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Live Methods as creative resistance: Crafting a PhD and solidarity in the neoliberal university

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Abstract

The call to revisit *Live Methods* prompted us to consider the legacy of this text at Goldsmiths college, where the editors and many of the contributors were writing from in 2012. We are PhD students in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, a space where *Live Methods* has left a marked influence through practices of teaching, learning and research. At Goldsmiths, the 2021–2023 academic years saw an extensive and deeply unpopular 'restructuring' process imposed on the college community by senior management, with staff unions responding through extended industrial action. This article reports on PhD student solidarity and creative resistance during that time. We discuss how the 'Live Methods manifesto' was used as an intervention on the picket line and as a critical resource for fostering resistance against the neoliberal restructuring of our university. This creative resistance was deeply rooted in the solidarities and affective infrastructures of support that grew out of our weekly Sociology graduate student seminar, 'Crafting a PhD'. In this article, we present a multimodal account of these events, including narrative and audiovisual material. A decade on from the publication of *Live Methods*, with the neoliberalisation of UK universities intensifying, we argue that the manifesto's call for sociologists to embrace a creative and critical orientation towards research is more vital than ever. *Live Methods* is a resource not only for research, but for inspiring creative resistance and sustaining our collective projects of learning and life within the university.

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Introduction

As PhD students and associate lecturers at Goldsmiths, learning and teaching alongside Les Back, Nirmal Puwar and the legacy of *Live Methods*, we have had to find ways to sustain hopeful affect and creative resistance amid redundancy, casualisation, and Research Excellence Framework (REF) metrics. *Live Methods* was written with an optimism and belief in social research, that academics could be part of making a different future possible. Today's context over 10 years later shares continuity with earlier stages of neoliberal agendas entering universities, but its progression over the last decade has led to increasing crises (Loveday, 2018; Lybeck & O'Connell, 2023). The UK higher education sector as a whole faces issues of mass casualisation, overwork, underpay and funding restrictions (Courtois & Sautier, 2022; Loveday, 2018). Recent years at Goldsmiths have been marked by national and local industrial disputes, including extended strike action by staff unions in 2021–22 against the 'Recovery Program', a college-wide restructure and centralisation process involving large-scale redundancies and cuts targeting 'unprofitable' degrees (Patten, 2022). In 2022, as the restructuring plans progressed, the threat of closure hung over courses such as (MA) Queer History and Black British History (Bengry et al., 2022). The negative impact on working conditions led to a significant loss of professional and academic staff, both mandatory and voluntary. With multiple rounds of redundancy planned for the years ahead, many chose to leave (Back, 2022). This has created a challenging context to engage with the legacy of *Live Methods*.

When published in 2012, the *Live Methods* collection offered a subtle, but radical, intervention into ongoing debates about the possible futures of sociological research. Where Savage and Burrows (2007) diagnosed a coming crisis of empirical sociology, urging the disciplinary community to pursue a new politics of method that engaged with big data and descriptive modes of sociological knowledge production (p. 896), *Live Methods* responded by suggesting that sociology's worth may be found in its modes of sustained critical attention (Back, 2012, p. 19) and collaboration (Puwar & Sharma, 2012). As series editor Shilling (2012) notes, traces of C Wright Mills thinking weave through the collection, offering a renewed sense of the possibilities for the sociological imagination (p. 2).

In a similar spirit, a decade later, we have been inspired to experiment with Live Methods to intervene in the sweeping redundancies, managerialism and neoliberalisation within our institution. As a group of PhD students centred around the weekly graduate seminar in the Sociology Department, titled 'Crafting a PhD', we organised a public reading of 'A manifesto for live methods' (Back & Puwar, 2012a) as a teach-out on the Goldsmiths picket line. The text was collaged, photocopied and printed as a manifesto for the crowd to be collectively read aloud. Standing at the front of the university the manifesto became part of the action, joy and energy in that moment – giving life and

liveliness to the demands of the text. In response to our planned reading of their jointly authored text, Puwar contributed an epilogue and Back joined the reading and our later writing retreat, where together we annotated the manifesto, updating it for the present. In this article, we reflect on these lively, crafty practices as a mode of creative resistance.

Live Methods offers a series of provocations that incite sociologists to engage our senses and affects in real time in order to create and produce. While the university as an institution increasingly seems to restrict our capacity to do this, Live Methods has guided our ability to recover much of the hope that has been lost, both through our interactions with each other (teaching, learning, as peers, friends and colleagues) and within our research. On leaving Goldsmiths in summer 2022, Back (2022) commented 'we need each other to do the work of teaching . . . regardless of what the politicians or managers believe, we make the university whenever we gather or learn together' (n.p.) – an ethos present in our weekly 'Crafting a PhD' seminars led by Back. Liveness here comes through the collective sharing of knowledge, resources, and time – through valuing each other when institutions flatten value to shallow and competitive metrics of success. Another key site of this collective sharing of knowledge has been the picket line. Teach-outs, rallies and conversations have built friendships and grown practice in ways that would never have occurred otherwise. In this article, we discuss how Live Methods not only offers prompts for creative engagement in research but further, as a critical resource in resisting neoliberal policies in our universities.

In what follows, we present a multimodal account, including narrative and audiovisual material. We trace the Live Methods legacy not within the terrain of disciplinary debates about Sociology, but rather on campus, moving from the PhD seminar room to the strike picket lines. In doing so, we want to pay attention to possibilities of live methods as a sociable practice, which amid precarity and loss, can foster connections and support creative resistance to the advancing neoliberal policies that strain our learning and working conditions.

Struggle for the university: Redundancies and restructure at Goldsmiths college

In 2012, Back and Puwar (2012a) noted the rushed temporalities of the neoliberal university – that outputs are sped up with no time for failure or open-ended research, and where outcomes need to be decided in advance. They drew on Emma Uprichard's call to find ways to destabilise bureaucratic metrics and the need for sociologists to be brave enough to stand up and overturn these 'conditions that increasingly obstruct our own work and knowledge systems' (p. 14).

The last decade of life in UK universities has been characterised by the ever-increasing neoliberal marketisation of education and the resistance by staff and students in response, as well as the continuing effects of Covid-19 on work and life. As three PhD researchers, and academic and admin staff members at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the University of the Arts London, teaching and learning alongside Les Back and Nirmal Puwar and the legacy of Live Methods, we have felt the consequences of these shifts as both students and employees. It is within the context of the redundancies, management welfare emails, casualisation, REF metrics and increasing competition

and isolation that we have had to find ways of developing hope, liveliness and creative resistance within the institution.

The university sector as a whole faces mass casualisation, overwork, underpay and funding restrictions, both in the UK (Courtois & Sautier, 2022; Loveday, 2018; Lybeck & O'Connell, 2023) and globally (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Ivancheva, 2015; Manzi et al., 2019). This can be attributed to the increasing neoliberalisation and managerialism of education which shifts universities from a public service to a competitive player in a knowledge economy (Baron, 2014; Enright et al., 2017). In the UK this can be seen in the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017, which framed the future of the higher education sector in the language of 'choice and competition' (Cabinet Office, 2016). Competitiveness in the neoliberal university causes precarity through an increasing shift towards zero-hours and fixed-term employment, a reduction in tenured staff, and expanding workloads through a drive to centralise and reduce the numbers of administrative staff.

University and College Union (UCU, 2022), the largest trade union representing academic staff in UK higher education, analysed the Higher Education Statistics Agency's 2020–21 staff data to report that 47% of academic staff were on some form of precarious contract. This precarity has increasingly been studied through the lens of the impact it has on staff members' welfare (Enright et al., 2017; Manzi et al., 2019; Loveday, 2017, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2021). This is particularly true for black staff members, with universities acting as 'spaces of exclusion' through the reproduction of white male dominance (Kınıkoğlu & Can, 2021, p. S819). One impact is a higher proportion of black staff members on precarious contracts (UCU, 2022). With increasing casualisation, workloads and competition, staff are placed under 'intolerable demands' and left to find individualised coping strategies (Gill in Loveday, 2018). University management's response to this at Goldsmiths followed a broader trend of privatised responsibility for (self-)care under neoliberalism (Ward, 2015) and across the higher education sector, with reminders to staff of the existence of welfare and counselling teams in the same emails that detailed the latest plans for redundancies.

As well as the welfare implications, relationships to work, peers and the teacher–learner relationship are affected by this move to reframe universities as businesses that provide marketable outputs and value for money. Within peer-to-peer relations, neoliberal managerialism shifts any academic ethic of collaboration to one of individual failing and reward (Aspromourgos, 2012). Through anxieties, evaluation and comparison to others – the drive to publish, to be promoted, to get a permanent contract – competition arises (Davies, 2010).

The move to evaluation as part of commodification can be seen most notably in the UK through the amount of 'quality assurance' frameworks departments and academics are subjected to. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Knowledge Excellence Framework (KEF) all measure academics through their *impact*. Universities are ranked in league tables, with input from the National Student Survey (NSS), with individual courses having oversight from accreditation bodies. Equality standards become part of these metrics too with assessment and awards relating to university diversity, which the university then can also use to sell itself. Troiani and Dutson (2021), in the context of architecture, write that 'the academic's time becomes increasingly devoted to and consumed by 'administrivia' (p. 16).

Quality assurance metrics and ranking tables also become a key factor in selling the university as part of a competitive market. University branding becomes about the *communication* of a 'quality' education, and less about actually producing quality (Palmer, 2014, p. 133). Toscano and Woodcock (2016) state that the TEF's conceptualisation of students is one that serves to discipline the sector and frame the university as a neoliberal training ground for future careers. Beyond this, they write that there is a disappearance of the 'teacher' in the 2016 UK Government White Paper that led to the TEF. 'Lecturer' and 'teacher' appear only four times, with 'the teaching body . . . liquidated in a forest of metrics' (Toscano & Woodcock, 2016, n.p.). With the disappearance of the teacher, the rise of staff precarity and the student understood as a consumer, teacher–student relations often shift to one of market value rather than solidarity. This is reinforced by increased securitisation within the university, with staff expected to monitor students through Prevent legislation and the visa system (Dear, 2018).

Covid-19 has also played a major role in structuring the university landscape since lockdowns started in 2020. Teaching moved online across UK universities and campuses were shut. The pandemic worsened academic precarity and increased uncertainty caused by neoliberal restructuring. This impacted certain people more than others, including those already on precarious contracts, staff with disabilities, and staff who already faced racialised and gendered inequalities (Hadjisolomou et al., 2021; Kınıkoğlu & Can, 2021). It also resulted in increased educational inequality for students, in terms of access to attending university in the first instance, performance while at university, and access to the workplace after (Montacute, 2020). The inability to meet students in person restricted ability to notice and deal with welfare issues, and isolation from peers seriously impacted teaching, learning and research – as well as mental health.

Staff and students have responded to and resisted increased precarity, inequality and the neoliberal restructuring of education in many ways. UCU has engaged in strike action nationally at least once every year since 2018, with many institutions involved in both national and local disputes. Goldsmiths academics, for example, entered into multiple weeks of local action on top of the national strikes over February and March 2022 in response to the college's senior management team's proposed restructuring and redundancies (GoldsmithsUCU, 2022a, 2022b). The senior management team's plan was developed alongside consultancy firm KPMG, as part of a financial agreement for credit with Natwest and Lloyds banks (Goldsmiths Senior Management Team, 2021). The academic year 2021–22 began with the reported accidental circulation of a KPMG training document, 'Managing Resistance to Change', circulated on social media, which advised Goldsmiths senior managers how best to handle individuals who 'feel threatened' by 'change' (GoldsmithsUCU, 2021). This is in line with KPMG's (2022) national strategy of 'consumer-centric' higher education 'designed to help position institutions to drive increased value'.

The local UCU strikes were joined by another union, UNISON (2022), who represent Goldsmiths' security guards, cleaners and administrative staff also taking industrial action from 2 to 4 March 2022. Alongside strikes, action short of strike (ASOS) and marking boycotts have been frequent, with Goldsmiths also being greylisted by UCU. The active student body has been a consistent feature of local resistance, on teach-outs, occupations, responding to neoliberalism, racism, climate change, and many other issues

within universities across the same period. Staff solidarity was sometimes visualised through major actions on strike picket lines or occupations of university buildings, however it was also produced on the small scale. We locate some of these smaller moments within the ongoing 'lively' practices of 'Crafting a PhD', our weekly graduate seminar in Sociology, which we argue acted as a social and affective infrastructure (Näre & Jokela, 2022) to attend to the troubles our institution faced and to sustain solidarity and hope.

A multimodal account of PhD solidarity and creative resistance

To explore how live methods are practised in the context of doctoral education amid processes of university restructuring, we present a multimodal account of our collective public reading of the Live Methods manifesto on the strike picket line.

We (the co-authors) are all PhD students in Sociology and Visual Sociology, and two of us are also Associate Lecturers teaching seminars in the department. One of us was a research administrator at another university in London that had undergone centralisation and restructure, arriving at Goldsmiths as a PhD student bringing personal knowledge of what Frances Corner's (Goldsmiths' Warden) brand of centralisation looks like on the ground for professional staff. We write from these multiple student/staff positions as well as from our commitments beyond the university. As both PhD students and Associate Lecturers, we occupy a space that straddles the positions of staff and student. Our separate email inboxes attest to this sometimes disorienting experience. Central college email communications addressed to the imagined consumer-student were full of apology and righteous blame for staff taking industrial action, seeking to align senior management with students' 'wellbeing' and 'success'. In our staff inboxes, the tone of communications was stern and hostile, calling for reason (rather than resistance) and compliance with the 'Recovery Plan' in the name of 'serious financial difficulties' (which we now know were misrepresented, with the goal for savings met before redundancies went ahead anyway in April 2022. See GoldsmithsUCU, 2021).

In developing this account we drew on traces from personal and social media (messages, emails, photographs), video footage of the public reading, and our own memories and reflections through creative writing. We invited ongoing dialogue with our 'Crafting a PhD' colleagues both informally and through a workshop where we facilitated reflections, presented video material, and shared our emerging argument for feedback. We analysed these textual and audiovisual materials collaboratively and iteratively, meeting regularly to talk, think and write together. Between sessions, a specially created WhatsApp group became a lively space to ping readings, ideas and images to each other, becoming a shared archive of the process. From this we made a narrative text and a video. We composed the personal narrative below from multiple 'I' accounts and perspectives, weaving them together.

The narrative text sits alongside the short video (1 minute 01 seconds. Available at: https://youtu.be/BPvzPrOzBkA). There is mobile phone video footage that captured our manifesto reading (thank you to Les Back for filming and sharing various clips with us). Though it was a good laugh watching it back as a group, there is something very different about seeing our irreverent playfulness in recorded form, fixed in the past. Arguably, our

joyful memories and the argument we make here about lively methods are not best illustrated by the video footage per se. So we have recrafted it, working with the audiovisual material as a way to think together about liveliness amid the fatigue of restructure.

In the video we share here, we have collaged audio clips together so that the words and soundscape animate the stills of empty(ish) campus spaces. Based on his video research project using 'soundscape recordings and digital video to explore the sensory and aesthetic qualities of a primary school', Gallagher (2014) argues that out of sync audio and visual can enhance the more-than-representational elements of video. The video he and a colleague made certainly evokes the liveliness of the social world through audio, which animates the still video images of recognisable school spaces. Interested in how this approach offers a way to work with the material, aesthetic and sensory elements of the social life of an institution, we have chosen to use a similar – though decidedly DIY – approach here. We layered recorded audio from the manifesto reading, the picket line and our PhD shared office, against unpopulated images of these places. Their (relative) emptiness stands in contrast to the buzz of activity and busy picket line that we describe. This form also highlights the material campus, and those changes, even minor ones, that we have felt as losses. The cushioned wooden chairs and large wooden table (second to last image in video) that shaped us convivially into a ring or an oval for 'Crafting a PhD' each week disappeared from the council room over the summer, replaced by many two person plastic tables and red plastic chairs.

Narratives from the picket line

Living in Peckham, 10 minutes cycle from Goldsmiths, meant I regularly came onto the picket line. The route was often lined with slick advertising, selling the university as a diverse and creative hub. Arriving one cold morning along New Cross High Street I was greeted by fellow Sociology PhD students calling my name in between banging drums and marching around campus. The slightly awkward scene was layered with the joy of everyone involved – shouting and playing together, marching to a samba beat. On other days the picket line was different – downbeat staff and no-one I knew, making it uncomfortable and lonely.

I had planned to meet with someone from UCU to talk about how we could best start organising around trans rights at Goldsmiths. I arrived at the Richard Hoggart Building with Maria and George and waited around to spot her. People were giving rather boring, but important speeches in the background. When we eventually met the chat was short but effective – it felt like we could build something. We parted just as an undergrad student started a speech about a member of staff who was vital to their learning being made redundant.

The picket line was defined by conversation. From different positions: student, staff, student and staff, librarian, UCU rep, under and postgrad. We share knowledge – each of us cross many spaces. How common it is to study, work, or teach across London's universities, consecutively or simultaneously. It allows us to share news of wider neoliberal management practices, precarities, sweeping redundancies, victimisation of staff active in unions, attempts to quash staff–student solidarity campaigns, like those calling for the in-housing of cleaning and security staff.

A slogan I regularly hear at picket lines is 'our teaching conditions are your learning conditions'. Teacher–student relations feel vital in these moments. Keeping in contact during strikes had been crucial for my welfare, and the welfare of students in general. With new education delivery systems, I often felt a huge disconnect between my students and the university, and between myself and the permanent staff in my department. Since I started teaching during Covid in 2020, lectures had been shared as videos and graduate students, like me, on precarious teaching contracts had taken up front-line roles, leading seminar discussions in person and, resultantly, becoming the face of the university to undergraduates. Post-seminar conversation and follow-up emails were directed to us, members of staff students had spent time with. The amount of pastoral care I had to deal with in the last term, that would have previously been attended to by those with more stable and consistent contracts, was overwhelming. These took precedence over teacher training courses; pedagogical theory and best practice felt important but I had little energy to engage fully.

At the same time, when student welfare was such a focus of the institution, there could be little separation between the situations of staff and students. Precarious staff at all levels struggle with mental health, housing, their own studies, and more. These pressures closely mirrored those of the undergraduates I taught. This was a major motivation for all of us in the strikes – there were power imbalances on the picket line, but it felt important to stand together against increasingly untenable working conditions, from precarious employment to the threat of redundancy.

I rushed off then to help finalise preparations for a teach out – a reading of the Live Methods manifesto on the picket line with anyone who wished to join. Live Methods had been an undercurrent to my experience of Goldsmiths since I started in 2021. Les Back led a weekly seminar, 'Crafting a PhD', an in-person informal gathering space. There were check-ins about everyone's weeks, discussions of common problems and individual sticking points, and occasional guests. Here I learnt about what a PhD was, from ethics forms to field research, literature reviews to questions like what is a 'chapter'? We also ate cannolis Les brought from New Cross Road. It's how I got to know people and it made my new PhD project feel like a real and going concern, learning through listening to my peers, amongst my self-doubt trying to fit into a new institution, a new discipline, a potential new identity.

Deep into the strike weeks we'd been self-organising 'Crafting a PhD' meetings. Our Wednesday seminar rolled around, though that week I had been in bed with Covid. But we call – no Teams, telephone-style – and get to it. I suggested organising a teach-out. Everyone, though tired, was excited, together we had many hands after all. We talk Live Methods: translating the manifesto, its form, this genre of writing, to the picket. We want to give voice/s to its demands, to play with its provocations aloud. To do this we bring it whole: reworking it into a political pamphlet to be put to work on the picket line. Our PhD designers co-opt the college photocopier. Copy, cut, stick, print: analogue manifesto made material.

I arrive outside Richard Hoggart, manifesto stashed in my bag ready. I look out for recognisable faces. Slower pace, eyes scanning, do I know anyone here? Which conversation could I join, or shall I get my bearings first? Sitting on the stone wall that arcs around the space, I check the WhatsApp group. You never quite know with teach-outs.

That slight wobble feeling of wondering if others will come. A flurry of I'll-be-there-on-the-way-see-you-soon messages buzz in my hand.

I spot some Sociology staff, including my supervisor, who also frequently supervises the picket line in strike times. I see other regular Sociology faces, most of whom I haven't actually been taught by. I know them better from the picket line and teach-outs that have been an almost annual feature since I first arrived at Goldsmiths in 2016. Then a fellow PhD friend. We hang together and chat.

I scan the area for the perfect place to start our reading. We need an area where it's possible to listen to each other, and for anyone to feel comfortable joining. I see Les parked on a circular bench that wraps around a tree, in the sun, in deep conversation with a student. That would be the perfect spot. I wait a while. I don't want to interrupt, but eventually go over and show them the manifestos, inviting the undergrad to join us.

I park my stuff and bob back to the picket line: 'We're Sociology PhD students, we are reading a manifesto for Live Methods, you are welcome to join.' More 'Crafting a PhD' friends have arrived and gathered around the tree, hugs of greeting across the circle. A library colleague scans the manifesto text. An MA student asks about joining, he's read Live Methods, studies with Emma Jackson on the Cities and Society masters. Eventually in the hustle-bustle he sits amongst us PhDs, the undergrad and Les. I'm suddenly aware we are about to read Les's words back to him. I wonder how he feels? A little embarrassed, perhaps? But characteristically game for our experiment. A few more Sociology staff drift over. Some sit. Others stand around the edge as the circle fills in, looking like they'll dip a toe.

Here we are. Assembled. Manifesto in hand. So, what are we actually doing?! George, Fo, Silvia and I try to explain – a chorus reading. But improvised. Not planned exactly – yes, improvised but together. We can speak with just one voice, or many, join when you want to. We'll read the text, references and all, from start to finish. How often have we discussed this text, which some admittedly haven't read? I can't remember who speaks first, George perhaps. As always, their abundant energy bounces into the text. This isn't the tentative start of a new group, but the continuation of many conversations started over cannolis. There's space for new voices, people give way to others, and layer up to offer support. We listen carefully. We stick with tricky sentences. We take time to share the labour and joy of reading and considering what the text can mean in the picket space.

In this sense, we talked ourselves into being sociologists.

Taking turns and jumping in, lending solidarity with unknown pronunciations or complex compound words, hitting points of resonance together, we tune into each other and to the local politics of this university space. Voices echo and layer on certain terms, vibrations of interest pinging out through shifts in pitch, tempo or volume: a chorus on 'queer theory' sings to the skies. Some vocal additions feel more like a commentary, sometimes a denunciation. The gesture demands playfulness, the manifesto calling for engaging with political issues without the 'drum roll of political piety'. We are many things, but not pious. Irreverent, joyful, thinking, feeling, trying on these sociological words, feeling the shape and taste of them.

As we speak colours and textures begin to appear that are different from when we read alone or inside our heads. Most of all, what emerges for me are common connections,

resonances and values. What matters to us as individuals, a PhD group, and wider student/staff community, come out in unexpected ways.

The undergrad takes the lead for a solo conclusion, a moment of clarity with a single voice to draw the text to a close. Here Les and Nirmal's call to 'debate the forms of work we are doing, the kinds of academics we are producing, and the institutional and life worlds we occupy as well as make'. Before we break I insert myself into the moment with an epilogue from Nirmal. She couldn't make our short-notice assembly, but sent us the gift of another provocation to think with. I read it out loud, as an epilogue:

> *. . . we wrote the collection when the integrity of Goldsmiths intellectual life was not under aggressive attack as it is now. If we were to write a manifesto for Live Methods now, it would need to include the unaccountable governance structures, elite networks at the top between KPMG and Goldsmiths, as well as a disregard for dissent and protest from staff and students.*

The reading itself may not hold KPMG to account, but is one of many small actions from our PhD cohort that can sit with those by staff and students across the university. Strategic action and negotiations by staff unions are accompanied by the lively social world of teach-outs and collective creative actions by students and staff. These, too, are resistance. In Les's words 'we make the university whenever we gather or learn together', and in this spirit, taking a sociological manifesto for a literal walk to the picket, and airing the debates about the politics of value feels important.

The next day we are out playing with Live Methods again with Nirmal, Ros Gray and the MA Gender, Media & Culture students at a teach-out in the garden and allotment tucked away past the nursery behind the Anthropology department. We talk soils and networks of activity not visible in winter but busy beneath the surface. returning us to questions of value and what matters as we draw and write together. It is sunny again, shoes off, our toes in the grass.

Discussion: Live Methods manifesto as an intervention

The narrative so far has described some of the practices of PhD students in the Sociology department during the academic year 2021–22. We have identified our weekly graduate seminar 'Crafting a PhD' as a key site of personal, intellectual and political solidarity during a year characterised by dramatic organisational change. The violent managerial restructuring process has been matched with ongoing resistance by staff UCU members, UNISON colleagues, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and the Students' Union through a variety of actions. Multiple layers of student–staff solidarity have developed over the previous six years of industrial action, but senior management have put strain on those relations as they sought to align students with their own interests. In that context, the labour and energy required to sustain resistance in the extended 2021–22 strike action was a significant challenge.

When thinking about the influence of Live Methods, we want to highlight that sociological practice is not the reserve of some separate sphere called research. Sociological practice is at play in all areas of university life: in teaching and learning at all levels of study; as well as between colleagues. 'Crafting a PhD' was a space where we as a cohort

of PhD students got together to discuss how our weeks had gone, talk about the problems we had faced, and, occasionally, hear from staff members about their career paths. These sessions sound relatively dry in this description, similar to the huge array of self-help and corporate wellness style seminars graduate students are inundated with, however there was something particularly special here. Where the Live Methods manifesto talks about avoiding the 'trap of the now' and being 'caught up in the nets of a relatively small time horizon' (Back & Puwar, 2012a, p. 8), these seminars provided a crucial space to gather and have intergenerational conversations. Dialogue between PhD years, even in the same cohort, can be restricted at the best of times unless the space is facilitated; this is even more true of permanent staff members who in our department occupy a different building across campus to us in a literal (if crumbling) ivory tower. With facilitation, however, the discussions helped us develop each other's PhDs, sharing common sticking points, and contextualising the transition to the neoliberal university with admin and academic staff who had decades of institutional experience and memory.

The seminar drew on the ethos of Live Methods and held space for the political possibilities of our learning and social reproduction together, an everyday resistance to neoliberal agendas. Particularly in times of restructure, the Live Methods manifesto proved itself to be a valuable resource in sustaining our life of the university. It is a reminder of the intellectual and social resources that we generate together and how these go beyond the reduced version of the education imagined in the dictates and policies of the university's senior management and their consultants.

The manifesto text became a literal tool of creative resistance when we printed it and took it to the picket line to voice its demands. Strike organising operates at the level of industrial relations: negotiations took place with lawyers on either side, and much labour went into defending workers' rights and making demands for employment relations that would protect the university. Importantly though, the strike also operates at the level of the interpersonal. The picket line is a strike action that makes publicly visible our demands for the kind of universities we want to see in the future, a form of demanding that can varyingly interpreted as 'violence' or 'solidarity' (Kelliher, 2020). However, more than just making visible, the picket line is a crucial space of collectively crafting these shared demands into being.

Following Law and Urry's (2004) invitation to consider how methods 'help make realities' (p. 404), Back (2012) asks us 'which realities should be turned down or cut down to size and which others, through our sociological imagination, turned up and magnified?' (p. 35). This methodological provocation travels; it has pedagogical implications that can be felt in our seminar rooms, on our campus and on the picket line. The pedagogic values contained in Live Methods can be seen in the energy certain groups of students brought to running and attending events during the strike. These efforts resonated with what Back called 'Not striking from the life of the mind' (the title of a teach-out at Goldsmiths' picket line) – that with a focus on power relations and possibilities to create otherwise, the learning in the strike is just as rich as in the classroom. Indeed, we are not the first to make this point: Mehta and Tillyard (2023) cite a student who, during a teach-out in 2021, noted that 'It took suspending the university to do the learning we wanted' – a learning that was 'spontaneous and creative, rooted in political education' (n.p.).

Many students at Goldsmiths attempted to organise such rich and creative events across the duration of the extended periods of strike, building on the energy that the moment brought. Though, as many of us found, these efforts quickly ran out of steam. This fatigue was not a necessity however. The MA Gender, Media and Culture that Puwar convenes in the Department of Sociology appeared an endless source of creative energy and public engagement. The students led poetry readings, zine-making, an audio history of the picket line, and teach-outs. In instances like these, where organising was successful, it was in communities where infrastructures of support had been built, and a language had been formed to understand what was occurring.

The influences of Live Methods become apparent in these moments of community – in seminar rooms, supervisory interactions and corridor chats. These 'spaces of resistance [begin] to break down barriers and build relationships between all staff, the students, the local community, and the natural world' (McKnight, 2024, p. 63). Where Puwar and Sharma (2012) discuss the crucial role of curating sociology, they invite researchers to instil dialogue and collaboration across disciplines and creative moments (pp. 40–63). This is tied up in their writing with the necessity to see others not just as something to use, but as individuals we should develop the capacity for respectful exchange with and be 'open to mutation and becoming otherwise' (Back & Puwar, 2012a, p. 11) alongside. Once again, the ethos of these research tools extends beyond methodology and underlies our affective interactions in universities. Speaking from the position of PhD students, peer-to-peer relations are largely positioned as one of competition – for funding, to publish, to secure teaching contracts and postdoc positions, and so much more. It is only through a shift towards care, dialogue and crafting together that liveliness can occur.

Across the course of our 'Crafting a PhD' seminars and strike solidarity actions, we played with the provocation to make sociological craft more artful and crafty (Back & Puwar, 2012a, p. 9). Sometimes in quite a literal sense, bringing craft practices into our shared sessions; 'collage your thesis' was a fun evening. Our reading of the manifesto was likewise led by a decidedly analogue craft practice, using basic 'traditional' university resources of the library, a book and a photocopier to design, produce and duplicate a material version of the manifesto as a folded pamphlet. Crafting as a metaphor here is not limited to any literal sense though, and may also extended into *craftiness*. As Back argues, 'artfulness in the sense it is being used here also involves being wily or bringing *a bit of craftiness into the craft*' (Back, 2012, p. 34). As students, creatively co-opting university resources to make the manifesto felt satisfying. Craftiness also shaped our strategies of resistance to the restructure through formal mechanisms. Following Ahmed's (2021) work on complaint as a feminist pedagogy through which you learn how institutions 'work and for whom they work' (p. 22), we flooded the Annual Progress Monitoring Form that we are required to submit with critique of the impact of the restructure, and with our solidarity with staff and fellow students. We also made these private institutional complaints public through our department's blog (Goldsmiths Sociology blog 2022) and across social media.

Our intervention on the picket line of collectively reading the 'Live Methods manifesto' was another form of voicing, and enacting, the social life of the university, in opposition to KPMG's and the senior management team's attempts to define our institution. Undoubtedly influenced by the legacy of Live Methods and informed by the

intergenerational knowledge of our teachers, colleagues and peers – that though this proposed 'recovery' was presented to us as inevitable, unchangeable and for our benefit and welfare, we attempted to (re)make the university by turning up and magnifying the methods that we wanted to hold on to.

Beyond the picket lines of UCU and UNISON, student activism at Goldsmiths has been an important source of liveliness and hope. The black and POC (people of colour) student-led Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action occupation of Deptford Town Hall in 2019 embodied possibilities for a better university; they won commitments to significant changes from senior management in response to their 12-point manifesto and beyond that demonstrated that a different university is possible through their practice (Dattatreyan & Mehta, 2020; Mounir et al., 2022). They brought a different Goldsmiths into being. This anti-racist student action left significant legacies: it highlighted the complex networks of student–student and student–staff solidarity, raising critical questions of whose strikes are supported, and which political demands are given energy by the wider Goldsmiths community. The university that exists and is being energetically defended from restructure is by no means a wholly inclusive space — to defend against restructure is not to deny that intersecting issues of race, class and gender continue to produce inequalities in how students and staff experience Goldsmiths. More broadly, there is a long history of critical engagement with the possibilities of the strike space and questions of protest, occupation and resistance.

As Live Methods travels 'what it is' is worked and reworked through those in dialogue with it. The provocations it offers travel through research and teaching networks, into the lives and minds of students and onto the strike space.

In offering an account of the energy and creativity of the 'Crafting a PhD' cohort (and similarly identifying this in other Sociology student actions), we are cautious of (re) producing categories of student solidarity that prioritise ableist and classist constructions of 'good' and 'bad'. When we talk about energy here we are also talking about labour, the labour of producing and maintaining a protest (McKnight, 2019). There is a cost to this labour and not everyone can participate in this way. The academic year 2021–22 was marked by 37 days of industrial action, and followed not only pandemic disruptions and losses, but was also preceded by six years of strike or ASOS actions as part of local and national disputes.

These questions of labour are important for union members, but they are also at stake in student–staff solidarity. The restructuring process of 2021–22 (officially called the Recovery Program) was only the latest incarnation of the pre-pandemic restructuring plans (Evolving Goldsmiths). The cycle of worsening conditions and organisation change, divorced from the needs of staff and students, created a pervading sense of precarity, driving many staff to leave before the redundancy process took its course. Losing supervisors can be heartbreaking for PhD students (even whilst personally supporting their decision to leave).

Hope and pessimism, energy and weariness are important dialectics here. Common understandings 'position weariness as the antithesis of political action, where individuals are slowly worn down until they no longer have the strength or capacity to resist' (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019, p. 157). However, Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019) invite a 'reparative reading of weariness . . . as a potential retreat from the

relentless drive to move forwards, a form of passive dissent' (p. 157). In their analysis of lived affects of austerity, they pay attention to 'forms of suffering and violence that are felt as a kind of steady ongoing form of endurance, rather than as a sudden eruption' and 'affective moments that are neither passionate nor intense, but instead listless and still, generating feelings of inertia, flatness, impasse' (p. 157).

In a similar counter-move, Rebecca Coleman explores 'hopeful pessimism' as a mood of austerity in their research on young people's ideas of the future in austerity. Coleman (2016) explores 'the implications of the future being imagined not as better but as diminished and, drawing on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, proposes a notion of hopeful pessimism' (p. 83). What might hopeful pessimism look like in the struggle for our university? How can we hold senior management, change consultants KPMG, and profiting banks Natwest and Lloyds to account, as Puwar calls for us to do? And through that same process, develop practices of 'hope'? As the work of Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar, Coleman, Puwar and Back discussed above all suggest, these are not in opposition, but it is through these actions that a worldly hope (Back, 2021) might be developed. Back (2021) advocates for 'training an attentiveness to the social world in troubled times', which he argues becomes an 'empirical question and a matter of documenting hopeful possibilities that often otherwise remain unremarked upon' (p. 3).

In truth, it was a surprise the impact that 'Crafting a PhD' had for many of us. It took on a life of its own. We narrate our collective reading of the 'Live Methods manifesto' here as one of many moments of liveliness, and place that in the context of our (still ongoing) weekly seminar as an ongoing form of solidarity. This enduring weekly space allowed for the everyday highs and lows from weariness, exhaustion and loss to joy, laughter and celebration, and plenty in between. Circling around the room each of us in turn answers the question 'How was your week?': an opening to share what we are actually doing (writing, reading, talking, making, working elsewhere for money, wrangling with an idea), from inching 'progress' forward to big wins of an upgrade or conference presentation to disappointments, losses, insecurities and stuck-ness. Private PhD troubles were listened to and the repeated process of circling round, over time, made common these experiences. 'Crafting a PhD' was about attuning to what it means to be a PhD student (a person) at Goldsmiths, connecting to longer histories of resistance in the institutions and to wider political struggles. It was about making space to think these things *together*.

Amid the intense emotions of loss and the ruptures of restructure, it would be easy to slip into the 'trap of now' locating our troubles in Goldsmiths itself and leading to a pessimistic or fatalistic outlook. The sense that the restructure meant death for Goldsmiths as a place was palpable for many of us resisting. It emerged in the imagery from the picket line, from our PhD Titanic placard to Grim Reaper imagery on UCU posters and images shared on social media of the iconic Richard Hoggart building edited so that fire blazes through the windows (the warden's behaviour equivalent to arson). How do you do the actual work of a PhD if the university is crumbling around you? Or rather, what work needs to be done to sustain the life of the university? Taking lively methods to the picket line was one response. Samba dancing and Greek chorus-style collective reading were joyful outlets of energy, playful ways to come together. Letter writing and complaints engaged another mode of resistance. Those moments of picket line action grew

out of more everyday and ongoing practices of solidarity in the classroom, with 'Crafting a PhD' emerging as an affective and social infrastructure of mutual support. Collective practices that sustain are important here. Writing from 2023, from amongst the students and staff who stayed at Goldsmiths and in our department, we can confirm that the university did not die – practices that sustain and grow possibilities for hope remain important as ever.

Conclusion

> We need to argue for an alternative future but also craft one into existence.
> (Back, 2012, p. 36)

Over 10 years on from the publication of *Live Methods*, what is the intellectual influence of this text on sociological practice? In presenting our experiences as PhD students in a college undergoing restructure, as part of the wider struggle for the university, we have brought to the fore how Live Methods offers one way of confronting politics and power in the increasingly neoliberal university.

As with the original provocations, this is not solely a matter of 'methods' in any technical sense. These sociable methods move towards a live sociology that counters the individualisation and competition promoted in UKHE. On a local level, these sociable, collaborative and politically engaged modes of learning and research resist the reduced version of education (and the social) that 'change managers', consultants and senior management try to enforce on our university. Back argues in the original collection 'this is not just a methodological matter of bringing sociology to life but a way to live and sustain the life of things' (Back, 2012, p. 36). Indeed, in the intensity and heightened atmosphere of the ongoing restructure, and compounding layers of loss, Live Methods became a touchstone not only for our research and fieldwork, but for sustaining our collective projects of learning and life in the university.

We are still feeling the pain of our new centralised system today (August 2023). Building an affective infrastructure of solidarity is an ongoing challenge. The value of everyday acts of friendship, collegiality and solidarity have been vital in maintaining and sustaining our PhD community through this time. Leaning towards liveliness in our practices together made space for joy, laughter, silliness, creativity and play. We took that spirit onto the picket line and into our actions in the university. This attentive and tuned-in approach offered a flexibility that was essential; sharing collectively the burden of labour that extended industrial action requires.

Our contribution to this collective reflection on the legacy of *Live Methods* follows our experience of the university, and, in many ways, our story is specific to Goldsmiths. Yet, as UK higher education becomes defined by the neoliberal university, our learnings take form beyond our specific context – that, in extending *Live Methods* beyond the textual and methodological, important tools are offered to help stay attuned to the possibilities of community, resistance and solidarity. Whilst the high intensity labour of organisation is crucial, through everyday acts, small spaces of connection, and by being open to being changed by others, we may renew our modes of sustained critical attention (Back, 2012) and collaboration (Puwar & Sharma, 2012) and find sociology's worth.

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