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Pieces of me, letters from us: collage-making as embodied reflection in autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

Using letter-writing as a research conversation, this paper discusses collage as a reflexive feminist method useful in qualitative fieldwork, particularly autoethnography. The paper is primarily presented through letters written between friends – the two authors of this paper – with an interest in collage as an art practice. The letters discuss the value of making collages in Samantha’s research process, aiding her generative reflection on the emotionally difficult situations she encountered during an ethnographic project. We contribute to literature on collage as research method by foregrounding the embodied character of physically making collages as a process, showing how the body knows more than we think in our research encounters. We conclude by calling for what Moira Ferguson calls a ‘polemics of the heart’ through letter-writing and collage as feminist practice that might soften the patriarchal structures of the academy.

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Autoethnography; collage; embodiment; feminism; friendship; gender inequality; letter-writing

Introduction

This paper discusses the use of collage as a reflexive feminist method useful in qualitative fieldwork. It does this through e-mail ‘letters’ written by and exchanged between the two authors of this paper – Samantha Parsley and Beatriz Acevedo – as a dialogue about how Samantha made collages to reflect on her autoethnographic experiences during research with women music producers for her project ‘In the Key’ (ItK *n.d.*; Parsley 2022, 2024, *In press*). Samantha’s use of this creative method was inspired by Beatriz’s take on collage over the course of their long friendship, and in particular the technique of ‘Oracle Collage’ and a visit to an Eileen Agar exhibition together in 2021 as we will explain further below. Thus, the letters are the method through which we are unfolding the different aspects of using collage, and the substantive focus of the paper is how to use collage, and the issues arising in doing so.

The order of the letters does not follow an academic structure, instead they ‘preserve the liveliness of conversation, in all its tangles and tangents, as a mode of writing that is both personal and professional instead of collapsing these exchanges into a single, linear intervention’ (Chihaya et al. 2022, 9). This approach encourages the free flow of a conversation, while keeping the dialogue within certain parameters (Hill, Middleton, and Acevedo 2023, 4). The paper itself, then, can also be thought of as a collage of different sources – collage as a writing framework as well as the subject

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of our writing and images of Samantha's collages along the way. We think this connects well with the aim of this special issue – researching through intimate, collaborative encounters. The paper unfolds as follows. We first set the scene by fleshing out the background and context for our letters, providing a literature review of others' writing on collage as a feminist method. We then present seven letters with accompanying illustrations that weave together process, reflection, our friendship and academic thinking. Our letters appear in different fonts to easily demark them from one another and from this more narratorial text. Next, we reflect on the importance of embodied, processual dimensions as our contribution to understandings of collage as a research method, conclude the paper by suggesting how both collage and letter-writing might represent a feminist 'polemic of the heart' (Ferguson 1985, 31) that can be used in other research encounters and contexts.

Who we are and how we collage

We are two middle-aged academic women who have been experimenting with collages as part of our creative practice for some years. We are both cis-gendered, heterosexual, living and working in the UK. Samantha is British-born and Beatriz is Colombian, making the UK her home 20 years ago, and we became friends after meeting at a conference shortly after Beatriz arrived in the UK. Our collage practice includes working with words/phrases as well as images. The phrases were introduced as part of a creative game called 'Oracle Collage': an art project initiated by Colombian artists Osvaldo Polo and Beatriz Acevedo. In a practice of almost 10 years, the artists collect random 'lines' clipped from newspapers or magazines in the form of sentences or questions. The collection of the 'lines' is undertaken in a haphazard manner – leafing through discarded publications and saving anything that catches one's eye. It is best not to over-think this process, just grab what attracts you. It does not really matter what the content of the 'lines' are, as their meaning is going to be determined later on in the process, during the act of collaging itself. Sometimes we send each other little refills of slips for each other's Oracles as presents.

'Reading' the Oracle is a spiritual exercise where, following a brief meditation, six lines are selected from the collection amassed in a box, and laid down one above another on a flat surface, from bottom to top following the design of the iChing (the Chinese book of Wisdom and Changes). They are then read out loud in that order so that the words can resonate outside the mind and take shape more materially through voice and sound. In our approach, the words tell a message, as an Oracle, a tarot card, or any other reflective prompt would do. The meaning read from this is, of course, not 'truth' as such – instead its purpose is to invite lateral thinking, integrating the random and the uncertain into our understanding of daily life. Once the six lines are placed, Oracle Collaging then involves combining the phrases with visual elements. The resulting Oracle collages reflect the feelings of surprise and amusement in both collagist and viewer on account of incongruous elements juxtaposed with one another. Collage then can be seen as a process of 'knowing (theoria), doing (praxis), and making (poesis)' (Plakoyiannaki and Stavraki 2018, 314). [Figure 1](#) shows an example of one of Samantha's Oracle Collages – as you can see she has embellished the lines of text with visual and material clippings. The interpretation process is completed by the relationality of the images and words as we explain further later in the paper.

More specifically – and as we shall hear further from Samantha below – the process of making Oracle Collages starts with the awareness of a feeling of discomfort or ambiguity that prompts a question or a guide for action. The process of choosing materials, working with glue, and picking the 'lines' take this feeling of discomfort into an 'optimal zone of confusion' to welcome learning. Ambiguity can work as a potential way of learning, as we need to stop and think, engage in careful deliberation, and develop a response or a solution (D'Mello et al. 2014). In our letters we mainly discuss Oracle collages but also consider how this practice evolved into a new form for Samantha – that of the 'Tiny Collage'. We will explain this further below through our letters.



Figure 1. An example of an Oracle Collage: words, images and material juxtaposition.

Collage as feminist embodied research practice

The intention to use Oracle Collage as a method for reflecting about Samantha's research process emerged during conversations between us on a visit to the exhibition of British artist 'Eileen Agar: Angel of Anarchy' in Whitechapel Gallery (August 2021) at Beatriz's suggestion, which will be explained further by Samantha in Letter 1 below (Figure 2).

Eileen Agar's work belongs to a tradition of women artists in search of expressivity and the disruption of the female body, through the combination of images, and sometimes objects appealing to the intuitive, the oneiric and the irrational in the surrealist type of art of the 1920s and 1930s. As explained by Blanca Ortega (2019, 9) 'collage is not committed to objects but to the relationships between them, from which the unexpected emerges'. For many women artists, collage is an ideal medium to inquire about the (female) body, reality, and binary systems, whereby collage contributes to 'the deconstruction of the body and its political fictions' (Ortega 2019, 11). We draw upon the long tradition of feminist artists and writers who have used collage as a medium rich in possibilities by 'utilising both fragmentation and relational strategies, which has often been employed to manifest this vision in the arts' (Raaberg 1998, 157).

Collage in organisation studies

Collage is a creative method with a long artistic (Elliot, Gowrley, and Etgar 2019; Taylor 2004) as well as feminist provenance (Elizegi 2019), and a niche following in qualitative research practice (Butler-Kisber and Poldma 2010; Plakoyiannaki and Stavraki 2018; Sciotti and Chilton 2019). Making collages can help surface 'a scholarly sensibility towards the non-discursive things that [might] otherwise go unnoticed' in autoethnographic research (Butcher et al n.d.). As such, collage is beginning to be regarded as a useful method to surface individuals' concepts, tacit understandings and new narratives about a topic (Plakoyiannaki and Stavraki 2018). It is often regarded as a psychology-driven, projective technique used more widely in marketing disciplines but also has utility for exploring organisational issues, e.g. organisational culture (Colakoglu and Littlefield 2011); uncertainty in

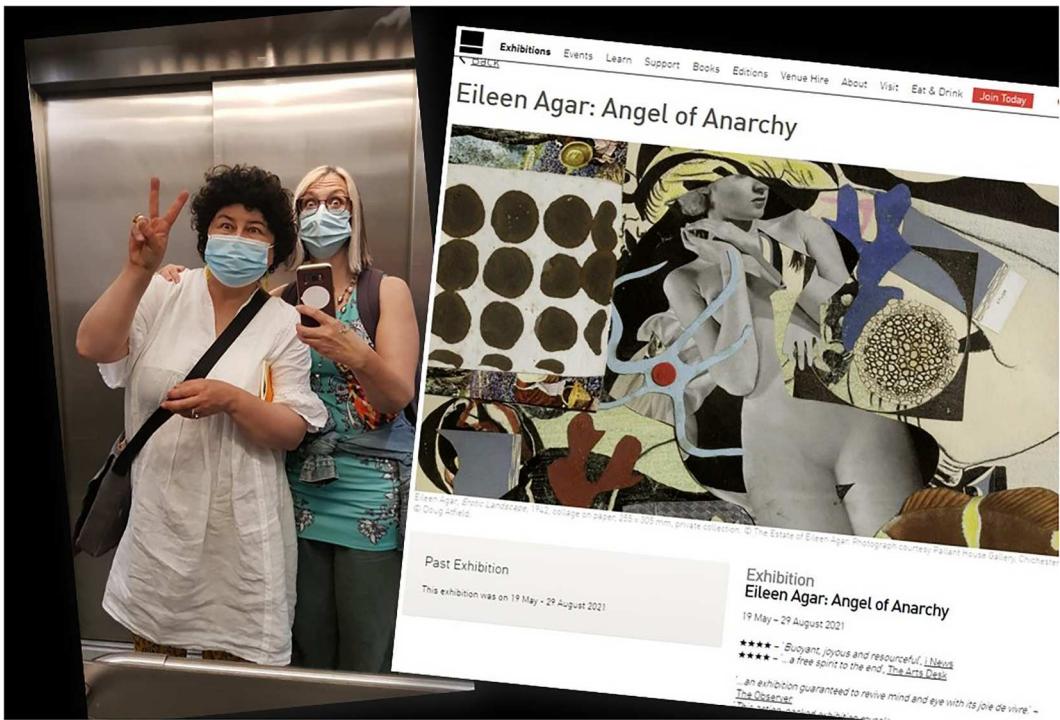


Figure 2. A visit to Eileen Agar: Angel of Anarchy. August 2021.

career counselling (Chant 2019), and as a method that ‘levels’ power hierarchies in research (Roberts and Woods 2018). Collage is distinct on account of its character as an artistic artefact that is a pastiche of images, motifs, and other materials that are cut out and pasted onto a flat surface to produce a whole, often resulting in unusual, playful, or unexpected effects (Kjellman-Chapin 2006). Collage is often included as a ‘visual method’ (e.g. Shortt and Parsley forthcoming; and the inclusion of a chapter on ‘collage’ in the Visual Methods section of Cassell, Cunliffe, and Grandy 2018), but we contend that the bodily unfolding of *making* collage beyond the visual is an area that has hitherto gone unnoticed. An interesting exception here is Culshaw (2019) who focused on the act of placing and reshuffling motifs, images and cut-outs with her participants rather than asking them to glue them into place. The decisions and reassessments of what went where and how this changed during reflective discussion became as important as the finished collage. With this in mind, and drawing on our own experiences, we suggest that paying attention to the *embodied* process of making collages has much to add to the literature on collage as a method.

Embodied methods in qualitative research

This focus on the body is not new in qualitative research of course. The materiality of creative writing has been eloquently captured in Tobin and Tisdall’s (2015) study of what it really means to say we learn through our bodies. They argue that to take an embodied perspective on learning is to specifically pay attention to sensations that arise as well as what we are thinking at the time. They invoke the ideas of Csikszentmihalyi (2002) on flow here, saying that it is when we are in flow that body and mind are united so that we cannot tell which is which in what we are doing and lose track of our surroundings altogether. Staying with writing, Essen and Varlander (2013) show how our bodies know more than we do when it comes to academic labour, e.g. thinking through the physical act of typing. In a classroom setting, Millei and Raby (2009) similarly note that practices of discourses

of 'good teaching' are realised as much through bodily comportment in relation to space and objects as they are through cognitive constructs about what good teaching is. Stowell and Warren (2018) place the body fully centre stage in organisational research in an ethnography of suffering in the waste recycling industry showing how 'embodied inhabitation' is the grounds for empathising with waste-workers' experiences of their occupations, and O'Shea's (2019, 2020) powerful body-accounts of their transgender and non-binary experiences likewise leave little room for doubt that gender is an ongoing performance and construction.

Chadwick's (2017) examination of embodiment in mothers' birth narratives asks how we can go beyond a conceptualisation of embodiment that consists only of asking people to talk about their bodily sensations – something which is notoriously difficult, but which we contend arts-based methods do very well. Vacchelli's (2018) report on her use of collage with migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women draws attention to this explaining how collages allowed her participants to share painful memories and the joy of hope through their selection and juxtaposition of materials, unleashing what the body knows beyond words, as a feminist epistemology. However, as will become apparent through the unfolding of our letters below, in this paper we see a different role for the body in the *process* of collaging that has not yet been fully exploited.

'In the key' – a mid-career sea-change

Through the letters that follow, we show how an embodied view of collaging is useful to explore the difficult, often suppressed emotions that arise when doing research (in this case on gender inequality). Self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, not being good enough, being terrified of speaking out and not coping with the repercussions of doing so are some of the themes Samantha made collages about during a two-year Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship called 'In the Key', awarded in June 2019 to explore the career experiences of women producing electronic music (ItK n.d.). In what follows, we focus much more on the process through which she made these collages than we do on the resulting artworks which are included mainly for illustrative purposes.

The research methods she used were broadly ethnographic, utilising multi-media methods and centred on a case study of electronic music production. The research aim was to empirically explore reasons for continued gender inequality in the electronic music industry, while developing a gender-sensitive theory of inequality in digital-creative industries more broadly (Parsley and Johansson 2024). To date she has completed 61 in depth interviews with women and non-binary electronic artists, and other gatekeepers in the industry, 31 of which have been edited for publicly available podcasts as part of the project's aim to increase the visibility of women artists (ItK n.d.).

Samantha is a life-long lover of electronic music and has been a committed fan of the dance music scene for over twenty years. She was nervous about finally making her passion into a research subject – would she destroy her love of the scene, and the potential for escape that it offered by turning into 'work'? But equally, she knew this was what she needed to revitalise her research career after several years of being worn down by university administration. Samantha had also recently taught herself to DJ and wanted to learn more about music production with a view to producing and releasing her own tracks – which she now does under the name 'Dovetail' (Dovetail n.d.). It was about a year into the project when she decided to use these activities as sources of data about how it felt to be part of the electronic music world. Her growing understanding also allowed her to empathise with her research participants during interviews and has ended up forming a sizeable autoethnographic component to the project (Parsley 2022). Her academic position as a Professor was also a source of capital in negotiating engagement with industry and she currently holds a position as Co-Chair for the Diversity and Inclusion Working Group of the Association for Electronic Music – a major global industry body.

The project represented a marked change in research direction for Samantha which she experienced as exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure. Neither gender studies, nor the music industry, were areas in which she had previously conducted any research, despite being known for her work

on creative approaches to management topics. She felt almost completely in the dark, terrified of starting again with a completely new project after so many years. She was also terrified of researching as an out and proud feminist given her working class background and upbringing in the 1970s around highly traditional gender-roles. Furthermore, *In the Key* was the first of her projects with the potential to have significant impact in non-academic contexts, indeed engaging with industry was an explicit aim of the research because the electronic music industry has a recognised problem with gender imbalance and is taking steps to address this (AFEM 2021; Future 1000 n.d.; Kahlert, Cirisano, and Oleksiyenko 2024; The Jaguar Foundation 2022). Although these factors were exciting and thrilling, they were also sources of extreme uncertainty and anxiety for Samantha. Coupled with her foray into a new musical pursuit in her early fifties, the onset of menopause and the Covid-19 pandemic, 'In the Key' pushed her far from her personal and professional comfort zone. We return to the 'pastiche self' Samantha was required to construct at the end of the paper where we explain how collage helps us see how we show up in our research.

Thinking and writing through letters

We were inspired to use letter-writing as the vehicle for this paper by several coincidences in our work as academics and creatives. These included Samantha stumbling upon Rautio's (2009) paper on correspondence as a research method filed and forgotten about in a computer folder relating to another project, and the publication of Chihaya et al.'s (2022) book *The Ferrante Letters: On Collective Criticism* which is a literary criticism of one of Beatriz's favourite authors (Elena Ferrante) conducted through the medium of academic friends writing to one another. For Chihaya et al. (2022), letter writing offers a way for feminist praxis, by dislodging

the fixation on individual productivity and its coldly quantified standards of academic success, refusing the culture of competition that defines many aspects of our profession ... enabling a plurality of methods, an amplified confidence in our different approaches to interpretation and appreciation. (9)

We were also pointed to the work of Robin Grenier (2015) by one of our kind reviewers who also demonstrates how conversation (in her case verbal) is a valuable tool for knowledge generation. Stamper (2020) supplies perhaps the most exhaustive review of letter-writing as a research method with fieldwork participants that we have found, and he offers an excellent step-by-step guide to using the method.

We also chose letters as our method following our own personal tradition in writing to each other, and because letters provided the time to read, reflect and respond to the stimulus of what they contain. Letter writing also mirrors the nature of collage, as a liminal and ill-defined type of art. As claimed by Jolly and Stanley (2005, 97), letters are located 'on the very borders of what constitutes a genre' while historian, Leskelä-Karki (2008, 329), points out that 'letters offer textual paths to explore how individuals construct themselves through language within a certain practice'. And with this in mind, let us leave the traditional academic narrative there and allow our letters to take over ...

Letter 1: letter writing, collage as a creative based method, anguish and fear

Considering the materiality and the process of making collage as an alternative to the use of collage as a qualitative research product for (psychoanalytical) interpretation.

Dear Bea

I am so excited to be thinking with you about the Oracle Collages again. I have loved making them since you introduced me to 'The Oracle' some years back and as you know I have developed the collaging around the cuttings quite

extensively so that they are rich and fun artefacts! After we visited the Eileen Agar exhibition last year you suggested that maybe the Oracle Collages I had been making over these past couple of years could be excellent 'reflective texts' to surface the emotional highs and lows I have experienced during my In the Key project - as an autoethnographic journal. We were inspired by all the layering and complex juxtaposition in her artworks, sometimes found motifs and sometimes motifs of her own making were put together which really resonated with how I am needing to hold together all my identities in this project. I loved this idea, and we tried to write a traditional academic paper but it stalled and seemed to be an aside to the 'real' thinking that we do in our WhatsApp chatting and conversations. So here we are placing the conversation centre stage - through letters to one another, I am so excited to read what will unfold!

So here are some reflections to get us started.

First of all, everything I have read about collage as a qualitative method seems to focus on the collage as a text to be read once it has been created. A text that contains overt and hidden messages that the maker is more or less aware of and is often analysed by one or more people independently of the collagist (or perhaps in collaboration with). This feels like a psychoanalytically informed mode of analysis - which undoubtedly has value, but I can't help thinking that it is also strangely detached from the materiality of collage-making. The value for me has been in the process, the making of the collage. Most of my collages have been made at periods of anguish or at least, indecision, such as feeling out of my depth when working with industry partners, being terrified of speaking out for women on social media (for fear of trolling and attacks), and feeling like I am not producing enough 'real' work from my project. So my first motivation for making collages was to help me deal with these feelings and doubts, de-fuse them somehow, through finding meaning in the Oracle, then being absorbed in the aesthetic process of selecting images and materials to cut, assemble and glue into place. Once I started making the collage, time would evaporate along with a lot of the anxiety I was feeling - I became lost in the stickiness of the glue, the precise detail of cutting delicate motifs, giggling and smiling at playful decisions to cut out an animal head and stick it incongruously on a fashion model's body, or other psychedelically inspired 'trippy' arrangements of colour, form and texture.

As I was in this process, the precise form of the collage was emerging through an interplay between the emotions I was feeling, the meanings I had ascribed to the messages from the Oracle, and aesthetic judgements relating to what fitted where, produced a pleasing and/or humorous juxtaposition. This shuttling back, forth and through was ongoing and generative - each decision led to another - sometimes I would go specifically looking for a motif that would fill a certain space and other times I just happened upon the perfect piece by flipping through all my magazines and scraps. As I began to arrange them, then stick them into place further meanings would come to me, that in turn would affirm or change the original meaning I was drawing from the words of the Oracle.

I wonder what thoughts you have on all this, from your knowledge of feminist art, methods and collage? I feel like through making the collages I was able to give form to deep, unsayable, formless feelings (usually unpleasant ones) and surface them for reflection in a way that was not only safe, but fun and hugely rewarding. I am deeply proud of the collages and deeply grateful to them for their help! I feel that this kind of method might have a lot to offer other researchers grappling with difficult feelings during their ethnographic projects.

Well, that's quite enough for now I think!

Looking forward to your reply my dear friend!

Sam xx.

Letter 2: the origin of Oracle collage

Explaining the Oracle Collage as a medium to piece together pieces of ourselves, allowing the integration of uncertainty and serendipity in reflective research/practice (Figure 3).

Dear Sam

Thanks for re-sparking the intention of this conversation about collage, feminism, oracles, and women writing (or any other creative non-binary endeavour)! We owe it to ourselves mainly and I think it is a nice way to reconnect with my friend Os, since he is such a creative influence in my life. Indeed, he has been doing the Oracle Collage for ages, and in his weekly instagram post he dutifully presents the post of the week. When I asked him about the process, he reminded me that as any other ritual, it requires disposition and concentration. Prior to 'summoning' (selecting) the phrases, he has a meditation, lights a candle and lets the process unfold. He also said: 'The consultation must be done in silence, read the phrases or pick any salient word, listen to its sound, its meaning, and unfold your emotions. An answer to your question will emerge, only if you connect to it sincerely. In this random configuration, you are the one who decides'.

When I moved to Europe, almost 24 years ago, he made me a small Oracle, which I consulted many times, until I started creating my own Oracle box, with phrases from the newspaper in England. It also became a 'conversation starter' with friends, as it is so revealing! Well you know that, since the Oracle has played a key part in our own friendship, and I gave you an Oracle box starter some years ago.

What has been interesting is how you have appropriated it as a compass to navigate through different emotional landscapes regarding the project of In The Key. You have also added a different visual language, your own, and the use of textures, glitter, fabrics, and many other tokens that made the collage a 3D, meta-textual artefact. That's the beauty of the Oracle Collage, it suits each person's needs and it responds to the 'sincerity' and the 'intention' of the reader.

Thanks so much for sharing your own feelings about In the Key. From outside we only see you as a role model: an audacious professor, without fears or doubts. I wonder if the collage is a way to conjure those fears?

When you write about your process, I see the ambiguity of the collage, the sparkling bits of excitement, with the heavy words of caution and self-questioning. And I am sure the result is as exciting as the Oracle Collage! We see life as several compartments: academic work here, creative practice there;

family life somewhere else. When we try to put them together, we are not very sure of doing one or the other. We don't need to 'think', it goes in the way it wants. Perhaps that's the beauty of collage: it does not matter. The whole point is to create these assemblages that ultimately work both for the maker of the collage and the viewer. Maybe collage is also healing and stitching (gluing) together those diverse parts of ourselves.

This is getting a long letter, and it is supposed to be a conversation ... but we know only too well that we don't exchange short texts, ha ha! This is an attempt to make our conversations into a form of collaborative writing, a vehicle for academic discussions with our own voices. Can this be a collage? I think so. Because a collage is not only a collection of images. It is a transformation, and this is perhaps the magic of collage: taking something that it is 'there' and transforming it into something new, extravagant, eccentric, humorous or intriguing. I think this is perhaps the intention of these letters: not only to cut and paste in the traditional academic collaborative writing, but rather bring the emotions, the body, the thoughts, and the writing together for our own appropriation of academic embodied feminine creative ... something.

Super excited to continue this,
Yours truly,
Beatriz

Letter 3: exorcising fears

Acknowledging the 'not-knowing' and 'doubt' of collage-making in making the familiar more unfamiliar so that you can assume an analyst role on your own experience (Figures 4–7).

Dear Bea,



Figure 3. Samantha's Oracle Box: a gift from Beatriz.

I'll start a new thread for each of our exchanges so that the text doesn't get too messy. I know that is a characteristic of collage - that messiness is generative, but when it comes to email and the potential to lose messages I don't think it's so helpful!

Thank you so much for your letter - as always you seduce me to think of different things I had not considered and the feeling of 'not-knowing' how you will respond to the points in my letters is a delight, especially given that we have talked at length about collage and this paper already! I will begin by continuing this theme of 'not-knowing' or as you put it 'not thinking'. Because yes, that is just how it is when I start to make the collage - I take the slips from the Oracle box you gave me after having a good rummage around in there, eyes shut and breathing relaxed, lay them out, read them, consider them and then I choose the background image and the first motifs. I try not to think so much. To let my emotions unfold. It is precisely this character that makes the process of collaging so powerful. That and that it is quick and easy to do. I don't really have to think about the form of the art, the medium, or the colour - as I would if I were painting or drawing - because all those things have been decided in advance because I am working with found materials, Campervan magazines, leaflets posted through my door, trashy magazines about fashion, old catalogues, you name it if it includes pictures I stash it in my collaging box! All I have to do is find them - by idly flipping through pages and looking through scraps until something speaks to me. Usually by making me laugh or aesthetically pleasing me - e.g. the body recognises them before the mind.

When that process is happening, I am not so much *conjuring* fears as exorcising them I think. I am turning the nameless, faceless, emotional churn of anxious feelings about whatever-it-is I am fearful of into a form where they can do no more harm. I am allaying (slaying?) those fears and making sense of them as irrational constructs by turning them into fantastical, comical, maximal, crazy texts. Fun, playful, Inert, *safe*. How can something be terrifying when it is reduced to child-like 'cutting and sticking'? When deep fears about not starting (let alone finishing) my research monograph are rendered hilarious in the juxtaposition of a tango dancing couple holding a vacuum cleaner, accompanied by a jumping cat and a cartoon battery wearing a Stetson, how dangerous can they be? I'm laughing as I write this (and will include a photo of the collage I am looking at with this letter) (Figure 8).

I'd like to back-track for a minute though to remember my scepticism about the Collage and how to begin with I thought it was new age airy fairy fortune telling mumbo jumbo. How can slips of paper that you cut from newspapers tell you the answer to anything?! Of course I smiled and went along with it because I have learned to just go with whatever flow you propose my darling friend - because it always leads somewhere wonderful and that I would never have thought to go myself. Yet sometimes the slips I draw out are really really *uncannily* relevant to the problem I have formed in my mind that I want to find resolution about. And of course it didn't take me very long to realise that Aha! Of course there is no external entity 'telling' your fortune, rather, it is the human mind (and heart's) ability to form



Figure 4. A big year ahead.



Figure 5. It's a pain being me.

narratives out of randomness that shows where the value lies. As you said in your quote from Oswaldo 'in this random configuration, you are the one who decides...' I guess the Oracle part is a kind of projective technique that through the phrases on the slips, and their materiality (size, font, paper



Figure 6. Patience trust and work.

type, colour etc) helps you think about things in a different way and come up with 'solutions' or advice to yourself *from* yourself. Coupled with the making of the collages after the slips are read/felt, this is what I think makes this method so useful as a way of reflecting on emotional situations during fieldwork for autoethnographers and ethnographers in particular. It's a way of making the familiar more unfamiliar so that you can assume an analyst role on your own experience – something that is at the heart of autoethnographic practice.

Before I sign off for now, I wanted to say some more about the emotional situations I made my Oracle Collages about – the fears – as you referred to them. My reaction to your observation that as a seasoned and experienced 'audacious' Professor I 'should' not have anxieties about my work made me momentarily quite cross! (only for a moment though my love...) In the Key was a project I started mid-career and mid-life, during my transition to menopause and at least half of it was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was a totally new academic venture for me – a new field, new theory, learning new skills as a music producer, combining these with my identity as a Professor and for the first time in my career I was working with industry and doing very public-facing research. I had no preparation for how it would affect me and no idea how difficult some of the episodes I experienced would be! On



Figure 7. For free.

top of this I was on a funded Fellowship which is very isolating even before you add in the reality of the profound separation that we all experienced during the lockdowns of the pandemic. So there were plenty of things to be anxious about. Some of these were indeed because I am a woman – such as being terrified of speaking out against sexism in the music industry and being attacked on social media, and others were more academy related – anxieties about what value I could actually bring to the music industry as an academic when the people I was involved with were doing such great work already. And when I was working on industry facing so-called ‘impact generating’ activities I was then worried that I wasn’t devoting enough time to analysing data and writing academic articles.

So I’ll leave it there for now and look forward to your reflections and responses.

Your friend,

Sam xxx.

Letter 4: collage as resistance

Collage as a medium to poke fun at the establishment, activate transformations and enhance auto-ethnographic practice (Figure 9).

Dearest Sam

I must confess I was eagerly expecting your response or the continuation of this conversation about



Figure 8. Tango vacuum cleaner.

collage. Our collaboration, dialogue and collegiature are very valuable for me and I feel that in the intersection of these three words, we can form the colla-gue, which somehow also suggests reveals the word 'glue'. Likewise to talk about this apparently playful/silly/mumbojumbo activity provides the elements for understanding the Oracle Collage as a technique.

Collage has also been a great way for me to exorcise/deal/tackle those fears, fears of perfection or fears when starting a creative project. As you said too it is turning the fear into something that can do no more harm. The historical fact that collage has been part of the feminine pursuits made it even more potent – after all scissors and a vivid imagination can be powerful weapons. The fighting strategy of the Oracle Collage is poking fun at the establishment, to reveal the ridicule of hegemonic/patriarchal structures. Indeed, the making of the collage is transformational practice – making some random cuttings into a cohesive/adhesive whole and by shifting your mood from fear to fun. I would argue that this type of art-based technique can be a perfect companion for any auto-ethnographic practice.

Thanks also for explaining the many identities and streams in the specific moment of your In the Key research. I read your letter several times and although I initially engaged emotionally with it, as in 'Oh my god, I was not aware of her complexity of feelings', in a second reading (and encouraged by your 'only for a moment' clarification) they look to me as 'fragments' or 'cuttings' themselves. Let me explain. There are many identities here: as a woman going through the big change of the menopause, hence shaking a well-developed identity; your own artistic departure from amateur DJ into a more professional practice; your development into a 'Professor with Impact', they are all overlapping with each other, creating something new, something unexpected, as an existential/ontological collage.

Collage in this case will be a mirror of your shapeshifting, a constant evolution and reshaping of identities and paths. Your own shape shifting when starting a project that apparently is uncomfortable and un-formed runs parallel to the collage practice, to take fragments, pieces, cuttings (of oneself?) into an unexpected new shape. Writing for this 'paper' on collage has become more like writing naturally, organically, womb-ly (as if coming from the womb ...) and seems to wink at Helene Cixous' call for women to



Figure 9. Some of Samantha's 'Tiny collages'.

write freely and wildly – what she calls the 'Laugh of Medusa' – to create an ecriture feminine, that can shift forms and be different.

In this regard, I am quite intrigued by your latest practice of the daily 'Tiny collage'. Especially in the last few weeks when you are preparing yourself for presentations, gigs, and the normal amount of academic work, alongside these letters. How do those collages 'reorganise' your attention? What are the transformations so far? And in the line of the above, how this tiny collage is also a way of poking fun, or transforming the domestic into another level of making/being?

*Sending you sticky hugs,
Beatriz*

Letter 5: the messy materiality of collage making

The power of playful aesthetics in revealing the vulnerability and honesty in academic research and profession (Figure 10).

Dear Bea,

Ahh – as ever you are so clever with your wordplay. I love that you used collage to evoke glue, and your mention of cohesive with AD-hesive as well. There is something in this 'stickiness', no? You signed off with sticky hugs too, perhaps from the hot weather, the flushes of the menopause, and of course sticky glue – joining, cementing, making separate things permanently together (if the glue is good of course). Coll-age also shouted 'colleague!' at me which I will leave you to read into. We are so much more than colleagues for sure, we have been friends for 17 years, can you believe that?!

I think I will start with your last point first as I am enjoying keeping my letters grounded in the materiality of the collage-making and yes I have very much been enjoying my new and current practice of making mini 'speed'

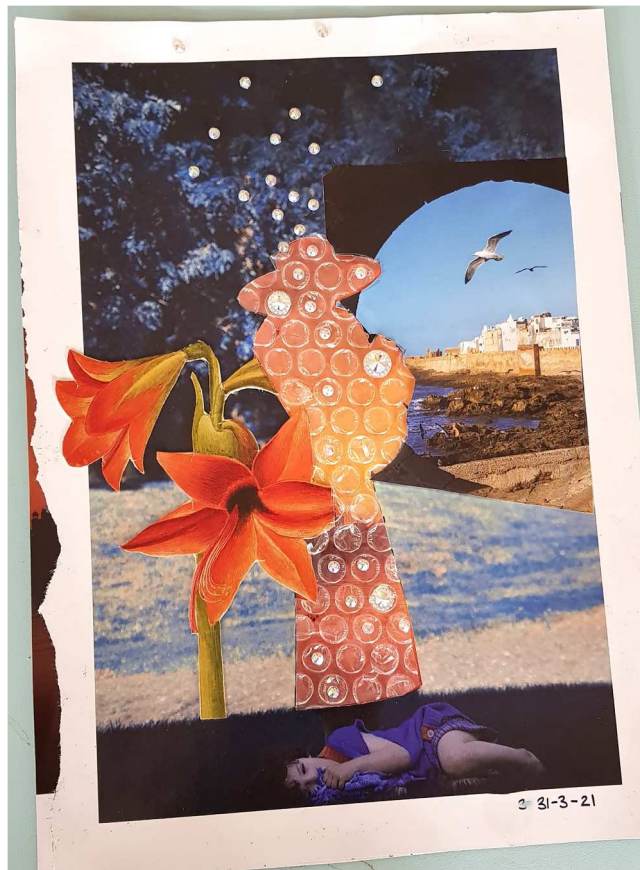


Figure 10. It begins with a feeling – a melancholic collage.

collages every day. It started the other day when I felt I was avoiding starting work for the day, in my home office-cum-studio and the familiar feeling of resigned slump churned in my stomach. Sigh. A commonplace scenario for all of us I'm sure, but what is always interesting to me (and frustrating!) is how I avoid things that on some level I actually want to do. Nice things. In this case it was working on the In the Key data analysis and book proposal. Why am I avoiding these tasks so much?!

I decided not to over-think that by going to the Oracle (which would take too much time), but make a small quick collage instead. I know how collaging shifts my mood fast and effectively but I also know how easy it is to get absorbed in the delight of making and the flow of the creation...if that happened there would be no time at all left to do the work, and then I would feel even worse. Hmm, that familiar procrastinator's spiral! So I set myself a limit of 20 min, and decided I would work with the motifs from my many boxes of materials that were readily to hand rather than trawling through it all looking for that 'perfect piece'. The size was dictated by the square on my daily planner that I usually use for writing a to-do list. I like the idea that I am obliterating that most symbolically violent symbol of the 'good worker' with the beauty, art and daft-ness of the collage. Definitely

poking fun at the establishment there, and it reminds me of all the other wonderful feminist art-based protests like guerrilla knitting, and subversive quilt making, Ann Ripplin's dolls, for example. I love these things because who can get mad at some pieces of wool, or cloth? Apparently benign, but deeply powerful - like so much of feminine energy.

Reflecting on this practice now, I can see how it allowed me to 'start' in a non-threatening way. I have found that any strategy that tricks me into starting without realising it works really well for me. I sneak up on myself in disguise and before I know it, I'm well underway. I guess it's a bit like distracting a toddler from a naughty activity, or impending tantrum by showing them something new and fun to do. Once I start collaging I feel productive, but of course I am producing something fun, through an enjoyable process, for no real purpose and just for me - although I enjoy showing them to others sometimes too. I think that feeling of being productive reminds me that I am a capable, self-determined person who is perfectly capable of writing a section of a report for a couple of hours, although of course at the time I am not aware of that at all - just the enjoyment of cutting and sticking. And the discipline of just 20 min, with limited materials, and every day makes me feel accomplished - that I can stick to things and get stuff done.

Reminding myself I am a competent, effective, 'starter-and-finisher' very much sticks to your idea about collaging identities - I think this is a topic well covered in the literature? It was you who helped me see that I was bringing 'all of the me's' to my collages and it was impossible - indeed, counter-productive - to try to separate them. One thing you missed from your list of 'me's' in your last letter was of course of person living through the Covid-19 pandemic - that strangest of times when I had all the time in the world, but couldn't make much use of it given the emotional turmoil and upsetting of 'the old normal' it brought. Perhaps the shrinking of our worlds at that time meant we had nowhere to hide from all those people that we are - we were locked down with all those multiple identities and it got crowded!

One thing I think my collages show is the complexity of things - it's like the world of connected yet disparate motifs that make up dreams - they make sense according to a logic that is not obvious nor accessible using our rational minds. Showing this messiness and complexity has always been part of my project as an academic - being vulnerable, open, honest about my processes to show (and hopefully inspire) others that it's OK not to be 'perfect', to behave in the assured, 'together' way that we have learned professionalism is. You can be successful AND be riddled with doubts, worried that you do half-arsed jobs, cut corners, and even don't give a shit about things that you feel you should. If only we were all more honest, how the artifice of the academy would crumble! Because no-one really prepares you for how things will *feel* when you are doing the many jobs of academia - in my case I wasn't prepared for how I would feel trying to balance my industry/ impact work with my academic persona and activity. I wasn't prepared for how 'following a new and sustained project of research mid-career' (as my Leverhulme Fellowship described it) would unsettle me. And most surprisingly of all to me was that I was woefully unprepared for how it would *feel* to do immersive ethnographic

research – after all these years of teaching about insider/outsider dynamics, ‘going native’ and the politics of fieldwork I had never really lived them. And that’s what the Oracle Collages in particular helped me with. Bringing those feelings from formless anxious murk in my gut, through the medium of aesthetics, manifested through my senses into concrete ‘art-me-facts’ I could regard and reflect on.

Well, this is a long letter, so I will stop there. I wonder if we can think together more about the properties of making, and of the senses in this process – what is it about the fingers, cutting, stitching, glueing, tiny fragments and recovered, saved, repurposed scraps that makes collage such a feminist pursuit, and such a secretly subversive one?

With much love.

Sam xx.

Letter 6: collage and getting loose

On the healing powers of beauty in re-stitching and glue-ing different identities.

Dear Sam:

I am delighted you are enjoying the process of making collages: they are a playful way to start the day, and if we want to ‘measure’ I bet you’ve made many. Can we say ‘many’ in the REF or TEF submission? Anyway, coming back to making collages and teasing ourselves to re-connect with work: I have been trying to go back to my own book (Bonito Living) and I found that although my desire is there, I found it difficult to go back. In my mind and heart I know it is something I want to do, but my body refuses, procrastinates, and gets distracted (in other words, it is afraid). I had to find ways to hook me and using tricks like changing the font, or the colour of the page have helped me to stick with it.

I’ve also found that the time I spent in me-time: e.g. the morning pages or my practice of dreaming and drawing, settles me down. My normal anxiety is notably reduced, and this mini-creative time allows space in my head to ‘be’ and prepare myself for the activities of the day. It is like a re-connection with beauty through making, that reduces the stress and prepares my brain for high-level activities such as working, decision making, teaching, and analysing. Beauty is like a great lotion that lubricates (and moisturises) our brain into the processes of the day, especially for us academics who are in brainy intensive jobs.

You write about the sense of accomplishment of completing the collages, the self-determination and keeping to the limits of time. It is easy to be carried away. Like in research, especially a project like yours that has turned to be deeper and more textured than expected, you may feel overwhelmed (I am overwhelmed with my own book project.) But it is important to get loose without getting lost, and I think your collages have been that – free space to let those doubts, realisations and discoveries jump out and down (like the materials you use and the textures you chose) while making sense. Moreover, in the research you are merging your academic and musician self, becoming both an actor and observer. You are doing this here, and that is brave. I am not sure if brave is the word, but it is daring and full of potential. The collage provides a space for the doubts from both sides, without prioritising one over the other. In a way, the collage is a place to stick those questions, but also it allows you to unstick and reconfigure them.

Which takes me to the field of pleasure, which shines through this letter! It is not about perfection, but having fun.

*I hope this letter has the same joyful and exciting effect in you,
Much love,
Beatriz*

Letter 7: writing as resistance

On the materiality and visceral aspects of writing and collage

Dear Bea,

It has certainly been a pleasure to develop our thinking in these letters together, and I hope that our readers will also enjoy this process too! At the start we did not even know about the C&O special issue, let alone intend to submit to it – such a wonderful synchronicity...because re-reading our correspondence today I am convinced that we have indeed collaboratively written an intimate encounter in these back-and-forth texts that our readers will feel for themselves as they read (I hope!)

Yes, you are right that there is a sense of accomplishment in completing the collages, but thinking about the Oracle Collages in particular, it was definitely the *process* that was generative for me – healing in fact – materialising (literally) what had hitherto been messy nameless murk swishing about in my body. The glue turning grey on my fingers as the print transfers from the newspaper cuttings – it starts to leave marks on the table and freshly cut pieces, so I go and wash my hands and realises I feel lighter, less embroiled in the trauma.

How can one reflect on stuff like that unless it's fished out and made safe? I got lost in the doing rather than wanting to reflect back on the completing, I was immersed in the making – the visceral touch of paper, glue, fabric and sparkly things... how can something be terrifying if it is funny? and covered in glitter? It is a powerful method for difficult research for sure. Perhaps that's why some feminist researchers have used it with refugees, migrants and domestic violence survivors.

Through its playful, fun, and often ridiculous character, collage – as you have explained in an earlier letter – is a subversive feminist method that I didn't even know I was following. I was just doing 'cutting and sticking' as I used to say to my children when they were little. It was our dear transcended friend and goddess Ann Rippin who taught me so much about how stitch-craft, quilts, fabric and making things from scraps has, throughout history, often been a key way women can challenge, subvert and resist. Often that involves coming together to do so through joint stitching of quilts and tapestries for example – indeed as we did during the 'Creative Parties' we held in lockdown together where we stitched and created talismans together over Zoom. I do hope that Ann is getting to meet all her feminist idols (and her beloved Walter Benjamin) on the 'other side'. My heart aches to think

that we'll have no more times like that with her – but of course she is always with us – intimately, through recollections like this.

Well my love, I think that is probably all I have to say on Oracle Collage. I wonder what we will make of these letters when it comes to assembling our paper? How will we cut and stick them together with other important fragments of context and embellishment? Whatever our end result, just like making collages themselves I have thoroughly enjoyed our process and without a shadow of a doubt I know that we have created some thinking and inspiration for others that could only have come through our intimacy as friends, and collaboration as scholars.

With all my love and thanks,

Sam xx.

The materiality of collaging and the contribution of bodily process

In our letters we hope you can 'feel' the physicality of leafing through magazines, tearing pages, and undertaking detailed scissor work. We hope to have communicated the tackiness of the glue under fingernails, and the affixing/ refixing of elements to one another as a visceral process that is emergent and contingent on the physical and aesthetic properties of the materials being used. The unfolding symbolism of the motifs that are selected (or randomly present themselves for use) often develop beyond any *a priori* intention on the part of the collagist. In the collage, we are able to play with the slips on the page, beginning to see what ideas emerge from the juxtaposition of words, imputed meaning and background image as we rummage through our box of collage materials. Taylor and Ladkin (2009), quote Richards (1995) on this process which we see as particularly pertinent in this paper: 'as the artist creates the work, the work creates the artist' (Taylor and Ladkin 2009, 60).

To date, we contend that literature on collage as qualitative research method has overlooked these processual and embodied dimensions in favour of the symbolic and representational content of the images and materials used. Taking these as a route to the 'inner world' of the collagist (e.g. Colakoglu and Littlefield 2011; Plakoyiannaki and Stavradi 2018), this view tends to treat collaging as an intentional process aimed at communicating apriori 'data' in response to the researcher's provocation rather than an emerging understanding-through-doing. As we note in our literature review earlier in the paper, an exception here is Culshaw (2019) who regarded her collagists' process part of the data as she observed their choices and discussions. We suggest that this process perspective is insightful. Experimenting with collage surprises us with flashes of excitement as we find an addition that is *just perfect*. We experience serene and soothing aesthetic pleasure in the emerging scene as we shuffle and paste motifs into place. It feels liberating and cathartic to tear pages from a glossy coffee table book with little regard for its 'proper' use, freeing us to question the unquestionable while doing so.

There are moments of frustration and poignancy, echoing our emotions reflected in the placing of certain objects / words / ideas together, or when we discover unsettling relationships between the ideas cut, placed, replaced, and glued and we feel these in our bodies *but safely*. Moments of frustration emerge at adding too much, of going over the top and not being able to peel the offending item off again, of having to live with our creative choices. When is it time to finish – and who can say when it is 'done' or not?

All of this bodily process helps us discover what we know and what we think. In Samantha's experience, the collages emerged through a series of performative decisions based on the juxtaposition and assembly of materials in-the-moment as the process unfurled. This allowed her to

make 'safe sense' of the turmoil she was living through, to stand back and gain the analytical distance needed to reflect on her experiences *as data* (Doloriert and Sambrook 2012; Ellis 2003). This is a vital part in navigating the politics of (auto)ethnographic fieldwork that are so often under-estimated by researchers before they enter the field, and indeed whilst there. Hibbert et al. (2022) point out that learning from negative, or traumatic emotional experiences is not necessarily straightforward and often overlooked as we rush to work out how to avoid them happening again, rather than using them more generatively *as data*. We contend that collage – and specifically its embodied character – is a powerful way to exorcise fears, express and 'make safe' doubts, and sanitise emotionally challenging situations through embodied and artful play. We propose that this dimension of collage be brought into the analysis as much as (or more than?) the final compositions.

Piecing it all together: reflections on letter-writing, collage and ourselves

To conclude the paper, we would like to end by reflecting on the lessons we have learned about how we 'show up' in our research processes and importantly how women exchanging letters with each other is a challenge to traditional, patriarchal (and even misogynistic) systems within the academy. Our experience expands on the potential for personal and professional learning as suggested by Jónsdóttir and Dyrnes (2019, 34) who argue that instead of working out 'who should teachers be?', it is important to explore 'who teachers are'. Adapting these questions, we think that the letters, as well as the collages, have helped us to challenge the (masculine) performativity of academic roles in university life more broadly (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2019).

We hope to have conveyed the embodiment and sensuality of writing letters, allowing time and the integration of daily life (fears, procrastination, deadlines) into the texture of the dialogue. The letters were written over the course of several months, weaving in the aspects of our lives that are not disciplined or normalised by the academic regime, which as we know, are wider, richer and more textured. The exercises of collage and writing, and collage letters opened new windows in the research process, while feeding an affectionate conversation. What started as an experiment has become a way of thinking collectively, collaboratively, collegiative, and *collage-tive*. The 'cola' (in Spanish) or glue (in English) uniting both collages and letters is the vulnerability and trust in not being judged and feeling safe. It is the hospitality of the dialogue, the possibility of containing something or somebody more than oneself, while reading, responding, creating and transforming our realities and our way of writing and being.

In our letters we bring together scholarship and daily life, even though sometimes this looks at odds with what we think either letters between friends, or professional colleagues should be like. They show our vulnerability, the pressures of playing different roles, and how we collage them into the tapestry of our daily lives. They also weave in scholarship with personal and methodological discoveries. This how is we actually how work together, but it feels almost like a guilty secret! There is no shortage of advice guides for early career academics on the importance of networking, strategically choosing co-authors who publish in the 'right' places and so on, but where are the prescriptions for friendship and intimacy? We hope that our approach in this paper reaches women who are new to the academy to show them that you don't need to behave, write or think like a man to succeed.

Moira Ferguson (1985, 31) calls this kind of writing 'personal polemics' or 'polemics of the heart', explaining how 'writings about love and friendship attack or subvert patriarchal domination quite differently, through affirming women in their support and love for one another'. This resonates deeply with us and we suggest that letter-writing as a method of academic collaboration might bring some of this gentler, affirming, *feminine* quality to all research teams, regardless of whether members have any kind of pre-existing relationship. Letter writing is asynchronous. It gives time for pause between utterances. Time to absorb and digest the views of others, and consider one's response carefully (Stamper 2020). It allows us to deeply listen to one another's positions and views in ways that synchronous methods can preclude due to interpersonal, personality, identity

and group dynamics. This kind of letter writing is easily enabled by technology these days, a simple Google Document can be viewed and edited by all, comments can be added, correspondents can use different coloured text and individual fonts. This has provenance in the method of ‘collective biography’ (Davies and Gannon 2006) whereby texts are jointly written by multiple authors to provide composite accounts – each person in the chain ‘writing into’ the previous person’s text, adding their experiences and ideas, growing the narrative.

Concluding thoughts, to stick things down

Writing differently does not mean breaking with all the hard-learned foundations of our academic training. Instead, it is about articulating all these mediums and techniques, creating new forms, poking fun at the pomposity of hard arguments, and letting the process evolve in an organic manner (Boncori 2022). This includes conversations, fragments, formulas, intentions and the great joy of a good phrase or thought. Here is where we see the closest connection between letter-writing as verbal collage and collage as the writing of ‘letters’ from the self. The process of collage surprises and delights us with the juxtaposition of images and taking things not so seriously, just as letters surprise us with their not-yet-known, compassionate dialogues in asynchronous time.

We hope to have shown how collage – Oracle or otherwise – can be an effective way to navigate the anxieties of oscillating between different identities, reflections and ways of thinking by sticking and juxtaposing in a way that makes them safe and less threatening. As such we return to the ideas of Blanca Ortiga and her view of collage as a fighting strategy: ‘Collage ... does more than reveal and open up available spaces for reification. It represents an avant-garde in a sense that is closer to fighting strategy: it opens new paradigms in artistic praxis as well as in theory’ (2019, 11). Whom we are fighting here is both the establishment of the academy, and our own internalisations of it in thinking who we should be as academics, and how we should act and feel. We are calling for a methodological polemics of the heart (Ferguson 1985).

So we end with an invitation to you – to find your correspondents, playmates and colleagues, and embark in exercises of writing, collaging, sparking, and sharing creativity and learning with those who have the time to play, to share, to listen and to respond with light, encouragement, wittiness and honesty. It has been a joy.

Affectionately yours,
Samantha and Beatriz.

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