

# While Doing the Successful Researcher Experimental Writing on Academic Lives in Neo-Liberal Surroundings

CHRISTINA HEE PEDERSEN<sup>1</sup>

*Roskilde University*

Co-producers: Birgitte Ravn Olesen, Ursula Plesner, Louise Phillips and Bente Kristiansen

**M**Y INTENTION in this article is to explore the dilemmas of the researcher as a practitioner in the context of a growing managerialism in western neo-liberal universities—in my case, a Danish university context—through experimental writing. I have been inspired to do so by a number of courageous feminist researchers who have been engaged in methodological experiments and transformations (Davies, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Haug, 1987; Hazleton, 2006; Krøjer, 2003; Richardson, 1997; Søndergaard, 1996; Staunæs, 2005).

Like Søndergaard (2005), I understand the notion of desire, subjectification and biography as mediated by narratives and metaphors and as constant movements between individuals and contexts. I am, like many others, preoccupied with how we can show and conceptualise the complexities that move the individual actor's articulations of socio-cultural discourse, and gain insight into the effects of such processes. Particular constructions of how to exist in academia articulate a wealth of circulating discourses that delimit meaning and possibilities for individual action in particular ways.

Davies and Petersen (2005) talk about identity/subjectification as “a closely woven fabric of self,” a multidimensional active process where ‘the I’ is both an active subject and subject to conditions that only make it possible to act legitimately in particular ways. I draw on Wright and Shore's (1997) use of Foucault's concept of governance:

We use ‘governance’ to refer to the more complex processes by which policies not only impose conditions, as if from ‘outside’ or ‘above,’ but influence people's indigenous norms of conduct so that they themselves contribute, not necessarily consciously, to a government's model of social order. (p. 6)

I decided to set off by allowing an open stream of consciousness to produce a text that, even if it made me feel uncomfortable, might make visible the conditions for knowledge production in a Danish university setting.

## Contexts of Professional Academic Lives

The discursive environments constituting and surrounding universities echo and repeat symbolic devices that drive forward societal changes and shape the ways individual academics construct themselves. One motivation that propelled my writing and thinking has been to understand the complexities of the competing discourses that influence the ways in which an academic person makes sense of herself/himself as knowledge producer. What is considered a ‘good knowledge worker’ within the neo-liberal norm? And which normativities and power relations are at play in the subjectification of the individual ‘as a good knowledge worker?’

In agreement with Selby (2005), I think that we need critical and conceptual clarity in order to understand the processes of resistance to and reflection upon (inter)personal subjectivities constituted through our professional lives. Academic burn-out is increasing as a concrete effect of the technologies installed to govern the reorganisation of the universities in Denmark. A new university law, new managerialistic approaches, centralisation and fusions are among the processes designed to produce in individuals higher levels of flexibility, productivity and cooperation with national economic objectives and global ideals as primary parameters. But these technologies change individuals. A recent quantitative study among Danish academics show that one third of Danish senior researchers feel so stressed that the effects on their health are noticeable (Dansk Magisterforening, 2006, p.1). Seventy percent of the same group find it difficult to keep up with their responsibilities at work. The same study concludes that the primary explanation for stress among academics is to be found in what is called “work without frontiers” and the uncertain conditions of financial support for research. The pressure to obtain external financing has increased and the success rate for obtaining funding has been low for some time as more and more researchers compete for the same money.<sup>2</sup> Senior researchers feel great responsibility as they are very aware that younger colleagues depend on their success in obtaining money for their projects. As one senior researcher states:

Time for research has shrunk. At the same time administration occupies more and more time, because you are supposed to participate in all kinds of evaluations and the implementation of new systems, not to mention the time for applications and management of bigger projects. But the day they evaluate you as a researcher, only the scientific demands are at play. And these are international, no doubt about that. We are good at self-management, but the problems have become too big. Far too many colleagues have already had burn-outs or are heading towards a sick leave. (Dansk Magisterforening, 2006, p. 1)

The radically changing patterns of governance within the university described by Åkerstrøm (2002) as a move from institutional to organisational forms, coupled with the fact that individual departments at the local level find themselves in a constant state of organizing and reorganising, should not be underestimated as sources of uncertainty and fragmentation that effect physical and mental well-being.

Gender in Academia<sup>3</sup>

Feminist researchers such as Davies and Petersen (2005), Højgård and Søndergaard (2003), and Hasse (2001) have already analysed how normative systems in academia are profoundly gendered and how topics, practices and dimensions that connote femininity and women are being transformed, given less value, blurred or simply excluded:

The professional discourses of academia concerned with scholarship and academic standards constitute, what are externally presented as the legitimate central discourses of university institutions. What in this sense is defined as academic is constituted through exclusion of a number of elements: political, personal and gendered dimensions are among others excluded from the definition. (Petersen, 2004)

In order to get closer to the ways gender influences Danish research environments, Søndergaard (2005) researched the widespread discomfort expressed by female academics. She shows that few real working networks can be found in academia, and that gender symbols such as the mere sign on the body, clothing, decoration in offices, female connoted attitudes in themselves produce exclusion. Gender was found to be an illegitimate strategy of differentiation when talking about the conditions of work of both male and female academics. Indeed she found a generalised understanding and celebration of gender neutral principles and practices, such as for example, gender neutral distributions of resources within the departments. She identifies two different ways of treating gender as a social category while, at the same time, she underlines that these two ways should never be understood as fixed: *the consensual environment* and *the dissensual environment*. In the first, discourses on gender neutrality govern unchallenged. In the second, gender differences and inequality is recognised but treated either pragmatically through fights or through elitism. In the dissensual environments, the older members of the field know that gender neutrality is a myth, but still they declare the gender-neutral character of their departments publicly and when talking to members situated at a lower level in the organisational hierarchy.

Søndergaard (2005) also shows how power and decision-making in the departments take place in the preparatory activities for meetings and gain organisational support through follow-up narratives in the organisation. Women are less likely to be invited to participate in these processes and the ‘balance of trade,’ the give-and-take relationship within the academic organisation, is established within a gendered logic. The differentiation between men and women is re-established as a legitimate dimension, when it is displaced, for example, to differing theoretical/methodological interests of male and female academics, to their publications, to administrative responsibilities, and so on. As Søndergaard points out, the conditions for subjectification of the successful academic are never properly initiated and the feelings of unease and not belonging to the academic institution keep getting reproduced at levels not always visible to the female academic subject.

In the universities, the inhabitants are shaped and limited to and through ‘the discipline.’ Scholars gain a clear idea of what belongs to, and what falls outside of academic practice. At the same time, academics often *perform* an ‘unknowing’ of what produces power. Certain forms of power are embedded in the institutions and seem foreign to ideals of the good ‘neutral’ scientific knowledge producer. To understand the Danish university environment it is also important to know that many women today put quite a lot of energy into trying to avoid a victim position

where they show weakness, seem too emotional, and appear too critical. The established cultural codes of the university as a social institution have historically been dominated by masculine-connoted practices and values such as competition, self-promotion, plays of power and ‘work-mania.’ Today’s ideals are being reshaped by what Connel (2000) calls images of global masculinities, whereby values such as innovation, work without frontiers, self-branding and extensive networking still within a masculine symbolic framework are re/emerging and becoming stronger.

### Retooling Thinking Technologies: Experimental Writing

In poststructuralist feminist writing one can find a constantly renewed retooling of thinking technologies (Søndergaard, 2005; Lykke, 2005). I will explore if the thinking technology of experimental writing can reveal important but hitherto invisible dimensions of the changing conditions for knowledge production that researchers could make use of as orientation markers in their everyday navigational efforts. I explore how experimental writing can cast light on how subjectification processes in gendered organisations express themselves in the universities and intersect with choice of fields, topics and status in academia.<sup>4</sup>

Experimental writing is a practice-oriented way of approaching an examination of a topic. In experimental writing, the effects of processes of legitimacy and social recognition present themselves as embodied. The writer, in her effort to materialise ideas through experimental writings, touches the normative borders produced by the field of knowledge within which she moves. She writes herself as a practitioner in the academic field rupturing the established genres by refusing to filter ideas out as too private, too obvious, too dull, too stupid.

It requires bravery to cross borders, to break silences, as your body leads you to where you think you could find something meaningful As Audre Lorde (1984) points out:

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not differences which immobilize us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken. (p. 275)

Haug (1992) describes the process of examining the text, as in Foucault’s (1969) archaeological work, as a training to be a detective:

Silence is another way of coming to terms with the unacceptable. In people’s memories it appears as an absence or a rupture. The recognition that these silences must be investigated and that the attempt must be made to propose theories to explain them was of great importance to the women’s movement. After all, we have been so accustomed for so long to being absent from history that in our thoughts and speech we tend to collude in ignoring the sheer existence of women. To hear what has not been said, to see things that have not been displayed, requires a kind of detective training. (Haug, 1992, p. 25)

### The Researcher: Subject and Practitioner

The strong tradition in academia for research subjects to perform as transcendent invisible subjects that can move around and say things without taking places, bodies, standpoint or posi-

tions into account is still a reality in most academic texts. Haraway's (1991) well-known critique of 'the God gaze' of the academic, still applies (Lykke, 2005).

In the process of searching for possible answers to the question of how we should understand what constitutes a successful academic researcher in today's neo-liberal surroundings, while, at the same time, exposing its paradoxes, is bound to move us into theoretical issues concerning the relationship between politics, theory, practice and the personal<sup>5</sup> (Singleton, 1996).

In common with Singleton, my own approach to research stems from feminist poststructuralist research within the field of communication and from action-research inspired approaches. Both of these traditions acknowledge the importance of recognising, making visible and enhancing the active role of the research subjects in the analysis, and both traditions have, for different reasons, difficulties in doing so (Pedersen & Olesen, 2008; Gunnarsson, 2006). The reason for this has become quite clear to me in carrying out the experimental writing for this article, as I have constantly bumped into insistent questions related to relevance and values.

My hope is that the experimental writing presented in this article will allow me to interweave research positions, methodological approaches and personal life stories and thus produce insights into the neo-liberal strategies through which gendered structures at the university transform academics into 'productive' entrepreneurs. Davies and Petersen (2005) show that the subjectification of academics as entrepreneurs within a neo-liberal discourse is at risk of undermining the very source of knowledge production that the strategies are designed to promote. In their work, Davies and Petersen (2005) also conclude that the blocking of resistance is accomplished in part by persuading each individual academic to treat the effects of neo-liberalism as personal successes, responsibilities and failings rather than as a form of institutional practice in need of critique and transformation.

I will now present the experimental writing in which I invite the reader to engage the different text and context that may produce unease in the reader as it did in the writer.

### Experimental Writing: *Getting On With It*

She sat in the public library looking out the huge window. The small boats passed by every so often. Light and water. Far away from her normal university setting. On neutral ground. A quiet place and time to go into depth surrounded by unknown others, each of them deeply engrossed in their reading and writing. How she has yearned for this possibility. Now she finds it difficult to start. She had just read an article about transformative moments in research where research was seen as performative and deconstructive at the same time. She could start off by taking seriously Turid Markussen's (2005) way of thinking performativity as practice. Why not try to trust her truth? Turid Markussen (2005) promises that her way of working can engage the researcher in the very moment of thought and writing. That was what she needed: to feel engaged and absorbed. This could maybe get her started. She reads the sentence again.

*Whatever the stakes are in a specific project, I 'argue' that doing performance, not as theory but as a mode of working, requires openness within the research process to the possibility that the researchers and their practices themselves must alter in response to situations in which they find themselves. Such openness increases the ability to enact shifts in the phenome-*

*non being studied, and thus also sharpens the transformative power of feminism. Refusing an enactment of the outcomes of research as "after the fact," such transformative modes of relating seem to be called for in order to develop effective ways of engaging with the present. (Markussen, 2005, p. 330–331)*

She sighed. What could it be in this very moment that could open up the troubling challenges of getting on with the writing? What could be an effective way of engaging with the present? She felt stuck. She could not write. Her heart wanting to be the engaged, inspired researcher. Her head, feeling dizzy. Her mind, a mess of desires and an enormous list of half-finished tasks that continuously interrupted her thoughts.

Engaging with the present seemed to be about wanting to write and being capable of writing. "Why do I write the word wanting," she thought? To show that I know what I want? That I know how to take adequate and deliberate decisions? That I know how to prioritise, that I know what to go for? That it is clear to me, what I want to write about, and what needs to be explored in depth? To show that I want to and can find things that have not been explored before? She sighed again.

This Markussen-thing does not bring me anywhere, she thought. Bull shit... 'the challenge of the moment'...come on! What was this other than an unbearably narcissistic exercise filled with just as unbearable blind spots, which would irritate the reader so much that she or he would stop reading? She could see them slapping their knees with laughter, because she went around in circles, not being able to get into a flow of interesting ideas. What she was writing were mere trivialities. After two and a half years of working her ass off she actually had a semester off for writing. Ha! Would she, after all, be capable of writing? And all the talking she had been doing. She, who always had something to say, had an opinion about almost anything. Now she was silent. Ha.

We could look into the expression 'being capable of,' she thought. She looked at herself from the outside. The letting in of a "we" in the sentence, as if that word would save her, was quite a strategy to cope with the lonely writing position! If only she could think clearly. 'But you can't,' a voice inside her finished the sentence. She did not at all see herself in the image of the intelligent researcher, elegantly serving a new dish on an exciting, innovative platform in some renowned international journal. Someone capable of challenging herself so much that she, the writer and thinker, got disturbed, so new insights appeared out of the blue.

Instead, she started zapping between old documents on the computer, desperately renaming each of them, cleaning and organising and hoping that this activity would produce something, or at least make her feel productive. One had heard of miracles before...that days of reading, ordering and rewriting old stuff would suddenly turn into a focused idea and reveal that she was actually capable, all on her own, to produce her thoughts, her very own ideas.

And if she grasped the word 'wanted' again, then what was it she wanted to write about? She wanted to write about the dehumanization of the conditions for knowledge production. She wanted to show how dominant discourses of good and bad research turned into daily pressure for the individual researcher, involved in teaching, administration, networking, politics and organisations along with this research activity, considered the most noble activity of them all. She wanted to

write against the individualisation by demonstrating how it operates and she wanted to make a gender point, showing the difficulties, the daily dilemmas, the lies and the pitfalls embedded in the institutional setting explain how she and others set standards that could easily kill any creative process of productive thinking.

She wanted to tell the world that she was not only critical but had visions for research. She wanted to invite others to share her desire for human encounters, analysis, change and community. She wanted to dare to take a stand that is positioned, calm and strong. Research processes should give and make sense to others in their daily struggles, she thought. Being a researcher should make it possible to sense surroundings and relationships and engage in them without all the time feeling obliged to consider and perform something within an already defined framework.

The words of “wanting” and “being able to” sent her way back to her activist youth. She remembered part of a song by Norwegian feminists in a weak and insecure voice: *But can we? Will we? Do we dare?*

And then the same women responding in choir with voices filled with strength, self-determination and self-esteem, which could lift any female listener off their chair: *Yes, we can! We will! We dare!*

And she knew that what she longed for was company in her struggle for sense-making in academia. An individualised knowledge worker doing the old images of what knowledge production is all about. It is about daring she thought and about being seen and recognised for what you think, desire and work for. But not alone. Rather, encountering others, other arguments, other views nurturing each other and acting together. Why should she write alone to prove her worthiness and right to be where she was? It was all about daring to ignore the institutional requirements and about the need for a common exploration of the many ways of being an intellectual with others.

### An open invitation

Therefore I invite the reader to sit back and savour the taste of the story. What does it produce and could this text be used to explore further the effects of new managerialism in the reader’s own national, regional and local contexts? What other texts might insist on being written? Could additional re-representations involving changes in format, changes in points of view, relocation of the situation, and writing about what is not there, open up different and productive perspectives (Richardson, 1997, p. 89)? The reader’s own experiences can be drawn on in the analysis while reading with or against both the text and its interpretations. I hope this writing/reading will inspire and engage the readers in their own processes of creative collaborative writing, thus interrupting the notion that writing and reading are solitary acts.

My analysis of “Getting On With It” builds on a first collective reading carried out by myself and colleagues in my departmental research group. To frame our mode of analysis, we adapted the extensive analytic scheme of Haug (1987, 1992) developed for her now classic scholarship on “memory work.” What follows, then, has its roots in a first collective process of analysis. The in depth analysis is done by me alone. In this instance, the working-conditions that my experimental writing set out to explore prove paradoxical: The choices of analytic approach combined

with the difficulties to find time to meet with the colleagues in my research group in itself delimit the possibilities for collective work.

### Learning from Articulations in a Text Fragment

The point of this analysis is to contribute to the exploration of how changes to institutional structures involving the merging of research institutions, combined with dominant discourses within and outside the universities, impinge on the individual academic. Where does our analysis lead us, and how widespread are expressions of self-governance such as the ones pointed out by authors such as Davies and Petersen (2005), Shore and Wright (1997), and Åkerström (2002)? How does the subject in our text-extract construct success and failure and how does she consider her position in the field where she works? Inspired by some of the insights produced by the analysis, I want to wrestle with the question of what to do. Does the text indirectly point to practices that could alter the situation in which many academics find themselves trapped? Do the contradictions of the text hint at ways of engaging with the present that disturb neo-liberal notions of success in academia?

Haug's scheme of memory work is very useful for other kinds of text analysis because of its systematic procedures and its way of construing and practising knowledge production as a collective activity taking place in a specific (historical) context. Haug (1992, 1987) considers the experience of individuals as a productive spring-board for the formation of theory, and she sees writing and collective reflection as activities which contain the potential for producing new consciousness in the individual. Like Lorde (1984), Haug states that silence/inarticulateness is a major obstacle to emancipation. Doing research is not only a matter of understanding our world, but of developing answers to the question of 'what we should do' (Singleton, 1996).

Scientific investigation is basically a mode of extending our perception of the world, more than it is a mode for obtaining knowledge about the world (Bohm, 1965). As a communications scholar, I would argue that it is difficult to identify where communication stops and perception starts or vice versa, a notion which in itself could open our view on what it is that 'a successful knowledge producer' does. Then one would say, as does Newman (1999), "Scientific investigation is basically a mode of extending our communication about the world and not mainly a mode for obtaining knowledge about it." Following this line of thought, the creation of collective, rather than individual thinking technologies has a potential for generating passion, inspiration, consciousness and political action in processes of analysis and mutual learning.

Haug's (in Schratz & Walker, 1995, p. 46–47) scheme consists of clearly defined steps on an analytic track that a group must follow. In meeting the requirements of each step, the group carries out a collective deconstruction of the written text, beginning with trying to reach a consensus as to the message of the author and his or her *everyday life philosophies, actions and emotions, interests/wishes*, and, additionally, *the actions and emotions/interests/wishes* of others present in the text. Then you see if you can find noticeable, surprising dimensions in the text (language, contradictions, silences, and so on). Finally the overall constructions of self, others and the meaning of the scene emerge and are collectively elaborated upon through discussion and reflection. (Haug, 1987; Schatz & Walker, 1995)

## Approaching the Site of (De)construction

In “Getting On With It,” our subject constitutes her contradiction as one of wanting to write and at the same time not being able to. The author tells us that it is impossible for her to write under the pressure of expectations from herself, other academics and her workplace. She feels stuck and unable to do what she is supposed to do and what she also wants to do. In her world-view writing is on the one hand, an expression of desire/longing, something very personal and important, but on the other hand, it is also an activity that is evaluated by others and that has to be exceptional and new to be noticed as legitimate in academia. The author *wishes* to live up to her obligation: to write. She *wishes* to respond adequately to the societal norms of doing what one is supposed to do as a professional. When it comes to the *actions* of the author, she is *sitting*, *stuck*, she is *sighing* and *looking* out and *needing*. She is silent, but paradoxically she is *writing*. Her *emotional state* is characterised by feelings of frustration and doubt. But she is also longing for a situation of engagement and absorption in her work. She wants to write in an engaged and involved manner to produce interesting texts, where she can show that she is able to contribute to knowledge production, but also to handle the well-established demands of scientific quality.

Many types of ‘others’ can be found in the text. We suggested that even her own head, heart and mind are constructed as others, as independent parts of her person. Her heart is ‘wanting,’ her mind longing for order and ‘a clean desk’ free of tasks, her head, dizzy. Small boats pass by and, as an ‘other,’ we meet Markussen, the feminist researcher. Other academics present in the text disapprove of her way of working and laugh at her difficulties of getting started. They back off from reading her text as they find it self-centred and they slap their knees in malicious pleasure at her failure. In the situation where she has to write she is surrounded by unknown others that read and write on what she calls ‘neutral ground.’ They are absolutely disconnected to her and have no interest in her. The laughing crowd wants to destroy her, or at least make her deliver what they consider proper academic writing, not these ‘unbearable narcissistic exercises’ and these ‘mere trivialities’ that irritate them so much that they cannot read. Markussen (2005) on the other hand, offers her something. She wants her to take up a performative methodological approach, which she claims ‘works.’

When looking for surprising or noticeable dimensions in the text-extract many things become apparent. It is a text filled with questions and self-reflection.

The language used in most of the text refers to everyday emotions and actions apart from the academic text written by another academic author (Markussen, 2005). The most noticeable contradiction in the text is the contradiction that can be found between the fact that the author *is* actually writing when, at the same time, she writes about and reflects on *not being able* to write. She even writes in the ‘correct way’ complying with what is here presented as her own methodological ideals (new, experimental, performative and courageous)!

The well-known mind/body divide can be found in the ‘dizzy head’ and the confused overloaded mind and the rational desire to be able to engage fully with the present—mind and body burning and absorbed in the activity of writing/living. At the same time, this initial part of the text transmits a bodily sensation of abandonment filled with sighs, existential doubts and lack of energy.

The struggle of the author to feel that her actions make sense in relation to her perception of what it means to be a good feminist knowledge producer is situated in more than one contradiction. The author seeks her answers through a rational reflection in order to produce legitimate academic writings while she deliberately “allows” a stream of “irrational” consciousness to flow

and materialize. In this contradiction, well-established normativities in academic knowledge production are hidden—norms where ‘real’ science is associated with objectivity, rationality, neutrality, and evidence.

Another example is the construction of writing and talking and of analysis and opinion as mutual opposites. Talking and having an opinion are definitely the subordinate partners in each of these pairs. When she describes how colleagues laugh at her inability to perform ‘the right academic,’ she engages actively in the practice of positioning her own conduct within the established academic normativity.

As Davies and Petersen (2005) found in their analysis of an interview with a successful female academic, the intentions and contradictions of the author are in a state of constant movement “due to the active elaboration and detailed rationalisations through which the life of the intellectual is normalised and made liveable” (p. 40).

There is also a classic counter-positioning of *her and them*, a discursive device that points to the important identity struggle going on throughout the text. This is a struggle about what kind of an academic I am, what I want, how I can become what I want and, not least, where I belong. The demand for answers to these questions are produced both from the position of a subject, subject to today’s working conditions at universities, but also from the position of reaction or resistance to these conditions.

Haug (1992) describes the process of what she calls a self-monitoring act as follows:

We realised...that we, too were constantly monitoring our own appearance and somehow displaying ourselves and as it were judging ourselves with the eyes of others according to an unknown criteria. In short, like her we failed to live in a straightforward manner, in tune with ourselves and instead made more or less successful efforts to influence the impression we made. Our aim then was to research our public selves, the images we had made of ourselves, the sense in which we were living as objects (p. 27–28).

In the text extract, the university or academia in general is portrayed as a hostile battlefield where the author cannot write. She needs a neutral space like a public library to be able to dig into substance and into an analytical knowledge production-mode. It is written between the lines that at the university she is disturbed and interrupted by activities that she does not consider hers, activities in which she does not feel she belongs. The official space/institution designed to generate this activity does not work for her. It is paradoxical though: The obvious presence of the judgement of the hostile others as a living context for her writing in what she thinks of as ‘neutral ground’: the public library. The in- and ex-clusion processes are internalised and cannot be avoided through displacement into another physical space.

When looking for the silences of the text, we noticed that the context of the concrete university is strikingly absent. Even though we get a glimpse of the working conditions—‘she had been working her ass off’—the objective structural conditions for knowledge production are not explicitly described and neither are the demands for publishing (publish or perish) in this first fragment of the text.

The title of this experimental writing ‘Getting On With It’ indicates that “‘it,” what has to be done is pre-defined. As readers we encounter the writer alone, struggling with what she has to do; this impersonalized ‘it.’ The author almost tells herself to pull herself together and get it over with, far from her ideal and dream of being absorbed and engaged in writing and knowledge production.

In this very stuck situation, there are no helpers present except Markussen. She is a virtual colleague and a feminist option which make it possible to try out her promise. Her way of writing represents a traditional academic writing style,<sup>6</sup> even if she advocates for openness, deconstruction and performativity in methodological approaches.

Accounts of what should be understood by neoliberal conditions of work are almost invisible in the text, even if this was the topic to be initially explored by the creative writing. What happens mostly happens between the author and her reflections, author and text. The outcome of the situation all depends on one individual, the author, who is to be capable of acting, wanting and daring.<sup>7</sup>

There is a visible contradiction in the text in relation to the well-known binaries inclusion/exclusion, longing and belonging, I/others. In the text, others are so distant that they are almost ghostly, imagined others. The author supposedly excludes herself from the university setting automatically in order to be able to be included in desired collective contexts (feminist research as a political context) and belong there. But in this case it only seems to be possible through an academic text, very far from like-minded humans.

### Constructions and Central Meaning of the Text Fragment

Following the analytic approach suggested by Haug (1987), the arrival at the last analytical level allows us to look at the construction of 'I' and 'Others,' and to produce an analysis of the meaning of the scene, as it comes into light after digging into detail in the initial part of this experimental text.

The 'I' constructed here is an isolated doubting person finding herself with a need to act/write and at the same time be indisposed. This subject is, at the same time, critical/sceptical towards her surroundings and vulnerably subject to the critical assessments of others. It is also an idealistic subject longing for something different/new without being explicit about it in the beginning of the text. She is constructed as a person with conflicting desires.

The variety of others (own head, mind and heart, the boats, the others surrounding her at the library, other/traditional academia/the university and the feminist researcher, Markussen) are first and foremost all constructed as distant. Some of them are hostile, gleeful and judgemental; the unknown others surrounding the author in the library are successful in doing what our author would like to do. They are engaged, conscientious and hard-working. Markussen is constructed as a kind of helper and an inspiration in spite of the lukewarm and somewhat sceptical attitude of the author towards her. Mind, head and heart are constructed as contradictory states of being (dizzy, messy behind with her work and longing).

### Meaning of the Scene

In the following text I will continue identifying some of the ambivalent movements in the constructions of both self, others and situation (partly) as articulations of a hazy mix of neo-liberal and vaguely articulated resistance discourses.

First, I want to draw attention to the active positioning (some would argue subordination) we witness in the way the author recognises herself as a knowledge producer. Her longing for others

and for a different type of (feminist) knowledge production, her critical stance, seems only to be possible if it is displayed in a marginalised and different framing.

She sees the outside (light, water and boats) through the big glass window and her description of the surroundings allude to the notion that she is both inside and outside at the same time. The unease with the mainstream and the imposed expectations exist hand in hand with an active taking-up of neoliberal discourses of productivity and innovation. Her desires to experiment with *new* thinking technologies that invite body/landscape relations and emotionality (Davies, 1999; Krøjer, 2003) into knowledge production fit nicely into a neo-liberal philosophy.

Davies and Petersen (2005) ask how this very quick normalisation of submissive practices has been possible. “How is it,” they ask, “given that neo-liberal discourse can so easily be constituted as monstrous and absurd, that academics appear to have engaged in relatively little systematic or widespread resistance”? Drawing on Dean (1999) and Rose (1998), they explain this development as a matter of self-governance, a matter of conducting and controlling one’s own conduct.

At the university one could say that there has been a move from a generic institution to separated and competing organisations (even within one university), which call for a new construction of the individual academic, that now should be a person that is capable of relating strategically to her or his own professional practice. It is the individual academic, not the organisation, who is called upon to adapt to new conditions, as the individual is seen as the one to take responsibility for his or her own security and well-being. The basic competence is to be able to relate to oneself *as* competent or incompetent, and to discover oneself as always ‘unfinished.’ In the dominant understanding of learning, disturbance and continuous self-reflection is the ideal. Åkerstrøm (2002) points to the paradox that, to be able to show a readiness to change, one has to be disloyal to one’s own experiences, disloyal to one’s own past.

If it is, as Wright and Shore (1997) suggest, that the growing new managerialism produces rank and file alienated subjects increasingly remote from the commercialized policy-making processes, while at the same time the frontiers of policies are expanding, also to local university departments, then it is not difficult to imagine the consequences for democracy and critical thinking.

Since our author governs herself, she conducts her own conduct. She seems to know the game and she relates to it, but in her own vision she is capable of distancing herself from it (Davies & Petersen, 2005). At the same time her doubts and her not belonging, and later in the text, her thoughts about daring, produce a contradiction between what she can do and what she wants to do. All these considerations in movement are internal and coupled to herself as a subject, converted into personal issues and a personal sense of responsibility to navigate in discursive surroundings loaded with normative symbolic devices.

In their analysis of an interview with a successful female academic, Davies and Petersen (2005) identify an ambivalent and ambiguous adoption and refusal of neo-liberal discourses. In this fragment of my experimental writings there is very little ambivalence and an underlying restrained, passive or distant type of resistance. They explain the lack of critique as a product of the lack of time and the danger associated with speaking the truth and claim that the university “loves the one who flogs herself” (Davies & Petersen, 2005, p. 51). Davies and Petersen (2005) also suggest that interest in change as opposed to the willingness to define the past as more desirable can explain the lack of protest towards the conditions. Living in a context of a growing new managerialism seems to produce desires to live up to demands for production, flexibility, reorientation and organisational change, values are exposed repeatedly both in the public debate

and locally. The orientation toward change and flexibility is experienced as voluntary and desirable to the subject. It is an unquestioned truth she has naturalized and interiorized and that she draws on throughout the text fragment. Bourdieu (1998) talks about such interiorization in the following way:

A whole set of presuppositions is being imposed as self-evident: it is taken for granted that maximum growth, and therefore productivity and competitiveness are the ultimate and sole goal of human actions; or that economic forces cannot be resisted... Then there is a whole game with connotations and associations of words like flexibility, *souplesse*, deregulation, which tends to imply that the neo-liberal message is a universalist message of liberation (p. 30–31).

In Denmark over the last twenty years we have witnessed a codification of love or ‘intimitation’ of the relation between organisation and employee. Åkerstrøm (2002) points out:

The relations to the organisation get universalized and include not only the core tasks of the employee, but her entire life world as such. One must keep showing one's love—if not it dies. In the organisation you do that by taking initiatives related to the development of the organisation, and the most important goal of these is to keep producing engagement and enthusiasm through change. (p. 82)

Åkerstrøm makes the point that the twin to inner involvement and engagement for the employee at the workplace is the outer observable and measurable initiative.

The subject analysed by Davies and Petersen (2005) constitutes her ambivalence between “core business” and the increased “housekeeping work” as something that has to be managed: “a balancing act” she calls it (p. 47–48). This ‘discursivation’ of the contradictions is not found the same way in our text. Here the author does not even mention teaching at the university as an important activity. Research is considered the activity; all other activities are subordinate and seldom enter in the auto-evaluation scheme of the academic subject. In my own working environment, I find colleagues that talk of this core activity as ‘my *own* work,’ ‘I have to defend my time for my *own* research,’ ‘I work with my *own* stuff at night,’ etc. Research is here related to individual production and performance, far from new managerialism’s celebration of research networks and research groups, built on knowledge-sharing and the expected synergy effects. Also here there is an ambivalent countermovement to be found in relation to collaboration and knowledge production. There is a battle between old notions of excellence produced individually by original thinkers for the common good of society, embedded in well-established academic institutions with new visions of academic organisations, their competitiveness and contribution to the national economy. The successful knowledge-worker is the one who brings fame and resources to his or her organisation.

### Thoughts and Threads to Follow

In the beginning of this article, I mention that it has been a challenge to dive into experimental writing, an adventure that causes discomfort. Throughout the analysis, I have asked myself what the discomfort is about. It should be partly understood as a form of resistance to the unfold-

ing of management cultures and to the general working conditions at the universities. It should also be seen as an indirect articulation of a longing for a different kind of community-based knowledge production than that suggested in neoliberal normativities. Ambivalence and ambiguity, at times in which individual decision-making and freedom of choice are celebrated in themselves can cause discomfort. But speaking of discomfort, what first and foremost becomes clear is that the ways in which feelings are expressed have serious consequences for the active positioning of the author by her surroundings and the way she herself does the positioning. The perception of this individual position and the acknowledgement of its possible negative consequences in terms of recognition and sense of belonging are what cause discomfort. This author both wants to break out (for example through the engagement in experimental writing) and belong to the imagined community of ‘successful knowledge producers.’

Selby (2005) advocates for further exploration of the discomfort. She calls for reflection on everyday, commonplace dilemmas for the academic that, “while ‘critical’ and thirsty for change, wrestles to dress experiences constituted by current organisational structures in ill-fitting theoretical clothes.” She defines this as a challenge because it implicates cultivation of “a sometimes painful gaze that dwells on the darker corners of professional lives” (Selby, 2005, p. 8). My point here is that the mentioned task of cultivation is not only painful, but is also a very risky business because it touches the frontiers of the legitimate. The question is then, how do partially-excluded subjects express feelings in creative writings ‘flowing freely from mind to sign,’ and what risks, or offers, does the materialisation of the writings produce for the involved academic practitioners? The ambivalence associated with the need for the inclusion of the excluded (gender, body, feelings and other silenced aspects), and the exclusions produced in this very intent is a political matter where the subject cannot stand alone.

This leads me to my second closing remark on collectivity and action in knowledge production. Given the transformative potential in the merging of the shared and the unique in creative writings, it makes sense to suggest this methodology as a possible strategy for the surfacing of collective resistance. I believe that creative writing allows the tensions and contradictions to stand out differently than if I had been writing from a neutral author position, and it allows a different kind of connection to the reader. Through creative writing, the discursive strategies with their coercive power are made visible, and these strategies invite both fellow participants in the process of analysis and the reader into conversation and into the sharing of everyday experience. It becomes possible to identify the mobilizing metaphors and linguistic devices that cloak policy with the symbols and trappings of political legitimacy. In the process of this type of analysis, foreground and background change place giving the analysts and the readers the possibility to learn about themselves and their surroundings. Experimental writing, at its best, can produce clarity and motivate a discussion of possible directions for individual and collective action. I characterised this text as a text filled with self-reflection. But the call for reflection and self-reflection should be understood as embedding both a possibility of reaching important insights in an oppositional discourse and a disciplining tool, belonging to the kit of technologies of self-governance and thus a very adequate way to conduct one’s own conduct in the neo-liberal context.

As feminist researchers we should discuss both the potential and limitations of experimental writing:

We have been more interested in deconstructing a particular technology in unravelling and describing its construction processes. But there is confusion over what to do once the

content floods out. The demand for explanation and whether or not explanation should be a desirable goal for researchers cannot be ignored. For some feminists, explanation is a prerequisite for action and change and consequently a necessity. (Singleton, 1996, p. 448)

### Exploring How to Speak New or How to Speak Old

I started out this text by arguing with the concept of novelty and innovation. The new rhetoric of concepts that accompany the neo-liberal development is embedded in an economic code: investing, negotiation, and offering knowledge. What is at work here is the symbolic world or symbolic violence as Bourdieu (1998) would put it, dressed in the words of freedom, success and agency (Rose, 1998). The acts of breaking silences should be combined with forms of organisation within academia that support room and time for in-depth knowledge production that go against objectification and establish connections between individuals.

Halberstam (2005) asks with Bourdieu (2001) what the responsibility of the intellectual in the age of new capitalism should be. What are the possibilities of critical counteraction by knowledge producers? Her latest research can inspire the discussion about where to look for resistance in both texts and contexts. First of all, we can take our starting-point in her rupture with the well-known normative claims that are used to present a particular way of defining a problem and almost beforehand suggest its solution, as if these were the only ones possible. Her radical research focuses on the notions of “failure” and “stupidity,” and she asks two related questions: What is knowledge production in the age of stupidity? And, maybe more important, in this context: What is it that failure and stupidity know? Or alternatively, what is it that discomfort knows? Could scrutiny of the success and failure criteria with the pain, pride, joy, shame and anger they imply, help us to understand what is at stake and find strategies to counteract these tendencies, which as Davies and Petersen (2005) point to, threaten qualified knowledge production as such.

The strategy of speaking differently has been an important post-structuralist and often feminist contribution (Butler, 1990; Søndergaard, 1996). But to what extent does ‘speaking new’ create alternative strategies for action for the knowledge producers themselves? The symbolic disputes around the wording of social, political and cultural phenomena are worth following. Åkerstrøm (2004) makes the point that the problem with what he calls ‘the words of salute’ in management language is that they have no explicit counterparts. Especially in the field of policy making, all the buzzwords are positive; their binaries are silent (and silenced), but nevertheless known by everybody as negative (old, stable, failed, solid, useless, unproductive, stupid, etc.), when they are not used explicitly as terms of abuse even as, in Denmark, one can observe a growing critique of this new symbolic regime in art and political discourse.

One is tempted to say that it is not about new words and concepts, it is about old ones. The temptation is to establish slogans that essentialise and establish direction. Here is a try:

\*In communication with others, old well-known insights become new. \*Through repetition, collective identities are constructed. \*In reproduction, stability is produced—in rediscovery joy is created. \*In connection with the past, meaning is established.

## NOTES

1. Parts of the analysis in this article were produced collectively with: Birgitte Ravn Olesen, Ursula Plesner, Louise Phillips and Bente Kristiansen, all members of the research group “Communication and knowledge production.” at the Department of communication, business and information technologies, Roskilde University, Denmark.
2. This year more funding was given to research, but it was placed within the strategic research priorities of the government and therefore mainly designated towards technological development and natural sciences.
3. In 2003 the number of public and private researchers in Denmark was 37,000 of which only 10,000 were women. The population of Denmark in 2006 is 5.3 million (Dansk Center for Forskningsanalyse, 2004).
4. This same approach could also be relevant in an exploration of the significance of ethnicity, age and other social positionings in organisational cultures.
5. Singleton’s specific question concerned whether or not women should have a regular cervical smear test (pp. 451–457).
6. See citation on page 123.
7. What is lost by analysing only a small part of the text is the obvious emergence of analytic insights produced by the text itself; insights about the need for collaboration in knowledge production, for example. The flow of the text and the revelations produced by the experimental writing bring to the author a clear understanding of the individualised norms of traditional views about researchers and the need for collaboration to make research make sense. At the same time, this idea of collaboration is central to knowledge production today and a precondition for future research funding.

## REFERENCES

- Bohm, D. (1965). *The special theory of relativity*. New York: Benjamin.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Modild*. København: Hans Reitzels forlag.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998). *Acts of resistance—against the new myths of our time*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Connel, R.W. (2000). *The men and the boys*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Dansk Center for Forskningsanalyse (2004). *Tema: Kvinder i forskning—kønne forskere*. Retrieved from [www.cfa.au.dk/tema/Kvinder%20%20forskning.htm](http://www.cfa.au.dk/tema/Kvinder%20%20forskning.htm).
- Davies, B. (2000). *(In)scribing body/landscape relations*. Walnut Creek/Oxford: Alta Mira Press.
- Davies, B. & Petersen, E. B. (2005). Intellectual workers(un)doing neoliberal discourse. *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, 13, 32–54.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira.
- Foucault, M. (2002). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Routledge. (Original published 1969)
- Halberstam, J. (2005). Keynote at the gender conference: Teori möter verklighet. In Malmö, Sweden 19. maj 2005.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575–599.
- Hasse, C. (2001). Contextualizing physics: Differences in gendered visions. *Analysis*, 2, 21–27.
- Haug, F. (1987). *Female sexualization: A collective work of memory*. London: Verso.
- Haug, F. (1992). *Beyond female masochism*. London: Verso.
- Hee Pedersen, C. (2007). *Virkelighedsversioner (Versions of Reality)* (under review)
- Hee Pedersen, C. (2007). Ich hoffe sie können ein witz vertragen—humor und geschlecht in modernen organisationen (It wouldn’t hurt if you could take a joke—on humour and gender

- in modern organisations). *Das Argument*. Zeitschrift für philosophie und socialwissenschaften, 49, heft 1. Berlin:Argument Versand.
- Hee Pedersen, C. & Olesen, B. R. (2008). What knowledge—which relations? Dilemmas of a contemporary action researcher. *International Journal of Action Research*, 4(3), 254–290.
- Højgård, L. & Søndergaard, D. M. (Eds.), (2003). *Akademisk Tilblivelse: Akademia og dens kønnede befolkning*, København: Akademisk forlag.
- Gunnarsson, E. (2006). The snake and the apples in the common paradise: Challenging the balance between surface and depth in qualifying action research and feminist research on a common arena. In N. K. Aagaard & L. Svensson. (Eds). *Action and interactive research: Beyond practice and theory*. Maastricht: Shaker publishing.
- Orde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. California: Freedom Press.
- Lykke, N. (2003). Cyborgs, coyotes and dogs: A kinship of feminist figurations and there are always more things going on than you thought! Methodologies and thinking technologies. In D. Haraway, *The Haraway reader*. London: Routledge.
- Lykke, N. (2005). Transformative methodologies in feminist studies. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(3), 243–247.
- Dansk Magisterforening (2006). Magisterbladet: *Journal for the Academic Trade Union*, September, 1–2.
- Markussen, T. (2005). Practising performativity. Transformative moments in research. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(3), 329–44.
- Newman, J. M. (1999). Validity and action research: An online conversation. In I. Hughes (Ed.), *Action research electronic reader*. Retrieved from <http://www.behs.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/reader/>
- Petersen, E. B. (2004). Academic boundary work: The discursive constitution of 'scientificity' among researchers within social sciences and humanities (Doctoral dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2004).
- Rose, N. (1998). *Inventing ourselves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Schratz, M. & Walker, R. (1995). *Research as social change*. New York: Routledge.
- Selby, J. (Guest Ed.). (2005). Critical psychology. *The International Journal of Critical Psychology*, Issue 13.
- Shore, C. & Wright, S. (Eds.). (1997). *Anthropology of policy: Critical perspectives on governance and power*. London: Routledge.
- Singleton, V. (1996). Feminism, sociology of scientific knowledge and postmodernism: Politics, theory and me. *Social Studies of Science*, 26(2), 445–468.
- Staunæs, D. (2005). From culturally avant-garde to sexually promiscuous. *Feminism and Psychology*, 15(2), 149–167.
- Søndergaard, D. M. (2005). Academic desire trajectories: Retooling the concepts of subject, desire and biography. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 12(3), 297–313.
- Søndergaard, D. M. (1996). *Tegnet på kroppen. Køn: Koder og konstruktioner blandt unge voksne i Akademia*. København: Tusculanums forlag.

