Abstract: Inequality is the pervasive structural characteristic of academic knowledge production. To dismantle this inequality, the challenge raised by prefigurative politics which is based on an ethos of congruence between means and ends must be taken up by the International Journal of the Sociology of Language. The IJSL’s peer review process, its academic conventions and its access model can potentially be spaces for concrete practices that prefigure parity in academic knowledge production.

Keywords: inequality; knowledge production; prefigurative politics
teaching-only sector are tasked with the socially reproductive but not surprisingly, devalued care work of teaching (Cardozo 2017). The production and circulation of academic discourse, however critical of social inequalities it may be, is built on these hierarchical systems and relationships. Unless these hierarchical systems and relationships upon which academic knowledge production largely depends on are unsettled and undone, deeply entrenched inequalities of class, race, gender and language will continue to be reinforced, reproduced and exacerbated globally, locally and – we do not talk about this as much nor as often as we should – within the academe itself (Kubota 2020; Mohanty 2003).

The rich scholarship that has sought to fundamentally change the inequalities of knowledge production has often focused on recognizing the epistemic basis of such inequalities, in the belief that by thinking differently, by critically questioning and challenging what is conceived of as knowledge, by shining the light on what and who is marginalized and silenced, we can influence or change how people think and therefore, what people do. This is extremely important work, and even if much has already been said and done in this regard, much more work remains to be done to struggle against, for example, the historical forgetting (Tupas 2008; Veric 2020) that is inscribed in epistemologies of knowledge and that animate the logics of academic knowledge production. But we must also recognize that even more work remains to be done to narrow the gap between our thinking otherwise and our acting otherwise (Kumaradivelu 2016). We cannot continue to shine at intellectual elaboration, even as business goes on as usual (Kandiah 2003). We cannot continue to theorize and be critical of societal inequalities, without also recognizing how the relationships in the academe which shape knowledge production (e.g. between professors and students, between institute directors and staff, between senior and junior faculty, between editors and associate editors, between peer reviewers and authors) continue to be largely hierarchical. We cannot continue to write, read and engage with critical scholarly works that excite us, that inspire our thinking and our desire for social change without also facing the uncomfortable fact that oftentimes, what we write and what we read are the very fuel of an academic publishing system which limits access to knowledge. We cannot continue to debate the geopolitics of academic writing (Canagarajah 2003) without also confronting how we do so through academic articles that use academic conventions (e.g. academic discourse written in standard English, the citation of relevant and recent research, etc.), the successful use of which is contingent on the availability of certain material resources (Canagarajah 1996).

I believe that in order to narrow the gap between thinking and acting otherwise, we need to ask the difficult question of whether the means we rely on for addressing inequalities within the current system of academic knowledge production are still
consistent or coherent with our ends of unsettling the system. This is part of the challenge raised by prefigurative politics which is based on an ethos of seeking congruence between means and ends, and which ultimately decenters and even eliminates the privileging of the attainment of the ends in order to focus on the process (Dinerstein 2015). The term, “prefigurative politics” emerged in the New Left (of Europe) in the 1960s and 1970s. It represented a break from “Old Left” practices which focused on structural and economic determinants while “[…] failing to address how people in movements for social justice often relate to each other in oppressive ways” (Cornish et al. 2016: 115). It is guided by the idea that radical social change requires creating and experimenting with the kinds of egalitarian practices, democratic spaces, and alternative modes of relating that anticipates a future society that cannot be realized yet (Cornish et al. 2016: 115). Prefiguration is a practice “[…] through which movements’ actors create a conflation of their ends with their means. It is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society” (Maeckelbergh in Dinerstein [2015: 17]).

What would prefigurative politics mean for the International Journal of the Sociology of Language (IJSL)? We know that academic journals are embedded in and vital to the unequal system of academic knowledge production that we seek to change. Within this system, prestigious and established journals like the IJSL are considered to be among the key gatekeepers of knowledge. As such, it is a powerful actor within the system of academic knowledge production. It has some of the most important means and mechanisms for (re)distributing forms of social and symbolic capital that are recognized by the academe and that in turn, underpin the division and the hierarchies of academic labor. It is within these conditions, with their limitations and their potentials, that academic journals like the IJSL operate.

If the IJSL wishes to prefigure academic knowledge production, it must ask whether its means, mechanisms and practices for producing, legitimizing and circulating knowledge are consistent and coherent with its ends.

First, is the blind peer review process coherent with an ethic of parity in knowledge production? The blind peer review system is built on the myth of meritocracy that is pervasive in the academe and that, as an ideology, promotes cut-throat competition while preventing the scrutiny of precarity within it by “obscuring the need for structural reform in holding up individual-level concerns and strategies (Zheng 2018: 238). In the context of the peer review process, a manuscript is supposed to be evaluated based on its scholarly merits alone. However, we know that the current system of knowledge production favors those who already have access to the right resources (e.g. the most “current” or “up-to-date” research publications, English proficiency, exposure to the genre of academic writing, etc.) and who have been socialized into “the game” of academic publishing. Instead of a blind peer review process that continues to
promote the myth of meritocracy within the academe, can the peer review process be a space for thick solidarities between peer reviewers and authors, solidarities that are not based on notions of shared suffering but that “[...] mobilizes empathy in ways that do not gloss over difference, but rather pushes into the specificity [...] of experiences” (Liu and Shange 2018: 190)?

Second, are the academic conventions that are valued by the journal and that are communicated to its readers, authors and reviewers through its evaluation criteria consistent with unsettling the unequal structures of knowledge production? Among these conventions are the citation practices that are allowed and valued by the journal. Citations are supposed to be about opening and creating conversations, but citations are based on exclusive notions of authorship that operate within a capitalist logic of individual claims to the ownership of knowledge, a logic that can warp into indiscriminate self-promotion, a logic that erases the collective dimension of academic knowledge production. Can the journal be a place where we can experiment with collective knowledge production, beyond or even outside of the never-ending politics of citations? Can the journal be a space for generosity instead of exclusive ownership?

Third, is the access model of the journal consistent with democratizing knowledge? The IJSL is not an open access journal even as open access holds the promise of making knowledge widely and freely available. However, within the academic publishing industry, open access does not actually mean free. It means that authors pay considerable amounts to journals to publish their own articles in an open access platform. Outside of the academic publishing industry, free access (just like paid access) might entail the unpaid and invisible academic labor of scholars in precarious positions. Furthermore, the democratization of knowledge does not automatically guarantee democratic, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative relationships within the journal itself.¹ The choice of access model is very important but, in the struggle to find creative means to democratize knowledge (see Blommaert 2014), how will the journal value academic labor given the different positions that its editors and reviewers have in the academe? What kind of relationships will the journal engender between its editors, its peer reviewers, its authors?

The intellectual work of challenging the epistemic basis of inequalities of knowledge production needs to be accompanied by concrete practices that undo the structural incentives to reproduce the current system of academic knowledge production. The journal could be part of the process of experimenting with and

¹ For example, see Flaherty (2018) for the controversies around the HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory.
trying to figure out together how to act, labor and care in prefigurative ways within the academe. The IJSL could be a space where it is not business as usual.

References


