultures. But the legacy of the zine is mercifully, not entirely archivable. As Sou and Hall (2023, 834) highlight, ‘zines go beyond traditional forms of research translation and dissemination, to enable more meaningful, sustained and personal engagements between participants, publics and research outputs’. Our project also goes beyond the material production of the zine: it is about the fluid, ongoing relationships and networks and intimate connections we have built up that have forged a collective. Our collective has marked the start of many burgeoning friendships that now exist outside of the formal structure of the project workshops. Many of us, for example, have set up or joined local sports teams together, cooked and shared meals with one another and we each feel a moment of warmth when we unexpectedly encounter each other on campus. We hope that this ethos of our collective, centred around nurturing these moments of conviviality and care, will continue to live on in unanticipated ways in the future.

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