

**The art of herstory keeping: The Feminist Library's materialities and
organisational practices**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Resource
Management and Organisation Studies

Essex Business School

University of Essex

September 2023

Declaration

I confirm that this thesis has not been submitted in support of an application for another degree at this or any other university. It is the result of my own work. Many of the ideas in this thesis were the product of discussion with my supervisors, Professor Melissa Tyler and Dr Louise Nash, as well as my participants.

This thesis is less than 80,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, references, and appendices.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to my supervisors, Melissa Tyler and Louise Nash, for their enthusiasm, support, constructive criticism, and advice, which have enabled me to complete this thesis on time and to the high standard expected, while also enjoying the journey. Without them, it is difficult to imagine this thesis coming together.

I am also deeply grateful to my participants, who have offered their time and insights without expecting anything in return. I have learned so much from them about the subject of my research, while enjoying the process, even in the most unexpected moments. It is hard to imagine the shape of this thesis without their generous insights. I must add here that this part of the acknowledgments must also extend to the whole community at the Feminist Library, as, over the years, I have learned much from everyone I met there, and I will forever be grateful for the experience.

I am also thankful for my friends and family who have supported me on this PhD journey. I am particularly grateful to Ayo and Jolanta who provided a source of unwavering, loving support, especially in the most testing moments.

Finally, I am also thankful for the support provided by the wonderful community at the University of Essex.

The Art of Herstory Keeping:

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Abstract

This project explores feminist organisational practices and materialities using the case study of the Feminist Library in London. The conditions of possibility and production of feminist organisational space are at the core of this project, considering the precarious nature of the Library. Alongside this, the research examines the changing nature of the feminist space today, particularly in the context of the digital era and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of difference in the production of feminist space is another important point of focus. In order to understand why the Library continues to 'matter' (to signify something of substance and value), I explore the experiences of the people who produce it and the different meanings it has for them. The research is based on nine in-depth interviews with workers and volunteers (some of them former), alongside autoethnographic reflections based on my work at the Library, and the organisation's archival materials. The main conceptual contribution of the project is a (queered) feminist re-conceptualisation of the social production of space as defined by Lefebvre (1991). It acknowledges the importance of change and difference and the multiplicity of perspectives and stories that make the Library what it is, whilst also pointing to the gaps in previous conceptualisations of the social production of space which often exclude marginalised perspectives. The findings of this research should be of interest to scholars within the field of organisation studies, as well as gender/women's studies. Importantly, as this research is autoethnographic and based on a feminist organisation, it also highlights potential learning and openings for further conversations within the Library community, as well as activist and archival communities more broadly.

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¹ Credit: Eva Megias/pops_comixs.

² Credit: Veronica Planton.

³ Credit: Holly Trill.

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Introduction

It can be argued that feminism has never had a fixed abode. That even during that era, which both of us remember, in which feminism seemed to be housed everywhere (and even had its own houses), it was never an 'it'. However, reified it seemed to become in some narratives, feminism has always been a journey with divergent as well as coalescent paths; a process of contestation and a politics of motion, in a word, a 'movement' (Epstein and Steinberg, 1996: 1).

Yet, as Woolf (1929: 6) famously declared (speaking metaphorically, but also quite literally):

'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction;' or to do any other work, we might argue. Therefore, the key query behind this thesis is: (how) does feminist space matter today? It inspires the first research question: how is feminist space produced, and what are its conditions of possibility? These questions become even more pertinent in the digital era – and in the wake of the pandemic – as the viability of physical spaces, especially those that can seemingly be digitally replaced or that do not generate obvious capitalist value, such as libraries or community centres, is called into question.

Therefore, another key research question of this thesis is: how is the social-materiality of the Feminist Library evolving and what is its potential futurity as a (queered) feminist space?

Further, the role of different and changing feminist perspectives in the building of the story of the Library is also crucial here, as it helps build a picture of the feminist space in the twenty-first century as an ever-changing, discursive, transformative space – a space of queering, as I will show here. Thus, another core research question of the thesis is: what theoretical resources help us make sense of how the Library is produced as a feminist and queer community? As the Feminist Library sits at the intersection of these issues, it appears particularly precarious, yet pertinent to these questions, and provides an excellent case study for the thesis.

Seeing that the project is autoethnographic, I start with my story of getting involved in the Library, which will also highlight the importance of considering the continuing struggle and precarity of the space. I worked and volunteered at the Library between 2016 and 2021, initially as a member of the management collective and then as its Premises and Fundraising Coordinator, while also organizing some events. I continue to be involved with the Library as a member of its community more broadly, often visiting and occasionally contributing to its exhibitions and collections.

This story is also a reflection of the feminist adage, the ‘personal is political’ (Hanish in Lee 2007, 163). It is personal, as I got to know the Library through attending its events. I later became both a volunteer and worker at different points during my time at the Library (although at times simultaneously). The story is also intensely political, however, as in addition to the timely issues making community spaces like the Library precarious that I already mentioned above, the organisation’s spatial precarity is positioned in the context of twenty-first century London: a city that, despite its rich feminist history¹¹ and claims to fame, including its ‘feminist Mayor’¹², is subject to widespread gentrification and the closure of community spaces that often accompanies it¹³. The questions that this raises about the conditions of (im)possibility of feminist space (and similar spaces more generally) propelled my research.

The personal and the political of my involvement in the Library were closely intertwined from the beginning, as I first started volunteering there around the same time as and because

¹¹ See e.g.: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/how-we-live-now-reimagining-spaces-with-matrix-feminist-design-co-operative>.

¹² See: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/proud-feminist-sadiq-khan-unveils-plan-make-london-best-city/>.

¹³ Among them, feminist, queer and women’s spaces. The Library is but one example of a feminist and women’s organisational space that came under threat around the same period. I will go into some examples of these other spaces in the following chapters.

of the organisation's most recent spatial crisis (in 2015-16), which threatened its home of over 30 years (and by extension, its existence altogether) because of unsustainable rent increases. The crisis was very much part of the austerity and gentrification politics enveloping London at the time (and since), and affecting spaces and community organisations across the capital (and beyond), as well as a longer trajectory of spatial crises disturbing feminist spaces, including the Library, for several decades¹⁴. I found out about the latest crisis at the end of 2015, and I got involved right at the start of 2016. In my naivete, I initially started thinking that I would quickly settle what I thought must have been a 'misunderstanding' – surely, the Council (landlord) could not seriously expect the Library to cover a rent increase of 150 percent? I was to have a quick political education in the state of twenty-first-century London gentrification instead. I learned about the many other community centres and libraries closing across the city¹⁵. I then helped organise a protest and a petition, as well as fundraising and media campaigns designed to prevent the Library's eviction and an unsustainable rent increase. I eventually also helped find its 'new' premises in Peckham, where the Library was relocated in 2019.

It was also because I became involved in the Library during this time of spatial crisis that I first found out about and started researching the wider context, including the much longer history of closures and precarity of feminist spaces, which has affected the Library on numerous occasions over the years. This precarious history began, arguably, in the mid-1980s

¹⁴ For example, as the Lesbian Bar Project helped highlight, the number of lesbian bars in the US has declined from about 200 in the 1980s to roughly 20; see e.g.: <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/lesbian-bar-project-chronicles-decline-women-s-queer-spaces-n1269463>. Similarly affected were, for example, feminist bookshops, see e.g.: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbw7j3/feminist-bookstores-women-activism-history>. Admittedly, a recent resurgence in interest has also been reported both in the US: <https://msmagazine.com/2023/01/21/feminist-bookstores/> and the UK: : <https://www.stylist.co.uk/books/feminist-bookshops-uk-london-second-shelf-history/255823>.

¹⁵ See e.g.: <https://www.newstatesman.com/business/economics/2015/11/we-lose-our-community-centres-cuts-we-are-losing-our-humanity-nation>.

when the Thatcher government decided to scrap the Greater London Council (GLC) and the great support it offered for feminist and other community spaces (see e.g., Gelb, 1989).

Indeed, the personal-political context of this thesis is also deeply entwined with the networked nature of feminist activism more broadly, as I only got involved directly with the Library because I was told about the crisis by a friend who has been involved from its foundational days. Thus, it is due to the deeply entwined nature of the personal and the political in my experience of the Library that I became a researcher on this topic – with a profound need to build an understanding of the conditions that make it (barely) possible for a feminist space to survive in contemporary century London.

Thus, this thesis is as much a piece of feminist activism as it is research – a nod to the much longer histories of feminist struggles, acknowledging their importance for feminist scholarship and community, and aiming to contribute to this larger theoretical-activist landscape by expanding the understanding of the production of feminist spaces, and their conditions of possibility; situating it as personal, political, and theoretical. This is reminiscent of Zeffiro and Hogan's (2015: 37) words:

For us, feminism is always rooted in the work of those who have made new modes of thinking possible, through its politics and applications. As such, a critical intervention such as we present here is also an acknowledgement of the struggles that came before our own.

Therefore, this thesis brings the story of feminisms' continuing spatial practices and struggles to the forefront, using the case study of the Feminist Library and my experience of it, as the key drivers motivating the need to understand why the conditions of production, possibility, and mattering of a feminist space remain precarious in the twenty-first century. The thesis

aims to help to improve these by addressing the first research question: How is feminist space produced, and what are the conditions of its possibility?

Nevertheless, the thesis is not solely focused on crises. Instead, I broadened the original scope to look at the Library's changing meanings, practices, and nature in order to build an understanding of how the space continues to matter to the people who use it today. Therefore, the research is situated in and contributes to the relatively niche, but growing, body of literature focusing on the topic of feminist spatial practice (following Matrix, 1984; Enke, 2007; Eichorn, 2013; Butler, 2015; Delap, 2016; Hogan, 2016; Tobin, 2017). It contributes to this work by offering an empirical account of what the Library is, and what it means, historically and today, and in doing so, it seeks to provide a new perspective on space in gender and organisation studies, one that draws together phenomenological, feminist and queer thinking (drawing on e.g., Dale, 2005; Ahmed, 2006; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015; Nash, 2018). More than a tribute to feminist thinkers and activists who came before, this study also seeks to make an activist contribution and to provide a challenge to certain ways of approaching feminism that create boundaries of inclusion with exclusionary effects. To this effect, I work with queer theory (Ahmed, 2006; Muñoz, 2009; Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2011; Eichhorn, 2013; Samer, 2014) to challenge and disorient (normative) feminist perspectives on space. The inclusion of different voices – particularly those of marginalised subjects – is highly important in this context, as their perspectives highlight the need for a continuous queering of the feminist space. Conceptually, this approach is particularly fruitful in terms of queering a feminist production of space, as I use Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space, alongside feminist and queer theory, to produce a queer(ed) feminist critique of the concept, challenging its masculinist assumptions and including previously marginalised voices, based on the case study of the Library. This connects to the second research question, which is: What theoretical resources

help us to make sense of how the Feminist Library is produced and experienced as a feminist and queer community?

The Feminist Library is presented throughout the thesis as a space that is co-produced by its communities, in a process that is collective and dialogical, and which changes over time as new voices join the conversation and contribute to the co-production. The process is far from simple or free from tensions. Indeed, alongside Organisation Studies (OS), feminist, and queer literature on social materialities and space (Dale, 2005; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2015), to which this thesis aims to contribute, my exploration of the Library also draws on literature on ‘haunting’ feminist materialities and histories (e.g., Hesford, 2005; Freeman, 2010), as well as the ongoing conversation in OS that acknowledges the importance of understanding organisational conflict and tensions as something that is both necessary to attend to and potentially productive (e.g., Yerby & Reaney, 2022). Further, using OS literature on disorganisation and creativity (e.g., Gabriel, 1995), as well as feminist aesthetics (e.g., Ziarek, 2012), the thesis also explores other complexities of feminist materialities, such as their symbolic connections to the past and future, and their critical, transformative potential.

As the role of materialities in these processes and dynamics emerges as important and co-constitutive of the Library community, the third research question, thus, emerges as: How is the social-materiality of the Feminist Library evolving, and what is its potential futurity as a (queered) feminist space?

Crucially, as a personal-political-theoretical activist project, I hope that this research will also contribute to the evolution, production, and practice of epistemic spaces, particularly feminist libraries and archives, providing insights into the multiple ways that these can challenge hegemonic knowledge production and produce. I also hope that the specific approach to

archival methods applied here will be of interest to other OS scholars – particularly more broadly, and beyond the thesis – as it shows that archives can be useful to researchers as more than resources for investigating the past, but also as ‘conversational’ phenomena, contributing to and challenging contemporary organisational imaginaries¹⁶, particularly spatial ones (see also Liu & Grey, 2018). The archival body, as Lee (2022) described it, is therefore approached here as a ‘living’ matter, capable of challenging power dynamics and generating affective interactions with people and organisations, rather than a simple collection of objects, or ‘things’ fixed in the past.

Before moving on to the rest of the thesis, I will provide an overview of its content, by chapter below.

Chapter One introduces the Library, including an overview of its history, as well as other contextual information, such as the key values underpinning its organisational practices today. Starting by introducing the organisation’s historical context and foundational principles, it proceeds to its more recent history, including the story of its renaming and dragon logo (see Figure 1). The chapter also highlights some of the key aspects of the organisation’s feminist values today showing how these underpin the Library’s praxis, such as accessibility and intersectionality. It sets up the organisation’s important role as an epistemic and political work and community space.

¹⁶ As I also explore in a more focused methodological contribution in a recent book chapter on the topic (Oldziejewska, 2023).

Figure 1



Dragon paw (not a logo, but one of the many inspired images¹⁷), 2019 – Credit: Eva Megias/pops_comix

Chapters Two and Three, which both review the relevant academic literature, focus on research on feminist libraries and archives, and on scholarship on organisational and feminist spaces respectively. Neither claims to be fully comprehensive, as this thesis draws on highly interdisciplinary sets of literature, and therefore a full review of literature across all of these areas (including queer literature and women's and gender studies with a focus on space and organisational praxis; feminist librarianship and archival research; organisational space and materialities literature; feminist perspectives on urban planning, geography and architecture, and more) would be a much more ambitious undertaking than the space of this thesis allows. Instead, I take a more focused approach, providing overviews of the most relevant literature. Thus, Chapter Two provides a brief overview of the literature on the Feminist Library (following from and completing the information on the organisation provided in Chapter One) followed by a more comprehensive examination of other feminist libraries and archives research. This research highlights the key roles of feminist knowledge spaces: first, as epistemic spaces challenging the neutrality of patriarchal knowledge and curating alternative ways of doing things; second, as feminist community sites, providing spaces of sharing and

¹⁷ I include more images of the Library dragon in other chapters, and I use visual methods throughout.

empowerment, as well as raising questions about who gets represented in them, and whose knowledge constitutes them.

Chapter Three, in turn, sets up the conceptual framework for the analysis of space in the thesis more broadly, particularly using Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space and OS and feminist literature on space. Towards the end of the chapter, some more critical perspectives on feminist space – including from queer theory, and Black and indigenous feminist thinking – are discussed, setting up the research context by mapping out what a queering of the social production of space might involve, a theme returned to later in the analysis and discussion chapters.

The research methodology is presented in Chapter Four, outlining the epistemic, ontological, and conceptual foundations of the thesis, and connecting this to the specific methodology and methods used. As the research is autoethnographic, in this chapter I also reflect further on the links between my personal/professional and political connections to the Library, the research, and its reflexive nature. 'Queering' my positionality in relation to the Library and feminist theory is something I strive for in this chapter, as it is key to the methodology and conceptual framing of the research design and analysis. This chapter also discusses key ethical challenges and considerations.

Chapters Five and Six are dedicated to the presentation of the findings, broken down into two parts. Chapter Five presents the analysis of the Library as an epistemic, political, and socio-material space, while Chapter Six focuses on its community and work/organisational aspects. At the same time, it is important to note that, although these aspects are presented separately for the purposes of the analysis, there are many overlaps highlighted throughout.

The Library as an epistemic space, presented in Chapter Five, is an agentic site of feminist knowledge production and recognition, as the participants are invited to actively inscribe

themselves in the space and its histories – or herstories (as the title indicates, the thesis and the Library centre feminist stories). The space of recognition is also intergenerational and dialogically co-produced with (past and present) others at the Library, but it is also a place where ‘hauntings’ are present, (reflexively) highlighting gaps in knowledge and meaning-making, and the need for a continual queering of feminist histories and practice (which is also indicated in the titular ‘art’ of herstory keeping). Further, the Library as a political space emerges as embodied and deeply entangled with the wider feminist movement, as the stories highlighted by the participants often also note such feminist connections, past and present, symbolic, and more practical. The socio-material space of the Library provides another rich source of deeply symbolic stories. The Library’s dragon logo, for instance, appears as symbolic of discovering feminist histories, as well as of their precarity, as its story becomes displaced even within the organisation itself. Similarly, some of the other objects of the Library, such as the archival ‘rubbish’, become symbolic of discovering unrecognised histories and making them part of the organisation’s story through the efforts of workers and volunteers. This chapter also provides space for an exploration of the changing nature of the Library’s materialities in the digital era, considering the Library as an always already-hybrid space, while also remaining, importantly, a physical space, showing how its materiality is key to the affective connections inspired by the organisation.

Chapter Six, in turn, explores the Library as a community and workspace, where differences and tensions emerge as key avenues of organisational transformation. Community is crucial for the Library, helping to sustain the space through its multiple crises, while the space also provides respite for and builds community. At the same time, the community can also be a key site of tension, as the Library is an ever-changing rather than static or homogenous community. Indeed, difference is crucial to understanding (and experiencing) the Library as a community and workspace, as a force for organisational dialogue and transformation, without

which the Library might be unable to fulfil its inclusive intentions, as this chapter highlights. Other sources of tension are also shown to be present in the Library as an organisational space, considered in this chapter as a form of disorganisation – which is both important to its creativity, as well as being potentially difficult to navigate. Finally, again, in this chapter, the Library emerges as a site that is both hybrid and at the same time still, importantly, physical.

In Chapter Seven, the discussion, I bring the above analyses together with some of the key literature to address the research questions and to highlight the empirical and conceptual contributions made by the thesis, particularly to research on the feminist and queer production of space. I show how, in combination, these perspectives are crucial to the spatial production of what the Library is and could be, and that the tensions and ‘hauntings’ apparent in this process are key to the Library as a space of feminist futurity and of hybridity, challenging spatio-temporal boundaries, yet preserving physical spatial existence. I emphasize how, in this respect, the Library provides an important space of – and for – feminist community recognition and connection.

Finally, the Conclusions section returns to each chapter in turn, highlighting the key contributions of the thesis, as well as some of the potential avenues for further research it has opened up.

Before closing the chapter, it is important to note that the work presented here is not a comprehensive study of the Library. It is a project that sits at intersections of various areas, including feminist organisation studies, information and librarianship research, archives, and history, and which presents a set of perspectives on the Library that are bound in time and space – a (post) pandemic time, shortly (three to four years) after a relocation, and a closure that followed closely, due to Covid-19 –

but which will hopefully, nonetheless, provide useful insights on and for the organisation, both for scholars and practitioners. The research, thus, tells a story of the Library, which, rather than being complete, is an amalgam of many stories, combining several different perspectives – and therefore providing a rich picture of a complex feminist organisation and space. There are many more stories that could (yet) be told, from the perspectives of volunteers and workers, past and present, whom I did not get the chance to interview due to time and space limitations, as well as thousands of other supporters, members, and other Friends, who did not make it into the participants' pool but who (I hope) one day to reach, and whose 'place' I have tried to reflect in the following chapters as well as I can at this point.

Chapter One

The Feminist Library history (or herstory) and context: Towards a conceptual framework for feminist librarianship and organisational praxis

History

The Feminist Library was established in January 1975 and opened to the public that Spring, with regular opening hours available from July (Walbe and Davison, 1979; Fairbairns, 1995). It was originally founded as the Women's Research & Resources Centre (WRRC) (WRRC Committee, 1976a). It was established at a time of rapid growth of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), commonly known as the Second Wave of the feminist movement in the UK (c. 1970-1990), which 'stimulated a desire for greater academic study of women and for recognition that women were largely invisible or hidden in traditional history' (Hildenbrand, 2000: 53).

The Library is a prime example of such a study, collecting, promoting, and producing movement literature. Its founders were very active in the WLM and were largely scholars¹⁸ instrumental in the early days of Women's Studies (WS) in the UK (and further afield; see Spender, 1981b), as well as other feminist organisations, such as feminist journals and professional associations (David, 2015). They challenged the lack of women in academia, education, literature, history, and beyond, and helped introduce a feminist perspective into academic disciplines and more broadly. As David (2015: 928) notes, the impact of this work was substantial, as: 'neither feminism nor gender was in the lexicon of higher education or public policy when we were starting out'.

¹⁸ Although, as Chester (2021) points out, they saw themselves primarily as activists or, according to David (2015) – feminist activist academics. The split between activist and academic feminism was not as pronounced then. More about this later.

Foundational mission and vision

The Feminist Library's first constitution (WRRC Committee, 1976b: 1), describes the organisation's activities as follows:

- v) Maintain records of such¹⁹ research in progress, and help researchers make contact with others in similar fields of research
 - ii) Organise meetings and seminars at which results and problems of research can be discussed, such meetings to be open to men and to the general public when this is thought appropriate
 - iii) Maintain a library of research materials for general use by women and men
 - iv) Raise funds to promote research on matters of particular relevance to women, and to finance the above activities
 - v) Initiate any other activities appropriate to WRRC's purpose.
- [With the purpose of assisting] women students, teachers, journalists and others engaged in research on subjects of particular relevance to women.

Although the constitution was updated in 1977 and 1982, only minor changes were introduced to the core activities of the WRRC in the later amendments ('and publish' was added after 'promote' under point iv; WRRC Committee, 1982). The 1977 version, however, included a major amendment to the overall objectives of the organisation, by adding:

to advance the education of women by carrying out and/or assisting the research and study into the social, economic and legal position of women in society and to publish the results of such research and study (WRRC Committee, 1977: 1).

¹⁹ Understood as "the research and study into the social, economic and legal position of women in society" based on the Feminist Library constitution, which we return to later.

These amendments reflected early shifts in organisational focus – as will be explored in more detail below, due to the changing context of and reception of WS in academia, growth in feminist publishing, and shifting conversations in the feminist movement more broadly – which were to be further formalised in later years.

Therefore, in its foundational years, collecting and collating information about WS courses and feminist research, both locally and internationally, was a key focus for the WRRRC, as this information was not easily accessible elsewhere in the early years of the WLM. The Library also produced feminist literature, which was particularly crucial in its early years, when feminist writing was not widely accepted by mainstream publishers (this will be further discussed later in the chapter). It could be argued that independent feminist publishing and scholarship inspired a greater recognition of feminist literature in mainstream publishing, academia, and education more broadly. More complex was the impact on feminism itself, as I will explore below.

While many of the foundational aims and objectives continue to be part crucial to the ongoing practice of the Library, there are also a number of interesting tensions, which are raised by them over time, such as who the Library is for. I will explore these in more detail below.

Contradictions and complexities - Feminist context (early years)

A few years into its operations, in 1983, the WRRRC was renamed to what it is known as today - the Feminist Library (full name: the Feminist Library and Information Centre) – as a decision was made to refocus on providing a more broadly accessible library of feminist materials for the public, in a move away from its previously more exclusive, academic focus

(McKibben, 1991)²⁰. This decision was made at the end of a lengthy period of debate about the change in the organisation's direction, which was also closely connected to persistent inclusivity and diversity issues at the Library (the Feminist Library workers' collective, 1984). The workers' collective felt it was important to distinguish the Library from academia and academic feminism, as a feminist organisation wanting to encourage a more diverse user base and membership (the Feminist Library workers' collective, 1984; the Feminist Library collective, undated, est. 1986²¹). It is important to distinguish the position of the workers' collective here, as it was largely distinct from that of the founders (more directly linked to WS) in this discussion, to highlight the serious split in the collective that was caused by these issues. Further, the importance of the issues of inclusion cannot be overstated here, as they also reflected key points of contention in the feminist movement at the time (e.g., Leonard, 1979; Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw, 1989; Thomlinson, 2012; Past Tense, 2017) and had a long-lasting impact on it and the Library's policies and praxis, as I will discuss later in the chapter, as well as in the analysis.

The situation was also partly a response to the increasing institutionalisation of WS over time, as the discipline became more recognised and accepted within academia – and thus arguably more exclusive. It was also a reflection of a new focus on creating a more inclusive space in the Library (Chester, 2021) in the context of wider shifts within the feminist movement to this effect. The decision was further connected with the rise of feminist publishing, with the increasing number of feminist books published and donated enabling the Library to provide a more inclusive and open collection for the public (Chester, 2021).

²⁰ For an exploration of the contemporary debate on the contradictions of academic feminism see Leonard (1979).

²¹ The date is estimated based on the positioning of the document within the collections, as well as some of the dates mentioned in the document.

It is, therefore, important to highlight the symbiotic relationship between the feminist movement and the Library here, as the organisation's policies and praxis developed (and continue to do so) alongside the movement. Indeed, the research proposes that the Feminist Library is a reflective materialisation of the feminist movement's theories in praxis.

However, it is not a straightforward relationship – as new issues of contention in the movement develop, they become part of the conversation at the Library, yet, there is not a direct causal relationship, as issues are discussed, negotiated, and re-negotiated over time.

The wider political changes of the time are also important to consider here. The new conservative government in the UK (and the US) hailed the start of a new era in Western politics. Its impacts included the abolition of the GLC, which adversely affected feminist spaces in the 80s (this will be discussed in more detail in the feminist spaces section), as well as the backlash against feminism in mainstream media, prompting what was to become known as the 'postfeminist' era (Faludi, 1991; McRobbie, 2004). Combined with the advent of information technologies, these developments challenged the position and pre-existing organisational structures and processes of libraries (Hildenbrand, 2000). These are just a few select factors worth mentioning briefly in this context. These factors and their impact on the Library's praxis (both then and today) will be explored in more detail throughout this chapter.

Women-only? space

In this context, other tensions in the early Feminist Library history also include a long debate about who is included, in terms of gender. Although the first constitution of the organisation was produced in early 1976 and the Library first applied for charitable status later that year (the Feminist Library Collective, 1976), it was not until a year later that the Charity Commission decided to grant the request. The delay was chiefly due to the issues of proving the Library's educational objectives, because of concerns around the WRRC being of benefit

chiefly (and then exclusively) to women. This policy was considered controversial at the time and caused a lengthy debate (Charity Commission, 1977).

According to Tyler (2006: 1) ‘the notion of women-only space was an issue of particular concern during the second wave of feminism (c. late 1960s-mid 1980s) during which period many women’s libraries were founded’. However, in the case of the Library, it remained a key question throughout the 1990s (and, to some extent, remains so to this day). Admittedly, discussions on this topic were a mainstay at the Library from the 1970s (Setch, 1998), in a reflection of the wider movement’s debates. However, it was not until the early 1990s that this translated into an actual policy of the Library as a women-only space. This only lasted a relatively brief period, from 1991 to 1997, as Setch (1998) noted, due to the regulations imposed on the Library by the Charity Commission, which decided that it was against charity regulations for a library to be women-only.

Thus, the question of the Library including men has been an open one through much of its history, although the Library’s community policy is much more inclusive today²². The complexities of these internal (and, to an extent, external) negotiations reflect the wider questions of ex/inclusivity in the feminist movement, which highlight key questions for our research – about what a feminist space is and who it is for.

Further, although throughout most of the Library’s history, women-only meetings were also welcome, it was only relatively recently that the policy was reviewed to explicitly include all self-identifying women both in all women-only meetings, as well as in the collective²³. This relatively recent shift is related to, and, again, a reflection of, the changes affecting the

²² See the Library’s community policy (<https://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>) for more details.

²³ See the Library’s community policy (as above); redrafted to this effect in 2016. These commitments were reiterated more strongly in a more recent Statement that can be found here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/statement-on-transphobia-and-accountability/>.

feminist movement and society more broadly, with an increased focus on intersectionality and the application of the concept beyond race to gender and other characteristics and identities (Butler, 1990, 2011). The related discussions will be explored in more detail in the intersectionality section.

The Library's resources, apart from the relatively short period in the 1990s mentioned above, are open to all. The Library did, however, provide a women-only reading room from its early years, until relatively recently (Setch, 1998). Moreover, although women-only collections objects exist to this day (this refers particularly to parts of the periodicals collection, as some of the WLM publications were intended to be read exclusively by women), there are ongoing discussions in the core collective of the Library²⁴ about how best to create a practicable policy regarding these in a collection that is free-standing, currently open to all and a library that is largely volunteer-run²⁵.

Today, the Library strives to be as inclusive and open to all as possible. Although some women-only meetings are allowed, they must be inclusive of genderqueer and trans women. The Library's community policy²⁶ is shared with anyone using the space, particularly for events purposes, even if these are external users, to ensure that these are complied with.

The above conversation also links, more broadly, to the difficulties facing women's spaces, collections, and work in the context of a patriarchal culture. The Feminist Library will be used here as an example of a feminist organisation operating in this context, allowing us to explore both these issues and the conditions of (im)possibility for a feminist organisational

²⁴ The distinction between the core collective and the other organisational structures of the Library will be made clearer in the section below – on collective ways of organising.

²⁵ From private correspondence with members of the collective.

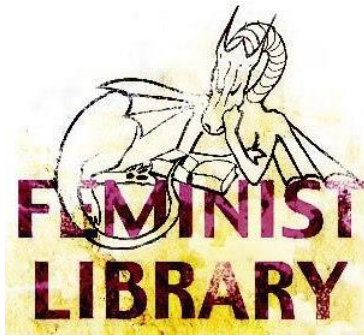
²⁶ <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>

praxis today. These issues will be explored in more detail in the section on feminist spaces. First, however, we explore the symbolic meaning of the Library's visual identity.

On matriarchies and dragons

The symbolism used to represent the Library is also of historic significance. Over its first three decades, the Library's logo was a combination of the women's symbol and either a book or a pencil²⁷. In the mid to late 2000s, however, a volunteer inspired by feminist interpretation of mythology, introduced the dragon as the new logo (Figure 2).

Figure 2



The original dragon logo, c. 2007 – Credit: Veronica Planton

Interestingly, the dragon, in its feminist mythology iteration, is symbolic of the matriarchy (the Feminist Library collective, 2014). It is therefore interesting to note here that it was first introduced about a decade after the brief period when the Library was a women-only space and yet it continues to represent the Library today.

At the time, it was applied specifically in the context of the St George and the dragon myth – symbolising the battle between the patriarchy (St George) and the matriarchy (the dragon) – during a period when the Library collective was locked out of its space (we return to the

²⁷ Which can be viewed, for example, here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/October-2010.pdf> and here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/fem-lib-newsletter-feb2010.pdf>.

various spatial crises later in the chapter). In the Feminist Library interpretation, the dragon, in defiance of the patriarchy (and a rejection of its mythology), abandons the embattled position it had been assigned by the patriarchal standard to read a feminist book instead. As such, it becomes a symbol of defiance against patriarchal rules and stereotypes, rather than of the matriarchy understood as a women-only or, perhaps more accurately, women-led or centred world (which is a long-standing point of discussion within women's history (e.g., Lerner, 1986), yet largely beyond the scope of this project²⁸).

This symbolism is introduced here, in the context of the women-only space discussion, as a reflection of the changing nature of the Library and what it represents. Although the dragon can be symbolic of the matriarchy, here it becomes a symbol of defiance against the patriarchy, as well as feminist representations of history (or herstory). It is a symbol of feminist history and organisations such as the Library as ones that challenge accepted versions of history on which our common (mis)conceptions of the world are built.

Further, it is also symbolic of the position of the Library as a feminist organisation in a patriarchal context. It was introduced as a symbol of the Library at a time when the Library was forcibly closed to the public. Further iterations continue this tradition. Particularly, the 2015 iteration of the 'Save the Feminist Library' dragon is symbolic of this, as the dragon logo morphs into a more 'battle-ready' form briefly to represent another threat to the existence of the organisation and the opposition to it (Figure 3).

²⁸ It is worth also mentioning here that the Library was host to the Matriarchy Study Group (for more on its relevance see, e.g. Lee, 1979) in its early years and continues to hold its archives today.

Figure 3



Save the Feminist Library campaign dragon, 2015 – Credit: Holly Trill

Thus, the dragon also becomes a symbol of the Library's mission of continuously saving herstories. In the context of the Library, the story of the dragon is one of continuous discovery of feminist history. Many new volunteers do not understand why the dragon would be the logo of the Library and do not suspect that it is a feminist symbol, until the mythology is explained. While this symbolism had already been 'discovered' by feminists before, it continues to be brought to the forefront through stories told and retold at the Library. Thus, the process of loss and (re)discovery of herstory is shown as a circular, rather than a straightforwardly progressive one. I will explore this further in the analysis.

For this research, the symbolism is also important as it helps to define what is possibly the most foundational question here: what is defined as 'feminist' here, for this study, and from the perspective of the Feminist Library? I will argue that 'feminist' should encompass the whole spectrum of feminist thought, similarly to how the Library does, morphing and changing over the years, in reflection of the changes within the movement. At the same time, it is useful to separate feminist (as political) work from 'women's' work (in its essentialist/separatist understanding) here. This is explored further in the part on feminist ethics and feminist collections practices.

From this perspective, it is also interesting to explore this symbolism in the wider context of the literature on dragons used as symbols of power in organisations (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990).

While it could be argued that, from a feminist perspective, a large degree of co-option of feminist mythology occurs here, others highlight the complex nature of symbolism more broadly – of both dragons and symbols more broadly (Gherardi, 2014). For example, as Thanem (2011) highlighted, the dragon symbolism can be applied to the marginalisation of the ‘monstrous’ in organisational theory and praxis, which can extend to such issues as marginalised gender and sexuality expressions. I will explore the symbolic intersections of gender and space in more depth in Chapter Three.

Meanwhile, below, I continue to explore the history of the Library through the various spatial challenges to its existence over the years.

Feminist spaces in crisis or on the precarities of patriarchy

The Feminist Library has often been undervalued and underfunded (the significance of this was explored in the Introduction and will be, again, in the analysis, while here I focus chiefly on a historical exploration of the Library’s spatial challenges). It has, over the years, occupied six different locations. Although these progressively increased in size over time, the organisation has faced many challenges over the years, which will be outlined here.

The Library first opened in what is described by Walbe as a ‘small, damp basement room in North Gower Street’ (Walbe & Davison, 1979: 33). It soon outgrew this small space and, in 1977, it moved to a slightly larger accommodation in Clerkenwell Close, which was shared with the offices of the famous Spare Rib magazine, among other organisations (Fairbairns, 1995), and made possible by a £3,000 grant from the Equal Opportunities Commission. This was a very substantial amount for the Library at the time, not least because, as Fairbairns (1995: 4) points out, ‘when the WRRC opened its doors in the spring of 1975, it had just

£50', and it was the first form of statutory support and endorsement for the organisation.

(Fairbairns joined the Library as the first paid worker, but had to fundraise her own salary.)

It was not long after, in 1979, that the Library had to move again, as it was outgrowing its premises (Spare Rib, 1982). At that time, it moved into a space with four rooms. The building was also shared with Sisterwrite – a flagship feminist bookstore in London at the time.

In 1983, the Library was relocated again (McKibben, 1991), this time supported by the Greater London Council's (GLC) Women's Committee, who owned the building and enabled the collective to employ three full-time paid workers, for the first time in the organisation's history.

Figure 4



The Feminist Library at the AWP (c. 1983-1989) – Credit: Brenda Prince, Format Archive.

The abolition of the GLC in 1986 marked the beginning of a newly challenging period in the Library's history (and for many other feminist and community organisations which relied on its financial support; see e.g., Murray, 2004). The community space, known as A Women's Place (AWP) and shared with other women's organisations (Figure 4), was sold, and the Library was forced to relocate again. Although funding was temporarily extended by the London Boroughs Grant Unit (LBGU), it was cut again in 1988. (The Library was unable to have paid workers for many years after that (Setch, 1998).) Following lengthy negotiations,

an agreement was reached in 1989 that the Library would be moved to a community centre in Southwark (a former GLC building, which was, at the time, being transferred to Southwark Council, by the London Residuary Body (LRB) (Telford District Land Registry, 1989), an entity set up to oversee the transfer of GLC assets following its abolition²⁹.

The new premises were not without challenges either. Soon after signing the new lease, in the early 1990s, the Council decided to review all its community premises agreements (commonly known as ‘peppercorn’ rent agreements), provoking another long period of negotiations with and mobilisation within the local community.

Further, the period mentioned above (of the introduction of the dragon logo) was to become a long gap in the operations of the Library (c. 2004-07), when its collective was locked out of its premises (the Feminist Library collective, 2014)³⁰.

Nevertheless, Southwark Council remains the Library’s landlord today. In late 2019, the Library was eventually moved to another (Southwark Council-operated) community space, the Sojourner Truth Community Centre in Peckham, after a decision was made by the Council to redevelop the previous premises, in a prime-location building, to be used as office space³¹. The Library collective has negotiated a long lease on the new space in Peckham (25 years). The negotiations with the Council lasted well over a year (with the lease signed in

²⁹ The Library also supported the redistribution of assets of the AWP in the time leading to its move to the Southwark Council premises. Like many other feminist and community organisations, the AWP failed without the support of the GLC.

³⁰ Interestingly, Tyler’s (2006) comparative research on women’s (and feminist) libraries and archives conducted at the time presumes that the Library was permanently closed, leading to some misleading results. Nevertheless, it makes for an interesting reading some 15 years later, lending useful historical perspective, which I will return to in the next chapter.

³¹ From private correspondence with the Council and members of the Feminist Library collective.

November 2019)³² – following a longer campaign to keep the previous premises from closure in 2015/16.

This is emblematic of the situation of the Library over the past four decades. This quote from a 1993 article continues to be a good reflection of the continuing challenges faced by the Feminist Library over the years:

The Feminist Library is back where it started. It still is housed in five crowded rooms. It still continually looks for volunteers. It still needs a stable source of funding. (Bad Attitude, 1993: 3)

The continuing precarity of the (physical) space is also emblematic of the precarity of feminist and community spaces more broadly. While the Feminist Library was one of the spaces that were ultimately preserved following GLC abolition, many others were not. The AWP was just one of the many examples of women's and community spaces that failed as a consequence of financial crises and politics of austerity over the years (for others see, inter alia, London Voluntary Service Council, 1986). Today, this is further exacerbated by the impact of more recent factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting lockdowns, and other restrictions on the Library (and other similar spaces). This will be explored further below and in the analysis chapters.

(In)equalities of opportunity

The precarious context of feminist/women's and community spaces, also applies to libraries (Busby, 2019) and what is considered 'women's' work – including librarianship (Kerslake, 1999; Ilett, 2003) more broadly. While women's work continues to be undervalued, this is

³² Yet, at the time of writing the first draft of the chapter (March 2021), the exact financial implications of the latest Feminist Library move remained unclear (although the rent had been agreed in the lease, the service charge remains unspecified). (From private correspondence with Southwark Council and the Feminist Library collective.)

further exacerbated by the impact of various crises (Pearson, 2019). It is estimated that around 800 libraries have closed since the beginning of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent politics of austerity (Busby, 2019). Austerity politics had a similarly substantial impact on both women's/feminist spaces (Wakefield, 2019) and community spaces more broadly (UNISON, 2019). The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and 'women's' work is just another recent example of this persistent pattern of inequality (Women's Budget Group, 2020a).

Kerslake (1999) and Hildenbrand (2000) also explore the wider complexity of this in libraries. Libraries can be sites of both liberation and oppression, offering early employment opportunities for women, while at the same time reinforcing the 'women's' work stereotype, which results in continued devaluation of both sectors like librarianship, as well as women. Feminist libraries and archives belong to the categories of both libraries and archives and women's/feminist spaces, which are often similarly undervalued. This is thus a particularly interesting intersection for this research: not only is there a (persistent) shortage of funding to feminist/women's organisations and to libraries, but also to what is considered 'women's' work.

These issues can further be linked to Ahmed's (2007) critical view of equality and diversity work, which are now commonly used frameworks by governments and other institutions, while often in practical contradiction with the socio-political context and response, such as the disproportionate impact and burden of the financial crises and COVID-19 on women and other marginalised groups (see also e.g., Women's Budget Group, 2020a, 2020b).

The intersection of these various precarities is where the Feminist Library space sits. It is an uncomfortable position, resulting from a history of crises outlined above, and leading to further contradictions and questions, such as how a space can be feminist and rely on

volunteer work. These contradictions are explored further in the section on collective working, as well as later in the analysis. Meanwhile, women's/feminist libraries and archives in the UK and the impacts of their precarious conditions will be explored in more detail in the next chapter, as well as through the data. Now, I move on to providing an overview of the Library's collections.

Saving histories (herstories)

Having reportedly started with about 50 books (Fairbairns, 1995), the Library collections now comprise approximately 10,000 books³³, 1,500 periodical titles, archival collections of over 30 individuals and organisations (held at the Bishopsgate Institute Library, in their special collections archive), a substantial collection of pamphlets (also held at the Bishopsgate Institute) and zines, estimated 14-15,000 items of ephemera (partially catalogued and in the process of being digitised), around 1,200 articles and 600 unpublished papers³⁴. The books' sub-collections include fiction, poetry, drama, and non-fiction, as well as children's and international selection. Maxwell (2013: 129) argues that this wide range of materials represents a break with the traditional librarianship hierarchy of 'worthy' and 'unworthy' objects, allowing for feminist histories of less prominent groups to be represented.

A key repository of the feminist movement's histories (or 'herstories', according to the feminist lexicon; Boletta, 1992) from its foundational days, the Library has largely relied on donations of materials, chiefly due to a lack of financial resources (Walbe & Davison, 1979).

As much as this might result in a somewhat incomplete collection, more intentionally, it

³³ The official estimates report between 7,500 and 8,500 books (<https://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/about-the-collection/>). However, this estimate pre-dates the Library's move to Peckham. As part of the process of moving the Library, some 4,000 book donations were sorted and added to the collection. Some of them were duplicates. However, it is reasonable to estimate that at this stage, the books collection includes around 10,000 items.

³⁴ As per a 2018 Your Guide to the Feminist Library (from private correspondence).

creates a depository of feminist materials that are precarious in their provenance, often unique (such as the notes of the first WLM conference), and precious – in some cases, preserving materials that could otherwise be lost to history – creating an important collection.

Interestingly, Maxwell (2013) also argues that this approach to collecting feminist materials is also feminist in the sense that it helps break the barriers between the collection and its community of users, who are also collections donors.

The importance of women's history, its precarity, and preservation have been explored briefly earlier in this chapter and something I will return to in the next chapter and in the analysis, as a theme that connects many feminist (and women's) libraries and archives.

Unsurprisingly so, seeing the extent to which women – and all other repressed groups – have been historically underrepresented in history (see e.g., Rowbotham, 1975; Bannerji, 2020³⁵).

In some ways, the Feminist Library is a direct materialisation of and response to this issue – the project of making the hidden visible, to paraphrase Rowbotham. Although, as will be argued throughout here, it is also more than that. The feminist collections practices at the Library will be the focus of this section, while I return to interrogate the epistemic role of feminist libraries and archives more broadly in the next chapter.

As mentioned above, most of the Library's collections are donations. In its early years, the Library collective was largely focused on collecting records of and publishing feminist research, as very little was published and available on women at the time. Much of the more recent literature was more proactively sourced from publishers, resulting in a much more inclusive collection, providing a better reflection of the feminist movement. However, donations of historical material still form a large part of the collection today. In some ways,

³⁵ Bannerji's work in this context is particularly useful, as it allows us to enter a more intersectional lens, including race, gender and class perspectives, as well as more international ones. We will explore these different intersections more later in the chapter, as well as in the following chapter.

collecting donations of materials directly from feminists became more urgent in recent years, with many WLM founders downsizing or considering discarding their collections completely. The Library is often their place of choice or, indeed, the only repository prepared to take all donations of feminist materials. At the same time, lack of space is an issue. With a substantial collection of some 20,000 books and periodicals (and other materials) in a space of approximately 150 square meters, the Library collective had to find alternatives for the rest of its holdings. To address this issue, the Library has formed a relationship with the Bishopsgate Institute, which now holds all its archives in its Special Collections, as well as most of the ephemeral and pamphlets collections.

The question of what gets curated onto the shelves, and thus forms the visible part of the collection, is a more complex one, which also reflects the history of the Library and the feminist movement. While much of the earlier collection comprised research papers, before the rise in popularity of feminist publishing, the books and periodicals collections grew exponentially in later years and now comprise the core (visible) materials. In addition, as zines grew in importance over the recent years, they formed a more prominent part of the collection.

The Library's collections policies and practices are thus feminist in other ways. They are a good example of how feminist organisational praxis is one of ongoing negotiation and re-negotiation, in reflection of the changing nature of the feminist movement.

This section also highlights interesting questions about what is defined as feminist literature here, as well as about feminist alternatives to traditional librarianship and archiving practices - often referred to at the Library as 'archivism', pointing to the connection between archiving and activism. While the answer to the former question is relatively straightforward (a broad definition of feminism is used to encompass all relevant herstories, regardless of their specific

feminist lens), the latter requires a much more extensive introduction. These intersections will thus be explored in more detail below, as well as in the next chapter and the analysis (see also e.g., Collins, 2012).

The collections classification system was specifically devised for the Library by a professional librarian, Wendy Davison in 1978-79, in a year-long project funded by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) (Walbe & Davison, 1979). The classification system is feminist in the sense of challenging the patriarchal assumptions of more traditional librarianship practices (Walbe & Davison, 1979). In most mainstream libraries, women's representation can often be problematic (see e.g., Ilett, 2003)³⁶, as much³⁷ pertaining to women tends to be classified in one 'women' or 'gender' section. The Library's system subverts this by making women and feminism the starting point and breaking down all of the literature into various subcategories from there (see also e.g., Wahhab, 1980)³⁸. It has been taught in university librarianship courses (Welsh, 2009) and remains, to this day, a unique reference source for feminist librarians and archivists.

At the same time, the Library has hardly ever been able to employ professional librarians, outside of the relatively brief period mentioned above. Although the Library currently does employ (mostly part-time) workers, they tend to occupy administrative roles, while the organisation remains largely volunteer-run³⁹. I explore the question of free labour later in the section focused on ethics.

³⁶ See e.g., Taylor (1993) for a similar analysis from a queer perspective.

³⁷ To this day, many collections still base their classification systems on these patriarchal foundations. The wider challenge posed to this by feminist collections will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

³⁸ Although the Library's collections policy is currently being updated to be more inclusive of the rising range of voices included in feminism(s) today, as well as more problematic collections, this is a work in progress at this stage.

³⁹ See: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/our-collective/>.

The collections team looks after the collection. Volunteers in the team do include trained librarians and archivists, as well as individuals from various other backgrounds, allowing anyone interested in this aspect of the Library to join, get trained, and gain feminist librarianship skills. In 2010, the Library was awarded an Awards for All grant to train feminist librarians. The Radical Librarians for Tomorrow programme trained about a dozen feminist librarians (Burin & Sowinski, 2014)⁴⁰.

Aside from the above-mentioned aspects of the Library's collections practices, the impact of digital technologies over the last few decades also deserves a mention here. Hildenbrand (2000: 51), in a review of the history of women in US libraries, goes as far as to suggest that the advent of information technologies might create 'a threat of a takeover of librarianship (...) [and] signal an end to historical studies'. However, as I will argue here, I think the picture is much more complex, as the Library shows that the impact over the years has been relatively contained and gradual. Already in the mid-1980s, the first digital resources began to appear (Microsystem, 1988), while correspondence from the late 90s indicated a more widespread shift towards digital library services (SCAN, 1998). However, as much as digitisation is now part of ongoing conversations at the Library, with digital media being seen as a tool to reach wider (e.g., international) and new audiences, at the time of writing, it is only possible to fully digitise a relatively small part of the collections (the ephemera). While some parts of the collection are available to browse in a digitised catalogue (the books collection, as well as parts of the collections at Bishopsgate Institute), and many regularly spotlighted on social media and in exhibitions (often both on- and offline since late 2020), most continue to be available in hard copy only. Nevertheless, what is now commonly known

⁴⁰ See also: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/October-2010.pdf>.

as the digital revolution continues to have a wide range of implications, which will be explored here and in the analysis.

For example, feminist ethical and legal issues, highlighted by the drive towards digital transformation, are well illustrated by the case of digitisation of the Spare Rib magazine at the British Library (Moravec, 2017) and its subsequent removal due to Brexit-related changes in legislation⁴¹. The Library's digitisation conversation similarly exposes the difficulties of digitising feminist archives, with important considerations above and beyond what is inscribed in the law. These are particularly relevant today and have become of increasing importance in the last few years, considering the severe limitations to access to archives, libraries, and other physical spaces due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, digitalisation and its implications on the Library will be discussed further in the analysis chapters. Meanwhile, the archivism aspect of the Library is explored more in the next two sections below.

Making herstories

The Library collective is much more than just herstory 'keepers' – it is also an active herstory co-creator and curator, as mentioned above. This brings us back to the concept of archivism - archiving as a feminist activist intervention and challenge to the status quo of standard. Here, I also link it back to the Library's publishing activities.

From its earliest years, the Library was actively involved in feminist publishing. In 1976/77, the members set up their own publishing collective, WRRC Publications (Leonard, 1979; Chester, 2020, 2021). The resulting series 'Explorations in Feminism' published research not considered to be of interest by, and/or often critical of, academia and mainstream publishing of its time. By 1980, the publishing collective produced at least seven titles under the

⁴¹ See e.g.: <https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2019/02/spare-rib-archive-possible-suspension-of-access.html>.

Explorations in Feminism series. The WRRC collective was involved in the publication of various other pamphlets, such as: 'Women and History' (Spender, 1980) and 'Women with a Past' (Turnbull, Davin and de Wolfe, 1980). As Chester notes, the lack of interest changed quickly, as feminist publishing increased its reach, and, by the early 1980s, the series was acquired by Hutchinson Education. It is important to note here that a mainstream publisher's involvement affected the accessibility of the publications in both a negative and a positive way – with increased reach, yet prices increasing considerably. Nevertheless, what is key here is the role of the Library in early WLM publishing, helping break these barriers.

Further, the Library collective did not cease to produce publications after the publishing collective officially separated from the WRRC and joined Hutchinson Education. The WRRC produced, for example, a substantive directory of Women's Studies courses in the UK (Bradshaw et al., 1981), which was then updated and republished at least once more in later years, based on the number of versions available in the archive.

Today, the Library may not have an official publishing collective or a subgroup that goes under that name, but it continues to produce publications. The Library collective is now mostly involved in publishing zines, the format of which is a reflection of the accessibility ethos of the organisation and the feminist movement more broadly. In recent years, the Feminist Graphic Arts series of zines was produced (Megias, 2013; Megias and Shula, 2014) in a collaborative process, with input from various members of the collective, as well as artists and workshop attendees. The production of zines at the Library continues to this day, based on the core principles of community, inclusivity, affordability, and accessibility. The Library's zines have now been digitised as part of the digitisation drive during the COVID-19

pandemic and are available to buy from its online and offline shop, as well as to view in the Library's collection, with access to some being free⁴².

In addition, there have recently been at least a couple of conversations about publishing periodicals online, with some online publishers approaching the Library about digitising its collections⁴³. However, in both instances, these were largely inaccessible initiatives, and therefore, not a reflection on the Library praxis (although I come back to some of the issues related to such initiatives in the discussion of feminist libraries, accessibility, and digitisation in Chapter Two). Thus, the Library's digitisation activities, as mentioned above, are presently largely limited to cataloguing and ephemeral collections, due to such issues and resource limitations.

The Feminist Library newsletter has been a mainstay in its publications, having been published through most of its history. At the time of writing the collective is also involved in a conversation about publishing a book on the Library⁴⁴.

Curating and exhibiting herstory

The curatorial practices at the Library, which are an integral part of the organisation's activities and crucial to its outreach and activism today, are also explored here. Curation in this context applies more to the outward-facing collections practices, bringing the materials to the wider public. Although the concept of feminist curation, as 'a form of knowledge production' (Richter, 2016: 64), can be applied to the feminist archive more broadly (which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter), the Library is also a space of feminist archival

⁴² See: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/book-shop-online/>.

⁴³ From private correspondence (both).

⁴⁴ From private correspondence.

curation as an art practice – curating the materials in the Library’s own exhibitions and in other exhibition spaces.

The events team, in collaboration with the curatorial team and other volunteers, works to put together a programme of events that encompasses a wide range of activities, including book clubs, zine-making workshops, talks, discussions, exhibitions, and more. Much of the programming, particularly the exhibitions, is inspired by and includes the Library’s collections, creating a reciprocal relationship between the collection and the programmes.

The Library was a space for events and meetings from its earliest days. In its Report of the First Year (WRRC Committee, 1976a), the collective reported a series of seminars on research questions important to women was already held (also Lee, 1979). The focus on more academic/research activities shifted along with the wider focus of the Library in the early 1980s when the organisation was renamed. By 1990, the Library was co-organising and co-hosting major feminist events, such as the Feminist Book Fortnight (the Feminist Library, 1990) – a large celebration of feminist literature and publishing, with a range of bookshops and libraries participating, which continues today⁴⁵.

Today, the Feminist Library, alongside the events team, has an active curatorial team, led by its Artist in Residence since 2018⁴⁶. They put on frequent exhibitions, creative workshops, and pop-up Libraries, including a more recent addition – a mobile version of the Feminist Library. The Feminist Library’s curatorial team regularly collaborates with creative institutions, such as Tate Modern and the Barbican, curating material from the Library as part

⁴⁵ Albeit as a recently revived adaptation of the original event. More about the revival: <https://feministbookfortnight.wordpress.com/about-feminist-book-fortnight-2/>
And about the history/comparison: <https://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/businessofwomenswords/2018/06/15/feminist-book-fortnight-1984-and-2018-an-interview-with-jane-anger/>

⁴⁶ From private correspondence with Minna Haukka, the Feminist Library Artist in Residence.

of major exhibitions, festivals, and other creative events. This allows the Library to reach a much wider audience than it would in its normal daily activities, within the limitations of its own location. However, it also raises some interesting questions of an ethical and political nature. For example, in 2020, Tate came under intense public scrutiny for the treatment of its workers in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g., Ringrose, 2020). In response, the Library collective decided to put together a statement withdrawing (at least temporarily) from the Tate Associates programme⁴⁷.

In recent years, the Library's creative and educational activities have experienced a shift online, in a reflection of the wider changes in society as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the Library hosted a few dozen meetings and events online, as well as launching its first-ever hybrid exhibition⁴⁸. Nevertheless, the importance of the physical space remains, as I will explore in more detail in the analysis.

Ethics and values – feminist praxis at work

Below I consider, in turn, the different values that make the Library feminist. The Library, as an active part and space of the feminist movement, is a reflection and reflexive materialisation of feminist theory, politics, and ethics in practice. Its core feminist values explored below include accessibility, autonomy, inclusivity, intersectionality, collective working, and anti-sectarianism.

Accessible space

The Library's resources are open to all and free to use. The Library does not have a membership (although it did in the past; see Ilett, 2003). 'Friends' of the Library are supporters who give regular donations to the Library to support its work on an ongoing basis,

⁴⁷ From private correspondence with the Feminist Library collective, 2020.

⁴⁸ See: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/black-history-month-exhibition-we-are-here/>.

while the space remains open to all, regardless of income or contribution. This decision has been made consciously in order to keep the resources accessible to all, while only those who can afford to support the Library financially are asked to do so⁴⁹.

Although the exact approach to membership has varied over the years, as the focus and policies of the Library have changed, even its earliest accounts show that accessibility was always central. Hampstead and Highgate Express (1976: 7), in one of the earliest press articles about the WRRC, mentions a £5 subscription for users, ‘though students or claimants pay what they can’. The same general principle of accessibility applies to the Feminist Library events, which tend to be free or accessibly priced when chargeable.

Physical accessible is also important. Discussions with the design team involved in the making of the new Feminist Library premises in Peckham clearly indicate this is another point of accessibility focus.⁵⁰ I will discuss this aspect of it in more detail in the analysis, while I move here to discussing the importance of autonomy.

Autonomous feminist (community) space

It is important to stress here the importance of autonomy to the Library’s existence as a feminist space. As a physical autonomous community space and hub of feminist activity, it the Library can be both a reflection of the movement as a creative, feminist space, as well as a materialisation of feminist theory and politics in its organisational practice.

Autonomy space is key to its development as a feminist space, both in its content and its praxis, as it enables the Library collective to work without unnecessary institutional constraints. As an autonomous organisation, the Library collective holds the right to make decisions. This is contrasted with most other feminist libraries around the UK, which are

⁴⁹ From private correspondence with the Feminist Library collective.

⁵⁰ From private correspondence with the design team and the Feminist Library collective.

often less accessible and inclusive, due to their more institutionalised settings (see e.g., Ilett, 2003). This wider context will be explored in more detail in Chapter Two.

The Library thus acts as a unique example of what Lefebvre (1991: 11) referred to as ‘space as knowledge and [anti-patriarchal] action’, or of what Ilett (2003) calls gendertopia. Ilett, in turn, builds on Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopia, from a feminist perspective, to look at libraries as spaces challenging patriarchal norms through feminist organisational and spatial praxis. As such, the Feminist Library is uniquely placed to offer a situated feminism in practice opportunity for studying feminist organisational praxis, and to consider some of the complex challenges and opportunities that this gives rise to, including (but not limited to) its material form. I will therefore continue to explore these concepts in the next chapter as they will provide an interesting point of departure for the analysis. I will also return to discuss the importance of autonomy to the production of space, particularly alternative types of spaces, in Chapter Three.

Meanwhile, the importance of collective working in the feminist space such as the Library will be explored further below.

Non-hierarchical or anti-hierarchical? Collective space

‘The choice to act as a collective was inherently a feminist principle’ (Dodd, 2018: 7).

Collective working (King, 2013) ideas are similarly central to the way that the Library operates. It is important in this context, however, to clarify the difference between non-hierarchical and anti-hierarchical (collective) ways of working, as this is a constant source of discussion, with the former ultimately, remaining an ideal. The Library is thus an attempt at non-hierarchical working, making it anti-hierarchical. Indeed, I question here whether a truly non-hierarchical practice is possible, even for a feminist organisation, situated in the context of a patriarchal society.

The collective/anti-hierarchical practices at the Library are expressed in many ways. First, new volunteers are encouraged to actively and critically contribute to the running of the organisation, co-creating its collections and events programmes. The Library has few continuously running events programmes, as it continues to reinvent itself, reflecting changing questions and issues within the feminist movement, as well as its volunteer makeup.

Further, as Setch (1998) highlights in her history of the Library, the organisation's change in focus and name can also be linked to its changing collective makeup. Thus, workers and volunteers can have a more far-reaching impact, including on policies and values. This, however, does highlight one of the problematic aspects of non-hierarchical working, as, as Setch notes, the decision was led by the workers' collective, raising the issue of (perhaps somewhat hidden) hierarchies arising even in non-hierarchical working (see also Freeman, 1972). Admittedly, with the loss of the GLC (and later LBGU) funding in 1988, the structure reverted to being volunteer-run shortly after and with long-lasting implications⁵¹.

The volunteer-run nature of the Feminist Library is a complex issue, which raises some interesting ethical questions. Can an organisation be feminist, ethical, *and* volunteer-run? How does a feminist organisation negotiate these and other contradictions while remaining feminist? Having paid (yet self-employed) workers makes these questions more complicated still. These questions are going to be explored in-depth in the collective working chapter.

The Feminist Library management team is the core collective of volunteers (also referred to as 'the collective' throughout) and paid workers (when applicable), ensuring that key organisational, strategic, and development issues are addressed. All committed volunteers are encouraged to get involved in the management collective, although there is a basic

⁵¹ Until a much more recent reversal to paying some workers, in 2016 (however, all are part-time at the time of writing).

requirement of attending at least three of its meetings before committing⁵². However, it must be noted that the adherence to this rule is less than strict.

Volunteers and sub-collectives, like the curatorial and events teams, are largely self-managing and the core team only gets involved in them when strategic questions or issues arise. Even then, the issues are addressed through a conversation, rather than external ‘directives’ from the management.

The trustee board is an integral component of the management team and a necessary part of the organisation, as a charity. However, the power of the trustee board is integrated and equal (for the most part) to that of the management team (with the rare exception of cases where contentious issues cannot be resolved and the trustee board has to make a strategic financial or administrative decision). Despite the number of these relatively formalised functions the Library must employ as a registered charity, such as the trustee board, much of the informal and collective nature of the organisation is retained, with volunteers able to move from one team to another quite freely, including the management team, with much creative potential.

Consensus-based decision-making processes, their relevance here, and complexities are discussed at more length later in the chapter, in the section on anti-sectarianism, while I now focus on the importance of inclusivity.

Intersectional and inclusive space

As mentioned before, inclusivity and intersectionality are at the heart of the Library’s values today. The Library’s Community Policy outlines the basic terms of reference, crucially, the inclusion ‘of all feminisms’, particularly welcoming ‘those who have historically been marginalised’⁵³.

⁵² From the Feminist Library Guide for volunteers (internal document).

⁵³ You can view it here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

This aspect of the Library praxis is one that provides key insights into the development of the organisation from its foundational days, alongside and reflective of the changing feminist movement. The wider historical context is of relevance here, chiefly the critique of exclusionary feminist perspectives and increasing focus on intersectional and inclusive feminisms in recent decades (see e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019), as mentioned before.

Early in the 1980s, the drive towards making the Library more inclusive became a reflection of these wider shifts, leading to the change of name and focus for the organisation, as outlined above. With the aim of facilitating the transformation towards the goal of making the Library a more diverse and inclusive workspace, the collective actively recruited a couple of new workers from previously underrepresented demographics, namely Black, working-class women and mothers (it is important to note here that the Library did not have any Black paid workers before 1984 (the Feminist Library collective, undated, est. 1986)). Sourcing more representative material was another way to make the Library and its collections more inclusive of Black, working-class, and Global South women.

Lengthy documentation from the mid-80s (e.g., the Feminist Library Workers' Collective, 1984) lends insights into the initial challenges of implementing such changes, including internal and external tensions and conflict. The issue of the Library as a women-only space is also connected to numerous tensions over the years. This further links to wider debates and developments in the feminist movement and the Library's attempts to work through the resulting tensions, which I explore in more detail below (and return to in the analysis).

Complexities, conflict, and contradictions - An anti-sectarian space?

To this day, diversity and inclusion issues remain part of important ongoing discussions at the Library. The organisation attempts to embrace its rich feminist histories and connections, as well as new developments, both in its archival and organisational praxis, making it a

somewhat unique and useful subject of study for both academia and the feminist movement. While the focus of the organisational practices might have shifted more decidedly to reflect the inclusion and intersectionality transformation within the movement, the collections remain all-encompassing in their nature to reflect the rich and complex history of the movement.

This is where I introduce the last key aspect of the Library's feminist praxis covered here, which is anti-sectarianism, aiming to be inclusive of all feminisms. In the context of feminism today, this is an interesting position to be in, as it can frequently be the focus of complex and highly contested debates and discussions, both internal (at the Library) and external (in the feminist movement and society more broadly). The conflicts and contradictions are explored here as key, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, to the development of the Library as a critical, learning feminist organisation, as well as to the constructive transformation of the feminist movement more broadly (see also e.g., Ramazanoglu, 1989).

Bartlett (1986) introduces an interesting analysis of how these tensions may be perceived and addressed in a positive, rather than a destructive manner, proposing a feminist ethic based on continued discussion and mutual support between the different variations of feminism. In this interpretation, feminism(s), in all its complexity and with all its contradictions, has the potential to be both transformative and anti-sectarian.

It is in this context that the concept of anti-sectarianism underpins the working practices at the Library, particularly its attempts to provide a space for different types of feminisms to co-exist. Nevertheless, the limitations of this are covered in the Feminist Library community policy (as cited above). The impact of this approach on the Library and how the organisation negotiates its position as an intersectional, inclusive, and anti-sectarian space, within this

ever-changing context and taking into consideration the apparent contradictions of these positions, will be discussed in more detail in the analysis.

It is also important to note here that the Library collective is also a reflection of this approach – encompassing women of different backgrounds, political affiliations, and feminist perspectives, working towards a common goal of saving, preserving, curating, and enabling access to herstories.

In this context, it is important to also return to another key concept that is central to the Library's praxis, that of consensus-based decision-making. While it is important to the decision-making processes at the Library, it is also not without its own challenges and internal contestations:

Consensus decision-making can be a useful way of collective decision-making, but it appears to also have some serious drawbacks. (...) [1] can mean compromise agreement (...) [2] discussion to achieve a consensus can put pressure on women to agree. (...) It is after all 'better' to agree than disagree. Yet what is so very wrong with disagreement? Can it not be healthy? (the Feminist Library Workers' Collective, 1984: 4)

This latter point takes us back to Bartlett's (1986) theory, which posits that discussion and disagreement are, indeed, key building blocks to a feminist ethic of integrity. Bartlett's proposal that different, and seemingly contradictory, forms of feminism, can work productively alongside each other, providing a source of balancing critique for one another, ensuring that neither gets lost in its own extremes, is a simple yet controversial one.

The question of how to most constructively integrate such an approach into praxis continues to be part of ongoing discussions at the Library, to facilitate organisation across difference. Their impact on the Library's praxis will be explored in further detail in the analysis chapters.

This further relates to the various ‘battling’ feminist theories impacting the movement at any given time. As shown throughout this chapter, these developments are key to the transformation of the Library and its praxis over the years, as a physical, reflexive materialisation of the feminist movement’s theories and politics in praxis. This will also be explored further throughout this thesis.

Summary

The feminist movement challenges patriarchal, sexist hierarchies, theories, and practices. By introducing both concepts and methods for addressing them – such as shared, community leadership, and cooperative structures (Klein, 1987⁵⁴) – it devises roadmaps for a more equal, feminist world. However, it is only by putting those into practice that we can test their underlying assumptions. Many of such feminist methods translate into librarianship, archival and other organisational practices at the Library, providing a unique case study of feminist organisational theory in praxis, and an opportunity for its critical evaluation, as outlined here.

A learning feminist organisation in its praxis, the Library is thus much more than a repository for the feminist movement’s history. It is feminist theory and methodology materialised in action in everyday organisational and spatial praxis. Feminist principles of collective and anti-sectarian working, intersectionality, accessibility, and inclusivity inform the organisational praxis of the Library, providing a unique research opportunity in relation to feminist organisational and spatial praxis. Therefore, these feminist approaches and their practical implications, as well as the role of the Library’s spatiality in these, will be studied here.

⁵⁴ See also e.g., Lorde (1984); Bartlett (1986); Crenshaw (1989); Butler (1990, 2011); hooks (1994); Fotaki & Harding (2018), for an exploration of these and other key feminist principles.

This project, crucially, considers the Library as a space that facilitates continuous development of such a feminist praxis. The Library, as a space that is simultaneously physical, conceptual, political, and digital, has a far-reaching impact on its various and changing types of users and thus has to continuously consider and re-consider these practices, with the communities in mind. It is, therefore, a feminist ethic that is a constant ‘work in progress’, a materialisation of the feminist movement in reflexive practice, applying and evaluating it critically and reflexively over time. It is proposed here that, based on the nature of feminism, the Library’s (or feminist more generally) praxis needs to remain only broadly defined and/or structured, and open to change, in a constant process of co-creation, re-negotiation, and re-definition, to reflect the on-going changes in the feminist movement.

Informed by this basic feminist framework, the Library collective runs the organisation as feminist in all the aspects of its praxis described thus far. The Library, thus, creates a microcosm of a feminist world, as a materialisation and evaluation of feminist theory and politics in practice. As such, the study of the Library’s organisational praxis will be of interest to Women’s/Gender Studies. This research also proposes that the study and development of feminist organisational praxis today is integral to the area of organisational studies in the twenty-first century, as foundational to building the possibilities of a different, more sustainable world.

In the next chapter, I will explore the literature on feminist libraries and archives more broadly to provide a good grounding for the rest of the research and the rest of the thesis.

Chapter Two

Feminist libraries and archives as (curated) epistemic spaces

This literature review is non-standard, as the commonly encountered order of ‘general to specific’ is reversed here. This is because, following logically from the first chapter – which already introduced some literature on the Feminist Library to contextualise its history and bases as feminist praxis – this chapter starts with a summary of the key existing research on the Library, followed by and leading to a broader overview of the literature on feminist and women’s libraries and archives⁵⁵, outlining what they are (see e.g., Hildenbrand, 1986; Ilett, 2003; Tyler, 2006), and who they are for (see e.g., Burin and Sowinski, 2014; Samer, 2014; Ashton, 2017). I also include relevant examples from research on other (feminist) epistemic spaces here. Feminist epistemic spaces are, therefore, conceptualised broadly here, as including feminist and women’s libraries and archives, but also other spaces dedicated to challenging patriarchal standards of knowledge production, through feminist knowledge collection, preservation, production, and dissemination activities - such as feminist bookstores. As such, feminist epistemic spaces are primarily concerned with challenging dominant (predominantly patriarchal) knowledge production and its spaces, and co-producing alternatives. I am also interested in the role of these spaces in the production of feminist communities, which is explored in the second part of the chapter.

⁵⁵ I refer to ‘feminist libraries and archives’ and ‘feminist and women’s libraries and archives’ interchangeably throughout the chapter. This is because, although some of the roles and objectives might vary between feminist and women’s knowledge spaces, there is also an important overlap, which is key to this research, in that they are all feminist in some sense – as will be explored throughout this and the next chapter - even though the extent of their feminist engagement may vary. At the same time, I include definitions of both to ensure conceptual clarity.

I also include a country of reference by each reference, to ensure transparency and inclusion of a diversity of voices.

In the next part of the review, in Chapter Three, literature on feminist and other organisational spaces will be reviewed, to further contextualize the study and to foreground the importance of this literature to understanding the Library as a feminist and organisational space. Combined, these chapters provide essential building blocks for a conceptual framework through which to consider what a feminist epistemic, material, political, community, and work space is, as well as to highlight the contribution of the Library to this area of research.

The Feminist Library – a research overview

While much writing on the Library exists, most of it is in the feminist and mainstream press⁵⁶ (e.g., Walbe and Davison, 1978), rather than academic sources. Where academic research does exist, most of this focuses largely on the organisation's librarianship and is largely descriptive in nature (e.g., Rikowski and Welsh, 2009; Dodd, 2018), with a few notable exceptions (Sayers, 1992; Ilett, 2003; Tyler, 2006). Sayers' work is focused on the Library's feminist organisational praxis, highlighting how integral it is to the Library's work; it is, therefore, a good potential source of comparative analysis, yet is in large part of historical value at this point, as it was conducted over three decades ago, since when the Library's principles and practice have changed considerably, as outlined in the previous chapter.

Tyler (2006) and Ilett (2003) explored UK feminist and women's libraries and archives more comparatively. Ilett included the Feminist Library alongside The Women's Library (London) and the Glasgow Women's Library, while Tyler studied these in addition to the Women's Archive of Wales, the Feminist Archive South (Bristol), the Swansea Multicultural Women's Resource and Training Centre, the Women's History Project (Ireland), Women in Jazz (Swansea), and the Women's Resource Centre (London). Although they both looked at these

⁵⁶ See e.g.: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/press-coverage/> for a good overview.

organisations from a feminist perspective – and including some aspects of feminist organisational praxis – today, both studies are relatively dated and can be read as being heavily influenced by their historical situatedness, particularly in reference to the Feminist Library. At the time, the Library was presumed to be closed or on the brink of closure (it was, but only temporarily so), which heavily affected the discussions, analyses, and conclusions in this research. Both accounts were also influenced by a particular point in time for feminism. The early to mid-2000s was arguably a relatively quiet period in UK feminism – between the ‘waves’, so to speak, following an anti-feminist backlash (Faludi, 1991) and the impact of years of neoliberal politics. At the same time, some acceptance of the feminist agenda in the mainstream was resulting, for example, in new funding sources for organisations such as the Glasgow Women’s Library (which Ilett highlights). There has also been a lot of critical feminist research done in the years since, which will be useful both to the study of feminist libraries and archives and to understanding their priorities in the changing context of feminism today. While both Tyler and Ilett contextualise their research in terms of developments in librarianship and feminism (which is something that I will explore later in the chapter), these conditions have changed considerably since. It will therefore be interesting to explore here how the Feminist Library’s context, position, and practices have developed in the years since this earlier research was undertaken and published.

It is also interesting to note here that Tyler’s analysis creates something of a separation between feminist libraries and archives and the rest of the feminist movement. From the perspective of a former worker and volunteer at the Library, this seems like an artificial distinction that does not reflect the complexities of the movement, which includes activist, educational, political, literary, and other types of efforts that combine and collaborate to produce the overall project of feminism – and many of which will be highlighted in the analysis. It could even be argued that the feminist role of these libraries and archives could be

inferred based on Tyler's own use of the concept of 'rooms', following Woolf's (1929) work, inspiring the titular 'library of our own' as a space for and by women (as, perhaps arguably, a political notion in and of itself).

As this chapter will highlight, feminist libraries and archives are political communities and projects, and are thus entwined with feminism more broadly. Their roles include various aspects of knowledge production, community, feminist work, and praxis. Although not all feminist and women's knowledge spaces espouse the same values or definition of feminism, they all have at least one common feminist goal at their core: the preservation and advocacy of feminist⁵⁷ knowledge and histories. Therefore, I will start the next section of the chapter by exploring this basic role.

Further, Ilett introduced conceptual elements that will be useful for this research project, as mentioned in Chapter One. Through the concept of gendertopia, Ilett builds on Foucault's (1986) concept of libraries as heterotopias – spaces of blurred temporal boundaries (both in the present and the past simultaneously). From a feminist perspective, gendertopias also function as spaces that challenge the patriarchal status quo and facilitate change, for example, to traditionally gendered rules of librarianship, thereby contributing new versions of history and forms of classifying knowledge. As Ilett describes in her historical analysis of women and librarianship, libraries were traditionally some of the rare spaces blurring the boundary between personal and public space, allowing at least some women early access to work opportunities (Ilett, 2003: 167-168). Ilett also underlines the importance of feminist librarianship's engagement with activism as part of a wider challenge to patriarchy.

⁵⁷ Where feminism is very broadly defined, and includes both the explicit attempt to create and preserve *feminist* knowledge, as well as feminist librarianship as an act of addressing gaps in the representations of women (and other minorities).

Ilett's conceptualisation of gendertopia provides another useful starting point for this research – for examining feminist knowledge spaces as spaces of a challenge to patriarchy beyond their basic role as spaces of herstory. However, Ilett's analysis is also limited in focus. Although collective working practices are also discussed, Ilett's analysis is rooted in (admittedly, feminist) librarianship and therefore tends to focus on these spaces as libraries first and foremost. This, I believe, limits their wider anti-patriarchal potential. I propose here that the feminist archive/library as gendertopia concept could be applied more holistically by looking at the various aspects that constitute these spaces, reflecting on the complexities of feminism (perhaps more appropriately labelled as feminisms (see, e.g., Humm, 2014)), its epistemic, political, community and material practices, and their full potential. This version of the concept includes the key aspects of critical feminist librarianship, alongside those of political, socio-material, and organisational praxis, and explores their relevance in detail. I will focus on the political, epistemic, and community aspects in this chapter, returning to the relevance of the socio-materiality to the Library in more detail in the next chapter.

A similarly holistic definition of a library was proposed by Budd (2004) - including not just collections and information (epistemic) aspects, but also people (in the organisation) and social space (community space, physical and otherwise), as well as services (which could be seen as of both community and epistemic potential). I propose a similarly holistic analysis. However, from a feminist perspective, a feminist knowledge space is also highly political, as a space of anti-hierarchical, anti-patriarchal challenge in its epistemic and organisational praxis.

It should also be clarified here that the concept of gendertopia should not be assumed to be utopian in the idealised sense. However, its feminist knowledge and spatial production in practice do facilitate the process of imagining what a non-patriarchal/feminist world might look like. Thus, this work also contributes to utopian literature if we define the concept

similarly to Firth (2020, no pagination) – as ‘instituting ideals, practices, and values in pursuit of’ alternative ways of coexisting in the world (see also e.g., Solnit, 2004).

The purpose of the current research is, therefore, to explore the role of the Feminist Library as a feminist epistemic space, as well as a political, feminist community, and socio-material organisation. The gaps, concepts, and historical context identified in Ilett’s (2003), and Tyler’s (2006) work provide an excellent starting point for a conceptual framework for this task. The following overview of relevant literature on feminist libraries and archives will serve to build this framework further, to develop a deeper understanding of why these organisations exist and what their evolving role as feminist spaces is. Their role in challenging patriarchal norms of archiving, librarianship, as well as knowledge generation, and history preservation are considered in the following section. Later in the chapter, more attention will be paid to the role of these spaces for feminist communities, particularly considering their changing nature and diversity. The concept of gendertopia is weaved in throughout the chapter, as I inspect the different roles and anti-patriarchal challenges represented by feminist libraries and archives.

Feminist libraries and archives as feminist epistemic spaces

Beginning with an overview of the foundational role of feminist and women’s libraries and archives as epistemic spaces, this chapter will help to provide a framework for the analysis of the Library in this thesis. This section will show that there are multiple aspects of the epistemic nature of these spaces. They are repositories of (feminist) knowledge and history, which help to build feminist consciousness, challenge patriarchal knowledge production, and produce alternative approaches through feminist curation, and other feminist practices, thus facilitating the co-creation of more feminist futures. Co-creation of feminist knowledge (and more feminist futures through it) is thus defined as a process that is collectively produced

through feminist epistemic spaces. This part of the chapter addresses these functions in turn – challenging patriarchal knowledge production and producing alternatives – as representative of the role of feminist libraries and archives as epistemic spaces, with a view to understanding their key aims and objectives, starting with the historical trajectory and reasons for the creation of feminist libraries and archives. The second part of the chapter will highlight the role of different feminist communities in the changing and continuing processes of co-creation of feminist knowledge and dedicated epistemic spaces.

Feminist librarianship and libraries – a short history

Ilett (2003, UK), Hildenbrand (1986; 2000; US) and Kerslake (1999, England) provide us with a useful history of libraries and archives, from a feminist perspective, starting with the remaking of public libraries to include women. While Hildenbrand (2000) looks at libraries more generally and the impact of women and feminism on librarianship, Ilett (2003) and Hildenbrand (1986) focus more specifically on feminist libraries and archives, using the broader history of the developments in the profession as a context for studying the reasons they exist, their role and impact.

Each of these authors explored the position of women in early librarianship and the associated problems of the profession. The importance of libraries for early employment opportunities for women emerged as one of the key themes in their respective accounts. At the same time, issues such as persistent gender roles, constraints to access to higher level positions, and stereotyping of librarianship as ‘women’s work’ also surface. Thus, a library becomes simultaneously a site of liberation and continued subordination of women, providing access to jobs for women, while also constraining those opportunities to those seen as

‘appropriate’ for their gender⁵⁸. Speaking of the intersection of feminism and librarianship, Hildenbrand (2000: 53) further noted:

Without a role in history, women were denied a vital tool for contemporary and future attainment. Historical studies were therefore linked to a reform agenda. Library feminism developed, but slowly, as library women were burdened with their supposed responsibility for the problems of the profession.

The last line from Hildenbrand also highlights another important aspect of these issues - the double bind of women being kept in a subordinated position in librarianship, while also being blamed for its low status. The employment-empowerment tension in (feminist) libraries and archives will be explored further later (and the contradictions of feminist work more broadly will also be examined), while the historical context continues to be discussed here.

Both Hildenbrand (2000) and Ilett (2003) also identified the Second Wave as a major turning point for the profession, from a feminist perspective. While Hildenbrand highlighted continued resistance within mainstream librarianship, it was, nevertheless, impacted by feminist thought at the time. With the advent of women’s professional groups and associations within librarianship, the consensus started shifting into more critical thinking about inequality of pay and unjust hierarchies, previously largely normalised under the guise of ‘women’s work’, as well as reflecting feminist thought in librarianship programmes. Ilett (2003), similarly, explored the influence of feminist thought on gender roles on the questioning of the low prestige of librarianship as a profession (a move away from blaming women, mentioned above), as well as the patriarchal systems of knowledge promoted in traditional librarianship. In a review of the impact of WLM on progress in librarianship,

⁵⁸ On this continuing challenge of the professions, see, e.g., Richmond (2017).

Deyrup (2014) found that most women agreed that this period in feminism had a positive influence on their professional positions and opportunities.

The issues outlined above are also some of the key reasons for the creation of feminist libraries and archives. According to Roff (2014; US), the earliest women's libraries (19th century) served an important educational role, providing access to resources for women who would not otherwise be able to access these at the time.

Ilett (2003) explored the role and impact of feminist libraries and archives in later periods of UK feminism, particularly in terms of challenging the traditional systems of knowledge classification and more community-focused librarianship⁵⁹ (which I explore in more detail later in the chapter).

Meanwhile, Hildenbrand (1986), looking at the reasons for the establishment of early women's collections, focused on their history-preservation and intergenerational potential, noting that interest in archiving feminist movement materials often flourishes in periods otherwise relatively uneventful in feminism. This is reflective of the gaps in earlier history and knowledge production that Spender (1986: 2), for example, also highlighted:

When I realised that there was this great heritage of women novelists of whom most of us have never heard, whose existence we have not even suspected, I began to appreciate the significance of our loss.

Eichhorn (2013; US), particularly focusing on the period between the Second and Third Waves, researched feminist archives, coming to similar conclusions pointing to their intergenerational role. She highlighted feminist knowledge production and preservation in the

⁵⁹ Similar trajectories of libraries as meeting/community spaces have also been studied more broadly, outside of the feminist spaces (see e.g., Audunson, 2005).

movement between the ‘waves’ as important feminist activities, helping to challenge the often-divisive historiography of feminism built around such periodisation.

Further, David (2015), links the genesis of the Feminist Library during the WLM era to the development of many other feminist organisations at the time, from activist groups to professional associations, feminist periodicals, and journals – highlighting the importance of understanding feminist knowledge spaces as key parts of a larger whole and networks of the feminist movement. This embeddedness will be discussed in more detail later and again in the analysis and discussion chapters.

Feminist libraries and archives can also be seen as vehicles for creating and building feminist consciousness. This can, in turn, be linked to the WLM practice of consciousness-raising (CR) (Zanish-Belcher and Voss, 2013), which was a common tool in feminist groups at the time as a way of politicising women. Although much has changed, the key roles of promotion and preservation of herstory, feminist education, and consciousness-raising, and facilitating feminist networks, remain important aspects of these spaces and the wider movement, as evidenced by much literature (see e.g., Lerner, 1975; Lee, 1979; Spender, 1981a; Spender, 1982; or more recently, e.g., hooks, 1994; Ahmed, 2017).

Nevertheless, the priorities of these spaces often shifted over time, alongside the feminist movement and its key objectives. Changing priorities in feminism also affected various other feminist knowledge spaces, such as bookshops. It is important to weave these into the story, as many feminist spaces, particularly since the WLM, served multiple roles as ‘all-purpose’ centres, with space for connecting and events, as well as providing information – even extending to unofficial post boxes for different feminist groups without their own space (especially key before the advent of digital communication technologies).

Meanwhile, Withers (2015; UK) highlighted how changing feminist perspectives and priorities can affect the feminist knowledge spaces in more complex ways. Using the example of the Fawcett Library (now The Women's Library in London), set up during the women's suffrage era, and for the purpose of protecting its histories, its history during the WLM was complex, as Withers (2015: 2-3) highlighted:

In the days leading up to the extraordinary [Fawcett Library relocation] meeting⁶⁰, a rush to join Fawcett ensued, as concerned women's liberationists and other women activists aimed to wield their voting power in order to protect the collection. It should be noted that the aims of the WLM and the Fawcett Society were not politically congruent.

Withers further describes the incongruencies as centering around changing movement priorities and the collections' content, noting that the Fawcett Library did not collect WLM materials. Although the points of tension might have been complex and important, the convergence around the central issue of the preservation of women's history was a clear priority connecting and uniting feminists across time periods and their differences.

Duncanson (2017) provided another useful example of tensions arising in feminist epistemic spaces. Using the example of the Archive of Austrian Association of Women Artists (VBKOE) and its fraught histories, they showcase how important it is to be aware of context and history when trying to understand feminist knowledge spaces. Although feminist in the sense of providing a space for women's art and women artists, and their histories, the VBKOE is also a place of highly controversial origins. Through an account of the histories of their early members and management – some of whom were known Nazi sympathisers –

⁶⁰ The Fawcett Society meeting in 1977, at which a decision was to be made about where the collection was going to be moved: the City Polytechnic, which was committed to keeping the collection together, or the London School of Economics, which was not.

Duncanson provides a glimpse into the tensions often apparent in these spaces. This serves as a useful reminder that independent women's or feminist collections should not be seen as idealised sites of feminist utopia. I will return to define such (and other) 'haunting' aspects of feminist epistemic spaces later in the chapter and will continue to explore the importance of tensions and conflict in the Library space in the analysis.

The next two parts of the epistemic section will focus on the (potentially) transgressive role of these spaces in challenging and subverting dominant, patriarchal norms of knowledge production.

Challenging the 'neutrality' of patriarchal knowledge

The writing of history is not a transparent affair. In common with other forms of writing, the writing of history entails issues of representation, which in their own turn entail issues of epistemology and ideology (...) representation both marks moments of absence and offers us a presence (Bannerji, 2020: 81).

Simone De Beauvoir (1949) was perhaps the first to articulate the point about the subjectivity of knowledge from a feminist perspective: 'Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth' (De Beauvoir, 1949: 175). She brought into question men's presumed objectivity and their claim to the right to create ('objective') knowledge, often oblivious to their own subjectivity and thus 'othering' women.

Patin et al. (2023) further highlighted the necessity of exposing these hidden assumptions and the resultant erasures in knowledge spaces. These erasures – which they conceptualised as epistemicide – and their proliferation in these spaces, continue to contribute to the marginalisation of not just women, but also Black, queer, and other subjects who have historically been excluded from knowledge production processes.

Feminist Standpoint Theory (see also e.g., Hartsock, 1981; Hekman, 1997) can help further facilitate this understanding in the context of feminist libraries and archives, exposing the hidden subjectivities, or 'standpoints', of patriarchal knowledge systems and practices, challenging them, and providing space for an alternative. While feminist scholarship strives to expose, critique, and challenge this, and to introduce alternative feminist perspectives, feminist epistemic spaces preserve this knowledge, promote it, and aim to make it accessible. As Hekman (1997) further points out, this must then be enriched by including a diversity of (feminist) points of view.

Further, as Yousefi (2017) highlights, building on Easterling's (2014) concept of infrastructure space, invisible standards and ideas, alongside physical spaces, and objects, can contribute to building and upholding unequal power structures. (Feminist) libraries can play a role in exposing and challenging these invisible power structures, as well as facilitating them. Therefore, we must be mindful of these dual possibilities.

Much feminist literature on libraries and archives challenges the presumed objectivity and neutrality of traditional knowledge systems and institutions. The 'neutral' process of knowledge production thus becomes exposed and (re)politicised, with feminist knowledge spaces becoming active, or activist, participants in the (political) process of creating alternative knowledge. They challenge the hidden assumptions and exclusions, helping address the resulting gaps and erasures by producing alternative systems, practices, and spaces.

Feminist literature includes various examples of this. Maxwell (2013: 126), for instance, explored the case of the Glasgow Women's Library, noting how 'Women's libraries and gender studies uncover the politics of knowledge systems, promote critical thinking and question taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions'. They can also serve to promote various

marginalised perspectives, becoming ‘active and dynamic sites of knowledge production’ (Maxwell, 2013: 126), inviting the community to participate in the process. More about the community diversity aspect will be discussed in the second part of the chapter.

Similarly, Zanish-Belcher and Voss (2013; US) highlighted the wide-reaching potential of feminist archiving, positioning the feminist archive as a key part of a broader feminist project - one with consciousness-raising and generative power, including the potential to (co)create and change history, shape knowledge and education, and thus the imagination of future generations. They propose that feminist libraries and archives go beyond the basic preservation and educational activities, and practice what they call proactive collecting (Zanish-Belcher & Voss, 2013: 1), to fill the gaps in women’s history, for example, by collecting oral histories. Burin and Sowinski (2014), similarly argue that feminist archives can be sites for educational change, with the potential to influence educational policy and the curriculum.

This sits within a much larger tradition of feminist historical revision, aiming to highlight and include the voices traditionally marginalised and excluded (see, e.g., Olsen, 1978), and to expand the role of feminist archiving as an authorising and legitimising act for women’s and feminist knowledge more broadly (Eichorn, 2013: 15).

Further, using the collection of oral histories as her research method and interviewing feminists, Radhakrishan (2020) invites us to think about the process of history-making and archiving as a continuous and consciously subjective one. Radhakrishan suggests that the process can involve ‘rediscovering’ one’s own history and re-evaluating one’s approach to see it from a new perspective. This is also important as through this process researchers can also elevate their participants to positions of history makers and activists who help rewrite history, particularly that which is underrepresented, with grass-roots archiving becoming a

form of activism. Similarly, Ashton (2017: 143) also links feminist archiving to activism, as ‘preparation for any social campaigning, as it demands critical thinking and structured responses’.

Tyler (2006) also notes that other important roles of feminist libraries and archives include connecting and raising awareness of feminist knowledge, as well as promoting access to it, and building networks. As noted in the section above, such feminist networks were crucial during the WLM, but they remain of key importance today, although perhaps with some changing priorities (I will explore this more later in the chapter and again in the analysis).

As Ashton (2017: 142) further points out, feminist archiving also needs to challenge ‘unquestioned preservation and conservation’ practices, asking difficult questions about what is being preserved, why, and for whom, ‘particularly if 99% remains hidden in storage’.

However, Ashton seems to only touch on the question of ‘where’ archival material is held, stored, and made or not made accessible, in the sense that will be explored in the thesis.

Although institutional norms of hegemonic archival practice that favour ‘unquestioned preservation’, are challenged, the spatial precarity of feminist knowledge production is largely overlooked, as the article focuses primarily on digital storage as an alternative site.

Further, Sadler and Bourg (2015) pose that feminist librarianship praxis also has the power to challenge the biases inherent in more traditional information management systems, from more typically recognised library systems to more digital era structures, such as online search tools. The feminist critique of neutrality of knowledge thus also becomes applicable to the digital era and its tools – and connected to feminist critiques of technology – in this context (see e.g., Rothschild, 1988). They also connect this to the critique of hegemonic, institutional libraries, and their (continuing) pretence of neutrality. The following section will focus on the tensions of feminist knowledge production work within institutions.

Feminist archiving within and outside institutions

Fidelis's (2010) research on stories of women in communist Poland notes contradictions inherent in women's institutional collections and practices. While the institutional archive in question does hold records on women, these have very little of the real women's stories, their voices, and experiences. While it could be said that this was mostly a reflection of the era, as other researchers, such as Tamang (2020) similarly highlight, this remains an issue today.

Fidelis also notes that not all women's collections have a feminist ideal at their core, pointing out the lack of women's voices in the collections in question, despite their seeming focus on women. However, it must be noted that Fidelis is referring to archives created by the ruling party at the time, not by women with a feminist intention, which is an important distinction.

Further, as Kuhnlenz (2020; Germany) notes, trying to do feminist work from within hegemonic institutions is challenging work. While feminists (and other critical researchers and practitioners) are making progress in shifting boundaries from within, they also often have to compromise when working with institutional limitations and contradictions. While addressing some stereotypes and silences, they might also have to work with others and compromise. As Ahmed (2017: 135-138), for example, highlights, negotiating such tensions can be exhausting work:

Walls often come up when we are doing diversity work. Practitioners regularly use wall expressions to describe their work. (...) diversity work as a “banging your head against a brick wall job.” (...) [and] scratching at the surface.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting here that it might also be possible to envisage a feminist future where feminist collections in institutions could be gendertopic, and function not just as collections, but as accessible, inclusive, intersectional feminist community spaces. Such worlds of possibilities are explored and tested by librarians and archivists doing feminist

work in institutions (see e.g., Hathcock and Vinopal, 2017; Smale, 2017; Kingsland 2020).

Eichhorn (2013), similarly, notes both the value and the challenges of having feminist collections within institutions, such as access to resources versus accessibility.

In her work on the history of the first feminist exhibition in the UK, *A Woman's Place*, Amy Tobin (2017) highlights some of the tensions that can also become apparent in trying to do feminist work outside of institutions. As she puts it, '*A Woman's Place* shows the fragility of working outside institutions and yet also the possibility of doing so' (Tobin, 2017: no pagination).

Further, similarly exploring the history of feminist art spaces (in the US), Jones (2016: 8) notes that such practices have had a major impact on larger art institutions, so that:

by the mid to late 1970s across Los Angeles, young feminist artists and teachers were developing entirely new institutions to articulate new modes of thinking, making, displaying, and teaching art and performance. At the same time, even large and relatively entrenched institutions such as Los Angeles County Museum of Art were not just accepting but commissioning a major exhibition on women's art history.

Therefore, as also mentioned in the previous chapter, autonomy is a key consideration for many feminist and other gendertopic spaces. It can help facilitate creativity and access for the marginalised, bypassing the limiting steer or even censorship of the larger institutions (Linder as cited in Brunow, 2020), or their exclusivity and its marginalising effects (Tamang, 2020).

However, highlighting the importance of autonomous feminist (knowledge) spaces does not equate to an anti-institutional argument. While these autonomous spaces have much creative and anti-hegemonic potential, their resource constraints can be substantial. Meanwhile, despite many institutional constraints, feminist work from within (including that undertaken by academics, librarians, and archivists) continues to 'make space' for feminism within

(however reluctant) institutions and build resources for feminism more broadly. Thus, as Crampton (2014: 14) put it, ‘a feminist outpost in the male-dominated academic [or archival] sphere [is] something worth fighting for.’

Therefore, it is important to highlight the value of both autonomy and wide support networks (including within institutions) in the study of feminist libraries and archives and their gendertopic potential. It is also crucial to remember that the relationship between autonomy and preservation is not a straightforward one. As Tyler (2006) highlights, independent feminist libraries and archives are the ones most likely to struggle. Nevertheless, Tyler’s research also points to a tension: while the preservation of (at least some¹) materials might be better enabled by placing these collections in institutions, this can also have a negative impact on the other feminist aspects of these resources, such as community accessibility, institutional challenge potential and organisational independence.

Tyler’s (2006) exploration of The Women’s Library’s (TWL) ‘rise to fame’ and institutionalisation highlights these tensions clearly. As TWL became a pretender to a ‘national’ women’s library status and became institutionalised within the London School of Economics (LSE), it gained accompanying resources, but this also had an adverse impact on other feminist collections in the country. Feminist community access to the collection and its diversity were also impacted (Ilett, 2003; Withers, 2015). While it is, undoubtedly, a feminist library in its content, it is also very selective, excluding later and more radical feminist materials, and attempting to divest materials that do not conform to the institutional definitions of what is ‘important’ enough or to the standard classification systems. However, its story also points to differences in institutional approaches. Even though TWL had previously been a part of an institution, its former host, the City Polytechnic, had allowed it to retain autonomy, whereas the LSE ‘merely’ preserves its collections (at times, arguably so). Although preservation is, of course, a major concern for feminist knowledge spaces, as

highlighted before, it is far from the only one. Ilett even goes as far as to suggest that TWL might be anti-gendertopic, considering the limitations of its institutional setting, separating it from the wider feminist movement, and submitting it to strict institutional norms and hierarchies.

The next section focuses on feminist classification systems and their potential to challenge and subvert patriarchal norms and hierarchies more specifically.

Re-ordering the world as we know it

Standard classification systems used in librarianship provide an interesting example of how subjective knowledge, and its categorization, can be. Looking at such systems from a feminist perspective exposes their hidden hierarchies and assumptions. Foucault's (1966) *Order of Things* is a particularly useful starting point here, as it highlights traditional knowledge systems and their often-hidden underlying assumptions, and how they can affect and limit our meaning-making capacities and processes. Thus, understanding the assumptions upon which these systems are built can help us to challenge some of their persisting hierarchies, biases, and exclusions. This process can help us understand the 'who' of the archive (i.e., who are they produced by, and for), particularly addressing the silences - the voices historically subordinated, disordered, missing, underrepresented, and misplaced in the collections, such as those of women, queer and Black people. Mangena (1994: 275-278), for example, highlighted this challenge:

Whether we are aware of know of other forms of experience or not, it does not follow that such experience does not exist (...) The definition of objectivity in the male idea of science was formulated upon the exclusive experiences of the powerful groups in society. It sets out to serve such groups to the subordination of the powerless.

As an example, Ilett (2003) analysed the impact of Dewey on library classification systems. The Dewey decimal system, as, still, one of the most widely used classifications, provides an interesting case study from a feminist perspective. The system is an example of unacknowledged subjectivity dressed as objectivity, enabled and disguised by the author's privileged – upper-class, white, and male – position⁶¹. Similar feminist critiques are provided by, for example, Searing (1992) and Hannigan (1994), and Taylor (1993), from a queer perspective - all challenging the idea that traditional systems of knowledge classification are somehow unbiased, objective, or neutral, and highlighting the importance of different standpoints and subjectivities for a critical analysis of who they include (and how) and, crucially, who they exclude and how⁶².

Thus, the processes of challenging, disruption, and dismantling of superimposed patriarchal, heteronormative hierarchies and standards, are also the basis of queer feminist analysis and praxis, as Kawthar and Jaha (2020: 402) further highlight:

Often, our queer lives cannot find fulfilment in 'clean,' proper, polished endings: to end a process is to seal our exclusion. To persevere in a process is to work towards dismantling what writes us off as fact. And so, not finishing becomes an embodiment of our knowledges that know no beginning and no end.

I explore the concept of queer(ing) in more detail later in the chapter, and again later in the thesis. For now, it is useful to just mention its applicability to challenging normative library classification systems.

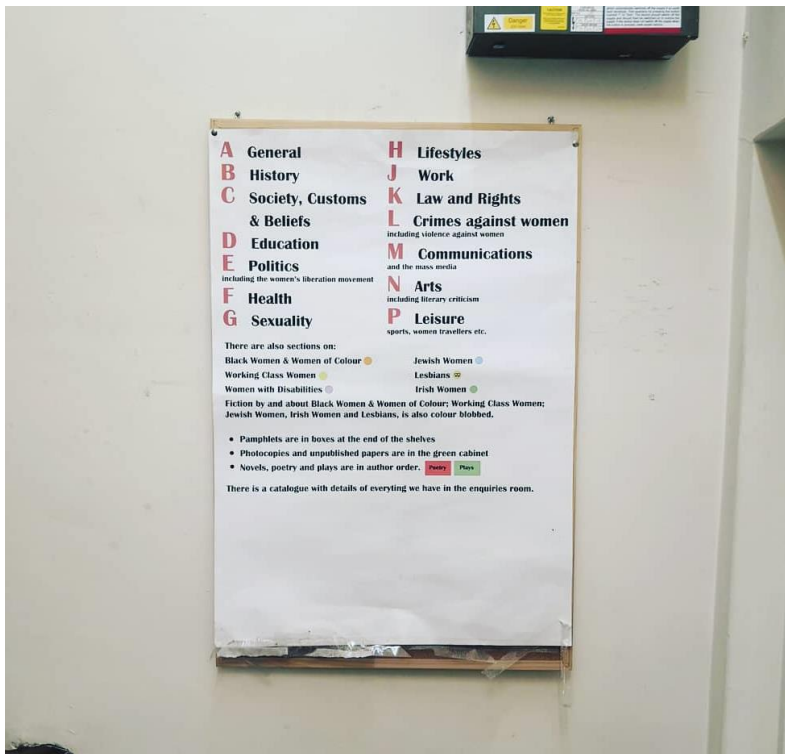
⁶¹ Interestingly, Ilett, as well as Hildenbrand (2000) and Weisbard (2003) all also highlight Dewey's problematic behaviours with women.

⁶² Both Searing and Taylor also note how new perspectives and systems of knowledge classification challenge the superimposed (and often artificial) divisions between knowledge disciplines.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the Feminist Library's classification system (Figure 5) provides a useful example of a feminist alternative to the more normative systems (e.g., Dewey), as it reverses some of their basic assumptions, which tend to 'other' and marginalise women (and other marginalised subjects) by trying to contain them as a small sub-category of the population. Thus, it highlights how more traditional classification systems can reinforce sexist stereotypes by assuming there is a very narrow set of areas (such as childcare and marriage; see Searing, 1992) that women can be reduced to or defined by. By making such gendered notions part of 'official' systems of classifying knowledge, libraries have the power to create, normalise, and reinforce societal inequalities. While the introduction of Women's and Gender Studies and the related categories might have gone some way towards remedying the problem, particularly in more academic institutions (as Searing also points out), many public libraries and other institutions⁶³ still perpetuate such stereotypes. Feminist systems of knowledge classification such as that of the Feminist Library, by contrast, show that women can be interested in and contribute to all areas of life, such as politics, science, and fiction.

⁶³ See also, e.g., Gill (2007) for a more in-depth analysis of such stereotypes and contradictions in contemporary media.

Figure 5

The Feminist Library classification system⁶⁴

Further, as the Library's stories from volunteers highlight, the system also allows for books to 'move around' on the shelves, depending on their interpretation by the volunteer doing the initial classification and possible reclassification. While this is perhaps not ideal in the sense of findability, it does highlight the political and subjective, rather than objective, nature of knowledge production practices, including via classification systems and practices⁶⁵.

Thus, the study of the Feminist Library's classification, and the processes of its making and remaking, make another important contribution in this area, highlighting the reflexive nature of feminist knowledge practices, changing as the feminist movement and its values develop and transform over time.

⁶⁴ Any images where credits are not explicitly specified were taken by the author.

⁶⁵ See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lvNL_O6F78.

Alternative formats, such as art books or zines, can also challenge the means of both production and classification of knowledge, broadening our definitions of what counts as valuable knowledge and as ‘worth’ archiving. For example, Zussman (2021) highlighted this in relation to art books specifically. Such formats do not sit comfortably within standard classification systems, as their materiality is as important as their content, if not more so, thus challenging what is considered to be of value. As Eichhorn (2013) notes, zines are another good example of this, and sometimes their non-standard materials can get lost in the process of being archived due to their complexities. I will discuss other examples of this later in the chapter, as these materialities also link to the types of knowledge often produced by marginalised voices.

The following sections explore other contributions made by feminist epistemic spaces, starting with their curatorial aspects and prefigurative orientation, before moving on to a more focused discussion of diversity, inclusion, and intersectionality in feminist libraries/archives.

Archival curation as a feminist practice

As mentioned in Chapter One, curatorial practices, as ‘a form of knowledge production’ (Richter, 2016: 64), are also an important part of what the Library is and does. According to Jones (2016), feminist curation can address the underrepresentation of women in exhibitions, through supporting women artists, as well as wider liberatory agendas, including anti-racist and queer ones. As mentioned earlier, this can challenge institutional approaches and lack of representation – Richter (2016) also highlights this. Feminist curatorial practice, therefore, has the potential to challenge and address the underrepresentation of women and other marginalised subjects, as well as other oppressive practices and structures.

Taylor (1993), Ashton (2017), and Greer (2021) raise similar points in relation to the archive. From their various perspectives (feminist, queer, and anti-racist, respectively), it becomes important to question the norms of who, but also what is considered 'worth' archiving and curating. Taylor and Greer consider this specifically while thinking about ephemera, while Ashton focuses more on performance. What is considered 'worthy' of being considered heritage can also have an important impact on 'appropriate' or even possible forms of scholarly work. Again, those at the margins – whether referring to the artists or the materials that are usually excluded – and traditionally most underrepresented in institutions, have perhaps the most feminist/anti-hegemonic potential when they are produced outside the constraints of the institution. Alternative settings – such as feminist libraries, archives, and exhibition spaces – can often be where the most marginalised find their place (Jones, 2016). As Wismer (2015) also highlights, public spaces can have similar potential. Ephemera, for example, can challenge the idea of the exclusivity of art by being freely displayed and distributed in public spaces. Perry (2016: 91), similarly, challenges the power dynamic of curation, by describing the role of the feminist curator as that of a 'mediator' between the audience and the artist, rather than, as previously thought of, as the exhibition 'author'.

As such, the feminist archive becomes a space preserving both voices and formats of knowledge that are not usually considered in more mainstream archival spaces, as well as bringing them to the wider public. I will come back to discussing the importance of autonomous spaces more broadly in Chapter Three.

Wismer (2015) also highlights the importance of recognising the complexity of the relationship between the archivist, librarian, and curator. Wismer's work shows how the feminist archive is not just a source, but a destination. Crucially, in the case of materials such as ephemera, the archive might be the destination, as mainstream collections often avoid these 'troublesome' types of materials (despite a recent shift). The Feminist Library provides

an interesting example of this complexity, considering both its open approach to collecting, as well as its curation practice intersection, and that the concept of archival curation can be applied to both the curating of the collections themselves, as well as to the process of looking at archives and collections as art, as highlighted in Chapter One. Thus, the library/archive becomes art while, at the same time, challenging and questioning what is considered worth archiving and exhibiting. This blurring of boundaries will be discussed in more detail in the findings and analysis chapters.

Wolf (2018: 1) uses the concept of the ‘metabolism’ of the feminist archive to further expand the role of archival curation. The archive becomes not just an active agent in preserving feminist histories, but also a co-curator of the movement itself, provoking conversation, collaboration, and intergenerational communication.

Greenan (2018), curator at the Women’s Art Library (WAL; UK), explores the importance of its slide collections to the artists they represent, the promotion of feminist art knowledge, and addressing the gaps in the representation of women artists in history and knowledge production. Focusing on digital curation Greenan (2018: 64) also refers to it as ‘an exercise of “enhanced curation”’ through which the WAL’s slide collection gains a newly accessible form. I discuss the wider impacts of digitisation on feminist spaces in Chapter Three.

Thus, feminist epistemic spaces are feminist, or gendertopic, through much more than simply being collections of anti-hegemonic, feminist knowledge. Through practices such as proactive collecting, feminist classification, and accessible curation, they become active agents, rather than just passive collectors, (co)creating, disseminating, and promoting access to more representative history, or herstory, inviting communities to participate, and blurring and breaking boundaries between curator, archivist, user, and subject. While I will return to the key question of who is represented and who makes feminist collections more fully later in

the chapter, under the 'communities' section, I now turn to the importance of feminist libraries and archives in creating, envisioning, and re-visioning feminist futures.

Re-visioning (the world as we know it): Envisioning alternative futures and feminisms through feminist archives

What appears to make archives and archiving compelling to so many feminist activists who came of age after the crest of the second-wave feminist movement is the fact that the archive, in a myriad of ways, opens up the possibility of being in time and in history differently (Eichorn, 2013: 8).

As also highlighted in the previous chapter, Eichorn (2013), and similarly, for example, Hildenbrand (1986) note how feminist archives and libraries have the potential to bring feminists together across time and difference, building intergenerational connections and challenging some contradictions and conflicts within and between feminisms. This spatio-temporal connection is also useful for conceptualising these spaces as sites for envisioning alternative feminist futures.

According to Samer (2014), the act of breaking generational barriers is one of enormous potential – not just for more intergenerational work and collaboration, but also for building more inclusive feminist futures, and future feminisms. This is also where I come back to the idea of queering, as Samer (2014) also takes the view of the feminist library/archive as a consciousness-raising tool, but from a queer feminist perspective. Using Adrienne Rich's concept of 're-vision' (Rich in Samer, 2014: 1), Samer proposes a role for the feminist archive as a challenge to the patriarchal model of the world in a more future-oriented sense. Samer (2014: 1) proposes that by reimagining the past, women 'could better know themselves in the present, and guarantee the survival of women and the continuation of women's creative and intellectual work in the future'. Although Samer's analysis focuses on

the potential of digital archives, in the context of thinking about archiving and librarianship as a feminist practice more generally, by adding a queer lens, this highlights the importance of working intergenerationally, as well as the inclusion of different voices in feminism(s) today, for building a more inclusive future for/through feminism.

The possibilities created by alternative futures and potential histories from a queer perspective are also explored, for example, by Bassette (2003), Rumens (2018), and Muñoz (2019). Muñoz (2019: 1), like Samer (2014), suggests that not just queer futurity, but queerness more broadly, is something that is 'not yet here'. Queerness, in this context, is seen as existing in a constant process of becoming, one that can be influenced by history, because, as highlighted earlier, the archive 'opens up the possibility of being in time and in history differently' (Eichhorn, 2013: 8)⁶⁶. Again, the archive becomes an important site of future building.

Rumens (2018) provides another interesting queer perspective, suggesting ways of applying it, not just to queering our histories, or herstories, but also to organisational praxis more broadly, allowing for a more holistic re-visioning of the future. Thus, again, the 'how' is questioned and challenged in everyday organisational praxis - not just in the context of knowledge spaces - alongside the 'what' and 'who' (and the 'where'); bringing together the key aspects of this project (the organisational and spatial praxis aspects will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter).

Queer theory and practice are also important here for another reason, as they help us to question feminist visions of the future, as well as more mainstream ones, ensuring that feminist (archival and otherwise) praxis includes and reflects other 'othered' subjects and

⁶⁶ Although some critical queer perspectives on the archive go as far as being 'anti-archival' (see e.g., McLeod, 2014).

perspectives, not just women. Bassette (2003), for example, notes the importance of revisiting, deconstructing, and reconstructing pasts through archives, including mainstream (and mainstream feminist) representations of lesbian identities, with a view to constructing more inclusive histories and futures.

Other important lenses for such revisions include anti-racist, post-, and decolonial perspectives. Azoulay (2019), for instance, provides an anti-imperialist perspective on archives as potential sites of radical re-thinking of the world as we know it and creating new, more inclusive histories, modes of structuring, collecting, and creating knowledge – and thus new potential futures for all historically marginalised subjects.

Similarly, Chhachhi and Abu-Er-Rub (2020) also refer to potential histories (rather than history), allowing for a future with a plurality of voices and possibilities to be articulated, none with a more superior claim to the ‘truth’ than the others. Chhachhi and Abu-Er-Rub (2020: no pagination) refer to the process of creating a feminist (photographic) archive of the Indian women’s movement as ‘thinking of a potential history that can sit alongside other histories.’

Ghosh (2020) also talks about the importance of archiving in helping us articulate the future that we want from an Indian feminist perspective. Ghosh highlights how history is written by those who win battles, but also those who archive it, rather than as a simple reflection of how things really happened. Looking at India’s struggle for independence, Ghosh shows that male revolutionaries are more likely to collect, preserve, and promote their own stories, in comparison to females, impacting in important ways on the storytelling and action potential of future generations.

Further, Sharma (2020), points out the dangers of superimposing a modern, Western imaginary of what feminism is onto historical figures. The myth of the objectivity of the

archive, and history more generally, is thus exposed again as, rather, just a version of history that allows for multiple interpretations, as well as the necessary plurality of feminist thought. This critique invites us to rediscover and reimagine feminism as feminisms, by reflexively challenging our – often ethnocentric – assumptions.

Similarly, in the UK context, Burin and Sowinski (2014), following Amos and Parmar (2005), discussed the Black feminist project as challenging white feminist assumptions and theories, as well as persistent gaps in representation, in feminism and elsewhere. While I discuss issues of inclusion, intersectionality, and representation in more depth under the next ‘communities’ subsection, it is also worth noting here that there is (still) a stark underrepresentation of Black women in (feminist and otherwise) archives and libraries, and in history more broadly, as Burin and Sowinski also highlighted. As outlined in the previous two chapters, this has been an important issue in feminism since at least the 1980s, and yet it remains an ongoing concern. Therefore, any (re)visions of feminist pasts and futures must prioritise this issue, alongside other silences in the archive. This challenge is key to feminism; as Amos and Parmar (2005: 49) note, ‘divide and conquer in our world must become define and empower’.

The Feminist Library/archive is uniquely placed, as a living, developing, learning feminist heritage site – a future-oriented one and a possible gendertopia – for this challenge. However, for this, as much of the revisionist feminist literature highlights, the inclusion of a plurality of voices and perspectives is crucial. Yet, considering the somewhat exclusionary history of the Library in this context is as important, as it highlights the ongoing relevance of ‘hauntings’ and tensions in the feminist archive in this process. ‘Hauntings’ are, therefore, defined here, building on the work of Gordon (1997: 8) as both absences and ‘seething presences’, as well as continuous tensions and negotiations of such histories that happen in a feminist epistemic and community space. As I will explore in the analysis chapters, ‘haunting’ materialities and

stories can travel through and become hidden, as well as (re)discovered, in a feminist space - and their changing sites and meanings can indicate and become sources of important contestations in feminism (see also Hesford, 2005; Freeman, 2010). At the same time, these 'hauntings', through their 'travels' and 'seething presences', can become important sources of queering and transformation in/of feminist epistemic space.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the important role of feminist libraries and archives as community spaces, considering the different perspectives that need to be articulated, acknowledged and more actively included in this context.

Feminist libraries and archives as feminist community sites

Feminist Archival Theory – feminist archiving as caring, sharing, and co-creating

The subject of feminist ethics is a complex one. Therefore, as much as it provides an important opening for this section, any simple definition of what 'feminist ethics' means is also to be questioned.

Henningham et al. (2017; Australia), for instance, provide a perspective on ethics using feminist archival theory, following Caswell and Cifor's (2016) thinking on a feminist ethics of care as applied to archival practice. They do so to refer to feminist knowledge spaces as playing an important role as custodians of collections, but also to explore how this relates to both the authors of the archives, as well as their subjects and users. They highlight the importance of activist feminist collections having an active link to and ethical responsibility for their community, which is defined broadly as encompassing activists, scholars, and archivists, as well as the subjects of the archive. The responsibility they espouse extends beyond the simple preservation of materials to working in collaboration with the community to co-curate/create knowledge and meaning, thus ensuring diversity of representation in history and collections, as well as challenging the separation between the archivists, the

archival subjects, and the wider communities. Thus, this process also challenges some of the traditional hierarchies of the archive as an institution, particularly those separating the archivists, the archived, and the researchers/users.

However, there is a need to critically reflect on the idea of feminist ethics of care more carefully to ensure that feminist archival praxis is not an essentialising one. While there is insufficient space for an in-depth exploration of the relevant controversies here, it is worth highlighting that Henningham et al. (2017) use an inclusive definition of feminism, encouraging the contribution and engagement of different communities, perspectives, and feminisms. From this perspective, a feminist ethics of archival care can be defined as ‘binding archivists to “records creators, subjects, users and communities of mutual responsibility” in pursuit of social justice objectives’ (Henningham et al., 2017: 92), with ethics being understood as a breaking with the traditional hierarchies of archival practice rather than as being premised on an essentialist view of women as ‘natural’ carers.

As such, the feminist archive becomes more than a collection of women’s history and the feminist movement – it can also be understood as a site for community building and empowerment. However, as highlighted before, there are considerable challenges associated with this work. The rest of this section, therefore, explores how feminist libraries and archives do this work by working for and with different communities, followed by a focus on how diverse communities continue to challenge persisting exclusions in these spaces.

Empowering communities – socially engaged archives

Boere (1998: 240) refers to feminist libraries and archives as ‘information intermediaries’, highlighting the function that they play in breaking down the barriers between the libraries and their communities and actively connecting users to knowledge. Ashton’s (2017)

Manifesto for Feminist Archiving contributes further to this perspective on feminist libraries

and archives by also highlighting their role in skilling. Thus, socially engaged feminist archives are defined here as those that practice not just community and collaborative curation, but also provide skills and knowledge, for example, through workshops engaging young women and girls in the process of feminist archiving and curation and empowering them for feminist activism and organising in the future.

These educational engagement activities further help to challenge who has access to (feminist) knowledge production, preservation, and curation. Tyler (2006) added that there is a considerable lack of librarianship qualifications among feminist libraries, further highlighting the importance of these skills. At the same time, the Feminist Library, as mentioned before, is one example of how feminist knowledge spaces engage not just in producing alternative knowledge systems, but also in providing access to skills based on these. This also connects with a longer history and practice of alternative, community education in feminism and activist movements more broadly (see e.g., hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970). These are often based on principles such as collective working, inclusion, and accessibility. By contrast, professional librarianship qualifications can be relatively expensive and inaccessible.⁶⁷ In feminist spaces, these can be replaced with alternative training in feminist cataloguing and classification skills, which tend to be designed to be accessible and free.

Further, Claeys (2013) focuses on women's information centres and exchange in revolutions – in this case, in the 'Arab Spring' – and their role in empowering women with tools and

⁶⁷ While the CILIP (2021) (professional association of librarians) website provides information about both short course and full BA/BSc and MA courses in librarianship, the pricing of these courses, as with higher education in the UK more generally, can be exclusive to many (see e.g., Dearden et al., 2011).

knowledge for activism (and not just in feminism). This process is important, as it highlights a direct impact of women's and feminist knowledge spaces on activism and organising.

However, these sites can also be used in various ways, some of them more problematic. As Lammasniemi (2020), for example, highlighted while exploring the role of early English women's rights organisations' archives in skilling women, before they had access to the legal profession through more official routes, these skills could then sometimes be used by middle-class women to dubious ends, such as working against working class or migrant women. In this context, Lammasniemi proposes, early women's rights organisations archives could be interpreted as feminist, as a source of empowerment, but could also be understood as anti-feminist, from a more intersectional perspective. It could therefore be dangerous to simply interpret the empowering role of the historical archive as feminist in the contemporary sense, without understanding the complexities often hidden in the historical context, through a critical historiography lens. With this in mind, I now turn to the penultimate section of this chapter, exploring which communities are represented in these spaces.

Whose communities? Intersectionalities in/of the feminist archive/library

As Townend (2020: 9) notes 'there is a recognised tension between ideologies of library neutrality and the needs of marginalised groups'. As Townend further shows, the myth of neutrality of knowledge production sites can also be exposed by exploring the impact of political changes, such as the introduction of Section 28, banning the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities. Such policies can have a notable impact on the practices and spaces of knowledge production, such as libraries or bookshops. The introduction of Section 28, for example, led to a traceable pattern of self-censorship in libraries and bookshops (including feminist ones).

Rebecca Solnit (2015) coined the term ‘privelobliviousness’ for those in privileged positions who do not have the ability to see other perspectives. She was specifically referring to white men; always being the hero of every story can mean that you do not get to appreciate looking at the world from any different position. It might be connected to a lack of empathy, and, as Solnit proposes, that is also why stories told from many different perspectives are needed. Difference is important and enriching for us all, whatever our position in society. Yet, the concept can be extended to other positionalities. This is where intersectionality theory can be useful, in recognizing the different, often complex patterns of privilege and marginalisation that can depend on our individual positionalities (see e.g., Crenshaw, 1989; Lewis, 2013; Collins, 2019).

The consideration of different perspectives in feminist knowledge spaces is therefore crucial to their inclusivity and accessibility. As Burin and Sowinski (2014; UK), for instance, speaking from a Black feminist perspective, and problematising the dominant white perspectives within many feminist archives, showed, autonomous Black feminist archives may be needed to address issues of Black underrepresentation.

Similarly, Lobo (2019) (Rise Up! Feminist Archive, Canada) also talked about Black feminist representation in the archive, highlighting the importance of the feminist archive for these communities. The feminist archive, in this context, can pose a far-reaching challenge to more normative archival practice and institutions, including its methods, criteria for inclusion, and issues of representation. At the same time, with its focus on Black-led materials in the archive, the paper also highlights the importance of the inclusion of different voices and community embeddedness in the production of representative archival spaces.

Meanwhile, Salami (2020), also speaking from a Black feminist perspective, highlighted how this lens enables us to see the many different formats that history is produced in – such as oral

histories, songs, dances, or myths. Often, these types of knowledge can be unrecognised and silenced, partly because they were historically associated with women, especially Black and indigenous women, and those occupying other intersectional positions of marginalisation. Yet, the ability to recognise and include such different perspectives can produce ‘a richer understanding of the world’, as Salami (2020: 9) also noted. Tamang (2020; India) made a similar argument, also highlighting how these preferred (by women) formats, such as oral histories, can often still be discounted in the mainstream, reproducing marginalisation. Like Burin and Sowinski (2014), Tamang suggested that alternative feminist projects and sites of archiving feminist histories can be a possible response to this⁶⁸.

Yet, feminist archives cannot claim to properly address the silences and inequalities of patriarchal (archival) norms and practices while still perpetuating their own. This recognition is necessary for building a feminist and more sustainable future, as Audre Lorde (1984: 118-123) also highlighted:

Refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women (...) The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.

Ilett (2003) provides a similar criticism of some of the inadequacies of the WLM in addressing issues of difference and relative under-representation, highlighting the importance of including a plurality of voices and intersectional perspectives. Although recent research and practice of feminist libraries and archives tend to center and address these issues more

⁶⁸ Aromi (2021), for example, also highlights the importance of community archives for collecting political stories of race struggles, from the perspective of the communities involved.

adequately by incorporating more recent contributions from feminist theory and activism and including more international perspectives, these issues are far from resolved.

For example, Radhakrishan (2020; South India) highlighted the importance of independent, grassroots feminist archives to the project of addressing the underrepresentation of women's activism in history, particularly in contexts where women are still hard to find. Radhakrishan notes that women are still less likely to document their own history, and, as mentioned before, how doing feminist research can encourage them to re-think and empower them to change that. Angelo (2020) makes similar observations, while working with stories of women in Kenyan politics and inspiring them to record their own histories, previously hard or impossible to find, in an autobiographical form.

Meanwhile, writing from a lesbian feminist perspective and highlighting the activist role of archives, Sadler and Cox (2018) in the UK (Sheffield Feminist Archive) and Taylor (2018) in Australia (Lesbian Feminist Archives), extended the representation considerations to the intersections of gender and sexuality. The role of the archive is explicitly presented as feminist and as part of the larger movement, and its changing priorities and objectives. Various queer community perspectives in/on the archive are also addressed by, for example, Killen (2017) (various/online, Australia), Samer (2014) (various, US), and Cantillon et al., 2017 (various, Australia).

Similar perspectives are represented by, for example, Mason and Zanish-Belcher (2007) (Iowa Women's Archives & Archives of Women in Science and Engineering, US), reflecting the concerns of other underrepresented communities, such as Latinx women.

However, despite the importance of intersectional perspectives in many of these studies, it must be noted here that most of the examples used so far have been focused on Western libraries and archives. While this is not without relevance, as both the Library and, by

extension, this study, is UK-based, it is also a reflection of the persistent ethnocentric bias in research scholarship. Today's feminism is truly transnational, and it is therefore increasingly important to challenge these biases. The following examples highlight some of the key reasons why this is crucial.

Stewart et al. (2011) note how it is important for countries like the US (and the UK) to realise and acknowledge feminism as a global movement. They describe the role of building a global archive of feminisms in challenging ethnocentrism and stereotypical feminist language, and in creating more inclusive scholarship, curricula, and transnational collaborations.

Greening's (2000) paper highlights how Western-centric perspectives can become embedded even in archives elsewhere, due to their colonial pasts and deep, continuing impact on globalised culture. While writing on the Women's Library in Istanbul, Greening mentions some historical factors, such as the adoption of Western script, have caused a cultural chasm, problematising historiographies of Turkey and Turkish feminism more specifically.

The role of language is crucial and has been explored by others⁶⁹. Mackie (2001), similarly, investigated how moving towards more transnational feminisms has also led to changes in language; for example, shifting from 'global' to 'transnational' feminism(s), with 'global' being associated with Western feminists' tendency to brush over important differences, without really understanding them.

Cotera (2015) also exposes the exclusions of feminist language and the power of the feminist archive to address certain silences in feminist history. From the perspective of a Chicana feminist and writing with reference to a digital feminist archive of Chicana feminism, Cotera seeks to address the inaccuracies of feminist histories and the language of 'feminist waves',

⁶⁹ Similar critiques of Western feminism and its ethnocentrism in language were developed by others, notably, Spivak (1981), who explores how such ethnocentricity affects feminisms of those 'othered' by such perspective.

which excluded, and to an extent continues to exclude, women of colour. Severe problems in finding primary or secondary sources for research in this area provided another motivation for the archive. Crucially, as Cotera notes, the feminist archive must be a highly collaborative – or co-creative, returning to the definition provided earlier – project, including students, academics, archivists, community members, and grassroots activists, if it is to address such silences and challenge the power systems that diminish those stories – and to produce more inclusive feminist futures.

Wo (2020; Singapore) and Freeland (2020; East Germany) also highlight how changes in feminist language, perspectives, and locations can affect archival research, calling into question the appropriateness of using modern, Western feminist frameworks for archival research, and showcasing the importance of temporal and spatial context. Wu notes how early ‘feminists’ in 1950s Singapore preferred not to use the language of ‘feminism’ for themselves. Meanwhile, Freeland (2020) shows how archival space and institutional change can lead to the appropriation of local feminisms into ill-fitting, Western frameworks.

Further, Hassan (2020) (Women & Memory Forum, Egypt) considers the importance of exhibiting women’s archives, including those not traditionally considered ‘worthy’ of becoming objects of exhibition, such as personal letters between ‘everyday’ mothers and daughters. Hassan also highlights the importance of considering intersections of class and gender in this discussion.

Such intersectional considerations are also crucial for a discussion of archival accessibility⁷⁰ more broadly. I will therefore discuss the importance of archives in the context of the Library in more detail in the findings and analysis. Meanwhile, I turn briefly to the subject of zines as

⁷⁰ See, for example, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2019 report (UK) for some interesting data on participation in libraries by race, class and gender.

an illustration of how the above themes can intersect with promising implications for the future of feminist knowledge spaces.

Connecting feminist libraries and archives, feminist futures and intersectionalities

Zines are often discussed by feminist researchers for their inclusivity and intersectional potential. Licona (2012), for example, explores zines from the perspective of feminists and queer people of colour. Inspired by Anzaldúa's concept of borderlands, Licona (2012: 2) proposes that zines, generally share a commitment to challenging the status quo, but that feminist and queer Black zines have a particular potential, namely that of challenging multiple intersecting oppressions and thus creating 'third spaces', both figurative and actual⁷¹, which have diversity of voices and perspectives at their core.

Meanwhile, Piepmeier (2009) suggests that zine communities – or what the author terms embodied communities (I discuss the embodiment aspect of feminist spaces in more detail in the next chapter and again in the analysis) are key to creating inclusive and accessible feminisms. Thus, arguably, the zine medium can be said to become an almost-ideal embodiment of intersectional feminism or gendertopia, or what might also be dubbed queer feminist space, following some of the queer theorists referenced above:

The community of zines doesn't demand homogeneity or perceived sameness; instead, zine communities are more like what philosopher Iris Marion Young describes as 'the ideal of city life,' characterised by variety, social differentiation without exclusion, and heterogeneous public (Piepmeier, 2009: 58).

Nevertheless, it is important not to idealise zines. I will study the role of zines in the Feminist Library in more detail in the findings and analysis chapters, showing how they can facilitate

⁷¹ While Licona refers to physical zines and spaces which facilitate their exchange, such as zine fairs, the term third space also incorporates borderland rhetoric and practices.

feminist community and access to collaborative herstory making. At the same time, they are presented as only one possible tool for this, rather than centred as the key approach to feminist knowledge production at the Library as a gendertopic, future-building space.

Indeed, as the story of the Library presented in the analysis and discussion chapters shows, it is the complex, co-creative, material nature of the Library that makes it the feminist organisation that it is today – a space where multiple types of feminist knowledge and many communities gather and contribute to its production. The value of co-creation, and including marginalised voices in feminist spaces, research and knowledge production more broadly has been explored by others, and highlighted as particularly key when working with and aiming to truly include marginalised communities and perspectives (e.g., Henningham et al., 2017; Williams & Drew, 2020). Returning to Henningham et al.'s (2017) idea of a feminist ethics of (archival) care, it can be argued that there is a responsibility in feminist epistemic spaces to include their communities in their co-creation to ensure both (agentic) inclusion and representation. Similarly, as the Library's story presented in this thesis will highlight, the co-creative nature of the organisation is what enables different communities to participate in and co-produce the space in a way that helps address some of the exclusion issues highlighted above and fulfils its promises as an inclusive feminist space – even while it is being challenged and transformed alongside the feminist movement (as it is not free from contestations).

Summary

This chapter has provided a summary of relevant research to date on the Feminist Library, alongside a longer historical and contemporary overview of scholarship focusing on feminist libraries and archives more broadly, helping expand the conceptual framework for this study. It has highlighted the importance, and value, of approaching the Library as an epistemic and

community space to build an understanding of its purpose and meaning, and of its continually changing context.

Further, using Ilett's (2003) definition of feminist libraries as gendertopias, and building on various other critical scholarship on libraries and archives, this chapter has helped to foreground the political nature of the Library, and thus the political role of the feminist archive (and library) in challenging and subverting the hidden assumptions of traditional knowledge production and classification. The chapter has also helped to build an understanding of the changing nature of the Library as a reflexive, continually evolving feminist organisation and as an active part of the feminist movement, as highlighted in Chapter One.

Building on this framework, this project, therefore, will explore the Library's political, community, and epistemic organisational praxis reflexively. As a feminist organisation and as a feminist epistemic space and community, the Library can uniquely contribute to challenging the patriarchal status quo and to various bodies of knowledge, including WS/Gender Studies and librarianship, as well as Organisation Studies.

Chapter Three will focus on spatial/material aspects of organisations, feminist and more broadly, examining how they intersect and contribute to the study of feminist organisational praxis, thereby helping to complete our conceptual framework and to show the interconnectedness of all these different aspects of libraries and archives as feminist knowledge and organisational spaces.

Finally, building on the last couple of sections, this chapter has also foregrounded how understanding the Library as an intergenerational, intersectional space that exists in a process of continuous queering will provide insight into the Library's organisational practice. Rooted in one feminist era but living through and learning from others, the Library provides an

interesting case study of the changing nature of feminist praxis, of the tensions apparent in this process, and of the negotiation of these tensions, as well as the possibilities of looking at the conflicts and contradictions differently. Thus, I believe the study of the Library adds a valuable and unique contribution to this area of feminist research, allowing for the building of new visions of and perspectives on feminism by looking at feminist knowledge spaces as places where different feminisms can intersect, interact, develop, and grow, through struggle and reflexivity as an ongoing process of 'queering' feminist knowledge and practice.

Chapter Three

Organisational and feminist spaces

This chapter provides an overview of literature on organisational spaces, including Organisation Studies and feminist perspectives, as well as a brief overview of other relevant areas, such as digital and other alternative spaces. Starting with a broad overview of Organisation Studies literature focusing on space and materialities, it proceeds with a relatively brief review of digital and alternative spaces literature, through to a longer discussion of research on feminist spaces. Finally, it provides an overview of some of the key critiques of relevant literature on feminist spaces, which leaves us with an important departure point for the critical analysis of the Feminist Library that follows.

This chapter, therefore, builds on the review of the literature on feminist epistemic spaces provided in Chapter Two, to construct a conceptual framework of feminist space understood as socially produced (building on Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space, as outlined below) and co-constitutive of feminism as a site of feminist knowledge and community production, but also of feminist material and organisational production more broadly.

The socio-material production of (organisation) space

This section begins with an overview of Organisation Studies literature on organisational spaces. Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space and Dale's (2005) concept of social materialities provide some of the key conceptual points of departure and building blocks for framing the analysis of the Library as a space of political, epistemic, and community value (as outlined in the previous chapter), but also as a feminist organisational and material space. Following this overview, the chapter then moves on to examine some of the key themes in organisational space research, such as community, power dynamics,

liminality, symbolism, aesthetics, and affect, before exploring the importance of digital and alternative spaces.

Conceptual foundations

To think spatially is to be alive to how an organizational form or body is always being placed somewhere, or seeking a place, whereby power becomes intimate to its realization and identity. To think spatially is to consider how boundaries (gates, access codes, language, hierarchies, hinterlands, no-go zones, back-rooms, colonial partitions) are being instituted and transgressed as well as more critically which boundaries define organization; how organizational forms echo or recoil from their wider settings (Beyes and Holt, 2020: 2).

As Bolt and Holt highlight, research on organisational spaces is a complex field, interlinked with questions of power, identity, and boundaries, and raising issues that will be relevant to this project and which will, therefore, be explored in more detail below. At the same time, as Taylor and Spicer (2007) noted in their review of literature on the topic, the study of space in Organisation and Management Studies is a relatively recent phenomenon, as space had historically been viewed as neutral, leading to a 'spatial turn' in organisational studies in the last few decades. This turn was inspired in large part by the work of Lefebvre (1991) on the social production of space. Lefebvre's theory integrated concepts of social, mental, and physical space, highlighting the interconnected and mutually constitutive nature of the previously largely separate aspects of space.

Subsequent research in Organisation Studies has built Lefebvre's (1991) typology. In a review of literature on organisational spaces, for instance, Taylor and Spicer (2007: 325) highlighted how Lefebvre's (1991) work helped challenge the previously dominant idea that 'the spaces and places that management happens in and through [are] neutral settings'. This challenge

enabled research in Organisation Studies, which considers spaces as more integral to and coproducing organisational practice – to understand space as socially produced and as co-constitutive of social practice in organisations (see also Watkins, 2005).

The present work also builds on the rich potential of Lefebvre's (1991) conceptualisation of space as socially co-produced but doing so from a queer(ed) feminist perspective. Working particularly closely with the queer phenomenology of Ahmed (2006) – which facilitates disorientations from and challenging of assumed and hegemonic perspectives (the implications of which will be addressed in more detail in the methodology chapter) – I focus on the important role of difference in the (co)production of feminist space, as it changes over time and is transformed by changing perspectives in feminism.

Another key piece of research that builds on Lefebvre's (1991) theory that is also central to this thesis and its theoretical framing is Dale's (2005) social material understanding of space as embedded within power relations. Dale highlights the mutually constitutive nature of organisational materialities and dynamics, particularly, in this case, those of control and resistance (see also e.g., Dale and Burrell, 2008; Courpasson et al., 2017; Harding et al., 2022). Workspaces, as Dale (2005: 670) showed us, can be sites where 'social and material arrangements (...) come together to create and reinforce a particular sort of organizational control' (and resistance). Dale and Burrell (2008: 39) similarly built on Lefebvre's work to explore how organisation⁷² is 'accomplished through spatial, embodied and material relations which can construct and reproduce certain power effects'. By looking at how changing spaces of organisation can also materialise transformational organisational dynamics, Dale shows how materiality is co-constitutive of (and with) social relations in organisations⁷³. Dale's

⁷² Also thought of more broadly here, as organisational processes, not just as specific organisations.

⁷³ Peteri et al. (2021) also investigated how changing organisational space can affect people's experiences and interactions, findings suggested open-plan workspaces can limit human

(2005) concept of social materialities underpins my analysis and discussion, enabling me to explore how feminist space is produced over time through socio-material practices and the dynamics of conflict and resistance, as well as the struggle of and for community.

Organisational spaces and communities

The importance of community in feminist knowledge spaces was already noted in Chapter Two. Research on organisational spaces has helped to further highlight the role of materiality in creating a sense of community and belonging at work. Garrett et al. (2017) explored this by focusing on people who use co-working spaces to address feelings of isolation and to meet their need for a sense of belonging. Space can thus be an important facilitator of working communities, as well as being co-constituted by these communities, as I will also explore.

In comparison, Hawick et al. (2018: 1017) highlighted how ‘buildings and spaces contribute in crucial ways to people’s experiences of these spaces’, particularly in negative ways. Their research exposed how space can be an important facilitator of or, crucially, a barrier to learning in student communities. The new medical school building they studied, although built with the aim of facilitating students’ learning experiences, also (unintentionally) created some barriers to learning, as the students reported feeling trapped and disconnected from the rest of the university campus. These barriers resulted from a planning and design process that was insufficiently informed by their lived experiences, also highlighting the co-constitutive relationship between people and organisational space. In other words, as people’s experiences are shaped by the spaces they occupy, they should also have a say in how it is shaped.

Numerous other studies have noted the importance of design for people’s lived experiences of space, including a sense of inclusion, belonging or agency (see e.g., Dale, 2005; Warren,

interactions, which can particularly affect women, who are typically more likely to use informal spaces. But I will explore gender and space in more detail later in the chapter.

2006; Kuhn and Burk, 2014; Peteri et al., 2021). Organisational space must, therefore, be shaped dialectically and reflexively (see also e.g., de Vaujany and Vaast, 2014; Cnossen and Bencherki 2018, on the importance of reflexivity in the process). I will return to this point later in the chapter, particularly when discussing feminist design and architecture.

Further community-focused threads explored in the previous chapter and in Organisation Studies include the intersection of organisational spaces and intergenerational working. For example, Down and Reveley (2004), building on Wenger's (1998) notion of 'community of practice', investigated how entrepreneurial communities and identities are formed in spaces of and through generational work encounters. The work highlights the often-divisive qualities of generational connections at work, although the authors also noted that this research counterbalances other work on intergenerational wealth transfer and kinship. As already highlighted in the previous chapter, these themes will be highly relevant here, as there are many similarly divisive generational narratives in feminist research, as well as those that attempt to provide alternative perspectives (see e.g., Eichhorn, 2013; Samer, 2014). This research will contribute to the latter aspect by studying the great potential attached to intergenerational working in the Library, as well as some of its challenges.

Organisational space (and time): Liminality and power dynamics

Much Organisation Studies literature also focuses on the importance of liminality and boundary spaces in organisations. As Chapter Two already highlighted, these themes are important to this research, as organisational spaces (such as feminist knowledge spaces) can help to challenge often taken-for-granted boundaries of knowledge production and who gets to make it.

In the context of Organisation Studies, Shortt (2014), for example, explored how liminal spaces can become organisational settings that are important to meaning-making. Much like

the dividers in Dale (2005), they provide a degree of privacy, or ‘own’ space, in an otherwise busy and chaotic space of work. The meaning-making potentialities of feminist liminalities will be richly explored in the analysis and discussion, as spaces with the potential to challenge not just dominant boundaries of knowledge-making, but also transgress boundaries between public and private spaces, traditionally separating men and women.

Bill and Olaison (2011: 11) studied what they describe as the ‘liminal ceremonies’ that co-produce the space of an antiquarian bookshop. Such rituals can include meetings between the bookshop keepers and their customers, haggling, and exchange. Thus, liminal organisational spaces can also be spaces of ritual and interactions between the worker and the outside world. As the previous two chapters highlighted, this can stretch very widely in organisations such as feminist knowledge spaces, through their vast networks.

The porous boundaries in spatial (geographical, architectural, and cultural) contexts of organisations are also relevant here. Nash (2018), for instance, highlighted how organisational space can matter and stretch beyond the immediate work site using the example of the City of London and its effects on our gendered experiences of organisational materialities. Nash (2018) shows how working in the City can be a gendering experience, excluding women, even while formally including them, through historically entrenched norms apparent through, for example, people’s behaviours and movement through the space, but also in architecture. I explore the wider importance of geopolitical factors to feminist spaces later in the chapter.

Concepts of unequal and hidden power dynamics are also highlighted by post- and decolonial literature on spaces. For example, Ashley (2016) noted how postcolonial memory spaces can be tools that de-colonise, as well re-colonising, and how these processes can often be intertwined. Similarly, Ulus (2015) showed how ambivalent such organisational spaces can

be, with racial tensions and relations often getting reproduced unconsciously. Similar tensions, as they are also relevant to feminist spaces, will be further explored later in the chapter and in the analysis.

Changing and liminal organisational spaces can also highlight the importance of spatial materiality to the experience of work creativity, and community, as Vesala and Tuomivaara (2018) highlighted. As they noted, a change to a natural, rural working environment can foster both creativity and community, but it also has its limitations.

Gabriel's (1995) concept of unmanaged space is also useful here, as it highlights the creative potential of spaces within organisations that are 'unmanaged', and which are often deemed unproductive due to their apparent disorganisation. Yet, they can hide the potential of fruitful informal and spontaneous encounters. The experience of creativity, liminality, and disorganisation will also be important to understanding the Library, and so I will return to these concepts from a queer feminist perspective in the analysis and discussion, to highlight the necessity of such spaces for its feminist work.

Finally, time and its interconnectedness with space, as well as its non-linearity and liminality are also relevant to the case study. Liu and Grey (2018: 640) recognised this interconnected nature of space and time through their concept of 'space in history', which they mobilise to highlight how spatial forms and symbolism can influence organisational identity, both historically and in a continuous way (see also Petani and Mengis, 2015). As such, they show how space is crucial to the building of organisational identity, intertwined with organisational history, its narratives, and changing nature. Such an approach helps us to challenge the concept of organisation as ahistorical, as the authors also show how the use of archives can continue to illuminate contemporary organisational narratives (see also e.g., Coraiola, 2015).

Shortt and Izak (2021), similarly, highlighted how meanings can be embedded into and transmitted through spatial materialities created over time, at more of an everyday level. By looking at the ‘time marks’ and ‘scars’ carved into workspaces over time, they explored how people connected to their places of work by marking their everyday usage and thus memories in/onto them.

I will return to the importance of time-space interconnections to feminist space more specifically later in the chapter, and again in the analysis and discussion. Meanwhile, I now turn to organisational literature on symbolism and aesthetics.

Symbolic, aesthetics, and affective spatial materialities

Other important concepts in organisational space research relevant here are symbolism, aesthetics, and the affective implications of spatial materialities. Understanding symbolism is important, for example, to the study of organisational control and the communication of organisational ideologies, as shown by Halford (2008), and to belonging (Self and Hudson, 2015). As the deeply important meaning of the Library logos in Chapter One also highlighted, symbolism can be very complex, with manifold implications for organisations, such as reconnecting to historical heritage, community, and recognition.

I will return to the importance of aesthetics in studying feminist spaces in more detail in a dedicated (feminist) section below. Here it is just important to note briefly how it is relevant to Organisation Studies. Grønbæk Pors et al. (2019), for example, noted the distinct aesthetic-material nature of people’s relationship with objects and places, as especially relevant in spaces such as libraries and archives (see e.g., Radford et al., 2015; Bembibre and Strlič, 2017). While Bembibre and Strlič (2017) highlighted the importance of heritage smells in triggering memories and enhancing learning, the tactile or immersive nature of these spaces has been highlighted elsewhere (Radford et al., 2015). Others have highlighted the

importance of, for example, music and sounds to people's affective experiences of spaces (Michels and Steyaert, 2017). And, as Megarry (2020) noted, there are also qualitative differences in the experience of community in physical and digital spaces. I will come back to this point in the next section.

Also relevant to this discussion is the literature on aesthetics and 'beauty' work as linked to the performance of femininity at work. Also relevant of course is how aesthetic norms and gendered performances can be challenged and subverted in feminist spaces and from critical perspectives – a point I will cover in more detail in the section on gender in organisations below (see e.g., McDowell & Court, 1994).

Before moving on to issues relating to digital technologies and spaces, spatial multiplicities and absences should also be considered. Indeed, Beyes and Holt (2020: 15) showed how the tendency to oversimplify spatial analyses can smooth over interesting generative complexities or the 'poetics' of space. The notion of organisational space as a creative assemblage may be useful here to highlight such complexities (see Duff and Sumartojo, 2017; Cnossen and Bencherki, 2018).

With this in mind, the present work thus considers organisational space as a highly symbolic and affective, complex liminal socio-material site shaped by assembled power dynamics, existing in a dialectical relationship with its occupants to produce a feminist space such as the Library, over time, but also in a non-linear temporal fashion. Conceptually, the links between Lefebvre's work on space and feminist and queer perspectives on organisational space and materialities are crucial here, as they help to frame the conceptual contributions of the thesis – namely the development of critical, reflexive account of the (queered) feminist production of space. While following the framework of space as socially produced set out by Lefebvre (1991), this work also focuses specifically on feminist space. Further, using Ahmed's (2006)

queer phenomenology, it aims to queer any taken-for-granted feminist spatial assumptions, by introducing different perspectives. Thus, following not just Ahmed, but also others, including Vaiou and Lykogianni (2006), Lugosi, (2007), Canham, (2017), Lelea and Voiculescu (2017), and Kinkaid (2020), this research provides a critical queer(ed) feminist perspective on Lefebvre's work on the social production of space. As Kinkaid (2020), crucially, notes, an appreciation of lived, marginalised, bodily experiences – particularly female, queer, and migrant perspectives – of space, is one of the key gaps in Lefebvre's work, which I aim to address here. I thus propose, from a queer, feminist perspective, that space matters - as a gendered tool that both co-creates our lived realities, but also as one that helps us to shape and re-shape these realities. As we (re)shape space from feminist, queer, and other marginalised perspectives, space helps us to reshape our lived experience, increasing our visibility, recognition, and scope for voice.

The next section of this chapter provides an overview of some of the most relevant research on digital and hybrid organisational spaces. As highlighted above, digital technologies matter particularly to contemporary organisational spaces, as they increasingly transform what space and work mean. Their specifically gendered implications will also be considered.

Organisational space in the digital era

While the Library remains a space largely based in/on its physical site, as highlighted in Chapter One, it is also under increasing digitisation pressures. The point by Grønbæk Pors et al. (2019) about the affective-material connection raised earlier already highlighted how important physical presence is to spaces such as libraries. Further, there are certain 'ghostly' affective qualities, such as touch, that are missing from the digital relationship with spaces and objects (Grønbæk Pors et al., 2019: 1). As the authors also noted, the distinct felt and thought effects of the material can be lasting and intertwined:

If the digital realm of Word files and PDFs was more analogue, less hermetically sealed off from the surrounding world and thus in palpable touch with its messiness, you would be able to see the soil of the Assistens Cemetery in Copenhagen, its mounds of damp earth, still clinging to our thoughts and words as you read this text (Grønbæk Pors et al., 2019: 1).

Taking my cue from this, I will also seek to explore other ‘haunting’ and disorienting effects of the feminist archival space in my analysis and discussion, as also noted in Chapter Two.

Thus, organisational spaces and materialities are a particularly interesting subject of study at this time, considering the increasing pressures of digitisation, particularly in places such as libraries, as their affective experiences cannot fully be (fully) replicated online, as highlighted here. While, as has been proposed elsewhere, digital environments can also facilitate the creation of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015; Silva, 2021) and resistance (Upchurch and Grassman, 2016; Barros and Michaud, 2020), they can also mean the loss of important (material) workplace rituals (Spicer, 2020) and lead to increased tensions in negotiating the demands of work (Kelly & McAdam, 2022). These technologies can also create new, and often hidden, forms of organisational control (Kaine and Josserand, 2019), blurring the lines between work and non-work, which, as previous research has shown, had already been eroding under neoliberalism (Fleming and Spicer, 2004).

My participants’ experiences, explored in the findings and analysis chapters, will further highlight how physical spaces cannot simply be replaced by virtual ones and how digitisation can raise important ethical and practical challenges. These challenges can be particularly stark in the context of marginalised populations and spaces. I will focus on examples of these explored in previous literature below.

While contemporary organisations can be sites of important discussions on inclusion and diversity, they often remain sites of unequal power relations and exclusion - in shifting forms with the changing dynamics and technologies of work in the twenty-first century. This is particularly relevant to feminist and other marginalised spaces, as such shifts can enable an increase in visibility, connectedness, and solidarity (see e.g., Duguay et al., 2022), while also adversely affecting populations already at higher risk of oppression, even violence (see e.g., Reghunadhan, 2018; Agostinho and Thylstrup, 2019; Todd, 2020; Adams, 2021; Webb, 2022). Thus, not everyone is open or able to opt in for the digital revolution, considering digital inequalities (e.g., Eichhorn, 2014; Hargittai, 2018). However, as Knights and Willmott (2017), for example, highlighted, both symbolic and physical violence might also be present in physical spaces, like pubs, while many marginalised subjects are willing to (or must) negotiate digital tensions and inequities (Todd, 2020; Arun & Arun, 2021). Thus, many complex factors are at play in thinking about the effects of digitalisation on organisational spaces, particularly on marginalised people.

Post-cyberfeminist analysis provides an interesting lens here (see e.g., Webb, 2022), highlighting how the rich possibilities opened up by digital connections must be negotiated against considerations of the safety of digital tools, if organisations want to think seriously about inclusion and accessibility. The specific challenges of digitisation in this context further link to the material demands of archival spaces. In a world of digitisation, not all archives are being or can be digitised, especially within the (relatively) limited resources of feminist organisations⁷⁴ or considering its ethical concerns – including questions around consent and whether we should ever assume everything should be digitised – particularly in communities that do not feel comfortable or safe in digital spaces (see e.g., Eichhorn, 2014).

⁷⁴ See also Summers (2011) for a broader exploration of this point on the resources it takes to digitise materials – including space for physical archives.

Thus, feminist organisations and other alternative organisational spaces, which I will explore in more detail in the section below, can provide an active response to such challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications for an equalities and inclusion agenda. The Women's Budget Group (2020a) investigated the disproportionate impact of the crisis on women in the UK, particularly analysing the overrepresentation of women in high-risk jobs and workspaces, such as social care and care homes. Literature also highlighted the adverse impact of the pandemic on women elsewhere (Derndorfer et al., 2021; Zulfiqar, 2022) and on other marginalised groups, such as neurodivergent professionals and disabled people (e.g., Das et al., 2021; Olsen et al., 2022), as well as on the mental health of remote workers (Yao & Li, 2022). As the long-term effects are yet to become fully visible, with continuing adjustments in the ways we work in the aftermath of the pandemic, this presents many opportunities for new research – including the impact on the nature of our changing (and rebuilding) relationship with spaces like libraries and archives, as the research will explore (see also Smith, 2020).

What is perhaps most relevant here is how these issues intersect with the impact of the pandemic on community spaces, including libraries, which were severely affected by having to close for prolonged periods during the pandemic⁷⁵. At the same time, the subversion of digital spaces during COVID, for example, for the creation of queer spaces also highlighted the rich potentialities of digital technologies (e.g., Duguay et al., 2022). And the dynamic development of newly digitised ways of interacting in many spaces and organisations, such as feminist libraries, archives, and bookshops (see e.g., Smith, 2021; Muse, 2021⁷⁶), highlights

⁷⁵ See e.g.: <https://eurocities.eu/latest/london-protecting-community-spaces-at-risk/>.

⁷⁶ See also: [Bookselling Research Network](#).

both the challenges and the opportunities of the response to the crisis. As Smith (2021: no pagination), for example, noted ‘more curating can be done online’.

The Library’s story will highlight such complex impacts of the pandemic and digital technologies more broadly, as the analysis will show, focusing on both the longer-term changing nature of the organisation and its more recent changes. The concept of hybridity will, therefore, be relevant to this exploration of the changing nature of the organisation in the digital era and more broadly, building on earlier work on digital materialities (see e.g., Miller, 2005; Plant, 2007; Horst & Miller, 2012).

Next, I turn to the literature on spaces of alternative organisational formations to explore their prefigurative potentialities and place the literature on feminist spaces (and the Library) in this context, as material spaces of prefiguration.

‘Otherwise’ spaces of organisation

The larger landscape of studies on alternative organisations and spaces is reviewed in this section, as it provides an important context for understanding the Library as a prefigurative, gendertopic space. These spaces explore the possibilities of/for organising and spatiality that are not premised on accumulation imperatives but which focus instead on priorities such as expanding the possibilities of livability for marginalised communities and creating more sustainable societies. Indeed, following Lefebvre’s (1996, 2003) wider work on space, it can be argued that these spaces create the conditions of possibility for a radically different space, city, and life, by raising questions about who has the ‘right to the city’ on what basis, and providing practical alternatives for those who are marginalised or excluded from this right (see also, Harvey, 2012). Below, I will explore some examples of such spaces that have been highlighted in the relevant literature.

Many examples of such spaces have been explored in literature, including cooperatives (Pansera & Rizzi, 2018), anarchist and social centres (Land and King 2014), queer anarchist spaces (e.g., Rouhani, 2012), squatted social centres (Bettocchi, 2022), LGBTQ+ centres (e.g., Self and Hudson, 2015) and other queer spaces (Burchiellaro, 2023), environmentalist spaces (Broto & Bulkeley, 2013), and more generally conceived community spaces⁷⁷. By focusing on the cooperative movement spaces in Italy, Pansera and Rizzi (2018), for example, showed the importance of space to these organisations. In thinking about these spaces, the authors highlighted the importance of the geographical setting and design, as well as local policies, attitudes, and Italian history for their flourishing. They also showed how design elements can facilitate organisational continuity and values more directly, for example, through the provision of shelter for people experiencing deprivation.

Land and King (2014), in turn, showed how the social space they studied could play an important role as a library and educational hub, a meeting space, and a garden. This highlights how varied and crucial alternative social spaces can be for action and inclusion, but also, again, how their materiality facilitates (or hinders) this.

The importance of values, tensions, and their negotiations is also highlighted in this literature, linking back to the research on feminist knowledge spaces cited in Chapter Two. For example, Rouhani (2012), researching a space of queer and anarchist politics, showed how fruitful it can be to explore such intersections for understanding and expanding the conditions of possibility of alternative space, and, by extension, its futurities. Meanwhile, Self and Hudson (2015) and Burchiellaro (2023) studied the possibilities and tensions arising in different queer spaces, depending on their wider spatial and socio-political contexts. Self and Hudson (2015: 230) highlighted how campus LGBTQ+ centres can be transformative,

⁷⁷ For a more comprehensive review of such spaces, see e.g., Jeffrey & Dyson (2021).

‘productively spatialising resistance’ (and queer, in this sense) or less so, depending on their political and spatial orientations. Burchiellaro (2023), similarly showed how geographical and political contexts can affect the production of queer space. By looking at queer spaces in the context of London gentrification, she highlighted how such contexts can disincentivise the production of some (radical) spaces, while making others (more mainstream ones) more possible. Burchiellaro highlights how the latter can also contribute to the pushing out of more radical alternatives. Thus, the conditions of possibility of prefigurative politics and their spaces appear to be intimately connected, with autonomy being another important factor in alternative spatial production, returning us to one of the key themes explored in Chapter One.

As Bettocchi (2022) also highlighted, it is important to explore both external and internal conflict and tensions in these spaces, which are areas often ignored or minimised in research. I will focus on such tension in much of my analysis of the Library, providing a useful, critical case study of feminist organisational space, including its multiple and evolving opportunities and challenges.

Temporary forms of spatial anti-hegemonic organising, such as the Occupy movement and other types of street protest, are also frequently explored in research on the social (political) production of alternative organisational spaces, or rather, spaces of/for organising (see e.g., Schneider, 2013; Butler, 2015; Halvorsen, 2017). Such studies tend to focus on the democratizing and empowering processes behind (re)claiming public spaces, but they also often highlight the inherent tensions and the transitory nature of such endeavours. As Rouhani (2012: 375) notes, ‘moving beyond a fixation on the spatiality of street protest alone’ is also important to expand this research area beyond the more obvious sites of challenging and alternative politics. This is also relevant to the study of the Library as a space of prefiguration, as the Library’s spatial materialities are crucial to its feminist organisation and potential.

As wider research on feminist spaces also highlights, the study of such prefigurative spaces can also show how important they are to creating networks, locally and internationally.

Baines (2012), for example, highlighted how these radical spaces of organising could be seen as part of more dispersed, virtual, mutual supporting networks. Dempsey et al. (2011), as well as Hunt (2013), provided more transnational perspectives on such networks.

Thinking specifically about libraries as alternative organisational spaces, Aabø (2005) foregrounds how such spaces are particularly crucial for community and democratic participation in the digital era – as the move towards digital spaces can weaken civic participation.

The present research is very much at the intersection of these different forms of spatial prefiguration: focusing on physical spaces of/for feminist challenge and prefiguration, while also exploring its various tensions and forms of hybridity. Below I move on to exploring some of the existing literature on feminist spaces and gendered spaces of organisation, building on but also moving beyond those studies of libraries and archives that have already been explored in the previous chapter.

Feminist and gendered organisational spaces

Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) noted that the organisation of spaces continues to affect the way that gender is constructed, reproduced, and challenged (or not) at work. Further, these effects are far from one-dimensional, as their complex interactions with other identity markers, such as class and race, show. Using Lefebvre's triad, Wasserman and Frenkel (2015) proposed three types of gender-class spatial work in organisations – discursive (related to conceptualisations of space), material (materialisation of space), and interpretive-emotional (interpretation of space) – accounting for both a (re)constructing as well as a challenging of gendered norms in their framework. While organisational spaces can be

constructed in such a way that they reinforce gendered and classed norms, for example through design clearly embedding gender-class hierarchies, they can also be used to challenge and reproduce these through their everyday uses, such as the display of ‘feminine’ artifacts. Similar effects of organisational spaces were explored, for example, by Self and Hudson (2015), focusing on the intersections of gender and sexuality. Their findings suggested that even spaces such as LGBTQ+ centres can contribute to both the reproduction and challenging of gender and sexuality norms; they also highlighted the important position of race in this normativity matrix.

How normative gender can be performed, reinforced, and challenged in and through organisational materialities was also explored in more detail by Tyler and Cohen (2010). Combining Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of representational spaces with Butler’s (1993) gendered conceptualisation of ‘bodies that matter’, they developed a framework for looking at organisational spaces as ‘spaces that matter’ as ‘those that represent a materialisation of cultural norms according to which particular gender performances are enacted’ (Tyler and Cohen, 2010: 193). They also highlighted how the challenging of gendered organisational norms, when it does happen, often occurs in ‘bounded’ ways (Tyler and Cohen, 2010: 188). Thinking about this concept in the context of the Library space provides an interesting perspective, which will help highlight how gender norms can be challenged and subverted (and reproduced) differently in different spaces. The Library is a space set up for resisting and subverting gender norms and structures from its outset, therefore, it allows for an analysis of how gender is performed and materialised differently in such spaces. Further, combining it with an analysis of what I refer to as ‘conditions of (im)possibility’ of a feminist organisation and space, following the work of de Wet and Shoots (2016), I will ask in what conditions and how spaces such as the Library become spaces that enable such a challenging of gender norms and the production of alternatives.

Other organisational researchers have studied the socio-material reproduction of gender using other theoretical perspectives which will also be useful here. For example, Merleau-Ponty's (1945) post-dualist ontology has been important to feminist critiques of how organisational space is lived and experienced as gendered. Building on this, Hales et al. (2021), for instance, showed how gendered expectations can become encoded, embodied, and embedded through interrelated processes and materialities.

Their phenomenological approach will also be relevant (and queered) here. Building on the work of both Lefebvre (1991) and Merleau-Ponty (1945), bringing in Ahmed's (2006) work on queer phenomenology, facilitates a complex analysis of how people interact with materialities and processes to produce spaces of and for organisation. This approach also allows for an analysis of the production of space from multiple feminist perspectives, particularly highlighting the lived experiences of marginalised people (in particular, focusing on women, queer people, and migrants here). I will explore the role of queering in more detail in the next chapter.

What is also important to explore here, building on some of the earlier points on aesthetics, is how gender is reproduced in organisations through aesthetic work. McDowell and Court (1994), for example, studied how gendered norms can be particularly embedded in certain sectors, such as banking, where their performance can be linked to sales. They show how embodied the experiences of gendered organisational norms, and their subversion, can be, by looking at the dress, experiences, and portrayal of bankers at work.

At the same time, organisational spaces can also be transformed by the entry of women into the professions. The redesign of early libraries by women librarians, breaking with some of the stereotypical design features, is one example discussed by Ilett (2003) and Hildenbrand (2000). At the same time, as Koevoets (2013) noted, and as explored in the previous chapter

through Ilett's work (2003)⁷⁸, the feminisation of librarianship is linked not just with a harmful economic devaluing of the profession, but also with fostering gendered stereotypes (see also e.g., Higgins, 2017; Richmond, 2017; Yousefi, 2017). Koevoets (2013), however, also highlighted the potential of feminist librarianship to subvert these persistent gendered stereotypes. In the findings and analysis chapters, I will similarly explore the potential of the Feminist Library space to subvert gender and other stereotypes.

A similar devaluation of women's work is also reflected in numerous other professions and workplaces, for example in curation, as VanHaitsma and Book (2019) noted. Space and institutions have a major role to play in this relationship, as highlighted by Jones (2016), who also explored curation, highlighting how radical forms of feminist art and curatorial practice continue to be excluded from mainstream exhibition spaces. The wider socio-political context is also crucial to understanding these processes, as showcased, for example, by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on exposing and exacerbating various gender disparities across disciplines and professions, as highlighted before (e.g., Women's Budget Group, 2020a).

While many mainstream institutions, including those which have an explicit 'diversity' focus, continue to use an 'add women (or any other marginalised group) and stir' approach (see e.g., Rothschild, 1988; Fife, 2021), these gendered issues are difficult to shift and change, as more critical approaches are needed. This research will explore a queer(ed) approach to subverting gender norms in a feminist organisation and for its production. Unlike larger, more mainstream/hegemonic institutions, feminist organisations tend to centre marginalised voices and perspectives, expanding possibilities of change (although at times also limiting them).

Much feminist research has already focused on the changing dynamics of organisational

⁷⁸ Jordan (2021) highlights another interesting contradiction: while public libraries were becoming open to women, private libraries (as a site of ownership and 'mastery' of books) remained largely the domain of men.

spaces through the increasing role of women in these spaces, which challenges their often male-dominated nature (see e.g., Ledwith & Colgan, 1996; Antoniou et al., 2019). Yet, relatively little attention has been paid thus far to the role of feminist spaces (and where it has, it remains largely in the domains of women's and gender studies). However, much can be learned from observing organisational dynamics in feminist spaces (see e.g., Enke, 2007; Hogan, 2016). Similarly, the space of the Library, by centring women's and feminist perspectives, rather than trying to find or insert these into an otherwise still dominant masculine space of organisation, presents an alternative way of approaching the subject. I thus plan to examine the Library as an epistemic, political, material, community, and workspace, as (intertwined) building blocks towards shaping an understanding of how feminist space is created, how this process challenges the hegemonic ways of being and (co)creating spaces, and how it (potentially) enables the creation of alternatives to it.

This research thus explores an area of organisational (and women's/gender studies) research at the intersection of space and gender, particularly focusing on feminist organisation and the (co)production of space, considering how (normative) gender is (and is not) played out and challenged within its space(s), but also how it works to challenge the wider hegemonic institutional and political context. As Tyler and Cohen (2010) showed, spaces of resistance work *matter* (see also Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015; Courpasson et al., 2017). The present research also asks the question of what impact the marginality of a space such as the Library has on its gendertopic and challenging potential, and what are the conditions of possibility of such a resistant space of marginality. In the context of COVID-19 and digitalisation, and the resulting changing ways of interacting with space – particularly the newly (dis)embodied (digital and hybrid) ways of engaging with a space such as the Library, which is highly tethered to its physical materialities – the ideas of liminal, digital and hybrid (feminist) spaces are also important to explore.

With this in mind, I turn to other feminist literature on space, with a particular focus on feminist spaces, next.

Feminist organisational space beyond Organisation Studies

In this section, I will focus on the literature on feminist spaces and feminist perspectives on space from across other disciplines. Starting with an overview of the literature from architecture, design, and geography, this section will highlight the breadth of feminist research on space, as well as focus more specifically on feminist spaces literature. The next three subsections will focus on aesthetics, community, and history, before the chapter closes with a section providing some key critical perspectives on feminist space.

Feminist architecture, design, and geography

While the architects' and managers' discursive work rarely refers directly to gender or class, it nonetheless lays the foundation for the rejection of markers of femininity, or indeed of anything that diverges from a Western, middle-class, rational aesthetics (Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015: 1486).

Therefore, unsurprisingly, much early feminist critique of the hegemonic organisation of space also comes from feminist architecture, design, town planning, and geography, which highlighted how the built environment is not made for or by women (or other marginalised groups). The Matrix Feminist Design Cooperative was developed specifically to address the exclusions of women's perspectives from the processes that inform the making of the built environment (Matrix, 1984). As highlighted below, Matrix (1984) also problematised the

artificial division between private and public space⁷⁹ created through such planning and its gendered effects. As they put it:

Modern cities have been planned to segregate different aspects of life; homes, shops, factories, and offices are all in separate areas. This segregation has affected women more than men, because our lives have never been so neatly partitioned between the different areas of work, leisure, and home in the way that men's have (Matrix, 1984: 4).

Women's isolation, devaluation of the value of housework (see also e.g., Saegert, 1980; Bondi, 1992), and safety issues for women in public spaces were also raised through their work. Importantly, alongside their critique, they also designed alternatives, as their work with feminist organisations such as the Jagonari Women's Educational Resource Centre shows.

Although, as Erlemann (1985) noted, it is very challenging to define feminist architecture principles. Yet, some of the same issues, such as accessibility and inclusion, are also reflected in the story of the Library (as explored in more detail in later chapters). Their relevance is also highlighted by more recent publications (e.g., Kern, 2019) and exhibitions (How We Live Now, 2021-22).

At the same time, the approach of organisations like the Matrix collective also came under scrutiny for their own assumptions and exclusions. Madigan (1986), for instance, critiqued its sweeping assumptions, such as that communal forms of living are somehow better than individualised (which does not necessarily correspond with the experiences of all women).

This, again, highlights the challenges of trying to define a single set of feminist architectural

⁷⁹ It is worth noting here the overlaps with Ilett's (2003) analysis of libraries as private/public spaces and their effects on women, and with connected accessibility issues (see also Ivan, 2021; Jordan, 2021).

or design assumptions. As a How We Live Now (2021-22) exhibition further highlighted, more recent feminist design and architectural approaches have also been informed by decolonial, queer, and intersectional theory and praxis. I will highlight the importance of these critiques again towards the end of the chapter.

Critical perspectives on design can also originate in other places, such as social justice work. The Design Studio for Social Intervention (2020: 1) highlighted the importance of socio-material entanglements as ‘ideas [which] are embedded in arrangements, which in turn produce effects’ and their change-making potential. They suggested that pedagogy and practice rooted in an understanding of these socio-material entanglements can be a way to build a better world. This can be linked back to the gendertopic potential of feminist spaces discussed in Chapter Two. These complex and generative, mutually constitutive relationships between the social and the material are thus core to the present work.

Other influential feminist perspectives on space have also been produced in geography. Massey (1994) underlined how intersecting social relations underlie the production of space, including its entanglements with gender and class, also raising the importance of considering the hybridity of space (and time). The difference between the concepts of space and place was also highlighted, noting the important role of meaning and identity in creating the latter. Similar perspectives have been highlighted by, for example, feminist ethnographers, like Ardener (1981) who also emphasised how space co-produces similarities and differences in the position of women considering a range of cultural and historical contexts.

Below, I will focus on some of the other key perspectives on feminist spaces, in theory and practice, explored in the relevant literature from other disciplines.

Symbolic and aesthetic feminist organisational space

Feminist aesthetics is difficult to define, as Ecker (1985), Petrescu (2007), and Ziarek (2012) noted (e.g., Plant, 2007). In Petrescu (2007), for example, numerous authors come together to highlight the complexity of thinking about feminist aesthetics in spatial practice, including newly hybrid conceptualisations of space and the in-becoming nature of feminist aesthetics. Nevertheless, it is useful to define some common threads of feminist aesthetic work. Ziarek (2012), for example, highlighted how much feminist aesthetics work focuses both on the losses (the gaps in feminist history, literature, et cetera), as well as aspects of reclamation and the revolutionary potential of recognition and doing things differently. As Ziarek (2012: 3) further argued, it is important to think about these issues together as ‘the exclusive focus on melancholia (...) is a historical symptom of the forgetting of the revolutionary tradition in modernity’. Conceptualising this more comprehensive view as a feminist aesthetics of potentiality, Ziarek also highlighted a feminist aesthetics that is applicable to feminist space, as I will show in the analysis and discussion by exploring how, in the space of the Library, memory, forgetting, and transgression are interconnected symbols of feminist space with transformative political potentialities.

As Piepmeier (2009) further highlighted, feminist aesthetics can also be an important tool of feminist community and solidarity. By exploring feminist zine culture, Piepmeier noted how their communities were importantly underpinned by their materialities and the embodied, shared experience of those. What Piepmeier also highlighted was the often DIY nature of these materialities, symbolic of the nature of the feminist movement: grassroots, much of it informal, frequently delivered on minimal resources, and therefore focused less on producing aesthetically pleasing objects, as on fostering feminist community and activism, as well as spreading counter-hegemonic messaging (see also e.g., Radway, 2011).

From a queer feminist perspective, Self and Hudson (2015 :232) similarly highlighted the role of aesthetics and symbolism in building counterspaces, as ‘spatial resistance was built into the fabric of the centre’ through art on the walls and decor, as well as spatial guidelines. Enke (2007) also noted similar points in relation to lesbian feminist spaces, where aesthetic considerations were important to sustaining them and their communities. I will explore the importance of the concept of community to the understanding and co-production of (queered) feminist space in more detail in the next section.

On the theme of the abject and transgressive meaning and nature of space, other feminist and queer creative work and research also focused on these types of aesthetics to spotlight important, yet oft-ignored feminist issues. For example, Gutiérrez-Albilla (2008), provided an overview of some of the issues highlighted through this approach, such as motherhood or bodily excrement. This work shows how the potentially transgressive nature of feminist aesthetics contrasts with and can challenge more mainstream gendered organisational and cultural aesthetics, which often place impossible aesthetic expectations on women at work, as highlighted earlier (see McDowell and Court, 1994). Eichhorn (2013) similarly showed how the abject and the feminist do not always sit comfortably together and thus have the power to disorient and challenge mainstream spaces, using the example of a simple lock of hair displaced in an archive.

Gherardi (1995: 138), meanwhile, highlighted how transgressive gender performances at work can breach the ‘symbolic order of gender,’ resulting in ‘negative rituals’, which are penalties for such transgressions. These penalties can undermine the subversive potential of such gender performances, highlighting again how mainstream organisations can exert control and limit the transgressive potentialities of feminist aesthetics.

As the above works show, there are multiple and complex understandings of feminist aesthetics – from the nostalgic to the transgressive and revolutionary, to the more bounded, negative, and penalized. All these multiple meanings are relevant to the analysis, and I will focus on the relevance of feminist communities, and their aesthetics, to the present research further below.

Feminist organisational space: Community and assembly

Enke's (2007) study of most feminist businesses in the 1970s (US), including bookstores, bars, and cafes, reveals that their founders' primary motivation was a desire to build and facilitate community through these spaces. This highlights the centrality of community to feminist space. As also highlighted in Chapter Two, the question of who has a voice in these community spaces is also crucial. What Enke (2007) referred to as contested feminist spaces highlights how feminist spatial struggles and negotiations can be external, but also internal, including questions of representation in these spaces and the best ways to practice feminist organisation (see also e.g., Hogan, 2016).

I will follow these questions of voice and representation throughout the thesis, applying a queer phenomenological (Ahmed, 2006) approach to highlight disorientations from any taken-for-granted feminist perspectives which may retain a preference for certain voices over others in these spaces.

Baines (2012: 29) also researched material feminist organisational praxis and its tensions, by studying feminist print collectives as 'experiments in democratic participation' enabling alternative media and media practices, such as collective work and ownership, but also important contestations. Similar experiments have also been studied by others (see also Jolly, 2012; Delap, 2016). It is important to explore these different contestations of feminist praxis, as what can often be informal forms of feminist organising can otherwise lead to hidden

marginalisations and unspoken hierarchies (see also e.g., Freeman, 1972). As also highlighted by Enke (2007) and others, space can be useful for building a rich understanding of feminist organisations and movements, as well as their contestations. Indeed, this is also a key premise of this thesis.

Similarly to Gunnarsson Payne's (2013) conceptualisation of mediating community/communitas⁸⁰, I, therefore, build on an understanding of feminist communities and spaces as transformative and as existing in a state of continuous becoming, not just through their anti-hegemonic praxis, but by a (re)centering of marginalised voices and ongoing questioning of who has a voice. In this sense, an open, dialogical approach to feminist community is something that makes feminist organisations and spaces sustainable, avoiding stagnation and obsolescence.

The questions of voice and representation are also important for another reason, as Yutsha Dahal (2021: no pagination) explored through the Women's Memory Project, Nepal⁸¹:

The idea of claiming space in public life was one of the most significant themes that emerged from the materials we collected. The distinctions between the private and the public have a complex history in Nepal, as elsewhere, but these concepts are also repeatedly mobilized by women in the narratives about their own lives—describing their moves from one sphere to the other as a major transition or a breaking of barriers that held them back.

As already highlighted, the distinction between private and public space is key to the discussion of space and gender. As Butler's (2015) work on the politics of assembly further showed, public spaces of protest are an important part of this, for building social movements

⁸⁰ Gunnarsson Payne follows Turner's (1995/1969, 1977) concepts of community here.

⁸¹ See: <https://www.nepalpicturelibrary.org/exhibitions/>.

and (re)claiming public space, and thus for contesting the artificial division between public and private spheres, not just for women but for other marginalised groups.

Various spaces and materialities can be useful to this process of reclamation, as Goggin's (2013: 6) idea of 'soft power' for the reclamation of public space through activist knitting and crocheting shows. It challenges the notions of who belongs in public space, but also stereotypically masculine connotations of 'power' more broadly. Thus, forms of protest and public space reclamation can vary widely, from subtle to more obvious, as Butler (2015) highlighted. The study of the Library will also explore this through its various examples reflecting these different forms, from walks and exhibitions to protests.

In the digital era and in the wake of the COVID pandemic, it is also important to understand the impact on the forms and spaces of protest and activist expression of digital technologies and hybrid forms of organising. Digital technologies had already established themselves as important tools for feminism in earlier years prior to the pandemic (see e.g., Turley & Fisher, 2018). While more studies are needed, especially to establish any longer-term effects of the pandemic, some interesting research on its impact on the organisation of space for feminism is already emerging (see e.g., Tabbush & Friedman, 2020; Ticktin, 2020; Ventura Alfaro, 2020; Deiana et al., 2022; Boucher, 2023).

In my analysis, I will be focusing on the production of feminist community and activism in and through feminist space, including the impact of the pandemic and digital technologies on this process. First, however, I turn to one more aspect of the feminist spaces literature that is important to this study, namely feminist space in history, before closing the chapter with a brief critique of feminist perspectives on space.

Feminist space in history

As also highlighted in Chapter One, the Library's history provides a highly useful tool for the exploration of the organisation's trajectory and space. It helps to show how the historical and political context of the Library has affected its present position.⁸² The study also serves as an important reminder that the feminist movement operates within a larger historical and socio-political context, which affects its spatial possibilities. I, therefore, also apply Liu and Grey's (2018: 640) conceptualisation of 'space in history' to the study of the Library, to highlight the continuous impact of its organisational history on its contemporary organisational space. This highlights the importance of spatial histories for spatial organisational presents, as well as the living nature of the feminist archive.

As highlighted before, histories and historical materialities can sometimes have 'haunting' effects. These hauntings, as Gordon (1997: 8) noted, can be both effects of historical absences, particularly of marginalised voices, as well as uncomfortable, 'seething' presences that partial histories can offer. Nevertheless, understanding such hauntings can also enhance the conditions of possibility and futurity of feminist spaces, as I will highlight in my analysis and discussion. As Hesford (2005), similarly noted, feminist histories can often have these haunting effects, particularly considering changing feminist language and politics – yet they can also generate the potential of seeing and doing things differently. The radical potentialities of these stories should therefore be preserved for future generations rather than discarded (see also e.g., Schulman, 2019; Tompkins, 2019). As also highlighted in Chapter Two, Samer (2014) and Eichhorn (2013) noted the importance of feminist histories and archival spaces for feminist intergenerational working and imagining possibilities of queer feminist futurity through it. Going back to the point about spatio-temporal hybridity

⁸² Others (e.g., Baines, 2012) have also highlighted these political histories of feminist and other community spaces. See also e.g.: <http://glcstory.co.uk/listen-to-interviews/>.

highlighted earlier by Massey (1994), its potential for feminist history and space becomes apparent through this literature (see also Freeman, 2010).

Foucault (1980, 1986) similarly highlighted that libraries are spaces that challenge our linear understandings of time, by being spaces of spatio-temporal in-betweenness (both here and in the past, and at times future, simultaneously), or what he called heterotopias. Through the concept of the heterotopia, Foucault highlights how libraries have the potential to hold endless possible worlds within their pages. Both spatial and temporal aspects of hybridity will be relevant to the thesis, as the Library will be explored as a physical organisation, tethered to its material space, yet also nomadic, digital, intergenerational, and full of hauntings.

Before closing the chapter, I would like to highlight some of the critiques of feminist spaces and the relevant literature, focusing particularly on queer critiques, as that is the critical lens I also take in the thesis more broadly.

Towards a critique and queering of feminist organisational theory and space

Gender is the prototype of social classification, and our social arrangements are the expression of that ‘institutional reflexivity’ ... which guarantees coherence, continuity and social reproduction between sexual difference and the attribution of gender (Gherardi, 1995: 129).

Yet gender is not the only lens through which we should analyse difference and oppression. As already explored Chapter Two, Black and indigenous feminists have subjected such oversimplifications to critique. In relation to space, Mohanty (1992) for example highlighted how feminist spaces can perpetuate sameness, by ignoring differences and in the process, contribute to marginalisation, even under the guises of solidarity and unity. Similarly, in thinking about difference and space, Mollett and Faria (2018: 565), noted that ‘racial, gendered and classed power operates in place and through space’ (also e.g., Puwar, 2004;

Oberhauser et al., 2017). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, organisational scholars have also used intersectional lenses to build a better understanding of space (e.g., Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015) and to highlight the need for a more inclusive shift towards more transnational perspectives (e.g., Dempsey et al., 2011; Metcalfe & Woodhams, 2012; Connell, 2018).

Queer theory provides another important source of critique, which will be crucial to the thesis, as it highlights the key role of different voices in the production of inclusive (feminist) space, but also the role of disorientation in challenging hidden assumptions (Ahmed, 2006). For example, Self and Hudson (2015: 216) interrogated the extent to which LGBTQ+ centres can both resist and reproduce 'homonormative whiteness'. Thus, they further highlighted the importance of applying a critical queer lens to an analysis of organisational space as it is socially (re)produced, to spotlight and challenge various levels of oppression in the production of not just hegemonic, but also counterspace.

Similarly, Samer (2014) showed how a queer critique of feminist space can be a fruitful source of not just disorientation, but of world-making. It can open space for discursive, intergeneration connection and work, thus facilitating queer feminist space and world-building, through acknowledging that feminism and queerness are in a process of continuous becoming, sometimes harmoniously, and often through struggle.

The concept of agency is crucial at these intersections of marginality and difference, harmony and struggle, as Anzaldúa (1987), Licona (2012), and Collins (2019), among others, have highlighted. Thinking about agency, difference, and marginality highlights how liminal spaces – or borderlands, as Anzaldúa called them – can bring attention to who is included and excluded in/from spaces, particularly from the perspectives of those occupying intersections of marginalised positions themselves. This perspective also highlights how such liminal

spaces can also be sites of learning through difference, generating new ways of seeing and doing things.

Although, as Braidotti (1994), for example, noted, boundary spaces are also important to feminist thinking as they are relevant to the subjects of transgression and freedom, the transgressive potential of these nomadic or hybrid spaces is not equally distributed, as Boer (1996) has highlighted. The latter perspective is reminiscent of Kawthar and Jaha's (2020: 404) reflections on the possibility of queer space, which seemed to them as 'unthinkable' up to a point, in the context in which they are working (Sudan). This critique will be relevant here on several levels, particularly to the explorations of feminist space as potentially nomadic, and centering difference and inclusion.

Finally, as mentioned in Chapter Two and highlighted again above, both physical and digital spaces can be problematised from these perspectives. Digital spaces can improve accessibility and help grow networks, but not always and not for all (see e.g., Licona, 2012; Eichhorn, 2014). They are not always safe spaces either, especially for those who are already marginalised (see e.g., Todd, 2020). Admittedly, physical spaces are not always safe either, as also highlighted earlier. Downes et al. (2016) also highlighted this, while also exploring how they could be made safer. Therefore, I will explore the impact of the increasing hybridity of feminist space today, while arguing that we still need physical and digital (queered) spaces of and for feminism, where difference is not only acknowledged but also taken as critical for questioning and challenging of (normative) feminist space; and thus, for the queering methodology applied here.

These important critiques of feminist research on space reflect a number of critical perspectives, including intersectional, Black, indigenous, and queer theory, similarly highlighted in Chapter Two. These perspectives expose the key problems of feminist space,

such as exclusivity, marginalisation, and heteronormativity. In the present work, the queer perspective will be central to the analysis, inspired both by the literature – particularly Ahmed’s (2006) queer phenomenology work, as noted before – and by my participants, whose stories I tell in the analysis chapters. Similarly to Ahmed, queer theory is central to the thesis in at least two key ways: it highlights the crucial role of different, particularly hitherto marginalised, voices in the production of inclusive (feminist) space; it is also a way of focusing on the disorientating moments in researching and building an understanding of the way that (feminist) space is perceived and challenging hidden, normative assumptions about/within it. According to Ahmed (2006: 107), ‘queer orientations might be those that don’t line up’ with normative ways of seeing and being in the world. Yet, these orientations can also open up ways of seeing and doing things differently:

In other words, a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the “disalignment” of the horizontal and vertical axes, allowing the oblique to open up another angle onto the world (Ahmed, 2006: 172)

Therefore, it is important to note here that the queering approach is also applied here in a future-building sense, following the work of Ahmed and other queer thinkers (e.g., Muñoz, 2009; Samer, 2014). In this sense, the study aims to facilitate a queering of the Library as a feminist space, reflecting on the urgent need to take up the challenges posed by some of the most marginalised voices in its production, as well as the gendertopic potentialities of these. I will explore the relevance of the queer(ing) methodologies in more detail in the next chapter.

Summary

In summary, although there has been much research at the intersection of gender and space in Organisation Studies and other disciplines, much of it, particularly in OS, tends to focus on mainstream space. In addition, while much of the literature builds on Lefebvre’s (1991) work

on the social production of space, there is a need to further explore the place of difference, particularly feminist and queer perspectives on spatial production. These perspectives highlight the socio-material role of space in sustaining them, but also the crucial role of difference in the production of space, its lived experience, and the possibilities of alternative (more sustainable and inclusive) ways of producing space.

Therefore, the present research will contribute to this literature by providing a queered feminist perspective on the social production of space, through both a feminist reading of Lefebvre's (1991, 1996) work, as well as a queering of it. It is an important task, considering the relative lack of attention to different marginalised lived experiences in Lefebvre's work. At the same time, it is also important to queer a/the feminist production of space, considering the points raised in the last section. I will be using a queer phenomenological approach, following the work of Ahmed (2006) for this, focusing on the most surprising, disorienting, and challenging moments in the data, to build on a range of different perspectives and to queer the meaning of feminist space today.

Finally, the present work also contributes to other areas of OS research empirically, including studies of organisational aesthetics, symbolism, and (social) materialities.

Chapter Four

Researching feminist spaces and epistemologies, and developing feminist methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology, linking the philosophy, theory, and conceptual framework, research questions, and aims of this research, to its research design. It also examines key ethical and reflexive considerations raised by and experienced throughout the project. Starting with a section on subjectivity and philosophy, it explores interconnections between feminist subjectivity, research philosophy, and practice – and its queering in the context of this research. The chapter then focuses on the conceptual framework used to support data collection and analysis, followed by a discussion of the research aims and design, ending with a section on research ethics and reflexivity. The research methods are a combination of autoethnography, archival research, and in-depth narrative interviews, drawn on, respectively, and in combination, to provide insight into the research questions. The project is also conceived as multi-site action research, with porous boundaries between the Library being studied and other feminist spaces and organisations, as well as between academic and non-academic knowledge sites, with multiple research sites and potential impacts being considered in this chapter.

The ‘personal is political’ is/as theoretical: Feminist subjectivity and research philosophy

As already highlighted in the Introduction, as a feminist researcher deeply embedded in the organisation I am studying, it is important to begin here by outlining my positionality and motivations for the research. As noted in the Introduction, the research focuses on the feminist organisational praxis and space of the Feminist Library, inspired by my personal (and political) experience of working, volunteering, and using the space over the past eight or nine years. As I became involved in the Library in 2016, during its most recent spatial crisis,

as also highlighted in the Introduction, I also became a researcher of its history quite sometime before starting this research project – for the purpose of facilitating the organisation’s historical knowledge and storytelling, and ultimately, conditions of possibility. Both aspects of my connection to the Library have become further intertwined through this research project, making the exploration of my positionality and subjectivity necessary. I will return to a more in-depth exploration of the importance of reflexivity as it pertains to this research and positionality later in the chapter.

As also highlighted in the Introduction, my ‘personal’ became deeply political very quickly in the context of my work at and on the Library⁸³. Due to the timing of my involvement in the Library, I became very interested in its history, especially the stories of its previous crises, as well as the work and history of feminist and other alternative spaces more broadly, their feminist organisational praxis, as well as their historical and political context. Eventually, this led me to this research. I have become deeply embedded in the organisation – as a volunteer and worker (at various points simultaneously), and invested in its everyday activities, operations, policies, and more strategic decision-making, as well as, crucially, in its preservation⁸⁴.

Highlighting, again, how my positions as a researcher and as an active (although, admittedly less so today than when I started the PhD⁸⁵) part of the Library team are intertwined is important here also because it has richly contributed to the process of this research, the importance of reflexivity in it, and my experience of it. Similar to bell hooks’ (1994: 3)

⁸³ Although it could be argued that it was political right from the start, as the space itself could be defined as political. I will explore this aspect of the Library more in the analysis.

⁸⁴ Including co-organising the campaign to Save the Feminist Library in 2016. See more at: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/save-the-feminist-library-campaign-protest-and-messages-of-support/>.

⁸⁵ Although I continue to be, marginally, involved in the Library, mostly through research visits and participation in occasional talks and discussions, I stopped working there, officially, at the end of the first year of my PhD.

words: ‘To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure’, I enjoyed the research process, including being challenged and changed through it in my initial thinking about the Library (and myself, as I explore in more detail here and in the analysis).

Importantly, this involvement and embeddedness in the Library did not happen in a vacuum. It was rather a continuation of my broader feminist activist, theoretical, and everyday praxis. My early engagement with feminist theory (as an undergraduate) led me to a life as an activist – in feminism alongside a broader range of engagements – and introduced me to a wider network of feminist libraries and archives besides the Library, as well as other activist spaces. My involvement in these wider networks – also concerned with the preservation of libraries and community spaces more broadly – further facilitated this research as autoethnographic (including observations across a multiplicity of sites of the Library, as explored later in the methods section), and my thinking about its aims and objectives. This approach highlights, again, the practical, direct connections between feminist theory and activism, politics and subjectivity, epistemology, and identity, and practice and research, in a reflection of the old feminist adage, ‘the personal is political’ (Hanish, in Lee, 2007: 163) and, as I add here, theoretical.

Therefore, as a feminist researcher, with a long history of engaging with feminist theory and activism, especially at the Library, my positionality and subjectivity are clearly important to my autoethnographic research. My position at the Library also provides excellent access to both materials and people, facilitating the blurring divisions between the knowledge maker (researcher) and the knowledge carrier (interviewee/participant), as well as embodied experience and embedded knowledge of the organisation. As Murray (2021) highlights, the study of books, book sites (including those online) more broadly, and people’s highly affective relationships to them, is a site of questioning of academia’s traditional ‘disavowal of affect’. This intersection of experience and embedded knowledge is key here, as it

emphasizes the interconnections between theory and (material) practice, while also pointing to some important issues related to reflexivity, such as working from a position of relative epistemic privilege (see e.g., Mohanty, 2002). These challenges are addressed here through reflexive autoethnographic work, and through triangulation with other research methods, including interviews and archival data, which present opportunities for testing and changing taken-for-granted assumptions through alternative perspectives, facilitated by queer methodology throughout (Ahmed, 2006). I will return to some of these ethical issues and reflexivity implications and connect them to a discussion of the ways in which my approach can be understood as a queering of methods later in the chapter.

As Steinmetz (2012) notes, the question of blurred boundaries is particularly pertinent in the context of online research – especially in the context of the pandemic and its aftermath. The Library, although having an online presence before the pandemic, had nevertheless operated mainly in/from its physical site until then. As such, the physical space of the Library was my planned site of research at the inception of this project, which changed considerably in the process, considering most of the data collection was conducted during the COVID pandemic and its ensuing periods of lockdown. I did not consider its digital spaces to be important parts of the Library prior to this time of relative crisis. How to (re)conceptualise planned research sites in the context of the pandemic was a daunting question for many researchers. In the case of this study of the Library, the whole process of rethinking the research site was a valuable challenge to my initial assumptions about what the Library is, not just as a research site but as an organisation more broadly, leading (or perhaps forcing?) me to consider new ways of conceptualising it. Thus, the Library became reconceptualised as a hybrid organisation, with an important presence both on- and off-line, and with porous boundaries between the two, which, at times, permeate further to highlight the importance of feminist networks and interactions for the Library (and for the research). This blurring of lines is something that

becomes a theme throughout the project, which will be discussed in more detail in the analysis and discussion chapters. This reconceptualisation also opens an important discussion of queering within feminist organisational, spatial, and research praxis.

Therefore, as highlighted in Chapter Three, building on Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the social production of space from a queer(ed) feminist perspective with reference to Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology, the thesis proposes a holistic concept of what a feminist political, epistemic, organisational and socio-material space is – including its changing nature (and growing hybridity) and its continuing importance for the feminist movement today. I outlined these concepts in the previous two chapters, and I will return to them again later in the chapter, in the conceptual framing sub-section.

For now, I would like to focus on the importance of the concept (and approach) of queering and explore the philosophical and conceptual foundations of the project further.

Queering feminist subjectivity and research philosophy

Such an autoethnographic study, building from the knowledge and deeply embedded experience of the researcher, also necessitates a queer approach, I believe. The research is grounded in feminist epistemology first, with knowledge (particularly in social sciences) understood as being socially and subjectively constructed, and always interpreted from a specific perspective or perspectives – centering and exploring the specific positionality and knowledge of the researcher as a feminist embedded in the organisation being studied (see e.g., Weber, 1978; but also Hartsock, 1981; Hekman, 1997, for a more specifically feminist perspective). Yet, the starting point of feminist epistemology is that it is also queered by the use and incorporation of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019) and queer theories (Butler, 1993; Ahmed, 2006; Muñoz, 2009; Halberstam, 2011; Rumens, 2018), and particularly queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006; Vitry, 2020) and methodology

(Halberstam, 2011), as the project centres the different perspectives of people instrumental in the making of the Library (and the research). The approach that I take to queering, following the work of Ahmed (2006) in particular, is focused on destabilising, questioning, and subverting the researcher's subjectivity and assumptions, led by the other voices in and around the Library. This approach also queers the research project more broadly, both conceptually and methodologically, as I also applied it to the questions of feminist production of space in the subsequent analysis and discussion.

As Halberstam (2011: 11-12) also highlights, queer methods can provide routes to a more reflexive questioning, and a further turning towards 'knowledge from below (...) [and] counterintuitive modes of knowing', which can 'dislocate the certitude of my own projections [and] (...) yield a vision of co-existence that does not require making others' lifeworlds extinct or provisional'. Thus, the queering of the researcher's subjectivity and assumptions (again, examples of which I will discuss in the analysis), further challenges the notions behind knowledge production as objectivity (as explored in Chapter Two), while also encouraging a co-productive approach to research.

And, as Vitry (2020: 936) notes (following Ahmed, 2006), queer phenomenology can also provide us with a way to consider the role of space in this process, thinking of the conditions under which the norms of capitalist space can be undone and resisted, and to imagine ways of organising queerly', reiterating some of the points made in Chapter Three. Building on the work of Ahmed (2006), Halberstam (2011), and others, I also work in queer ways, crossing not just disciplinary and theoretical boundaries, and making connections across them, but also stepping outside academia for my inspiration, resources, and knowledge; akin to Thomas' (2017: 172) 'queer sensibility,' challenging boundaries of disciplines and methods. (I will return to exploring the importance of this further later in the chapter when I discuss autoethnography.) Such an approach also helps to challenge academia's (hegemonic)

emphasis on 'proper' (academic) sources, (re)focusing instead on knowledge co-production and queer resources such as 'low theory' (Halberstam, 2011: 2) or the feminist 'scrap heap' (Eichorn, 2013: 25), and drawing insights from resources that are not (stereo)typically recognised as valid.

This approach also mirrors closely the mission of organisations like the Library, challenging the hegemonic knowledge sources, as also explored in Chapter One and Two. I think such an approach is fitting here for another reason, as it reflects the praxis of the Library where organising, collecting, and inclusion have been increasingly focused on queer and other marginalised subjects over the years (although these methods tend to be described as intersectional rather than queer at the Library⁸⁶).

Relatedly, although Rumens (2018: 86) has highlighted that 'the search for a definitive description of queer theory is both futile and undesirable', while leaving space for openness about definitions (as the process of queering can also be seen as a process of becoming, as noted earlier) for the purposes of the current project, a certain level of clarity would be helpful. Thus, queering, for the purposes of this thesis, is understood as a process that invites an unmaking and disorientation of any taken-for-granted assumptions stemming from our positionalities, and particularly the positionality of the researcher here (following the work of Ahmed, 2006). It facilitates a continuous challenge of both the patriarchal norms that challenge the viability of spaces such as the Library, as well as of the internal organisational and methodological norms informing academic research. The process involves acknowledging multiple perspectives, particularly those of marginalised voices, which raise important questions of what a feminist space is and whom it includes, challenging some of my initial assumptions. While my starting point of feminist positionality seemed to be in

⁸⁶ The organisational preference is to use the framework of intersectionality. See the Library's community policy for more details: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

‘natural’ alignment with the Library, the queering of my subjectivity led to a queering of my methodology and conceptual framework, co-constructed with my participants (see e.g., Patti & Ellis, 2017), thus broadening my perspective on the Library, as a queer, as well as a feminist space, and providing a deeper questioning of what a feminist space is, who it is for, and what its conditions of possibility and liveability might be. This is reflective of both the Library’s changing nature in recent years, as well as my own evolving subjectivity over time, particularly in relation to the research project. I explore the impact of queering on my conceptualisation of space further in the next section.

Conceptual framework

As mentioned before, this project builds on Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the social production of space – emphasising the interconnected nature of lived, perceived, and conceived space – from critical feminist and queer perspectives (Ahmed, 2006, 2019; Vitry, 2020). The Library is thus conceptualised as a queer(ed) feminist socially produced space, co-created by different voices and perspectives. Further, it is seen as a socio-material space (Dale, 2005), where feminist community is produced through the space, as well as being co-produced by it in complex and continuous ways. It is also a space that matters (Tyler and Cohen, 2010) to the production of feminism and the resistance to stereotypically gendered ways of being. It is, finally, an organisational (social) space and an epistemic space for feminist movements in which recognition matters and which is also in the process of queering through different perspectives. Through this process, the space is helping envision a world that is not yet but can be feminist. This approach raises important questions about who is represented in space and who is not, its conditions of possibility, as well as its complex and changing nature and futurity, particularly in the current context of the post-pandemic period, exposing the increasingly hybrid nature of space. Below, I explore each of these aspects of feminist political, epistemic, organisational, and socio-material community space in more detail.

Researching the Library as a feminist epistemic and political space

The political and the epistemic are closely intertwined at the Library. As already highlighted in Chapter Two, feminist knowledge production can be seen as a political act, and therefore so can the epistemic place supporting it. They challenge the mythological idea of the neutrality of knowledge, by introducing practices of knowledge-making from a perspective – or a diversity of feminist perspectives, more accurately – that is alternative to the dominant, patriarchal one. Examples include feminist collections and classification systems, which centre marginalised voices and challenge stereotypical (patriarchal, heteronormative) ways of ordering knowledge often taken for granted in other institutions. In addition, the Library transgresses such boundaries by working with more mainstream institutions, such as Tate Modern, to curate its materials within those spaces to expand the reach and impact of these alternative processes of knowledge production.

While research has already explored the epistemic nature and role of feminist libraries and archives quite extensively (see e.g., Walbe and Davison, 1979; Searing, 1999; Ilett, 2003), the role of feminist (physical) space and material organisational praxis in this context has not been well researched, apart from a few notable exceptions (see, e.g., Eichorn, 2014; Ashton, 2017). As such the issues of feminist organisation and material production of space will form the main focus of this study. This will involve examining the socio-material entanglements in the production of the Library space, building on the work of Lefebvre (1991) and Dale (2005), and queering it. This is particularly interesting to explore at this point in history, in the context of the fast-changing socio-political context, in the aftermath of the pandemic, and its effects on the relationships between the social and the spatial (Fuchs, 2020). Thus, the exploration of (political) feminist materialities is key to this project, as the aesthetic considerations discussed in Chapter Three also highlighted. The political-epistemic implications of these can be far-reaching, as noted, for example by Ziarek (2012) who wrote

about the deeply complex nature of feminist aesthetics, which can be symbolic of both historical losses faced by women, but also of transgressive, revolutionary potential.

The changing feminist movement forms another important part of the Library's context, as also highlighted in Chapters One and Two, as the space is co-produced by and for the movements, affecting its feminist praxis and its spatial conditions of possibility. As such a space, the Library can be seen as its 'room' of our own (Woolf, 1929), an idea previously used to understand feminist libraries and archives as epistemic spaces, especially historically (see e.g., Roff, 2014). Perhaps more accurately, the Library can be thought of in terms of 'rooms', as, in the analysis, its different, overlapping spaces will bring back questions of difference and who gets recognition in spaces of feminism(s).

By extension, studying feminist knowledge spaces can also highlight the value of intergenerational work, as also noted in Chapter Two (see e.g., Eichorn, 2013). Nevertheless, it is important not to ignore the place of silence and disorienting moments in these spaces. As highlighted in the previous chapter, these can have 'haunting' effects, but they can also facilitate a queering of the space, as they encourage thinking about who (and what) remains excluded, and on what basis.

The political, epistemic, and socio-material aspects of the analysis will be covered in Chapter Five. Next, I focus on the important conceptual considerations of feminist organisational praxis and community to the study of the Library, which I will analyse in more detail in Chapter Six.

Researching the Library as a feminist organisational space

As highlighted in Chapter Three, the research also explores what alternative – queer, feminist - organisational praxis insights can contribute to Organisation Studies. While many mainstream institutions still use a reductive 'add women (or any other marginalised group)

and stir' approach (Rothschild, 1988) or look at 'diversity' as simply a linguistic tool (see Zanoni et al., 2010; Ahmed, 2019⁸⁷), alternative organisations such as the Library can often test more radical ideas (see e.g., Jones, 2016). In this project, I also explore how the Library's approach may offer useful insights into feminist praxis, particularly its spatial aspects, as it also highlights the challenges and the conditions of alternative spaces.

Demystifying and building an understanding of the role of difference and tension in the movement is another potential benefit of research on feminist organisational space that various authors cited in the previous chapters also note (e.g., Bartlett, 1986). Although conflict is frequently portrayed as negative and as the breaking point in feminism (e.g., Faludi, 2010), the study of feminist and epistemic organisational praxis can offer a much more complex and constructive version of the story. The concept of contested feminist space is useful here (Enke, 2007), as it offers an underexplored lens through which feminist space can be studied as a way of facilitating an understanding of conflict and tension in feminism as difficult, but potentially transformative forces.

The temporal dimension is relevant on various levels here, as it interacts with feminist spatial organisational practice in interesting ways. First, as highlighted in Chapter One, the Library changes over time, alongside the movement, with implications for both its space and organisational praxis, for example through its changing accessibility policies and definitions. Secondly, as noted in Chapter Three, there is a complex relationship between organisational history, space, and narratives (Liu & Grey, 2018). Alongside the 'haunting' moments mentioned earlier, this highlights how non-linear organisational narratives can be intertwined with space and archives and continue to inform organisational practices and experiences. I will explore examples from the Library, such as the 'conversational' effects of its archives, in

⁸⁷ See also, e.g., Fife (2021) for an analysis of the problem in the cultural sector.

the next chapter. Finally, the increasing importance of digital media and spaces, particularly in the wake of the COVID pandemic, highlights how the feminist movement and its spaces are organised in constantly changing, increasingly hybrid ways (as also highlighted). In the findings and analysis chapters, I will highlight some of the key differences between organising in and across the Library's physical and digital spaces, reflecting on the relative limitations of the latter for feminist organising, community, and creativity.

The methodology, combining interview, archival, and autoethnographic data, is designed to facilitate a critical exploration of these practices and their changing nature over time by providing historical insight, alongside more recent perspectives, and insights into lived experience. In the next section, focusing on the concept of community, I highlight the importance of lived experience in the production of feminist space and in the thesis.

Researching (and queering) feminist community

Although studying space is crucial to understanding feminist communities and movements and vice versa – as highlighted above, it is often also an overlooked aspect of feminist research. In this research, I will show that there is a continuing need for (physical) spaces for the movement and explore why I believe this is the case.

Arendt (1958) wrote about the political importance of spaces of appearance and Butler (2015) foregrounded the significance of spaces of assembly and recognition; their respective focus was largely on public spaces, such as protest squares, as highlighted in Chapter Three. But less open, more semi-public spaces matter for addressing the need for appearance and assembly too, as, for example, Enke (2007) noted. This research looks at the Library as an example of such a space as an important site of and for feminist community-building and politics, themes I will explore in Chapters Five and Six.

Community is also understood here as a process of continuous becoming, as highlighted through the work of Gunnarsson Payne (2013). The process of forming and engaging in a community is dialogical and centres different voices, often those from marginalized backgrounds. It is important to note, of course, that this process is not necessarily one that is free of tension, bringing us back to the concept of queering. Following Vitry (2020) (and, as noted earlier, Ahmed, 2006), and underpinning my approach to the research is also a belief that feminist space matters not just as a space for producing feminist knowledge, materialities, and organisational praxis, but for (re)aligning, recognizing, and reorientating towards marginalised subjectivities and praxis, especially those that have been and continue to be marginalised (including from within the feminist movement, such as queer voices). As Vitry (2020: 939) highlighted:

Some bodies are “queer” because they find alignments in “queer spaces” while other bodies are queered by being thrown out of alignment in straight spaces.

It needs to be added, however, that some such bodies also find themselves ‘queer’ in queer and feminist spaces. Although in a number of ways, it could be argued that this project, and the Library itself, can be conceptualised as already queer (i.e., as a representational space for inclusive feminist communities⁸⁸), neither the study nor the Library itself are necessarily always or unproblematically queer. This is where Sara Ahmed’s (2006, 2019) queer phenomenology becomes useful for queering feminist space. Ahmed’s (2019: 198) definition of queering highlights how: ‘to queer (...) is (...) to bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background’. As I will further note throughout my analysis, this queer approach facilitates – cultivates – disorientations. In this sense, the ‘hauntings’ of the Library’s

⁸⁸ By centring marginalised, particularly women’s and queer, voices through its collections, classification, curatorial and organisational practices, including, for example, its community policy, and queer events series.

problematic history (e.g., its historically exclusive policies and practices) are also taken into consideration in the analysis, and the methodology is designed to facilitate this.

Crucially for the thesis, in light of the above literature – and the disorientating impetus of the methodology – I would emphasize that the Library is most helpfully approached as an entity or constellation of meanings and materialities that are always in the process of a continuous queering. Led by my participants, I will explore what it means to be a (historically and today) marginalised subject in such a space, how doing/being so disorients the space (and the researcher's assumptions), and I will consider what the conditions are, or could be, for queering feminist spaces. Below, I will explore how this links to concepts of feminist futurity and space.

Queering feminist futurity and/in space

Linking the queer(ing) threads explored with those highlighted in Chapters Two and Three above, Ashton (2017: 126) proposed that ‘feminist archiving is a circular process of creating [the] society we want to be evidenced.’ Samer (2014) further argued that this process should be intergenerational and dialogical. What Samer (2014: 10) also highlights is that this process opens unexplored possibilities for queer futurity: ‘should gender, sexuality, and desire be completely restructured in a feminist and queer future, the surviving subjects will not be us either’. The process of queering is thus a process of opening new possibilities, as Muñoz (2009: 1) similarly suggests:

Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, *other ways of being in the world*, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward (emphasis added).

This is another reason why the queering process needs to remain openly dialogical, highlighting the future-orientated nature of queer methods, even while they are using the archive/history to help envisage alternative, queer futures. Thus, this research also aims to examine feminist space from a queer perspective that is not simply limited to issues of representation but focuses on different, and at times disorienting, ways of seeing, which nevertheless highlight the transformative and future-oriented potentialities of queer theory, methods, and perspectives. As I will highlight in the analysis and discussion, it is particularly marginalised voices and perspectives that can have this effect, opening possibilities of more sustainable, alternative, queer, feminist praxis, and futures.

The project is therefore also conceptualised as action research (Avison et al., 1999; Bleijenbergh, 2023) – combining research with key questions on meaning, nature, and the conditions of possibility of feminist space and, crucially, how can these be improved, with the aim of making queer feminist spaces and futures more viable in practice. As Bleijenbergh (2023) further notes, what is crucial in feminist action research is its co-creative capacity. Thus, as much as the space of the Library is seen as co-produced by its members, as noted in the previous chapter, so is the research, with the aim of building the organisation's conditions of possibility.

Therefore, combining concepts framing the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991) with a queer phenomenological approach focusing on disorientations (Ahmed, 2006), and working with what de Wet and Shoots (2016) refer to as the 'conditions of (im)possibility' alongside the literature on queer future highlighted above (and Ilett's (2003) conception of gendertopias highlighted in the previous chapters), I will ask how feminist spaces come into being, why, who (co)produces them, how their nature changes over time, and how that affects their conditions of possibility. A queer phenomenological approach (Ahmed, 2006) facilitates the questioning of how spaces can be sustained, (re)produced, and 'matter', crucially, from

hitherto marginalised perspectives and how we can help re-orient which spaces matter, not just from feminist perspectives, but also in wider public imaginations. Any findings will be applied (of this activist research) to the Library's praxis, in an effort to improve its conditions, as well as the mattering of the most marginalised subjects within it.

Thus, combining feminist and queer perspectives and methodologies in this project has a crucial effect on this work: helping to (re)conceptualise feminist spaces as sites of queer, feminist futurity and providing key building blocks for a conceptual framework of a queer feminist analysis of space. I will also highlight why studying spatial and organisational feminist praxis is important to building a more comprehensive understanding of political, epistemic, and community spaces like the Library, and that re-imagining its potential futures is as significant as critically, reflexively evaluating its past. As Samer (2014) highlights, the intergenerational work of feminist archives (and libraries, here) can be usefully looked at through a queer lens to provide an opening for queer feminist futures which we might not yet be able to fully envisage.

Below, I move to outline the details of the research design, including research questions, aims, and methods, before moving on to practical, ethical, and reflexivity challenges.

Research design

As highlighted before, as this research was autoethnographic, it was important for me to include a wide range of other perspectives on the Library to ensure that my initial assumptions about the nature of the Library were challenged and changed where needed and to enrich the analysis. In-depth interviews were carried out to this end, with the Library's volunteers and workers, alongside archival data engagements and observations across a range of other feminist spaces. The following section explores these methods and issues in more detail, starting with the research questions and objectives, and moving on to methods.

Research questions and aims

Starting with my experience of the Library is important here again, as it informs the motivation for this research. The research objectives are informed by this experience, particularly working on the Library's spatial struggles, as they motivate the need to understand why the conditions of production, possibility, and mattering of a feminist space remain precarious in the twenty-first century, with the aim of improving these. This led me to the first research question: How is feminist space produced, and what are the conditions of its possibility?

As the project developed, other key research questions surfaced. The inclusion of different voices and perspectives, particularly those of marginalised subjects, became highly important to the aims of the project, as they highlighted the need for a continuous queering of the Library/feminist space. The second question, therefore, is: What theoretical resources help us to make sense of how the Feminist Library is produced and experienced as a feminist and queer community?

Closely connected is the third research question: How is the social-materiality of the Feminist Library evolving, and what is its potential futurity as a (queered) feminist space? In response to these three questions, the research aims to make a theoretical contribution to Organisation Studies, particularly on space, proposing a reconceptualization of Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space from feminist and queer perspectives. The crucial role of difference is underlined in this research, particularly as it facilitates the queering of both dominant and feminist spaces, as it disorients normative notions of space (whether these are patriarchal or feminist). Through this reconceptualization, I hope to also contribute practically to the larger activist project of improving the possibilities of feminist space and the (spatially situated) livability of marginalised lives.

Methods

Autoethnography

As highlighted above, a key departure point for this research is my experience and positionality within the Library, providing an important source of motivation and inspiration. Thus, critical autoethnography (see e.g., Holman Jones, 2016) also became a good starting point for my methodology. From the early days of the project, I kept a research diary, which I used almost daily, to note reflections on my process, any new ideas, questions, and any relevant reflections on my work in/for the Library. The diary also helped me to process and negotiate tensions arising from the research and my positionality at the Library. These included moving between and blurring the lines between the insider (worker, volunteer) and outsider (researcher) perspectives, and between theory and personal narrative, in a manner that both informs the research and is continuously and critically reflexive (Cunliffe, 2016). This approach allowed for a gradual and conscious development of the conceptual framework, in a reflection of the ‘critical’ in critical ethnography (Holman Jones, 2016), including through recognising and challenging problematic assumptions. This was crucial to this project as autoethnographic research, as dealing with deeply embedded (and at times problematic) assumptions can be one of the biggest challenges of this type of research (Ettorre, 2016). I will provide further reflections on this process, and some examples, in the section on reflexivity below.

Although I initially started the diary in an electronic form, I found that the notes I was making were limited by the format and not reflexive or user-friendly enough, which led me to switch to a paper diary format early in the process (about three months in). This move facilitated more reflexive writing and more creative uses of the diary, with notes in different colours, highlighting key points in creative, symbolic ways that helped me to find my way

through and note different emergent themes, important questions, and turning points. This, in turn, facilitated an ongoing, hermeneutic process of analysis, with new reflections prompting a return to earlier thoughts, encouraging further reflection, and gradually building the analysis reflexively.

Observational notes on the (physical and digital) spaces of the Library provided a great source of autoethnographic data, alongside these everyday reflections. Some of these observations also took place in other relevant sites, such as exhibition spaces the Library temporarily occupied, such as Beaconsfield Gallery, and organisations like the Bishopsgate Institute (and other sites of the Library's archival collections). Other key examples of spaces that has enriched my work here (beyond the Library proper, even when the observations happened at the Library) included working with/in the FLA Network (Feminist and Women's Libraries and Archives, UK), which had direct implications for the analysis presented in Chapter Six; and the Sister Library's (India) residency at the Feminist Library in 2021-22, which I explore in Chapter Five.

This approach helped to highlight the networked nature of the Library – as also discussed in Chapters Two and Three – blurring the boundaries between the organisation and other relevant feminist knowledge spaces, organisations, and individuals (and the wider feminist movement by extension), alongside archival and interview encounters which highlighted this through stories. This provided an excellent source of reflection on the Library space as much more complex than (as initially envisaged) limited to the physical premises of the organisation.

Returning to the Library after a long (approximately one year) break – due to the prolonged lockdowns during COVID-19 – proved a further useful source of reflection on the changing nature of the space. Returning after such a break provided what Allan (2018: 538) referred to

as an ethnographic jolt a new source of reflection and perspective on the space, making ‘the familiar strange once again’, combined with my already changing perspective as a researcher (from worker/volunteer). Through these observations and resulting reflections, the Library emerged as a hybrid, ever-changing project. I explore this complex and changing nature of the Library’s materialities in detail in Chapter Five.

The use of the reflexive diary and multi-site observations provided critical tools for making this autoethnographic project critically reflexive, which is crucial for addressing some of the key limitations of this type of research. Triangulation with archival and interview methods provided some of the other tools for this, as I explore below.

Archives

As mentioned above, this project uses triangulation to help challenge my hidden biases and assumptions, which could prove more persistent with the sole use of autoethnography.

Archival research is one of the means of achieving this in this project. This method also provided a more rounded picture of the organisation, as it enabled access to the perspectives of many more, particularly former, workers, volunteers, and users than could have been reached directly through interviews (as well as external stakeholders, such as other feminist and community organisations or local authority representatives).

The use of this method led to, for example, a re-examination of the meaning and central importance of conflict and tension to the understanding of the organisation’s development.

Although the archival research was initially focused on the historical context of the Library, it quickly transpired that archives could have much more complex uses and disorienting effects, such as ‘conversations’ with our ancestors, challenging simple, linear notions of time.

Although the ‘silence’ of the archive (its inability to actively respond) and archival methods by extension can be seen as one of its notable shortcomings, as Jolly (2019), for example

similarly noted, these methods can also be tools for addressing important gaps in feminist knowledge – partly through listening to the archive. While Jolly (working on oral histories collections) referred to this act of listening as a more literal archival research device, I apply the concept of archival conversations more symbolically, thinking particularly of the affective ancestral connections sparked through material encounters in the feminist archive. I will explore these often ‘haunting’ archival connections and reflections in more detail in Chapter Five.

Thus, the archival methods as applied here also build on some of the critiques highlighted by feminist epistemic spaces literature explored in Chapter Two – focusing on some of the gaps in mainstream historical knowledge that feminist spaces and methods can uncover and challenges, particularly those representing previously unrecognised voices. Further, also building on critiques outlined in the previous chapter, the archival methods as applied here also pay particular attention to some of the different formats of knowledge that can be conducive (or not) to the recognition of such marginalised voices (see e.g., Halberstam; 2011; Salami, 2020). These methods can therefore be recognised as feminist, as they take into consideration and critically approach the political nature of knowledge production processes.

The Library’s archives are largely situated at the Bishopsgate Institute Library’s Special Collections⁸⁹. They were initially accessed there, although copying (by permission from the Institute archivists) was required to circumvent the issue of very limited access during the initial stages of the project (again, due to the extensive periods of pandemic-related lockdowns). Data copied into an electronic format was then transferred onto my computer and sorted into folders according to key periods and reflecting major events of those periods (largely reflective of the way the documents are sorted in the actual archive), including the

⁸⁹ While some of the more recent organisational archives can be found at the Feminist Library, most have been moved to the Institute due to space and resource issues.

Library's founding documents and financial crises over the years, providing the basic themes for my initial literature and historical analysis in Chapters One and Two.

It was not possible to explore all archival materials within the available timeframe. The archival material selection process, therefore, centered on these key events and periods in the Library's history, informed by my prior knowledge of the organisation and focusing on the periods that I needed to gain more in-depth knowledge on to provide a good overview of the organisation, particularly for Chapter One. Further archival research stemmed from a need for clarity on some contradictory claims made on the Library's history in conversations with members of its collective. In the next section, I will also explore how the frame of thematic analysis of the archives changed from largely historical to reflecting more of the conceptual framework of the thesis during the course of the research, in light of the insights provided by the literature and triangulation with the other methods.

Although the Library's organisational archives⁹⁰ at the Bishopsgate provided the core material for archival research, some of the more recent materials can still be found at the Library and in electronic form (online, as well as on shared, organisational and private drives). The added benefit of privileged access to (particularly electronic) archives was particularly useful during the time of the pandemic, as it provided access to some of these even during lockdown periods when both the Library and the Institute were closed.

The approach to the archival methods used was also affected by these periods of lockdown (combined with the triangulation of archival and interview data), not only in terms of the analysis and thematic framework (as explored further in the next subsection), but also in

⁹⁰ Additionally, another collection at the Bishopsgate proved useful, the Format Archive, a feminist photography collection, of an organisation that did not directly relate to the Library, but which, nevertheless, included a selection of rare photos of one of the Library's old premises which were used.

encouraging a more embodied experience of the archives as material, affective objects (see also e.g., Kirsch & Rohan, 2008). For example, after re-entering the archives following these periods of lockdown, I was inspired to pay more attention to the material nature of the archival objects (as I was deprived of this opportunity when access to physical archives was impossible), such as the thickness of the letter paper or the envelopes in which they were sent (where available). The enhanced consideration for these materialities, in turn, intensified my attentiveness to the affective elements of the archive, like those that I describe in Chapter Five, which spark the ‘conversational’ archival encounters. Thus, being able to do archival research in the physical collections helps bring the voices behind them ‘to life’ – especially following extended periods without this ability.

Interviews

Further means of triangulation were through interviews with the Library’s workers and volunteers⁹¹, including some former workers and volunteers, and one other key informant (a Friend of the Library⁹²). Purposive sampling was used, with participants selected primarily based on their roles in the Library to account for a range of different perspectives and experiences, including a Friend, a former volunteer at the Library Bookshop, a curator, a former fundraiser and Writer in Residence, a member of the design team at the Library, a former and a current (at the time) administrator and finance coordinator, and a couple of Spanish Book Club members. Although it must be noted that they do not claim to cover all perspectives on/in the Library (mainly due to the time), the participants also comprised a range of positionalities, including migrant, queer, global majority, white and Western

⁹¹ Although the initial plan was to include former workers and volunteers involved in the early days of the Library, space limitations of the thesis meant that I eventually focused on participants who were involved either currently or in recent years. See more about the Friends Scheme: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/support/friends-scheme/>.

feminists. Nine participants were interviewed altogether, with each interview taking approximately an hour (and one participant interviewed twice).

The format was semi-structured, which was also, arguably, narrative in style (see e.g., Warren, 2002) – very loosely structured to open the initial conversation, focused on eliciting the participants’ stories and experiences of the Library from their own perspectives. I then only followed up with questions if the interviewee needed a prompt to continue their story and to ensure that the different aspects of the Library were addressed. Such an approach encouraged participant-led storytelling, ‘allowing [me] to understand the deeper significance of an event in the light of others’ (Gabriel, 2004: 170) and to see participants as co-producers of knowledge. The semi-structured interview schedule was written around the key emerging themes of community, material, and epistemic space that emerged from earlier chapters (derived from the academic literature and archival research, as well as my own experiential reflections), and was used as needed, with follow-up questions added on any emerging themes as the interviews progressed.

Although access to participants was made easier by the positionality of the researcher as an organisational insider, due to the pandemic, the interviews were necessarily conducted online, on Zoom⁹³, in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines. Although the originally planned, in-person, approach could have facilitated additional data (for example, from observing participants in the organisation and how they interact with it), the use of online methods also facilitated accessibility and sustainability (Archibald et al., 2019).

To help visualise important material aspects of the Library space, I also asked my participants to share images of meaningful aspects of the Library, alongside the interviews. These visual

⁹³ Although alternative options were provided to ensure accessibility and inclusivity, the participants all agreed to use the platform.

techniques facilitated what Warren (2008: 572) refers to as ‘almost literally [bringing] the material environment “into” the interview room’, bringing attention to the importance of the material and affective nature of the space, even in the context of this digital research.

The approach to interview data collection and analysis was phased to encourage immersion and reflexivity. The first phase of the interview data collection was spread over eight months to foster critical immersion into each interview’s insights allowing for reflexive, incremental, and interactive analysis to emerge. This process was enriched through both the participants’ and my supervisors’ feedback (as well as continuous engagement with literature and other data sources), co-creating potential new directions for data collection, research questions, and conceptual framing. This process, particularly through the participants’ insights, also often provided unexpected material (see also e.g., Silverman, 2000), facilitating the queering approach discussed earlier and its disorienting effects (Ahmed, 2006).

At the next stage, follow-up emails were sent to participants, some with questions and with the emerging analysis, to further foster reflexivity, ensuring that my analysis reflects my participants’ contributions without privileging my perspective as a researcher and trying to stay participant-led throughout (Essers, 2009). I also conducted one more interview (with Eva) resulting from these follow-up emails.

The transcription and analysis stage further fostered this interactive, reflexive process. I manually transcribed the interviews myself, facilitating a critical hermeneutic analysis (Thompson, 1981; Roberge, 2011). Reading the text multiple times, against the literature and new archival and other observations, helped to surface new themes, while continuously rethink and challenge my own knowledge of the Library and any resulting preconceptions about what the data and findings might look like, to facilitate the queering process. Such an analytical process thus further facilitated a dialogic approach to data collection and analysis –

not just between the interviews and the autoethnographic reflections, but also by going back to the archives, as the archival analysis approach further developed through this process.

Having collected and reflected on the initial analysis of the interviews, I went back to the archives to look at further files, and my approach to the thematic analysis developed through this iterative process, becoming more focused on the emerging themes and disorientations (moving on from the initial framework for this, built largely around historical events, as mentioned earlier).

This helped critically and reflexively build on the initial conceptual framework, finding themes in the data incrementally, and, again, highlighting any potentially problematic assumptions, as well as emerging tensions, apparent contradictions, and silences (see, e.g., Martin, 1997; Hardy and Palmer, 1999; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010; Cunliffe, 2016) in the data. For example, while I initially approached archives more as simple sources of historical data, following some of the interviews, as well as the enforced (pandemic-induced) separation from the archival materialities, I started approaching them as more affective, conversational, material sites (as explored in particular in Chapter Five).

Some of the other limitations of the individual methods that could be, at least partially, addressed through such a process of triangulation include challenging internalised assumptions. For example, as Denzin (1978) and Patton (1999) highlighted, when using interviews, triangulation with other methods can be a good way to address issues that can stem from their often-performative nature and enhance the quality of the data analysis more broadly, through helping mitigate biases. Using interviews alongside autoethnography made this a two-way process, as I was able to challenge my own assumptions, as well as some of those of my participants.

Below, I will explore some of the key challenges of the research methodology, as well as the importance of ethics and reflexivity in more detail.

Challenges

Although various challenges surfaced during the research process, especially in terms of access to archives during the COVID pandemic or the ethics of voice and anonymity in feminist research, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, they also generated some opportunities. Below, I focus on these key challenges and opportunities.

Access challenges (and opportunities)

The pandemic made access to archives and people particularly problematic, as mentioned above. Over much of the first year of the project, the former even proved impossible, with archives and libraries largely closed due to COVID-19 response. Due to the access limitations, archival data accessed during the initial year was predominantly limited to archives pertaining to the history of the Library at pivotal times of crisis, which, nevertheless, facilitated the writing of the organisation's history in Chapter One. Therefore, the thematic analysis of the archival data was quite limited in these initial stages. Having ongoing access to many of the born-digital (later) archival materials was also helpful at this stage, although it raised distinct, ethical issues, which I will cover in the next section.

Although the limited access to archives presented a set of challenges to the research in terms of accessibility and the scope of the analysis, it must also be noted here that it also created interesting openings for useful discussions at the Library, expanding the potential of this project as action research. It inspired digitisation of some of the materials during the research process, as mentioned above, as well as conversations about digitisation of the Library's materials, its limitations, and potential in the context of the research. Although the digitised

materials are largely limited to internal use at this stage, these opening conversations are important for improving archival access for the wider Library/feminist community.

A reopening of the Bishopsgate archives at later stages allowed for a more in-depth textual analysis of the Library's archival data, particularly considering the enrichment of the emerging analysis from the interview data at that stage, but also the material aspects of the archive. The immersive nature of the physical archives also highlighted the socio-material nature of the Library and the 'live' relationships between people and the archive that it fosters, as I will explore further in Chapter Five. At the same time, this could perhaps be seen as another hidden opportunity stemming from the many challenges brought about by the pandemic, as I thought this immersive experience was enhanced after the period of relative deprivation.

Similar access issues also applied to participants and spaces. As mentioned above, I could not interview my participants in person, as originally planned, which impacted on the material observations that were possible in the interviews. While challenging the initial plans to carry out all the interviews face-to-face, ideally in the Library, the online interviews were also beneficial in other ways, facilitating accessibility for interviewees, as well as eliciting additional insights on the impact of the pandemic on the Library as an organisation and community. As highlighted in the previous chapter, the impact of the pandemic on feminist space and organisational praxis has already been explored in a growing body of research. This project set out to bring additional insights to this work from my participants' and my own reflections, highlighting the changing nature of the Library, as well as its continuing need for physical space, as I will note in both analysis chapters. Although, as Steinmetz (2012) argued, even before the pandemic, the internet had a 'collapsing' effect on experiences of space and time, this was arguably accentuated during and as a result of the pandemic.

The access limitation also extended to the Library itself and to my ability to conduct observations in the space, as it was also closed for a prolonged time during the pandemic. This meant that my observation-based reflections were limited to online spaces for much of the project. Nevertheless, in combination, these challenges and experiences also facilitated creative and critically reflexive disorientations, including of any simple definitions of what a (feminist) space, a research site, and an archive are, blurring the boundaries between the digital and the physical spheres. The spaces are seen and experienced as increasingly hybrid, while also challenging the notion of digital space as somehow not ‘material’ (e.g., Horst and Miller, 2012). As Murray (2021) further highlights, the notion of digital space does not preclude intimate and affective connection to the material – as my participants highlighted, and as I will discuss in the findings and analysis chapters.

Ethical challenges (and opportunities)

Interesting ethical challenges and questions also transpired from the early days of this project in relation to the archives and with reference to my own (researcher) positionality, as well as that of the interview participants. Key issues included negotiating archive uses as a researcher with privileged access, as well as questions of accessibility and marginality, and voice versus anonymity in the context of feminist research with participants.

I will highlight the problem of naming (Moore, 2012) first, as it foregrounds some of the key questions around voice and marginality, which are central to feminism (as already noted in Chapter Two). In the context of this research, it is something that was brought to my attention during the ethical approval process. Although as a feminist researcher, I must also consider issues of confidentiality and anonymity, it is important to (re)centre other questions – which are often neglected yet which might be of equal importance – such as the question of those of

naming my participants or giving them the choice to do so (which was the approach I took⁹⁴), considering the centrality of voice and recognition in feminism. This is crucial to consider from a feminist perspective, as, as Virginia Woolf (1929: 48) famously noted: ‘I would venture to guess that Anon [...] was often a woman’. Yet, in this research context, I still had to navigate issues around the primacy of confidentiality above these considerations, especially as they pertained to institutional ethical approval for the project to proceed. The complexity of this navigation acknowledges that, as Sudbury (1998: 33) put it, participants are ‘knowing subjects in their own realities’ and are active contributors to the research process (see also, Essers, 2009). Indeed, as I highlight throughout the thesis, I see the PhD as co-created with them, as my analysis is in large part informed by my participants’ insights. This is not to say that confidentiality issues should be ignored, but their generally assumed primacy needs to be reflected upon if not proactively challenged, particularly in research from a feminist perspective and other research involving marginalised participants.

Further, with interviews being conducted online generally proving to be easier, more accessible, sustainable, and cost-effective to many participants (for more considerations of the benefits and challenges of using Zoom for interviews, see e.g., Archibald et al., 2019), it was important for me to reconsider my prior insistence on in-person interviews as an ethical, not just a practical question. The typical (at least pre-pandemic) requirement to travel to in-person interviews could, at least at times, be seen as unfair and unethical, considering the available technological alternatives, particularly from the perspective of participants in marginalised positions. Although I was forced to use the alternatives considering the context of the pandemic, this reconsideration will perhaps make approaches to research more reflexive in the long-term, not only for myself but in research more generally.

⁹⁴ In the end, four of my participants decided to be anonymous for the purpose of the research, while five decided to use their real names.

Finally, questions of trust and consent must be considered as central throughout the project, in the context of participants, but also in relation to my engagement with the archives.

Although I had easy access to documents (including confidential ones) due to my position at the Library, I had to carefully consider the implications of using them, rather than automatically presuming that 'access' equates to 'consent'. Thus, I insisted on filling out data usage forms for researchers in the archive, despite the trust of the archivists at the Institute implying, at times, that I did not have to. Further, I resolved not to use any sensitive documents in my thesis that I had access to due to my position, but which were not otherwise available for public access elsewhere. Where I was not sure, I sought explicit consent from relevant people.

The importance of reflexivity in my research project is already highlighted through these ethical challenges and several of the considerations in the research methods section. I will highlight how this relates back to the broader scope, concepts, and methodology of this research below, before closing the chapter.

Reflexivity

The ethical challenges highlighted here, again, point to the interconnectedness between feminist theory and practice, encouraging a more reflexive approach to the research process, questioning the primacy of often taken-for-granted notions such as anonymity, and spotlighting other ideas, such as voice, accessibility, and considerations of marginality, and the importance of balancing these. As Cunliffe (2016), following Deetz (1995), proposed, this is key for an ethical practice based on dialogue and reflexivity, acknowledging and centering participants' (or workers' or students') voices and subjectivities, challenging taken-for-granted norms and opening new conceptual, practical, and methodological possibilities. As

Holman Jones (2016: 235) also notes, this is a key part of queer methodology and writing in so far as:

Queer stories also recount the debts we owe to other's voices, words, and ways of living and loving (...) as an opening up and out into new ways of relating.

This was a highly useful source of methodological reflection for my project, as through the process of this research it became clear how central my participants' voices were to the analysis and the shape of the thesis. A methodological approach informed by queer thinking and by a range of feminist perspectives, and enacted through an autoethnographic research design, therefore, focuses on questions of reflexivity and voice.

Further sources of reflexivity in the project include queer literature on spaces. For example, reading Kawthar and Jaha (2020) challenged my thinking about the conditions of possibility of queer feminist space and my own privilege in having access to one. By presenting a reflexive perspective on queer space as a seeming impossibility in a different geographical and political context, they challenged some of my foundational assumptions and my privilege in making these assumptions. Other queer thinkers helped challenge and change my definition of what a feminist space is and, crucially, how to approach it (e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Self & Hudson, 2015; Burchiellaro, 2023). Working with these disorientations, I propose in this thesis that a feminist space (and future) needs to be queer(ed) and that the process of doing so helps to challenge some of the most persistent marginalisations in our societies, such as the continuing exclusion of queer people in (some) feminist spaces.

Finally, queer theory and practice produce another effect that is important to note here. As highlighted before, through the work of Samer (2014) and others, queer practice needs to necessarily remain open and dialogical, as we do not know what the future will look like. Therefore, I note, again, that this research does not aim to present a definite or complete

picture of the Library, but rather one that is open, of an organisation that is a continuous work-in-progress, a learning organisation in a process of queering.

Summary

To conclude, this chapter summarised the key philosophical, conceptual, and methodological underpinnings of this project. As a researcher studying the Feminist Library as an autoethnographic project, from the perspective of a former worker and volunteer, I started by clarifying my positionality and subjectivity as relevant to this project. I then described how this related to the feminist philosophical underpinnings of this research, as well as to the importance of queering these foundations, from the perspective of a critical feminist researcher, challenging my deep-seated assumptions about the Library. I also highlighted how this positionality and research more broadly raise important ethical and practical challenges, as well as emphasizing the importance of reflexivity in the research process.

The conceptual framework and research design were also outlined in this chapter. The research design combined critical autoethnography with archival research and in-depth qualitative interviews with the Library's workers and volunteers. The research field was also explained (and the ways in which its boundaries became blurred was also reflected on), by approaching the organisation as multi-sited, highlighting complex network of feminist, activist, and archival connections. This approach helped to acknowledge the embedded nature of the Library, in the feminist movement and more broadly. Using a critically hermeneutic approach, I explained how I immersed myself in the data (and the organisation) to reflexively challenge my initial assumptions and to produce meaningful, actionable insights. The study aims to address questions about the conditions of possibility (mattering) and production of the feminist space, also considering its evolving nature, particularly in the light of its different communities and in the post-COVID, digital era, but also thinking about its futurity. The

chapter also explained how the project also attempted to build an understanding of a queer(ed) production of feminist space, in order to redefine/reorient feminist space by raising questions about the role of difference in it, and thus to expand the possibilities of/for queer feminist spaces and futures. I suggested that research that centres marginalised experiences and praxis can make valuable contributions to Organisation Studies (and academia more broadly), and to prefigurative practice.

Finally, the chapter has aimed to show how (and why) this is a critical, queer feminist study on the importance of feminist organisational praxis and its materiality, using the holistic framework of space as socially constructed, building on the work of Lefebvre (1991), Dale (2005), and others, (crucially, Ahmed, 2006), providing a queered perspective on the production of space.

The next two chapters will focus on the key findings that emerged from the data. Chapter Five focuses on the Library as an epistemic, political, and socio-material space, and Chapter Six on its meaning and nature as a community and workspace.

Chapter Five

The Library as an epistemological, political, and socio-material space

Chapter five focuses on three key themes emerging from my research on the Library: namely, epistemic, political, and socio-material space. The section on the Library as a feminist epistemic space places more focus on hitherto less explored aspects, such as recognition and voice, rather than the collections or the catalogue of the Library. This section highlights how the Library enables everyday voices to contribute to its herstories and how absences ('hauntings') are challenged where necessary. The political is shown as embodied, through forms of street action, rich connections to feminist networks, as well as a brief reflection on the potential for decolonising of taken-for-granted feminist space and narratives. The socio-material aspects, meanwhile, highlight how meanings in the Library are made, symbolically, through its struggle for recognition and moments of forgetting within it, as well as the changing nature of materialities over time.

The recurring sub-themes of voice and recognition highlight important interconnections between all the themes explored in the thesis, as they are found across the different sections. These can also be sources of frequent disorientations, particularly due to exclusions, both historical and present. However, this also presents many opportunities for queering, in other words (or defined here as) changing the orientation of/in feminist space, thus building an alternative, transformative version of it, following Ahmed's (2006) definition of queer(ing) as disorientations. These interconnections are also important to note, as at least some of the lines separating the analytical themes are created here for the purpose of analytical flow while, in reality, being much more intertwined.

The analysis is presented in sections based on the themes emerging from the interviews with the Library's (former and current) volunteers and workers (and one other key informant),

produced alongside archival data, autoethnographic reflections, and literature. The interview and archival data provided rich sources of disorientations from my original assumptions about the Library – contributing to the queering of the space – and I attempt to note a good selection of those throughout the analysis. The analysis presented here is, therefore, knowledge of the Library co-constructed with my participants, historical figures of the organisation, and beyond.

Thus, the chapter starts with an exploration of the Library as an epistemic space of recognition(s) as it happens through various activities, where participants are invited to find themselves and contribute to the making of the Library, its stories, and conversations. The ‘hauntings’ – where the representations in the Library are found lacking or sit uncomfortably – also richly contribute to the queering of the space and of my positionality within it. The political aspects are then explored, starting with elements symbolising the Library’s struggles and moving through links to the wider feminist movement found in the space. Finally, stories of everyday and precious materialities are explored for their symbolism of struggle and recognition, as well as the changing nature of feminist materialities.

The Library as a feminist epistemic space

The Library as an epistemic space – that of collection, dissemination, preservation, and co-creation of feminist knowledge – includes obvious threads not extensively explored here (particularly collections policies and practice), as they have been researched elsewhere, as highlighted in Chapters One and Two. Instead, the analysis of the epistemic space focuses here on the less explored, and thus more surprising, themes, particularly those of agency, recognition, intergenerational connections and conversations, and the disorientations and ‘hauntings’ that emerge. I start the epistemic space section with an exploration of the agentic

aspects of recognition, where people intervene in the space to see themselves and their communities represented.

Inscribing oneself on a canvas of herstories: The Library as space of recognition

The Library participants'⁹⁵ ability to 'inscribe' themselves onto the canvas of the space/organisation is highly important. It is important as it provides the participants with a sense of agency and voice through co-creating the space and feminist history, and having an impact on who is recognised in these stories and the space. This is both a collective and individual process, as my participants highlighted various co-creative activities through their stories. It is also a process that changes over time, as the organisation develops, as shown through Chapter One and the juxtaposition of the archival stories with interviews and reflections here. The Library thus becomes an agentic space of recognition, with people actively and collaboratively co-creating it, in a process of mutual co-constitution, as my participants also highlighted.

Recognition is also important in feminist space due to the history of omission of women from both knowledge production and spaces (as explored in Chapters One and Two). Further, creating a sense of agency in public (or semi-public) space is also key, as it can also be placed in a context of these being largely historically exclusive of marginalised voices, including women, as this quote from the feminist design collective, Matrix (1984: 1), shows:

If you are reading this at home, for instance, you are probably in almost the only place where you can impose something of your own individuality on your environment (...)
Because home is the only place with this potential freedom we value and strive for it.

⁹⁵ As I will note below, these can include volunteers, but also supporters and users more broadly.

Despite the four decades since the Matrix publication, women's (and other marginalized bodies'; for example, see Butler (2015); Kawthar & Jaha (2020)) ability to impose or inscribe themselves (or even appear) in public spaces can still be relatively limited (see Tyler and Cohen, 2010; Kern, 2019; Dahal, 2021). By contrast, feminist spaces such as the Library can be seen as 'canvasses' where feminists can more easily 'inscribe' themselves on/into their wider environment, and by extension into feminism and history or herstory. Thus, the Library can be described as a space of epistemic recognition and creative freedom outside the home (I explore some contradictions of the latter in the next chapter).

This process happens through both literal contributions to the organisation's materialities, such as the collections' donations, zines, or the new logo workshop (see Figure 6), or more metaphorical ones, like the discussion and co-creation of organisational policies and practices (which I will focus on in the next chapter). My participants talked about a range of activities and artifacts that enabled them to contribute to this process of co-creation. Eva, volunteer, and co-founder of the Library's Spanish Book Club, provided several such examples, including graphic arts events organised with the goal of adding to both the material and knowledge of the Library. As Eva explained, they produced: 'some paper little booklet or zine that I wanted the Library to have forever'. They also noted that this co-creative process of material produced a sense of recognition and belonging. Highlighting the open nature of this process of inscribing oneself, one's work, and stories into the Library space, Eva also mentioned that various artists 'from different places' were invited to contribute. The Library's zine collections are an amalgamation of such materials, as well as others obtained by volunteers or sent by different makers and other feminists. We can also think about this co-creation in relation to collections more broadly, which are largely donated, by individuals and organisations, including books, periodicals, ephemera, and other materials, such as archives of everyday feminist praxis, including letters, emails, and other documentation. In

our conversation, Eva also highlighted the intersectional, activist element of these, as it was important for them not just to find, but also to contribute collection items that corresponded with their migrant identity (this aspect will be explored further in the next section). These, thus, form a collectively created archive of the movement, a meta-archive, always in the making, long before the introduction of the relatively new, zine element.

Figure 6



The Library dragon logo re-design workshop creations, 06/04/19

Many people can contribute to the Library's creative activities and collections, and ultimately, feminist histories. Another example of this co-creative, rich tapestry of the organisation is its new dragon logo (I discuss its symbolism later in the chapter). It was created during a day event, organised as part of the process of the Library's relocation to its new space, which involved a collective task of re-branding by brainstorming and creating ideas for the new logo in a workshop. An open invitation to the event was sent out to

supporters and followers of the Library, and all participants shared the task of collectively co-creating the new visual identity development.

The Library is, therefore, both individually and collectively, and continuously, co-created by the people involved. Its collections are formed by various donated and co-created objects, contributing to the materiality, knowledge, and identity creation in/of the space. The co-creation is a crucial aspect of this, as it also contributes to the collective members' and other users' sense of agency and recognition as they co-produce not just the space, but feminist history more broadly. It is a collaborative, collective, and ongoing process in which every feminist, not just expert historians, can participate. I now turn to exploring the epistemic meaning of the collections as spaces where recognition happens through 'intergenerational conversations'.

'Talking to my ancestors': Searching for representation and recognition with(in) the Library

Eva also conceptualised the experience of discovering intergenerational connections within the collections as 'talking to my ancestors'. Such conversational encounters happened in the space, both in archival encounters and direct interactions between people, as other participants also reported.

Eva initially looked for these connections in the Library community and, unable to find someone who they felt represented them, they searched in the periodicals. There, they found the migrant, Spanish-speaking 'voices' they identified with, as they explained:

I spent hours looking at pamphlets in the periodicals room and some of them, magically, they were in Spanish (...) So, it was like talking to my ancestors, in that way, in the silence, in the solitude of a library.

This was crucial for their continuing involvement in the Library, as they did not find any such role models in the organisation's living community at the time and it was important for them to do so. It was also an important part of connecting to older generations of feminists through these materials. As Eva noted, this made them feel as if the ancestors were still around, even if they were not, in more literal ways (I discuss 'hauntings' in more detail in the next section). Eventually, these conversations led them to start the Spanish Book Club, partly to fill this gap for other feminists from similar backgrounds arriving at the Library.

Another migrant (South American) volunteer, Gloria, also highlighted the importance of such material international connections. The collections felt inclusive, as they included materials covering the Global South. Although when Gloria arrived at the Library sometime later there was that Spanish-speaking person already there to welcome and anchor them (Eva), the ability to find one's own history in these collections was still important from their perspective. (Gloria also had an active role in the founding of the Spanish Book Club, which I explore in more detail in the next chapter).

This part of our conversations also became one of the key paths for my activist research. Eva felt that the international voices needed to play a bigger, more central role in the collections. I explored this sentiment further in relation to Polish and queer migrant voices by trying to find (queer) Polish voices in the collections⁹⁶. This exploration was partly inspired by my conversations with Eva, as we discussed the possibilities of adding more of these collections from our different perspectives as migrants, as well as organising meetings for migrant

⁹⁶ Although I did find some Polish migrant voices in the collection (especially from the period of the 80s and early 90s - the Solidarity movement and the post-Soviet period), I did not manage to find any queer Polish representations within that. Numerous of these were written from a Western perspective, something which appeared disorienting to me, although perhaps of its time (much of the critique of the Western feminist movement has been of its white, colonising tendencies, as previously explored (see also e.g., Graff, 2003; for a more specifically Polish perspective)).

feminists to explore our ancestral stories in the collections, and to help improve the Library's representativeness. Yet, these conversations also inspired an important disorientation in my experience of the Library: the questioning of my relationship to the archive and, by extension, feminism more broadly, as a migrant feminist. While Eva seemed to have the 'conversational' experience specifically in relation to what they called their ancestors, I had it in the archives in relation to people who had seemingly little in common with me, apart from being feminists. I explore some examples below.

The archives include many collective movement stories (some of which I highlighted in Chapter One, like the Library being instrumental in Women's Studies), as well as, crucially here, more personal feminist stories. The latter proved particularly moving, often producing what felt like a more personal connection and what I refer to as a 'conversational' experience. To me, the voices behind the archives 'came alive', due to the personal angles and often affective stories included. It is important to also note here that most of these encounters were influenced by my perceptions of what the Library is today, from the perspective of somebody involved contemporarily, I thus refer to them as 'intergenerational conversations'.

Some of the letters found in the archive included stories of personal struggles. These personal stories helped shape the story of the Library as a 'personal is political' space (following Hanish in Lee, 2007), with effects on how the theoretical and the political of the movement developed. For example, Frances, who corresponded over an extended period, wrote numerous passionate letters, from personal life anecdotes, including stories about breastfeeding, to related, potentially useful information for the Library collections. For instance, in one letter, Howard (1977) wrote:

I see your subject index does not include breastfeeding. This forms a major activity in many women's lives – I have done it for six years – and I have donated 2 books to the

WRRC library on the subject (...) I fear breastfeeding is a taboo subject in Women[‘s] Liberation [Movement]. (Emphasis in the original.)

In this letter, Frances makes clear connections between personal experience, feminist politics, and the Library collections. In others, proposals to deliver talks in the Library are made, similarly inspired by experience. The conversations happening at the time between Frances and the Library were brought ‘to life’ through the archive over 40 years later, by the passionate voice and personal stories. Particularly in the context of the larger, impassioned correspondence with the Library, the letters make the voice feel alive and embodied today, providing me with a ‘conversational’ impression.

Other participants also frequently highlighted the intergenerational conversations that happened within the space, between people, not just in the archives. These intergenerational stories shed further light on the ‘personal is political’ aspect of the epistemic space. These were often considered a ‘powerful’ learning and a formative experience of the Library, facilitating connections between generations around feminist histories, building recognition of a longer, living, collective story of feminism, as Lisa, a Germany-based Friend of the Library, for example, described:

I also enjoyed that there were so many different generations and people from different backgrounds and they were all welcome, all their perspectives were welcome and appreciated. I went to a consciousness-raising workshop, and there was, for example, an elderly woman, and she told us things about the grassroots movements and how she experienced feminism when she was younger and that at some point she felt excluded because she doesn’t have an academic background and other people she connected with had (...) And that was super inspiring, and I really learned a lot from that experience.

Lisa also highlighted the continuing importance of these conversations today for ensuring that the awareness of past struggles is passed down, helping prevent history repeating itself in dangerous ways, in feminism but also in society more broadly. This reminder was frequently echoed in my experience of the Library collections. Such intergenerational conversations were also some of the most memorable parts of my own story of the Library, not just in the collections but the community.

The Library emerges here as an epistemic space recognising a diversity of voices in feminism(s), reflected in both literal and more metaphorical conversations that happen within it. Yet, some participants, particularly migrants, who found the voices best reflecting their experiences in the collections, also highlighted the ‘haunting’ gaps in representation in the live community of the Library. This was similarly reflected in my experience of finding interesting, affective connections in the archives, which provided a source of connection, but also disorientations, especially when considered from my queer migrant feminist perspective and facilitated by my conversations with other migrant participants. Some of the key conversations that transpired both in the space and the collections were intergenerational, positioning the participants as part of a living collective co-creating the Library, feminist movement, and history. Thus, this section particularly highlights the importance of intergenerational communication to the Library as an epistemic space of recognition, as well as ‘hauntings’ and disorientations. This part of the chapter also highlights the potential of the project as activist research, helping address these ‘haunting’ gaps, as well as prompting some important researcher reflexivity. The continuous, ongoing work of building inclusive recognition in feminist space, including through expanding its international collections and conversations, led by members and groups who are underrepresented, illuminates the need for more such interventions; the Spanish- and Polish-language examples are just a couple of many possible routes for exploring and including the whole diversity of feminist voices. I

continue to explore other ‘haunting’ aspects of the epistemic space of the Library archive and other materialities in the section below.

The Feminist Library as a space of archival ‘hauntings’ and queering

The gaps in the conversational representations discussed above already link to the Library as a space of ‘hauntings’ – absences that can also be a ‘seething presence’ (Gordon, 1997: 8) or partial presences, as Eva’s story highlighted. Exclusionary moments found in the archives challenge an image of the Library as an inclusive feminist space, despite its explicit orientation as such⁹⁷. However, these ‘hauntings’ can also be opportunities for queering, as highlighted above. Here, the archival ‘hauntings’ are troubled and disoriented further through their historical trajectories. Historical attempts at addressing silences and exclusions can, for example, challenge any straightforward definition of queer stories and illuminate the fragility of feminist histories – even, at times, in feminist spaces. Thus, further exploration of the Library ‘hauntings’ shows that feminist history and knowledge are perhaps more complex and precarious than may appear – with queer stories emerging in unexpected places, with sometimes troubling, yet insightful messages, and requiring an examination mindful of their historical context alongside new perspectives.

Although the Library was an exclusive, women-only space between 1991 and 1997, as highlighted in Chapter One and documented in the archives, stories of some of the active, long-term collective members contradicted this. I do not believe this was a conscious act of history suppression, but it might be a sign of collective forgetting or denial⁹⁸. It is,

⁹⁷ See e.g., the Library’s Community Policy: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

⁹⁸ I explore feminist forgetting/memory losses further later in the chapter when focusing on the Library’s socio-materialities.

nevertheless, interesting to note that it seems convenient in the sense of aligning with the preferred (inclusive) contemporary organisational narrative.

However, these early moments of exclusion do not reflect the simple, divisive narratives often perpetuated in post-feminist, and even some feminist, stories of the movement (e.g., Faludi, 2010). As some early 80s archives show, the decision was part of an open, public conversation with the movement⁹⁹, with a survey on the idea of the Library becoming women-only¹⁰⁰ published in its newsletter. This may not appear too far from today's feminist exchanges in a digital world, yet it seems to me a more inviting method: openly welcoming different opinions, within the relative safety of a movement publication – arguably, safer than the online debates prevalent today. Thus, again, who makes the Library and its knowledges extends beyond the space and into the wider movement, although with sometimes disorienting results, especially when observed today, restricted by contemporary feminism's inclusion definitions and tools.

Further, archival documents from the early 1990s show other attempts at inclusion¹⁰¹. These included renewed efforts to make the space more inclusive to previously underrepresented groups, particularly lesbians, as evidenced in the archives through numerous mentions in lesbian presses. These described the space, for example, as 'the most lesbian-friendly library in the country' (The Pink Paper, 1991: no pagination). While this may not meet the present-day test of a queer or an inclusive feminist space, it shows that queer stories can be found in the archive, even in such 'haunting' moments. This does not excuse the other exclusions

⁹⁹ As was common practice at the time; see e.g., Mitchell & McKinney (2019); Wonders (2020).

¹⁰⁰ According to McNeill (1983), however, the Library showed a bias towards keeping its doors open in the survey wording.

¹⁰¹ A renewed focus was being placed on the implementation of the new Equal Opportunities policy around this time, which could be argued to be one of the key factors behind these attempts.

happening at the time, but it highlights the importance of historical context and feminist archives in queer history, while challenging over-simplified stories of feminism(s) (I explore this complexity further in the discussion).

Although the Library has expanded its inclusion focus substantially since, this is very much ongoing work, as Eva's story already highlighted. Recent attempts at queering the Library include an effort to (re)open these conversations to the public. One recent example was a Monica Sjöö exhibition¹⁰², including material on Greenham Common – another, historic exclusive feminist space – discussed from a queer perspective. This discussion facilitated a challenging and disorientation of the story of Greenham, both as a queer and a feminist space. Although it is often seen as a lesbian and women-only space, we explored its hidden bisexual and more queerly gendered stories. These discussions are necessarily ongoing, as they can spark more questions than answers. After the discussion, I reflected on how good it would have been to hear some of these queer(ed) Greenham stories directly from women who were there.

Therefore, the Library remains a space of 'hauntings' today, as these story highlights. These 'hauntings', as troubling as they may be, however, can also be sources of queering, sparking re-orientations, like in the queer(ing) discussions of Greenham, which help unearth queer stories in these disorienting pasts and facilitate thinking about how they can interact with the queer potentialities and reality today.

Nevertheless, as a queer subject of my research, trying to work reflexively on the Library, I had to admit the often-uncomfortable effects of these stories and materialities. Knowing the active queer community of the Library today made the 'haunting' archival tensions a

¹⁰² In collaboration with Beaconsfield Gallery; for more details see: <https://beaconsfield.ltd.uk/reading-group-2-queer-activism/>.

mainstay of this research. Yet, their educational impact on my reflexive journey was substantial – spotlighting the intergenerational tensions, which I had missed before, but also prompting redefinitions of the meaning of feminist space. The potential of these ‘hauntings’ made them necessary parts of building an understanding of the feminist space and its queering potentialities – as part of the wider processes of re-reading feminist histories for the present and their potential for co-creating different feminist futures (see also e.g., Samer, 2014). Some of the tensions are perhaps necessarily only uncovered, with attempts at reconciliation potentially seen as an overinterpretation, from a perspective that does not sit comfortably in the historical context, particularly for the living communities that deal with the results of these tensions today, like the stories of Eva and Gloria highlighted¹⁰³. As such, these stories and experiences helped build a picture of the Library as an epistemic space, re-orienting it as a complex space of ongoing queering and struggles for recognition, rather than simply an already queer(ed) space.

Before closing the section, I offer another example of the ‘haunting’ materialities of the Library: its Styrofoam gravestones (Figure 7). They help reiterate the symbolic significance of such disorientations for queer, feminist history, and forgetting. Although they are possibly the most talked about objects at the Library, they are also symbolic of feminist forgetting and erasure of uncomfortable histories. Visible through materialities, they continuously hide the stories behind them.

¹⁰³ See e.g., Tompkins (2019) for a more dedicated exploration of the ongoing tensions.

Figure 7



The gravestones as displayed in the (previous) Library's office, 2017 – Credit: Catherine Grant

Although the gravestones were originally created for an exhibition commemorating lost lesbian spaces, the curators also challenged their historical exclusions from queer perspectives¹⁰⁴ and the related tensions of this process. Three gravestones from the London exhibition were donated to the Library. Yet, as their changing and sometimes disorienting positionality in the space shows, they do not always sit comfortably in it, highlighting through their (arguably somewhat problematic) queer story, which tries to work with sometimes exclusionary lesbian pasts. Thus, again, the 'haunted' objects can appear as a source of both 'haunting' and queering of feminist spaces, organisations, and histories – and the Library, a continuing work in progress in this process.

¹⁰⁴ The gravestones were produced for the London version of the Killjoy's Kastle: A Lesbian Feminist Haunted House (originally Toronto), a Halloween 'haunted house' style exhibition (see Mitchell & McKinney (2019), Cvetkovich (2019), and Tompkins (2019) for a more in-depth exploration of the exhibitions, their queer stories and their rich tensions).

In the Library's former home, the gravestones tended to be rather informally exhibited, usually in the office (Figure 7); not hidden, yet not on full display. At the time, the poster with their origin story (Figure 8), highlighting their queer potentialities, was hidden behind boxes in the sorting room, finally dusted off during the preparations for the Library's relocation.

Figure 8



The Killjoy's Kastle's exhibition poster & origin story, hidden in the (old) Library sorting room, 17/10/19

Perhaps this at least partially explains their (partial) hiding in the Library. Additionally, one of the stones is more symbolic of this than the others – the one assumed most problematic, symbolic of lesbian separatism – often hidden behind the others (Figure 9). Despite this partial forgetting or hiding, they tend to be either on display at the Library or in exhibitions, serving as reminders of both lost feminist spaces, as well as their historically often-problematic nature (and the queering of these histories). Further, in the new Library they are even more visible in the main library space, alongside the collections (Figure 9).

Figure 9



The gravestones exhibited at the new Feminist Library in Peckham, 11/09/21 – Credit: Lisa Beck

Notably, Grant (2019: 190) suggested another explanation for their (somewhat) hidden nature:

[some of the] gravestones were nowhere in sight, presumably hidden beneath the piles of boxes waiting to be moved (...) lying dormant, not quite lost but barely remembered.

Due to my familiarity with the Library, I can argue against this 'barely remembered' interpretation. While it is possible that, during the time of the visit, the gravestones were not in their usual display place, as the Library was being prepared for relocation, in most of my photographic archive of the period, they were to be found visibly positioned somewhere in

the Library (Figure 10) or featured in exhibitions, which is where they were most likely at the time of Grant's visit if they were not visible, rather than 'hidden beneath piles of boxes'.

Thus, although indeed symbolic of the complex nature of feminist histories in other ways, hardly forgotten, they continue their journey with the Library – perhaps in an act of defiance against the hegemonic forces seeking to erase these stories (and the Library, considering the context of the move). It is, nevertheless, interesting to note Grant's point as it highlights the hidden nature of feminist history also noted before – including sometimes in the feminist archive (although more often elsewhere).

Figure 10



The gravestones as displayed in the (old) Library ahead of the move to Peckham, 02/10/19 –
Credit: Panama Diaz

Thus, the combination of intergenerational and intersectional conversations, and archival and other material encounters, is key here, highlighting multiple perspectives (collective and individual), histories, and reflections, past, present, and future-focused on the Library. These invite important organisational and historical disorientations challenging taken-for-granted stories of the Library. A number of these are 'haunting', symbolising the silences and forgetting still apparent in feminist history and space, and reminding us of their continuous precarity. But they are also often sources of queering; although the gravestones were originally produced as both a celebration and a queer critique of lesbian feminist spaces and

histories, their somewhat hidden history queers them again in the Library. Their story is symbolic, showing just how intertwined the processes of feminist preservation, forgetting, haunting and queering can be.

The Library story, therefore, also highlights that time and space are closely intertwined. Histories help us queer our definition and vision of feminist space, while also disorienting the notion of queering through time. The Library emerges as a space of agentic recognition, where definitions of feminist space representation and inclusion change over time, including through processes of ‘haunting’ and queering, which continuously challenge limits of representation, memory, and history. I discuss the intertwined nature of feminist space-time further towards the end of the chapter while moving to the Library as a political space next.

The Library as a political space

The second part of the chapter focuses on political activism in and through the Library. The section starts with an exploration of embodied, street activism and other engagements by the Library community, before moving on to some of the wider political/activist connections with the feminist movement(s), symbolic and material. The section ends with some reflections on decolonising feminist space, inspired by the presence of an Indian feminist space within the Library. While aspects of some of these – such as recognition and movement interconnections – have already been highlighted above (and they weave and connect throughout the analysis), the section below shows how different types of political engagements are key to the creation of the experience and stories of the Library, and feminism more broadly.

‘Bodies in protest’: The Library as a space of embodied politics

The notion of embodied, street activism in/with the Library was key to some of my participants' stories and the organisation's materialities featured in those. Starting with

perhaps the most obvious example, the protest as part of the Save the Feminist Library campaign¹⁰⁵, this section explores the importance of street activism in the story, struggle, and recognition of the Library.

The Library's anti-eviction demonstration, held in early 2016 outside Southwark Council's offices, is perhaps the most self-evident example of this. It is a crucial, defining moment in the organisation's story, as a turning point in its spatial struggle through an effective act of political protest. The action also provoked strong emotions, highlighting the affective connections people can have to the organisation. Caroline Smith (Caro), former fundraiser and Writer in Residence at the Library, particularly highlighted the importance of this moment in her story: 'I just had the feeling that we were doing something really incredible, actually'. The centrality of the Library as a space of street activism in Caro's story challenged my preconception of it as primarily a space of feminist episteme and community, reminding me of the '(archiving) and activism' in its slogan.

Caro then went on to describe how the protest was arranged as an expression of creative, epistemic, and material activism, symbolically using feminist books. Caro took on the role of a 'conductor', creating a street activist art 'sound piece, where different voices could [simultaneously] read out different texts', producing a feeling of 'real gravitas', as she described. She further reflected:

it worked (...) really well. And I remember this beautiful eclectic sound piece, where I remember one woman was reading out Jane Austen, and another woman was reading out some poem, and it felt very profound, actually. And then I remember Gail

¹⁰⁵ See: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/save-the-feminist-library-campaign-protest-and-messages-of-support/> for more details.

and you coming out of the Council offices with the petition, and it felt maybe it turned it from a protest into a kind of ritual, so it became more mythic.

The Library's histories and collections were used as protest props accompanying the action of handing in the campaign petition, and symbolising the political nature and importance of feminist literature, history, and knowledge. The political-epistemic-affective connections were further highlighted through the language she used, including words such as 'ritual' and 'mythic'.

However, it was not just the protests that showcased the Library's political nature. Also bringing together feminist history, knowledge, and materialities onto the streets were, for example, the Bardo walks¹⁰⁶. Although described as walks, rather than demonstrations, they moved through the streets of London, bringing the Library's artifacts out into the public realm and consciousness. By bringing feminist stories, archival, and other objects (see Figure 11) of the Library onto the streets, this act highlighted their importance, while also blurring the line between public and 'private'¹⁰⁷ (feminist) spaces.

¹⁰⁶ Caroline Smith devised Bardo, an audio walk across London's west end commissioned by Camden Peoples Theatre for the feminist festival and funded by the Arts Council. It involved working with many volunteers at the Library. The walk ran for a year. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD4a8aUIWCs&feature=youtu.be> for more details.

¹⁰⁷ Although the Library is not a 'private' space per se, this theme connects back to the literature on libraries and libraries as 'in-between' spaces and the literature on gender and private versus public space (e.g., Ilett, 2003).

Figure 11

Bardo walk, screenshot, 18/02/22¹⁰⁸

While the collections might be described as political in and of themselves – as highlighted in Chapters One and Two – the act of bringing some of them and the more everyday feminist materialities onto the streets (especially in the act of protest) exposes the political nature of the space in another sense. Through the act of transgressing the boundaries between private and public space, these materialities are symbolic of the political nature of the organisation more broadly – including its precarity and struggles, but also feminist recognition and how feminist space facilitates it. The political nature of the space becomes more evident as it spills into the public domain, challenging and queering the boundaries of public and private space, while also highlighting the continuing importance of feminist space. More about the links to the wider feminist movement(s) and its transgressing activities next.

Movement with/in the movement¹⁰⁹: Travelling with and curating feminist activism

¹⁰⁸ Date of screenshot, rather than original footage (created by Caroline Smith and Eva Megias). For the original, see the link above.

¹⁰⁹ The subtitle was inspired by a roundtable I helped organise at the SHARP2021 conference (<https://www.sharpweb.org/main/conferences/>), entitled 'Feminist Publications in Movement: Developing a Model for a Feminist Publishing Circuit'.

The Library is also symbolic not just of its own political struggles, but of the feminist movements more broadly, locally and across borders. The stories told by my participants and through the archives also connect the Library to these wider political movement struggles, as well as challenging the boundaries of the Library itself. First, I will explore some examples of the inspiration taken from the wider feminist movement for some of the Library's campaigning. Secondly, I will reflect on how the Library travels, alongside and with the wider movement, and is a destination of travel, with some decolonising potentialities of such boundary transgressions. As such, the Library moves, grows, and develops, alongside and with the movement, both symbolically and literally.

Firstly, Shirley, a former member of the Library's design team¹¹⁰, highlighted the connections between the wider movement and inspiration for Library actions. She talked, for example, about the dress co-created with a designer friend for the purpose of raising money for the Library's relocation. The dress was inspired directly by one of the Library banners (Figure 12)¹¹¹, and more symbolically, by feminist stories of protest across borders, as she explained in our conversation:

I was really inspired by Katharine Hamnett and Geri Halliwell and (...) their bodies in protest (...) [and activists protesting] for women's rights with the Palestinian flag, and the police would take the flags out of their hands and stop them protesting. So, then they decided to make dresses out of the flags.

¹¹⁰ See more at: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/help-the-feminist-library-build-its-new-home-crowdfunding-campaign/>.

¹¹¹ It is also worth highlighting here that the FL banner (or 'flag') was often taken onto the streets of London for demonstrations.

Figure 12



The Feminist Library banner which inspired the parliament dress, 16/10/19

Shirley thus links the materialities of the Library to those of the feminist movements internationally, placing the Library within the wider political symbolism and aesthetics of these movements. While the meaning of this might seem largely symbolic, Shirley further highlighted how the dress attracted a lot of attention when it was worn in the Houses of Parliament.

Other interview stories, like that of 'Edda', curatorial team worker/volunteer, similarly presented the Library as a travelling, somewhat nomadic activist space, where movement happens alongside and inspired by feminist activism elsewhere. Edda also noted the potential dangers of activism, particularly through stories other of the Greenham Common peace camp. These stories highlighted the political connections between feminist materialities (Figure 13), nomadism, and precarity, as the Greenham activists had to always be ready to move at a moment's notice, in anticipation of police raids, making the mobility essential. Linking this to

the Library, Edda said: ‘So, I like that kind of spirit at the Library as well, that we are on the road a lot and have to think about that kind of mobility’. Although the mobility may be more symbolic for the Library, it is nevertheless also linked to other forms of precarity, thinking back to the Library’s spatial struggles.

Figure 13



Mobile kitchen at the Greenham Common peace camp, c. 1983-1992¹¹² - Credit: Astra Blaug¹¹³

Edda also recalled how a team trip to the former site of the Greenham Common camp inspired conversations about the Mobile Library (Figure 15)¹¹⁴ and its various exhibitions

¹¹² N.d. Dated roughly based on the available dates in the artist’s photo archive.

¹¹³ Astra Blaug’s collections have been donated to the Feminist Library by Astra’s family. They are now largely based at the Bishopsgate Institute, Special Collections, as part of the Library’s archival collections, although some of the materials, including Astra’s sculptures are part of the collections at the Library. Find out more: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/collections/blaug-astra>.

¹¹⁴ You can find out more about it here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/mobile-feminist-library-van-interview-with-kristin-luke/>.

(including materials found at the camp site, such as the fence wire¹¹⁵). Edda's story of the Library thus also becomes a story of a nomadic subject (following Braidotti, 1994; Boer, 1996) in a nomadic, activist space, in its many different guises, also including a mobile bookcase taken to protests and exhibits, as well as countless suitcases used for the purposes of moving materials from the Library to bookstalls and elsewhere (Figure 14).

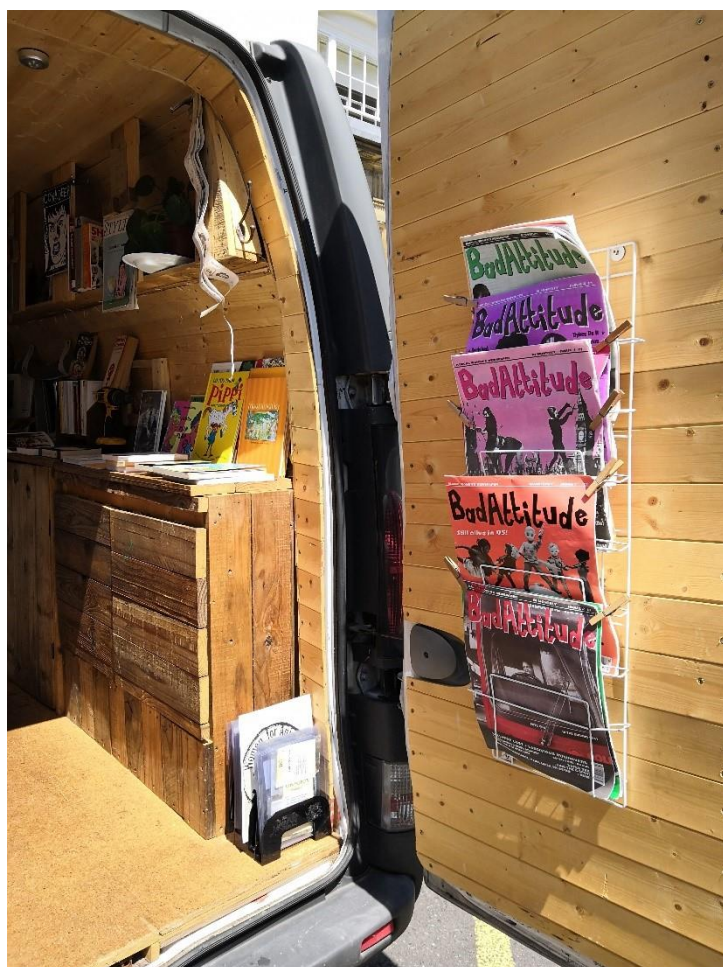
Figure 14



Some of the Library's 'travelling' objects, 07/12/19

¹¹⁵ While it is up to interpretation whether the relatively recently retrieved wire was actually from the time of the camp, the object remains highly affective in nature, evoking memories and stories of the time, as well as questions of what art is and what is an archive.

Figure 15



The Mobile Feminist Library van at the Open University, 27/06/19

Edda's stories further linked the nomadism to other objects in the Library, or what she dubbed the archival 'rubbish'. Edda showed a great level of care for these objects, safeguarding some in her own space, leading to the creation of an unofficial or semi-official archive beyond the Library space. The meta-archive story is also reflected in other interviews, highlighting the Library is not just nomadic and plural, not linked exclusively to one specific site, and expanding in unusual directions, for example, in people's apartments and closets¹¹⁶. These spaces could be considered another type of 'in-between' space in the

¹¹⁶ In a more official sense, parts of the Library collections are located at the Bishopsgate Institute, as noted before, but it also links back to Eva's ancestral story, highlighting the need

Library,¹¹⁷ alongside migrant community spaces like the Spanish Book Club (which I will consider further in the next chapter).

Finally, I want to add a brief reflection on the story of the Sister Library (SL) here. It was in residency at the Feminist Library in 2021-2022, adding an interesting and important dimension to these reflections on the political, nomadic nature of the space – from a decolonial feminist perspective. While imprinting itself into the Feminist Library – a UK feminist space – during the residency, the SL – an Indian feminist space – raised important questions about precarity, feminist movements (both in the literal and figurative sense) and feminist work, as well as the conditions of possibility of feminist space from a decolonial/decolonising perspective.

Another example of how feminist libraries can be nomadic, the SL moved across India and beyond before reaching the FL, with the aim of collecting women's stories from diverse and marginalised communities. As it did not have a space of its own, at least initially¹¹⁸, and considering its precarity, it provided an example of a more nomadic feminist space than the FL and an important source of disorientation for my developing analytical framework.

Through its interventions, it further connected some of my earlier methodological reflections challenging my assumptions of the possibility of feminist space, as somewhat more taken-for-granted from a European perspective (see also e.g., Kawthar and Jaha, 2020). These interventions included a talk, a range of materials (including ones made during the residency), and a discussion.

for more ancestral archives to be brought into the Library collections. I also have some boxes stored in one of my closets.

¹¹⁷ Following Foucault (1986); this is also a term that Eva uses, following Caro's formulation for the concept of the Bardo walks, discussed earlier. The meaning of Bardo, from Tibetan, signifies transition. You can read more about the Bardo concept here:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/feminist-library-5-westminster-bridge-rd-london-se1-7xw/bardo-an-experiential-audio-walk/1187005151322075/>.

¹¹⁸ Admittedly, a permanent version of the Sister Library now resides in Dhaka.

First, the juxtaposition of objects from both libraries (Figures 16-17) enriched my reflections on the political nature of feminist materialities, knowledges, and space. The colourful SL decorations on the walls and ceiling of the Library hall changed the atmosphere and aesthetics of the space, while also disorienting the assumed primacy of the Library (perhaps in an act of decolonising the Western feminist space), as if claiming it for the SL, albeit temporarily. Secondly, the process of assembling an SL zine during the visit raised important questions around women's work – also its theme - both theoretically and practically, by inviting us to work on it collectively while we moved from passive event participants to active participants and workers. Finally, browsing various materials (Figure 17) from both libraries while engaging in conversations raised further questions about women's work and access to space – public space more generally, not just knowledge spaces. One of the zines I left with – a powerful material reminder of the meeting and the reflections it provoked - explored stories of Indian women and their difficulties claiming or even occupying spaces outside the home, presenting further realities challenging my preconceived notions of feminist space. The experience, therefore, provided crucial sources of disorientation and queering of my image of the Library and its materialities from a decolonial perspective (or perspectives, through the stories of women in the zines).

Figure 16



The Sister Library at the Feminist Library – materials from both Libraries, 12/01/22

Figure 17



The Sister Library posters and zines at the FL, 12/01/22

The Library space is therefore political through symbolic and actual activism. Its street actions transgress boundaries between public and private space, highlighting the continuing importance and precarity of feminist space and history. Its more symbolic and nomadic activism, through the Mobile Library and other objects, connects the Library to the wider feminist movement. The Library's movements also highlight, again, the interconnected nature of feminist space and time, as stories of past and present movements intertwine. Travelling in often unexpected ways, symbolically, through inspiration, and more literally, through everyday objects and archives, the Library also becomes a meta-archive. The materialities of the Library are also symbolic of feminist precarities elsewhere, as the story of the SL shows, highlighting the differences across feminist geographies struggles. The potential for further archival growth and development in terms of representation is also inspired by some of the more disorienting reflections.

The next section explores further reflection and disorientations transpiring from some of the Library's other materialities.

The Library as a socio-material space

Although there are a lot of interconnections between the epistemic, political, and material aspects of the Library already mentioned above, the last part of the chapter focuses on the socio-material space aspect more specifically. Starting with some everyday and unique materialities as symbolic of spatial struggle and recognition, it then considers the changing nature of the Library's materialities today, in the context of the development of digitisation technologies and the (post)pandemic.

Of feminist dragons and 'rubbish' – symbolism of struggle and recognition

In this section, I further consider the complex symbolism of the Library by exploring the intertwined stories of mythical and more everyday materialities. Firstly, some of the unique,

‘mythical’ materialities and the importance of physically experiencing them, highlight the continuing relevance of feminist space for herstory. Further, I highlight how seemingly mundane objects can also provoke deeply meaningful feminist stories and connections, through their links to the Library struggles, personal histories, as well as world-making potential. Thus, the section focuses on the importance of such everyday materialities and some of the more ‘precious’ objects in the Library experience, and their intertwined symbolism of struggle and recognition, particularly as encompassed in all its complexity through the dragon symbol.

Starting with the importance of experiencing the physical and unique materialities of the Library, Caro, for example, highlighted how this strongly affects the experience of feminist history. She reflected on the potential of this experience to elicit strong emotional reactions and ‘almost overwhelming’ connections with feminist herstories:

You know, you’d walk [among] the bookshelves and you’d see the first edition, nineteenth-century poetry books next to all these zines that were only in the Library. You could just spend a whole day with just looking at two or three books. It’s almost overwhelming, actually. (...) There’s something about the weight of herstory and feeling the weight of it.

Figure 18



Tactility of the Library space – posters made from copies of periodical covers, in the old periodicals room, 17/03/18

Similarly, Alice, administrator, and finance coordinator, recalled building a connection with the Library, prior to getting involved, through discovering a particularly meaningful book on a stall. Thus, the story of the Library’s materialities is also about physically experiencing the importance of feminist histories and knowledge. The epistemic nature becomes evident yet again, alongside the socio-material, affective connection. Although one could argue that the collections could usefully be moved online – perhaps making access easier (for some) – to my participants, this would mean the loss of important, tactile, affective connections with the Library’s material histories and knowledge.

Further, the symbolism of the ‘mythical’ nature of feminist history and space, and their struggles, is perhaps best encompassed in the dragon logo. While I have already explored some of its more historical aspects in Chapter One, below I focus on its more recent guises and connections to the Library story, particularly its continuing struggle against precarity and for recognition.

As one of the designers of the Library dragon symbols, Eva also highlighted this complex symbolism through the various and changing forms of the dragon particularly well. Although the dragon logo was originally designed to symbolise a break from the patriarchy, with the creature pictured relaxing with a book (as noted in Chapter One), Eva (aka pops_comixs) redesigned it¹¹⁹ during the move to reflect ‘collective anger’ over gentrification – one of the reasons for the Library’s relocation – and the instability of this time in the Library’s trajectory (Figure 20), with ‘books, everything was floating in the sky’, as they phrased it.

Figure 19



The Feminist Library move campaign flyer – dragon design by pops_comixs, 10/18 – Credit: Eva Megias

I found Eva’s interpretation somewhat surprising, as my impression was that, by that time the collective was more excited than angry about the move (to the bigger, more sustainable premises). However, it was, undeniably, in reflection of the collective mood of the preceding

¹¹⁹ Admittedly, in this iteration, it was not a logo, as Eva also highlighted.

‘Save the Feminist Library’ campaign against eviction¹²⁰, which, evidently, lingered a bit more than I remembered.

Although following the move, the dragon ‘returned’ to a resting position, redesigned by Anna Lincoln (Figure 21), the process was not without its challenges. The design team behind the new dragon initially thought the symbol was too complex to work well as a logo. Having met with clear resistance from the Library collective, they decided to keep it after some discussion. Importantly, through the process, it became clear that the dragon’s story and symbolism were initially lost on the design team. Once it became clear, they decided that it should ‘obviously’ be kept, as Shirley said. Thus, the dragon is not just a symbol of the fight against the patriarchy and the Library as a space of precarity and struggle for recognition, but also of the importance of feminist history and knowledge, as well as their losses and silences – again, even at times occurring within a feminist space working to preserve these.

Figure 20



The current dragon logo, 11/10/19 – Credit: Anna Lincoln

This complexity was further highlighted through another exploration of Greenham Common history, this time through a photo album on the peace camp donated to the Library (Figure 22). The exploration exposed a much longer tradition of dragons as feminist symbols. While

¹²⁰ The 2016 dragon version of the dragon (also introduced in Chapter One) pictured it in a battle-ready stance.

commonly embraced and celebrated in feminism at the time, according to the donor, it has become seemingly forgotten since, as the Library story shows.

Figure 21



The FL move and Greenham Common dragons, 19/11/18¹²¹

Despite these memory issues, the dragon remains highly present in the organisational imagery. Eva reminded me of other versions of it designed for the Library, like the Feminist Graphic Arts one (Figure 23) or the series of designs made by Korean feminists (e.g., Figure 24). The latter were produced as a gift to the Library – without any control or prior knowledge of its collective. Thus, the symbolic materialities of the Library become, again, intertwined in complex stories of feminist history and forgetting – but also of recognition and community solidarity.

¹²¹ Original photos donated by Liz Jellinek.

Figure 22



Feminist Graphic Arts dragon designed by Eva Megias, 02/10/19 – Credit: Panama Diaz

Figure 23



One of the Korean dragon logo designs, c. 02/19 – Credit: KORADFEM

Alongside the dragons and other unique materialities of the Library, its more everyday objects featured just as strongly in some of the interviews. Indeed, their apparent significance was one of the most surprising moments of my research.

For Laura (a former volunteer), for example, they were central to the experience of the space, combining the impression of mess and ‘chaos’ in the (old) space with its important memory connections, or memory anchors as Shortt and Izak (2021) described these. Items like the Library noticeboard (Figure 25) or the pig donation box (Figure 26) – also featured in Caro’s story – were rich sources of anecdotes, which continued to amuse years later. Through such material-affective moments, these stories also highlighted the formative importance of such objects, as they became sources of lasting inspiration for developing creative practice.

Figure 24



The noticeboard at the old Library, 21/12/18

Figure 25



The Feminist Library pig donations box (in transition to the new space), 12/01/22

Edda's exploration of the Library's 'rubbish' similarly represented such everyday objects and how they could become significant in other ways. These included old labels, folders, and boxes – objects that Edda often saved from being discarded (thus 'rubbish') by taking them home, reflecting both the lack of space at the Library, as well as deep consideration for these otherwise unwanted (by others) materials. Edda likened the process to archaeological excavation or cleaning:

I call it digging, (...) [or] is it scavenging, almost? (...) diving into these piles of papers (...) I'm responsible for the rubbish and all the bins (...) Side products (...) left behind...

Again, the Library's materialities become symbolic of the precious and precarious nature of feminist histories and knowledge. Somewhat contradictorily, while some more unique materialities evoked stories of precarity, other, often more mundane objects, became symbolic of the most lasting affective-material connections to the space. Edda's story was further enlightening here, as it raised pertinent questions of what is considered 'worthy' of being archived and what is not.

Edda's preservation efforts are further evidenced in the Library's curatorial work, where some of the everyday objects often become exhibition materials, bringing key questions of feminist archiving to a wider public. For example, Figure 27 shows various old display and cataloguing units placed alongside more traditionally recognised collection items, such as books and posters, in an exhibition at the Showroom gallery. Therefore, the Library's curatorial work helps challenge not just the organisation's precarity by increasing its visibility, but also by extending important questions around recognition beyond the immediate space of the Library.

Figure 26



The Feminist Library residency at the Showroom Gallery, 19/07/18

To add to the complexity, the physical Library is one deeply reflective of these contradictions. For Caro, for instance, the (old) space was both ‘amazing’ and ‘unique’, while also visibly precarious, with the ‘wallpaper in the loos sort of peeling off’. Other participants also highlighted these contradictions, while perhaps leaning more towards emphasising the precarious aspects. Some even described the space as a ‘bit of a dumping ground’ (Laura) or ‘dark’ and in need of repair (Lisa). These impressions resonated with me, at both extremes. Again, on the one hand, the precarious Library space is symbolic of its positionality within the larger context of austerity and patriarchy, and on the other, its continuity symbolises the ongoing importance of feminist history and materialities of representation, thus giving the space the impression of being amazing, even in a visible state of disrepair. Eva highlighted another important aspect of the Library’s ‘ruins’, reflecting on their potential for facilitating difficult conversations (which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter) and even for alternative world-making, linking them also to squatting spaces and movement.

The old space of the Library was particularly symbolic of these contradictions: at once seemingly irreplaceable and passionately defended space of history and recognition, yet too precarious to be considered viable as a library. This symbolism was perhaps epitomised in the image of the ‘Women are Revolting’ poster hanging (transgressively and symbolically) on a wall marked by a history of dampness for some years before the relocation (Figure 28). As I reflected on my own deep connection to the space, I realised that these affective epistemic, socio-material, political connections to the (old) Library are also linked with my positionality: my involvement in the collective during the anti-eviction campaign and the research into the longer history of crises. This involvement likely compounded the affective meaning of the space as something precious and in need of protection, despite and because of its struggles. Therefore, the Library’s unique materialities can, again, be linked to the (personal) stories of spatial precarity and struggle for recognition.

Figure 27



'Women are Revolting' poster symbolically hung at the old FL, 02/10/19 – Credit: Panama Diaz

Although the new space is an improvement, its relative lack of visibility continued to be highlighted by some of my participants. Thus, while the new space is in many ways a much 'deserved' space, as Gloria describes it, where the organisation finally 'arrives' after a decades-long struggle against precarity, one that is larger and more secure than before, with a long-term lease, it also retains elements of precarity, both in its new location (further from central London, in the backstreets of Peckham) and the wider context of gentrification and austerity connected with the relocation¹²². It is thus a space of recognition, which allows for the Library's growth, improved stability, and organisation¹²³, but also of continued precarity.

As part of the new space design team¹²⁴, Shirley particularly highlighted the recognition aspects of the new space. The feminist design team remakes it into a feminist space¹²⁵, not just in its content, but also in its purpose-built form¹²⁶, for and with the feminist community.

¹²² The local community's precarity also adds to this complexity. I will explore this in more detail in the next chapter.

¹²³ The process of the move has forced a much-needed process of re-organisation at the Library, both in terms of its collections, as well as work.

¹²⁴ You can read more about the team, for example, here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/fl-newsletter-no.-30-autumn-2018-181018.pdf>.

¹²⁵ It was originally designed as a school hall and later repurposed as a community hall.

¹²⁶ You can see the new space designs here: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/the-feminist-library-has-the-keys-to-its-new-home-press-release-11th-nov-2019/>.

The community is centred in the space through this feminist design approach. Thus, the new Library space becomes an embodiment of feminist principles in its physical space; a space of feminist recognition, at multiple levels (although not without challenges, as highlighted above).

Finally, the precarity of the Library is also visible in its archival materialities, from countless local and international letters of support to abundant mentions of the funding/spatial crises found. It was still notable just how present these materials were, with around twenty dedicated folders, out of a total of about 200, and with relevant content found elsewhere.

By exploring the story of the Library through these materialities, it becomes clear that the history of the precarity and spatial struggle of the Library is intimately connected with its stories of recognition. Further, the struggle for recognition is far from straightforward, especially as it is both internal and external. The Library team shows signs of forgetting its own stories, while also working to address this problem more broadly. The materialities of the Library thus paint a complex picture of precarity and recognition being intertwined with both the everyday and the unique objects. This further links to questions of what is considered important and ‘worthy’ of being archived, but also the affective nature of the feminist archive.

The changing nature of feminist materialities is further explored below, in the context of digital and pandemic shifts.

Of feminist fiche – shifting feminist materialities and space-time in the (pre)digital era

As already highlighted, the boundaries of the Library space are not easy to define. Digital materialities add to this complexity. Prior to conducting the research, I had strongly associated the Library with its physical space, but my participants provided different perspectives, challenging my assumptions. Apart from the multitude of physical spaces of the

Library ‘discovered’ in the research, and highlighted above, digital sites also surfaced. In the final section of this chapter, I focus on the digital and hybrid nature of the Library, its historical nature, and the continuing importance of the physical site.

First, as a relatively recent member of the collective, Alice, for example, highlighted the Library’s Instagram as a first point of contact and connection, while also noting a qualitative difference between it and the physical Library and its community. Eva further highlighted the increasing role of the virtual Library, talking about the growing online presence more generally (and long before the pandemic):

this space, the Internet one, I saw that developing from the very beginning, really, from having a website, to later on being in social media, in a very successful way, I will say, today, we have an established audience or followers.

It was helpful to have this perspective, as it pointed to a lengthy digital/hybrid presence that I did not fully recognise before. Further, the archives presented an even more disorienting picture. As early as the 1980s, mentions can be found of multiple collaborations around technologies that enabled, for example, a digitised catalogue, making feminist knowledge more accessible, or at least that was the idea. Some technologies were more successful in this than others. The digitised catalogue was a debated issue at the time for various reasons, including the amount of preparatory knowledge required for its operation. Meanwhile, other similar technologies became obsolete or semi-obsolete, making it difficult to retrieve the information they contained. Microfiche catalogues, VHS tapes, cassettes, or film slides are all examples of archival technologies containing potentially useful but hard-to-access information in and on the Library, such as films and photos¹²⁷. Thus, losses of feminist

¹²⁷ Although, they are not necessarily all irretrievable; see for example, for digitised newsletters of the Library originally recorded on cassettes:

information and knowledge can also be linked with, counterintuitively perhaps, preservation technologies, which can become obsolescent over time.

Nevertheless, as the examples above show, the Library has been an already-hybrid space (another type of in-between space) for at least forty years. While technologies of preservation may have time-defining qualities, so do communities and spaces. When talking about the different Library communities, like the Spanish Book Club, Eva also redefined their experience of the Library space-time – speaking of ‘before and after’ the club (more about these communities in the next chapter). Sarah (former administrator), similarly, talked about the time-defining qualities of the Library’s move as being ‘in limbo’ when waiting to find the new space. My experience was similar, unsurprising perhaps, considering that I joined during the Save the Library campaign. Again, the Library can produce disorienting effects in relation to time, as well as space.

This experience was never more disturbed than during the pandemic. After periods of no access at all, as Lisa highlighted in our conversation, the experience was tainted by mask-wearing. The experience of enjoying ‘getting lost’ (or serendipity, which also strongly resonated with me) in the collections/space becomes blurred by the discomfort of wearing a mask, which can also block some other important aspects of the Library experience, such as being able to smell the books.

The physical presence of the Library and its collections strongly affect the experiences of my participants in various ways, making a case for the continuing need for the physical space (or at least a hybrid, as the digital space also has important effects and increasingly so). Thus, the line between the digital and physical Library is both shifting and blurred, perhaps making it

https://www.mixcloud.com/Feminist_Library/feminist-library-newsletters-1-2-winterspring-1986/.

an already-hybrid organisation, considering how the timeline of this process is extended through the research. The experience of being in the Library can also be time-defining, especially disorienting during the pandemic. Further, digital materialities of the archive and their fragility problematise the often-assumed connection between digitisation and progress, as they show how the former can also be linked to (often unrecognised) losses or silences in the archives. Thus, the Library as a digital-material space disorients (and queers) both expectations and experience of feminist space-time, meaning it cannot be simply defined. In the next chapter, I will explore the themes of hybridity and blurred boundaries further, and more specifically as related to feminist work and community.

Summary

The chapter focused on the epistemic, political, and socio-material aspects of the Library. The epistemic aspects explored are those of recognition, agency, intergenerational connections, and conversations – including some ‘haunting’ and disorienting moments (and materialities) found within them, also connected to the queering of the Library and its complex, sometimes contradictory histories and stories told about them. The political aspects explored in the chapter focus on embodied, activist experiences of the space and the links to its political nature and wider feminist movements that these highlight, blurring lines around the Library as a standalone space. The socio-materialities of the space, in turn, highlight the affective and symbolic importance of everyday, as well as the more unique materialities, as symbols of precarity and struggle for recognition; and the changing nature of the Library’s materialities and temporalities, and their interconnectedness. Overall, the key conceptual themes emerging throughout this part of the analysis are those of precarity, struggle, recognition, queering, haunting, and hybridity – and these will be explored further in the next chapter, focusing on the Library as a space of feminist community and work, as well as in the discussion.

Chapter Six

The Library as a space of feminist community and work

This chapter focuses on community and workspace aspects of the Library. In terms of communities, the Library is presented here as a space of solidarity, belonging, and refuge from patriarchal forces. The communities are also key to the conditions of possibility of the space, as they unite around and sustain the organisation, especially during times of spatial crises. At the same time, the space of belonging is also problematised from the perspective of the Library's 'in-between' communities, which challenge a straightforward narrative of feminist space, while creating their own spaces of belonging within it. This challenge also connects the theme of community to that of work within feminist space, as issues of conflict, tension, precarity, and agency within the space of feminist work open that section of the chapter. This is followed by a subsection on other contradictions of working in a feminist space, particularly operating against yet within hierarchies and patriarchal, capitalist frameworks. The final subsection explores the ongoing hybridisation of the feminist space of work and community, connecting the two core themes of the chapter.

There are common themes recurring throughout the analyses, such as those of recognition, haunting, queering, and hybridity, that I return to here, while new ones also emerge in this chapter, such as the ethics of feminist work in the era of digitisation. Further, the recurring theme of political space emerges again through important community and workplace conversations, which are often complex and seemingly contradictory yet, at times, also transformative.

The Library as a space of communities

The Library is first explored as a community space (with community defined in a broad sense, encompassing various groups and people the organisation engages with, not just

feminist ones¹²⁸). The Library as a space of feminist community emerges as a space of belonging, a feminist ‘room of our own’ or intersectional ‘rooms’; a space of refuge and respite from the patriarchy and other forces of oppression; a space of departures and returns, which inspires and welcomes back. Throughout, recognition is a theme that interconnects them, linking back to the previous analysis chapter. Similarly connected are also the themes of spaces of queering and ‘haunting’, with conflict and tensions prompting continuous reflections in and transformation of the community space. As these are also important to other aspects of the space – specifically those of an inclusive feminist community and workspace – they connect the two key parts of this chapter and the analysis. It could therefore be argued that the Library becomes a community, in a major way, by negotiating these conflicts and tensions, not in spite of them. Crucially, the links between the Library community and the conditions of possibility of feminist space(s) are absolutely central in this part of the analysis and to understanding the Library – and thus where the chapter starts.

‘Sheer willpower of the women’: Community/ies as the key condition of survival of precarious feminist space

The Library represented an important space of recognition for its communities, as highlighted in the previous chapter, which meant that these communities became key to the survival of the Library in times of crisis. Again, multiple communities emerge through this part of the story.

¹²⁸ While the Feminist Library’s Community Policy provides an important starting point for the definition of the kind of community space the organisation is (see: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>); I also found Eva’s definition of ‘in-between’ feminist communities pivotal in the research and linking to the concept of space as developed by Foucault (1986), as well as the concept of mediating communities as developed by Gunnarsson Payne, (2013), and the notion of queering (Ahmed, 2006, 2019), highlighting the continuously-becoming nature of the Library communities; all discussed in the previous chapters. I also expand the scope of communities by including the international and local communities the Library engages with (which will be highlighted in this part of the analysis), but which do not necessarily define themselves as feminist.

Edda particularly highlighted the symbolic importance of the Library (and libraries more broadly) as a space for multiple communities, speaking from the perspective of a migrant feminist moving to London from a country that values such spaces much more. Arriving in London in the political context of austerity politics linked to losses of community spaces, libraries appeared as particularly precious. As such, the Library is important not just as a feminist space, but, in this larger context and from a migrant perspective, becomes symbolic of endangered community spaces more generally.

Other participants also expanded on this. Caro, for example, highlighted the Library's precarity as symbolic of wider spatial struggles at the time:

So Feminist Library had an amazing (...) [collective] presence, despite the fact it was quite hard to find. Its visibility, or its mythic stance, just it took on every library, represented every library whose funding had been cut. And it had an amazing ability to speak of its time.

In this context, the Library's community, 'honouring the weight of the history or herstory', as Caro put it, becomes a crucial force counteracting gentrification and securing the survival of the space. Other interview participants also highlighted this as key. Laura, for example, talked about this in a way that highlighted the commitment that it takes:

how the Library works itself? (...) Because everyone's just so passionate, I guess that's how, really. That everyone's willing to turn up and do things that maybe they don't really want to do. (...) just sheer willpower of the women is how it works.

For Lisa, from the perspective of someone unable to volunteer, being based in a different country, it was also important to highlight the role of the wider support network behind the Library, such as its Friends (regular donors):

I'm just so inspired by the people who invest their energy and their time. (...) I'm also proud to be a Friend at the Library (...) I just want to do a little bit to keep it alive from afar, even though I can't be there, and I can't volunteer or do something actively, but I want to stay connected to the Library, in a way.

As Lisa noted, parts of this wide network of support are remote, perhaps less visible, yet still crucial. This became particularly visible during the crowdfunding campaign for the Library's move. Supporters were able to publicly comment on the fundraising page to express the reasons for their support¹²⁹, which came from all over the world, including people who did not even know about the existence of the Library before the campaign or had never visited due to their remoteness. Some highlighted the important role of the Library in their routes into feminism, others donated in acknowledgment of the legacy of their late mentors who had been involved in the organisation, while others still reiterated the precarious context of cultural and feminist spaces and the anger that this sparked, or the hope that the new premises provided. The passion that Laura talked about extended to this wider community. Some even donated despite their own financial precarity. Again, the political/activist links of the Library are highlighted through these wider links to feminist networks across borders that Sarah also noted.

Thus, the Library community is more accurately described as communities, as it expands beyond its workers and volunteers, and regular users and supporters, into wider, international networks of feminist support. Local community organisations affiliated (at times very loosely) through these struggles also matter here, further broadening this definition. Gloria talked about this. For Gloria, learning from the experience of the fundraising campaign and the work that went into it, highlighted not just the importance of this process for the Library

¹²⁹ You can view supporters' comments here: <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/help-the-feminist-library-build-its-new-home/comments#start>.

space and organisation, but for the conditions of possibility of other similar spaces and of Latin American communities in London by extension:

I think [the conditions of the Library and its move] have a big impact for me because I connect the situation, the situation you live around in your house, in your place (...) not just with the poverty or austerity [but also] because sometimes we don't have enough money. But you and the other women with this fundraising, with the donations, demonstrate or show me that it's possible to have a better place for a space and continue survival with these materials. And for me, this is part of the politics of self-care.

Therefore, in Gloria's story, the Library becomes not just a symbol of precarity and the struggle against it, but also of self-care, hope, and strategies for building a better future. The lessons from the Library's story provide hope for other libraries and community spaces, but for other communities and precarious lives more broadly.

Thus, while through numerous stories communities emerge as key to the survival of this precarious feminist space, the relationship is also mutually beneficial. As the Library becomes symbolic of the wider context of the precarity and struggles of libraries and other community spaces in London and beyond, it is also a symbol of survival, and thus recognition and possibility of hope for the other feminist and precarious spaces and lives.

At the same time, there are also moments in the story of the Library, which disorient this 'mythical stance' of the organisation as a symbol of precarity and survival. In the recent history of the Library, these become apparent, for example, during the relocation to the new space, particularly in its impact on the communities already located in the community centre. Alice, for example, noted a sense of tension stemming from the Library being 'imposed in Peckham'. Although it could be argued that the Library did not impose itself, but was rather

forcibly imposed on the preexisting Peckham communities by the local government officials who initiated the process (resisted by the Library collective)¹³⁰, the sentiment was nevertheless reflected in some of the conversations with the local community ahead of and during the relocation process. The work of making the Library an appreciated member of the local community necessarily continues in this context¹³¹. Thus, the Library becomes not just a symbol of spatial struggles and community precarity, but also of gentrification – albeit unwillingly so – especially from the perspective of some of the pre-existing communities in Peckham.

Further, it is interesting to note how these narratives can be contextually and affectively created. I thought it was notable, for example, to observe how long the narrative of struggle against the closure of the old Library took to be replaced by the narrative of a new and brighter future in the new space, even after the immediate crisis was averted and the new space located (as highlighted in Chapter Five). Although this is understandable, reflecting the lengthy history of spatial crises at the Library and the wider context of London gentrification, it also shows how the nature of the struggle can be highly affective and lasting, which may lead to the perpetuation of the precarity narratives – perhaps sometimes longer than necessary (arguably). This reflection also links to the themes of precarity and tensions, also connected to feminist work more broadly, and explored at more length later in the chapter.

Therefore, the theme of political space already explored in the previous chapter interlinks with those of the feminist communities behind the Library here, as they emerge as key to the conditions of possibility of the space. The passion and commitment of the supporters of the

¹³⁰ As previously indicated in writing about the Save the Feminist Library campaign, thus reiterating these forces as ‘conditions of impossibility’ of feminist/community space.

¹³¹ I was part of the team speaking with some of the members of the local community during the move process and arguing for the Library working with and alongside the local community, thus it was difficult for me to hear that these perceptions might still be persisting, at least to an extent, at the time of the interviews.

Library facilitate its survival against serious challenges over time. Through its struggles, the Library becomes a space that gives hope for survival to other communities and spaces, becoming a space of hope and recognition beyond its immediate space and community. This part of the Library story also shows the importance of having and keeping a ‘room of our own’ (Woolf, 1929) for the feminist communities, as the Library sustains people while they facilitate its survival. Yet, the meaning-making processes behind this are also challenged and disoriented, importantly, as the Library becomes a symbol of hope, but also gentrification, especially from the perspectives of some of the pre-existing communities in Peckham. While these meanings are made, they also highlight the affective nature of space- and community-making, especially through times of struggle. Therefore, the Library emerges as an important, co-constructed, challenging but also challenged, community space, highlighting the multiple and shifting meanings of feminist (and other) communities.

I now move on to discussing the Library as a space of belonging, before asking the question of who belongs in the space.

‘You can’t take a holiday from the patriarchy’: The Library as a place of refuge and belonging

The community of the Library also functions as a gathering space for the feminists – a space of refuge and belonging, away from the oppressive forces of capitalist patriarchy. However, these themes are also disoriented in the next section.

Lisa perhaps most vividly described the importance of these aspects of the Library. As a relative outsider (a German feminist who is neither a volunteer nor a worker), arriving at the Library for the first time, Lisa found a space that was welcoming for a young feminist unfamiliar with such (feminist) spaces. Crucially, as Lisa explained, the welcoming space meant providing a respite from the outside world, one of frequent patriarchal confrontations:

You can't take a holiday from patriarchy. (...) if you step out the door, then you will constantly be confronted with things that you can't ignore or that are just part of this patriarchal structure because they're everywhere. And that is why I think it's so important to have a space where you can step back from that and get some of your energy back, and then you feel powerful enough to go out again and try it again and have debates (...) And I think the Library is a perfect place for that.

Thus, Lisa sees the Library as a space that provides respite from the confrontations of everyday sexism, as Bates (2014) referred to it. Further, it is also a place of belonging, where this sense of refuge is provided by a welcoming community, where one can 'step back' while meeting like-minded people (broadly speaking at least; I return to the importance of difference in the space shortly).

Similarly, Laura also highlighted that the warm welcome was experienced regardless of age or level of feminist knowledge. The latter point was particularly important to Laura, who noted how the Library can provide respite, not just from the patriarchy of the outside world, but from the discrimination that can sometimes also sneak into feminist spaces. Having overcome the fear of this, Laura finds a welcoming, accepting space in the Library, describing her relief at this as:

it felt like a very welcoming space, a space I could just be me and be accepted (...) I guess before I went there, I felt like I need to know all this stuff about feminism because I didn't, really (...) Before then I haven't read any feminist books other than the ones I had to read at uni. (...) I didn't feel like that [at the Library], so that was good. I didn't feel like I've got to pass this test.

Thinking back to the themes of epistemic space discussed in the last chapter, one can find recognition and a welcoming space at the Library without a particular level of feminist

knowledge. As an epistemic, but also importantly, a feminist community space, the Library welcomes everyone, regardless of how versed they are in feminist theory or literature (although I discuss other limitations of this in the next section).

Caro, similarly, described the Library as an important destination for women, further suggesting that this was a universal experience, at least to an extent¹³², as she observed:

I remember this couple walking into the Library and it's as if patriarchy got stopped at the door. And I found, over and over again, women who walked into the Library just unfolded in a really exciting way (...) maybe I was just projecting, I don't know, but she had the space that she hadn't known before.

Further, in stories like those of Laura, Lisa, and Caro, the Library also becomes an important space of departures and returns – and a key anchor, as people who leave often return. Thus, it is a space of continuing belonging (although perhaps not always straightforwardly so, as some of the other stories highlighted later in the chapter will show). It is also linked to pivotal life moments and experiences that inspire people's later life stories, as noted in the previous chapter, with people returning to the space again and again, both literally and metaphorically. For Laura, for instance, the Library experience reverberated through her feminist story years after: from her Instagram feed through to her studies, from work to creative practice, as also noted in Chapter Five. Lisa, similarly, continues to feel a strong sense of connection and inspiration from the Library for years after the initial visit, returning whenever in London, supporting the organisation remotely as a Friend, and activating her feminism both in her studies and at work. She links those later feminist engagements to her experiences at the Library:

¹³² Caro notes the limitations of the interpretation, nevertheless, it remains a recurring theme.

[After my first visit] I decided to put the focus on gender studies in my own studies as well (...) And last year I was elected as Deputy Equal Opportunity Commissioner [at work] (...) I really like it because I want to give something back, something of what I experienced in the Feminist Library, for example, that there is solidarity and that you can connect to people and give them reassurance and support.

Similar stories of anchoring, departures, and returns emerge from other interviews.

Interestingly, in Caro's story, the act of returning to the Library highlights how this continuous sense of belonging is a shared experience, even if it can be imperceptible:

When the Library left Westminster, there was that celebratory or leaving thing, and I did a little leaving performance there. (...) And that's when I thought, I mean, someone said, once you join the Library you'll never leave. And I felt when I came back: oh, I'm back, or I'll never leave.

Through the various stories of the Library told by my participants, this was a key thread – the Library as a place of lasting belonging, anchoring, welcoming, and offering respite from an often hostile, patriarchal society (relatively at least). Thus, again, the Library emerges as a space of recognition, not just epistemically, as explored in the previous chapter, but also as a live community and exchange space. Even after official departures from the organisation, the endings often remain open, and the Library, an active anchor in the lives of former volunteers and workers, a place one can return to again and again and still feel a sense of belonging. The ideas explored here, therefore, also link to the idea of the Library as blurring space and time, as explored in the previous chapter, and extending it beyond time at/within the Library.

At the same time, for some members, although it is also a source of respite from patriarchy and other sources of oppression, such as anti-immigrant sentiments and austerity, it can also

be a challenging space. I focus on the importance and the challenges of the Library as a space for diverse communities in the section below.

‘First time a British space give me this opportunity’: Making space for intersectional, dialogic ‘rooms of our own’

Conversations with some of the migrant participants provided a particularly rich source of insights for conceptualising the Library as a space of recognition and belonging, as they highlighted both its intersectional, inclusive aspects, as well as some of the key challenges of occupying that space from their perspectives. A number of my participants described this as a crucial part of the space, welcoming them as migrant feminists, and thus providing spaces of recognition for them as such, but also making room for challenging and expanding the ideas behind inclusion at the Library. The latter aspect also links to a sense of agency that those working/volunteering had in developing these community spaces within the Library (which I will continue to explore in the work section).

For example, as a Latin American feminist, new to London, Gloria described finding the Library space as a good experience, highlighting the importance of this in the context of her migrant identity and its political context at the time:

[It] was very, very important to me to have the opportunity to meet Eva and Anna, because, [at] this moment, they speak Spanish and they understand me when I feel so frustrated and don't have the words to communicate my feelings, my emotions, they support me to translate. So, for me, it was a very good experience, especially because (...) when I came to this country, my story, my personal and family stories, is part [of] this hostile environment against migrant persons, and I am a survivor of this politic. (...) but when I went to Feminist Library, I didn't feel anything of that [hostile environment].

Therefore, for Gloria, it was not just the experience of finding a welcoming feminist space in London, as for Lisa and others before, but also, and perhaps more crucially in the hostile political context, a space that made her feel welcome as a migrant, Spanish-speaking feminist. The Library thus provided both a space of belonging and an important space of recognition for Gloria, both as a feminist and as a migrant, who did not, prior to finding the space, feel accepted in London or the country.

Further, Gloria's experience extended to the Library collections – as explored in Chapter Five – as well as community events, where active involvement of people like her was also welcome. Crucially, by providing scope for such involvement, not just a passive welcome, the Library facilitates 'rooms of our own' for a diverse range of identities and communities, including those that tend to be marginalised or outright excluded elsewhere. In this sense, as Gloria explains, such inclusion enabled the development of:

the first Latin Feminist Festival, and for me it was a very good and very challenging experience because [it] was the first time, when, basically, a British or Londoners' space, gave me this opportunity to run something from my own background, with my own people.

Gloria and Eva also highlighted the importance of the Spanish Book Club for extending the space longer-term and to other Spanish-speaking, migrant feminists. This is how Eva noted the inspiration for the Club:

we thought that we needed to create a space for feminism in Spanish. Because we were attending some events, but we felt like we needed to say what we wanted to say in our own language. (...) it wasn't about your level [of] English or anything, it was

just something more (...) from your heart that you need to express yourself in your mother tongue.¹³³

This also links to another important aspect of those ‘rooms’ within the Library that Eva highlighted: their nature as ‘in-between’ spaces – those that are perhaps not quite as visible or central as the others within the larger community of the Library, due to the language or broader primacy of white, Western feminisms within feminist spaces. Eva also highlighted these more problematic aspects and the need for work to make these spaces more visible, more central, and primary even within the Library. Some of the gaps in diverse representation (especially in the community, leading Eva to explore the collections) were already noted in the previous chapter, but is worth also highlighting how Eva reflected on the effects of these, retrospectively:

looking at the history of me in that space, it took me a lot of years to something that [would] be welcoming to myself. So, my critique [of] the Feminist Library space, as I found the space in the first time, is that (...) it wasn’t inclusive, in terms of welcoming people from all around the world.

Nevertheless, Eva decided to stay on – partly because of their ‘talks with their ancestors’, representations found in the collections, as discussed in the previous chapter - and participate in the process of actively creating the Library as a more inclusive space, providing what was missing from their perspective; one might add, effectively so, considering how different Gloria’s experience of entering the Library was a few years later. Yet, the project of making the Library an inclusive space for all is not a finished, but a continuous one. Both Eva and

¹³³ This was different in the Polish Book Club. Although the language aspect was important to others, to me personally, the group was a way of connecting with Polish feminists who are perhaps not as interested in street activism, and of creating a space dedicated to talking about Polish feminism and feminist literature in London (the space was co-created with a Polish feminist activist group, FARSA; <https://farsapl.wordpress.com/>).

Gloria acknowledged this in our conversations, not brushing over the continuing challenges. Indeed, these challenges often emerged as pivotal moments in the Library's story. I discuss some of these moments, as relevant to the Library as a workspace, the extra workloads that this work requires, and the key role of the volunteers in addressing these challenges at more length in the next part of the chapter, while focusing on the community implications here.

Many of the 'in-between' community spaces with/in the Library included fruitful collaborations and inspirations beyond the immediate space/community, for example, a regular presence of the Spanish Book Club at the Spanish Book Fair or translation events with mother tongues¹³⁴ (Figure 29) extending the platform for building representation for the marginalised communities outside the Library space. Eva further talked about the challenges, but also the key role of the Club in helping them build social skills and their identity, both through the literature read and the people met.

Figure 28

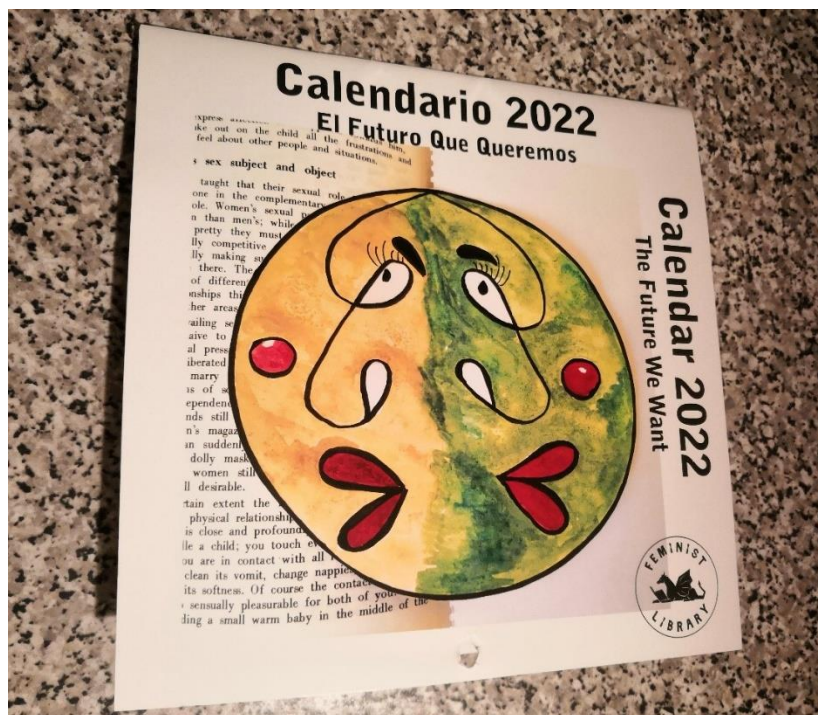


mother tongues translation party at the Library flyer, 12/06/18 - Credit: mother tongues

¹³⁴ In this case, mother tongues refers to a specific organisation, which has used the Library space and collaborated with some of Eva's activities. They specifically requested not to have their organisation's name capitalised.

The community stories told by the migrant feminists behind the Library thus make it not only a space of belonging but of a multitude of complex belongings. The ones that are often challenging and queering contribute to the picture of the Library as an ‘in-between’ space and a work in progress, rather than simply ‘already there’ in terms of community. Crucially, these in-between communities are often key to creating change towards building an increasingly inclusive space at the Library, and thus in creating feminist spaces of the future; linking to some of the key feminist literature on difference (e.g., Lorde, 1984). Eva talked, for example, about the important conversations in the Club about colonial legacies. These conversations often translated into ones with the wider collective of the Library (more about these in the next section). A recent material example is the Spanish Book Club 2022 calendar, themed ‘The Future We Want’ (Figure 30). (I return to this theme later in the chapter, and again in the discussion.)

Figure 29



The cover of the Spanish Book Club 2022 calendar, 13/03/22

It is also important to note here that it was not just migrant perspectives that provoked these conversations and disorientations within the Library and their crucial relevance for the (re)definition of its communities. Reflections from queer perspectives also provoked similar considerations and dis/re-orientations (akin to Ahmed's (2006: 72) work on queer 'reading between the lines'). For instance, as a queer volunteer, Eva was also disoriented by moments such as being greeted with the words 'Hey Sister', which did not make them feel fully included. This was also an interesting source of autoethnographic reflection, contrasting with my experience in the Library's archives. I found numerous letters signed 'In Sisterhood', which initially appealed to me as simple expressions of feminist solidarity and community. However, my conversation with Eva provided another angle. I realised that I had not given much thought to the disorienting effect they could have on other queer members. Thus, these diverse, intersectional perspectives, facilitated the queering process already initiated through the queer theories, grounding my methodology as well as my perspective on the Library as a queer(ing) rather than already-queer space.

Therefore, the Library emerges as a space of belonging and recognition for diverse communities, creating intersectional 'rooms of our own', but with accompanying tensions and disorientations. Although some participants (like Sarah or, indeed, myself) even likened the Library to 'home' or 'haven', none of them idealised the space as one without challenges. Indeed, many of my participants volunteered stories of tension or conflict, without needing much, if any, probing – defying my expectations. Yet, perhaps this should not seem particularly surprising as, as some of the stories of the Library show, these moments, although challenging, were often central and instrumental in (continuously) making the Library a more inclusive space. The 'in-between' spaces can also be sites of rich inspiration for activist research, as they often open difficult conversations, which in turn can illuminate places where change is needed. Thus, the Library as an inclusive space is a continuous work

in progress, a space of queering, rather than an already-queer space. A sense of agency, recognition, and ‘situatedness’ is key in this process of co-creation, although, as it requires work, often extra work, it is further explored at more length in the next section of the Library as a feminist workplace.

The Feminist Library as a feminist workplace

The Library as a feminist workspace is linked to and extends some of the themes already discussed above, particularly those of recognition, inclusion, and queering of feminist community spaces. The feminist principles of organising are deeply interconnected with, but also at times conflicting, with the practical requirements and limitations of running a feminist organisation in the real world, particularly considering the context including austerity and gentrification, but also questions of feminist ethics or legal frameworks. I outline some of these connections and challenges of running the Library as a feminist workspace in more detail in this section, closing the chapter by returning to questions of hybridity and feminist spaces in the digital/(post)pandemic era.

Space of conflict, tension and agency: The struggles for an inclusive feminist (work) space

Work in the feminist space of the Library is also intertwined with tensions, conflict even, and ‘in-between’ spaces, which help continuously negotiate the boundaries of inclusion in the space and organisation, as already noted above. Thus, although the conversations on these can be difficult, as Gloria highlighted, they are also crucial to the making of an inclusive feminist space (as the Feminist Library aims to be¹³⁵).

¹³⁵ As per its community policy: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

Gloria highlighted the importance of this particularly well, as somebody with direct experience not just as a Spanish Book Club member and part of the wider collective, but also personally. As Gloria described the situation, it became clear just how important these difficult conversations can be:

I have an experience [of being] discriminated and, [at] the end of the day when I think about this experience, for me, [it] was racist practice, but I feel happy [that] when I disclosed this case with you (...) and the Feminist Library [took] very seriously this situation [taking] the responsibility to address the situation. And, for me, [this] was a very transformative experience in Feminist Library and for this reason, I think I continue to engage with Feminist Library.

Thus, it was not simply the ability to have these conversations, but to see them transformed into action that became crucial conditions of Gloria's continued involvement. Further, seeing other similar situations being transformative for the organisation's praxis and having an active role in opening and pushing these conversations transpired as important, producing a sense of personal and collective agency and achievement, as Gloria explained using the below example:

I think in this moment (...) Feminists Library didn't have a policy about [trans inclusion] (...) When I went to the Feminist Library, this was one topic very important, and I think my meetings and my chats with Eva and Emma [were] crucial because (...) I was thinking [of] the importance of that they [are] queer persons. They told me as well, they [thought it was] important to talk about that. So, I think this was a little push [on] our part to open the conversation in the different groups and as well in the manager's groups.

Eva had a similarly strong sense of agency in contributing to the creation of the Library, while highlighting not just the individual and collective aspects of this, but also that the two were mutually constitutive:

every decision I took in the Library wasn't really coming from me. [It] was also because I was participating in an environment that pushed me in certain directions, so this is the very good thing about a collective. That, if I started the Spanish Book Club with [Gloria], around mother tongues, around the political scenario at that moment (...) everything together was the reason why I did something.

Thus, one could argue that making such difficult conversations an important and effective, transformative part of the Library praxis was crucial to sustaining the organisation as a feminist space (and spaces) that continues to develop around core values of inclusivity and intersectionality. If the volunteers' commitment is contingent on the Library being as committed to the values it claims to have¹³⁶, and the organisation depends on volunteers, these conversations provide key means for the organisation to sustain and develop, while building its community and workspace.

Despite the challenges of working through such difficult conversations and tensions, other participants also highlighted that they were important for organisational, as well as individual learning. Sarah, for example, from the perspective of a former worker, noted how being a space of interesting, 'enlightening' conversations was part of the appeal of the Library. As much as it could be, at times, challenging, it was also crucial to volunteers' and workers' growth, and to the making of an open, inviting space for the diverse range of feminists involved in the movement and the Library.

¹³⁶ Again, see the Library's community policy for a good overview of those values: <https://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

It is also worth noting here that these practices are not new, as they transpired through some of the archival stories. For example, as noted in Chapter One, in the 1980s the Library conducted discussions on how to address issues of underrepresentation of Black women in the collective. While McNeill's (1983) letters show how the Library openly discussed the question of whether to become a women-only space. Similarly, these archival stories can be conflict- and tension-rich, yet necessary, and often transformative. Open and honest communication, often not just within the Library collective but with and through the wider feminist community networks, was and remains key to these transformations.

Thus, tensions, difficult conversations, and effective communication around these are crucial aspects of feminist work, rather than impediments to it, as opportunities for organisational learning and transformation. Further, the Library as an inclusive feminist workspace is created somewhere at the intersection of individuality and collectivity/community, or communities, as Gloria's and Eva's stories highlight again and again. The 'in-between' spaces and the affective sense of agency found through these conversations are crucial to sustaining the Library, its volunteers' commitment, and its communities. In this sense, feminist communities are intimately interlinked with feminist work. However, as Eva's and Gloria's experiences of these spaces highlighted, they are not without their problematic aspects, with some of the extra work inadvertently shifted onto those already most marginalised (often situated in the 'in-between' spaces) and some of the conversations more effective than others. I continue to discuss the issues of precarious feminist work below. As such, conflict, and tension – as well as, importantly, conflict communication and resolution (and a sense of effective agency for volunteers) – alongside haunting and queering, become crucial connecting threads between the different themes of the analysis.

'Feminism and coffee cups': Precarity and (dis)organisation of feminist work

As mentioned above, Eva also highlighted the issue of precarious work in feminist workplaces¹³⁷. Although this issue does not exclusively apply to those in the ‘in-between’ spaces of the Library, it is nevertheless notable that it was Eva who raised this issue most clearly in our exchange. As the ‘in-between’ spaces of difference are where difficult conversations often happen, or at least start, this can increase the workload of those already operating from more than one marginalised perspective; the more ‘nots’ you are, the more ‘diversity’ work you likely end up doing, as Ahmed (2017) highlighted. Below, I explore the precarity of work in the Library alongside the relative lack of organisational hierarchies, to highlight some interesting connections and contradictions.

Other structural issues are also at play. Due to limited funds, most of the work at the Library is done on a voluntary basis and thus often alongside regular paid work, and can therefore be exhausting. Therefore, the precarity of the Library space and its work is also interlinked with the precarity of the people who sustain it and the wider systems of exploitation that sustain said precarity; these were also highlighted in the introductory and literature chapters. Such precarious work can lead to burnout, as Eva explored in our conversation:

[it] doesn't matter how much you want to change the world or how much enthusiasm you have, there is a moment that you feel very miserable because of the precarity of how we work, how we need to have paid work somewhere else (...) it's really, really difficult. I think, in my case, I felt very upset that I had to respond to so many people and I felt overwhelmed, and I stopped curating these events. But I really like what we did.

¹³⁷ Although for absolute clarity it is worth highlighting here that precarity is not a feature of feminist work per se (see e.g., Worth, 2016).

Eva returned after a period of reflection, but in a changed, less pressured capacity, and ended up enjoying the space more. Yet, they also went on to note this as a shared experience: ‘I think this is a common experience to many people in Feminist Library that (...) maybe your enthusiasm sometimes kill you, in a way’.

At the same time, Eva ended our interview on an interesting note, proposing that the Library could be seen as a potential emergency home (in quite a literal sense this time, although only hypothetically at that point) for those in the most precarious positions, such as losing a place to live. As such, the Library becomes a space of precarious work, as well as a space of respite from the wider structures of precarity (and, again, blurring the (patriarchal) lines between home and work).

Sarah also highlighted how similar contradictions of feminist work are also noticeable for paid workers, who despite being paid (largely part-time), often still do voluntary work, often blurring the divisions between one and the other. At the same time, it is also important to highlight the privilege of having even relative financial freedom as a paid worker. Sarah also noted the perks of doing a large variety of work in the space, like gaining new skills. I had a similar experience, as both a former worker and a volunteer. Reflecting on it, I had to admit that it could be both challenging, as well as exciting, the Library workspace providing much scope for developing not just new skills, but also agency, by generating ideas for new events and projects.

Nevertheless, it had the potential to be exhausting, as Eva highlighted, leading to confusion and further tensions. For example, when working in the fundraising role (paid), there was a period that I agreed to do this from the Library while opening the space for visitors (similarly to other paid workers). Although this was based on the (correct) assumption that the Library could not afford to pay a librarian, it also meant that the additional workload of meeting and

greeting visitors, which, while often immensely enjoyable, also clashed with the fundraising work; perhaps also blurring the lines between work and pleasure

Similar, hotly debated, issues can be traced back through the archives. For example, when Fairbairns (1995: 4), the first paid worker, wrote a retrospective piece in a twentieth-anniversary newsletter on the nature of feminist work at the Library, which explored some of the key early challenges, she asked a very simple yet important question: ‘Why do some feminists think it is OK to leave their coffee cups for other feminists to wash up?’ This question continues to be relevant, I think, reflecting on my experiences of working from the Library in recent years.

Today, as the Library is in a new, and newly refurbished, space, there is a renewed commitment to keep the space tidier and generally better organised. However, during my recent visits to the new space, the messiness of the old Library was still present, to a large extent. Surprisingly perhaps, I had to admit to myself that I found this situation somewhat comforting as if it reminded me of ‘my’ space of the Library – the previous one that I was more familiar with, despite much visible evidence of its disorganisation or precarity. Laura also highlighted related complexities, describing the ‘organised chaos’ of the old Library as a reflection of its beloved, messy materialities (explored in the previous chapter), as well as of perceptible tensions - symbolic of confusing organisational processes. As Freeman (1972), for example, highlighted, such confusion can compound issues of unequal feminist work. However, as Caro further noted in our conversation, beyond representing the comfort and memories of what we know, the messiness could also be seen as a sign of accessibility:

You go into the British Library and (...) you're not allowed to do that [freely engage with materials] (...) it's all so contained and controlled (...) Feminist Library is not that space and that's its joy.

Thus, the precarity of feminist work is symbolically connected with the materialities of the space, reflecting its precarious nature, but also its important affective elements, such as its memory anchoring value. At the same time, it is important to note the broader, structural connotations of the precarity of feminist work – the financially precarious and messy nature of the organisation can add to the pressures of volunteering, especially for the more marginalised volunteers and workers. These pressures can even lead to burnout, even if, or perhaps especially when doing work one is passionate about. The blurred boundaries between work and volunteering, and between work and pleasure, show that the Library can also be a space of refuge from precarity, even while being a place of precarious work. I continue to explore some related contradictions below.

Freedom to ‘just run with it’: Creativity and contradiction of feminist workspace

The relative disorganisation or messiness of the Library also links to another key theme explored in my interviews and here – the Library as a space of creative freedom; this relationship in organisations more broadly was also highlighted in Chapter Three (e.g., Gabriel, 1995).

As mentioned before, for example, by Sarah, the Library could be an exciting place to work, with workers and volunteers able to learn new skills and define their own projects, rather than being too constrained by top-down rules and directives. Caro also noted the importance of this creative freedom from the perspective of an artist, describing the space as having a ‘really unusual’ sense of creative ‘generosity’, in contrast with other creative organisations. Having started at the Library as a performer, she described this as foundational to her involvement. Caro explained this in more detail during our interview:

Usually with residences, you're there for a set period of time and there's a sense of: you are fulfilling the brief of the institution, so somewhere along the line your edges

are going to have to be smoothed off a little bit to fit in (...) and you have (...) your outputs that are agreed on and a date, and then you leave, and that's the deal. And the Feminist Library was much more grassroots and there was no set time, so I think I stayed [for] five years. And it was very much about enjoying the Library, and that sense of generosity is really unusual (...) And how I felt is that extended from the individuals to just serving a more collective vision, which made me feel very at home and like it's a real (...) sense of belonging and not a pressure to turn up with the goods (...) it was really about artistic process.

Thus, the openness to 'run with' ideas without too much top-down control was important to Caro's work at the Library. This also connects to the concept of the Library as a collective workspace with a 'vision,' as well as the sense of belonging explored earlier in the chapter. This sense of collective vision is thus something that links individual creative freedom with the larger mission, praxis, and community of the organisation. Again, the personal is emerging as closely connected with the political.

As a key part of the curatorial team, Edda also felt that the space allowed for a creative exploration without many constraints. In Edda's case, it was also closely linked with the materiality of the Library, and the need to 'limit my desire to collect' the meta-archive cumulating outside the main space (explored in the previous chapter). Thus, the sense of freedom to collect allowed by the Library appeared almost too generous in this case, highlighting important space limitations of archiving (in and beyond the archive).

These creative freedoms extended to the 'in-between' spaces and collectives of the Library, working 'separately, but together', as Gloria described it. It was important to both Gloria and Eva to highlight this element of the Library, enabling the independent, dedicated conversations in their mother tongue to be had as part of the Club, but also taking some of the

key, at times difficult, conversations back to the larger collective. This meant having input into the work practices of the Library, while retaining creative independence, as well as getting support when needed; which facilitated, for example, the production and distribution of the Club calendar.

For Eva, it was particularly important to also highlight the value of working autonomously, as an individual, as well as sharing their skills with the various teams and the larger collective, contributing materials to the Library in both ways. This also resonated strongly with my experience of work at the Library. Both my involvement in the management collective, facilitating the move and the organisation more broadly, as well as my more independent work organising events and the Polish Book Club, made for important parts of my experience. The latter helped me develop my skills and creativity and the former meant I could play an important role in the preservation of the Library, while both facilitated my research journey.

Somewhat contradictorily perhaps, returning to the points on organisational messiness above, Shirley noted how she perceived the Library as bureaucratic. This was somewhat surprising to Shirley, but it was also one of the most disorienting moments in my research, as it contrasted with much of what the other participants were saying and my knowledge of the organisation. As Shirley explored the lengthy processes of decision-making that she was a part of in more detail, it became clearer that this perspective was very context-specific, relating to the slow and complex process of moving the Library. As a relative outsider – part of the design team, and not a volunteer beyond that capacity – Shirley had a somewhat different perspective from most of my other participants. Participating in the discussions we had as part of the larger move team (made up of the design team and the management team), but not the other team meetings where most of the decisions were made, was perhaps what

created that impression of bureaucracy. Therefore, perhaps that perspective was perhaps less surprising than it appeared at first.

Nevertheless, as this was something that I found myself still thinking about with a certain amount of disorientation a few months later, it challenged one of my key preconceived notions of the Library (largely shared by my other participants) – that the Library was a relatively unstructured organisation. After much reflection, I had to admit that there was some substance to Shirley's point. Although the Library was a feminist, anti-hierarchical organisation, some hierarchy was perhaps unavoidably there. It is, after all, run as a charitable organisation, complete with trustees and a management team, as porous as these structures may be. The challenges of navigating these structures as a feminist organisation normally working much more collectively were compounded by the complexities of the move. Thus, it was necessary that Shirley's story challenged me and my somewhat idealised notion of the Library as a space of anti-hierarchical ways of working¹³⁸.

Nevertheless, Shirley also reflected on the importance of working collectively – both with the wider Library (premises) team and the expert (design) team – and attempts at adhering to feminist principles through that:

I never felt that someone was more in charge than anybody else [working with the Feminist Library premises team] (...) [And within the design team] I think we were quite good, actually, divvying out what we have to do, and we were all very aware of each others' schedules, and if people had deadlines everyone was quite caring with that and empathetic, and we worked quite well as a team, really, in the end.

¹³⁸ It also resonated with my own gradual re-conceptualisation of non-hierarchical work as anti-hierarchical, in reflection of my own experience and the practical realities of running an organisation, such as having a trustee board, and the feminist anti-hierarchical ideals – while also challenging my thinking on this further.

These reflections also highlight the importance of care in feminist work, while at the same time, noting some of the challenges of working collectively. Although Shirley perceived the idea of anti-hierarchical collective work as more of an aspiration rather than a reality, she admitted it was a worthwhile challenge, not just at the Library, but more generally, for organisations¹³⁹.

Going back to what Laura named ‘organised chaos’ when talking about the ways of working at the Library, the relative lack of rules, or clear structures in places, meant that the organisation could perhaps, at times, move between these different extremes, rather than it being simply one or the other form of organisation. Hence, the idea of ‘collective bureaucracy’ is used for the Library here, highlighting these contradictions.

The Library is, therefore, again, a place of blurred boundaries – also in terms of the structures of the organisation. While the relative lack of hierarchical control over the workers’ and volunteers’ time and outputs can result in a boost to creativity and feelings of freedom appreciated by the participants, some also reflected on the apparent ‘bureaucratic’ or confusing organisational processes and structures. To reflect this complexity and apparent contradictions, it was dubbed a ‘collective bureaucracy’. Although these contradictions were, to an extent at least, a matter of perspective, they were also an important source of reflection on the nature of the Library and feminist praxis more broadly. While a lack of structure may be highly creative to some, it can also have unintended consequences for others.

In the next section, I explore further organisational complexities and tensions, this time focusing on the ethical and legal challenges of doing feminist epistemic work.

¹³⁹ The confusion caused by these contradictions is also reflective of some of the earlier literature on the limits of ‘non-hierarchical’ praxis (Freeman, 1972); see also e.g., Jain (2012) for a more recent exploration of such challenges.

Ethical and legal complexities of a feminist workspace

Further challenges of feminist work were exemplified by some of the legal and ethical complexities behind the questions of information exchange and digitisation in a feminist space. Tension and contradiction continue to be present in this aspect of the Library's feminist work praxis.

Interesting historical examples were found in the Library's archives. An important part of the Library's early work relied on exchanging information with feminists internationally. It was a key part of the Library's early operations, as it facilitated the building of Women's Studies (as highlighted in Chapter One), as well as other movement networks. To facilitate these exchange networks, as part of these processes, the Library shared the contact information of feminists with others, including phone numbers and addresses. While this practice does not continue today, I had to admit that my surprise was almost palpable when I found in the archives just how freely such personal information seemed to be shared. Although data was freely provided by the users (on forms put together by the Library), there did not appear to be any notes about data privacy and security on these forms that I could find¹⁴⁰. From the perspective of someone who had some interest in data protection and privacy (and specifically, experience dealing with it at the Library in more recent years), it appeared to me as both ethically and legally surprising. Admittedly, I only later reflected on the historical context of this practice, considering both the more relaxed legislation and the fact that such practices were commonplace in the movement(s) at the time (see e.g., Eichorn, 2013).

At the same time, this was a reminder of some more recent conversations at the Library. For instance, as part of an external, FLA (Feminist & Women's Libraries and Archives network,

¹⁴⁰ It is worth noting here that I did not go through the whole archive, but it the materials that I did go through, I found several sign-up slips and none of the early ones covered these issues.

UK) meeting, we considered the complex relationship between copyright legislation and ethics today, in the context of digitisation of feminist materials. The meeting exposed the continuing limitations of the relevant legislation, particularly challenging its suitability in feminist contexts, such as collective publishing. For example, in the context of the British Library digitisation projects, and specifically that of the feminist *Spare Rib* magazine, although the legislation originally enabled the project, in a broad sense, it also stirred much controversy among feminists.¹⁴¹ The subsequent removal of the digitised magazine, following Brexit, mentioned earlier in Chapter One, shows that the recent changes in legislation leave even more gaps in terms of dealing with much-needed projects of digitising feminist collections.

As the idea of collective publishing arose, among other things, to challenge individual ownership, it is perhaps fitting that it does not neatly fit within the copyright legislation boundaries. At the same time, this can also lead to considerable practical and ethical challenges, as in the British Library example¹⁴². Similar challenges were faced by the Library collective when it was offered a digitisation collaboration opportunity by a mainstream publisher, who wanted to use their resources to do the work, but also to charge for access (to materials free at the Library). The invitation was rejected. Thus, the complexity of feminist praxis is, again, evident in some of the ethical and legal challenges explored.

Thus, discussions of ethics in a feminist workspace can prompt more questions than answers. While looking at the history of the Library as an information exchange space brought up challenging questions of why information was exchanged (seemingly) without much concern for the data, some of the more contemporary knowledge exchange processes raised further,

¹⁴¹ See e.g., <https://blogs.bl.uk/living-knowledge/2015/05/digitising-spare-rib-magazine-the-inside-story.html> for a longer exploration of the key issues.

¹⁴² See also, e.g., Meagher (2014) for an exploration of wider challenges, which were already notable in feminist publishing of the 1970s and 80s, when the idea was at its height.

and somewhat contradictory, questions of insufficiency of legal/copyright frameworks for feminist praxis. Below, I focus on some of the more recent challenges and opportunities of digital work in a feminist space.

Of feminist cyborgs and hybrids – developing feminist communities and workspace in the digital, (post)pandemic era

Continuing on some of the themes of hybridity explored in Chapter Five, this section focuses on the changing nature of feminist work in the digital era.

Eva was one of the participants who perhaps most clearly highlighted the benefits of expanding online ways of working during the pandemic, increasing the Book Club's visibility, and connections across borders. Although I was somewhat surprised by just how strong the sense of connection that both Eva and Gloria managed to build online was, Gloria even likening it to 'family', after some reflection, my experience with the Polish Book Club and the growing ease and frequency of international connections enabled by the new online meeting format during the pandemic proved similar. In fact, jointly with Eva and Gloria, we started the International Book Club during the pandemic, to make the most of the opportunities of transnational connections that online meetings enabled. Although this latest addition to the range of book clubs at the Library proved relatively short-lived, the inspiration behind it was not, as my conversation with Eva made clear. We spent much time talking about potential avenues for continuing the project, or an iteration of it, such as meetings for migrant feminists to look at the Library collections, in search of their herstories, and to inspire further collecting.

However, as Gloria also noted, the new ways of working developed during the pandemic were not as conducive to all types of community connections and work. Edda further highlighted the extent of this. The long periods of library closures due to the pandemic, when

all interactions were virtual, changed the nature of the Library community so much that it became difficult to talk about it¹⁴³. For someone working in such hands-on ways with the materiality of the Library (as discussed earlier), this was also a highly challenging time for Edda, with the limited access to the materials restricting her creative work.

These seeming contradictions in the perceptions around the benefits and limitations of the newly digital/hybrid ways of working at the Library also link back to the exploration of hybridity and its materialities from the previous chapter – including their continuously developing nature. In this context, Eva also talked about the shifting material nature of the Library more broadly:

Today, in 2022, there is a physical place in Peckham [where] a lot of things happen with local people, and then there is also an Internet space where people all around the world could pop up as well and see what's going on with us. (...) And it's another experience that I think is very good, knowing the Internet could be very bad. So, I think we just created a place for feminists in [the] Internet. So, it's not [just] the physical or the paper pamphlet that you can touch with your hand in Peckham, it's much more as well.

Alice also talked about this, recalling being part of the online community of the Library on social media for a few years before getting more directly involved, yet describing that engagement as 'surface level'. This helps reiterate the point that some aspects of community, such as deep engagement or affective connection cannot easily be reproduced in online spaces.

¹⁴³ Such sentiments were also reflected in a number of more informal conversations I had about the new virtual ways of interacting at the Library – and beyond.

Eva also talked about the experience of contributing to the visual identity and history of the organisation by creating material for the Library from the comfort of their own home (even before the pandemic), further highlighting the continuing importance of physical space(s) and materialities for the Library's work. This also facilitated the disorientation of the definition of the space, while linking the shifting boundaries of feminist workspace to some of the materialities discussed in the previous chapter.

While it is perhaps too early to say what the post-pandemic world will look like in the longer term, the differences in opinion in regard to the current changes at the Library outlined above provide some good insights into this; and indeed, what it is starting to look like already. On the one hand, there are some clear benefits of being able to connect online more easily, such as increased opportunities for communicating across borders. Meanwhile, the strong need for in-person connection and to engage with physical materials, again, highlights the importance of physical space. Both are already visible, with, on the one hand, a return to the largely in-person events organised at the Library since most COVID restrictions were lifted, and with some online meetings retained on the other. While the virtual connections enabled by online meetings were excitedly reported by some, the public meeting and library space has largely returned to its pre-pandemic ways of operating now.

I believe that the past can provide a good indicator of possible future trajectories for the feminist space of the Library. While it remains to be seen how much of the 'old' pre-pandemic operations of the Library, particularly in the context of the materialities conversation, will remain in the longer term, the interview encounters and archival explorations, like the ones outlined above, were a useful reminder that the Library has been a space of somewhat hybrid nature for quite some time and continues to change. Although the hybridity of feminist work is expanded through the pandemic experiences of virtual meetings and events – and to some extent celebrated as a space of expanding connection opportunities

– it is also critiqued by others, especially those who are unable to do their work without accessing the physical Library. Thus, again, the currently shifting ways of working at the Library also have some disorienting effects on my preconceived notions of the Library, while reinforcing something that already emerged as key in the previous chapter – a continuing need for physical feminist space today. At the same time, the physical space is not without its challenges, such as the financial cost of keeping it open, as earlier discussion highlighted. I will revisit the relevance of these challenges again in the Discussion Chapter.

Summary

In summary, the chapter brings together some of the key analytical themes emerging from the exploration of the Library as a space of feminist communities and work. First, the Library as a community space emerges as a space of crucial solidarity, belonging, and refuge, but also a space where the boundaries of belonging are questioned and constantly shifted. The Library as a space of work emerges as a place of conflict and tension – and the crucial role of volunteer agency in its resolution – as well as inclusion, a space of precarity and (dis)organisation, a space of creative freedom and, sometimes contradictorily, hierarchies, a space of crucial ethical conversations which challenge the limits of existing legal frameworks, as well as a space of increasingly hybrid (yet, at the same time, continuously challenged) work. Throughout this chapter, boundaries of what feminist community and work are and might be are (continuously) challenged, and the feminist space becomes a space of in-betweenness and continuous queering of feminist work praxis and community; similarly to the key themes from the previous chapter. In the next chapter, I will explore these themes in more depth, bringing the empirical analysis presented in the last two chapters, drawing together insights from the archival, interview, and autoethnographic data, into dialogue with the relevant literature on library spaces and feminist workplaces, returning to the research questions raised by the project and attempting some answers.

Chapter Seven

Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter, I first review the key themes that surfaced in the analysis, before returning to the research questions and literature. I especially revisit the key points in Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, with the aim of providing a queer(ed) feminist perspective on it, primarily using Sara Ahmed's (2006, 2017) work. I then discuss the significance of the findings for the literature reviewed in earlier chapters, developing the theoretical analysis and contributions.

As the analysis chapters and the contextual literature set out in Chapters One, Two, and Three have shown, the Library is an important epistemic, community, and political (e.g., Hildenbrand, 1986; Eichhorn, 2013; Ashton, 2017), as well as feminist work and social materialities space. These themes provided a holistic framework for the analysis of the Library in Chapters Five and Six. Through the analysis, the Library emerged as a complex and dynamic, continually struggled over space of feminist work.

Chapter Five focused on the Library as an epistemic, political, and socio-material space. Through Chapter Five, the epistemic space emerged as a site of agentic recognition, where participants could find themselves in the space by discovering stories and people representing them, and more actively inscribe themselves into the space and feminist histories in collective and individual processes of co-creation. These processes have the potential to transform the organisation and its boundaries of inclusion and recognition through reflexive, open dialogue. But the sense of recognition was also at times disoriented through the perspectives of those participants who were underrepresented in the Library, these gaps often having 'haunting' effects on these members. Also in this chapter, the political space of the Library emerged as a

space of embodied politics, transgressions, and nomadic movements, connected to historical feminisms. Chapter Five was also where the Library's socio-materialities were explored, with their complexities, from the archival to the everyday. They brought up, again, elements of recognition found through the materialities, but also important aspects of precarity, as they often highlighted how precarious feminist history and space can be. At the same time, it was these precarious materialities that facilitated a perpetual challenge to perceptions of what a (feminist) archive is, including what and who should be included in it. Chapter Five ended with an analysis of the changing nature of feminist materialities and a discussion of the increasingly hybrid nature of the Library, showing how the latter facilitates a blurring of its spatiotemporal boundaries and its meaning.

Next, Chapter Six brought together some of the key insights about the Library as a community and a workspace. First, the Library emerged as a space of community and solidarity, which was a key factor in sustaining it through times of crisis. At the same time, the conditions of (im)possibility remain deeply political, as highlighted by the larger context of community and spatial struggles also explored in the chapter. The Library also emerged as a space of community belonging and refuge from outside, patriarchal oppressions. Yet, the sense of belonging was also somewhat disoriented/queered, particularly for participants who did not 'find themselves' as easily in the Library as others, linking back to some of the themes of recognition and its hauntings explored in Chapter Five. Nevertheless, this was also where intersectional 'rooms' or 'in-between' spaces of belonging were created, making space for the expansion of what the Library was through agentic difference. Important links between the Library as a space of communities and work, difference, and tension also emerged as crucial to understanding how the Library was organised. Negotiating tensions through ongoing processes of building recognition through difficult conversations often facilitated these 'in-between' spaces of agentic difference. Still, the Library as workspace

could also be a place of precarity and disorganisation, which had the potential to create hidden hierarchies and exacerbate inequalities, particularly for those at the feminist margins. Thus, recognition is understood here as agentic, dialogical, reflexive, and based on an understanding of political and material conditions of precarity¹⁴⁴. While disorganisation was also, importantly, linked to a sense of creativity and creative freedom in the space, other tensions became apparent in some of the ethical and legal conversations around communication and digitisation of feminist materials, which raised important questions about the nature of feminist organisational praxis. The chapter ended with an exploration of the changing nature of the Library as an organisation in the digital era, which highlighted both its hybridity, as well as the continuing importance of the physical space to the Library as a community and workspace.

Acknowledging that these are not separate, but intertwined aspects of the feminist space, as highlighted above, recognises the complexities of feminist space and enables me to fully address the research questions. First, How is feminist space produced? And what are the conditions of its possibility? Second, What theoretical resources help us to make sense of how the Feminist Library is produced and experienced as a feminist and queer community? And third, How is the social-materiality of the Feminist Library evolving, and what is its potential futurity as a (queered) feminist space?

To help address the first question, on the production and the conditions of possibility of the feminist space, and to build on the understanding of the Library developed in Chapters Five and Six, in the next section, I return to Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of

¹⁴⁴ For a more detailed exploration of the different feminist approaches to recognition and how they can be reconciled with more materialist understandings, which give more consideration to the material conditions of precarity, see e.g., Fraser (2007).

space. First, I will provide a brief reminder of the key points made in it, and then offer a feminist critique and alternative perspective to the (masculine) production of space.

Later in the chapter, to address the second question, on the experience and production of a queer and feminist space, I consider how a queer(ed) feminist analysis of the Library raises important points of critique in relation to the feminist production of space, such as who is included and excluded from it, and how these perspectives queer and change how a feminist space is produced and what it means. Finally, this point brings us back to the question of the changing nature and futurity of the feminist space, addressed before closing the chapter.

Throughout this chapter, the critical analysis of Lefebvre (1991), as well as of the Library as a feminist space, is informed by Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology. The latter provides both a conceptual and methodological lens through which to 'queer' established notions of space, challenging and reorienting them towards marginalized, previously hidden, or ignored perspectives, and thus alternative ways of seeing and producing space. In the analysis developed in this chapter, this applies to both patriarchal and (dominant) feminist notions of space.

As Ahmed highlighted, feminist perspectives can have this effect, challenging and exposing the hidden assumptions in male writing that have historically claimed a universal position. As she puts it,

Feminist philosophers have shown us how the masculinity of philosophy is evidenced in the disappearance of the subject under the sign of the universal (Ahmed, 2006: 34).

But queer phenomenology also 'allows us to consider how the familiar takes shape by being unnoticed' (Ahmed, 2006: 37), which is not necessarily limited to patriarchal assumptions.

As highlighted in Chapters One and Two, feminist thought has often also had problematic

tendencies, such as generalising from the white, Western feminist experience (see e.g., Thomlinson, 2012; Lewis, 2013), or producing its own ‘straightening devices’ to keep people in (a normative) line (Ahmed, 2006: 66). Nevertheless, similarly to Ahmed (and others¹⁴⁵), I try to show that bringing queer and feminist theory into conversation, and particularly queer methodology into a critical relation with these feminist spaces of tension, can be a productive source of dis- and re-orientation for feminist thinking, here, particularly on space. I would argue that this is an especially necessary task in a space such as the Library, rich with histories of such tensions and exclusions – and where some of these tensions remain highly relevant today, as explored in the previous two chapters¹⁴⁶ – as well as with a focus on inclusion¹⁴⁷.

Therefore, queer phenomenology can provide a way of exposing and re-orienting away from the ‘universal’ and ‘straight lines’, including both when these tendencies are patriarchal and within feminist thinking. It thus illuminates different subject perspectives, particularly focusing on those of marginalised subjects who had been rendered invisible, and how they can open up new, more inclusive ways of re-orientating ourselves in space. Thus, bringing feminist, queer, and other marginalised perspectives into consideration on the social production of space enables us to view it – as well as feminist space – differently, (re)orientating it towards these viewpoints and lived experiences to build toward more inclusive conceptions of space and its production.

¹⁴⁵ Showden (2012), for example, showed how bringing feminist and queer theory together in the context of thinking about sex work can have useful implications. Also, as noted in a number of earlier chapters, Samer (2014), for example, applies this approach in the archives.

¹⁴⁶ See also the Library’s relatively recent statement on transphobia, which was a result not just of the organisation’s internal drive for inclusion, but the wider political context surrounding the issue: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/statement-on-transphobia-and-accountability/>.

¹⁴⁷ See the Feminist Library’s Community Policy: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

This approach thus facilitates disorientations from an assumed perspective – usually male, but here disoriented further, in the feminist context – helping re-frame space and our view of it from different perspectives, particularly centering those previously excluded from space and knowledge co-production, thus extending our perspective, widening our view, and enlightening a multiplicity of perspectives and enabling alternative pathways, which had previously been hidden. Queering, as Ahmed describes and advocates it, helps to disorient hegemonic assumptions around knowledge production and the production of space, challenging the absences of women and other feminist perspectives from key theories of space and making space for new perspectives. Here, the positionalities which particularly help queer include migrant and queer feminist voices, as they facilitate not just disorientations from the patriarchal hegemony, but also from universalising feminist perspectives. But it is important to note that these are not the only voices with this potential in the Library. Therefore, the research remains open-ended and an invitation to further discussion of the issues raised here (I will explore some of the opportunities for further research and activist discussions that this research opened up in the Conclusions). Queering thus, so defined, is a fitting method for critically analysing masculine space, as well as dominant feminist space, as it helps build a critique of both. This critique not only challenges patriarchal perspectives on conceptualising and producing space but also any feminist perspectives on spatial production with tendencies towards creating new hegemonies within feminism(s). This is a necessary task in a feminist space such as the Library, which is defined as intersectional and inclusive¹⁴⁸, and which must therefore be a reflection of the rich diversity in today's feminisms, especially considering its own history of exclusion and helping challenge any ongoing issues of feminist inclusion (both internally, in the space, as well as in feminism more broadly). This approach helps to expand the possibilities of

¹⁴⁸ As in the footnote above.

feminist space. Thus, queering is taken here to indicate a political act of challenging, disorientating, and unsettling the norm, reorientating, and changing, not just hegemonically masculine perspectives, but also a feminist ‘universal’, considering not just queer identity perspectives, but any others which provide a pertinent challenge to these normative lenses¹⁴⁹.

Further, as queer phenomenology can redirect ‘our attention towards different objects, those that are “less proximate” or even those that deviate or are deviant’ (Ahmed, 2006: 3), it can facilitate building a picture of the Library as a complex space, one that provides a feminist space of recognition, but also continues to be a work in progress, continuously challenged, disoriented, and changed through the different, changing voices contributing to the organisation over time. Chapters Five and Six helped to highlight this story of the Library as continuously queered, as a space that enables continuous questioning and transforming of its community and organisation by the changing voices of the movement and space. Building an understanding of the nature of the Library as a space of community recognition, but also the tensions within that space and the queering that these facilitate, therefore, shows how this process is one of continuously (re)negotiating an understanding of feminist space as complex and open. Therefore, the building of a queer conception of space is a continuous work in progress.

Here, the Library provides an example of what a ‘feminist revolt’ or alternative, feminist space might look like in practice, queering hegemonic (patriarchal, masculine) space, as well

¹⁴⁹ Although queer identities and related perspectives do provide several interesting points of disorientation in the analysis. It is also important to remember (while not limiting the definition to) the queer roots of queering. As Ahmed (2006) also highlights, this approach is informed by the understanding of how queer bodies often fit strangely (if at all) into (normative) spaces, producing disorienting effects. Similarly, here, I use my queer body/perspective as a starting point for looking at space, particularly feminist space queerly, while allowing other disorientations to also shape the analysis (and my perspective), for example, participants’ voices, engagement with Ahmed (2006), other critical feminist literature (e.g., Mohanty, 2002), and other sources.

as feminist space itself. This conception builds critically on Lefebvre's (1991: 410) concept of a 'feminine revolt' in/through space, which, although not precisely defined, stands in opposition to dominant, masculine, space, while also providing a queer disorientation of what a feminist space is, queering universalising tendencies in feminism, as outlined above. First, it offers a feminist critique of the hegemonic, patriarchal social production of space, highlighting some of the blind spots and results of exclusions, using an example of a feminist space. Second, it shows what a feminist alternative to this dominant space can look like and do, focusing specifically on the example of the Library. Thirdly, it offers a queering of this feminist perspective, highlighting some of its own exclusions. Thus, offering feminist and queer perspectives on the social production of space, this thesis expands (queerly) on the work of Lefebvre (1991), highlighting the crucial yet often overlooked role of marginalised perspectives and lives in the production of (feminist) space.

Below, starting with an outline of the key concepts and gaps in Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, I will then build on these from feminist and queer(ed) perspectives in the later sections of the chapter, showing why and how such a critique is both useful and necessary to building more inclusive conceptualisations of space. Finally, I will close the chapter by summarising its key contributions.

Research Question 1: How is feminist space produced? And what are the conditions of its possibility?

The social production of space

Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space provides a valuable source for scholars working on space across the disciplines - from organisation studies (e.g., Watkins, 2005) and accounting (e.g., Ghio and McGuigan, 2021), to geography (e.g., Kinkaid, 2020) and sociology (e.g., Lugosi, 2007) – helping build an understanding of space as socially

constructed and co-constitutive. The theory brought together previously separate conceptualisations of space – conceived, perceived, and lived. As Lefebvre outlined it, these represent spaces as they are designed by experts, as put into practice, and as directly experienced by their inhabitants, respectively – providing a framework for a more holistic understanding of space. For Lefebvre, it is only:

Once brought back into conjunction with a (spatial and signifying) social practice, the concept of space can take on its full meaning. (Lefebvre, 1991: 137)

The framework thus showed how the more symbolic or technical ways of conceptualising space overlap with and are co-constituted with social space. As Dale and Burrell (2008: 1) put it ‘through the adaptation of the physical world, the social and cultural worlds have also come into being’, and this process is mutually constitutive, as culture and society, in turn, co-construct the physical world. As Lefebvre also highlighted, space is produced socially and historically, meaning it can have varied results in different contexts.

Conceived, perceived, and lived aspects of space are thus portrayed by Lefebvre not as separate, but as co-constitutive parts of a whole, necessary for developing a full understanding of space. This understanding of space helps bring together previously separate, abstract ideas of space as imagined by experts with the lived experiences of it, as it is experienced on a daily basis by its participants, for a fuller understanding. In the section on the feminist production of space below, I will discuss each of these ways of conceptualizing space in relation to the Library.

As Lefebvre (1991: 129) also highlights, social relations are created in and through space, and indeed, are inextricably linked to the process of spatial production:

The social relations of production have a social existence to the extent that they have a spatial existence; they project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there,

and in the process producing the space itself. Failing this, these relations would remain in the realm of 'pure' abstraction.

Thus, positing that we cannot fully grasp social relations without understanding the conditions of their spatial production, Lefebvre's theory becomes particularly useful in building a better conceptualisation of the dynamics of spaces such as the Library, where feminist politics and organisation are deeply embedded in space.

Therefore, embodied, lived aspects of space are at the heart of Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space, as he tries to bridge the gap between abstract and lived space by recentering the body. Yet, despite this focus and attention to power relations that produce space, certain bodies do not seem to have much of a role in that production. Although Lefebvre (1991: 380) focuses on bodies and differences in the production of (counter)spaces, noting, for example, that 'genuine differences exist' among 'the masses', these 'masses' remain largely undifferentiated, as there is a lack of more in-depth engagement with these issues from the perspectives of the marginalised, especially women, migrant, and other 'Othered' bodies (see also e.g., Kinkaid, 2020). These are of particular interest here, as the thesis is concerned with feminist space, and as Lefebvre pays little or no attention to them in his work on the social production of space. I will expand on this critique and the relevant literature in the next section.

Finally, here, the concept of appropriated space, which Lefebvre (1991: 165) understood as 'a natural space modified to serve the needs and possibilities of a group that it has been appropriated by' is also useful in the context of the Library. In this context, the concept of (re)appropriated space, or what Lefebvre (1991: 167) referred to as a space of diversion, is particularly useful, as the Library space is reappropriated not directly from nature but, arguably, from patriarchal, capitalist domination (and it is only partly appropriated, as it

continues to negotiate its existence with/in it). The relevance of this concept is key here, as, as Lefebvre (1991: 167) also notes, the ‘diversion and reappropriation of space are of great significance, for they teach us much about the production of new spaces’. New spaces, in this sense, provide alternatives to capitalist and patriarchal forms of organisation and domination.

Thus, the space of the Library, as a feminist space, serves as a great starting point for building an understanding of what a feminist production and (re)appropriation of space can be. The section below will develop a more in-depth feminist critique of the social production of space, highlighting its gaps, and thus creating an opening for an exploration of the processes of feminist (and queered) production and reappropriation of space provided in the following sections of the chapter, which will also address the thesis research questions.

A (queered) feminist critique of the social production of space

Building towards a reconceptualization of the feminist and queer(ed) production of space, using the case of the Library, this section highlights the key relevant gaps in Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the social production of space, from feminist and queer perspectives.

As mentioned above, while providing an invaluable resource for scholars concerned with space, Lefebvre’s work on the social production of space largely fails to account for women’s and a number of other marginalised perspectives. Admittedly, there are fragments where Lefebvre (1991: 410) highlights and critiques the masculinity of dominant space, such as when discussing the ‘masculine virtues which gave rise to domination by this space can only lead (...) to a generalized state of deprivation’. But when he attempts to address the alternative, it tends to be in ways that are rather brief and binary, like when he speaks about an alternative to masculine spaces of domination as ‘uterine’ as opposed to ‘phallic’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 410). His work, therefore, risks reinforcing gendered stereotypes rather than challenging them. Although Lefebvre (1991: 410) also refers to, for example, ‘feminine

revolts' as a way of opposing what he sees as dominant, masculine space, he does not go very far in imagining what the spaces produced in the process could look like. In the brief moments when he does, what Lefebvre (1991) defines as feminine space appears, again, to encompass fairly essentialist views, perhaps inadvertently reinforcing the binaries that he sets out to challenge. He also asks, for example, 'Is a final metamorphosis called for that will reverse all earlier ones, destroying phallic space and replacing it with a "uterine" space?' (Lefebvre, 1991: 410). And although hinting that the answer is not that simple, he leaves the question largely open, moving on swiftly to other aspects of his analysis. Thus, the female perspective on space in Lefebvre plays a limited and largely symbolic role and requires more empirical investigation, as well as theoretical understanding and critique. Meanwhile, the binary nature of the language used by Lefebvre indicates a lack of attention to feminist (even less so, queer, although arguably unsurprisingly, considering the timing) perspectives, which are also explored in detail here.

There is a particular lived social perspective that Lefebvre focuses on in his critical analysis of space: that of the working classes. And although Lefebvre's conception of the working classes is broadly defined, encompassing 'differences of regime, country, location, ethnic group, natural resources, etc.' (Lefebvre, 1991: 64), he pays little attention to building an understanding of the lived experience or the role in the production of space of other marginalized groups, such as women. And although Lefebvre does note concerns about the alienating effects of the modern city, highlighting the disconnect between inhabitants and their engagements with space, he hints at, rather than exploring in depth, the tensions between these marginalised communities and city spaces, largely overlooking the ways these are gendered and heteronormative.

As a feminist space, the Library provides an insightful departure point for a (queered) feminist critique of these silences and assumptions, as well as a case study for the

reconceptualization of the social production of space towards a feminist production. As such, the rest of this section will focus on the feminist and queer literature providing further foundations for this critique and reconceptualization, before discussing how the study of the Library contributes to this literature.

Thus, this work also builds on feminist critiques of masculine hegemonic space across disciplines (e.g., Matrix, 1984; Nash, 2018; Kern, 2019), as explored in Chapter Three. These raise issues of, for example, gendered segregation of spaces, safety, and accessibility as key to feminist architecture, design, and planning; rather than focusing on a feminine/masculine aesthetics of space¹⁵⁰. Further, this work also builds an understanding of how alternatives to dominant, masculine, space can be materialized, lived, and experienced (see e.g., Ilett, 2003; Baines, 2012). Thus, while expanding feminist critiques of dominant, masculine space – and the social production of space – this work also shows how space can be socially produced otherwise, from a feminist perspective, which is also itself queer(ed). That is, it provides an analysis of space that is a challenge to both the dominant, masculine production of space and to exclusionary tendencies within feminism.

Some similar work, seeking to provide feminist and queer perspectives on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, has already been done in organisation studies (e.g., Tyler & Cohen, 2010) and other fields, such as geography (see e.g., Canham, 2017; Kinkaid, 2020), sociology (Lugosi, 2007), urban studies (e.g., Vaiou and Lykogianni, 2006), and at intersections of disciplines (e.g., Lelea and Voiculescu, 2017). Kinkaid (2020: 167) provides both a critique of the relative exclusion of marginalised lived experience in Lefebvre's (1991) work and an exploration of the potential of such inclusions to enrich the theory, seeking to

¹⁵⁰ It is not to say that similar (to Lefebvre's) critiques of 'phallic' space have also been made by feminists. Nevertheless, they often serve to prompt feminists' own critiques about associating particular architectural styles with masculinity or femininity as reinforcing gender binaries (e.g., Bondi, 1992).

actualise ‘the political potential Lefebvre attaches to differential embodiment in *Production*’. Using a critically phenomenological approach, Kinkaid thus highlights the lived experience of marginalized subjects, yet does so largely theoretically¹⁵¹. Canham (2017) takes a more empirical approach, using Lefebvre’s work on the social production of space to map out, and build an understanding of, the differential access to space and lived experiences of Black, working-class, queer women in Johannesburg, focusing particularly on how the production of queer space is constrained at these intersections. Lelea and Voiculescu (2017) use Lefebvre’s triad to explore how the existence of international feminist networks enables the production of feminist festival spaces in Romania. Meanwhile, Tyler and Cohen (2010) studied the experiences of women working in academia to explore how spaces play a formative role in the reproduction of gendered behaviours and norms in organisations, combining Butler’s (1993) work on bodies that matter with Lefebvre’s (1991) idea of representational spaces.

Despite this research, not much literature has used Lefebvre’s (1991) theory in the context of feminist space, while also applying a queer approach to build an understanding of a queer(ed) feminist production of space. Thus, the present work expands on the above-cited literature, seeking to actualise ‘the political potential in Lefebvre’, in a similar vein to Kinkaid (2020: 167), while building a specifically queer(ed) feminist perspective on the social production of space and highlighting otherwise overlooked, marginalised perspectives. By doing so, using Ahmed’s (2006) queer phenomenology, it manages to queer not just the social and patriarchal productions of space, but also feminist alternatives, highlighting and critiquing its own hegemonic tendencies. By focusing specifically on queering both the social production of space and feminist space, the present work adds a unique perspective to this literature, helping to build an understanding not just of what a feminist space is and how it is produced

¹⁵¹ This work also highlights the important links between Lefebvre’s theory and phenomenology (and Merleau-Ponty), already noted in Chapter Three.

differently from social space as envisaged by Lefebvre, but also which bodies are included in and which are excluded from its production. While previous work, such as that of Lelea and Voiculescu (2017), has already examined feminist spaces using Lefebvre's (1991) writing, it has not adopted this queer approach to also reflect on feminist spatial production more critically. Even if Lelea and Voiculescu (2017: 798) do refer to a 'pro-queer activist paradigm' in their work, 'queer' is used in their study largely as a descriptor of the organisation and space in their case study (Riot Grrrl movement and Ladyfest Romania), rather than as a concept underpinning their methodological approach. As such, while there is already some research on feminist spaces using Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space, the present work adds a queer perspective.

What these works have in common is that they take marginalised perspectives and bodies, particularly those marginalised in society and excluded even from Lefebvre's (1991) work, as a departure point for their analyses. Although, as mentioned above, Lefebvre (1991) certainly takes the role of bodies in the production and appropriation of space seriously, some bodies, particularly gendered, marginalised bodies, are not fully considered. Here, I thus consider the process and importance of a reappropriation of space from lived feminist and queer perspectives, to build an understanding of the Library space, as well as these lived perspectives, and their co-constitution.

Such complex processes of queering highlight the multi-layered challenge and contribution to the – social, dominant, and feminist – production of space that feminist space can offer; challenging the normative, exclusionary assumptions in the production of dominant space, the masculine, binary assumptions behind the theory of the social production of space, as well as any exclusive assumptions that may inform a feminist production of space. As Ahmed (2006: 20) further highlights, despite the disorienting effects of such an approach, meaning one can become lost at times, these moments can also 'be converted into the joy of a future

that has been opened up.’ Thus, queer and feminist alternatives to the hegemonic and masculine production of space can also enable a more future-oriented production of space. Therefore, similarly to the work of Ilett (2003: 143) on feminist libraries as gendertopias, which repositions spaces of feminist knowledge production as spaces for thinking about and producing the ‘otherwise’ and ‘providing a counter-balance to everyday society’ through alternative, feminist (spatial) praxis – this thesis also looks at the future-building potential of the Library. Specifically, here, the Library is explored as a (queered) feminist epistemic, political, socio-material, community, and workspace.

The rest of the chapter builds on this critique of the social production of space from feminist and queered perspectives, by bringing together the findings from the research on the Library with queer and feminist theory, as well as other literature, particularly organisation studies’ research on materialities and space, to produce a feminist (and queered) reconceptualisation of the social production of space.

Towards a feminist production of space

(Re)conceived and reappropriated feminist space

I begin the discussion of the feminist production of space with a consideration of the (re)conceived and reappropriated space of the Library, particularly thinking about the new space of the Library and its redesign process. These were explored towards the end of Chapter Five. The examples explored there, highlight how that gendered symbolism is less important in the process of redesigning the space than practical and political considerations, such as community voice and accessibility.

Although aesthetics and symbolism are also considered in the redesign of the Library – as the example of the conversations about the new dragon logo in Chapter Five shows – they are far from being the most significant. What comes through as clearly more important in this

process is co-creating a feminist space that is an embodiment of the organisation's political values¹⁵², with and for the community. Indeed, the significance of the dragon symbol only becomes clear when it raises important political questions of its own, about the precarity and importance of feminist history. Thus, the values designed and built into the new Library, such as community accessibility and voice, are expressions of its core feminist values and politics, rather than of gendered aesthetics. I would, therefore, argue that this design process challenges the idea of 'feminine revolts' as introduced by Lefebvre (1991: 410), replacing it with the idea of 'feminist revolt' space. It is a socio-material, political community space, challenging masculine/patriarchal ideas of space, where aesthetic and symbolic considerations serve as a means of expressing said politics, rather than some inherent or universalizing notion of 'femininity'.

Drawing on the work of Dale (2005), alongside Lefebvre's (1991) theory, highlights the role of social materialities in facilitating organisational processes and as co-constitutive of the dynamics of power relations within and of an organisation. This theoretical approach facilitates such a different way of thinking about a spatial 'feminist revolt'. In the Library, as the community gets involved in the production of feminist space, community building is also facilitated, with new connections being made. As highlighted in Chapter Six, it is a process that involves and affects communities at various levels: feminist, but also local communities which form new users, as well as posing important challenges. The lengthy discussions about design also noted in the last chapter show that community is a central part of the whole process of redesigning the Library, while the process also raises important questions about the definition of the community. As the Library is relocated, its community changes, offering new challenges, as well as opportunities for collaboration. The process of feminist spatial

¹⁵² See the Library's community policy for these: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

production is, therefore, also a process of feminist community production – one that is reminiscent of Lefebvre's (1991) claim about social relations as being created spatially.

This process is particularly key for marginalised groups that lack recognition, such as feminist and queer groups. Here, the work brings together Lefebvre's (1991) theory with Ahmed's (2006, 2017) queer and feminist work. While Lefebvre's (1991: 380) focus is largely on the working class or 'the masses', Ahmed (2006, 2017) clearly focuses on queer, women's, and racialised bodies, perspectives, and orientations, and their formation. For instance, thinking about how 'the queer subject within straight culture deviates' (Ahmed, 2006: 21) and how 'feminism helps you make sense that something is wrong' (Ahmed, 2017: 27), facilitates disorientations from patriarchal ways of seeing (and producing space) which often make women and queer people feel like deviant subjects. This process can open and reorient us towards ways of seeing from feminist/queer perspectives. Similarly, through the production of the Library space such (collective) processes of reorientation are facilitated, creating and building recognition with and for the community through co-production. Claims to space by precarious subjects become important acts of recognition and, inscribed in spaces such as the Library, they also gain some permanence and material substance, thus extending through both space and time. This highlights that bodies and differences are crucial to the process of feminist spatial production, as they are at the centre of the design process.

Such ways of producing space can have their frustrations; as Shirley, for example, highlighted (in Chapter Six), they can make the Library feel like a bureaucracy, through the lengthy and complicated process of decision-making. They are, nevertheless, crucial.

Community involvement at every stage of production ensures that the space becomes not just a conceived, but also a perceived and lived feminist community space. This means that the space is co-produced as well as inhabited by the feminist community. Having close alignment between conceived and lived community space is an important part of the feminist production

of space, as centering the needs of the community in the process of co-production of the space is part of what makes the space suitable for the feminist community. Rather than creating an illusion of this alignment – as Lefebvre (1991) suggests can be problematic in more hegemonic spaces – feminist space actively works on this alignment throughout the process to ensure that its communities feel part of the space. While I focus on the (re)conceived feminist space in this section, it already highlights how central community is to this space, and thus how deeply intertwined conceived and lived aspects of space are in the Library as a feminist space.

These issues also put Lefebvre's work in conversation with other feminist thinkers, including in design and architecture (e.g., Matrix, 1984), and urban planning (e.g., Kern, 2019), who have long postulated such, feminist, re-centering of lived experience in spatial design, with particular attention to female, queer and other marginalised bodies. Matrix (1984), for example, argued that a lack of consideration of women's needs in spatial design produces spaces that can be highly problematic for female users, limiting access and jeopardising safety. Similar arguments have been made more recently by Kern (2019), who also developed a critique of the use of limiting, binary definitions of gendered bodies and spaces. Bringing together these considerations, the new Library space shows how crucial lived, embodied experience is to the production of feminist community space by centering access and recognition issues in the re-design. Exploring feminist space such as the Library also shows how the alignment of conceived and lived space can be improved in design, particularly by taking such feminist considerations into account from the inception stage. Returning to some of the points made earlier in relation to the work of Kinkaid (2020) and others, the analysis of spatial production through a feminist lens shows how crucial the consideration of lived communities is to the production of (re)conceived feminist space. It is also important to note

here that the nature of feminist space is not fixed, but open, reflecting changing feminist communities, orientations, and imperatives. I return to this point in the next section.

For now, it is also important to highlight that the Library space is an example of only partly re-appropriated space, as the new Library is built for the community within a pre-existing, more mainstream frame (under the ownership of the local authority). Such re-appropriation offers a way of exploring the conditions of producing a feminist space within a more mainstream (hegemonic, patriarchal¹⁵³) space, as well as its limitations within this wider space. These limitations include an inability to redesign the space completely without external constraints, which might be similar to a lot of more mainstream spaces, but in the context of feminist space such constraints can have additional distinct, gendered, effects. This is exemplified by the lengthy negotiations between the Council representatives and the Library collective, which eventually (reluctantly) led to the Library's move into the new space. Nevertheless, this partial re-appropriation of space can still provide a way of envisaging feminist space, both within this frame and outside of it, as it allows us to see and experience feminist space in practice and remains an important, practical act of feminist world-making, especially as feminist spaces remain relatively rare, historically as well as today (see e.g., Uprichard, 2018; Kern, 2019¹⁵⁴). As the Library reappropriates hegemonic space as feminist to centre feminist voices and history, it challenges patriarchal domination in both spatial and knowledge production, while expanding space for alternatives. Further, as Ilett (2003), for example, showed, such spaces can present 'gendertopic' potential in that they represent not just alternatives to patriarchal knowledge and spatial production, but in terms of

¹⁵³ Although, interestingly, the local authority could also be argued to be in some opposition to these.

¹⁵⁴ Similarly for queer spaces, see e.g.: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/urban-lab/docs/LGBTQ_cultural_infrastructure_in_London_nightlife_venues_2006_to_the_present.pdf. And despite of, arguably, shifting dynamics (see e.g., <https://www.stylist.co.uk/books/feminist-bookshops-uk-london-second-shelf-history/255823>).

organisational praxis. I continue to explore the future-orientated potentialities of feminist space towards the end of the chapter, drawing further on Ahmed's writing on queer phenomenology.

As the above shows, the Library represents a feminist space that challenges and subverts masculine norms of spatial and knowledge production. This space is an alternative to masculine, patriarchal spaces of separation and domination, as a space that centres (feminist) community, its voices, and bodies, through a collective process of co-producing space that is accessible and inclusive. In turn, it is community that constitutes the key condition of possibility of feminist space, showing how community and space are co-constitutive. Thus, feminist spatial production presents a way of seeing how spaces of/for 'feminist revolt' may be conceived and co-produced, and what they enable, in terms of community recognition and feminist knowledge production, as well as envisaging feminist spaces/worlds more broadly. This feminist approach represents both a feminist challenge to dominant space, as well as a critical feminist perspective on the social production of space and Lefebvre's (1991) reference to 'feminine revolts'. Community recognition means that feminist communities can find as well as extend themselves in the space through the processes of spatial and knowledge production. Such an extension in/through space is also a way of further building feminist community and recognition, and space through and with it. As such, it is important to highlight here that not only is the process of recognition epistemic – as highlighted through the feminist libraries literature in Chapter Two and the analysis in Chapter Five – but it is also spatial, in so far as it is co-produced in and through space.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the above focuses on the new Library space, as it is a space that allows for an exploration of the process of the production of feminist space from its earlier stages. Nevertheless, much of the thesis otherwise focuses on the previous Library

space¹⁵⁵. Therefore, below I move on to discussing the perceived space of the Library, mainly using reflections based on the previous premises.

Perceived feminist space

Below, I continue to explore the socio-material and community aspects of the Library space, while also linking to the themes of work and epistemic space, particularly the latter, as the organisation is perhaps primarily perceived as that. The epistemic space of the Library emerges as one of continuous, agentic, creative, anti-hegemonic co-production of feminist knowledge by its participants. Also placing the discussion within the wider context of feminist and organisational aesthetics and materialities literature, the section focuses on the perceived Library space.

Beginning with the epistemic space, as it is at the core of the organisation's identity, as Chapter Five illustrated, the Library is not just a passive collection of feminist materials accumulated over time. Instead, it is continuously co-produced by its members in very concrete, material ways, as participants can 'inscribe' themselves into the space and, through it, into feminist histories. Importantly, these inscriptions are both collective and individual, as Eva highlights in the analysis chapters; indeed, the two can hardly be disentangled. This links, again, to what Lefebvre (1991) described as the creation of social relations – and space – through their projection in space. The Library is generally perceived as an epistemic space, and more specifically, as shown in Chapter Five, a living space of feminist knowledge and history co-production. Through this collective process of knowledge co-production, the Library communities and space are also produced. Therefore, not only is there a close alignment between its conceived and lived space but also between perceived and lived space.

¹⁵⁵ As most of the data was collected early in the period of transition to the new premises, thus at a time when most of the participants' memories of the Library were limited to the old space.

The knowledge and space are continuously, collectively, co-produced by its members, through feminist archives and materialities, in a process of everyday, agentic co-construction. Spatial production is thus an important part of the recognition-building role of the Library.

Thinking about how this epistemic, community work is done – and about its aesthetic, socio-material, and political forms – the Library helps further build an understanding of the everyday symbolic practice of space as/for ‘feminist revolt’. As mentioned above, it is a space that challenges stereotypical (masculine) ideals of femininity through design.

Moreover, as its aesthetics also represent disorganisation and chaos, particularly in the former premises¹⁵⁶, it can be said to be a site of outright rejection of stereotypical femininity, or at least one that materializes a blurring of the lines between the feminine and masculine. Again, in this sense, the Library can be understood as challenging and queering Lefebvre’s (1991) masculine take on feminine space, in a way that mobilises, and materialises, Ahmed’s (2006) methodology of queer disorientations. The Library space can allow us to reorient ourselves, moving towards new forms of knowledge and spatial production beyond patriarchal norms, placing the feminist subject at the centre (as in the example of ‘inscribing’ ourselves in the space), and creating new, alternative pathways and seeds/tools for feminist world(s). But it can also disorient what women’s work means by looking at its (messy) formation in the feminist space.

The Library is far from a standalone example of this type of challenge. It can be linked to the often messy, DIY aesthetics of feminism more broadly. As Piepmeier (2009) highlighted, it can be interpreted as a tribute to feminist history, as well as a way of creatively and accessibly connecting contemporary feminist communities. In thinking about feminist communities, it becomes apparent that this aesthetic is not just revolutionary in a

¹⁵⁶ Although some aspects of this persist, as explored in Chapter Six.

symbolically subversive sense; it also conveys active implications, such as creative freedom, community building, and accessibility. Further, as Caro highlighted in Chapter Six, the old, messier space of the Library also created an informal, relaxed, and welcoming setting for feminists to come in and engage with the materials – in contrast with more formal, institutionalized collections like the British Library. And, as Eva highlighted in Chapter Five, having this ability to engage with the materials freely also facilitates connections across generations of feminists and can even produce a conversational effect with/in the collections. Thus, these material connections provide a way of finding connections with the wider feminist movement(s), creating community and inclusion. Showing, again, how feminist materialities are deeply intertwined with questions about the role of the Library as an epistemic space of recognition and community, this also highlights the crucial role of physical space in facilitating these.

These connections are further complicated by deeper engagement with feminist literature. Ziarek (2012), for example, proposed that feminist aesthetics can symbolise not just connections with feminist history and community, or the revolutionary potential of challenging and subverting patriarchal definitions of the feminine; they can also highlight the historical losses experienced by feminists. The Library's stories also illuminate this aspect of the space and its materialities/histories. While, as Caro highlighted in Chapter Six, walking into the Library (especially for the first time) can become a powerful moment of finding recognition and belonging through experiencing its feminist histories and space, these can also be moments of mourning – following a realization that it is 'the space that she hadn't known before.' Although the mourning is a largely silent reflection in Caro's story (despite silences reappearing a number of times), such moments can also be disorienting, as the Library's presence is also a response to the historical erasures of women's and feminist histories, producing a 'haunting' effect, as historical absences often do; as also highlighted,

for example, by Gordon (1997). Some of these effects can be exacerbated by differential representations in the space, complicating the picture further, points I will return to in due course, below.

Beyond its epistemic and material aspects, the Library is also an important perceived space of community, as exemplified by its events and community policy¹⁵⁷. These provide an accessible, inclusive community space for those who need respite from the patriarchy or who want to connect with other feminists, as explored in Chapter Six. You do not need to read to use it. Some people even refer to it as a ‘home’ as a space where feminists can feel at home by leaving behind the everyday sexism of patriarchal spaces, connecting with others as they do so. Of course, even the feminist ‘home’ is not without its tensions. I will also discuss these in more detail below; for now, it is important to consider the Library as a series of lived feminist spaces. While multiple interconnections between the conceived, perceived, and lived spaces of the Library have already been highlighted, this is a particularly important aspect of the Library to discuss further, as it brings us back to some of the key points related to meaning-making and the precarity in/of feminist space, community, and work.

Lived feminist spaces

Drawing further on the work of Ahmed (2006, 2017) and Dale (2005), we can understand how the spatial struggles of and at the Library are played out in ways that materialise the dynamics of precarity and solidarity that shape both women’s everyday lived experiences, and the wider narratives of the feminist movement.

As noted before, understanding the Library as a community space provides insights into the conditions of possibility of both the space itself, and of the community and its materialities. As highlighted in Chapter Six, it is through feminist community solidarity that the space is

¹⁵⁷ See: <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/about/community-policy/>.

sustained, particularly through the most precarious times of crises. Here, Lefebvre's (1991) theory comes into conversation with both Ahmed's (2006, 2017) and Dale's (2005) work, to highlight the co-constitutive and precarious nature of feminist community and spatial production. While the precarity of the feminist space is what brings the community together in solidarity, this process also co-produces feminist communities. The Library space may need the community for survival, but the community also needs the Library, as feminist recognition is facilitated through the space it provides (and constitutes). As noted before, the sense of recognition is epistemic, found in the collections and intergenerational conversations, but it is also spatial, as the space, despite being precarious, can offer a sense of respite from the patriarchy, a safer space for feminists¹⁵⁸, as well as solidarity and hope for the community. As Gloria highlighted in Chapter Six, it also helps other communities through their struggles. Although this highlights the continuing precarity of these communities and spaces, it further facilitates the creation of alternatives to dominant spaces. Precarity affects both the community and the space, but it also brings them together in this process of socio-material co-production (although it has the power to separate too, a theme I return to below). Therefore, again, building on Dale's (2005) work, the thesis highlights how feminist (and community more broadly) space is co-constitutive with and of feminist communities and points of recognition.

Building on the work of Dale (2005) also helps explore how the dynamics of control and resistance play out differently in/through feminist workspace. Here, the feminist space, built with the aim of resisting and challenging patriarchal hegemony over knowledge production, also encourages its participants to voice other forms of resistance – rather than trying to overly control them. Therefore, the Library as a feminist workspace can also be said to

¹⁵⁸ Rather than a safe space, considering the struggles apparent inside (see e.g., Downes et al., 2016).

challenge stereotypical gender norms, both in terms of aesthetics and materialities, as well as its work practices. In contrast to Lefebvre's (1991) conceptions of femininity and masculinity, which, whether consciously or not, promote a rather binary, essentialist understanding of 'women's' or 'feminine' space, connected to ideas such as 'women's work' and private/public divisions of space, the concept of space as/for 'feminist revolt' challenges gender norms, as well as blurring such divisions (as also discussed in Chapter Three). As the recurrent issue of the dirty coffee cups, for example, shows (Fairbains, 1995), relative disorganisation and mess are prevalent in the space, challenging the stereotypical connections between ideas around certain types of 'feminine' ('house') work, cleanliness, and femininity. Resistance to doing free 'women's work' is a challenge to patriarchal values, blurring the lines between traditional feminine and masculine binaries in relation to work; but it is also a terrain of internal contestations. It thus appears that women who step outside of the space of patriarchal home and stereotypical femininity can be quite reluctant to play the stereotypically gendered roles, such as those of happy housekeepers, in other settings. What happens to gendered stereotypes in the feminist space suggests that space can play a key role in challenging and subverting traditional gendered norms and divisions. Thus, the reproduction of gendered roles is interlinked with the (re)production of gendered spaces.

Further, as Laura and Caro both highlighted, creative work and inspiration can also be fostered by the mess and relative disorganisation of the Library. This is in reflection of the wider literature on organisations and spaces of disorganisation as beneficial to creativity, for example, by Gabriel (1995). Similarly, the Library's organisational messiness is not simply a symbolic rejection of patriarchal divisions and stereotypes; it also facilitates creativity, affective connections, and community. Although the disorganisation might not necessarily always be a deliberate tactic, it is persistent over long periods of time, thus signalling that such 'mess' is an important part of the Library. Affective connections are crucial as they also

strengthen memory, making the organisation and its space and materialities important to its members, particularly former members, stretching the connections over time, as Laura, for example, highlighted in Chapter Five. Similarly to Shortt and Izak's (2021) work showing how organisational meanings and memory connections are marked on workspaces, the present work extends this observation to feminist space, where spatial 'time marks' and 'scarred objects' become 'memory anchors' (Shortt & Izak, 2021: 1688), as well as conditions of possibility. By strengthening the socio-material connection to the space, they extend the conditions of possibility of the Library (through, for example, former volunteers becoming long-term supporters).

Yet, the messiness can also be counterproductive at times, with unintended consequences, such as hidden hierarchy and exclusions, as Freeman (1972) for example highlighted. I return to these points in the next section, but it is worth just noting here that this also links to Ahmed's (2017) work on marginalisation and the uneven burdens of 'diversity' work.

In sum, the lived, perceived, and conceived feminist spaces are deeply intertwined, as feminist communities continuously co-produce the space, making them the key condition of possibility of the Library, and creating tools for both resistance and subversion of masculine gender norms and the 'feminine ideal' (Jefferies, as cited in Skelly, 2017: 3), as well as for fostering feminist creativity, recognition, belonging, and for the building of alternative worlds.

Therefore, in answer to the first research question, the production of the Library as a feminist space is interlinked with its role as a socio-material, political community, work, and epistemic space. The space is co-produced by its community, which creates its key conditions of possibility, while also co-creating its communities through a socio-material process fostering mutual recognition. The 'feminist revolt' space also challenges masculine,

hegemonic assumptions of spatial production by recentering marginalised experience, challenging boundaries between and aesthetics of femininity and masculinity, and producing alternatives. Although the process is also full of tensions and precarity, it nevertheless allows for the creative production of alternative space and enables community connection, recognition, and respite. The affective, socio-material nature of the space is crucial, as it enables the community to develop deep connections to the space, strengthening its conditions of possibility further.

Nevertheless, there are also ‘hauntings’ within this space that need to be addressed to build a fuller understanding of the (queered) feminist production of space within and through the Library. While feminist space can be said to be a space of queering already, through the processes of challenging, disorienting, and subverting hegemonic spatial praxis and knowledge production, it can also be ‘haunted’ by absences in representation or misrepresentations, raising important questions of who a feminist space is for and how it is a discernibly feminist space. Thus, processes of queering are necessarily perpetually ongoing. The next section will focus on these processes, particularly in relation to any taken-for-granted feminist ways of seeing and producing space, addressing the second research question.

Research Question 2: What theoretical resources help us to make sense of how the Feminist Library is produced and experienced as a feminist and queer community?

This section focuses on why queer(ing) the feminist production of the space is crucial to the production of the Library as an inclusive feminist space. To this effect, Ahmed’s (2006, 2017) work on queering and diversity is brought into conversation with Lefebvre (1991), to build an understanding of the Library as a space of queer(ed) feminist spatial production. By using Ahmed’s (2006) queering methodology, we can explore how feminist spaces dis-orient

hegemonic spatial arrangements, while also disorienting feminist space itself from any taken-for-granted definitions and assumptions. Therefore, I focus this part of the chapter on the key concepts of recognition and its ‘haunting’ and queering, disorienting assumed definitions and meanings of the feminist production of space from different perspectives found within the Library. I will therefore be using literature on ‘haunting’ (Gordon, 1997; Hesford, 2005; Freeman, 2005) alongside the work of Ahmed (2006, 2017) in this part of the discussion.

I believe the focus on queering is necessary because feminist movements change over time and so does the Library. This changing nature is, to a large extent, connected with the changing makeup of its communities. As the goal ‘to be inclusive of all feminisms, and particularly welcome those who have historically been marginalised within society as a whole, and within the feminist movement’ is enshrined in the Library’s community policy, it is crucially important that this process of building the space as an inclusive one is a continuous endeavour, addressing any areas of marginalization and exclusion, whether they are historical or ongoing. This process helps to build a sense of feminist recognition and community, as the Library is continuously co-produced by its communities. Yet, this process is not without its challenges, as it also exposes a differential nature of privilege, precarity, and marginalisation. In recent years, the key role of migrant feminists, such as the Spanish Book Club, in the remaking of the Library through difficult conversations highlights this, as noted in Chapter Six. In this sense, the Library can be described as a space of and for critical reflexivity, including collectively/collaboratively so.

The differential nature of precarity can lead to separations between these communities, as, as Lefebvre (1991: 99) highlights, capitalism has the ability to shift blame for the ‘sickness’ of its cities onto people, making them internalise systemic problems, leading to divisions between the precariat that ostensibly replace or cover systemic struggles and solutions. That

is, to an extent, the case with the local communities in Peckham, where the Library relocated to, creating tension, as it is seen as an expression of gentrification, as highlighted in Chapter Six. While local communities have engaged with the Library more over time – and vice versa – their initial aversion can be seen as symptomatic of the adverse effects of capitalist, patriarchal hegemony on space, which fragments movements, adversely affecting the production of alternative/reappropriated spaces. At the same time, as the established Peckham communities are suffering from the impacts of gentrification and are being squeezed out of their own space, it is perhaps not surprising that they are suspicious of new organisations moving in, exacerbating demand for space, even if there is potential for solidarity between these organisations.

Therefore, the Library as a space of recognition also becomes a space of continuous queering of that sense of recognition through difference, as different voices come to disorient, challenge, and change what the feminist space is and who it includes. Thus, the process of (queered) feminist spatial production is necessarily continuous and open-ended, as it needs to be critically reflexive, enabling it to transform, incorporating the changing nature of feminist and other concerned communities. As highlighted in Chapter Six, it is important to note that there are multiple communities involved in the process, beyond feminist ones, as the example above illustrates. This extends Lefebvre's (1991) work by highlighting how social space can be produced with more consideration of the plurality of bodies and perspectives concerned, by centering previously marginalised bodies and voices. In this case, feminist space is produced by centering feminist communities and values, such as accessibility, in part, by using a broad (and open) definition of relevant communities – but also by negotiating tensions that such changing boundaries of its communities can produce. As Samer (2014) highlighted, feminist spatial production needs to be necessarily open-ended, as we cannot predict what feminists or queer communities of the future will look like, or need.

As noted throughout the analysis, the absences or relative absences of some of the voices from the Library can have ‘haunting’ effects, which can lead to a further queering of the space. These are especially relevant to those still marginalized within (Western, English-speaking) feminisms and thus feminist spaces. Eva, for example, highlighted the personal impact of missing migrant ancestral voices from the Library. As their stories also show, a queering of recognition and feminist space is closely linked to these ‘hauntings’, as these can lead to the dis/re-orientation of the White, Western, English-speaking feminist ‘universal’, and potentially, to its re-negotiation and transformation by these voices. As before, the process is continuous and conversational, as archival ‘conversations’ lead to discussions in the community, which in turn facilitate material interventions.

It is important to note here that these ‘haunting’ moments take on at least two meanings in the Library: first, as highlighted before, and akin to Gordon’s (1997) absences or ‘seething’ presences; and second, denoting feminist histories which might sit uncomfortably together, similarly to Freeman’s (2010) and Hesford’s (2005) work. The present work expands on this scholarship, particularly feminist work on haunting histories (Hesford, 2005; Freeman, 2010) by working with a complex notion of hauntings. These hauntings are caused by both patriarchal erasures (and at intersections with other forms of domination) and by uncomfortable, yet at times deliberate, feminist mis-/under-representations of history and silences. Again, the Library’s feminist materialities and aesthetics, far from purely symbolic, provide crucial tools for challenging patriarchy and addressing these absences, for feminist and queer communities, knowledge, and space-building. These newly recognised voices can create their own ‘rooms’¹⁵⁹ and materialities with/in the Library, expanding its boundaries. While it is noticeable that the space facilitates this kind of change, the work of queering is ongoing, as this process is far from straightforward, because feminism and feminists change,

¹⁵⁹ Connecting to Woolf’s (1929) work again.

as noted above, and because further gaps continue to surface and require addressing. Thus, using Ahmed's (2006) definition of queering as disorientation from the assumed/taken-for-granted perspective, the queer(ed) feminist production of space can be understood as one that exists in a continuous process of co-production. It is not enough to create/produce a feminist space once; a feminist space of recognition is a work of continuous co-production and queering, as a response to the changing nature of feminisms – and their tensions – and to the ongoing precarities exemplified by these histories.

The concepts of recognition and queering are thus closely linked to the Library as a community space. Queering, importantly, here, is a process that enables different communities to affect, disorient, and transform the space from their different and evolving positions. As noted, for example, by Eva in Chapter Six, the Library is made up of diverse communities, which work together (as well as, often, autonomously) to co-produce the space. The Library could perhaps be more accurately described as, plural, spaces, 'rooms' or 'libraries', rather than singular, as in-between spaces such as the Spanish or Polish Book Clubs illustrate. These provide 'in-between' spaces of recognition for those who do not find these as easily in the core collective of the Library (or elsewhere in feminism). The point about autonomy is important, as it creates spaces for these constitutive communities within the Library to co-produce it, including through processes of contestation, as Gloria also highlighted in Chapter Six. These are important parts of the process as they allow for these places of difference to build and, in doing so, mobilise a sense of agency to co-produce the Library. Therefore, the feminist community queers and co-produces the space, but it is also co-constituted by the space, which helps to bring it together and build it. Or, as Dale (2005: 649) described it, the space and the organisational processes (in this case, of community making) 'are seen as mutually enacting'. This links to the concept of space of/as resistance introduced earlier. Importantly here, spaces of difference and difficult conversations, such as

the Spanish Book Club, are both encouraged and supported. This support is key for these sites of internal transformation and resistance, as the ability to have difficult conversations – both in the ‘in-between’ spaces of the Library and in/with the larger collective – is crucial to producing a transformative and inclusive feminist space. It is crucial that the larger community of the Library facilitates these conversations for this process to be effective. Hence, resistance and difference are also crucial to the co-production of feminist space.

The Library, thus, emerges as a space of transformation, negotiation, and tension, through agentic difference which is enabled through the ‘in-between’ spaces of the Library and through, often difficult, intergenerational, and intersectional conversations. Both Ahmed’s (2006) work on queering – facilitating dis- and re-orientations from entrenched feminist positionalities – as well as on work and diversity (Ahmed, 2017) is relevant here, as it is also important to highlight other internal challenges of these processes. As Ahmed (2017) shows, those who suffer from oppression are more likely to be burdened with extra workloads, often under the guise of building more ‘diverse’ workplaces, and that is more likely to affect those at intersections of marginalised positionalities. Similar issues can arise in feminist spaces. For example, while Eva highlighted many joys of working at the Library, they also noted it was important to talk about burnout, alongside the problems of invisible and extra work of migrant and queer feminists. Despite the transformative conversations and the inclusive, intersectional community policies, the Library continues to have issues, such as a relative lack of representation and visibility of migrant feminists in the workspace. Therefore, working with Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the social production of space from both feminist and queer perspectives allows us to build an understanding not just of the importance of these perspectives for building an inclusive approach to spatial production, but also of its challenges and the work that remains to be done, including in/through feminist spaces.

Therefore, the Library as a community space is closely interlinked with its work practices and space. The key issues raised through the Library's feminist work practices similarly center around who makes the space, as well as how. The production of feminist space can thus be confusing and disorientating as various notions of what feminist organisation is and should be, and who gets to decide, are negotiated in the space. Many of these questions are left open-ended since the organisation's rules are not always strictly defined. Returning to the concept of disorganisation, although potentially creative (e.g., Gabriel, 1995), such a lack of organisation can at times be linked, for example, to hidden hierarchies and inequalities (Freeman, 1972). Such inequalities are particularly relevant to those who already occupy marginalised positions and who can become even further marginalised by extra workloads, as highlighted earlier (Ahmed, 2017). Further, as Shirley's story highlighted (discussed in Chapter Six), such a lack of organisational structures can also appear as hidden rules and hierarchies, especially from the perspectives of relative 'outsiders', making it more difficult to understand the organisation and get involved.

In sum, and in answer to the second research question, the queer(ed) feminist production of space centres community and difference, but it also has multiple contestations, both internal and external. Theoretically, the present work not only brings Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space into conversation with queer phenomenological literature (Ahmed, 2006) and organisational materialities (Dale, 2005), but also that on contested spaces of feminism and hauntings (Hesford, 2005; Freeman, 2010), which highlights how feminism and feminist spaces are made up of difference and tensions, and Ahmed (2017) on the challenges of diversity work, which focuses on the precarious nature of feminist work, even in feminist spaces. These also foreground the importance of working with tensions for the creation of inclusive, reflexive, discursive spaces. Here, again, the mutual co-constitution of feminist space and communities of difference is highlighted, as the latter continuously co-

create the space, while the Library also provides ‘rooms’ for community building. While this work highlights how being disoriented in space can be painful, it also shows how it can create new paths and possibilities. Here, as gaps in knowledge are exposed, feminist space also creates opportunities for new knowledge production, facilitating change and world-building. A queer(ed) feminist space must, therefore, necessarily remain dialogical, open to negotiation and change, and have scope for listening to ensure that it is not unreflexively reproducing inequalities. The Library as a queered feminist community and workspace is continuously co-constructed through these kinds of negotiations.

The last section of the chapter focuses on the research question on the evolving nature of feminist space and the futurity of said space.

Research Question 3: How is the social-materiality of the Feminist Library evolving, and what is its potential futurity as a (queered) feminist space?

In this section, I start by examining the Library as a nomadic space, which highlights its ever-changing, hybrid nature, while exposing the problematic nature of the concept of nomadism from a feminist perspective. Moving through the material to temporal hybridity, the section explores the changing nature and futurity of the Library.

Understanding the nomadic nature of the Library from a queer perspective highlights it as a space that is in constant movement. While having dedicated premises, the Library also moves, resulting from both precarious living conditions and boundary-challenging transgressive feminist movements. The movements of and with the Library, constitute steps towards recognition of women and feminist history within the public sphere through the act of appropriating this sphere¹⁶⁰. The embodied, material nature of these various movements is

¹⁶⁰ Arguably, the FL could easily be argued to be part of the public sphere already, as a library (see e.g., Appleton & Hall, 2023). Nevertheless, as its activities in movement (from walks to protests) demonstrate, the public sphere is not yet as feminist as we might like to believe. Thus,

important, as shown by the Library's walks, and protests, explored in Chapter Five, for embedding the Library in the public sphere through different tools and tactics. Each tool might 'speak' to a different audience, therefore they all have a role to play in the wider project of reclamation and reappropriation of the public sphere for feminism. Thus, the crossing and blurring of boundaries by/at the Library signifies material and symbolic transgression against the dominant divisions of spaces into private and public, feminine and masculine.

Further, as Edda's stories of the Greenham camp, for example, highlighted in Chapter Five, through its movements, the Library continues to weave into the wider herstories of feminism(s), showing them as interconnected, and blurring further boundaries. These entanglements are both spatial and temporal, as the ancestors are ever-present in the materials, at times even 'speaking' through the materials as if they were alive even if they are not, as highlighted through Eva's stories. They show how deeply entwined these herstories are with the stories and the making of the feminist space and communities today. Thus, similarly to Freeman's (2010) concept of temporal drag – where the past has a constant pull on the present, but the present also queers the past – a queer feminist production of space is boundary-blurring in terms of both space and time. This challenges normative notions of time for feminist historiography, as well as highlighting the important role of organisational archives and histories as sources for organisational studies. Akin to the work of Liu and Grey (2018), these types of sources continue to inform organisational narratives, whether we are conscious of it or not, and are therefore of more than historical significance.

Thus, the concept of the feminist production of space also builds on the nomadic literature of feminists such as Braidotti (1994) and Boer (1996). As in Braidotti's (1994) writing, the

as McLaughlin (2014) highlights, the public sphere's role as a space/tool for world-building makes these transgressive activities an important part of the Library.

Library's nomadism is symbolic of feminist transgressions, connections, and networks, over both time and space. But it is also reflexive, highlighting the limitations of the nomadic freedom narrative, in ways that reflect Boer's (1996) concerns. As Boer (1996) notes, exploring the idea of nomadic spaces through different lenses can expose them as sites of privilege and unequal access. Similarly to migrant voices in the Library, Boer recognises the differential nature of privilege and precarity, highlighting that free access to public space and the ability to see these spaces as domains of freedom can be a sign of privilege. Therefore, the political and socio-material space of the Library shows how the (feminist) social production of space is not just a transgressive, anti-hegemonic process, but an entangled, material, precarious, and continuous one.

As Dale (2005: 672), highlighted, following Massey (1995), 'places are always already hybrid'; in other words, 'they have shifting identities which are shaped by the dynamic nature of social and cultural relations across space'. In a feminist space like the Library, this hybridity is highlighted in various ways: through the Library's movements and the connections to feminism that these inspire; through the changing makeup of the community in the space and their co-constitutive nature; or through the haunting effects of feminist materialities on the making of the space today.

Further still, building on the insights on the Library's social materialities, important questions are raised about the changing definition and nature of feminist archives. Edda's scavenging for the archival 'rubbish,' similar to Halberstam's (2011) scavenger methods, elevates everyday feminist materialities to the level of precious archives, even if they are not widely recognised as such, queering archival definitions and challenging hegemonic and feminist knowledge production standards. This is also reminiscent of Eichhorn's (2013) work on feminist zines as materials that do not otherwise sit comfortably in archival space (see also e.g., Salami, 2020). The present work extends this challenge to feminist materials and spaces

more broadly, blurring the boundary between everyday feminist archival materialities and what is seen as ‘proper’ feminist collections, what is considered archival and what is archived in organisational spaces more generally (and what is not), in an effort to expand the archival imaginaries that make up organisational materialities and meanings, as co-constitutive, to borrow from Dale (2005). Thus, the queer feminist production of space challenges the boundaries not just of space and time, but also of feminist materialities and knowledge production, expanding our notions of archives and other spatial and organisational materialities, blurring boundaries, and building an understanding of how meaning is made, socio-materially, by and for the community. And, as explored towards the end of Chapter Five, the changing nature of archival preservation technologies further blurs lines of archival definition. The continuity of these processes of blurring and queering is thus an important point relating not just to the nature of feminist space, but also to its futurity.

Further, the futurity of the Library is also closely interconnected with its socio-materiality and with its role as an epistemic, work, and community space. Looking at the hybridity of the Library, explored both in Chapters Five and Six, and following Foucault (1986), the space might also be called a heterotopia: both here and in the past, through the stories it contains, it is an in-between, liminal epistemic and community space. However, the space is also future-orientated as a community and workspace, continuously co-producing feminist knowledge, but also worlds more broadly, through feminist organisational praxis. The Library is more than a storehouse of feminist history; it is also actively co-produced, challenged, and transformed by its communities. Therefore, building on Ilett’s (2003) concept of gendertopia, it can also be understood as a feminist space facilitating the production of more feminist futures, while also challenging any straightforward divisions between pasts and presents.

At the same time, it is crucial to note, before closing this exploration of the hybrid nature of the Library, that its physical space also has a continuing and important role to play in its

(imagined) possible futures. The Library is a space that, in its physical form, connects people to feminist history, community, and materialities. It is its physical space that provides the ability to engage with the materials on one's own terms, which e.g., enabled Eva to forge ancestral connections and Edda to save archival 'rubbish', as discussed in Chapter Five. It is this space that enables a fuller connection to the feminist community, beyond that which is possible online, as Alice noted (in Chapter Six). Again, in a mutually beneficial relationship, the space co-produces the community, bringing it together and providing it and those who identify with it, with a sense of belonging. Therefore, the digital space cannot simply replace the physical, as my participants emphasized, even those who also highlighted the benefits of the former. Thus, a queer(ed) feminist production of space is also, necessarily (at least in the case of the Library), physical, even while its spatio-temporal boundaries continue to be blurred. Returning to Lefebvre (1991: 404), we might surmise that (feminist) 'social relations (...) have no real existence save in and through space', despite their ever-changing nature. Indeed, perhaps this is more evident now than ever after the pandemic has shown us more clearly than before the benefits of connecting through and in space. Despite the valuable connections that were made online during the pandemic, these cannot fully substitute what physical space and connection have to offer.

And, as some of the technological and ethical challenges of feminist preservation and publishing work show, this continuing need for physical connection and space is perhaps even more understandable in a feminist space. As in the exploration of the Library fiche or the discussions around the ethical issues of digitization, the study shows that the digital should not be fetishized as the future of organising, as many challenges are created by these technologies, even if they are designed to address them.

Thus, in answer to the third research question, the evolving nature of the Library shows how a (queered) feminist production of space happens in a liminal space, where boundaries of

space and time are challenged, between private and public space, but also between pasts, presents and futures, as well as taken for granted socio-material boundaries (as with definitions of feminist archives). At the same time, the consideration of privileged forms of feminism also points to the limits of nomadic expression. The feminist space becomes an important space for finding recognition and envisaging feminist futures, while it is also, continuously intertwined with the past in complex ways. While it is an already-hybrid space (both in spatial and temporal terms), its physical form continues to be highly important, again to its pasts, presents, and possible futures. The ethical challenges explored and the physical connections to the community and materialities highlighted by my participants show why the Library remains a physical space, at least for the foreseeable future.

Summary

In summary, this work provides a reconceptualization of Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space from a queer(ed) feminist perspective, first by challenging masculine assumptions present both in hegemonic space and Lefebvre's socially produced alternative, and second, by extending the challenge to the feminist production of space itself. Space of and for 'feminist revolt' is posited here as more than a feminist space challenging masculine forms of spatial production; it simultaneously builds feminist representation and recognition, and queers – disorienting, challenging, and changing – spatial and organisational forms for feminist work and community. Understood in this way, queer feminist space is continuously co-produced socio-materially, transformed by and for feminist and queer communities. As 'each society (...) produces a space, its own space (...) offers up its own peculiar space,' and 'ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production' (Lefebvre, 1991: 31, 44), so the feminist space considered here becomes a microcosm of and a building block for what a feminist society may look like. To build this space for envisaging feminist and queer futurity, the Library re-appropriates hegemonic

space, which makes it a site of tension, but also of challenge, transformation, and possible (re)construction.

Focusing on the perceived space of the Library highlights the nature of the Library not just as a co-produced community space, but as a space of respite and creativity for the feminist community. The creativity, produced alongside and through the Library's 'chaos', helps to showcase how feminist space challenges and blurs the distinctions between masculine and feminine space. It is also closely interlinked with lived feminist space, where feminist work not only challenges stereotypes around 'women's work', but encourages resistance, creativity, and affective connection. However, importantly, precarity and marginalisation are also highlighted in these processes. Therefore, the exploration of the perceived and lived space of the Library builds on the organisational literature on social materialities (Dale, 2005), and disorganised spaces and creativity (e.g., Gabriel, 1995), as well as feminist thinking on precarious work (e.g., Ahmed, 2017) and aesthetics (Ziarek, 2012).

A queer(ed) feminist production of space, in turn, and in answer to the second research question, also builds on queer and feminist literature on 'haunting' materialities (Hesford, 2005; Freeman, 2010). This production is intergenerational, ongoing, dialogical, and open to change and working with being dis/re-oriented and transformed by tensions and differences. The process of a queer(ed) feminist production of space is an entangled one; it is collective and intergenerational, and at times full of tensions and 'haunted' by the past. Crucially, queering provides a key analytical concept throughout the thesis, not just because the space queers dominant conceptions of space and knowledge production, but also as a disorientation of any stable notions of what a feminist space/community is or should be. Such disorientations are necessary in a feminist space that aims to be inclusive and that must, therefore, participate in an ongoing and open process of listening to different voices,

particularly those previously unheard. This process needs to, necessarily, remain open; as Samer (2014: no pagination) highlighted:

Should gender, sexuality, and desire be completely restructured in a feminist and queer future, the surviving subjects will not be us either. However, if we understand that we have allies in 1970s feminisms in this process of imagination, we can begin to revise ‘re-vision’ and read, watch, and listen to this history differently.

Throughout, thus, recognition and queering are core threads that help make sense of and weave the story of the Library as a queer(ed) feminist space and as a space that queers (social production). The concept of queer(ing), as it is defined by an anti-normative drive (Ahmed, 2006), is both helpful for disorienting and challenging dominant space, as well as feminist space, especially if the latter falls into the trap of contributing to the creation of hegemonizing versions of feminism. It is also defined by a future-oriented understanding of queer and queering (Samer, 2014; Muñoz, 2009). It helps to build an understanding of the queer(ed) feminist production of space that enables recognition and world-building engagement for a diverse range of feminists.

Thus, placing Lefebvre’s (1991) theory of the social production of space in conversation with queer feminist thinkers like Ahmed (2006), and with people’s lived experiences of the Library, provides fertile ground for a critical, reflexive queering of the concept of the social production of space, by challenging and subverting dominant, particularly masculine/patriarchal notions of space, as well as disorienting feminist space itself. One could also argue that it is only through such queering that the social production of space gains a new and necessary social dimension, as the space of the Library is produced from the lived perspectives of women, queer people, and feminist migrants.

In answer to the final research question, the space also appears as both hybrid and nomadic, even ‘always-hybrid’, as shown by the exploration of its technologies over time. Yet, despite its ever-changing nature, its physical form is still undeniably needed by its various communities, especially those in particularly marginalised, precarious positions.

Finally, it is also important to note here that the present work does not attempt to create *the* model of a feminist organisation. As Ilett (2003), for example, shows, there are different ways of approaching this task, and these are arguably all necessary, in reflection of the richness of the feminist movement(s).

In summary, bringing feminist and queer perspectives to previous (masculine) conceptions of space has interesting and disorienting effects on said space. First, it disorients gendered (masculine) assumptions around knowledge production and the production of space, challenging the absence of women and feminist perspectives in key theories of space. By challenging and dis-/re-orienting them, it makes space for new (feminist, queer, migrant) perspectives, which have not previously had many opportunities to make space. Finally, and crucially, it blurs spatial boundaries and highlights the multiplicity of these perspectives and their co-productive, and disorienting, potential in and impact on feminist space, queering feminist perspectives on space. Through building an understanding of the past, present and future possibilities of feminist (and other alternative) space, a queer exploration or re-reading of Lefebvre’s (1991) work enables us to build on and expand our understanding of the conditions of possibility of feminist and alternative spaces. In the final part of the thesis, its conclusions, I will bring these points together.

Conclusions

This final section brings together the key findings and conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions of the thesis. It also highlights some of the main limitations, connecting these to possible avenues for further research.

The thesis started with the question of whether feminist space matters, and if so, in what ways, taking as its starting point its continuously precarious position, particularly in London, as the setting of the Feminist Library. I was especially interested in this topic as an activist embedded in the Library and witnessing its precarity as a worker and volunteer, and wanting to develop a deeper understanding of the situation through research. The research led me to a much larger story of spatial precarities and struggles of/for feminist and community groups and libraries. This situation seemed counterintuitive, considering the widely evidenced importance of these spaces (see Roman-Velazquez, 2014)¹⁶¹, yet it quickly became evident that it was part of a larger political struggle for space and the right to the city (see e.g., Lefebvre, 1991, 1996; Harvey, 2012). Therefore, the work also explored the changing nature and production of feminist space, particularly at this time, with its associated socio-political and technological changes.

Crucially, the study also became an exploration of the important role of difference in the feminist space of the Library – vital conceptually and methodologically, facilitating disorientations from my taken-for-granted assumptions. Such disorientations expanded the meaning of feminist space, acknowledging the importance of multiple and changing

¹⁶¹ For more on this in relation to libraries, see also e.g.: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/reflections-libraries-foreword-by-bjarne-hammer-9193229.html>; and relating to women's spaces, e.g.: <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/the-case-for-sustainable-funding-for-womens-centres/>; regarding community centres, e.g.: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lse-london/how-is-gentrification-impacting-contemporary-london/>; and in terms of queer spaces, e.g.: <https://theconversation.com/the-queer-city-how-to-design-more-inclusive-public-space-161088>.

perspectives to its understanding. Methodologically, the thesis contributes to a queering of research methods in organisation studies by suggesting ways in which archives could be used more ‘conversationally’ – enriched by triangulation with autoethnography and interview methods; thus, blurring both spatial and temporal boundaries. Empirically, it expands (queered) studies of feminist materialities, knowledge spaces, and organisations.

Conceptually, the work contributes to the growing body of scholarship on space in organisation studies, particularly expanding feminist, and queer perspectives on the social production of space by Lefebvre (1991). Below, I synthesize the key contributions of the thesis chapter by chapter.

Chapter One provided an introduction to the Library, including key points in its history, its foundational principles, and core values today. The chapter set up the organisation’s important role as an epistemic, political, work, and community space, also providing important analytical foundations for conceptualising the Library and for the rest of the thesis. It also provided an important starting point for the wider literature review on feminist knowledge spaces in the following chapter.

Focusing on the importance and role of feminist libraries and archives more broadly, Chapter Two expanded on the above introduction. Considering this wider context of scholarly work on feminist knowledge spaces was important as it highlighted the crucial role of these in challenging the proclaimed neutrality of patriarchal knowledge, in building alternatives, and as sites of community and recognition. Thus, the chapter foregrounded the important discussions on community recognition, co-production and queering of feminist epistemic spaces in Chapters Five to Seven – and some of the key contributions of the thesis. As the Discussion Chapter then highlighted, building on this literature and the research findings of the thesis, the study of the Feminist Library expands this area of study by focusing on their role as community spaces of recognition, co-production, haunting and queering. By

challenging a simple definition of feminist community and noting the important role of haunting materialities in feminist epistemic spaces, the Library highlights that feminist knowledge spaces are sites of continuous co-production and queering, affected by the changing nature of feminisms, the resulting tensions and negotiations. As such, the thesis builds on queer feminist literature on epistemic spaces (Eichhorn, 2013; Freeman, 2010; Hesford, 2005) by exploring their crucial role as spaces of community, but also hauntings and queering, enriching feminist knowledge and space production and embracing the necessary tensions of the process.

Chapter Three, in turn, introduced Lefebvre's (1991) work on the social production of space and the relevant Organisation Studies literature building on it, setting up the conceptual framework for analysis further. The chapter also engaged with feminist and queer perspectives on space beyond those focusing specifically on epistemic spaces. Together, these bodies of knowledge helped set up the conceptual framework of the analysis of the Library as a feminist epistemic, material, political, community and work space that is socially produced and in the process of continuous queering, bringing Lefebvre's theory into conversation with Ahmed (2006) and other queer and feminist thinkers. This provided a useful framework for addressing the Research Questions of the thesis in the Discussion Chapter, exploring the changing nature of the Library, its conditions of possibility, and futurity. In terms of key conceptual contributions of the thesis, this chapter's literature also grounded the feminist and queer analysis of the social production of space, which formed the core focus of the Discussion Chapter. As I then explored in the Chapter Seven, feminist spatial production poses a challenge to the binary boundaries of masculine space and spatial production. It re-appropriates masculine space for an alternative, feminist spatial production, as well as futurities, in a process of continuous co-production by and for feminist communities. As such, the thesis contributes to Organisation Studies literature using the

social production of space (e.g., Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Dale, 2005), particularly from feminist and queer perspectives, focusing on how a (queer) feminist space is produced and how it challenges and provides an alternative to normative, masculine space. Further, the thesis also contributes to queer research on space more broadly (Ahmed, 2006; Burchiellaro, 2023), as well as feminist aesthetics literature (e.g., Ziarek, 2012) by focusing on queering feminist space and the challenge it presents to any homogenising understanding of feminism and feminist space, and by combining previously largely separate feminist aesthetics narratives. The feminist space becomes a complex symbol of both feminist community and recognition, both feminist history and loss, both mess and organisation (and more).

Further, the present research expands on feminist studies of organisational processes and their challenges (e.g., Freeman, 1972; Ahmed, 2017), particularly highlighting the open-ended, and necessarily continuously so, nature of feminist organising, reflecting the changeable nature of feminist movement(s) and, by extension, of feminist spaces. This changing nature is also impacted by developing technologies landscape, although the Library is also positioned as an always-hybrid organisation in this context.

Chapter Four, focusing on the research methodology, included the thesis's epistemic, ontological, and conceptual foundations, its aims, and the methods used, as well as reflections on the ethical and practical implications of my positionality in relation to the Library. The chapter also provided further links to the importance of queer theory in the research, particularly its methodological implications, thus foregrounding the methodological contributions of the thesis. Highlighting the important role of archival methods in the research, the chapter also helped ground the thesis' methodological contribution in terms of queering the archive as 'conversational' and thus activating archival methodologies for Organisation Studies. Expanding Liu and Gray's (2018) notion of a feminist 'space in history', the analysis builds an understanding of how organisational identities are co-

produced socio-materially and dialogically over time, and how revisiting the past can shape the way organisations are co-created contemporarily. The use of archives was key here, as it produced conversational effects, highlighting the active role of history in the co-production of feminist space, knowledge, and community – and supporting a view of the archive as a ‘living’ matter (see also Lee, 2022).

As these archival encounters often had ‘haunting’ effects – for example, bringing ‘to life’ the voices of ancestors found in the archives – the research also contributed to feminist and queer literature on historical ‘hauntings’ (Freeman, 2010; Hesford, 2005), highlighting the tensions apparent in these ‘conversations’, alongside their transformative potentialities. As these conversational effects were also reiterated in some of the interviews and autoethnographic reflections, it is not just the archives, but the combination of these methods that helps highlight the important role of archival materialities in the study of epistemic spaces as sites of co-production, recognition, ‘hauntings’ and transformation.

As methodologically, I was especially informed by queer phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006), it enabled me to work reflexively with disorienting moments in my data analysis, continuously challenging my pre-existing assumptions, and embracing the multitude of disorientations in these encounters. This meant that I could enjoy and learn from these, even while, or perhaps precisely because of being challenged by them¹⁶². It is crucial to note here that these moments were not rare but rather formed a continuous thread throughout and co-produced the thesis. The disorientations provided by my participants proved central to the thesis and to my co-productive methodological approach, (re)orientating my positionality and subjectivity in trying to do this work reflexively, while being led by many of the insights gained from my

¹⁶² I especially appreciated this methodology, as, as an undergraduate, I struggled deeply with such moments when writing my dissertation. Instead of appreciating these rich moments of learning from my participants, they frustrated me. I wish I was taught about queer phenomenology then.

participants, as well as the archives. For example, thinking with and through some of the insights from my participants (particularly Eva and Gloria) helped me to work towards de-Westernising my own feminist perspective, as a Polish feminist largely whose life experiences and ways of understanding have been largely shaped within the UK context, and formed the basis of my reflections on the nature of the Feminist Library communities. I had similar reflections about my queer identity, as I explored at more length in the Methodology and Analysis Chapters (Chapters Four, and Five/Six respectively). These disorientations led me to explore my identity as a Polish, Eastern European, queer, migrant feminist woman in more depth, through literature in the Library and academic scholarship (e.g., Graff, 2003; Koobak & Marling, 2014; Karkov & Valiavicharska, 2018)¹⁶³, as well as a reflexive diary. The use of queer methodology thus facilitated a move away from and queering of a number of my taken-for-granted perceptions of the Library and informed one of the major contributions of the thesis, the queering of a feminist production of space.

I am, therefore, immensely grateful to my participants, the literature, as well as my supervisors and other colleagues for offering such fruitful insights, which have become sources of disorientations and queering, and have proven central to the making/co-production of the thesis as it is: as a deeply entangled piece of work, an amalgamation of my own and my participants' reflections on the Library, as well as a personal learning journey. It is hard to imagine, for example, what the thesis would have looked like without Edda's 'rubbish' or Eva's ancestors (to which I come back again and again in the analysis). Thus, I see the PhD as a co-creative process of queering and becoming. It would be difficult to overstate the co-

¹⁶³ Particularly the reflections of Karkov and Valiavicharska (2018) struck me as analogous to the case with my participants, especially those belonging to the Spanish Book Club, as their insights allowed me to see new similarities between our perspectives and opportunities for further collaborations.

creative role of my participants in this process, as they have influenced not just the shape of the thesis, but also the way I think about the Library and my subjectivity more broadly.

The findings presented in Chapters Five and Six outlined the key aspects of the Library as an epistemic, political, socio-material, community, and work space that transpired from the research, following the framework developed in the literature chapters. The findings thus contributed to the expansion of research on feminist epistemic spaces, importantly by not just highlighting their well-recognised role as knowledge and community sites, but also their key political, socio-material, and work aspects.

Further, as highlighted in Chapter Five, the Library's epistemic space emerged not just as an agentic site of feminist knowledge production and recognition, as the participants were encouraged to actively inscribe themselves in it, but various tensions and 'hauntings' also emerged in this space, highlighting gaps in feminist histories and spaces, and the need for their queering. The Library's political space was both embodied and deeply entangled with the wider feminist movement, as the participants' stories often also highlighted such feminist connections – past and present, symbolic and more material. This, again, highlighted the spatiotemporally disorientating nature of the Library space – and its queering potentialities. The socio-material space of the Library, again, provided another rich source of deeply disorientating and symbolic stories. While the Library's dragon may be symbolic of feminist histories, it is also a symbol of their continuing lack of recognition and precarity, as at times they became 'lost' even within the organisation itself. Closing with an exploration of the changing nature of the Library over time, the chapter also highlighted the Library as an always already-hybrid space, as well as the continuing importance of its physical site, enabling many affective connections to be made and sustained that the participants highlighted.

In Chapter Six, I explored the Library as a community and workspace, and their importance for the organisation's condition of possibility, helping to sustain it through its spatial crises. Differences and tensions emerged as key to the Library's organisational transformation, providing important challenges to the status quo, and because, as an inclusive, intersectional feminist space, the Library must pay attention to different feminist voices to fulfil its promises. The space also provided respite from spaces of patriarchal domination.

Disorganisation and technology issues provided some of the other sources of tension, but I also show how these have the potential to become the basis for creativity and transformative dialogue. Again, the Library emerges here as a site that is both hybrid and remaining, importantly, physical, to preserve community as well as the materiality of feminist work.

In the Discussion chapter, Chapter Seven, bringing the above analyses together with key literature, I addressed the research questions and highlighted the conceptual contributions made by the thesis, as noted above. To summarise again, crucially, building on Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the social production of space by drawing on feminist and queer perspectives, the chapter highlighted how feminist and queer(ed) space is reflexively, critically co-produced. A feminist reading of Lefebvre also helps to highlight how feminist epistemic space can challenge dominant knowledge and spatial production while building its own alternative. Meanwhile, a queer perspective enriches the analysis further, as through the introduction of new and different voices, the uniformity of the idea of feminist space is continuously challenged, disoriented, and transformed. This process is not straightforward, as multiple tensions and 'hauntings' became apparent. Yet, these were also key to the transformation of the Library as a space of inclusion and feminist futurity.

Through the Discussion chapter, I also highlighted how the thesis contributes to feminist aesthetics and nomadism literature (e.g., Boer, 1996; Ziarek, 2012), as well as queer and feminist archival literature, all highlighting the (spatially and temporally) boundary-

challenging nature of feminist materialities (e.g., Freeman, 2010; Eichhorn, 2013). Through embracing the liminality and disorientations woven into organisational space, I emphasise how a queering approach has the potential to challenge hegemonic boundaries and assumptions, building on the transgressive nature of feminist aesthetics and materialities. In such spaces, resistance to control can be seen as both a transformative and a creative force. While building on Gordon's (1997) and Hesford's (2005) work on hauntings and ghostly encounters in the feminist space helps us to understand how the Library produces itself as a space of transformative recognition, by bringing together a range of different voices, both spatially and temporally. While the physical space of the Library remains important, its growing digital presence adds to these effects, making the Library an increasingly hybrid space.

As I noted before, this was also an activist research project. Below, I highlight the key activist contributions of the PhD, before closing by reflecting on some further research opportunities opened up by the process.

Activist contributions

From a more practice-oriented, activist perspective, the research sought to contribute to the expansion of knowledge highlighting how this continuous feminist production and reclamation of space might create and build the conditions of possibility for feminist (and community) spaces. As Gloria highlighted in Chapter Six, the Library's success in the most recent spatial struggle in the context of London gentrification provided a source of hope for other communities experiencing similar struggles, expanding their conditions of possibility. However, as Burchiellaro (2023) also noted, the challenges of building alternative spaces in the existing political climate are manifold and continuously evolving, including capitalist takeovers and co-optations of community spaces and agendas. Therefore, I hope this thesis,

along with other (both academic and non-academic) publications resulting from this research, will contribute to this critical project of expansion of the conditions of possibility of feminist/alternative spaces, and to what Kern (2019: 166) termed a feminist ‘city of possibility’ – extending spaces of safety and inclusion for women and other marginalised subjects, but also of alternative forms of community, anti-hegemonic living, and being.

I plan to work with my participants to co-produce workshops, discussions, and (non-academic) publications to make the findings of this project accessible to individual organisers and activist groups, alongside academic audiences, and to effectively contribute to this goal of expanding the conditions of possibilities of feminist and other community spaces, for I believe that:

Struggle does not aim at mastery but at a transformation that puts the active back into activism as an ethical and a political project which will destabilise the autonomous subject in favour of liminal, dynamic, contingent, and embodied subjectivities (Daskalaki and Fotaki, 2017: 149).

Following from this and considering how fruitful my experience of working with my participants’ insights and with queer, reflexive methodologies has been, I am also proposing to start with a discussion (possibly developing a series of discussions) with the participants and others at the Library to explore other uses of the thesis that might be beneficial for the organisation, and for other feminist, queer and community spaces more broadly. These discussions could, building on the findings and the queer methodological journey, also include others who could benefit, for example, the broader Polish and migrant feminist networks. These broader discussions could explore, alongside the Library and feminist spaces, the identity-shaping qualities of English-speaking feminisms, particularly at this point in history, considering the growing transnational activist networks, but also the renewed

onslaught on migrant and other communities (see Guma & Dafydd Jones, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019; Shankley & Rhodes, 2020).

As the PhD was an iterative process of continuous conversation and reflection throughout, challenging and changing my image of the Library (as well as myself) it made queering part of my everyday feminist practice beyond the research methodology. I will thus always be indebted to my participants, supervisors, and other colleagues for challenging me to the extent that the thesis was changed profoundly. Without them, I would not necessarily have been able to produce both a feminist and queer(ed) picture of the Library, which I believe will contribute in rich ways both to the knowledge and practice of feminist spaces and organisations. As Holman Jones (2016: 231) put it:

Together, queer theory and queering practices aim to create change—in ourselves, in our relationships, and in the world.

Continuing this process, I am working with my participants to produce further activist impact. I am planning to work with some of them on putting some of the key takeaways of the analysis into practice through more hands-on interventions, such as expanding the Library's archives of migrant voices, following conversations with Eva and Gloria. This could be done, for example, by connecting to some of our living 'ancestors' and exploring their unrecognised collections. These types of interventions could help to expand the Library's meta-archive in valuable ways, supporting a queering of the space in the process. Further, building a digital archive of feminist stories could provide another way to expand this (with the extra permissions, as necessary, of course)¹⁶⁴. This also raises the question of

¹⁶⁴ This could be done by working with the current stories of my participants to start with, expanding to the digitised, and beyond. I have also started having conversations about a digital archive with Hannah Dean at the University of St Andrews, combining this work with her work on female entrepreneurship.

the permeable nature of the methods used, as participant interviews have the potential to become an oral histories archive, and part of the larger archival collections of the Library, blurring the boundary between the archival sources and the other methods used.

What is more, I believe that one of the most interesting avenues for further exploration, particularly in relation to discussions with archivist communities, is linked to the changeable and changing nature of the (feminist and otherwise) archive in the digital era. As archives are increasingly digital, access to them may become easier for some, but not necessarily for all, as highlighted before through literature and Edda's story, as discussed in Chapter Six.

Importantly, the assumptions underlying this process can make it more difficult for materials to be collected, as the archive is assumed to be already (digitally) 'there', rather than proactively archived/produced. Thus, discussions of what is and, importantly, what is not included in the (feminist) archive, particularly in the digitisation era, can form an important wider activist-epistemic contribution of the project.

Limitations and further research opportunities

As with any research, this work has some limitations – which also provide excellent further research opportunities. Much research, both on the Library and on feminist spaces more broadly, remains to be done, and the thesis does not claim in any sense to be comprehensive.

First, the time limitations meant that not all of the Library's archives were reviewed and that not all initially intended participants were interviewed. While it is perhaps not realistic to think that all possible perspectives on the Library could have been covered in this thesis, considering the nearly-50 year history of the organisation and the time-limited nature of the project, it could have been beneficial to include some more contemporary perspectives on the Library if time permitted. As noted in the Methodology Chapter, the interview method can provide a somewhat biased view of a topic, considering the specificities of participants'

perspectives and their often-performative nature in the interview encounter. Although triangulation helped with some of these challenges – also helping address similar limitations of the autoethnographic method and bring archives ‘to life’ – more interviews are also planned at the next stages of the project, providing an extension of the findings and analysis presented in the thesis, with a particular focus on some of the perspectives not covered here.

The timing also means that this work represents a snapshot of a particular time in the organisation’s existence. The context of transition from one space to another provided a key focal point for the interviews and the observations, and thus the thesis. Hence, much of what has been written here speaks mainly about the Library as it was either before or during the transition from one setting/building to another, although much historical context has also been covered. The post-transitional picture was much more difficult to grasp here, due to the timing of most of the data collection. As such, I think the question of the longer-term viability and the conditions of possibility of the Library post-transition would provide an excellent starting point for further research on the organisation. It would be of interest to place this question within the wider context of feminist and alternative spaces, as the Library speaks to the broader issues of their conditions of possibility, crucial to consider at this point in history when the current forms of living are widely challenged by the multiple crises of all types of alternative space¹⁶⁵, as highlighted before. Therefore, following submission, I am planning to seek funding for post-doctoral research, focusing on feminist spaces and their conditions of possibility more broadly, and placing the Library within this wider context. This research could further be put into a broader framework of research on alternative spaces and organisations and used as an educational resource for the study of such alternative forms and their potentialities.

¹⁶⁵ As well as the wider context of the crises of living and care, also currently being called into question; see e.g., Bunting (2020).

Further, the time and space limitations of the thesis meant that the analysis and discussion did not incorporate all the findings from the data analysis, but simply a carefully considered selection. For example, I decided to keep the stories that most disoriented my perception of the Library, such as Edda's exploration of the archival 'rubbish', as it highlighted the in-the-making nature of the feminist archive. Meanwhile, for instance, my detailed observations of the new Library, as it is situated in its new premises in Peckham, and the symbolic significance of it, will make excellent material for complementary papers, I hope.

Returning to the activist contributions discussed in the previous section, I think it would make for an interesting and important piece of queer feminist research, for both academic and archivist audiences, to focus on finding more queer stories in the Library. I believe they could be an insightful source for challenging organisational storytelling at the Library and feminist narratives more broadly, expanding further on the theme of haunting feminist encounters.¹⁶⁶

This research avenue could also make a useful contribution to wider archival practice, as it raises critical questions in relation to approaching and managing archives of queer and challenging histories. In addition, future research aiming to further explore some of these concepts and issues in the Library could also usefully focus more specifically on certain voices, such as Black and trans people in the archive, which have been historically silenced.

Other potential future research avenues could include the affective impact of language, and particularly the domination of English in the Library (and libraries and archives more broadly), on migrant communities and their experiences of the space. Although this thesis has already benefited enormously from the insights of the Library's migrant volunteers and workers, the research focus could be expanded further through a more dedicated project on the topic engaging a wider range of volunteers and workers from various diaspora

¹⁶⁶ Indeed, I have already presented a paper on this topic at the UCU LGBT+ research conference 2023.

communities¹⁶⁷. Similarly, other markers of difference could also be made more of a focal point.

As such, there is rich potential for multiple papers (as well as at least one book) to be generated from this research, alongside and complementary to the thesis. I am looking forward to exploring these and various other possibilities for further research and publication generated through the whole project.

In summary, although this research makes several theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions – from reconceptualising Lefebvre’s (1991) work on the social production of space from a (queered) feminist perspective, to enriching the perception of what a feminist space and archive is – many opportunities for further research remain. Following more than three years of PhD research dedicated to this project, preceded by several years of informal research, I remain excited to continue the work of developing a deeper understanding and expanding the conditions of possibility of feminist and other anti-patriarchal, queer spaces.

¹⁶⁷ For example, including the recently developed Algerian connection (partly as a result of a presentation I gave on the Spanish Book Club – linking back to the activist impact of the research), which may lead to the creation of a new book club at the Library soon.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Consent Form

Participant Consent form for Research Project: “The Art of Herstory Keeping: The Feminist Library’s Archiving and Organisational Practices”

Dear participant,

This research is being carried out by Magdalena Oldziejewska under the supervision of Prof. Melissa Tyler and Dr Louise Nash.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the researcher.
The answers which you provide will be recorded through audio recording.

Please see the attached Participant Information Sheet for details about the study and your rights as a participant.

Yours,

Magda Oldziejewska

<u>Statement of Consent</u>	<u>Please initial each box</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided in the Participant Information Sheet dated 01/03/21 for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had any questions satisfactorily answered. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. If publications or reports have already been disseminated, these cannot be withdrawn, however, these will only contain anonymised or aggregated data, unless I have explicitly opted to include my name. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained (unless I have explicitly opted to include my name). Appropriately anonymised data might also have to be shared with members of the PhD examination team upon request, in order to support the assessment process. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I understand that my fully anonymised (unless I have explicitly opted to include my name) data will be used for a PhD student dissertation and research publications/presentations. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I understand that the data collected might also be used to support other research in the future and that it will be fully anonymised unless I have explicitly agreed to include my name. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I give permission for the data to be stored in the form of (anonymised/named – as agreed) transcripts and audio/video recordings. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree for this interview to be audio recorded. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I agree to participate in the research project, “The Art of Herstory Keeping: The Feminist Library’s Archiving and Organisational Practices”, being carried out by Magdalena Oldziejewska. 	<input type="checkbox"/>

When using my personal interview data the research may (please delete as appropriate or specify):

- Identify me by my name and role in the organisation.
- Identify me by my full name only.
- Identify me by my first name only.
- Not identify me by my name and endeavour to preserve my confidentiality.
- I would like to be identified as (please specify) _____

Participant’s signature

Date

Researcher’s signature

Date

Appendix 2

Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet for Research Project: “The Art of Herstory Keeping: The Feminist Library’s Archiving and Organisational Practices”

Dear participant,

I, Magda Oldziejewska, am currently carrying out a piece of research entitled, “The Art of Herstory Keeping: The Feminist Library’s Archiving and Organisational Practices” under the supervision of Prof. Melissa Tyler and Dr Louise Nash, as part of my PhD research thesis.

We are investigating the Feminist Library, focusing on its feminist practices and their challenges, as an example of a feminist organisation and knowledge and community space. The aim of the study is to contribute to the knowledge of feminist organisations, feminist spaces and feminist libraries, as well as of the feminist movement. The study will be conducted using in-depth interviews with volunteers, former volunteers, workers and former workers of the Feminist Library, as well as using observation and archival research.

This information sheet provides you with information about the study and your rights as a participant.

What does taking part in the research involve?

The in-depth interview that you are asked to take part in will be an oral interview, it will be about an hour long, it will take place via an online platform such as Zoom or over the phone and it will be voice recorded. You will be asked questions about the Feminist Library, its space, working practices and the impact and challenges of those, and your perceptions of them.

Do I have to take part?

Naturally, there is no obligation to take part in the study. It’s entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to give consent to take part. If you decide to participate in the study and then change your mind in the future, you can withdraw at any point, even after the data has been collected. If publications or reports have already been disseminated, these cannot be withdrawn, however, these will only contain anonymised or aggregated data, unless you explicitly agree to have your name included. If you wish to withdraw from the study at any time, please contact the researcher on the details below.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept securely on a password protected computer and will only be accessible by the researcher. However, this research forms part of my studies at the University of Essex and therefore may be subject to scrutiny by other University staff in determining the outcome of my degree.

If you are mentioned individually in any publications or reports then a participant number or pseudonym will be used and identifying details will be removed, unless you explicitly agree to have your name included. A list may be kept linking participant numbers or pseudonyms to names, but this will be kept securely and will only be accessible by those listed above. A copy of the information which we record about you, but not other participants, will be provided, free of charge, on request.

You will be asked if you would like to include your name alongside your interview data but unless you specifically opt to do so your name will not be included in any published data or resulting research. You may also be asked to provide some demographic information for analysis purposes. Data collected through this questionnaire will be anonymised and you will not be individually identifiable in any reports or publications from this research, unless you explicitly opt to do so.

The research data will then be retained for a period of at least ten years after the completion of the project, in accordance with academic standards. Due to the in-depth nature of the data and the research setting, the data will NOT be made available for re-use in accordance with the relevant academic

standards in order to adhere to the assurances made to participants regarding anonymity, and to which participants have agreed using the Consent Forms (attached). At the end of that period, the data will be permanently deleted from all computer(s) that it had been stored on.

Are there any possible disadvantages or risk of taking part?

The time that you are dedicating to giving the interview, which is provided voluntarily.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your participation will help contribute to the bodies of knowledge on feminist libraries and spaces, as well as feminist practices and organisations.

What is the legal basis for using the data and who is the Data Controller?

The legal basis for processing the data collected from this project is informed consent. The Data Controller for his project is the University of Essex and the contact is Sara Stock, University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part, please contact me, the primary researcher at mo20879@essex.ac.uk, by end of December 2021.

Who is funding the research?

The research is self-funded the researcher (who is supporting her research using a Student Finance England loan).

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of your research be submitted in part fulfilment of my PhD programme. They might also be used for publications, such as journal articles or conference papers / presentations. Any results will be anonymised and you will not be identifiable, unless you specifically agree to have your name included. Upon completion, the PhD thesis will be stored in electronic format on EThOS, the British Library's e-thesis database. A copy of the findings of the study can be made available to each participant upon request.

Who has reviewed the study?

I have applied for ethical approval to undertake this study. My application was reviewed and approved by the Social Sciences Ethics Sub-Committee at the University of Essex.

What happens if something goes wrong?

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain, or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been treated during the course of this study then you should immediately inform the student and/or their supervisor (details below). If you are not satisfied with the response, you may contact the Essex Business School Research Ethics Officer, Dr Maria Hudson (mhudson@essex.ac.uk), or the University of Essex Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (sarahm@essex.ac.uk) who will advise you further.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

We would be very grateful for your participation in this study. If you need to contact us in future, please contact me (mo20879@essex.ac.uk) or Prof. Melissa Tyler (mityler@essex.ac.uk). You can also contact us in writing at: EBS, University of Essex, Colchester CO4 3SQ.

You are welcome to ask questions at any point.

Yours,

Magda Oldziejewska

Appendix 3

Interview Schedule

1. First, I'd like you to tell me your story of the Library (how did you find it; how did you get involved; how do you feel about it?). Feel free to talk at as much length as you'd like.
2. Could you tell me a bit more about your experience in the Library? Specifically thinking about, how it feels physically being in that space and using its materials? And what kinds of feelings does it bring up? (Follow-up question about changes during COVID if not covered. And about the comparison of the materialities of the new and old Library. And about specific memories of the space(s). Ask participants to share pictures of any particularly meaningful memories/objects mentioned.)
3. What do you think the role of the Feminist Library is? Why is it important? (Follow up question about the shift online if not covered.)
4. Can you talk about your experience of working as part of the Feminists Library? I mean the practices, and how you experienced them. (Follow-up question about the community of the Library if not covered already.)
5. Is there anything there that you thought about since we started talking, that you would like to add/might want to talk about?

Appendix 4

Participant Information Table

Participant number	Participant name	Participant pseudonym (if applicable)	Participant's relationship to the Library
P1	Lisa Beck	n/a	Friend of the Library
P2	Caroline Smith (Caro)	n/a	Former fundraiser and Writer in Residence at the Feminist Library
P3	Anonymous	Laura	Former volunteer at the Feminist Library
P4	Anonymous	Shirley	Former member of the design team of the Library in Peckham
P5	Anonymous	Edda	Member of the curatorial team at the Library
P6	Anonymous	Gloria	Volunteer, Member of the Spanish Book Club at the Library
P7	Eva Megias	n/a	Volunteer, Member of the Spanish Book Club at the Library
P8	Sarah O'Mahoney	n/a	Former Administrator at the Library
P9	Alice Thompson	n/a	Former Administrator at the Library

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