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## Powerful writing as writing ‘with’

Jannick Friis Christensen, Sarah Dunne, Melissa Fisher, Alexander Fleischmann, Mary McGill, Florence Villesèche, Marta Natalia Wróblewska<sup>1</sup>

### Towards powerful queer-feminist academic writing

Whether physical, political, or intellectual, power is usually seen as a male<sup>2</sup>, or masculine attribute. Although – unsurprisingly – hardly present in the canon of writers (and clearly less represented in the list of Nobel prize winners), great female writers have left their footprint on generations of readers. Some of these authors are labeled as feminists, whether in fiction or nonfiction, starting as far back as Christine de Pisan in medieval times. Much more recent examples of feminist, powerful works include *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, or *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus, and many others in between. Perhaps certain authors are excluded from the canon of powerful writers – writing outside the mainstream – for that very reason: attempting to produce powerful, feminist and queer writing. Whether an author is included or excluded from the canon, it still begs the question: what makes writing powerful? And more specifically, what are the genres of powerful writing? Is the academic genre a powerful one? Can it be feminist *and* powerful? Can queer-feminist writing in organization and management studies be powerful? One could argue that powerful writing is about changing certain institutions that govern norms for writing and publishing. But how can one change an institution from within without simultaneously perpetuating that very institution – at least in part? And how does

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- 1 The authors contributed equally to this piece of work and are cited in alphabetical order.
  - 2 Although we use binary terms (e.g. male/female, masculinity/femininity) we acknowledge and encourage the possible multiplicity in their understanding (masculinities, femininities, etc.).

that influence the possibility for powerful writing from non-conforming bodies, i.e. non-conforming bodies of text as well as the non-conforming bodies of our authorial voices? What desires drive powerful writing? These are some of the questions that we addressed during a session on the theme of Powerful Writing in the ‘Feminism, Activism, Writing!’ workshop that took place at Copenhagen Business School in the fall of 2017<sup>3</sup>.

We contend that devoting oneself to critical queer-feminist organization and management research implies believing that a critique of contemporary realities is possible and worthwhile, and, at the same time, that social realities are organized, that they can (referring back to a state of possibility) or even should (relating to the normative character of queer-feminist critique) be organized in different, alternative, and emancipatory ways. Powerful writing, within the queer-feminist project, should mean engaging in changing existing social relations of exclusion and marginalization (also in academia) and, again, it implies believing that this is achievable while working in academia.

In this research note, we discuss powerful writing as empathic intellectual work, we discuss its neoliberal context, and we reflect upon the link between changing realities and changing academia. We illustrate our theoretical discussion with two extended vignettes about some of our experiences. We hope that these examples of our personal experiences will resonate with those of our readers. Indeed, as the title of the note suggests, we purport that powerful writing is writing ‘with’. In this spirit, we do not conclude by providing any definitive truths or how-to guides for powerful writing. Rather, we end the note by pointing to *beginnings*, that is, by outlining a few possible ways forward. Overall, our hope is to fuel the academic conversation about powerful writing.

### **Empathic intellectual work in the neoliberal academia**

First, we contend that powerful academic and feminist writing could mean the simple (albeit not always easy) task of engaging *with* the world intellectually in what can be framed as empathic intellectual work. Empathic intellectual work means emphasizing the value of intellectual work, while acknowledging the position of academic as a privilege. This relates to what Ruth Sonderegger (2016: 22, italics added) calls ‘the challenge (not) to speak *for* others’. It is a privilege to speak (and to write, we might add) and there are several ways to both take and give voice, empathically, through powerful writing. One could ignore any

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3 During this session we also gathered ideas in this publicly accessible padlet [https://padlet.com/florence\\_com/powerfulwriting](https://padlet.com/florence_com/powerfulwriting).

asymmetries in power relations, rights, resources, respect, etc., taking absolute equality as a necessary starting point for emancipatory politics, as Rancière (1991, 2004) suggests. However, this might come at the price of ignoring socially structured differences that co-construct the specific starting points for engaging with the world as Spivak (1994, 2012) maintains. Rather than offer a long theorization on this subject, we propose instead to delve into a first vignette, in which we find an illustration of how such empathic intellectual work can be practiced – even over time, and how it can lead to powerful writing.

### Vignette 1: Producing powerful feminist business ethnographic writing

In *Wall Street Women* (2012), a historical ethnography of the first generation of women to build professional careers (1956-2010), I, Melissa Fisher, a feminist anthropologist, followed this pioneering cohort as they moved from relatively modest career beginnings, holding jobs on the lowest rungs of investment banks and brokerage houses (in the 1960s and 1970s), to high-level positions in global finance and national politics (in the 1990s), and to new ventures in 21<sup>st</sup>-century international philanthropy and the promotion of gender equality globally. On the one hand, I followed certain traditions in feminist ethnography in the book and subsequent articles I wrote on various women's work and enterprises. On the other hand, I took some innovative approaches empirically, methodologically, and representationally. I wish to highlight two of these innovations in order to argue that they contributed to producing what I hope and believe is, powerful feminist business ethnographic writing: 1) voicing; and 2) long term access, positionality and collaboration.

First, after a chance meeting in a graduate anthropology class in the nineties, I followed the Wall Street women's cohort over more than two decades through a combination of traditional and innovative methods, and in the process was able to give readers a unique 'behind the doors' perspective on an elite group of women. Feminist anthropologists of work in the nineties were focusing on the marginal, the poor, and factory workers. Given the reflective and decolonial turns within the discipline, many feminist anthropologists wanted to give voice to the women they worked with (Abu-Lughod, 1993/2008). I too wanted to give voice to a group of largely unknown women, women who many, at least in the social sciences and certainly feminist circles, did not necessarily like, at least in terms of the women's embrace and facilitation of late capitalism. The issue for me in terms of providing powerful writing was to create a space, albeit an anonymous one, for the first generation of Wall Street women to voice and express their experiences, feelings including joy, frustration and the loneliness of being the only women in a sea of hyper-masculine men, as well as their experiences of sexual discrimination, a term that most of the women were not even aware of until the late nineties. Overall, feminist ethnographic writing provided me with the means to explore how the finance women themselves reflected on, critiqued, and sometimes re-worked the changing relationship between markets and feminism, thus allowing me to problematize the idea that market capitalism always and inevitably subsumes feminism.

Second, I have been reflecting upon my own changing position, situation and connection with female financiers for nearly three decades. As Marietta Baba – arguably the ‘mother’ of business anthropology – wrote a number of years ago:

‘It seems as if there is a kind of enmeshing of your life with the pathways of these women. Not like there’s a community and you – where you yo-yo. Instead there’s such a diffused group of women that are all around and that you follow up with – that they’re not out of your mind’. (Baba, 2013: 120–121)

While I have gone on to study various other types of business actors and institutions, including women’s mechanical cooperatives, I have remained in touch with some of the financial women. Also, although not ethnographic in form, I have worked with producers and actors of the 2016 Sony Class ‘first female financial thriller’ *Equity* – about three very different women in NYC finance (Fisher, 2016). In this sense, contemporary women’s experiences – difficulties, frustrations, ambitions – were dramatized to millions of ticket buyers. In addition, I along with the executive producer and others, have used the film as a pedagogical tool – showing it to audiences of students, bankers, and the public – to elicit a conversation about the state of women in finance, if and how feminism exists within Wall Street – as well as if and how a feminist movie about women in finance can or cannot be made. In this latter sense, I feel that I am promoting feminist scholarship and activism as interrelated activities. One of the challenges I face in doing so, is engaging with multiple audiences, from critical scholars to Wall Street CEOs, who have very different ideas and feelings about feminism, including particularly in recent years neoliberal feminism.

To me, feminist ethnographic writing’s strength is not about remaining in the stratosphere of theory or only at the level of storytelling. The power of feminist ethnographic writing, on business or another domain, lies in its ability to thread a middle ground – to link analytics to events, to draw the lines between stories and intersecting structures of power, gender, sexuality, and other forms of difference including whiteness (Fisher, 2017).

In reflecting upon the privilege of doing academic work, we find it worthwhile putting the current situation of the academic worker into writing. In particular, we contend that asymmetries within academia co-construct unequal starting points for writing powerfully. Neoliberalism is ubiquitous in every sense of the word; it characterizes market, capital, self, and even academic institutions. The university is now a neoliberal institution where precarious employment, free labor, and market-based demands are omnipresent for academic staff, administration, researchers and students alike. Of concern, in the context of this note, how this affects the possibility to do powerful writing when precarity affects feminist research projects and, moreover, women’s studies and gender/sexualities programs.

Once heralded as a coveted career path and secure profession (think of the notion of academic tenure), researchers now face years of insecure, low hour contracts without guarantee, often seasonal and based on semester terms. Gill’s (2010)

work, notably, focuses on her own experience of the intensification and stress of academic work though she does note at an early point her own privilege as white, educated and employed on a secure contract. In addition, there appears to be a growing delegitimization of feminist studies in the university and the subsequent defunding and even closure of said research programs. In 2016, the Women's Studies program at Ruskin College was terminated; accompanying it in the UK was University of Kent and University of Edinburgh that both cut institutional funding for gender and sexuality studies programs. Meanwhile at Oxford University, not a single member of staff at the Women's Studies department is salaried, making them 'Oxford's cheapest faculty' (Duan, 2016). Moreover, in many cases, feminist doctoral students are awkwardly and precariously placed in various schools – school of communication, school of cultural studies, school of arts and humanities – already at risk without the accompanying closure of said schools. In other words, there is no institutionalized feminist research setting to allow the field to live and prosper. Sara Ahmed (2017: 28) identified a similar situation, where, in her desire to research critical theory, she was placed in an English department.

Neoliberalism thus presents new and deeply concerning issues, particularly for early career researchers. So how do we achieve powerful feminist writing in the face of such neoliberal institutions? To fight back, it is essential that we do not become atomized within a system that sees collective action as a threat. After all, it is as a collective that feminism has been its most forceful and its most transformative. By working transnationally, through collaborative, flexible and creative networks (rather than individual and competitive environments), feminist academics can build new paths to expression and connection. Digital media offer new paths to connect our work with a broad audience. At a time when conversations about feminism are growing around the world, we want to acknowledge that writing for change means writing in modes which are accessible in every sense of the word. As stated in the title of bell hooks' famous book 'Feminism is for everybody' (2000), and so it remains, not least because there remains so much to fight for.

### **Changing realities, changing academia**

Dhawan et al. (2015) criticize the psychoanalytic approach to desire as grounded in a fundamental lack. They ask how specific economic arrangements, like ownership and/or capitalism, shape specific forms of desire and, vice versa, how specific concepts of desire shape our thinking of possible economic arrangements. Arguably, mainstream neoliberal economics and organizations studies did and do still have a performative impact; changing realities would

imply de-centering their hegemonic position, re-positioning them as one of many possible ones and eventually rendering neoliberal economics and organization studies irrelevant through critical scholarship and powerful writing. But what is the desire for changing realities from a queer-feminist organizational perspective? Is it about determining organizational structures, organizational practices, that allow for practicing equality on an everyday basis; our desire for just and equal societies? Is it about queering organizations? What role can writing play in such endeavors?

When it comes to powerful writing, as feminist academics and activists we are caught in a double bind. Academic feminism, due to its heterogeneous intellectual heritage, builds on several powerful, ground-breaking texts of progressive social movements (Marx, Luxemburg, Gramsci...) as well as intellectual currents of existentialism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and poststructuralism that have engendered texts which are pioneering not just on a theoretical level, but also on a literary and artistic one (think of Cixous, Irigaray, Sartre, Veil, Benjamin, Derrida, Kristeva, Wittig...). At the same time, feminist thought has had a parallel development track outside of academia, as talented writers depicted the female life experience in a man's world (Woolf, Alcott, Plath) and showed how a female gaze might establish a new world which will not be a function of the male (Mansfield, Kraus).

And yet, despite these two powerful currents – the intellectual-theoretical and the fictional-literary – that bring with them endless new forms, new vocabularies, new avenues, we as academically-based feminists struggle daily with the written word. Beyond the typical challenges common to all those who write, our own gaze as feminist academics is tied in particular to the specific position of feminist thought which straddles the role of social movement, agenda, and theoretical current. On an intellectual level, we accept and cherish this hybrid identity as something which opens feminism up to different influences and inputs. In practice, this positioning brings with it several problems of a most pragmatic nature for the field of feminist research in academia. These are connected to our own positionality, the status of feminist research and such down-to-earth issues as job prospects of feminist researchers (Pereira, 2017). Very often we find that we need to make choices: to render our texts more academic in order to publish in the outlets which will allow us to progress in our careers (relating back to our earlier point on the realities of neoliberal academia), or to render them less academic (more personal, emotional, accessible, readable, authentic...) to better express ourselves or to reach a broader audience we wish to communicate with. Despite the fact that feminists have been actively questioning and subverting the traditional (male or masculine) patterns of academic writing for the last decades (Widdowfield, 2000), these problems remain pertinent. And perhaps they are

the most real where feminism could make the biggest difference. In the next vignette, one of the authors, Marta Wróblewska, reflects upon her experiences of feminist writing in different contexts and media.

### Vignette 2: Writing, speaking, sticking

While Poland has admirable traditions of feminist writing both in the literary tradition (Żeleński, Krzywicka, Tokarczuk) and in the academic one (Bator, Iwasiów), currently the winds of history are definitely blowing against the women's movement and against the social-progressive agenda generally. In particular, one can mention the ongoing struggle for reproductive rights, including the #blackprotest movement which emerged in 2016. At the same time, there is a broader fight around identity issues in Poland – a young and extremely strong movement has emerged around nationalist, anti-European, anti-LGBTQ and anti-immigrant slogans (see e.g. Kozłowski, 2015).

This nationalist agenda found wide-scale support in intellectual circles. There emerged an entire intellectual environment – composed of journalists, writers, academics – who enthusiastically supported the nationalist current by developing its theoretical base. The historical-political reflection these authors put forward is based on ultra-conservative values and often bears traces of conspiracy theory, including linking the feminist agenda to communism – which in post-communist Poland is an accusation not to be taken lightly. With the boom of “patriotic” publishing (popular and academic books, several weekly magazines, etc.) and intellectual interventions (debates, exhibitions, etc.) the nationalist-misogynist agenda became intellectually legitimate, no longer something to be ashamed of, even for a student or an academic. With the development of audio-visual production around these notions (patriotic film, music...) and the rise of a merchandise industry (patriotic t-shirts, gadgets, etc.) radical, xenophobic patriotism became something we never expected it to be – *sexy*. From a theoretical perspective, this alliance between academics, intellectuals and the broader social masses, has been taking the form of what Gramsci referred to as ‘historic bloc’ (1971/1999: 384, 689-691).

Throughout my adult intellectual life – around a decade now – I, Marta Wróblewska, have strived to support the feminist agenda in Poland, particularly through writing. My master's thesis in philosophy investigated intellectual links between critical theory and feminism. In the years after graduation I published translations of important feminist theory, poetry, and commentaries to feminist novels. Most of this frantic writing – published in different papers and digital venues – seemed to go unnoticed. Even worse, I discovered that parts of my scholarship have been cited in ultra-conservative, far-right outlets, including an academic journal in theology, to support the very thesis I was arguing against – that the connection to left-wing politics was feminism's original sin. Disillusioned, for a while I gave up, focusing on the more academic strand of my work. But hearing about triumphs of ultra-conservative movements in Poland, and particularly seeing racist, nationalistic, homophobic symbols in the public space (as graffiti, sticker-art, gadgets displayed at shop windows) still sparked in me the same anger and will for action. Only now, I was looking for different forms of expression, which would allow these outbursts of emotion and outrage, these snap moments (Ahmed, 2017), to become interventions.



Over the last few years I experimented with three different forms of expression, which, I hoped, would allow me to express my sentiments in a more direct manner, by intervening directly in the public space. The first one was t-shirts. As ‘patriotic clothing’ was becoming a trend in Poland (including brands such as ‘Red is Bad’ opening shops on main shopping streets in Krakow and Warsaw), I decided to experiment with the idea of reclaiming symbols of People’s Poland. I chose not the overtly ideological ones which are not only extremely loaded symbolically, but also explicitly banned by the Polish law – but symbols of institutions which in today’s capitalistic regime could be looked upon with nostalgia, such as beautifully-designed logos of various co-operative initiatives. While my ‘Społem’ (co-operative grocery store) t-shirt was commented on favorably by friends, and a bit ironically by family-members belonging to the older generations, it failed to realize its goal, as it was not perceived as a *political* or *ideological* intervention, but rather as a playful borrowing of vintage logotypes in the vein of hipster aesthetics.



Figure 1: T-shirt with logo of co-operative founded in the era of People’s Poland – image produced using creator on megakoszulki.pl website.

The second intervention was inspired by my participation in the ‘Breaking the silences in the neoliberal academy’ workshop at the University of Warwick<sup>4</sup>, the final activity of which consisted in collectively producing feminist zines challenging the modern performative academia. The energy and the technique which stayed with me after this event, gave me the inspiration to prepare a similar zine for the upcoming Polish Independence Day (2016). Polish military and patriotic holidays (not unlike most of those which take place around the world) in general tend to celebrate soldiers, leaders, politicians – usually men. In order to question and subvert this trend, together with a group of female co-authors we decided to dedicate a zine to eight positive heroes of Polish history, who ‘fought’ for a better future with their talent, skill and intellect – several of them female or feminists. We distributed this zine during a patriotic ceremony and had very positive reactions. It was an uplifting, empowering and collectivist experience we could build on. And so we did.

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4 Link to the call for papers: [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/centres/socialtheorycentre/breaking\\_our\\_silences\\_on\\_the\\_neoliberal\\_academy.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/centres/socialtheorycentre/breaking_our_silences_on_the_neoliberal_academy.pdf).

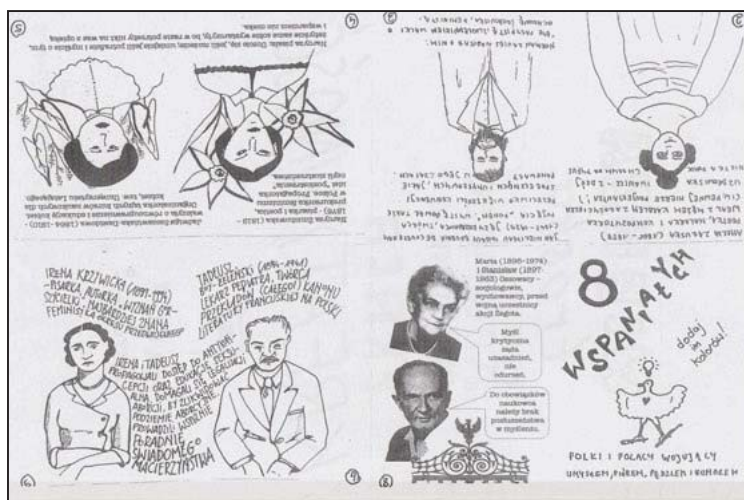


Figure 2: Picture presenting one of the pages of the zine featuring eight heroes and heroines of Polish history<sup>5</sup>

The following year (2017), for the same holiday, women from the same group met to produce another artistic form of urban intervention – sticker art. Stickers have been used for years by Polish hooligan groups, resulting in a true proliferation of often offensive (homophobic, racist, xenophobic) slogans which are now ubiquitous on bus stops, on public transportation, at road crossings, etc. The idea behind our project was to playfully and ironically subvert the standard slogans of these groups, by playing on sounds and rhymes. So ‘God, honor, homeland’ (‘Bóg, honor, ojczyzna’) became ‘Fava beans, hummus, vegetables’, (‘Bób, hummus, włoszczyzna’), ‘Poland for Poles’ (‘Polska dla Polaków’) became ‘Poland for Polish women’ (‘Polska dla Polek’). The official slogan of the patriotic march ‘We want God’ (‘My chcemy Boga’) was changed into ‘We want ice cream’ (‘My chcemy loda’) – we also replaced a sword in the nationalistic ‘Falanga’ symbol with an ice cream cone. Apart from these, we produced stickers with several slogans referring to the struggle over women’s reproductive rights such as ‘We don’t want God at the gynecologist’s’ (playing on the official slogan of the Independence Day March – ‘We want God’). The stickers were meant to be used in a reactive way, i.e. for covering existing offensive stickers.

This was by far our most successful intervention. Many of our friends and acquaintances congratulated us on the idea and requested a few stickers for their personal use. When these were shared on social media, we got several requests for the original files, so that groups outside our city could print out their own stickers. In the months that followed, when confronted with a hostile symbol in the public space, many times I reached into my purse for my ‘secret weapon’. This was an empowering feeling. The fact that I often later found these stickers torn or scratched off confirmed my sense that I was engaging in the broader struggle over exposing and disrupting the symbols that dominate the Polish public space.

5 Retrieved from [www.przeklamliteracki.wordpress.com](http://www.przeklamliteracki.wordpress.com).



Figure 3: Picture of the sticker art subverting the ‘God, honor, homeland’ slogan. The sword in the nationalist Falanga symbol was replaced with a carrot. In the background: participants of the Polish Independence Day celebrations<sup>6</sup>

In the context of these varied experiences in engaging with the feminist agenda and combating the anti-feminist (anti-progressive) movement in Poland, I would be tempted to say that the less academic my intervention was, the more powerful. The less wordy, the more it was read. At the same time, however, I realize that while this bottom-up urban activism was not academic in its character, it would have never taken place had it not been for my academic background and inspirations. Without the ‘academic moments’ the ‘activist moments’ would not have been possible. Taking up, once again, Gramsci’s concept of historic bloc, I would see my academic writing and my every-day, pop-culture or urban-culture gestures as attempts to intervene on different levels in a social movement which is complex, multi-dimensional and multi-faceted, as attempts to disrupt the existing historic bloc.

### Concluding comments – Powerful writing now!

We believe that powerful writing, besides a desire to change realities, also implies a desire to change academia. Contemporary academia, governed by measuring output (in top-star ranking journals), impact (citations) (see e.g. Callahan, 2017) and relevance (i.e. a functionalist epistemic understanding of usefulness) establishes a capitalist system of redistributing credibility, attention and financial resources towards those who already have such resources (known as the Matthew effect). Working and existing in contemporary competitive academia, we do not have the impression that our readiness to share, to engage in acts of solidarity, to

<sup>6</sup> Source: Facebook page of a journalist who observed the gathering. The post provoked 879 reactions.

engage in activism is supported by institutional arrangements. However, powerful writing means to maintain that these possibilities exist, that they can be nurtured and that pursuing an intersectional feminist agenda combined with a critique of late capitalist forms of (knowledge) work and production is a way worth pursuing. Indeed, changing academia means constantly engaging with the question of how to criticize, remodel, and/or subvert the structures while working out of a position that is formed exactly by those structures one tries to subvert. Speaking up collectively for livable work conditions – within and beyond academia – is the first step.

In the spirit of the 'Feminism, Activism, Writing!' workshop in which we started our discussion about powerful writing, we think it fit to end this note on some suggestions for ideas and actions that can be carried out and promoted right now.

#### *The personal voice of collective writing*

Asha Dornfest once said in an interview 'I think new writers are too worried that it has all been said before. Sure, it has, but not by you' (Goins, 2016). Yet, writing a paper is always a product of our entanglement with other contributors in the form of comments from colleagues, reviewers and editors, but also the research material, inspiration from other authors, etc. In co-authoring and writing things up collectively we acknowledge that position. In this way, we not only get to amplify our individual voice through the voices of others, we also get to develop several different voices and, therefore, get to voice difference. This note itself, as the product of a breakout session during the FAW! workshop, is the work of more people than the ones credited as authors.

#### *Multimodality*

Powerful writing develops across the mediascape: academic articles, but also shorter newspaper or magazine pieces, blog posts, panels, speeches, stickers, etc. as illustrated in the vignettes above. Besides, writing may take many forms and cannot be reduced to text, since it can also include other bodies of symbols such as mandalas, quilting, performances, and so on. Derrida famously made the statement 'I have only one language, yet it is not mine' (1998: 21), encouraging multilingualism while reminding us that none of us owns nor masters any given language, whether spoken or written, even when we claim a mother tongue.

#### *Disruption*

Academic writing can feel much safer than writing for a broader audience. In academe, the worst thing that can usually happen is that we will be politely

ignored or receive some derogatory comments from reviewers or conference participants. However, the broader the audience we try to speak to, the broader the spectrum of the reactions we can expect – sarcasm, anger, contempt, intimidation, aggression, threats... What if we ‘speak’ (or ‘stick’ – referring both to our second vignette and to Sara Ahmed’s (2014) exploration of the stickiness of affect) more publicly? Do our hearts beat a little faster? We also get certain reactions because we disrupt – or act as killjoys (Ahmed, 2014) – and that’s the whole point. Is it really ‘speaking’ if you are merely repeating or parroting what is already agreed upon? Speaking up means disrupting that agreement, saying something that may be ill-heard because it comes to function as a breakage in pointing out something problematic and therefore poses a challenge to – and potentially kills the joy in, for instance, a dominant nationalist narrative (as illustrated by the vignette from Poland).

Last but not least, we suggest that powerful writing has to be related to *powerful reading*. This also supposes writing texts in a way that reading them can have an impact; writing texts that can and should evoke intersubjective resonance, share thoughts, provoke ideas, arguments, feelings and, eventually, action. During the ‘Feminism, Activism, Writing!’ workshop, some participants brought up a video in which Maya Angelou<sup>7</sup> describes with vivid insight how powerful words shape our world. Words, Angelou says, are things. As such, our ability to produce feminist writing that invigorates, confronts and disrupts starts with us being mindful of how we make use of the written word. Going forward, it is through the careful and powerful crafting of words that we will build a scaffold for feminist work within the academe and beyond – and achieve our aim of writing ‘with’.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8PXdacSqvcA>.

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