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

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### Résumé de l'article

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

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### Abstract

How does the process of producing a zine contribute to resistance and action to create new spaces of solidarity? This article reflects on such a process to account for the experiences of the 'Concrete Collective,' a research collective of staff and doctoral 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). A key output of this project was our co-produced zine, which became a means to express the collective's distinctive journeys through HE and experiences of (un)belonging within and beyond the university. In this article, we reflect on how we worked to create a safe space within the institution and how arts-based making practices were central to expressing 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 to collectively critique and resist isolationist tendencies that create a sense of unbelonging amongst historically under-represented groups within HE. This act of creation allowed us to critically reflect on the dynamics of how solidarities may be produced. Finally, we reflect on the possibilities of nurturing and sustaining solidarities and collective spaces while carefully attending to hierarchical relationships present within the university.

## Keywords

belonging, higher education, zine, solidarity, doctoral, underrepresented students

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## 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 even 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 levels, there is a stark underrepresentation 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). Our article 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 lived experiences as staff and students from historically underrepresented backgrounds within HE.

Fortuitous connections with kindred-spirit colleagues led us to the development of a project that envisioned collaboration and co-production with doctoral researchers of colour, resulting in the formation of the 'Concrete Collective,' a research collective of staff and doctoral researchers. 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 article in a moment when 'decolonization' is in vogue in university circles and we 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. To avoid serving such empty purposes, we take a step sideways to focus on the commitments and potential 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?*

*Degrees of Belonging*, our co-produced zine,<sup>1</sup> (The Concrete Collective 2022), formed a core material document of our collective conversations over the course of the project. Each of the authors of this article created two pages of the zine, and collectively, we created a centre-spread and agreed on the introductory text. In this article, we reflect on our collective experiences of using collaborative arts-based methods to produce this zine. As McLean (2022) notes, adding participatory arts-based methods to a project alone cannot challenge power dynamics and disrupt privilege. We therefore critically considered the composition of our collective and the differential powers we had to shape and steer the project: 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 employed as members of the original research team to lead the project. Therefore, the authorial 'we' in this article is/was fluid, sometimes referring to the whole collective and sometimes to the three original members of the research team, but always informed by the conversations and intimacies shared in the collective. It reflects the changing shifts in our identities and relationships throughout the project, as we found our common ground through our interactions. The original research team desired and designed a project 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. It was devoted to hearing shared ideas, experiences, emotions, and the making-doing-crafting activities accompanying their expression. The 'collective' emerged as a distinct identity when we sought an appropriate way of labelling ourselves with the zine created. One could say that the zine animated 'the collective' and brought this identity into sharp focus. In authoring this article, we have taken care to share the labour between us, and recognise the differences amongst us, with some of us being grant-funded researchers with dedicated time to spend on the project. We see the process of writing, editing, and revising as a collaborative one, shared amongst the collective. For instance, this article took its shape 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 article, alongside extracts from the zine.

This article is intended to acknowledge the special and specific contributions of all members of the collective, and we hope that a publication such as this will 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 article 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 article, 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

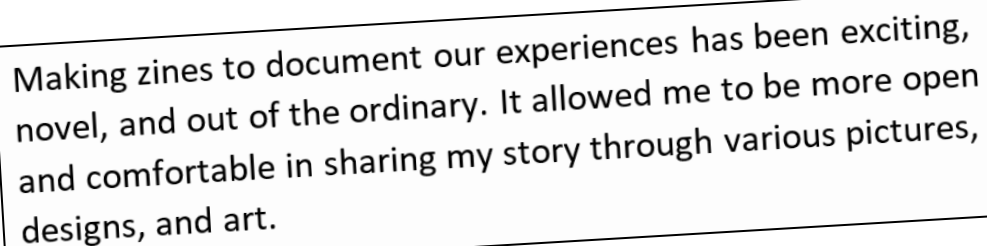
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<sup>1</sup> Degrees of Belonging Zine available here: <https://www.eggboxpublishing.com/product-page/degrees-of-belonging-zine>

project and zine. We hope our contribution shows how these journeys generated solidarities that shaped us as a collective.

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

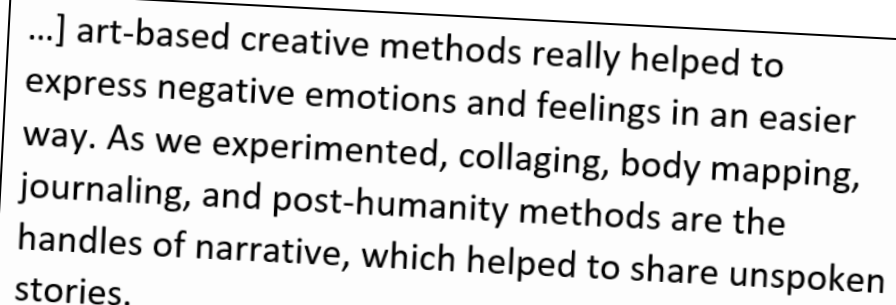
Our original intentions for the project were to ground it in participatory, relational, and reparative frameworks that centre students as co-producers of knowledge. The project was devised as a set of three workshops that would build on each other, in the hope that this iterative process would deepen our ties over the year. These workshops drew upon a portfolio of creative methods 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-making activities that would encourage participation in various 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). We intended 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 collective's sharing of stories, experiences, and feelings, we uncovered deeply personal and moving, sometimes painful and traumatic, and other times joyful and playful moments. One of the difficulties we faced was in how to share these complex stories and experiences with stakeholders across the university, beyond the collective's safe and intimate space. Specific challenges and vulnerabilities also come with publicly critiquing the institution while many of the collective occupy precarious positions as early career researchers. We were also wary of flattening out the diversity of our individual experiences and the richness of the creative expressions into a more traditional, reductive analysis that would feed into a conventional article.

Through our collective discussions about addressing some of these challenges, 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 centering 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. Because they tend to be self-published works, zines are a popular and powerful way of sharing ideas in formats that might not fit 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 broader 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 (2021)—or Feminists Liberating Our Collective Knowledge—confronted the ongoing persistence of racist ideologies and the reproduction of white supremacy within the campus of the 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 who converse in 'World Englishes' and languages beyond English in daily life, allowing us to locate our everyday lives and interests within academic







Figure 4: page from zine

*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. To flatten hierarchies between us and avoid falling into fixed roles as faculty versus learners/students, we highlighted how the project was not a research training programme, but 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.

I sometimes reflect on my life and wonder, "Where do I belong?" Nowhere? What is this place where I feel at ease? ...I learned about the "time, space, and belonging...of students of color" project during the early stages of my PhD, when I was struggling to adjust back in the UK. Given my background and the dilemmas I was experiencing at the time, I knew I had to take part in this project.

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. For multiple reasons, spaces that are collegial, free for us to disassemble, and free from contractual/extractive relations are not easy to find or create. 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). Regarding cultivating such spaces, we didn't know what to expect: who would respond to our call, and would doctoral researchers 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 to help us introduce ourselves to each other. From earlier experiences, some recalled how such introductions allowed us to open up about something 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

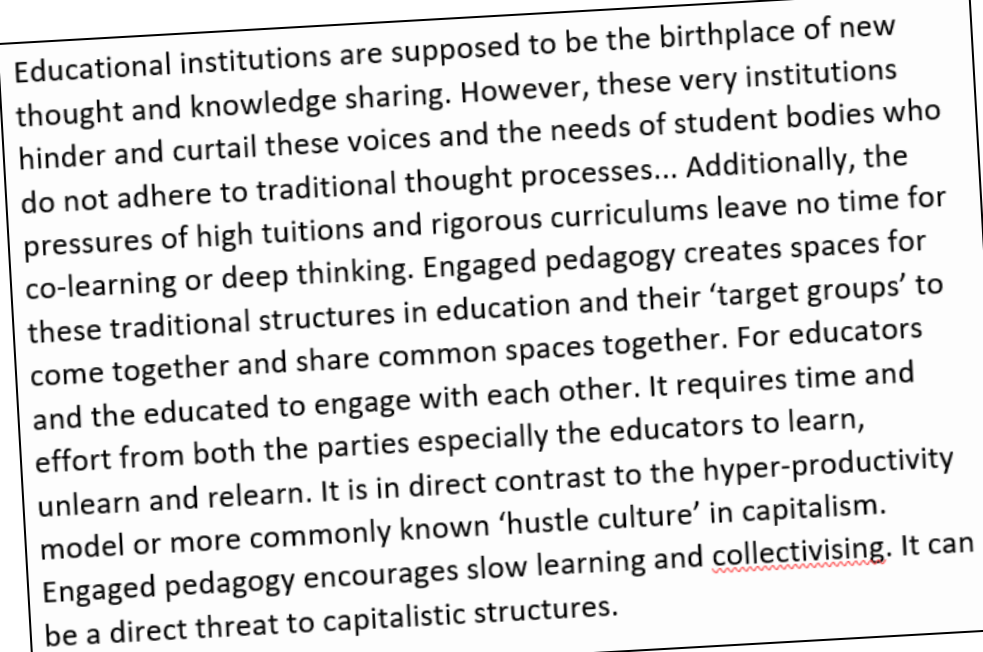
lives were shared through these objects, some intense, others more light-hearted, and each snippet seemed to build a new space. In making room for each story, a space where we could belong began to take shape.

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 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

It may be seen that such activities or objects are insignificant or an end in themselves. But we argue that they help the process of becoming 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, 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

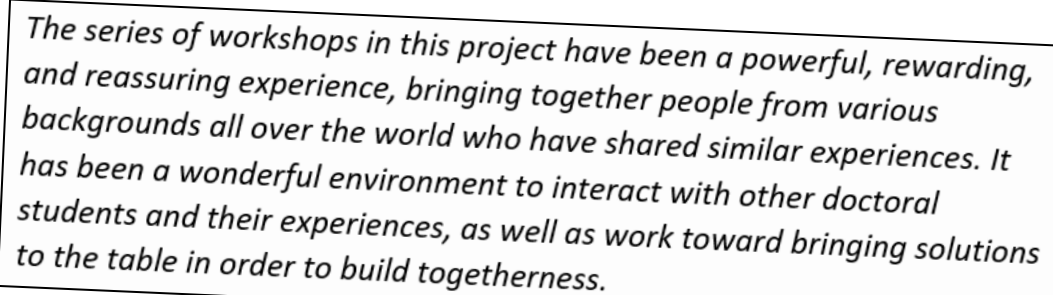
can exist to create new, purposeful knowledge even within the inevitably neoliberal space of a higher educational institution.



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

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; deprioritising institutional or top-down agendas and starting from our experience; establishing that we are all 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 10: reflections from writing workshop

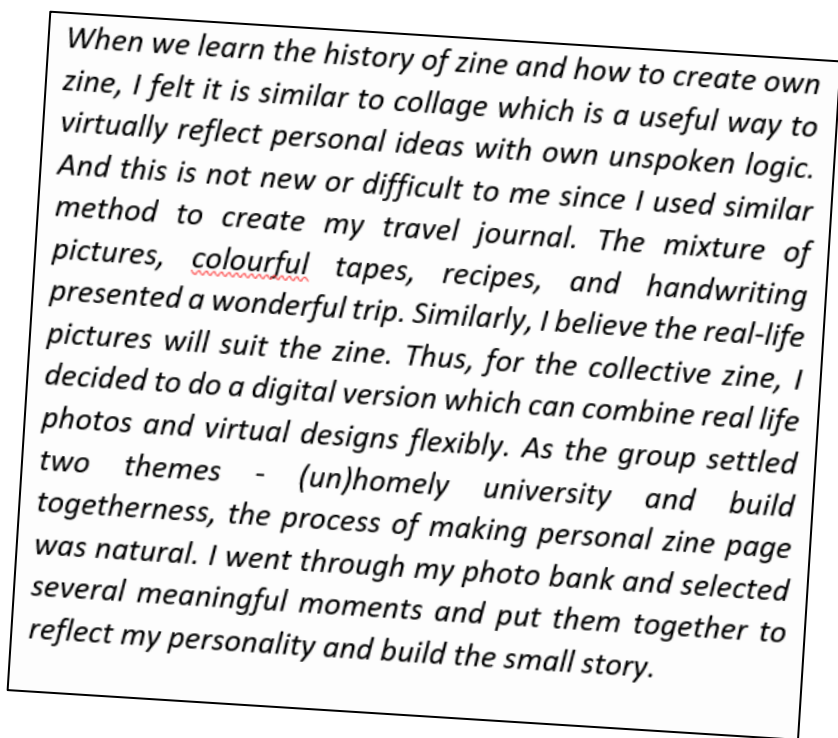


Figure 11: page from zine

### Process: Making the Zine

Once we decided that a zine would be the most suitable output for expressing 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 also decided 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 focused on "envisioning or crafting futures or conditions which may not yet currently exist and provoke new ways of thinking" (Ross 2017, 215) to ultimately 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: 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.



*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 12: 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 echoes 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 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.

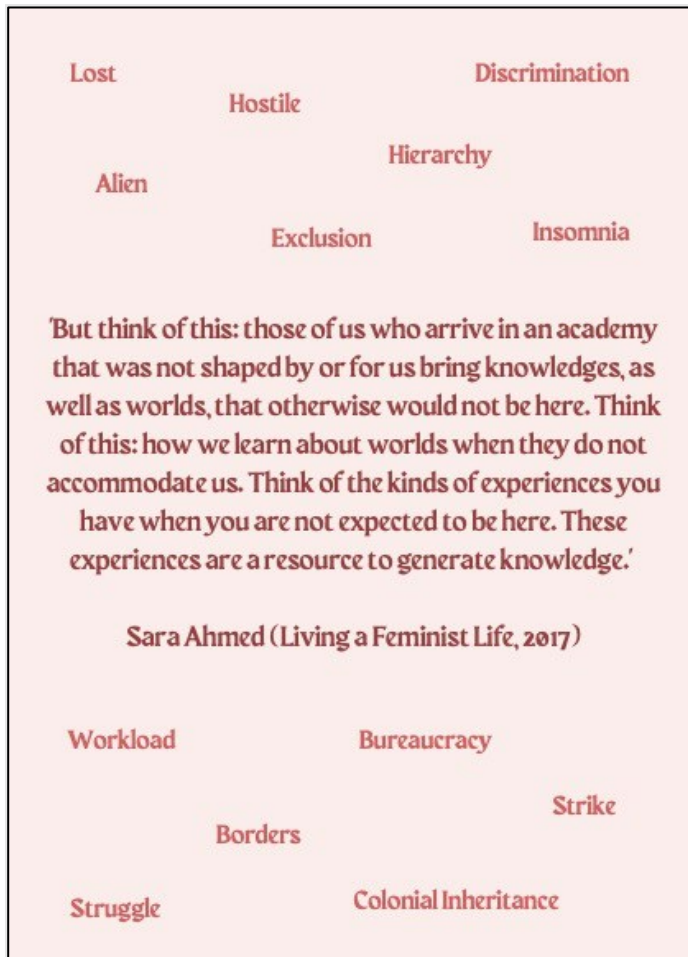


Figure 13: page from zine

*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





*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 breakthrough, 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 contribute to the rigid and often factory-like production of peer-reviewed articles. It allowed us to experience a slowing down of time, emphasising reflection, creativity and play rather than 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, 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 belief 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.

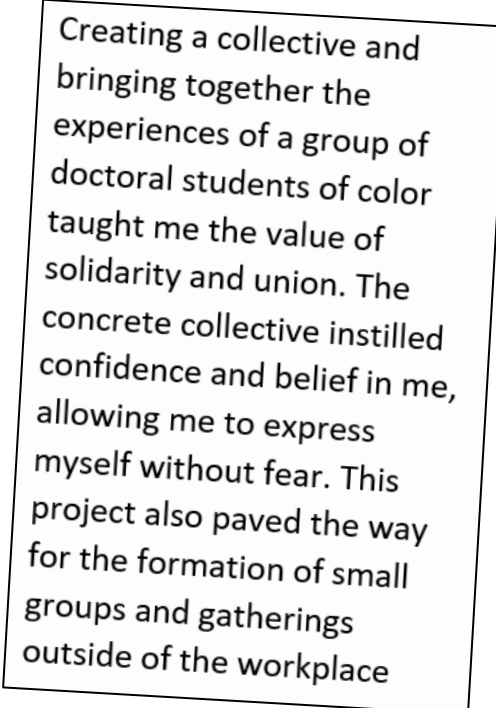
Figure 18: reflections from writing workshop

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

In the end, putting together the final version of the zine was akin to stitching together—a giant collage of collages—itsself both a physical manifestation of a social commitment, an expression of solidarity, and a means of building solidarity between the makers. Each page was unique: some of us were more comfortable with images, whereas others 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.

## Afterlife of the Zine



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, 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 misrecognised 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).

Therefore, 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 tricky to resolve. After all, we wanted our experiences to be heard, picked up, and used in ways we could not 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. Ultimately, we held a public launch of the zine, inviting a group of carefully selected academics, students, our advisory board members, administrators, and university leaders responsible 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 ourselves up 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, and the list of words, all contributed to a certain enigmatic opaqueness that allowed this mediation between public and intimate content.

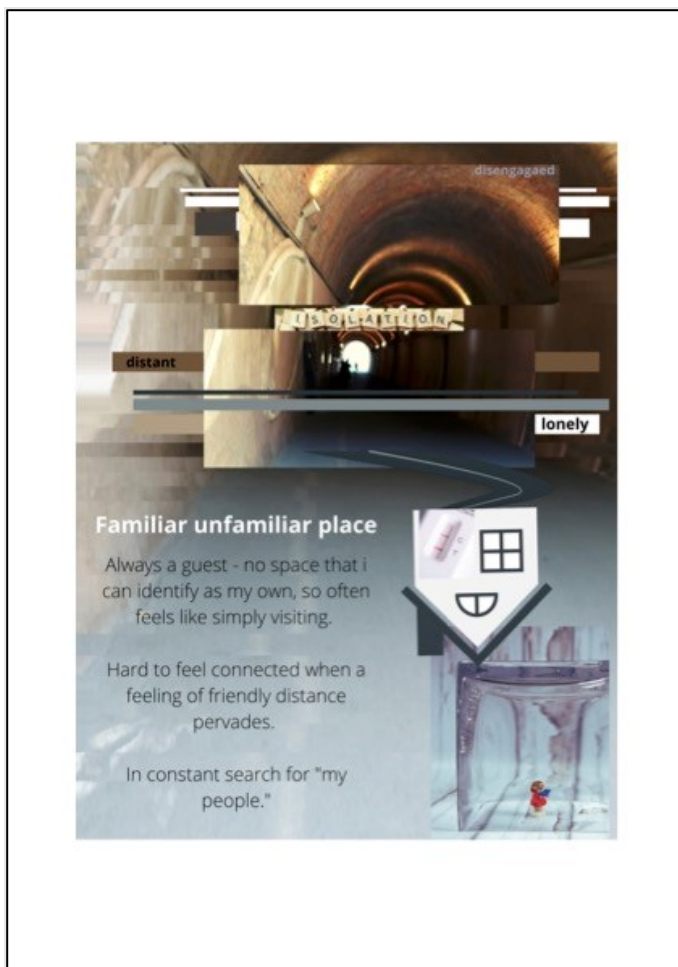


Figure 21: page from zine

Other reasons for our hesitancy arose from the 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 had to refuse some well-meaning but not-quite-appropriate invitations to contribute to conversations and initiatives 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 collages 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 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 that yields a list to 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 have 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 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 ongoing 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 how our experiences of un/belonging within the university cannot be divided into a simple binary. 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', the space created by our collective led to "new material possibilities and social positions" (Duggan 1993, 373), 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 gives us hope that new collective writing practices may become more acceptable. For example, Owens and Green (2020), are undertaking a "joint" PhD and Gibson-Graham (1996) have collectively authored for years. While such collectivity in academic production may not yet be the dominant form of writing in academia, it is clear that collective, collegiate work is not beyond its bounds.



Figure 24: page from zine

### Concluding Thoughts

As a collective, we currently find ourselves in a liminal space as we wait to see if we can obtain funding to push further with the project, which has formally ended. This is just one of the challenges of short-term funding when it comes to projects that focus on building sustained engagement and trust: can our collective survive outside the demands that the neoliberal academy pushes on us when we do not have the protection of funded time? How can our collective retain and sustain its spirit when doctoral students finish their studies with the university? And 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?

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 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). However, the ethics of care we learnt and practiced with/for each other during the project meant that one of our biggest lessons was to resist a specific sense of time that



envelopes us. Our positionality has been shaped by ongoing debates within critical geography regarding the decentring and destabilising of neoliberal norms of productivity within academia (Rogers et al. 2014; Sou and Hall 2023; McClean 2022). 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). During our project, for example, our focus on creating and experimenting together throughout our workshops allowed us to centre fleeting moments in time and celebrate simply being in the moment together, focusing on the joy of creating for creating’s sake. 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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