

Writing, the Feminine and Organization

Alison Pullen* and Carl Rhodes

Summary

We consider how genre and gender are implicated in academic writing about work organizations, noting that masterful, rational and penetrating masculine forms have long been dominant. The result is the privileging of a masculine style of writing that has come to be seen both as gender neutral and mandatory. This has served both to marginalize women's writing and to disable men's femininity. To subvert and undermine this, we consider the possibilities of a feminine writing of organization that defies rational categorization so as to enable a multitude of affectual voices and texts to cross over from exclusion. This creates a space where feminine writing can be encouraged and published and where issues surrounding the feminine can flourish.

Keywords: feminine writing, gender, gendered organization

In 1994 Avital Ronell was interviewed by Alexander Laurence. Ronell used the term 'feminine writing' in her book *Crack Wars* (2004 [1992]) and was asked to explain her relationship to it, especially in reference to Hélène Cixous. Ronell speaks:

Cixous was one of my first bosses. She hired me to teach in France at Vincennes. She is someone whom I continue to admire immensely. She's brilliant, beautiful, generous, and politically very astute and active. In that regard, she's a model for me. She makes certain interventions and makes things happen according to non-traditional ways. She's also a friend. I imitate her way of teaching, which is to say, she has so-called feminist hours. She teaches every other Saturday or Sunday for nine hours, so that women can come and aren't stuck at home during the week with their children. So I've done that here at Berkeley. I teach a Sunday seminar. I have learned things like this, fundamental things about teaching, about political responsibility from Helene. The section on feminine writing owes a lot to her. Cites her work. It's about writing for pleasure, writing that's on the loose, that not phallically pointed, or doesn't make a point, or even get to make dents in referential aspects of writing. The problem of the woman who has all the equipment, yet no one to write to, is a problem of feminine writing. Concerned with the violence of non-address, it doesn't have an institutional back-up or a support system, and doesn't have a sense of its purpose or aim. That is a kind of homage to Helene's work (in Laurence, 1994, n.p.).

This special issue of *Gender, Work & Organization* has its origins in a stream of the Gender, Work & Organization conference held at Keele University in 2012. The stream was convened by the two of us with René ten Bos and the late Heather Höpfl. When we developed the call for contributions we acknowledged the different styles and genres that might be adopted in the act of writing (the journalistic, the academic, legalistic, novelistic, diaristic, and so forth) and how these could be exercised with varying degrees of competence in the instance of producing a text. We acknowledged too that matters of style and genre are gendered and, moreover, in academic writing in management and organization studies (as well as the social sciences more generally), it is masterful, rational and

Address for correspondence: *Alison Pullen, Department of Marketing and Management, Faculty of Business and Economics, Macquarie University, Balaclava Road, North Ryde, NSW 2109, Australia; e-mail: alison.pullen@mq.edu.au

penetrating masculine forms that are both dominant and privileged. We wanted to contest this, like Ronell, with an exploration of the problems and possibilities of feminine writing.

It has long been accepted that organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990). Despite this, much less attention has been directed to considering the research text as also being gendered. Instead, there has been a widespread assumption in conventional organization theorizing that patriarchal academic language and writing (although largely un-named) is entirely appropriate as the *de facto* standard and, more than this, it is the superior medium of written communication. This is what we wanted to question. Further, we wished to create a space where feminine writing of organizations could be encouraged and published and where issues surrounding the feminine (from feminine ontologies, ways of knowing, methodologies as well as the advancement of feminist theory) could flourish. What we also hoped to show, and as the authors whose papers are assembled here collectively demonstrate, was the inestimable multiplicity of that which can be invoked by feminine writing. Our task was not to define or limit the possibilities of feminine writing, as much as to let it happen.

We understand feminine writing as comprising a plurality of particularities, rather than as a set of generic rules that are to be followed. The range extends at least from poetry (Sayers and Jones, this issue) to the crafting of dolls (Rippin, this issue) and might be variously characterized by the hallmarks of writing differently (cf. Grey and Sinclair, 2006), writing responsibly (Rhodes and Brown, 2005), writing with dirt (Pullen and Rhodes, 2008), writing subversively (Höpfl, 2007) and bisexual writing (Phillips *et al.*, 2014). Such work exemplifies the possibilities within our field to contest what can at times seem like an overwhelming dominance of the masculine-rational text (see Rhodes and Pullen, 2009). Such examples connect to a long legacy of gendered writing that has developed outside the narrow confines and conservative structures of management and organizations studies. Thirty years have passed since French feminist writers such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray began making their contributions to feminist writing and thinking. Writers as diverse as Avital Ronell, Shoshana Felman, Adriana Cavavero and Silvia Montiglio have further developed this kind of research. The political possibilities made possible by these writers have barely materialized in organization studies. Indeed, a privileged masculine style of writing has been regarded as the primary acquisition of an academic education. Other forms of writing which bleed, disrupt or provoke, as well as challenging masculine/authoritarian writing, are most commonly regarded as unacceptable. This special issue intends to further interrupt and resist this gendered textual domination. Without the hubris of seeking to reinvent a new orthodoxy, the idea is to both practice feminine writing and to challenge the possibilities of it having a normative status, as Muhr and Rehn (this volume) and Steyaert (this volume) testify.

This special issue has attempted to bring together a plurality of engagements of writing forms, theoretical and methodological commitments, by offering papers from a collection of writers who want to disturb the taken-for-granted gender neutrality of organizational research in relation to the often implicitly masculine-rational order that structure the field. The focus is not only on how gender is something that we study, but also how our own gendered practice and subjectivity infuse our very own research and writing (Höpfl, 2000; Pullen, 2006). These papers interrogate the theoretical-philosophical issues underpinning the gendered processes of textualization in which we are immersed as researchers of organization and gender. Contributors have questioned persistent forms of writing which seek to achieve the homologation of women and the feminine within patriarchal order (Höpfl, 2000; Phillips *et al.*, 2014). Theory, however, does not exist without the text, not without the bodies that write and read it. The embodied nature of writing is thus present whether it is explicit or implicit.

The intention to subvert through the proliferation of embodied experience cannot always be read on the surface of the words and letters of the text, presenting itself as well in what is not

said. The unsaid in this subversive project is interjected by the reader as much as it is inserted by the determined writer. In light of this, we do not wish as editors to give an account of the papers collected here as if to assume a supra-authoritative editorial position; while it might be the case for all writing, the papers in this issue in particular enable readings that are embodied and personal. Our reading is ours, and as we peruse once again these papers we are reminded of the possibilities of conveying difference even within the feminine, as well as of the political potential of working at the margins. These are margins where affectual voices cross over from exclusion, and where embodied writing practices, feminine styles, playful genres and subversive practices sing and dance on the page. In such arenas the marginalization of women's writing and of men's femininity are challenged in ways infused with critical reflexivity, feminist ethics and political conceptions of writing. Most importantly for us as both readers of the papers and editors of the issue, this work questions dominant structures and practices that seek to limit what organizational researchers are allowed to write and how they are allowed to write it.

Those of us present at the conference stream from which this special issue emerged were well aware of the specificity of putting together a collection of papers on feminine writing, as well as of the ways in which such writing could be emancipatory for both women and men. However, whether women wanted to write as feminists was a question left open, as was the possibility of men engaging with feminism and feminine writing. What was abundantly apparent, however, was the unrelenting desire for many women and men to challenge masculine norms and phallogocentric writing in management and organization studies. The disruption offered by the feminine might just enable a space, form and politics in such writing.

The issue starts with Janet Sayers and Deborah Jones' paper 'Truth Scribbled in Blood: Women's Work, Menstruation and Poetry'. Using feminist writing on menstruation, the paper alerts us to an abject subject in organization evident of dirt as bodies leak into assumedly sterile work spaces. Working from Hélène Cixous' (1976) 'The Laugh of the Medusa', this paper considers the meaning of menstruation at work. The starting point for this consideration was the public announcement by a prominent New Zealand CEO that women take more sick leave than their male counterparts on account of having periods. This moves on more centrally to an examination of the public online responses to this statement; responses presented as poems that can disrupt power and repression. The paper is important for showing the relationship between text and flesh, abject bodies; and how dominant power relations manifest in norms of neutrality, rationality and masculinity can be publicly resisted.

The second paper turns to aesthetics. In "'I Write Like a Painter": Feminine Creation with Arts-Based Methods in Organizational Research', Brigitte Biehl-Missal brings together feminine writing and organizational aesthetics to explore arts-based methods as 'feminine creation'. Brigitte relates feminine creation to *écriture féminine*, *peinture féminine* and the modern choreography of Trisha Brown. Challenging conventional academic writing, Brigitte contests masculine stereotypes of rationality, rigorous method and explicit knowledge production through the practices of poetic writing, painting and dance. Wonderfully original, the paper includes its own series of *peinture féminine*, some of which are contributions by the artist and organizational writer Henrik Schrat. Concluding, Brigitte shows how gendered bodies can be 'reimagined' through aesthetic formats of organizational research.

Remaining in the realm of aesthetics, gender and organization, Ann Rippin's 'Feminine Writing: Text as Dolls, Drag and Ventriloquism' also unsettles the dominant norms of academic representation. In Ann's case the purpose is to queer gendered academic performance so as to disturb the conventions that seek to determine the meaning and normative values associated with written text. To do this Ann produces a countertext that employs fiction and 'fictional truth' so as to create a space for what often cannot be said. Through the making of dolls as

ventriloquists' dummies and as texts in their own right, Ann shows how embodied selves can be conveyed through fiction, craft, text and non-text, and self and non-self. Importantly, this practice serves to queer masculine organizations and organizing as well as drawing out important methodological implications for researching organizations using non-conventional art forms.

In 'On Gendered Technologies and Cyborg Writing', Sara Louise Muhr and Alf Rehn problematize the take-up of Hélène Cixous' idea and practice of *écriture féminine* and its potential for disruption. Sara Louise and Alf critically show how feminine writing runs the risk of reproducing the binary distinction between male and female that it has sought to free itself from. Subversively, they put forward the idea that understanding the cyborg nature of writing as 'a parallel mode of inquiry' might enhance *écriture féminine*. From this vantage point gendered research writing is reconceived in terms of the technologies through which it is produced; writing is thus rendered as cyborg as well as gendered.

In a similarly playful and serious challenge to the binary structures that may be ironically reinforced through the very act of questioning binary thought/representation, Andrew Dickson's 'Hysterical Blokes and the Other's *Jouissance*' presents a man's practice of feminine writing. Writing in the form of autoethnography, Andrew ponders the assumed feminine character of 'weight anxiety' from the perspective of man who undergoes that very affect. Using this self-example as a means to think through the meaning of gender, Andrew connects with Lacan's hysteric's discourse to show how, through writing, men productively question their own masculinity by undermining its oppositional relation to the feminine.

Exploring the relationship between writing, ethics and politics, Sheena Vachhani's paper 'Organizing Love — Thoughts on the Transformative and Activist Potential of Feminine Writing' asks: what does love do for feminine writing? Sheena works from the perspective and possibility of a feminine poetics of organization whose resolve is the disruption of gendered normalization. Sheena contests the masculine text, understood in terms of rationality and mastery, with the notion of love. To write with love as well as to question its representation, Sheena offers a reading of three selected texts: Julia Kristeva's *Tales of Love*; Luce Irigaray's *The Way of Love*; and bell hooks' *All About Love*. This leads Sheena to explore how an 'ethics of love' can not only form the grounds of the relationship between self and other, but can also inform bold and politically activist feminine writing. What is shown is how such an ethico-political ideal of feminine writing can be understood and practised as a vehicle for change that undermines the dominance of the masculine in organizational knowledge production and representation.

The issue ends with Chris Steyaert's 'Three Women. A Kiss. A Life. On the Queer Writing of Time in Organization'. In this paper Chris reads and interprets Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* in conjunction with the work of Virginia Woolf and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to consider the possibilities for female work and life. Chris approaches feminine writing from a queer position, as well as from one that relates different conceptions of time to the possibilities of gendered subjectivity. *The Hours* is taken as a queer story about female potential to reconsider time in terms of pause, moment and affect as well as to engage in the multiplicity of life. Doing so, Chris elaborates, disrupts masculine linear temporality so as to open life to possibilities beyond the heteronormative.

This collection of papers represents the culmination of four years of organizational and editorial work undertaken by the two of us (Alison and Carl) who write this introduction, together with Heather Höpfl. But as we undertake this task of writing in the New Year of 2015, the gender and organization studies community will be aware that Heather passed away in 2014 after a short illness. In the weeks leading up to Heather's death, the importance of her work became

felt by ourselves and others because, despite her ground-breaking research, thinking and publications in the area of women's writing, women's organizing and feminist methodology, the writing that Heather produced over the past three decades was her-self. For those of us that knew her and for those of us working with her ideas, Heather's passing was a huge loss. This special issue would not have produced the depth and range of works if Heather Höpfl's work had not come before it. We had the honour and pleasure of being inspired by and working with her on this particular project, and it seems both strange and appropriate to finalize it by writing about her.

Heather examined my [Alison]'s PhD and spent much of the viva questioning the writing out of the feminine. The examiners asked me to include a preface which reflected on the process of writing my-self out of the thesis. This piece became Pullen (2006) and has been a fundamental turning point in the work that I have become interested in. Heather's work on matters of gender, culture and writing have also been central to our joint work, especially as it relates to her demonstration of how it is possible to live and write academically in a manner not determined by narrow and prejudicial masculine norms (see Pullen and Rhodes, 2008; Rhodes and Pullen, 2009). We are far from alone, and Heather's influence on the field has transformed people and their work by invoking them to question why they do what they do. In responding to this question her influence is, and perhaps more importantly, in the form of a demonstration of how we can subversively challenge the academy and its repressive mainstream practices. Heather's feminism enabled many women to follow her example and practices both explicitly or implicitly. Her narrative playfulness, embodied presentation and use of visual performance encapsulated the ways in which her spirit lived through her work. Her verbal and written work delighted, troubled and confused. What we can be sure of is Heather's lasting influence on thinking and writing differently, especially through feminine writing.

In 2007 Heather wrote:

And so this piece of writing attempts to undermine the extravagance of masculine forms of writing; of writing to produce the codpiece, writing as conceit; writing which is antagonistic to fragmented experience. It will not satisfy some, it will irritate others. The article is unbalanced, unresolved: like life itself. It is about stories, illustrations, asides, observations. It is also, with all its attempts to subvert (with all its attempts to make it 'dirty'), a piece of male writing. (Höpfl, 2007: 619)

This attests to a feminism that seeks to make trouble (see Segal, 2007) in whatever arena trouble needs to be made. In the male-dominated realm of management and organization theory feminism is still dirty — it is perhaps more of an *F-word* than it used to be (cf. Calás and Smircich, 1989). It was against the patriarchal nature of organizations and organization theory that Heather's work often positioned itself (see Höpfl, 2002a); a position from which not just to complain but from which to conceive of alternatives. This is an unfinished project, and in Heather's words:

Conventional representations of organizations are patriarchal, masculine and directed by the animus. They reduce the notion of 'organization' to abstract relationships, rational actions, and purposive behaviour. In contrast there are alternative ways in which the organization might be conceived (Höpfl, 2008: 349)

It is this project of re-conception and re-representation that we continue in this special issue, offering our thanks always to the hospitality of her work. This is a project that demands an end to the melancholic effects of modes of organizing and writing that result from 'commoditized representations in the obsessive-compulsive pursuit of organisational idealisation' (Höpfl, 2002b: 21).

Texts are written by bodies; here, often about bodies; they inscribe themselves on our skin and through our flesh. The intercorporeal experiences that many of us have shared with Heather make what we do and what we write have some semblance of meaning; of life, work and death. Heather's passing also reminds us of living with the uncertainty of the unknown and how what needs to be cherished, if it is work, is the importance of that work to affect, to effect change. Despite advancements, women remain disadvantaged in our academies, societies and economies. The feminine suffers alongside. Often these abjections produce shame, silence, but within them is also the potential for radical subversion. Feminine writing is but one such potential, and as we have seen with the papers in this issue, this potential can be explored, developed and realized. These papers, like Heather's work, enable us to remember the politics of the feminine, the abjection of difference, and the possibility of things being otherwise.

There is much work to be done.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- Acker, J. (1990) Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender and Society*, 4,2, 139–58.
- Calás, M.B. and Smircich, L. (1989) Using the F Word: Feminist theories and the social consequences of organizational research. In *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 1989,1, 355–9.
- Cixous, H. (1976) The Laugh of Medusa. *Signs*, 1,4, 875–93.
- Grey, C. and Sinclair, A. (2006) Writing differently. *Organization*, 13,3, 443–53.
- Höpfel, H. (2000) The suffering mother and the miserable son: Organizing women and organizing women's writing. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 7,2, 98–105.
- Höpfel, H. (2002a) Strategic quest and the search for the primal mother. *Human Resource Development International*, 5,1, 11–22.
- Höpfel, H. (2002b) Hitchcock's Vertigo and the tragic sublime. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 15,1, 21–34.
- Höpfel, H. (2007) The codex, the codicil and the codpiece: Some thoughts on diminution and elaboration in identity formation. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 14,6, 619–32.
- Höpfel, H. (2008) Maternal organization. In Barry, D. and Hansen, H. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization*, pp. 349–58. London: Sage.
- Laurence, A. (1994) Avital Ronell Interview. *The Write Stuff*. Available at <http://www.altx.com/int2/avital.ronell.html> Last accessed 2 January 2015.
- Phillips, M., Pullen, A. and Rhodes, C. (2014) Writing organization as gendered practice: Interrupting the libidinal economy. *Organization Studies*, 35,3, 313–33.
- Pullen, A. (2006) Gendering the research self: Social practice and corporeal multiplicity in the writing of organizational research. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 13,3, 277–98.
- Pullen, A. and Rhodes, C. (2008) Dirty writing. *Culture and Organization*, 14,3, 241–59.
- Rhodes, C. and Brown, A.D. (2005) Writing responsibly: Narrative fiction and organization studies. *Organization*, 12,4, 467–91.
- Rhodes, C. and Pullen, A. (2009) Narrative and stories in organizational research: An exploration of gendered politics in research methodology. In Bryman, D.A. and Buchanan, D. (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Research Methods*, pp. 583–601. London: Sage.
- Ronell, A. (2004 [1992]) *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Segal, L. (2007) *Making Trouble: Life and Politics*. London: Serpent's Tail.

Biographical note

Alison Pullen is Professor of Management and Organization Studies at Macquarie University. Her research interests include embodiment and gender in organizations, ethics and politics of organization, and feminism and organization.

Carl Rhodes is Professor of Management and Organization Studies at Macquarie University. He researches issues related to ethics and justice in organizations, organizations in popular culture, and writing-based research methodologies.