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**Structural Disputes:
An analysis of infrastructural inequalities in the case study of the
Women of the World festival in Hull, UK City of Culture 2017.**

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Abstract

In 2017, Hull, in the north east of England, was named UK City of Culture. Beyond economic regenerative interests, the 365 days of transformative culture expressed itself in multiple equality-themed events. Programming practices included large-scale celebrations of equality in the form of the Women of the World festival, the LGBT50 event series, and the Freedom Festival. While such focus on social justice and equality is highly appreciated and relevant in the context of a city of culture, I discuss infrastructural deficiencies encountered in these celebrations of equality. Based on an ethnographic study of the Women of the World festival associated with Hull UK City of Culture 2017, this chapter highlights infrastructural barriers to equality relating to micro, meso and macro structures of the festival. With attention to structural discrimination in so-called equality-themed events, I argue for the fragility of the notion of equality. While equality was celebrated in the content of the Women of the World festival, equality needs to be understood as an essential practice and process within the infrastructural conditions of such events.

Introduction

In 2017, Hull, a medium-sized city in the north east of England, celebrated being named the UK City of Culture (UKCOC) through ‘365 days of transformative culture’ (Hull 2017 Ltd, 2015: 14). The celebrations of arts, culture and heritage aspired economic, social, and cultural regeneration, as the city of Hull aims to move out of the shadows of deprivation. With over 2800 events, the schedule was full of opportunities to engage with and explore the multiple facets of creativity that the city, region, and country had to offer (Culture Place and Policy Institute, 2018). While not formally outlined as a central ambition of the project, the year-long cultural programme foregrounded on multiple occasions the struggle for gender equality and social justice as a core value of Hull’s UKCOC award. Large-scale festivals, such as the commemorative celebrations of LGBT50 and the annually recurring Freedom Festival, fostered a culture of equality that the celebratory community shares. Another crucial celebration of gender equality took place from the 10th to the 12th of March 2017, as the Women of the World (WOW) festival claimed Hull City Hall. WOW Hull promised to ‘celebrate women and girls and take a frank look at what stops them from achieving their potential’ (Hull 2017 Ltd, 2017d).

In an ethnographic study of the event, I collected insights from producers, artists and visitors at the festival in order to understand how the WOW festival

negotiates the notion of equality on an experiential, discursive and infrastructural level. While the experience and content of the festival foreground ambitious engagement with equality, in this paper, I highlight structural disputes over equality as an infrastructural condition. I outline the limitations and difficulties of the infrastructural conditions of the WOW festival in Hull in 2017. Through an analysis of structural disputes on micro, meso, and macro levels, I argue for the fragility of equality. Inadequate structures put the discursive negotiations of the concept at risk. I do not aim to scrutinize WOW Hull, nor any projects affiliated to the festival franchise. Rather, I want to highlight the need to celebrate equality within adequate structures. The celebration of equality as a political struggle is crucial and needs to be considered as a positive development. However, ongoing commodification risks compromising the achievements of the equality movement.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Firstly, I situate the investigation in reference to the relevant research affiliations, field, and methodology. Secondly, I engage with the conceptual discussions associated with the celebrations of equality. While acknowledging the potential of celebrations as socio-cultural practices of meaning-making, I engage with questions concerning structural violence and its particular application to festival contexts. Thirdly, I illustrate micro, meso, and macro encounters of structural disputes, as noted by research participants in the WOW festival in Hull. The perceived restrictions imposed by the associated labels, the establishment of restricted access due to ticketing systems and VIP spaces, as well as the tendencies of commodification through corporate festival branding are three examples that highlight inherent structural inequalities within the celebration of equality in the WOW festival in Hull in 2017.

Situating the Research

Through brief discussions of the relevant institutional affiliations, the circumstances of the field, and the methodological approach, I situate the research in its scholarly context.

Institutional Affiliation

The material presented in this chapter derives from the research project: *Gendering Cities of Culture*. In this project, I investigate the production of cultures of equality in the mega-events of Hull UKCOC 2017 (Hull2017) and Donostia/San Sebastián European Capital of Culture (ECOC) 2016 (DSS2016). In the overarching project, I explore the production of cultures of equality in the two field sites through six selected

activities in the '365 days of transformative culture' (Hull 2017 Ltd, 2015: 14). Due to limitations of space, this paper concentrates on the case study of the WOW festival in Hull in association with the city's celebration of the UKCOC award. *Gendering Cities of Culture* forms part of the *GRACE Project* (Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe) and is funded through the European Commission *Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action* Framework.

Field

In this research, the UKCOC initiative, the city of Hull, the mega-event of Hull2017, and the particularities of the WOW festival in Hull interlink and constitute my research field. Due to these prominent entanglements, the research requires me to address the field in accordance with Hilgers and Mangez's (2015) interpretation of Bourdieu's notion of field. Rather than a geo-spatial unit, the field is characterised as an entity of relations between geographies, institutions, and practices. By introducing the city of Hull, the UKCOC mega-event, and the WOW festival, I disentangle the most essential elements of the field for this study.

Kingston upon Hull, referred to as Hull, is situated in the county of Yorkshire in the north east of England, at the junction of the Humber Estuary and Hull River. The city counts around 260,000 inhabitants (Office for National Statistics, 2019). As a port city, its geography is oriented along the river banks and spreads into the hinterlands. The city was first mentioned in the twelfth century and named Kingston upon Hull under King Edward I in 1299. It gained importance in trade, due to the access to the North Sea provided by the Humber Estuary. Trade connected the city with Scandinavia, the Baltic region and the Low Countries. At its height in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the whaling and fishing industries influenced the urban expansion and progressions. The accumulated wealth and importance of the port city was the reason for major bombing during World War II, in which 95% of the city centre was destroyed or damaged. In the 1950s and 1960s, the city recovered from the war in economic and social terms. While Hull experienced another decade of importance in trading and fishing, the 1970s saw a collapse for the city's industry. Ever since, the population has dealt with the socio-economic consequences (Hull City Council, n.d.). The preliminary evaluation report of Hull2017 summarises that, with an unemployment rate of 7% in 2016, Hull is the third most deprived local authority out of the 326 local areas in England. The average Gross Value Added (GVA) per head

is as low as 18,000 GBP in Hull in comparison to the national GVA of 27,000 GBP per head (Culture Place and Policy Institute, 2018).

The bidding, selection, and execution of the UKCOC is an essential element in the city's regeneration plan to overcome the socio-economic consequences of de-industrialisation. 'A city coming out of its shadows' (Culture Place and Policy Institute, 2018: 6) served as motivation for the selection panel's decision in 2013 to grant the 'badge of authority' (Redmond, 2009: 2) to Hull. While not affiliated with explicit monetary value, the title's attractiveness comes from the associated prestige of the award. Carried by the Department for Culture, Media and Sports (2013), the national title was inspired by Glasgow's and Liverpool's success as hosts of the ECOC in 1990 and 2008. The UKCOC award was first celebrated by Derry/Londonderry in 2013. Hull is the second city to be awarded the title UKCOC and is followed by Coventry in 2021.

Central to Hull's celebration was the programming of 365 days of cultural activities in 2017. Structured along four programming seasons entitled *Made in Hull*, *Roots and Routes*, *Freedom*, and *Tell the World*, the programme included four major events, which engaged audiences with particular politically relevant topics. The WOW festival constituted the first of these focused events (Hull 2017 Ltd, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

The multi-day, multi-platform festival took place in the City of Hall and surrounding venues from the 10th to the 12th of March 2017 in reference to International Women's Day. Affiliated to the WOW festival brand, Hull's celebration embeds in a global network of festivals for gender equality. The WOW festival franchise originates from South Bank Centre in London, where the festival brand was created by former director Jude Kelly. The festival's ambitions are explained as follows:

Women of the World is a global movement celebrating women and girls, taking a frank look at the obstacles they face. [...] It is the biggest, most comprehensive and most significant festival dedicated to presenting work by women and promoting equality for women and girls. (Southbank Centre, 2018)

Since its inauguration in 2010, the festival has been celebrated nationally and internationally, as various WOW festivals take place on a semi-regular schedule in the UK and other countries such as Brazil, Australia, and the United States. WOW Hull was organised by a team from Hull 2017 Ltd and led by executive producer Henrietta Duckworth and programmer Madeleine O'Reiley. During the organisational process,

the WOW Circle of Friends was established, which brought together local women as representatives of gender-specific institutions in and around the city. The programming of the festival was informed by a series of community brainstorming events entitled WOW Think-ins, which took place between September and November 2016 in different community hubs around the city. Inspired by conversations held with participants of the WOW Think-ins, the programme included an eclectic combination of talks, debates, and performances by local women and organisations. During the festival, a central act was the awarding of trailblazer status to local women of the past and present, who have contributed to a more just and equal society. The list includes artists and activists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, the Head Scarf Revolutionaries, and Maureen Lipman.¹ The festival achieved a fairly low attendance in comparison to its original expectations. Even though informally discussed as a legacy project, WOW Hull was a one-off event and did not return in 2018.

Methodology

In the ethnographic study of the WOW festival, my research practice is driven by a feminist methodology of reflexivity. Rather than aspiring to objectivity, I embrace a commitment to social values as the methodological approach of this study. My considerations derive from Harding's (1993) call for strong objectivity. The scholar outlines: 'Maximising objectivity in social research requires not total value neutrality, but instead, a commitment by the research[er] to certain values' (Hirsch & Olson, 1995: 202). In accordance with scholars of the emerging field of Critical Event Studies (CES), I see this methodological approach applied in the study of festivals and events. Lamond & Platt (2016: 2) observe, 'Present methodological discussion within event studies is often dominated by the changing demands for refinement of methods suitable for event evaluation'. Countering objectivity-driven, neoliberal research agendas, their publication, *Critical Event Studies: Approaches to Research*, introduces scholars such as Pavoni & Citroni (2016), Dashper (2016), and Finkel & Sang (2016) in their discussion of innovative approaches in event research, as they encompass ethnographic, auto-ethnographic, and participatory practices of

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft was an eighteenth-century writer, philosopher and feminist activist, who lived in the market town of Beverley, close to Hull (HU17 Admin, 2018). The Head Scarf Revolutionaries was a Hull-based group of women who campaigned for safety regulations on the trawler fishing boats in the 1960s and 1970s (Lavery, 2015). Maureen Lipman CBE is a film, theatre and television actor, who was born in Hull (N.D., n.d.).

investigations. This marginal but crucial research perspective supports me as an orientation in my methodological approach to the study of festivals.

The analysis of the infrastructural conditions of the WOW festival in Hull is based on my participatory observations in the WOW Circle of Friends, selected WOW Think-ins events and the three days of the festival. Additionally, I was able to conduct semi-structured interviews with one actor involved in the management of the event as well as three artists contributing to the programme of the three day festival. Furthermore, I collected perceptive accounts of the festival from audience members attending the event. Hereby, I established a collaboration with a group of five ‘observing-participants’, who, as residents of Hull, visited, explored, and observed multiple events as part of Hull2017. The team observing the WOW festival include three cis-women, one trans-woman and one man, who cover an age range between 30 and 75 years old. Their location of residence spreads across the east, west, and centre of the city (Grabher, 2018). The data were analysed through Mayring’s (1994, 1991) suggested technique of qualitative content analysis. In the further presentation of the analysis, all references to participants are anonymised through pseudonyms.

Celebrating Equality – Conceptual Considerations

The ambitions of the WOW festival are outlined as a celebration of equality. In order to investigate these aspirations, Finkel et al. (2013) as well as Finkel (2009, 2015) suggest considering festivals as socio-cultural practices of meaning-making. In the edited volume *Time out of Time*, Falassi (1987: 2) explains practices of meaning-making in celebrations as follows:

Both the social function and the symbolic meaning of the festival are closely related to a series of overt values that the community recognises as essential to its ideology and worldview, to its social identity, its historical continuity and to its physical survival, which is ultimately what the festival celebrates.

Falassi’s (1987) consideration of the close affiliation of festivals with a ‘series of overt values’ of the celebrating community elucidates how festive events produce meaning. In the context of the WOW festival in Hull, the socio-cultural practice of meaning-making is expressed in the celebration of gender equality as a value acknowledged and highlighted through the event.

As Falassi’s (1987) and Finkel et al.’s (2013) attention to the practice of celebrations outlines, festivals do not take place in a vacuum. The scholars highlight the relevance of negotiations of values through celebrations as expressions of their

contemporary situatedness. Events reproduce social relationships, conversations, engagements or – more simply – culture. The global network of WOW festivals responds discursively to the particular situatedness of each host city, as WOW Hull illustrates. The event, and its programme of speakers, performances, and interventions, produces a particular vision of equality situated in the locality and temporality of the celebrations. In the awarding of the trailblazer status, WOW Hull explicitly highlighted local women and their achievements as an expression of the locality. Therefore, the celebration of WOW Hull reproduces and produces conceptualisations and considerations of what equality can mean in Hull in 2017. Consequently, WOW Hull illustrates how celebrations are situated within a reality that ultimately shapes their inherent content.

With awareness of the potential of meaning-making through celebrations on a discursive level, my analytical focus shifts towards the infrastructures enabling the celebration of equality. Equality-themed events embed within the wider festival landscape and urgently need to address the inequalities existent and documented in festival grounds and the festival industries. Contemporary discussions show that festivals reproduce structural inequalities and injustices in their infrastructural framework. Gisbert & Rius-Ulldemolins (2019) highlight that due to the emphasis on subversive, transgressive festival experiences, there is often a failure to understand how hegemonic social and cultural structures and controls still govern these festival spaces. The authors' call for attention is answered by increasing academic and non-academic discussions of inequalities in festival contexts. Unequal representations in line-ups, gender-based violence, and exclusionary access policies are just a few examples discussed in the studies of festivals. In their considerations, Gisbert et al. (2019), as well as other authors (see Bows (2019); Cvetkovich & Wahng (2001); Eder, Staggenborg, & Sudderth (1995); Fileborn & Wadds (2019); Fileborn, Wadds, & Tomsen (2018); Papisova (2018); Staggenborg, Eder, & Sudderth (2018); and Thomas (2017)), highlight the inequalities, injustice, and violence that is inherent to the infrastructures of celebrations. Traditionally characterized as a 'time out of time' in a 'place out of place' and associated with experiences of 'norms out of the norm' (Turner, 1987: 76), festivals, through their infrastructures, need to be questioned in relation to their perpetuation of structural discrimination, which shapes society and therefore the celebrating community.

From a conceptual point of view, the analysis of celebrations of equality takes place on discursive and structural levels. Festivals are characterised through their potential of meaning-making as their space-time contribute to the negotiations of values. However, as embedded within the temporality of their own situatedness, festivals cannot be reduced to liminal, transgressive spaces subverting pre-existing norms. This becomes prevalent in consideration of the infrastructural conditions and in the analysis of structural violence and injustice inherent in such spaces. When festivals claim equality in their discursive outlines, the infrastructures contribute essentially to such celebrations of the socio-cultural values as meanings are being made in plaster forms. As previously outlined, I am not scrutinising the relevance of celebrations of equality in the form of festivals or the particular WOW festival in Hull. But my intention is to argue that festivals – even those with a focus on equality – need to be read within the socio-cultural conditions in which they are embedded. Structural injustice runs through society, and, therefore, affects the context of celebrations, as I illustrate in the following analysis.

Infrastructures of In/Equality

In the conceptual discussion of festivals, I argued that celebrations do not happen in a vacuum; rather, they need to be considered in the socio-cultural contexts in which they are celebrated. Independently of the focused content of the event, festival frameworks embed in pre-existing structures. In acclaimed celebrations of equality, events risk their own values, as forms and content might not coalesce.

In the context of the WOW festival, I illustrate in the following analysis how such contradictions play out. While this was not the main focus of the interviews held with producers, artists, and visitors, research participants continually remarked on elements and encounters of structural injustice within the framework of the event. I have clustered these issues in the arbitrary system of the micro, meso, and macro structures of inequalities. As explained in further detail below, the micro, meso, and macro considerations of structural discrimination in the WOW festival in Hull refer to personal and even intimate experiences, but also expand to collective concerns and overarching structures of inequalities in the event.

Perceiving In/Equality

The experiences of observing-participant Sophia invite me to consider the very personal and even intimate encounters of structural inequality in WOW Hull. Sophia's experiences refer strongly to expectations and anticipations regarding the event. Her

narrations tell of a journey of multiple experiences that need to be regarded in their totality, in order to understand the structural dispute and their effects.

Sophia is in her mid-40s and identifies as a woman. As referred to in the quote below, she has experienced the transition from one gender to another and also identifies with the label 'trans'. Sophia joins the observation opportunity enthusiastically and does not mention any concerns with her participation to me prior to the observations. It is only towards the end of the follow-up conversation, in the week after the festival, that Sophia shares with me her fears and doubts, which accompanied her prior to any WOW related events. She explains:

(Deep Breath) Right. At the very beginning of the WOW Think-ins and then again at the festival, I was very worried and concerned. Right until I stepped out the door and went to the launch, I was very worried that I would not be able to feel part of the event, because of not being born female. [...] I was very concerned that in some way, I would feel like an outsider and there would be a sort of an underlying thing, 'oh, why is she here? She does not have the same issues that we have.' So, yeh, whether I would be accepted into the space [was a concern of mine]. That space being the festival, you know. (Sophia, Observing Participant, 15.3.17)

On the basis of her identification as 'not born female', Sophia experienced difficulties associating herself with the event. She relates her disassociation with the content of the festival as expressed in the titles, labels, and programme. The explicit wording of 'Women' in the title of the festival as well as the programming spectrum of the festival triggered Sophia's concerns. She explains: 'When we looked at the programme, there was nothing that referred to Trans and there was nothing that referred to lesbian women. Nothing at all. There was no mentioning of sort of queer politics at all that was missing' (Sophia, Observing Participant, 15.3.17). The lack of acknowledgement of non-normative forms of femininity re-enforced Sophia's doubts.

One might argue that Sophia's experience is a subjective and singular perception due to her own pre-conceptions. However, I counter such simplified declarations in support of the experiences of a marginalised identity within a mainstream event. I read Sophia's considerations as a call for structural disputes. The event organisers did not make an explicit effort to clarify the notions and labels used for the event. Sophia clearly remarks that the enthusiasm for her attendance was motivated by her role as observing participant and that the festival's accessibility felt

restricted by the anxieties caused by lack of definition and acknowledgement of marginalised identities in the event celebrating gender equality.

Her initial concerns, fears and doubts of being or feeling ‘like an outsider’ at the event were countered by the actual experience of attending. Sophia reflects:

[Once I was at the festival,] I made absolutely sure that I would have my voice heard. That was my way of being visible, of saying that I had something to say about the issue and that my voice was just as valid as all of the other women that were in the room. I was concerned I wouldn’t feel welcomed but I seemed to be welcomed quite a bit. [...] I surprised myself by getting through it and I was surprised by the response of people to me and so [pause] I am glad I went, because, in some small way, it just justified my place on the planet and I felt part of society – rather than, always feeling like an outsider. (Sophia, Observing Participants 15.3.17)

The positive experience of her attendance does not diminish the previous structural struggle that Sophia experienced. While marked by a ‘happy ending’, Sophia’s experience of structural violence on the micro level of her personal position within the event demands attention in an event celebrating gender equality.

Ticketing In/Equality

Next to the micro scale affecting the very personal encounter of structural violence, research participants urge me to look at a meso level of structural disputes. Hereby, the experiences of structural injustice is still felt on a personal level but also engages a wider collective of audiences as visible structures restrict experiences of equality.

The materiality of access – ticketing and spatial arrangements – caused emotional debates about infrastructures of inequality inherent in celebrations of equality. Observing participant, Rachel, synthesises the debate well as she explains: ‘I was pretty angry [and thought I had to] explode at some time, because people like me [...] can’t spend or don’t have the spare cash to spend 10 or 15 pounds to go to a festival’ (Rachel, Observing Participant, 22.3.17).

Rachel’s emotional reaction to the ticketing circumstances is informed by this lived reality in her community. Rachel is in her late-40s and identifies as a woman. Her motivation to join the research project derive from her hope to ‘get out to mingle more’ (Rachel, Observing Participant, 22.3.17). As a stay-at-home mother with a teenage daughter, the costs of leisure are a major concern for her. While she considers herself to be ‘quite well off’ (Rachel, Observing Participant, 22.3.17), she is aware and

considerate of members of her neighbourhood community, who are struggling with high levels of deprivation.

The logistics and pricing were a major concern for the majority of observing participants. Day passes were priced at 10 GBP per day. The opening and closing event was additionally ticketed and required extra payment. As Rachel points out, the ticketing structure required potential visitors to have 10 GBP spare and available at the moment that ticket sales went live. Additionally, a quarter of events in the festival required additional registrations. While I completed such registrations for all observing participants in order to facilitate their attendance at the festival, I experienced difficulties registering for appropriate time slots and shows due to the complex process. While ticketing mechanisms are a form of crowd management, in the context of a celebration of equality and in the socio-economic realities of a city like Hull, festival tickets are an infrastructure of inequality, excluding, particularly, women and marginalised groups in the population. Therefore, ticketing is a prime example of structural disputes in the context of the WOW festival in Hull.

Furthermore, meso levels of structural disputes also include considerations of spatial arrangements of festivals. While festival venues are continuously under discussion for their contribution to in/equalities, my attention is on the spatial arrangements within festival venues, and particularly it is on the provision of a VIP space and treatment, which suggests an immediate structural dispute. I draw on my own observations for this discussion. As I supported the WOW Circle of Friends, I received free tickets to the opening ceremony for the festival. On the evening of the opening, while around 30–40 people waited on the main plaza in front of City Hall, I walked into the main foyer to pick up my tickets and was asked by a volunteer to follow her. Without having received any information about special treatment, I was taken to a back room behind the main stage, where I encountered many WOW Circle of Friends members, performers in the festivals and the production team of Hull2017 Ltd enjoying a free buffet of canapés and wine. In a short speech, chair of the board of Hull 2017 Ltd, Rosie Millard invited us to the opening ceremony and expressed her gratitude on behalf of the team of Hull 2017 Ltd. Sophia, who was with me at the time, reflected upon an such arrangement:

Glamour Glamour Glamour. All of the sort of knows and faces in the city were there [in this VIP space], you know, all of the best people were there. They had that VIP lounge, didn't they? For all the special people, the

business leaders and the special people in the city, people, who sort of exist in the top layer of the pile and not the regular folk, who had to wait outside.

(Sophia, Observing Participants, 15.3.17)

While I understand that this treatment and the spatial segregation in the form of a VIP lounge derives from a grateful intention, as a member of the production team explained to me later, the mechanism contrasts with the ethos of the festival.

Marketing In/Equality

The final layer of encounters of structural disputes addresses the overall framework, from which the WOW festival derives and in which it is placed. In this consideration of the macro structures, I draw upon statements from observing-participant Daniel. Daniel is in his mid-30s and identifies as a man. He joined the team of observing participants as a form of training for himself. As a musician, he actively seeks out events relating to the performing arts in order to engage with new ideas and the associated community in Hull. Therefore, in his visit to the WOW festival, he focused mainly on the performances taking place during the event and reflects in detail about their narratives. Beyond this focus, when questioned about how the festival contributes to cultures of equality in the city, Daniel expresses strong views in opposition to the idea that an event like WOW Hull can be true to its celebrated values. He synthesises:

No festival like this one can achieve a culture of equality, because they all base in capitalist principles of profit. It is like there is more marketing than content. Around the world, all the big festivals work in this way and it is an economic question not a cultural one. (Daniel, Observing Participant, 15.3.17)

Daniel's considerations call attention to the overarching structures of how the event is produced and promoted. As a global festival movement for gender equality, South Bank Centre London constructed a brand, which travels similarly to a franchise system around the world. Founded by Jude Kelly, the festival's identity is defined by the logo, which marks the festival heavily through its colour scheme of red, yellow, and black. Furthermore, the structures of programming through community brain-storming called as WOW Think-ins conditions the celebrations. Even within the festival programming structures, certain elements are borrowed from the original festival concept. In 2019, the WOW foundation established itself as a company to run the London event as well as the franchise of the festival brand. The exact conditions for

festival franchisees are not made public in the official web presentation of the WOW foundation or the WOW Hull presentation. However, I estimate that the co-operative perspectives as addressed by Daniel strongly influence the development of the event and its expansion. Therefore, on a macro level of observed structural disputes, Daniel's observation encourages us to ask how equality, a celebrated value, becomes a commodity in the context of a branded festival. While I refrain from an oppositional binary and rather refer to a mutual co-existence of profit-focused capitalist intentions and the celebration of equality, this reality of structural injustice needs to be examined in further detail through future research.

Discussion and Conclusion: The Fragile Notion of Equality

Drawing on producers', artists' and visitors' perspectives of the WOW festival in Hull in 2017, this paper discusses structural disputes which are experienced in the celebration of gender equality. By highlighting examples of perceived structural inequalities on a micro, meso, and macro level, I engaged with a nuanced understanding of what festivals and events can do. While often discussed in terms of a liberation due to the liminal experiences with which festivals are associated, the discussion of structural violence allows me to shine light on the variety of aspects that merge in the complexity of the festival environment. The WOW festival in Hull produces and reproduces in its content notions of equality, which are crucially embedded in the local society. However, when investigating the form and framework of the festival, structures and conditions of inequality appear, which put the celebrated value at risk. In reference to Sophia's experience, I highlighted the very personal concern of accessibility as the label of 'women' was neither challenged in the programme outline nor clarified in any other form. On a meso-level of collective encounters with structural inequalities, I addressed Rachel's consideration of the ticketing prices as systems of exclusion. Additionally, I highlighted concerns about the spatial arrangement in respect to my own observations and questioned how the establishment of a VIP space limited considerations of equality in the celebration. Finally, through Daniel's remark on the commodification of equality, I suggest that the franchise structures, in which the festival brand WOW is embedded, require further attention.

The analytical examples contributed by Sophia's, Rachel's, Daniel's, and my own observations do not scrutinise the WOW festival and its ambition to celebrate equality. However, conceptually and analytically, the observations invite

considerations of the fragility of equality. While clearly embraced in content of the festival, the practices and processes of the celebration need to be embedded in structures of equality in order to support the celebrated value. Festivals and events hold productive and reproductive capacities in society. The celebration of equality in the form of the WOW festival represents a great achievement and important development in consideration of the struggle for gender equality. However, continuous attention to the holistic practices of equality is crucial in order to avoid structural disputes between content on equalities and forms of inequalities.

About the Author

Barbara Grabher is a research assistant at the Culture, Place and Policy Institute and PhD candidate in the context of the Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action Framework GRACE project (Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe) at the University of Hull, UK. Grabher holds a BA in Cultural and Social Anthropology from the University of Vienna, Austria, and an MA in Gender Studies from Utrecht University, Netherlands, and University of Granada, Spain.

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