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Deborah M Withers

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Deborah M Withers

Independent researcher

Abstract

This article presents a conceptual approach to feminist history that focuses on the strategies activists use in different temporal and spatial locations. The argument builds on recent insights within feminist theory and historiography that reveal an intimate relationship between historiography and epistemology in (feminist) knowledge politics. This article, however, probes the limitations of this relationship by focusing on how current historiographical methods exclude or dilute the actions and events of history through representation and citation. By examining the work of Jamaican theatre collective *Sistren*, and Bristol (UK) agit-prop group *Sistershow*, the article presents two ways to rethink temporality that makes those histories resistant to representation. This article argues for a more careful historiography that can do justice to the action of different historical temporalities. In the process, it opens emergent spaces and temporal challenges for feminist knowledge politics.

Keywords

Epistemology, historiography, improvisation, process, strategies

From the performances of the Suffrage Actress Franchise League in Edwardian Britain to contemporary street theatre in Iran; women activists using performance as a strategy in the Okmeydanı Social Centre in Turkey at the beginning of the 21st century to the agit-prop antics of *Sistershow* in Bristol, UK (1973–1975); from contemporary Bristol-based improvised playback theatre group *Breathing Fire* to the Jamaican theatre collective *Sistren* (1977–), women activists across time and space have used theatre and performance as a strategy to communicate political ideas.

Corresponding author:

Deborah M Withers, Melion Dolwion, Drefach Felindre, Carmarthen SA44 5UY, UK.

Email: debiwithers@yahoo.co.uk

This article starts from a simple premise: that feminists and women's rights activists have used similar strategies at different times and in different geographical locations throughout history. It argues that it may be fruitful to approach feminist history, and the history of feminist ideas, through examining the specific political strategies activists use/d, a conceptual approach I call *strategic affinities*. Strategic affinities is not a concept that calls for the *dissolution* of spatial and temporal boundaries, which subsume all differences into the logic of the same, nor does it operate as a 'fantasized narrative that imposes order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences' (Scott, 2011: 51). It is instead a concept that aims to elaborate the points of connection *and* divergences between feminist activists, writers, thinkers and world makers across different historical times and spatial locations.

Knowledge formation in contemporary feminism

This article aims to build on the insights of theorists such as Ann Laura Stoler and Clare Hemmings, who have highlighted the close relationship between historiography and epistemology within (feminist) knowledge politics. Both writers argue, in divergent manners, that the formation of historical knowledge is vital to the construction of *all* knowledge. In other words, 'we' base what is known on what is thought to have happened in the past. As Stoler argues, "epistemic habits" are steeped in history and historical practices, ways of knowing that are available and "easy to think" (Stoler, 2010: 39).

The aim of this article is to unsettle epistemic habits within feminist historiography that may have become common sense through their repetition. Hemmings (2011) outlined a key example of this, when she pointed out how the historical periodization of feminist theory (and the theoretical periodization of feminist history) is organised as narratives underscored by progress, decline or return. These representations do not necessarily correspond to the nuances, intricacies and specificities of what happened in feminist history. Instead they have been based on 'what we *think* has happened' (Hemmings, 2011: 133, my italics), and are subject to citation practices which allow these distilled stories to become part of everyday feminist knowledge.

Another key example of such epistemic habits within feminist history is the dominance of Wave-based representations. This is arguably one of the most common ways feminist histories have been, and continue to be, narrated. Wave-based understandings tend to be temporally and spatially specific, and problematically locate the origins, definitions and terms of feminist history as the purview of the West (see Batra, 2010; Caughie, 2010; Dean, 2009: 346–348; Graff, 2007; Tripp, 2006: 54). Wave-histories can also assign modes of activism to specific temporal sites (see Withers and Chidsey, 2010: 309–312), thus enacting forms of feminist historical knowledge that can be temporally and spatially static. It is such temporal and spatial rigidity that I want to depart from in this article by trying to bring into contact, and move more freely between, the different strategies used by women across time and space.

To mobilize the strategic affinities concept, that aims to facilitate greater proximities to the action of multiple feminist pasts across time and space, the 'disqualified knowledge' (Halberstam, 2011: 11) of grassroots activists needs to be taken seriously. The actions of grassroots activists, and the forms of (im)material culture they create, are often

not granted the same epistemological value as intellectually verified academic knowledge. This is partly because, as Niamh Moore (2011) suggests in her study of transnational eco/feminist activism in the 1990s, the dominant epistemic culture prevalent within feminist theory has chosen to ignore the 'extensive knowledges' (2011: 10) that inform activist practices. The risk of being labelled essentialist, emotionally invested or critically unsophisticated has often been too great for those wishing to perform academic authority (Stengers, 2008). Such an epistemic culture has, over time, prevented engagement with the action, knowledge and practices of activists.

Furthermore, as Maria Do Mar Pereira usefully formulates, feminist knowledge within the academy *in general* straddles 'the threshold of acceptability, as being reasonable and credible but only up to a point' (2012: 298). Even within feminism there are certain kinds of knowledge, such as those emerging from activist communities that may be perceived as 'too political', 'emotional' or 'self-interested' or 'partial'. Such knowledges risk transgressing the boundaries of credibility for the hard fought-for feminist episteme and are subsequently 'split off' in order to secure the 'proper' intellectual feminist project. As Gail Lewis explains in an interview conducted for the *Sisterhood and After* oral history project, where she reflected on how Black British feminist perspectives were not studied in UK Women's Studies courses during the 1980s (and subsequently beyond), such splitting racialized feminist knowledge as *properly* white: 'You got called out as voices and living examples of activism, you weren't called out as voices of and living examples of scholarship and theoretical development' (Lewis, 2013).

To consider this point further we might reflect on why the many publications written by women activists – from pamphlets, newsletters, newspapers, to manifestos and blogs – are not part of everyday citation practices used to form the basis of feminist knowledge. Why are publications like *FOWAAD!* or *Outwrite* not quoted for their sophisticated intersectional analyses of class, racism, imperialism, homophobia and sexism? Part of the answer is a pragmatic one: it is about access to materials and conventional disciplinary boundaries. One would expect, for example, a historian who is comfortable with archival work to engage with such texts, whereas a literary theorist may not. But another answer is about value and how knowledge becomes verified, legitimized and, importantly, how it circulates. Furthermore, the everyday actions that accompanied such publications, the processes and challenges that fomented their production, are also omitted as a source of potential knowledge. How can what 'remains differently or *in difference*' as 'bodily transmission' or a 'counter-memory' (Schneider, 2011: 105) also become part of knowledge production?

Yet it is precisely such textual, affective and performative remains that need to be injected within feminist historiography so the events and actions have the opportunity to shape and question dominant tendencies within feminist knowledge politics. Because of the close relationship between epistemology and historiography, epistemological practices need to be more careful in how they relate to the action of 'the past'. That is, they should be capable of handling the complexity of, and do justice to, the histories and lives they make a claim on through casual narration. For feminist epistemology to flourish, surely it cannot be based solely on abstracted, distilled narratives or habitually reiterated stories? Surely there are ways to infuse historiography with friction and movement so that it can be more like the event-ness of life itself? One possible way to enact a different

historiographical method is proposed in this article: to explore what activists *do* strategically across different spatial and temporal locations to change the world in a feminist way. It argues that we look again at histories assumed to be 'over' (mastered, finished). Not merely to *revise* those histories, but to rethink how time, space, alliances, connections and concepts impact on how historiography and epistemology are enacted, and can be enacted, in relation to feminist knowledge politics.

Strategies

By focusing on the strategies activists use I am not suggesting that a street theatre performance by a group of Women's Liberationists in Bristol in 1974 will be *the same as* a group of women activists using Invisible Theatre on the streets of Iran in 2010 (Behbahani, 2011). There are irreducible differences between these groups, even if a connection between them can be traced because they use a similar strategy: the actors, their life stories and audiences will be radically different, as will the way they move their bodies in public, so will the issues they raise, to name a few. They may not even call themselves feminists.

However, these women's actions – that take place in different spatial and temporal locations – do utilize a common *strategy* (that of theatre and performance) to communicate their political messages. They mobilize chance and surprise in order to reach new audiences in public spaces. Due to this, they share what I call a strategic affinity. Locating the affinities between strategies is one way to move flexibly across time and space while retaining a specific focus on the *actions* enacted by grassroots historical actors. That is, through making the connection between strategies it is a wider invitation to engage with the particularity of locations, experiences and situations of activists in feminist history. Similar to Regis Mann's Black feminist and womanist history of 'what might have been' (2011), strategic affinities present 'a counterhistory that permits *necessary* exchanges across time', and uses these exchanges to infuse the self-conscious feminist epistemological project which is aware of its rootedness in historical claims and practices (2011: 583, my italics).

Approaches to feminist history that examine the strategies activists use therefore create opportunities within time and space to explore the collisions between the commonality *and* the difference of what people do to make everyday interventions. Such occasions are also an opportunity to engage in a deeper and more proximate way with the particularities of situations. That is, to be able to take each historical action as 'it is' and on the terms of its own self-articulation – using, as far as possible, the materials, stories and actions of historical actors as a source of epistemological value. Strategic affinities aim to create a stage where and when the meaningful simultaneity of feminist actions across time and space are played out. As Michelle Bastian suggests, following Gloria Anzaldúa, it provides an opportunity 'to be coeval (i.e. to live in the same time with another) [and] recognise the multiple lines of time and of history that operate within the present, in ways that are not fully commensurable' (Bastian, 2011: 158). Strategic affinities are temporal and spatial experiments that account for specificity, complexity, disjuncture and resonance. They create opportunities for what Jacqui M Alexander (2005) calls 'crossings', producing occasions 'of living memory, of moments, of imaginings, which have never

ended' (2005: 278). These moments for Alexander are profoundly ethical, grounded in the desire to 'dare yearning for each other' (Alexander, 2005: 278). It is a yearning that creates openings for curiosity and emergent modes of proximity within a profoundly transformed understanding of space and time. It is a creative knowledge experiment with the emergent not-yet-known.

This article presents two case studies, the Sistren theatre collective from Kingston, Jamaica (1977–) and Sistershow from Bristol, UK (1973–1975), in order to demonstrate how exploring affinities between strategies can enrich the interrelationship of historiography and epistemology in feminist knowledge politics. In their very names the groups invoke the notion of 'sisterhood', a familiar feminist trope, and thus seem an appropriate place to begin this process. I have deliberately chosen to focus on activists who used theatre and performance because these strategies can support the

... interrogation of spatial and temporal (teleological) [normativities] and [facilitate] the telling/showing of oppositional versions of the past that propose not only different constitutive events but different ways of constructing the past in the present. (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996: 109)

An important quality of theatre and performance is that it lends itself to thinking about historical events in ways that are (a)live and in process. Rethinking how histories move across time and space, and understanding history as something both 'live' and not 'over' or, even, in 'the past', is key to the elaboration of the strategic affinities concept.

In this article I want to draw attention to actions that are not necessarily connected to specific political campaigns, or which seek to 'enter the corridors of power' (Roseneil, 2000: 3). My aim is to explore how the strategies used by Sistren and Sistershow are faithful to the many 'escape routes' (Papadopoulos et al., 2008) women's and feminist movements have imagined and practised across time and space. Such histories resist recuperation into what Papadopoulos et al. call the 'double R-axiom [rights and representation]' (2008: 27) of post-liberal sovereignty; political systems that exert control through the *inclusion* of marginalized subjects, thus 'reincorporating [them] into the workings of power' (2008: 69). Exploring the affinities between strategies can of course accommodate activists who pursue more reformist trajectories. History continually demonstrates that feminist movements, individual feminists and women's rights activists deploy multiple strategies in order to meet often very diverse ends. The point about focusing on the affinities between strategies is to be able to trace connections between the everyday events of feminist histories across time and space, and do justice to the specificity of the differences that may emerge in the process of comparison. My interest here lies with theatre, but your interest may be different – the call to explore strategic affinities is open.

Strategic affinities aim to get closer to what 'emerges [in the] historical irruption' of ephemeral (and sometimes undocumented) actions in order to consider '*the incision* that it makes, the irreducible – and very often tiny – emergence' (Foucault, 2002: 28) within the social. These are events that circulate but may not have been captured themselves in the practice of narrative or monumental history making. These are the gestures, the touches, the preparatory conversations, the silences and hesitations that are central to experience but are seldom recorded in the drive for narrative coherence. They are integral to understanding both of my examples in this essay, Sistren and Sistershow.

To begin I introduce Sistren. Sistren's work will be used to explore a relation to historical knowledge that is based in processes and the creativity drawn from everyday events. Such an orientation provides a way to rethink historiographical temporality that does not enclose action as past, finished or over. Rather, the processes Sistren deploy in the work described below create a space where the action of *doing* is embedded within the final 'product', as the film documents the process of making it, rather than presenting a neat, finished representation. Both Sistren, and later Sistershow, offer two counter-temporalities that will help elaborate the strategic affinities concept. In their different ways both present a challenge to temporal forms of knowledge production that assume 'we know' what happened in 'the past', and without hesitation therefore represent its multifarious happenings. Let us stop for a moment then, and trace the steps into the moment of action with the help of the Sistren theatre collective.

Strategic affinities I: The Sistren theatre collective

They are a theatre collective with a difference ... they develop their material from *real life*. (Thomas, 1987: 70, my italics)

Sistren are a Jamaican based women's theatre collective. Formed in 1977 through an employment programme run by Michael Manley's socialist government, at its inception the group comprised mostly of working-class women (Ford-Smith, 1986: xxii). Sistren were part of a 'global explosion in the 1960s and 1970s of third-world grassroots theatre' (Green, 2004: 474). They were influenced by methods from Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed', but were different from many groups because of their explicit focus on working-class women's issues.

Honor Ford-Smith from the Jamaica School of Drama became their artistic director in 1977, and they worked closely with her throughout the 1970s and 1980s. During this time they produced many critically acclaimed productions including *Bellywoman Bangarang* and *Nana Yang*. Their work and collective practices, which are renowned internationally, have afforded them an almost mythological status among their followers. Elena Thomas, for example, wrote in 1986:

First there is the myth that poor Black working class women cannot achieve anything worthwhile. Sistren disproved this decisively in their earlier period. Second there is the myth that women cannot get along with each other. Sistren disproved this from the beginning and continue to do so. Third, there is the myth that people from different class backgrounds, yea, of different races and colours cannot unite and work together for the good of all. Sistren is a living example to the contrary. (Thomas, 1987: 69)

Such eulogizing of Sistren's ability to foster inter-racial and inter-class alliances is understandable considering the vast archive of material the group produced, and continues to produce. Their work includes plays, films, *Lionheart Gal* (a book of life stories), a quarterly magazine *Sistren*, screen prints, a research centre, popular education workshops and other empowerment initiatives. The impact of the group's feminist work is transnational: Gail Lewis has spoken of the significance of Sistren's visits to Brixton Black Women's

Group during the 1980s, describing the experience of participating in their workshops as healing and transformative (Lewis, 2014).

For issues of space I cannot offer a historical overview of all of Sistren's activities (for further research see Ford-Smith, 1989; Green 2004, 2006; Smith, 2013). My discussion focuses on their 1985 film *Sweet Sugar Rage*. The film is an example of how Sistren used particular processes (collective working, participatory research, interviews and workshops) devised from theatre practice that were then applied to other creative forms. *Sweet Sugar Rage* dramatizes a meeting between 'town and country women' with the aim of creating cross-class solidarity and consciousness. It demonstrates how

... the harsh conditions facing female workers on a Jamaican sugar estate are revealed through the eyes of SISTREN THEATRE COLLECTIVE. Against a background of massive layoffs in the island's essential industry of sugar, a SISTREN drama-workshop is a vehicle for unearthing intimate documentary material on the women workers. (Sistren, 1985, caps in original)

In the film 'the eyes of the Sistren theatre collective' intimately engage with the sugar cane workers' lives. However, through lengthy interviews the voices of the workers are foregrounded. The film tries to avoid romanticizing the meeting between the 'town and country women', as it respectfully holds in place the tension 'between the infectious energy of Sistren and the *hesitance* of the rural women' (Sistren, 1985, my italics). The film demonstrates how 'personal testimonies, a hallmark of the company's work, were used to empower diverse groups of women, from prison inmates to sugar workers' (Smith, 2013: 866). *Sweet Sugar Rage* is a documentary about the working processes of the group *as much as* it is about the sugar cane workers' struggles. Because of this, it invites the viewer into a different temporal experience of storytelling that resists forms of representation that smooth over the fissures of process in order to present a story without rough edges, false starts, mistakes, frustrations or interruptions.

This is an important quality to retain when constructing a historiographical method that can account for the processes and actions of feminist history. As Hemmings has demonstrated, within narratives about the feminist past that circulate within epistemic communities, there is an ironic dissonance between their historical unreliability and narrative authority. Narratives that depend on an abstracted understanding of 'past' historical action are 'secured and made believable' (Hemmings, 2011: 20) not through historical accuracy or proximity, but through patterns of collective recitation. Stoler also points to the habitual 'ways of knowing that are available and "easy to think"' (Stoler, 2010: 39) that shape the construction of knowledge. But what if historiographical knowledge is not easy to think but always demands careful attention to historical actions? What if historical knowledge is *difficult* to represent and, indeed, resistant to representation? What other conceptual tools are required that can do justice to what happened as history? How can challenging forms of knowledge that demand particularity and careful explanation translate within citation-based epistemic communities without diminishing what they 'are'? What if the point of historiography is not to *secure* knowledge or render it *believable*, but to rupture the fixity that 'the past' could ever be secure (hence, that there can ever be 'a' *past*)? How can historiographical methods help *astound* those that encounter the material events and thriving life of history and take the of risk narrative incomprehensibility?

Developing a non-representational approach to historiography could be helpful here because it 'locate[s] the making of meaning and signification in the "manifold of actions and interactions" rather than in a supplementary dimension such as that of discourse, ideology or symbolic order' (Anderson and Harrison, 2010: 2). Within such a framework, the minute details of production, the interpersonal discussions of what to do next and the dress-rehearsal that are so often excluded from 'final' accounts of the past, *can* become intelligible, necessary and legitimate forms of knowledge. And it is such non-representational knowledge that *Sweet Sugar Rage* offers. It facilitates a rethinking of historiographical positioning and, from that, epistemology. For *Sweet Sugar Rage* is a document of what Sistren *did* in order to gain material for the film: it re-enacts their search for working-class Jamaican women who would be willing to share their story. It teems with actions and interactions and undermines representational norms by refusing to leave them out of the final cut because they are what is interesting, part of 're-defining ... the parameters of political process and action' (Ford-Smith, 1986: xv).

As such, the film offers an opportunity to experience proximity to the *events of process*, a temporal experience within storytelling that can shift viewers closer to the action of what happened as it was happening. Of course *Sweet Sugar Rage* is still a representation, but crucially it refuses normative expectations of linear representation, and thus incises a different experience of time. Through relaying the actions of the group by proximate documentation it invites viewers to *think with* the practices of Sistren in order to explore solutions to the material conditions and everyday lived realities of the sugar cane workers' lives. By thinking with these practices, there is no conclusion or representation, only *doing* and *activation*. The temporalities the film makes known, offer insight into a historiography where the time of action is never finished: life is ongoing and so is history.

After the intensive field research, the film focuses on the story of Iris, '25 years a sugar worker [who] recounts the scandal of her clash with unions and management over her right to equal pay as a female field supervisor' (Sistren, 1985). The action then moves back to Kingston, where Sistren facilitate a workshop in which participants 'confront, through role-play, the problems facing sugar workers' (Sistren, 1985). The workshop is an immersive experience, aiming to create conditions of embodied proximity to the sugar workers' lives. We see participants carrying heavy objects that help them 'to really feel what things are like for the women workers and how strong they are' (Sistren, 1985).

Through improvisation, Sistren re-create Iris and the sugar workers' story, demonstrating a proximity to action and experience that the film, as a whole, enacts. The performance is followed by discussions, where the participants' grapple with the political problems they see depicted before them. The aim of the workshop is to find creative solutions and alternative stories that can change the dominant script that is perpetuating inequalities within society. These stories enable the possibility of constructive collective action and self-organization that offer practical solutions to women's low pay and exploitation. The participants, comprised of rural and urban women, then *act out* collectively produced alternatives, as they become a source of inspiration to 'change the things that keep the [women] down' (Sistren, 1985). The film demonstrates how theatre and acting offer marginalized people unique political tools which help them develop alternative visions for the organization of society. Through movement, re-creation and

verbalization, difficulties are shared in a process that utilizes both practical problem-solving skills and the imagination to change situations that may seem fixed or insurmountable.

The workshop discussions also create spaces where women from different social and economic backgrounds can meet and speak to each other. The conversations highlight the persistence of power inequalities based on class within Jamaican society, as the voice-over informs the viewer:

Working class women think that using Iris' story as the basis of education is not enough. Unless middle class women are prepared to give up their privileges and fight for changes alongside us, there will be no solution. (Sistren, 1985)

As working-class women articulate the persistence of structural inequalities and privilege that maintain the prevailing organization of society, the possibility of unity and a happy ending is arrested. Viewers are instead faced with the lived reality of the *unending* story of oppression and struggle. While it may be tempting to see this as an admission of hopelessness, this is countered by the myriad of strategies the film presents that can reshape personal and collective action in the face of inequalities. 'Women in groups *begin* to see the problems we feel are private and personal are really determined by the economic and political structures around us' (Sistren, 1985, my italics). The film depicts both the frustrations and hopes of the women involved, while suggesting that such activities are part of grassroots practice that can eventuate in collective and individual empowerment by directly engaging with the material realities the women are immersed in.

While I have only been able to engage with one aspect of Sistren's hugely important work, I have chosen to focus on the processes of *Sweet Sugar Rage* because it enacts temporalities grounded in the difficult theatre of lived action. It offers no way out of this challenge, highlighting the restless struggle at the heart of social transformation and foregrounds the complexity of lived experience. In order to trace a strategic affinity across feminist time and space, I will now move to a very different geopolitical reality: that of the agit-prop theatre collective Sistershow, who were based in Bristol, UK, from 1973 to 1975.

Strategic affinities, 2: Sistershow

Sistershow were an anarchic Women's Liberation theatre troupe who used arts and entertainment to break with the 'amendment led' (VT West, 2000) politics of the Bristol Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). Like Sistren they used women's everyday lives as source material for their drama making. Pieces such as *Bored Housewife* and *Impregnated Duster* critiqued the inertia of the middle-class housewife, while *Menstrual Cycling*, *Female Bisexual Song* and *Rape Dance* underlined the group's desire to startle audiences and question social taboos. Like many of the alternative theatre groups in the late 1960s and 1970s in the UK, they were influenced by surrealism and Dada, and used tactics drawn from these movements to shock audiences into new forms of political consciousness, inflected, of course, with a feminist slant.

Sistershow's 'happenings,' or what key member Jackie Thrupp called 'interruptions' (Rook, 2009), took place on the street and in more traditional venues, such as the Almost Free Theatre in London (1973) and the Bristol Polytechnic Theatre (1973). The organization of the group was based on collective principles, and meetings were characterized by heated discussion and conflict (Rook, 2008; Taylor, 2010). Due to the intensity within the group, at a time when the language to describe the politics of Women's Liberation was only just emerging (VT West, 2000), Sistersshow only worked together for three years before disbanding.

In this time Sistersshow developed no formal repertoire or infrastructure, and left behind few 'completed' documents from which it would be possible to faithfully reconstruct their performances. Archive material of the group was collected for the *Sistershow Revisited* public history project (2010–2011). This resulted in an exhibition, online blog archive and catalogue that aimed to revive the cultural memory of Sistersshow and related histories of the Bristol WLM for contemporary audiences. The Sistersshow archive includes written and photographic documents, as well as a selection of oral histories that were conducted with the surviving members. It is accessible at the Feminist Archive South in Bristol (UK).¹

Despite efforts to collect as much information as possible about Sistersshow for the project, there is still a lack of clear and formal documentation of what the group did on stage. This is largely because the theatrical method the group privileged was improvisation, both in live performance and as a way to generate ideas in rehearsals. Placing so much emphasis on improvisation was a source of frustration for some members who wanted to develop the sketches into formalized scripts. Others, such as Thrupp and VT West delighted in the method, revelling in its potential for disruptive spontaneity. It is the potential of improvisation that I focus on in the concluding part of this article. I want to suggest that the singular temporal moment of improvisation is another tool that can bring the distance of represented history, where we encounter what happened abstractly, after the fact, into proximate contact with diverse historical temporalities, and therefore diverse expression of historical action. Within the context of Sistersshow the improvised sketches were particular to the unique moment in which they occurred. As activist Dale Wakefield remembers, 'we'd often do a march and Pat and Jackie [two key members of Sistersshow] would turn up and do a performance. I don't think it was planned. If you saw it you saw it. If you didn't, you didn't' (Wakefield, 2011).

This is not to say that such performances did not continue to have an impact on those who saw it, or on those who performed in them after the event had finished. Such an improvised performance 'never completely disappears but, instead lingers and serves as a conduit for knowing and feeling other people' and, crucially, other historical times (Muñoz, 2009: 113). This article is clear evidence of the potential of ephemeral events to inspire and activate something in those that learn about them after they have occurred, no matter how fragmentary the remains are. It is important to stress, however, that the singular improvised performance only happened once. The re-experience and reinterpretation of events in memory and interpretation should be understood as a qualitatively different time to the moment of their singular occasion. There can be no representation of the improvised event, such traces 'remain ... differently or *in difference*' (Schneider, 2011: 105).

Accepting this, how does such an understanding of time affect *how* historical knowledge can be constructed? Ethically, how can the improvised event that 'make[s] ...

people capable of thinking and feeling' (Stengers and Pignarre, 2011: 136) be understood on the terms of its own possibility? What demands does it place on those attempting to convey the sense of history that can do justice to the particular historical time the improvised performance enacts? The improvised moment unfolds through its articulation. It draws on the immediacy of the environment it is performed within, accruing the textures of space and bodies as they act responsively to each other's movement. Improvisation may include 'references to highly current incidents or to the reactions of audiences [which] foster an intimacy' (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996: 127), relaying singularity of temporal action. While improvising actors inevitably bring their personal histories, experiences and memories to the creative moment in which improvisation occurs, the moment of improvisation itself is absolutely singular. How is it possible to cite and represent the improvised event without undermining what it *does* to the time of action and knowledge? And becoming proximate to the singular understanding of time, how can this facilitate a different kind of ethical historiography? How can the improvised moment be used to render transparent what happens in process of representation and how it serves to alter events, to make them differ from their singular moment of occurrence?

Despite uneven documentation, Sistershow's traces resonate with Alexander's 'archaeology of living memory' (Alexander, 2005: 278): fragments, sketch ideas, performance items, song sheets and now deteriorated photographs. These forms of ephemeral cultural artefacts cannot represent themselves – at least not in terms of normative temporalities of representation that have a beginning, a middle and an end. They do not offer representations that appear to tell 'the whole story'. Narratives, through the logic of teleology, performatively announce their coherence and historical completion (that is their end, their past-ness). Archives and histories such as those offered by Sistershow are an opportunity to engage the imagination and force meaningful encounters with the dissonances of history: its gaps, its elisions and incompleteness. Such a fragmentary archive invites consideration of what historical actors did *as well as* what they said or left behind that can, potentially, become proximate to the complexities of historical events in their everyday manifestations.

Within the context of Sistershow, to know that *such events were interrupting*, to draw on Thrupp's terminology, rather than to have a complete record of its occurrence, is its historiographical possibility. It suggests a different historiographical orientation. One guided by force, fragment, incision and event rather than comprehensive documents and secured, believable, secondary representation. Such a historiography provides tools for working with ruins, absences and deteriorated traces, for being suspicious of any kind of statement that seals questions, rather than (re)opening them. As VT West asked in 1973, during the throes of her creative political adventure with Sistershow: 'where do we find this new consciousness and from where do we get our shoves? By doing, by exploring and acting on what we newly perceive.' This exploration is bound up with action and shoves, doing and movement. It may feel chaotic, but it is difficult to think and it is alive.

Strategic affinities: Re-opening the incision

This article has argued for a different approach to feminist and women's history that is capable of drawing complex alliances between seemingly disparate forms of action across time and space, thus creating opportunities for surprising alliances. I have called

the approach strategic affinities. Using this framework to explore feminist histories is a pragmatic call for a focus on the strategies activists use as a means to resist the temporal and spatial enclosure that can contain feminist historiography. Focusing on strategies is potentially more flexible, creating room for proximate feminist encounters across time and space. Strategic affinities are therefore conceptual tools which can facilitate access to 'the different cartographies of feminist struggle in different parts of the world; *our different histories*; where they change course and *how they diverge*' (Alexander, 2005: 264, my italics). It is not the only alternative method for exploring how different encounters can take place, but it is a call for change from current practices. Strategic affinities are thus motivated by strategy itself. They offer practical tools to think and act without the flattening effects of representation, the temporarily settled historical dispositions that often catch the act of thinking before it can move. They call for a keen attention to both activist and knowledge-making practices, foregrounding what people did as the means by which what is known as history and, consequently, knowledge can be transformed.

So, what are the affinities between the strategies of Sistren and Sistershow who took the centre stage in this discussion? From making such a connection between these very different groups of women, my aim is to pursue the multiple divergences that emerge from their common method of theatre and performance, focusing in particular on how they can help us to think the temporality of knowledge differently. For what both groups offer, in their varied ways, is an *unleashed* historicity that presents concrete ways of reworking historical time that could prove useful for subsequent machinations of feminist knowledge politics, should it continue, of course, to rest on the intimate relationship between historiography and epistemology. Whether it is concern for an understanding of time as process from Sistren's *Sweet Sugar Rage*, or the singular unrepeatable moment of improvisation of Sistershow's spontaneous street performances, both these tools are ways to think with history that cannot be reduced to representation alone because 'after' does not exist within their temporal enactments. Both groups' strategies – in very different ways – present temporal demands for the texture and materiality of everyday life to become part of the fabric of historiographical understanding. Crucially this demand is met by the possibility of their creative archival legacy and the residues Sistren and Sistershow have left within the social. These circulate haphazardly, inconsistently and opportunistically, waiting to be encountered by those open to such occasions. Strategic affinities are offered as a concept that aims to widen the incision that ephemeral actions make so that the cut is left gaping open. In this space, where temporality is reworked in multiple ways and secure representation is rendered impossible, epistemology and historiography have the opportunity to combine in ways that are exciting and emergent.

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1. You can visit the materials via the University of Bristol's Special Collections: oac.lib.bris.ac.uk/DServe/, reference number: DM2606 Sistershow Revisited.

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