ACCESS

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Writing the
field of equity

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Cover image: Kira Jovanovski (2020), grunt_iteration 02 in the boughs and stamped: installation in University Gallery. Photograph by Jedidiah Cranfield. (c) the artist.

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Kira Jovanovski (2020), playground in iso: installation.
Photograph by Kira Jovanovski. (c) the artist.

Kira Jovanovski is a practitioner in spatial installation and architecture. The images included here are from an immersive exhibition, sensory echoes (2020) that comprised a collection of works and experiments exploring our somatic experiences of built form via the senses and was developed in situ over the course of the exhibition.

The work was developed as part of Kira's PhD research, Interruptions: An exploration of the body's movement and memory in architectural space, through site specific installations, mapping and works on paper, which is situated in the space between architecture and art and investigates ideas of embodied perception, the body's afterimage and memory, kinesthetic learning and latent aspects of space. Attempting to articulate what at the surface is ungraspable and obscured. The work in this exhibition considers the way that our sensory perceptions, through our physical activity informs our spatial readings.

EDITORIAL
Writing the field of equity

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Introduction

This inaugural issue of *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, builds on the ground laid by *International Studies in Widening Participation*, while taking new directions. The journal is increasing its focus on challenging injustices in diverse contexts of worsening inequalities despite years of equity policy in higher education. In foregrounding the concept of 'access' we are committed to producing a body of work that both troubles and advances equity commitments. As well as raising significant questions about access to what forms of higher education and for whom, the journal is concerned with wider debates about access, including access to writing and publishing in the field of equity in higher education.

Part of this project involves engaging with a diversity of voices and perspectives, methodologies and theories which foreground a concern for disrupting the dominant forms of representations of and in the fields in which the knowledge of equity is produced, formed and contested. The journal thus welcomes contributors at early and advanced stages of their careers and applies broad understandings of equity issues, which includes how class, dis/ability, gender, geography, faith, nation, race and sexuality intersect. The journal encourages contributions which critique and challenge academic conventions, bringing to light different ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies and formats. Such aims and commitments have shaped this first issue – a special issue dedicated to *Writing the field of equity*, authored by the new executive editorial team. This is our invitation to readers not only to engage with our pieces but also to author your own, contributing to these ongoing debates and issues that shape the field of equity in higher education.

Our intention with this inaugural special issue is to open a space where the struggles for access, what is being accessed and participation in higher education can be articulated, debated and troubled. We hope you read the issue through the lens of the dilemmas and challenges you negotiate in relation to access, equity and writing, and that the issue raises new questions that you take up as contributors to the future shape of the journal, and the field, across a range of diverse international contexts.

More specifically, *Writing the field of equity* grapples with questions of what we write about and why we engage in writing, who is included/excluded in such processes and how the politics of

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knowledge-formation and representation play out in writing practices. The issue is concerned to align our editorial and writing practices with the social issues explored in our writing: writing (and being published) as a privilege. We consider the gendered, classed, raced and linguistic power relations that enable the claim to know and the legitimisation as an author, which requires access to higher education and to academic codes and networks. Access to writing is related to inequalities of time, place and space, requiring that we pay attention to the histories, temporalities and geopolitical spatialities in which whole groups of people have been excluded from authorship. This raises the ongoing question of who (and what) gets 'silenced' through publishing processes (or even before writers engage with the publication process). This is a complex web and requires close attention to the intricacies of exclusionary practices that make it possible to have an 'authorial voice' and to write about certain issues in particular ways, including attention to the role of networks, peers and supervisors, editorial practices, prestige cultures such as league tables, gatekeepers and the discourses at play at certain moments in time and space that are (mis)aligned with particular value judgements (that are often deemed as neutral). It is also the case, of course, that authors can continue to be silenced when published, for example through the politics of citation and what and how contributions are differently (and unequally) valued and judged.

Equity is a polysemous, multifaceted and contested concept. It is often translated in narrow terms as counting individuals from targeted policy categorisations of social disadvantage (such as low socioeconomic status) who have enrolled in and/or progressed through higher education. It is sometimes associated with deficit discourses that focus the problem of equity on what students from disadvantaged backgrounds supposedly lack (such as aspiration, study skills, confidence). Equity has been weaponised in its appropriations by conservative agendas, with some examples including narratives of dumbing down, lowering of standards, and the minimisation of structural racism and sexism. This often co-exists with some acknowledgement of social privilege and advantage in relation to patterns of higher education access and participation (including what and where students study in relation to social privilege and advantage) but justifies this through meritocratic discourses tied to potential and capability.

Equity in higher education has also been represented though social justice perspectives, including for example Nancy Fraser's multidimensional social justice framework, which holds together the often disparate threads of redistributive, recognitive and representative justice (Fraser 1997, 2003 & 2009). This is in sharp contrast with policy narratives which have been selective in their focus, with policy interventions often economic in nature (for example, through the provision of bursaries) and, increasingly, cultural (as exemplified by the recent Clapping for Carers campaign in UK), but rarely concerned with political and affective equalities. A growing body of work draws from Fraser's multidimensional social justice framework to reframe access, equity and widening participation in higher education (Burke 2002 & 2012; Bozalek & Boughey 2012; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek 2017; Bozalek et al. 2020). Social justice approaches to equity also emphasise the need to understand inequalities in higher education not only as measurable barriers but as affective lived, embodied experiences (Burke 2002, 2012 & 2017; Leathwood & Read 2008; Read 2011; Brooks & O'Shea 2021; O'Shea 2020). Research has brought attention to the lived experiences of groups that have been largely ignored or constructed as 'the problem' in equity policy and literature, such as refugees (Stevenson & Willott 2007; Tsegay 2021) or carers (Brooks 2015; Moreau 2016). The politics of representation has been a key concern of critical researchers including how policy categorisations such as low socioeconomic status overshadow and exclude from view the identity positions of (for example, working class) communities (Threadgold, Burke & Bunn 2018; Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020). The growing policy concern to evaluate equity and the ways evaluation methodologies often misrepresent

those participating in equity programs has also been a key concern of social justice approaches to equity in higher education (Lumb 2018; Bennett & Lumb 2019; Lumb & Burke 2019).

These multidimensional social justice perspectives are highly significant in examining writing the field of equity, as 'good' academic writing has often been constructed as apolitical, decontextual, disembodied and devoid of emotions. They show instead that access to the written form (and, *a fortiori*, being published) constitutes a form of privilege which reasserts classed, racialised, gendered and linguistic power dynamics. Suffice here to remind how archives are often populated by stories narrated by and about the White, male and middle-upper class citizens – less so of the marginalised, associated with other aurality. Academic writing in particular can be exclusionary as it relies on gatekeeping processes and specific linguistic codes to which all do not have access (Moreau & Galman, this issue). These codes are built deeply into the representations, forms, content and style of our writing. The papers within this special issue explore the empirical and conceptual dimensions of how writing is in and of itself an exclusionary practice and an act in the production of exclusion, marginalisation and social inequality.

Reflecting on representation

One of the key issues raised in this special issue is who has access to representations: to defining what kinds of groups and categories exist in the world, what features and what aspects of their character are salient. The group *is as it is*, an 'ontological slippage' which allows the reader to assume the reality of the group represented. This is a dangerous slippage in such a politically contested domain as equity and inequality. So quickly can those deemed 'underrepresented' be marginalised from the representations of themselves. These are replaced with sterilised 'docile bodies' (Santos 2014, p. 152), a narrow identity made to represent the aspects of a person deemed relevant by the professionals who oversee, regulate and evaluate the suitability for higher education access. Representations (such as low socioeconomic status) are often engaged in higher education at a sufficient distance from the people being represented to forget the subtlety and nuance of lived experience. It rounds off the complex edges and polishes away the blemishes and inconsistencies to produce a neutral, inoffensive representation. From this, we can infer and conject all the different symbolically violent notions that our power might allow.

Bunn (this issue) draws attention to this as a serious concern through exploring who has access to representations in equity writing. When equity writing is drawn back into representations that align with the dominant account, the very people we seek to represent are excluded, an act of representational violence. This violence is twofold, in that it is both the setting of the parameters of epistemic categories and discourses by professionals and elites, and the *lack* of access to representations that marginalised groups are being represented by. Equity categories, if not the notion of equity, has been preconstructed in ways that neutralise many of the cultures, identities and personhoods that exist beyond the objectives of policy-makers and institutional administrators. Instead, the values prescribed into higher education are constructed as universal, despite being a narrow spectrum of the differences and contrasts in our societies.

Equity groups are primarily political categories being portrayed as scientific categories. These political categories already comprise the history of struggle and contestation, one that the representation itself conceals. They conceal the histories of domination, of colonialism, of patriarchy, that are so quickly invoked and perpetuated as *legitimate* through their unproblematised use. They are used because they show aspects of a person or people that are politically conducive to the people in social positions with constitutive power, and sustained

more through the inertia of domination and an ensuing complicity/compliance, than by any rigour in the production of meaningful representations.

Lumb and Ndagijimana (this issue) demonstrate how quickly these ways of knowing are obscured for students known primarily through their status as 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker'. The plurality of languages, beliefs, and ways of knowing across the Global South and Indigenous groups are funnelled into a narrow colonial lens, in short order obscuring, if not annihilating any opportunity for a plural recognition of knowledge within higher education. Representational violence is invariably produced in the inability to access the shape, form and mono-national hegemony of the representational form that comprises so much of the way that a nation state and its institutions will view them, and subsequently act upon them.

In many ways the *lack* of officiality of refugee and asylum seekers as an equity group demonstrates just how powerful representational violence is. It shows that the way in which a group is officialised, sanctioned, *recognised* by state power is a violence. It demonstrates the narrowness and rigidity of the way in which forms of social suffering, inequality, deprivation and marginalisation are represented within the processes of officialisation. Yet without the status of an officially recognised category, the fate of groups might be even worse, having no means to access state resources, such as higher education fee waivers or scholarships, having no 'domestic' legitimacy. People with refugee and asylum seeker experiences accessing higher education are hence bound up within other equity categories, such as Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB), without recognition of the distinct and complex ways that their social situation enables them, nor of the ways that refugees and asylum seekers might construct themselves in their own group making (see Tsegay, in this issue).

Ndagijimana's reflection on the aspiration to proficiency in French language (colonial) demonstrates the power of officialised representations. It draws people into a reverent relationship to the very representational violence being inflicted. It offers a narrow path to liberation from oppression only through assimilation into the monocultural form it demands of those subordinated to it. Yet, as one violence is mastered, another is met. It serves as a powerful reminder of how the seeming naturalness of being an Anglo, English-speaking Australian is an arbitrary form that can be taken for granted *only* when it is not being challenged. Lumb's reflections point precisely to the difficulty of this: how can you know differently when the processes of legitimation are the very structuring of your means to recognise? It is a structuring of being and requires an immense reflexivity to even begin to unearth. Higher education is bound up within this settler-colonial violence, not only through the denial of formal access for marginalised groups, but also through the denial of epistemic alternatives to the sanctioned knowledge contained within higher education and its disciplines. And indeed, as Lumb and Ndagijimana allude to, the innocuousness of the wrapping of the representation of the idyllic Australian lifestyle is built on an overt settler-colonial violence.

Although official/legitimate categories are often portrayed as looming monoliths, officialisation is not produced through a single sweeping moment. The extremely complex layers of approval and sanctioning take representations through a long journey of documents, submit buttons, spreadsheets, budgets and committees. There is no 'moment' where the group comes perfectly into being, but is shaped through minor but consequential acceptances and approvals of it as it is carried through these processes. For example, both Tsegay and Burke point out how ethics procedures in higher education institutions routinely return the obligations of the researcher toward rationalist accounts of research ethics, subsequently displacing different ways of knowing ethics within research. These procedures bend the possibilities of even what can be

represented, what must be avoided, and what *lives and is brought into reality* in any given artefact or apparatus of research. But all of these adjustments and *absences* incrementally force out the alternatives.

So what is to be done? Burke notes, a 'representational ethics' is required that is sensitive to power, authority and domination within our writing. This sensitivity requires *presence*, of being aware of the stakes of writing in any of its mediums so demanded in equity work. The forms in which things are written exceed the journal article – the ethics document, the grant application, the risk assessment – and require vigilance in how they play their own part in the alteration, if not deformation, of a representational ethics. At each stage of writing we must take representations seriously and to guard against dismissing criticality as being 'too difficult', too complex, or too depressing. Although the answer is not likely to be forthcoming, we maintain presence, and a 'patient praxis' (Bunn & Lumb 2019), that is, willing to be uncomfortable, and to sit with the unsettling and difficult questions of representation throughout our writing.

Writing knowing: Form and content are inseparable

Representation is closely connected to questions of ontological access – what forms of writing provide access to being (recognised as) a knowing subject. The approaches we take to writing, and the underpinning ontological positionings and epistemological perspectives that shape how and what we write, are significant in framing the focus, aims and lines of argumentation developed in our writing. Our special issue attends to the ontological and epistemological relationalities of form and content and argues with Richardson (2003) that form (how we write) and content (what we write) are entwined:

> Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (p. 499)

In hegemonic framings, writing is often perceived as detached from methodology and method. Richardson's reframing of writing as a way of knowing disrupts hegemonic constructions that writing is simply reflecting, rather than forming, knowledge and knowing. The pieces across this special issue explicitly challenge hegemonic constructions of writing to closely consider the significance of writing for epistemological and ontological formations and what that means for questions of access. In Burke's contribution, these questions are the focus of attention, including consideration of the underpinning methodologies that shape our writing, knowing and thus knowledge of 'the field(s) in which we are differently (and unequally) situated as writers/readers/knowers' (Burke, this issue).

How we write is crucial in what is made visible, included and recognised – and also what is invisible, excluded and misrecognised. Questions of form are always related to the politics of knowledge and knowing. The continual exclusion of the personal from the formation of legitimated knowledge is reproduced through taken-for-granted academic conventions such as the privileging of writing in the third person and the valuing of what is constructed as objective forms of knowledge. In this issue, authors intentionally disrupt the privileging of the "objective voice" to bring in personal accounts of knowing and knowledge. Tsegay writes a personal account of his academic journey to explore the complex inequalities in accessing quality higher education and writing in the context of Eritrea. In writing reflections and analysis of personal conversations, Lumb and Ndagijimana (this issue) consider the 'undiscussable' dimensions of their everyday encounters, creating a new space of developing relational forms of knowing and

grappling with their differently situated selves within complex histories of colonisation, including how language is entangled in power relations.

These contributions illustrate the power of personal forms of writing for generating relational knowledge about the complexities of access in its broadest sense. Such rich forms of knowing are undermined by the construction of form in generic or neutral terms as mere convention that authors must conform to in order to be publishable. We argue in this special issue that posing writing in such generic terms produces a distortion of the power relations in which differently situated writers are (not) recognised as authoritative knowers. Indeed *how* we write shapes *what* we write about. The idea that there is no question of form – that the conventions around writing in a particular disciplinary field of practice is beyond interrogation – is highly problematic. The idea that form is inconsequential to and/or detached from content reproduces hegemony and fixes in place the power of particular ontological positions, which produce author/ity and contribute to what is recognised as a 'significant' contribution to knowledge, or not.

We learn about form in the context of the disciplinary foundations or subject specific contexts in which our training/education is developed and these are tied to shared understandings of social and academic literacy practices. Form is reinforced through the pedagogical spaces and communities of practice in which disciplinary/subject specific knowledge is produced. Unless we are experts in the field of academic writing, it is rare to interrogate or analyse the implications of particular forms of writing on the formation of knowledge. We argue in this special issue that forms of writing are crucial to the formation of knowledge and this is deeply entrenched in histories of exclusion of forms of writing/communication/expression. This is most clearly demonstrated in the article by Moreau and Galman in which they draw from a different form of expression, the comic, to powerfully re/present the experiences of carers and care-oriented labour in higher education. As they argue, the written form can function as an exclusionary space that filters who and what gets access and representation/recognition. Those who do not fit the profile of the 'bachelor boy' can be excluded and emotions, care work and other work, and dimensions associated with femininity are constructed as antogonist to academic writing.

Towards writing as inclusive praxis

In the essay *It Matters What Stories Tell Stories; It Matters Whose Stories Tell Stories,* (Haraway 2019), through 'compost narration' or 'writing-with in layered composing and decomposing in order to write at all' (2019, p. 565), Haraway reminds us that nothing makes itself nor tells its own story. The work helps us to think about how this special issue develops something of a meta-writing project, unfolding in close connection to the difficult term *equity*; a collection of *writing-about-writing-about-equity* in which writer/researchers engage, at least in part, in a sustained troubling of their own positions in relation to the possibility of a different higher education and, often times, 'who they are as a researcher in a way that holds promise for advancing the critical edge of practice' (Lather 2016, p. 126). Burke (this issue) asks us to explicitly consider the implications of writing being a social and relational practice that cannot be disentangled from methodological, epistemological and ontological concerns. And it is to some of these ontological concerns – for example, the writerly beings, the being of writing, the beings written – that this section of the editorial now turns.

For Coole and Frost (2010), drawing on Stephen White, ontology facilitates consideration of more than the nature of being but also the 'underlying beliefs about existence that shape our everyday relationships to ourselves, to others, and to the world' (2010, p. 5). The ontological turn (Lather 2016) has certainly offered new, and re-turnings to, ways we might conceptualise

relationships and realities. Adopting a relational ontology, how might we assess some of the multiple, co-existing and fluid formations that enact the tensions and encounters, rough objects and reals, beings and realities, writings and the written of this special issue? It is certainly well-rehearsed territory to describe this as an issue written in the social context of an increasing neoliberalisation of higher education that sees the growing hegemony of ideas such as 'knowledge economy' attached to the existence of universities. As Ozga explained some years ago (2008), this concept of the knowledge economy is a 'meta-narrative that assumes and requires the commodification of knowledge in a system of global production, distribution and exchange' (2008, p. 265). This meta-narrative has developed as part of a broader set of conditions which do nothing to facilitate more socially just arrangements in institutions such as universities. These are conditions which shape what it is possible to be and to become in higher education; conditions that limit and delimit what is possible or even likely, arguably 'shaped by the narrowed ontological boundaries set within dominant imaginaries [that] prevent the possibility of lateral possibilities, imaginations, anticipations and futures to arrive' (Lumb & Bunn, 2021, p. 126).

These power relations have immediate consequences for writing the field of equity in higher education, as multiple yet constrained ontologies unfold. Bunn (this issue) notes, in an extended deconstruction of the 'labyrinthine challenge' of representation, that in writing we are not just reflecting a reality but taking part in its construction. Bunn asks us to consider how we might 'feel the weight of the water', beseeching us as a responsibility, perhaps an ethic of writing equity and certainly an 'endless labour of vigilance and reflexivity in our writing', to consider the very immediate possibility of violence through representation that the field of equity in higher education can facilitate par excellence. Also focusing on how writing relates to a responsibility in relation, Tsegay (this issue) writes about the personal privilege of writing and the difficult question of whose voices are involved. This special issue is alive, sometimes explicitly, sometimes more subtly, with these sorts of considerations such as how difficult it is for projects of writing not to re-inscribe settler colonial perspectives and commitments including the marginalisation of ways of being that are so commonly swept aside in projects of imperialism. As a way through this messy terrain, Burke (this issue) argues for practices that re/member one's own social, cultural and historic location; particularly given the ways in which hegemonic practices tend to 'exclude at the level of the ontological (who can claim authority) as well as the epistemological (what kind of knowledge is seen as worthy of recognition)' (p. 27).

The ontological turn has seen in some quarters a new appreciation for the ways in which writing has historically been both time-intensive and material in character (Ulmer 2017) with artisanship and craft practices enjoying a remembering and renewal. Moreau and Galman (this issue) take up the comic as an arts-based research practice in seeking to consider the parts and the whole of a social problem in higher education simultaneously. In their piece, they show how the comic strip presents a readerly space where 'the contiguous images and words that characterise comic art allow readers to be challenged by individual carers' stories while also considering the larger socio-cultural context' (p. 47).

Richardson (2003) points to difference in the ways we write as being a method of discovery; a powerful point that disrupts notions that writing is simply a reflection of 'what is known'. We understand writing as actively shaping meaning-making processes. This special issue aims to provoke readers and potential contributors to this journal to use writing in different ways as a form of inclusive praxis; a way of bringing new perspectives and hidden dimensions of access and inequity to light.

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Writing representations to life: higher education and the production of equity realities

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This paper deconstructs the often 'taken-for-granted' character of categories, classifications and representations that haunt higher education equity research and writing. It argues that there are no innocent representations. Instead, representations are part of the *production* of divisions: of how categories, classifications and groups are imagined. Far from an objectivist account of 'the real', the category used to represent is a performance of its own production. To speak or write the category is to bring the category into being, making possible particular forms of understanding, knowledge, action and practice.

This paper explores how these lead to forms of 'representational violence' in two forms. Firstly people are grouped into representations that are conducive to the 'dominant imaginary' (Lumb & Bunn 2021). In these, people are constructed by the most convenient forms for their control, measurement and regulation. Secondly, representations are produced through and between people in dominant positions, including policy-makers, researchers and institutional executives. This means that the very people *being* represented by a category rarely have the opportunity to be involved in the category's construction. The paper thus concludes on the need to take the work of representation within equity writing seriously. Ignoring the need for radical deconstruction of categories as a part of equity writing, research and practice is very likely to lead to perpetuation of dominant representations that perpetuate cycles of inequality.

Keywords: representation, equity, writing, higher education

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Introduction

This paper explores how equity research and writing produces representations of groups of people. It deconstructs the seriousness of the 'taken-for-granted' character that haunts categories, classifications and representations in higher education equity research and writing. It explores how writing in equity research and practice in higher education is an expression of 'different visions of division' (Bourdieu 1987, p. 13) and their consequences for equity, equality and social justice. This makes equity writing a deeply political affair. There are no innocent representations. The representations that we take up, that we enact and perform in our writing are part of making them real. Our writing conveys and legitimates the representations we select and carries forward the inertia of their histories. Yet, there is a substantial body of language, terms and concepts that are used to represent the mission of equity and widening participation that too often go without interrogation. The way inequality is represented *matters* and contributes, for better or worse, to the perpetuation of inequality.

Representations are part of the *production* of divisions: of how categories, classifications and groups are imagined. They limit and delimit, they *make* the divisions, and subsequently, the ways that these are acted upon, how they are practiced and how they are habitualised. Representations inevitably leave something, or someone, out. They require a generalisation of a certain characteristic, trait, belief or practice. Far from an objectivist account of 'the real', the category used to represent is a performance of its own production. To write the category is to bring the category into being, making possible particular forms of understanding, knowledge, action and ultimately intervention.

Writing is but one instrument in the production of representations. There are numerous ways in which representation is made, remade and circulated that include the media, policy and polling. These serve as the basis for 'symbolic manipulation' that 'tends to be monopolised by specialists in representation – trade-unionists, politicians, state managers, pollsters, journalists and intellectuals' (Wacquant 2013, p. 276). But the focus on equity writing here is a crucial one, as it is one of the key instruments that equity researchers and practitioners have at their disposal to do their own work of symbolic manipulation. There is a substantial power in the way in which concepts and categories of equity establish the dominant characteristics of recognition of a group of people. The domination of the production of representations is even more exaggerated when we consider that marginalised groups have these representations *constructed about them* without their inclusion in their production. It reflects a colonisation of representation so that certain ways of being are never codified, never *known*, other than through autocratic systems constructed for knowing social groups, communities and people through a narrow, convenient and often politically useful construction.

Equity writing resides in a dangerous space in the work of producing representations. Equity research is 'implicated in the work of group-making' through its adoption in governmental policy, often to produce the effect of a 'falsely rationalised vision of their rule' (Wacquant 2013, p. 277). The representation of the very issue of equity is produced as something that can be quantified, managed and fixed through the implementations of rational controls, despite the significant body of research demonstrating that this method itself is part of the legitimation of inequality (Burke 2012; Bourdieu 1996). Equity research is at the heart of this concern, as it is one of the key rational machines used to demonstrate the reality of equity, to measure equity and to demonstrate *change* as interventions are enacted. Dominant classifications and representations tend toward a neutralisation of the relationality of systemic inequality through this rationalised vision and perpetuates instead understandings of inequality that promote it as an unfortunate but inevitable side-effect of modernity, or worse still an individualised failure of

self-production. These representations tend to draw on notions of meritocracy (Littler 2018) to imply that higher education is a fair and neutral system that rewards hard work, merit and aspiration.

The example I draw on is the representation of the socio-economic other – a group alternatively recognised in some form of overlap with low socioeconomic status, working class, marginalised, underrepresented, non-traditional and first in family, along with a series of unofficial and derogatory terms (for example see: Pini & Previte 2013; Threadgold 2018). But of all these (and despite my strong preference for class and class analysis), there is a need to understand the way representations are made from social positions of authority to *constitute* a representation as legitimate. One of the difficulties in this constitution is that *only* a narrow aspect of personhood pertaining to higher education participation is represented, typically excluding the broader socio-structural conditions by which these divisions are made. It also hides from view the alternative personhoods and values that individuals may not be willing to simply leave behind. Moreover, this narrow vision allows for the assumed superiority of the values enshrined in higher education. As Skeggs (2004) alludes to, deficit representations of working class values are part of a historical inertia that has continually depicted cultural, if not biological *inferiority*. At the very best, the working class can be righted through the moralist intervention of their cultural superiors. When categories and representations favour or are favoured by the dominant, they invariably do violence to the interests of the dominated. It highlights the importance of these representations, especially when we consider who has the *power* to make representations stick.

Equity writing can challenge these representations. Burke (this issue) presents a much more profound set of possibilities for how to offer counter-hegemonic approaches to equity writing than this paper can fully offer. However, the notion of radical doubt (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) is offered as a tool for making such a challenge. Rather than looking for an answer 'out there', radical doubt looks towards how our own socialisation into historical, taken-for-granted representations need to be continually deconstructed. An uncomfortable task, but one that is part of the responsibility to representation in equity writing.

Representation

Representation 'is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events' (Hall 1997, p. 17). In contrast, we don't have the ability to communicate through a detailed description of each and every thing. For, even if we tried, we would have to rely on generalised ideas and concepts to understand what the describer was trying to communicate. Representations are made around common features or likenesses, but it is also possible that the thing in common would not be the most appropriate representational association. Hall (1997, p. 17) uses the example of planes and birds both having the quality of flight, but also must keep in mind that they are distinguished by one another by other characteristics (for example man-made machines versus organic beings).

Writing is a process of representation. It represents a world that you, as the reader, interpret, subsequently providing some sort of information and knowledge about it. As the writer, I anticipate that the reader can decipher my meanings: the words, assemblages, tone, style and so on. These all are built as I write, around what I expect people can and cannot interpret. This can be constantly modified in different texts, for, as I write toward different audiences my style can be changed. I can expect familiarity with concepts in some places, while need to explain them in others. The representations that are selected entail a historical context: we are embedded in a moment in time where certain things make sense to talk about, to analyse, and to represent.

Representations are embedded in long histories, but can be both fluid and monolithic. If in 2017 I was talking about the effects of COVID on higher education, no one would make sense of what I meant. Yet even now, this simple term can be written here with the assumption of a deep sense of my intention.

Representations are necessarily exclusionary – they include the practically relevant aspects required for communication, interpretation and knowledge. However, we don't often dwell on what is being excluded: if someone tells me to get milk, I don't think through all the things that I won't get, or why I wasn't expected to go and milk a cow (goat, soybean or almond) myself. These are functionally invisibilised. However, this functional invisibilisation has a politics attached to what is practically, and what is politically, excluded or alternatively made visible.
From the outside, representations seem like they are fairly stable. They don't need to be unsettled for the most part. Most categories, terms and concepts that represented the multitude of differences and similarities of our world at least seem final. Up is up, down is down. Birds aren't crickets, and so on. This position is part of a dominant, or hegemonic representation that is linked with the epistemological dominance of modern science (Santos 2014). This hegemonic vision envisions that we are sensorily (or via instruments and technologies) experiencing the real, and what is being represented is a reflection of this reality. The ordinary representation that science provides is the ability to refine and improve representations in order to bring them in alignment with reality. The things of the world are assumed to be measured more and more accurately and new instruments can be built to inspect otherwise hidden dimensions of their nature. But there are contestations of this approach to knowledge and representation. Different forms of representation, the things that appeared rock-solid, become more ephemeral and porous. From a constructivist perspective these representations are arbitrary human categories for the purpose of having knowledge about them that have been arrived at over long periods of struggle and contestation.

The production of reality and the power to constitute

When we write, we are not just reflecting reality, but taking part in the historical struggle over its construction. Writing in the research and advocacy of equity in higher education is part of this struggle for what representations are used, who they represent and how the problem of equity is construed. Far from an objectivist account of 'the real', the category is a performance in its own production. To write the category is to bring the category into being, and allows particular forms of understanding, knowledge, action and ultimately intervention that can be conceived only in and through the way in which representations include and exclude.

> What we consider to be social reality is to a great extent representation or the product of representation, in all senses of the term. And the sociologist's language plays this game all the time, and with a particular intensity, derived from its scientific authority. In the case of the social world, speaking with authority is as good as doing: if for instance I say with authority that social classes exist, I contribute greatly to making them exist. (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 53–54)

The researcher writes with the authority that allows for an ontological slippage from a thing named to a thing that the reader takes to exist. It is writing *as if that is the reality of what is being written about*. The authority of writing, through style, data, references to support and sustain, peer review and publication, encapsulates a social and political history of constituting academia as both authoritative and legitimate. This authority is produced through social closure: if everyone had the capacity to write and produce in these forms, then no one would have the authority they produce. Expertise and authority are *scarce* and remain so to protect their claims

to legitimate expertise and authority. It is an act of collective 'illusio' over the wielding of this symbolic power that is maintained through the critique, support, defence and so on that remain within the academic game. This allows for a representational legitimacy and authority that, through its ability to act 'without concealment' demonstrates the backing of an authoritative group that provides the power 'to constitute and impose reality' (Bourdieu 2018, p. 77).

Equity research is constituted through this form of authoritative legitimacy. It allows for equity researchers to constitute the 'problem' of equity, whether it is through 'aspiration', 'success' or the type of 'equity category' that an individual fits to (or at least is fitted to by the representation). There is a narrow group of representations that are considered legitimate. We can chart the emergence of this in the context of equity in higher education in Australia with *A Fair Chance for All* (1990). This report was released over three decades ago and put into motion formally recognised equity groups. Since this moment, despite contestation of the categories, these must nevertheless be understood as the dominant representations of what counts as equity, what counts as being equitable and what interventions are legitimate. Equity research hence starts at any point with the historical legacy of the constitution of what equity is, what matters and what does not, who is included and who is not. Authority is hence established only insofar as equity research remains part of this 'dominant imaginary' (Lumb & Bunn 2021) and placed coherently within the historical constitution of legitimate equity representations. The further an alternative knowledge or representation that might be offered moves away from legitimated representations, the less likely it is to be recognisable as bearing the marks of authority and legitimacy. The representations that are recognised can in turn expect to be legitimated as we invoke them only insofar as both the writer and reader share in a *recognition* of this order. Subsequently, the representations in my writing say as much about my own social position as does the thing that is being represented.[1]

Coming to terms with the responsibility of representations in writing must continually be confronted within the power that instils its authority. This is challenging because dominant representations retain an *ease* in their invocation. Alignment with the dominant account of reality creates far less symbolic and affective resistance. Unfortunately, innocence to these paradigms make them no less efficacious: ease is formed through the frictionless causality of the dominant imaginary, as it is a privileged misrecognition of the stakes and effects of representation. As Bourdieu (1986, p. 257, n. 18) neatly summarises, 'innocence is the privilege of those who move in their field of activity like fish in water'.

The ease of accepting dominant accounts of reality is also owing to their account at least partially reflecting a general experience of reality. If, for example, I propose research on equity and continually refer to people as 'low socioeconomic status' (low SES) it may well pass without too much interrogation. There *are* people who have far lower 'socioeconomic status' than others. We are likely to see in this representation at least a partial, if not fairly well-developed account of reality. They are concocted through policy, research and law, and formed into a *legitimate* category through scientisation and research. This allows for 'low SES' representation to subsequently be measured, valued, quantified, and *acted upon*, subsequently confirming its legitimacy as an account of reality. This becomes a representation that researchers, policy-makers, administrators, institutional leaders and executives, the architects and architectures of

[1] Bourdieu (2020, p. 253) demonstrates how tricky it is to explain this problem: 'this representation of others is a function of the position that the person representing and the person represented hold in the objective space'. The representations, classificiations and categories are produced in the synchronicity between position and disposition and are thus as much about the values, principles etc. that a person holds as it is about what is sanctioned from within the social space that a given person holds. Or put more bluntly, you are more likely to adopt the dominant imaginary when your authority is constituted by the dominant imaginary.

law and so on can all use to act on behalf of, or toward, a group of people that are seen to belong to this category. It allows for people to be recognised by government and institutions in particular ways, and can then be governed and acted upon through the visibility that the representation produces.

But if I replaced low SES with 'the proletariat' or 'the exploited workers' in my writing I would expect at least a raised eyebrow. I have substituted a dominant representation with another one that maintains at least a partial overlap with that of low SES. But what is common across these two representations? Is it poverty? Is it that they only own their labour power? Even as I reflect on it, the representational overlap seems to only be at face value. They represent different philosophies that incorporate a much broader view of history and politics. What 'the proletariat' may signal is that I am also carrying into this representation a sense of a political history, one that I would expect to be understood as Marxist, and one I would certainly expect demonstrates a sense of a fundamental injustice imbued in the social representation of those being represented. It reflects elements of the relationship that 'low SES' people have with economic systems and the means of production that the dominant account of reality does not ordinarily recognise. I would be unsurprised to be dismissed for using this account for carrying such a political position into my work. Using low SES as a representation is easy in the same way that Bourdieu's fish doesn't recognise water.

The representation of people as low SES in equity policy could be called an individualised 'teleological intervention' in that it assumes that individuals can continually *improve* themselves and that our society is in a process of advancement. But this advancement has not been occurring for low SES people. An intervention can be had where the advancing (or advanced), if not enlightened, bureaucrats, policy-makers, higher education institutions staff and so on can step in and disrupt this failing trajectory and *right it*, turn it back towards progressive improvement and advancement. But say this underlying logic of teleology was substituted here with 'Sisyphean intervention'. What would that do? If we represented these interventions as a cruel punishment, whereby we continually demand of someone to perform a task of 'righting themselves' through a modification and realignment of aspirations that, even in the imminence of its completion, will never be properly completed, what would change? Firstly, there is the more conservative representation that would indeed see this as Sisyphean because low SES people are terminally incapable of these sorts of changes. They are in their situation *because* of their relegation, if not resignation, to this fate. This is present in debates about quality, and the 'watering down' of higher education by allowing the low SES to participate (for example see Gale & Parker 2017). On the other, the more critical position would be that 'yes, it is terminal, because the structures of our society consign people to this fate'. There are large bodies of work that surgically demonstrate how these systems reproduce inequalities intergenerationally (Bourdieu 1996; Bourdieu & Passerson 1977). For example, the argument that widening participation has led to deficit constructions of the working class is not new (Burke 2002; Lawler 2005). Nor is it new to argue that this position is held together through an individualising of attributes while neutralising social conditions and circumstance.

This example demonstrates that the wide web of educational inequalities are made invisible to instead focus on personal attributes as *a priori* to the social. Interventions such as 'raising aspirations' are predicated on a deficiency in the low SES that can be intervened in through remedial programs (Gordon et al. 2021; Burke 2012). These are often run by equity practitioners who are dedicated to social justice – but are nevertheless based around a rapid injection of middle-class dispositions that would take a middle-class person their young lifetime to attain. They assume the natural superiority of the middle class, and tend to fail to recognise, or at least cannot accommodate, the suffering and class injuries that are likely to be experienced within this

transition – no matter how successful it is. Abrupt transformations are often accompanied by the painful 'hidden injuries' (Lehmann 2013) and shame (Burke 2017; Loveday 2015 & 2016) associated with trying to join a space not meant for them (Reay 2017). What this example shows is how these representations become imbedded with philosophies and beliefs that are not necessarily brought to conscious scrutiny each and every time we enact them discursively.

While we can and indeed do contest dimensions of dominant representations, there is an *ease* when they align with a neo-liberal teleological individualisation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and psychologisation (Walkerdine 2019). When we adopt strategies for intervention that reflect dominant values, we can 'fight the good fight' because we don't become its casualties. Thus, the most *neutral* condition of higher education is also its most doxic – the innocent 'taken-for-grantedness' of liberal subject formation is the basis from which judgement of competence, aptitude and success revolves. Thus, the representation of alternative subject formations is so routinely absent within policy (and to a large extent, research) that it 'goes without saying' that this is the *natural way for humans to be*. Thus social justice, widening participation and equity interventions will often be based around the most neoliberal subject within the larger group that is traditionally 'underrepresented'. Moreover, the more severely marginalised groups are less likely to be both formed and subsequently interpellated by the dominant act of group-making, a point I will explore further below.

Representational violence

Representational violence refers to a mode of separating between necessary exclusion as a part of the formation of representation, and the *violence* in the construction of forms of representation that can be used for the intent to retain domination through symbolic/constitutive power.[2] It is a violence that means that people do not have access to the constitutive power used to produce representations of them. The representational violence that is contained in equity categories is made invisible in the way that the concept is focused and the way it is deployed discursively.

Those that engineer such policy are also the beneficiaries of the policy, institution and social positions presented as successful, or on a trajectory towards success:

> One of the major stakes in these struggles is the definition of the boundaries between groups, that is to say, the very definition of the groups which, by asserting and manifesting themselves as such, can become political forces capable of imposing their own vision of divisions, and thus capable of ensuring the triumph of such dispositions and interests as are associated with their position in social space. (Bourdieu 1987, p. 13)

Higher education is a powerful example of this. It requires a form of success that fits the narrow confines of liberal subject formation: all else – other ways meaning and success could be interpreted are marginalised, ridiculed and subjected to symbolic violence. They are stigmatised. As Walkerdine (2021, p. 63) elaborates, 'liberal regulation naturalised the bourgeois subject

[2] Using interchangeable terms to refer to a 'fuzzy' concept can be a useful exercise in remaining vigilant in thinking about what the concept is trying to do, rather than getting caught in a dogmatic overture to an authoritative reference. For example, Bourdieu exchanges 'symbolic violence' at times with 'recognitive violence', which, I find a usefully freeing moment in my own thinking. Here I want to use the concept of 'representational violence' as linked to symbolic violence, but also sharing in the meaning contained in other concepts, including epistemic violence, or even constitutive violence. All of these retain shades of unique analytical value, but also bear a common intent.

while pathologizing and regulating other ways of being'. Many equity representations are reduced to a narrow subject, focused only on the attributes relevant to higher education participation as this bourgeois subject. These representations imply *raising* people from their abject condition, one that can be overcome in social mobility (assimilation) into a middle-class form of being. Representation hence focuses on the parts that can be modified or fixed to suit the higher education space and relegates the rest to a social 'background' (see Bunn, Threadgold & Burke 2020).

The case of low SES is a powerful one to understand representational violence. As I have alluded to earlier, there are many coinciding representations of 'low SES'. I used a broader one – the proletariat – but this also shares in the representational space of 'the working class'. For the purposes of this paper, I am using them synonymously, even though they represent important differences. An important shared trait in the representations of this somewhat broad and amorphous group throughout history has been its production by policy-makers, bureaucrats, capitalists and intellectuals. The pattern is a familiar one. Writing the representations contributes to its production as a reality that *excludes* competing representations.

Historically, the working class have been represented within middle and elite culture as inferior. The working class still, today, is broadly represented as abject (Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; Tyler 2013) and disgusting (Lawler 2005). Class, in these instances, does not need to be always recognised in overt, deliberate ways. It is often enacted through subtle dimensions of the understanding of taste (Bourdieu 1984), of 'affect' (Threadgold 2020) and even the way that a person walks, talks and acts in the world (Charlesworth 2000). Representational violence is exercised through the act of intervention to *reform* an entirely deficit 'culture'. As Skeggs (2004, p. 39) points out, these interventions are 'reliant on the knowledge and "expertise" of bourgeois reformers'.

The danger in writing is that we enact this 'expertise' as part of a continual reinforcement of the representation. There is a real risk that the representation of the 'low socioeconomic status' student as being deserving so long as they maintain the sufficient level and types of 'aspiration' turns equity work into a form of middle-class value production, in that it becomes part of a sense of moral sense and worth, lifting the 'deserving poor' without ever having to acknowledge the power within the ability to assign who is deserving within equity interventions. The supplanting of the eroding 'working class' with decontextualised measurement of the vertical differentiation of wealth, income, status and education is suitable to the individualised, psychologised accounts of the neoliberal era.

However, representational violence marks both the classified *and* the classifier (Bourdieu 1984). Its use simultaneously elevates and distantiates those with the power to constitute and legitimate representations:

> This is what the representations of the working-class should be seen to be about; they have absolutely nothing to do with the working-class themselves, but are about the middle-class creating value for themselves in a myriad of ways, through distance, denigration and disgust as well as appropriation and affect of attribution (Skeggs 2004, p. 118).

It is easy to see equity work as simply 'good', but this approach ignores the stakes in struggles for equality. The terms used to represent equity in our writing can be as much about the validation and confirmation of the person with the constitutive power to make representations stick. Notably, claims to practicality that wish to overlook the historical contexts and production

of inequality for the purpose of immediately producing change conceal the way in which representations form part of practice that limit and delimit modes of knowing and action.

Final reflections: Radical doubt and reflexivity

What has been discussed to this point is the difficulty of coming to terms with the way that we write representations when so much of this is established in ways that exist prior to our conscious comprehension; that we feel an ease, a naturalness, when we adhere to the dominant imaginary. It demonstrates the stakes in trying to turn against this current, to feel the weight of the water. While this point can be read as somewhat pessimistic, systems of authority are neither perfect nor complete. Moreover, there are plenty of ways that the improvisational character of people (even when they are trying to be thoroughly conformist) continue to bring new adaptions into the formation of social spaces (see Bourdieu 2000). While these should be understood as part of the dynamic, fluid and adaptive character of power and domination, they always leave the door ajar to resistance, transgression and transformation.

Thus, one of the key tasks of writing in equity research is the need for a 'radical doubt' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 235). Radical doubt refers to the endless labour of deconstructing even the most innocuous components of our understandings and practices. Though in proposing such a thing, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 235) also acknowledge just how monumental a task this is:

> How can the sociologist effect in practice this radical doubting which is indispensable for bracketing all the presuppositions inherent in the fact that she is a social being, that she is therefore socialised and led to feel like a "fish in water" within the social world whose structures she has internalised? How can she prevent the social world itself from carrying out the construction of the object, in a sense, through her, through these unself-conscious operations or operations unaware of themselves of which she is the apparent subject? (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, 235).

Unlike ideology, which implies a much more cognitive model, the notion of doxa aims at looking at how we are inevitably produced as people through socio-historical processes (Bourdieu & Eagleton 1992). We cannot not be doxic. Our culture, practices, accents, perceptions and dispositions are built deeply into our understanding both of how to be in the world, and how the world is.

When I consider growing up as a working-class kid, I reflect on just how many stories are told and how many lives that are lived that have little power over the representations that are produced of them. They are grouped according to an alienated representation, rather than one forged through solidarity. Socioeconomic status, to put it bluntly, is a term that sounds like it was made by bureaucrats, for bureaucrats. It does little to incorporate alternative dimensions of representation and attempts to distil the causes, effects and affects of inequality into the most 'accurate' – read sterilised – types. Nor does it engage reflexively with just who comes up with these theories, for what audience, and why questions of representation tend to be treated as superfluous. Opting for forms of representation that appear safer, more palatable, or even 'objective' or 'neutral' is inevitably a political act. The terms and intent thus need to be interrogated to consider how they were formed, who was involved, what were the stakes and what were the intentions. Writing in equity requires a radical doubt, a vigilant deconstruction of the minutiae of representation. Working towards counter-hegemonic representations requires a

willingness to be unsettled, and to continually be left in the discomfort of confronting the taken-for-granted. Questions of what is represented in the dominant accounts of value, success and aspiration throw into doubt a substantial part of the orientating power of the dominant imaginary. Writing equity requires a 'patient praxis' (Bunn & Lumb 2019), one that is able to sit within the discomfort of picking apart the taken-for-granted and ease of the hegemonic.

This paper has been concerned with deconstructing the representational violence of writing. It explores the need to critically examine what and how we write, so that we do not fall prey to dominant accounts of reality aimed at invisibilising competing accounts of reality through hegemonic representations. Whenever we try and unearth the challenges of representation, we inevitably draw them back into being as part of making sense of our efforts. They are historically situated, and we can do little but to know the world through them. Representation is a labyrinthine challenge that has no simple answer. It is something that comes from the structural and relational conditions in which we find ourselves. It well surpasses our individual claims to agency, as grand or as limited as they may be. But a continued commitment to a 'radical doubt' can provide a counter-hegemonic rendition. We can write towards the goal of counter-hegemonic challenges, but this will remain uncomfortable and unsettling. It is an endless labour of vigilance and reflexivity in our writing.

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Writing ourselves differently through feminist praxis

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Abstract

Academic writing practices are interwoven with complex formations of knowledge and knowing, shaping what is 'known' about access and equity, what it means and how groups and communities associated with equity policies are (mis)represented. However, the methodologies that underpin academic writing practices and knowledge-formation are rarely interrogated due to the taken-for-granted conventions at play. Academic writing is largely an exclusionary practice in which unequal power relations reinforce the authority of some to engage in knowledge-formation in particular ways, while Other bodies of knowledge and people are de-legitimised through hegemonic epistemologies. In ignoring the important relationship between access, equity and writing, long-standing and entrenched inequalities for both student and academic authors are concealed from view. Drawing from feminist writing praxis, I explore the possibilities of generating counter-hegemonic spaces for potential knowledge transformation, as key to commitments to access and equity.

Keywords: academic writing practices, feminist writing praxis, inequalities, authority and knowledge, auto/biographical approaches

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Introduction

> Unfortunately, there is no capacity for the Dictionary to contain words that have no textual source. Every word must have been written down, and you are right to assume they largely come from books written by men, but this is not always the case. You are correct in your observation that words in common use that are not written down would necessarily be excluded. (…) All words are not created equal (and as I write this, I think I see your concern more clearly: if the words of one group are considered worthier of preservation than those of another … well, you have given me pause for thought). (Williams 2020, p. 156)

This quote from Pip Williams' novel, *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, highlights an enduring dimension of inequality entrenched in the written word. The novel's heroine, Esme, spends her life collecting the words of women, especially those at the margins of society. The women's words are excluded from publication through established editorial practices in the decades-long development of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In her quest to make sense of the meaning and impact of these exclusions, and to recover and protect these 'lost words', she exchanges letters to seek the wisdom from her lifelong friend and adopted aunt Ditte. The above quote is an extract from Ditte's fictional letter to Esme. The novel, although set in time a century ago, speaks to many of the ongoing issues I touch on in this paper, in which exclusionary writing practices continue to shape who is seen as a legitimate knower and what forms of knowledge are socially valued.

Indeed, academic writing is deeply entwined with the politics of knowledge and knowing, and in this way, is a space in which subjectivities and inequalities are formed and reformed in and through hegemonic practices. What can be known, in what ways and by whom, is shaped by the exclusionary and inequitable spaces of academic writing and conventions, whether that is the student essay (Lillis 2001), the peer-reviewed academic article and/or other contested writing spaces in higher education (Burke & Jackson 2007). Knowledge about equity, what it is, how it is done and who it is for, is formed through the social practices of academic writing, which themselves are exclusive. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the practice of writing, entwined with knowledge-production and subjective-construction, profoundly shapes what is 'known' about access, widening participation and equity, what it means, and what its focus should be (is it about social justice transformation or a means for individualised forms of success), and shapes the construction of those associated with it (often through pathologising, deficit imaginaries of disadvantaged subjectivities) (Burke 2008 & 2012). However, the methodologies that underpin writing practices and knowledge-formation are rarely interrogated due to the taken-for-granted conventions and expectations at play and the author/ity of the academic writer (Stanley & Wise 1990). Writing itself is embedded in structures of exclusion that shape who is recognised as having the authority to engage in knowledge-formation and which bodies (of knowledge and people) are represented through what epistemic (mis)framings (Lather 1991 & 2007).

In this article, I consider how writing is bound up with power, knowledge and inequality. I will argue that, in ignoring the important relationship between equity and writing, long-standing and entrenched inequalities for both student and academic authors are concealed from view. Drawing from feminist writing praxis, I will explore my personal journey in making sense of equity through writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2003) and through reclaiming the power of auto/biographical methods (Burke 2002) as a way of understanding how complex and intersecting inequalities play out in academic writing practices. Feminist writing praxis engages

theory that emerges from 'practical political grounding'; theory that is 'both relevant to the world and nurtured by actions in it' (Lather 1991, pp. 11–12). It aims to 'create critical and counter-hegemonic spaces of potential transformation, in which different ways of knowing and generating knowledge might take place' (Burke 2017, p. 16). In order to situate my argument about the significance of auto/biographical practices for writing differently through feminist praxis, I will first outline some feminist critiques and perspectives on the relation between writing and the politics of knowledge and knowing.

Feminist perspectives on the politics of knowledge and knowing

> The sharp edge of intellectual passion opens up what you can't control; I love thought that welcomes the risk of formlessness, the unpredictable consequences of ideas. That's what critical theory does when it is done well (Berlant 2004, p. 447).

Feminist critiques have provided important challenges to hegemonic epistemological frameworks that are privileged in and through taken-for-granted academic writing practices (for example, Harding 1987, 1991 & 1993; Lather 1991 & 2007; Alcoff & Potter 1993). These writing practices are legitimised and largely unquestioned through the performative cultures of universities and production practices of academic editing and publication. Performativity relates to the intensification of discourses of 'productivity' that regulate academic subjectivities through the assessment technologies of measuring the quality of outputs, which further embeds the logics of particular practices. These practices of assessment of what counts as 'quality' and 'impact' are seen to be necessarily exclusive of Other voices in the fields of practice in which knowledge is being constructed as 'objectively' formed. As feminist (Burke & Jackson 2007) and Indigenous (Cameron 2020) scholars have pointed out, this reconstructs gendered and racialised binaries that signal legitimate forms of academic knowledge, for example rational (legitimate) and intuitive (illegitimate) knowledge. However, such exclusive practices are largely positioned as outside of research ethics. Consideration of ethics are mostly narrowed to the institutional bureaucracies of ethical approval processes, which are undoubtedly important for ensuring ethics is a key focus in the research processes. However, bureaucratic ethics approval processes simultaneously limit more nuanced attention to the complex politics of knowledge, knowing, representation and inclusion in authoritative/authorial processes. Nuanced attention includes the need for greater ethical consideration of contested notions of objectivity in research, particularly those decontextualising orientations connected to claims to generalisability (Lather 1991).

Further, the inequities of how identity and knowledge are produced also demand ethical consideration, most particularly when personal stories (for example, those produced through interview methods) are reconstructed as 'data' for the purposes of the author's arguments and claims without close examination of the 'social values shaping a particular research process' (Harding 1993, p. 18). Such reconstructions, hidden through the discourse of 'evidence' and 'findings', not only exploit the stories of Others[1] who do not have access to direct representation of their words through published writing, but also could do harm to Others and their wider communities. This potential harm is related to the injustice of misrepresentation (Fraser 2008) in which a person or community does not have control over how their stories, experiences and/or voices are represented in published academic texts (Burke 2002). Recognising that writing is

[1] I use 'Others' with a capital O as a way of pointing to the marginalisation of communities of people who do not have access to the institutionalised practices in which to control their representation through academic writing, drawing on seminal works such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

inevitably a political act, as it requires the framing of a problem, argument and conclusion, harm can occur in processes of 'frame-setting' (Fraser 2008). For example, in a recent and extensive review of international literature on equity in higher education, it emerged that of the 209 articles identified through a systematic review process, almost all misframed equity through a deficit perspective (Burke et al. 2021). This deficit misframing located the problem of equity at the level of individual deficiency while not paying attention to the historical, structural and systemic inequalities that produce the social conditions of unequal access to and participation in higher education (ibid.). Yet this misframing is difficult to challenge when it is the voice of the author, rather than of the Others constituting the data, that is granted authority through academic writing practices, which include selection, interpretation and representation of 'the evidence'. Feminist writing praxis generates post/critical methodological tools to intervene by bringing attention to the problematic emancipatory politics of research and writing (Lather 1991; Burke & Jackson 2007).

Feminist epistemologies suggest that all researchers and research are socially situated and so processes of forming knowledge are contextual, political and relational (see for example: Alcoff & Potter 1993; Lather 1991 & 2007; Harding 1987 & 1993). Researchers inevitably engage in the work of framing a research problem/aim/question as a key part of the process of conducting and writing about research. Although often represented as an objective process, it demands the researcher locate the problem/aim/question in a wider body of literature; a subjective process embedded in the gendered and racialised politics of citation (Ahmed 2017). Literature reviewing is partial, requiring the researcher/writer to select, exclude and interpret different bodies of work across and within the hierarchical terrain of research value. As such, literature reviewing is a contested practice, located in complex power relations in which particular authorial voices are recognised, whilst Others are excluded. This becomes apparent only when analyses are explicitly undertaken to identify which authors are highly represented in bodies of literature, and which are excluded, and how this might relate to gendered and racialised inequalities that then are constitutive of 'the field'.

The design of a research project and the development of the methods of literature review, data collection and analysis are undertaken by researchers who are located in wider ontological contestations about the nature of knowledge and knowing. Evidence-based practices tend to conceal how debates about the nature of knowing are embedded in the design of research. Lather (2007) considers the value of 'getting lost' through 'practices of non-knowing' in order to make 'room for something else to come about' (p. 7). 'Authority becomes contingent' (ibid.). Feminist praxis problematises the complex research processes of naming a problem, defining a term, or developing a set of questions and examines the (often hidden) processes of selection, interpretation and analysis, including of what counts as the relevant bodies of literature, theories, concepts and data. The methodologies, social relations and contexts that situate the researcher engaged in processes of interpretation, argumentation, theorisation, conceptualisation and/or critique profoundly shape the analyses and the research 'findings'. The concept of 'findings', however, carries with it assumptions and values associated with objectivity and distance; the idea that the researcher can be situated 'outside' of the interpretation of data as a value-free process and the notion that the researcher's role is simply to 'find' a set of pre-existing meanings to what is assumed to be a pre-existing problem. The discursive formation of the research 'problem' is ignored or unrecognised. If the 'problem' of widening educational participation, for example, is constructed as raising individual aspirations, then a particular construction of access and equity is produced. If 'the problem', though, is seen as the cultural and historical misrecognition of a community of people, together with the maldistribution of educational access, resources and opportunity, then a rather different construction of access and equity is

produced. The ontological contestations that shape the politics of knowledge, although often hidden through the discourses of 'objective knowledge', are significant for understanding how inequalities are embedded in taken-for-granted research and writing practices. Indeed, relations of power and inequality are largely seen as separate from the pursuit of knowledge, and questions about identity and difference are often excluded from debates about knowledge-formation through academic writing practices. It is important, though, to attend to the ontological position of those producing knowledge that is publicly recognised, legitimated and validated. This helps unearth the otherwise hidden values and assumptions that shape validation practices (such as peer review) and the historical, social and political contexts in which bodies of knowledge are produced and valorised – or excluded.

Thus academic knowledge is situated, contextual and inevitably exclusive, even when it claims generalisability and objectivity, with significant implications for commitments to equity in higher education. Academic knowledge is formed through writing within, and sometimes against, different disciplinary, ontological and epistemological frame/ings, and within the wider context that writing is the central process of the dissemination of research. Writing itself is regulated through the social practices within and across disciplinary fields, the hegemony of particular geocentric, racialised, ableist, classed and gendered voices; the foregrounding of bodies of literature over-representing the ontological positionings of authorial subjectivities constructed as neutrally-positioned, authoritative subjects. The passive voice privileged in academic writing works to conceal the identity positions that the author brings to the text and, through this, manipulates and distorts the argument being crafted through the discourses of science, objectivity and generalisability. However, I argue that the author's positionality in creating the text, and forming the line of argument, is a distortion when the author fails to recognise their own social/cultural/historic locations. As Stuart Hall powerfully argues, identities and knowledge are formed through discourse:

> Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modulations of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion. Above all ... identities are constructed through, not outside, difference (Hall 2000, p. 17).

This means that inevitably the identities of authors, and those (mis)represented in the research text through 'the findings', are also constructed through discourse (power/knowledge) and difference. This difference has become heightened through the hierarchical technologies that measure the legitimacy of academic identity through metrification (Burrows 2012) and the related research assessment technologies that determine what is seen to count as 'quality'. Academic writing is discursively produced through the hegemonic writing practices that are valorised through the structures of research, publication and assessment. This is enmeshed in metrics-oriented concepts of impact that reproduce hegemonic writing practices. Such hegemonies produce the competitive spaces in which 'high-impact' journals are the subject of desire for situating the institution/discipline/academic as 'excellent'. In these ways, writing is deeply embedded in power through the hegemony of epistemological frameworks that characterise the social and exclusionary practices of academic writing and publication.

Writing as a social practice: Problematising essayist literacy

Lea and Street's academic literacies framework (2000) presents a significant challenge to the epistemological hegemonies that at once conceal power from view whilst also maintaining unequal power relations. Academic literacies (Lea & Street 2000) reframe writing as a social, rather than neutral, practice that is inextricably connected to complex relations of power and politics of identity, knowledge and difference (see also: Crème 2003; Ivanic 1998). Within hegemonic epistemological frameworks of academic writing, the essay is the privileged form of literacy practice, underpinned by explicit and implicit regulatory conventions. In the context of student writing, Lillis argues that 'essayist literacy' is a 'gendered practice-resource', which operates as a binary framework and 'privileges particular dimensions of meaning making over "others"' (Lillis 2001). In her research, Lillis explores the desires of women writers and their longing for connection and involvement, arguing that:

> It is no accident that these categorizations of "other" – for example, emotion, evocation, informality – are precisely those dimensions of meaning that those historically constructed as 'others' should desire. The women writers seem to accept the dominant conventions in constructing their texts, but resist them in their thinking about what their texts are, or might be (Lillis 2001, p. 39).

The social practices of essay writing, widely hegemonic across 'high impact' social science journals, serves 'the discursive routines of particular social groups whilst dismissing those of people who, culturally and communally, have access to and engage in a range of other practices' (Lillis 2001, p. 39). Hegemonic literacy practices exclude at ontological (who can claim authority to know) and epistemological (what kind of knowledge is seen as worthy of public and institutional recognition) levels, privileging the objective, scientific, neutral and rational authorial voice, constructed as unproblematically presenting transparent 'findings' based on evidence, rather than exploring complex questions within particular contexts and from specific locations. When this is tied to the constructions of 'access' and 'equity', this ontological emphasis on the objective author recuperates particular discourses, whilst claiming these to be value-free. The complex, messy, affective and subjective lived experiences of inequality become invisible, while the rationalist and objectivist representation of the researcher as detached expert is valorised. In this writing framework, knowledge-production is viewed as apolitical, re-claiming the methodologies that foreground worldviews constructed as neutral but are actually entrenched in particular social, geopolitical and cultural locations. Peer review, editorial and publication practices, also entrenched in discourses of objectivity, further strengthen the valorisation of such situated knowledges as neutral and apolitical through the hegemonic discourses of evidence-based, measurable and objective forms of knowledge and knowing, concealing the values and perspectives the author(s) bring(s) to their writing.

This discussion draws attention to a central strategy forming access and equity interventions, the provision of academic and study skills as a form of remediation that is seen to overcome the barriers of disadvantage. Such interventions frame writing as a set of techniques that are separate from methodological, epistemological and ontological concerns. The logic is that by providing these techniques, students seen as 'lacking' will gain the appropriate skills to access, learn and succeed in higher education. Embedded in a deficit model of equity, the problem of access is located in the deficient individual who lacks the required skills needed to participate in higher education (Bowl 2003; Burke 2012). This critique is not to deny that academic and study skills form an important aspect of the development of writing and that providing access to these skills is not an important intervention. However., I argue this can only be of value when embedded in

a broader pedagogical framework that includes access to the complex processes of writing, including enabling epistemic access in a disciplinary context as well as consideration of the emotional, intellectual and subjective processes of crafting a text and constructing an argument. Epistemic access is a crucial concept that brings to light the struggles over access to disciplinary knowledge as well as to being a participant in the generation of knowledge-formation. Thus, unless student writers are enabled access to the epistemological frameworks that legitimise particular ways of writing within a disciplinary field, they are unlikely to be recognised as capable writers and to be granted equitable participation in processes of meaning-making. It is crucial to consider the contestations in which different bodies of knowledge are socially valued or devalued and under what terms of judgement. Epistemic access requires reflexive attention then to the construction and validation of 'the field' and what knowledge is excluded from it. By reducing the complexity of essayist writing practices to a set of skills and techniques, and avoiding such crucial considerations, the power relations of those who are (mis/recognised) as un/able to write become reinforced. Those learners who, even after being taught 'how to' write, are left unable to express themselves through the hegemonic practices are seen as lacking potential, talent and ability and therefore are not able to position themselves as a legitimate writing subject. Lillis (2001, p. 22) identifies three prominent characteristics in relation to hegemonic academic and study skills approaches:

> Firstly, both the "problem" and the "solution" are constructed/perceived as being overwhelmingly textual. That is, they are construed as being locatable and identifiable in the written texts that students produce, rather than in any broader frame of reference which includes, for example, questions about contexts, participants and practices. This is manifested not least in the continuing widespread belief in the possibility of teaching writing skills or "good academic writing" outside mainstream disciplinary courses. […] The second characteristic is what can be referred to as the institutional claim to transparency; that is while the language of students is made visible and problematised, the language of the disciplines and the pedagogic practices in which these are embedded usually remains invisible, taken as a "given". […] Thirdly, both the "problem" and the "solution" are conceived as being, whilst annoying, relatively straightforward to identify and resolve (Lillis 2001, p. 22).

By identifying these characteristics, Lillis reveals the hidden inequalities that are embedded in constructions of knowledge and writing. Writing constructs subjectivities of knowing and has significant implications for ontological access to authority in knowledge-formation practices. The hegemonic positioning of essayist literacies effect students as well as the wider practices of research, dissemination and publication.

In the next section, I interweave my autobiography with feminist praxis, engaging in writing differently by drawing from my personal experiences of accessing (contested) writing practices in higher education. This shift to the personal is an intentional subversion of the taken-for-granted structure of an academic paper.

Situating the auto/biographical authorial voice

As a high school student, I was praised by my encouraging English teacher for my writing skills. I had developed a sense of confidence that writing was 'natural' for me and this was reinforced by my love of books and the written word. Years later, after surviving domestic violence and finding a pathway to rebuilding my life via higher education study, I chose to focus on English

Literary Studies, which again felt a 'natural' choice, drawing from that childhood confidence I had once experienced. Through my Access to Higher Education pathway program, I discovered Sociology and decided to take this as a minor focus of my combined degree, believing that Sociology would prove to be too challenging for me as the major component of my degree. However, my sense of confidence as a writer was undermined as I was confronted with the conventions of academic writing in English Literary Studies, a disciplinary field I quickly found to be an exclusive domain of practice. Feeling restricted by the assessment criteria, I had to write in the passive voice and could not draw from my experience as a reader, at least not in any direct way. Rather I had to construct an argument through the literary criticism literature that I found alienating and pretentious. I could not find a source of connection with the literature and I became anxious about how to address the essay questions as part of assessment tasks. In struggling to make sense of my apparent lack of writing skills as a university student, I compared myself negatively to the younger students who had followed a traditional route into higher education and seemed so much more capable of constructing an argument and demonstrating criticality.

Sociology was similarly alienating with a focus on objectivity and the requirement to demonstrate an 'unbiased' and 'value-free' position in the assessment tasks. However, this experience was transformed through the pedagogical interventions of a young feminist lecturer who had just completed her PhD in Critical Race Studies. Through her teaching, I felt a sense of connection with the texts I was studying and discovered a body of work that inspired me as a student writer. My choice to study English Literary Studies and Sociology started to make sense as I read across literary and theoretical works that inspired my thinking: Toni Morrison, Angela Davies, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Ruth Frankenberg, Sylvia Plath and Simone de Beauvoir. Their work resonated so deeply that I discovered a renewed sense of voice and self-confidence. My self-development as a learner and writer was further supported by an emergent passion to represent the stories and experiences of mature, women students who, like me, expressed their disconnection from many of the taken-for-granted writing practices that determined their success or failure as students. My pain and loss of confidence in trying to navigate the expectations around objectivity, neutrality and exercising a 'value-free' position in relation to literary texts and the male foundational theorists of sociology became instead a rich resource through the feminist emphasis on the value of insider knowledge, situatedness and personal experience for theoretical understanding and development. Feminist standpoint theory fostered a sense of empowerment to research and write about my female peers' experiences as part of my Honours thesis on women accessing higher education. Feminist critiques of positivist-oriented epistemologies enabled me to develop a critique of higher education and the specific practices that perpetuated relations of exclusion, misrepresentation and misrecognition and excluded from view the emotional and affective dimensions of inequality and practice.

Indeed, despite years of widening participation and equity policy, which I directly benefitted from, progression and success at university for underrepresented groups remains fragile and is too often dependent on serendipity. It was my fortune that while fleeing domestic violence with my baby, homeless and living in a women's aid refuge, I developed a friendship and bond with a young working-class woman who accessed a degree at Cambridge University under rather extraordinary and inspiring circumstances. Her education and the friendships she developed at university, as well as her personal experiences of domestic and family violence, enabled her to develop into a compassionate and powerful agent of change in her professional work for Women's Aid. Through my friendship with her, my confidence blossomed, and I benefitted from her networks, including her partnership with an early career academic based in Politics. He kindly offered to read some of my undergraduate essays and was struck by my writing, urging

me to take my studies further to Masters degree level. At the time, I didn't understand what a Masters degree was, or why I would pursue one, but with the unexpected gift of his encouragement and guidance, I found my way to the Institute of Education where I was tutored by a group of feminist scholars of education, including Debbie Epstein, the late Diana Leonard, Valerie Hey, Deborah Cameron, Elaine Unterhalter, Annette Hayton and Jane Miller.

It was Jane in particular who inspired me to write differently as she shared with her students her concept of the 'autobiography of the question' (Miller 1997), an idea that has remained constant in my research, pedagogical and writing practices ever since (for example: Burke 2002 & 2012; Burke & Gyamera 2020). Jane's autobiography of the question urges the writer to locate her questions in the histories and theories more capacious than her own, as a way of extending her personal thinking to wider debates, discussions and bodies of work so that she can situate her work in and contribute to broader considerations (Miller 1997 in Burke 2002). As a post-graduate student, I found writing within feminist methodological frameworks challenging; feminist praxis demanded of the author a deeply ethical and reflexive re/positioning within contested fields of study and theoretical perspectives.

Over the years, as I developed as a feminist teacher myself, dedicated to nurturing inclusive pedagogical practices, I became increasingly interested in writing as a social practice (Lillis, 2001) and I discovered the field of academic literacies (Lea & Street 1997), which I interwove with feminist critiques of knowledge and knowing (Lather 1991 & 2007; Alcoff & Potter 1993; Ribbens & Edwards 1998). As I later developed my doctoral thesis (Burke 2001), I explored the relationship between the pedagogical and methodological, embedded in feminist praxis (Lather 1991; Stanley & Wise 1990) and drawing on a multidimensional understanding of social justice (Fraser 1997, 2003 & 2009) leading to the development of pedagogical methodologies (Burke 2002; Burke, Crozier & Misiaszek 2017; Burke & Lumb 2018) and further deepened by the collaborative development of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (Burke 2020). Writing about these commitments, my work aimed to articulate the importance of eclectic theoretical reframings to understand how social, cultural and symbolic inequalities and violences are formed, invisibilised and sustained in institutional sites such as higher education and how they might be challenged through feminist praxis, bringing attention to the complex interplay of hegemony and difference.

On hegemony and difference

Feminist work has long explored questions of difference and its relation to power, knowledge and contested practices of research and writing. This has included attention to the implication of writing practices in discursive and contested forms of mis/representation complicit in the subtle politics of difference that underlie and reproduce the hierarchies of writing in academic spaces. In bringing to light the relationship of writing to difference and inequalities, feminists have paid detailed attention to taken-for-granted practices such as 'being explicit' (Lillis 2001), 'being critical' (Danvers 2016) and referencing and citation practices (Lillis 2001; Burke & Hermerschmidt 2005; Ahmed 2017). The social, cultural, emotional and affective dimensions of writing practice have been brought to light by such work, contesting the rationalist, objectivist and positivist constructions of academic writing that work to exclude experience and identity (Lillis 2001; Burke & Jackson 2007; Danvers 2016). Drawing on Ahmed's (2010) circularity of affect, Danvers considers how critical thinking practices 'circulate and stick to certain bodies' and the ways this reproduces certain bodies as '(il)legitimate critical beings'. Lira et al. use the analogy of research as a form of path-making to challenge the hegemonic citation practices that reproduce the valorisation of certain voices in the field over others:

> In her book Living a feminist life, Ahmed (2017) writes that citation practices are like following paths. Some of these paths are official well-worn paths with names that everybody in a given field are expected to use, most of these names belong to men, less to women, and even less to women of color. In those paths that are less used, people that walk them are often challenged for their choices, and find themselves making new paths. Following this analogy we propose to think of research also as path-making in the authors we build on, the methodologies we use, and the knowledge that we share (Lira et al. 2019, p. 475).

In Lillis' and Ramsay's (1997) examination of their experiences of referencing, they introduce their compelling concept of 'orchestrating the voices'. This concept brings to light the complexities of academic writing made invisible by the study skills approach to 'referencing' as a technical or mechanical process. Rather, orchestrating the voices brings to light the challenge for writers to develop their authorial voice through the work of weaving together the different voices of others from the wider bodies of literature that the writer engages through the iterative crafting of an argument. In my praxis-oriented work with Monika Hermerschmidt (Burke & Hermerschmidt 2005) we drew on feminist insights to teach writing differently. Our aim was to engage post-graduate student writers with the complex processes of thinking about what they wanted to say and why, how that related to the writing of others and to their personal histories and experiences. As part of this, I developed an exercise for the doctoral writing sessions I taught, drawing on Miller's autobiography of the question and encouraging students to write reflexively about the different values, contexts and ontological and epistemological contestations they brought to their research and writing. This proved to be a powerful tool for the doctoral writers I worked with and I continue to draw on this exercise in a range of pedagogical and professional development contexts. This method enables writers to consider writing differently; as a method of inquiry rather than as a 'mopping up activity at the end of a research project' (Richardson 2003):

> Writing is also a way of "knowing" – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. […] Writing as a method of inquiry ... provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves and others, and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science. Writing as method does not take writing for granted, but offers multiple ways to learn to do it, and to nurture the writer (Richardson 2003, p. 499-500).

Writing is a profoundly discursive space in the production of contested meanings and the generation of exploratory questions that extend the possibilities of our imagining. Contested meanings are situated in power dynamics and as such have the potential to make a material difference to the lives of those (mis)represented though academic texts; which carries the risk of producing harmful consequences. This important insight forms the depth of ethical commitment of feminist writers to exercising an ongoing commitment to critical reflexivity. This moves beyond hegemonic versions of reflective practice to the continuous exercise of considering the self in relation to others as implicated in wider socio-political contexts. The commitment to writing is more than publishing findings; it is a political project in which the writer is committed to empower those involved in change as well as to engage in a process of critically understanding the social world (Lather 1991, p. 3). Writing is a politics of knowing and being known, which

'takes on urgency in our discourse about what it means to do social inquiry' (Lather 1991, p. 86). Reflexivity is thus a key tool of the writer to acknowledge the 'constructive quality of research' (Usher 1997, p. 36). Reflexivity demands the writer to exercise a form of accountability and responsibility by interrogating their position of author/ity. The ethical aim is to disrupt the normalising and/or pathologising gaze of social science research and policy. Usher explains that reflexivity:

> is in a sense to research the research, to bend the research back on itself, to ask by what practices, strategies and devices is world-making achieved? By asking this question, the research act is made self-referential or reflexive (Usher 1997, p. 36).

Writing becomes a process of critical self-reflection *and* wider contextualisation with power and ethics an enduring central consideration. This is not about re-authorising the privileged position of the author as authoritative but is the practice of critical examination of one's own, others' and wider socio-political assumptions and actions. In this way, writing reflexively moves beyond individual reflection with the aim that the author might 'become more sensitive to the power relations embedded in the research process' and 'interrogate their own social location to disentangle how it shaped their definition of the situation' (Haney 2004, p. 297). Reflexivity suggests that the author inevitably brings her or his experiences and values to the writing process, which then shape the decisions she makes about the ways she positions herself (and others) in the text. The aim is to make this explicit as an ethical form of praxis, recognising the partial nature of knowledge which is always situated across the politics of difference and contestation.

In hegemonic writing frameworks, difference is conceived narrowly in terms of originality of contribution, related largely to identifying and filling 'gaps' in the literature. This helps ensure that the hegemonic structures of academic writing are held in place, re-privileging positivist ontological and epistemological orientations. Publication and writing conventions reproduce particular ontologies in the formation of knowledge; a largely formulaic structure (introduction, literature review, method, findings, discussion, conclusion) which is entrenched in the re/privileging of objectivist epistemologies for which feminist scholar activists have long critiqued as discussed above.

In the table below, I capture some of the characteristics that underpin the differences between hegemonic writing practices and feminist praxis. I invite the reader to reflexively consider these differences in relation their lived experiences as writers and readers and the relation of these differences to the politics of knowledge.

Table 1: Differences between hegemonic writing practices and feminist praxis

Key components	**Hegemonic practices**	**Feminist praxis**
Construction of research focus	Addresses gap in the field through identifying a research problem. Passive voice, author positioned as objective and as detached from the line of argument developed.	Challenges, interrogates, situates, reframes the field through multiple research questions. First person, author exercises reflexivity and locates herself explicitly in the contested perspectives she critically explores through writing processes.
Review of related literature	Systematic review, atheoretical, topic-driven, decontextualised, guided by a research problem;	Exploratory, theoretically-driven, reflexive, inter-weaving critical insights across contesting fields and theoretical

	hegemonic field is privileged through the discourses of citing 'the relevant literature'.	perspectives to problematise the author's questions and values and to interrogate the wider assumptions in different bodies of literature and authorship.
Method/Methodology	Presentation of method(s), little discussion of ontological and epistemological framing of the research and writing; instrumental focus on ethics.	Critical discussion of methodological framework(s) that have led to particular methods being used in the research and writing; close attention paid to epistemological framing. Attention to the politics of knowledge and knowing. Locating the research/researcher through ontological considerations and complexities; ongoing engagement with ethics through exercising critical reflexivity and consideration of the politics of representation.
Theory/Concepts/Terms	Largely atheoretical; presentation of key terms or definitions.	Theoretically- and/or conceptually-informed, explicit consideration of key concepts. Theory is a means to progress critical forms of action. Theory is a radical tool for transformative change.
Findings/Analysis	Findings presented from data. Decontextualised analysis is a process of identifying information based in the evidence presented. Findings presented as generalisable.	Conceptualised and contextualised discussion/exploration of writer's analysis of participants' accounts. Theoretical literature woven through analysis to situate the author's interpretations in a wider body of debate and thought.
Conclusion/Reflections	Descriptive summary of key findings. Recommendations are made on the findings provided.	Theoretical summary of questions and challenges raised by the research, consideration of ongoing questions and possible further lines of enquiry/theorisation.

Researching and writing (our/selves) differently

> To deconstruct authority is not to do away with it but to learn to trace its effects, to see how authority is constituted and constituting (Lather 1991, p. 144).

Feminist concepts of praxis are central in generating a new politics of writing for which our journal is engaged; a way of writing our/selves differently as part of a commitment to a transformative project of access to writing and knowledge-formation. As Lather suggests above, this is not to undermine the authority of the writing voice, but to find more ethical ways to develop authority in relation to our situated selves in complex formations of difference and inequality. This requires explicit consideration of the politics of difference, including ways of writing differently, disrupting the taken-for-granted positions of authority in conventional academic texts and authorship and drawing on feminist praxis to assert authority through a reflexive orientation to the representation of self and other. This requires the tools of interrogation of the processes of knowledge-formation, including creating a reflexive space through iterative writing practices that consider the constitution of authority in relation to

ontological access and locate the author in contexts of exploration and uncertainties. The underpinning questions include not only who can write and claim a position to know but also how we write and claim to know with great sensitivity to the lives of others and representational ethics.

In relation to such considerations, reflexivity becomes an ontological and ethical tool in coming to assert author/ity as a knowing subject. Lira, Muñoz-García and Loncon (2019) use their writing to interrogate their research positionalities before engaging in research as part of their commitment to challenging the epistemic traditions and knowledge hierarchies of education research in the context of Chile. As part of their feminist and decolonial ethics, they do research *before* research to question the ontological and epistemological positionalities they bring to the research process, aiming to also provoke reflection in others with similar commitments. They draw on a 'correspondence-centred methodology' in which they use letter-writing as part of a process of critical reflection before developing research questions. This enables engagement with the dimensions of meaning-making often excluded from consideration; the emotional, auto/biographical and personal work that necessarily forms the research questions that are seemingly posed through rationalist, objectivist and scientific practices. They explain that their dialogic methodology:

> allowed each of us to do memory work as we wrote about our experiences and ideas as well as gave space to the complexity of what we each bring to our research including our fears and vulnerabilities, our perspectives about knowledge and academia, our experience doing research in education, our schooling experiences and their smells, pictures, flavors, hopes and the damage that was inflicted during those years (Lira et al. 2019, p. 476).

Letter-writing, exchanged amongst themselves as part of their dialogic methodological approach, generated 'detailed data of complex stories while also facilitating a personal, confidential style, as though to a close friend or relative. The letters generated responses that were at the same time caring as well as productive towards the future research project' (Lira et al. 2019, p. 479). This was part of their aim to 'decolonize their work through questioning their epistemological stances, negotiating and tensioning them at the moment of writing and/or deciding how specific themes are approached' (ibid, p. 477).

I have drawn on similar practices in my work with Gifty Gyamera in our workshops with women in Ghana, which we designed to create time and space to critically explore our experiences as women in higher education through feminist praxis; bringing theory to speak to our personal, research and pedagogical practices, identities and experiences (Burke 2017; Burke & Gyamera, 2020). We developed letter writing as a method to engage in participatory research practice with a group of women participants located in Ghanaian higher education. This opened up new authorial spaces for the women who collaboratively deconstructed the expectations they faced in the context of neocolonial and neoliberal discourses of internationalisation that pressurizes Ghanaian academics to mirror the performative cultures and practices of the West (see for example Gyamera & Burke 2018). Framed by feminist praxis, letter writing opened up alternative writing and knowledge practices in which the meanings, understandings, and insights of women's lives could be communicated differently, in a more intimate, personal and relational space that disrupted interviews as the primary way to generate knowledge in qualitative research. This method enabled the generation of powerful, auto/biographical counter-narratives to the hegemonic discourses of higher education, in which only certain ways of writing are legitimate forms of knowledge-production. Letter writing of course has its own histories, conventions and

social practices, and so this method requires a critical approach to the problematic taken-for-granted meaning-making practices it is implicated in. However, letter writing, when situated within a feminist praxis methodology, provides a different kind of writing space that has the potential to inspire the feminist imagination and to understand hidden power dynamics concealed from view by the hegemonic neoliberal, neopatriarchal and neocolonial perspectives embedded in the writing discourses of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity'. Letter writing as counter-hegemonic feminist praxis mobilises the power of writing for articulating the often-hidden aspects of women's contradictory experiences that re/form identities and meanings in, through and against academic practices. This foregrounds the emotional dimensions of and subjective investments in knowledge formation, so often occluded from view through the regulatory spaces of academic writing and publication.

Feminist praxis is a powerful methodology that generates a range of writing practices. In *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning* (Burke & Jackson 2007), Sue Jackson and I draw on feminist interventions to subvert hegemonic practices through writing an academic book differently. We use fictional writing as a method to bring attention to institutional writing practices that are taken-for-granted, such as emails and minutes of meetings, but are implicated in relations of power and authority. These practices, we argue, are important sites of meaning-making in educational institutions. We build on this by bringing in visual representation as a method to contest the privileging of the textual. Finally, we argue for the power of feminist praxis in recognising the value of the personal for developing new forms of understanding, insight and bodies of knowledge. The validation of the personal as a site of meaning-making has been a key contribution of feminist work, including modes of autobiographical writing.

Gannon et al. (2019, p. 48) use feminist collective biographical writing as a way to 'think academia otherwise' and to capture the micro-moment of joy in their collaborative story-telling of being feminist women in higher education. As a creative and generative feminist methodology, collective biography is a tool to interrogate lived experience and subjective formation of subjectivities, against notions of the coherent individual privileged in the neoliberal, neocolonial academy. Writing collective stories is drawn on to explore the temporal, affective and discursive 'encounters that produce bodies, objects, subjects and through which they come to cohere' (Gannon et al. 2019, p. 59). For Gannon et al. (2019), writing became a process within the intensive space carved out over a day and a half workshop, in which the iterative production of stories was made possible through reading, listening, revising and writing together. Out of the workshops, two publications emerged (Taylor et al. 2020; Gannon et al. 2019) producing both 'grim tales' and 'joy found in mundane environments':

> Our stories of academic life, we found, often entailed grim tales of meetings in small rooms where conversations were constrained by hierarchies of command and control, men in suits, doors, passageways, institutional forms, routines and procedures, silences or forced joviality – all of which is consistent with previous literature on neoliberal managerialism. Teaching, learning and research were almost absent, although ostensibly academic work is about these practices above all. The atmospheres we described were constraining, oppressive, even claustrophobic. But we also found amongst and within our stories micro-moments where different atmospheres emerged, where energy was released, where a crack opened and something else was let in. Joy was not a topic we had nominated for collective investigation; pleasure had not been discussed during our workshop. However, as we worked through the collective biography stories that remained in our shared

> Dropbox, we began to notice that many of our stories were either explicitly about joy being found in mundane environments, or of joy being found, despite the violence of the situation, in gestures, glances, attunements, and momentary flights of imagination or desire. We began to recognise that these were also integral to how we emerge and become as academic subjects – to the 'selves' we considered ourselves to be as academics (Gannon et al. 2019, p. 49).

Feminist writing praxis enables a writing of selves differently, identifying the everyday-ness of experiences of the macro-structures of inequality that otherwise are invisibilised in hegemonic academic writing practices that privilege large scale 'evidence'. Such feminist re/presentations of 'small stories' engage the affective and embodied moments of conflicts with power, from ordinary working days in academia (Taylor et al. 2020).

Reflections

Academic writing is fuelled by the discourses of excellence, and the intensification of institutional competition for rankings at the top of the global league tables. This impacts profoundly on the performative cultures of universities and regulates academic subjectivities in the context of neoliberal, commercialised and market-driven higher education, where the value of an academic is reduced to the metrics that signal an academic's level of success. Difference is measured in terms of publication and income-generation metrics that signify the worth of the individual in relation to global, national and institutional markets of status and prestige. The pressure on academics to publish only in a limited list of preferred, high-impact-factor ranked journals undermines the capacity to write differently due to the requirement to conform to the journal's practices in order to have a chance at being published. This impacts unevenly on differently positioned writers (for example, early career researchers, university teachers, professional staff and students) in the wider publication markets of status and prestige. Metrification ensures the perpetuation of writing hegemonies as journals are also subjected to hierarchies of value built on the foundations of metrics-based data in the same way as individual academics are.

Writing is a social and relational practice entwined with complex relations of power, knowledge and inequality. Related to the politics of difference, writing is enmeshed in practices of exclusion that are rendered invisible through assessment technologies. The author is always situated in relation to these technologies as well as the writing of others; and through the process of writing, knowledge is formed and reformed through the different voices at play, some of which are revalorised. Thus the author is not an individual authority, detached from the contextual perspectives and values at play to simply uncover 'findings' and assert truth and certainty. Writing is intimately connected with ethical questions about the forms of knowledge legitimised in fields of practice, the knowledges excluded and the reproduction of truth claims that are connected with enduring and new forms of inequality. Writing is a profoundly discursive space in the production of contested meanings and the generation of exploratory questions that extend the possibilities of our imagining. In its hegemonic constructions, writing reasserts certainties and truth claims, closing down the possibilities of thinking with and through difference. Feminist praxis, in its commitment to open up spaces to write our/selves differently, presents ways to reimagine writing as a project of trans/formation. We need to ask then, given the power relations explored in this paper, who has access to writing and in what forms?

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Writing/drawing care-based equity into practice: A research- and art-based collaboration about caring responsibilities in academia

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Abstract

Carers are a group of particular significance to society, who contribute precious time and energy to other people's needs and, simply put, enable society to operate (Tronto 1993). Yet, in many settings, they are largely rendered invisible and misrecognised. This is the case in academia where the figure of the 'bachelor boy' (Edwards 1993) has long prevailed and, linked to this, carers have been 'written out' of higher education narratives. In this article, we reflect on our experience of developing a research- and art-based collaborative project (*Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities*) which involved the production of a series of drawings shared online and, in the course of the forthcoming months, through campus-based exhibitions (Moreau & Galman 2021). Through comics-based research, we seek to distantiate ourselves from the conventions of academia to expose its care-free norms and how they frame the experiences of carers and non-carers in ways which are diverse, fluid and intersectional. We also seek to encourage the development of social, including writing/drawing, practices which are equitable to all, including carers. Writing and publishing can be exclusionary processes and the arts are not immune to this. However, we argue that the arts do more than enhance accessibility but have the potential to challenge forms of academic writing which have historically 'written out' carers and care work.

Keywords: carers; comics; writing; drawing

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Introduction

Carers are a group of particular significance to society, who contribute precious time and energy to other people's needs and, simply put, enable society to operate (Tronto, 1993). Yet, in many settings, they are largely rendered invisible and misrecognised. This is the case in academia where the figure of the 'bachelor boy' (Edwards, 1993) has long prevailed and, linked to this, carers have been 'written out' of higher education narratives. In this article, we reflect on the work we developed as part of the *Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities* project, a research- and art-based collaboration between the two authors, which took place in 2020 and 2021. The project involved the production of a series of drawings shared online and, in the course of the following months, through campus-based exhibitions (Moreau & Galman 2021). Through comics-based research, we seek to distantiate ourselves from the conventions of academia to expose its care-free norms and how they frame the experiences of carers and non-carers in ways which are diverse, fluid and intersectional. We also seek to encourage the development of social, including writing/drawing, practices which are equitable to all, including carers.

Troubling the care-free norms of academia requires, among other things, to ponder on the production of academic texts and how writing and publishing can be exclusionary processes, including, though not only, for carers (see Lumb & Ndagijimana 2021, in this issue). Academic writing in particular can (and often does) constitute a site of symbolic violence (Connell 2007): which stories get to be told or erased, through which experiential and theoretical lenses, by whom? Who owns the cultural capital and academic habitus necessary to grasp academic conventions? Who gets to claim a positional identity as a (care-free) scholar and writer? The arts are not an unproblematic medium either and accusations of elitism against the art world abound (Burke & McManus 2011). However, we do argue that art-based research has potential to trouble imbalances of power and hegemonic academic conventions in ways the written form cannot.

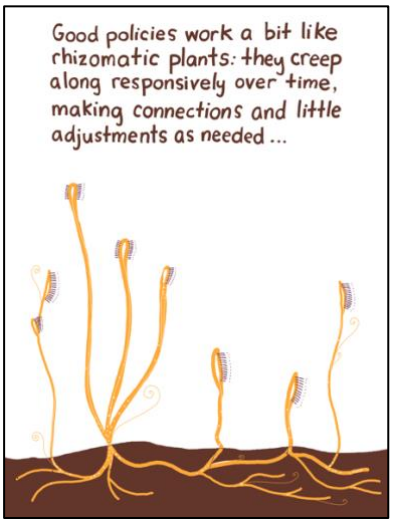
Further to presenting the outcomes of our comic-based research, we reflect on writings about care in research academic circles, before presenting our attempt, through this art- and research-informed collaboration, to write/draw care-based and other equities into practice. We then conclude by looking at how we can disrupt or trouble care-free academic norms in pandemic times.

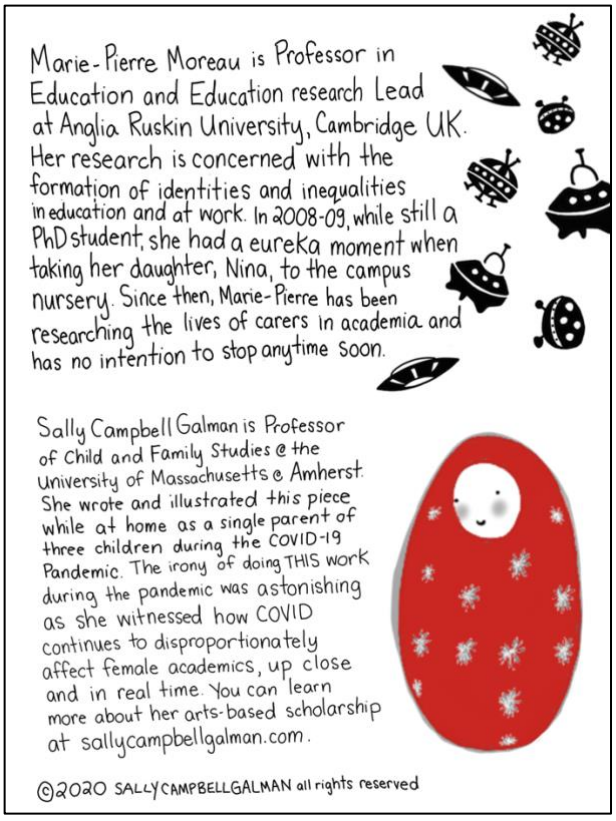
The art work


Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities:
What Works
Marie-Pierre Moreau & Sally Campbell Galman
Funded by an Advance HE Good Practice Grant
Higher Education has been dominated by a construction of the "good" and "legitimate" academic worker as white, male, and seemingly carefree... and this trope has proven itself to be durable.
what are "children"?
I'm so very carefree and my elbow patches are so very droll, what? Also I have servants.
My lab coat is white and so am I!
The durability and power of this construction of "goodness," "legitimacy," and competence is such that most academic workers must make parts of themselves invisible. Among the things and selves that are HIDDEN are diverse CARING responsibilities.
However, INVISIBILITY quickly becomes something else... a kind of MISRECOGNITION happens and carers become resented as "SPACE INVADERS"
"I don't think I get any support for being a student parent: I get some GRUDGING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, but it's this OH YES I SUPPOSE YOU'D HAVE TO GO TO THAT WOULDN'T YOU? Not really good enough, not focused on the task COME ON NOW LADY, YOU'RE DOING A PHD—
WHERE ARE YOUR PRIORITIES?
IS WHAT I FEEL IS THE LINE SO YOU HAVE TO PRETEND AND GET 'ROUND IT."
(Lauren, PhD student)
"I think it is very IRRESPONSIBLE of a student to go to University and EXPECT the University to sort everything out for them. That's WRONG. If you're a PARENT... and if you then make a decision to educate yourself, which is admirable... It's like saying, 'Oh but I've got three DOGS, who's going to walk me dogs?' You wouldn't expect the university to become DOG WALKERS would you? If it means sorting out childcare, then you JOLLY WELL SORT IT."
(An actual quote from a Head of Student Services)
YOU WOULDN'T EXPECT THE UNIVERSITY TO BECOME DOG WALKERS WOULD YOU
While most carers navigate INVISIBILITY and being pushed out as SPACE INVADERS, caring responsibilities are diverse, complex, and shifting, and they exist within hierarchies of care. These hierarchies come with differences in VISIBILITY & SUPPORT
MANY PEOPLE SEE & IMAGINE THE CARER AS THE PARENT OF A HEALTHY, ABLE CHILD AND NOT...
"At the moment, EVERY PLAN I MAKE includes how I can get back as quickly as I need to and THIS WILL GO ON until father finally keels over. The main thing is the EXTRA BURDEN of having this HANGING over me all the time and wondering what it's going to be EVERY TIME"
- Isabella, Lecturer


Just as caring responsibilities are diverse and hierarchical, so also the positionalities of the carer create differences in belonging.
Carefree, masculinist, heteronormative higher ed discriminates against ALL carers, but especially those who occupy marginalized positions vis-a-vis gender, ethnicity, class & sexuality
Don't mind me - I'm just a durable Bachelor Bog archetype!
"When [son] was born, the PR people I work with were VERY KEEN for it to be very PUBLIC that I was taking some paternity leave ... to demonstrate from the top down that we thought it was a sensible thing that FATHERS took time off work and spent time with their newborn children."
(Dave, vc)
Caring is a virtue signal for men, but a professional impediment for women.
"[Caring responsibilities are] NOT SOMETHING THAT I CAN OPENLY DISCUSS because it would be seen as a PROBLEM."
(Kat, professor)
"My partner was ill. I was on temporary contract [and] there were two or three other members of staff on the same temporary contract. One of them, a man, got a post elsewhere and used that to get a post here. I was told by various people that this was okay BECAUSE HE HAD A FAMILY. I pointed out that I did actually have a family and I had caring responsibilities and somehow THAT WASN'T RECOGNIZED because MY PARTNER WAS A WOMAN.....
... and because there weren't children. Because of that I've always been more explicit to make clear what those caring responsibilities are, so people can't HIDE BEHIND a sense of,
Oh! But it's not kids and you're not a parent!
Finally we must also recognise POWER, PRIVILEGE, & PRECARITY amid the complications of hierarchies.
Carers at the top of the hierarchy are privileged but their caring is not seen.
Since I've moved to management, I can't talk about the challenges of child care. It's glossed over.
I can talk about caring but I will need to unmask regularly as a post doc.
There is more visibility at the bottom of the hierarchy... but also more PRECARITY.
And what about support staff?
We know very little about those who work in such positions and how they experience CARE WORK
CAUTION
WET FLOOR


WHAT WORKS
Good practices are multidimensional
Good practices are multi-level
Good practices follow an ethic of CARE rather than top-down, one-size fits all approaches.


Good policies work a bit like rhizomatic plants: they creep along responsively over time, making connections and little adjustments as needed ...


Marie-Pierre Moreau is Professor in Education and Education research Lead at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge UK. Her research is concerned with the formation of identities and inequalities in education and at work. In 2008-09, while still a PhD student, she had a eureka moment when taking her daughter, Nina, to the campus nursery. Since then, Marie-Pierre has been researching the lives of carers in academia and has no intention to stop anytime soon.
Sally Campbell Galman is Professor of Child and Family Studies @ the University of Massachusetts @ Amherst. She wrote and illustrated this piece while at home as a single parent of three children during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The irony of doing THIS work during the pandemic was astonishing as she witnessed how COVID continues to disproportionately affect female academics, up close and in real time. You can learn more about her arts-based scholarship at sallycampbellgalman.com.
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Writing about care in academia: Gazing into the void and grappling with deficit discourses

Feminist authors such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, writing about the English, French and broader European context, have pondered about the socio-cultural norms which posit the incompatibility of ('serious') writing and forms of work associated with femininity (de Beauvoir 1949; Woolf 1929). Yet the sociology of education, and of higher education in particular, has often ignored care/rs. Writing from a so called universalist perspective (although one better described as masculinist), some sociologists of higher education have given surprisingly limited consideration to equity matters, constructing instead the learner and the educator as disembodied. Like the 'universal' citizen of the philosophy of Enlightenment imagined by Descartes and his contemporaries (1996 [1641]), this rational subject of academic knowledge often conceals a White, abled, cisgendered masculine body, which, because it is unmarked and taken as the norm, remains invisible and, ultimately, power-wielding (Delphy 2010; Héritier 2002; Puwar 2004).

Yet the feminist and other critical onto-epistemologies and politics which have emerged since the 1960s have challenged the old frameworks (Bowles & Duelli-Klein 1983; Freire 1972; hooks 1994). Linked to these, social class, gender, ethnicity, age and occasionally sexuality and disability have become prevalent concerns in some social sciences departments, though by no means all. More recently, an extensive scholarship has challenged the denial of emotions, domestic and bodily matters characteristic of higher education research (Ahmed 1998; Leathwood & Hey 2009). Carers, however, as a group, have continued, in the main, to be ignored. Moreover, the visibility and recognition of care is selective, fluid and marked by gender, sexuality, social class and ethnicity (Moreau & Robertson 2017 & 2019).

Gazing at the field of care and higher education, it appears that carers as a category of its own is a relatively new entrant to the field. Earlier research explored the experiences of mature students and/or mothers 'returning' to education (Edwards 1993), but this work rarely centred on care and when it did, nearly always focused on mothering. Likewise, work on women in academia often touches upon motherhood, overlooking other forms of caring (Ward & Wolf-Wendel 2004). The late noughties seem to have marked a turn, with the emergence of a body of work on student parents (Danna Lynch 2008). More recently, the carers category has gained momentum and become more inclusive as other categories of care work are considered, including caring for humans and non-humans (Henderson et al. 2018).

Yet research on carers in academia has not gone fully 'mainstream', with hegemonic onto-epistemologies and theories left broadly untouched by these developments. Deficit discourses of caregivers and other 'non-traditional' groups (students and staff alike) continue to misrecognise those who do care work and to construct academia and care as mutually exclusive, leading to performances of academic and carer identities which nearly always threaten to invalidate each other (Moreau & Kerner 2015). Rare is research in higher education which constructs care as the central tenet of society Tronto (1993) claims it to be and even rarer is research which critically engages with how the norms of academia render invisible or misrecognise those with care. Care instead is constructed through individualised, deficit discourses as a burdensome commodity, albeit one incorporated into neoliberal agendas seeming to maximise financial benefits through the marketisation of equity (Lynch et al. 2012).

Writing equity into practice: A research- and art-based collaboration

The project underpinning this article, *Fostering a sense of belonging for higher education staff and students with caring responsibilities*, was born out of a concern that, despite the steady growth of research on carers in academia, carers and research on carers remained invisible and misrecognised (Fraser 2008), as 'mainstream' research and policy circles continued to operate broadly untouched by research in this area. This is not of course specific to care and is an ongoing challenge for all equality issues and their social interconnectedness.

On a more individual level, we, the authors, experienced a growing tension between writing about care while simultaneously navigating university norms which remained stubbornly care-free. For example, when, empowered by my research, I (Marie-Pierre) raised in a previous institution how repeated last-minute changes to teaching timetabling (three times in the space of one week, immediately before and right after term started) were detrimental to carers, staff and students alike, I was told by a female senior manager that bringing up (my) caring responsibilities was 'unprofessional'. I also learned on that occasion that framing this concern in terms of 'student satisfaction', rather than as an equity issue, was likely to lead to a more favourable reception, possibly because it fed into neoliberal ideologies which construct higher education as a marketable commodity for student customers, and feminism and other equity struggles as the handmaidens of new forms of capitalism (Fraser 2013). Another growing realisation came from the fact the academic texts I (Marie-Pierre) wrote on carers seemed rather ineffective in terms of generating interest beyond the small community of researchers engaged in the field. In comparison, the pieces I wrote for a variety of newspapers and policy websites led to a steady stream of highly personal emails from strangers. In contrast with policy and research in this area, which have usually focused on parents, this came from those individuals whose care responsibilities were less supported yet often more challenging in many respects (that is, financial, organisational, emotional) than the parenting of a healthy, abled child (see Moreau & Robertson 2017 & 2019): women and, occasionally, men, caring for a partner, sibling, and/or elderly relative often with an illness or a disability. The sharing of these intimate experiences (including in some cases of the death of the person they cared for) made for some painful reading. I have resisted the 'datafication' of these personal stories (see Burke, in this issue), yet three themes clearly emerge: the (painful, exhausting) emotional dimension of care work; the inhospitability of academic cultures (or, in rarer cases, its hospitability, constructed as a cause for celebration); and a sense of validation and being 'seen' when reading about the research.

The tensions between writing academically about equity issues and (not) making a difference (in a social justice-informed manner not conveyed by the more neoliberal definition of 'impact') led to a sense of discomfort and was the impetus for a first art-based project, supported by the Good Practice Awards program of the Advance HE. With film director Tim Bernard, I co-produced a short feature, *Carers and careers in academia*, involving interviews with academic carers and higher education policy-makers (Moreau & Bernard 2019). Building on the film, a second grant from the Advance HE enabled us (Sally and Marie-Pierre) to develop the comic-based collaborative research discussed in this article. We shared ideas about the research and how the drawings would convey some of the engagement we wanted the project to generate. This led to the identification of the key themes and, for each theme, of related quotes from interviews conducted as part of my (Marie-Pierre) research projects. Our discussions went from the macro, that is, the structure of the drawings and how they would form together an exhibition with a sense of togetherness, to the micro, that is, the drawings, the quotes and their links within each panel, with Sally conceptualising and drawing the images.

The story so far: Disrupting academic norms in the midst of a pandemic

Academic conventions, art-based interpellations

In contrast to the centrality of care work in producing and maintaining our world, care work and carers continue to be marginalised, including in higher education policy and research circles. This also characterises the production of academic texts, which have 'written out' care/rs of their narratives. Our work attempts to challenge the prevalence of the figure of the 'bachelor boy'. Yet we also acknowledge that the written form, and academic writing in particular, represents a site of symbolic violence as a selective process which constructs the social world and, thus, potentially sustains power relationships (Connell 2007). Moreover, our own experiences highlight the limitations of seeking change through academic texts only. Academic texts are often physically or conceptually inaccessible (for example when they are behind a paywall). Likewise, the academic canon reiterates the carefreeness of intellectual thinking, where excellence becomes out of reach for those doing care work, for example through the mobility and full availability imperatives (Henderson & Moreau 2020), and, as such, academic writing can be exclusionary.

At its most basic, arts-based research is the process of employing the tools and processes of art making to gather, analyse, understand, engage with, and/or disseminate data. In other terms,

> arts based research can be defined as the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies. It represents the unfolding and expanding orientation to qualitative social science that draws inspiration, concepts, processes and representation from the arts, broadly defined. (Knowles & Cole 2008, p. 608).

Within the larger umbrella of arts-based research is comics-based research, with which we have engaged in this piece. This is a relatively new form of arts-based work, which has been defined by Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower and Sousanis (2020) and Galman (2021). The comic genre as fundamentally about contiguous images and text, offers certain affordances that are potentially powerful for qualitative work. These include multimodality, the blending of sequential and simultaneous communication, an emphasis on explicit demarcation of creator voice, and what Kuttner et al. (2020) refer to as the work of 're-storying'. Re-storying is particularly important to the analyses here. As Kuttner et al. (2020) write in the context of Weaver-Hightower's 2017 comic piece, *A Father's Story*, Weaver-Hightower takes apart, and then reassembles, a complex and multilayered story that shifts back and forth from the personal narrative to larger medical conceptual information, 'using the tools and conventions of comics to piece together a coherent narrative' (p. 203) offering simultaneous layers of complexity. In this work, we also employed re-storying to tell multiple connected narratives in the context of the larger landscape of policy and practice. Our use of comics-based method creates a layered, interdependent comic narrative that can be read as both a single page as well as a multilayered communication or 'cross panel meaning making' (Kuttner et al. 2020, p. 203).

While acknowledging that the arts are not an unproblematic medium either, this research- and art-based collaboration views the arts as method as a powerful tool for conceptualising and understanding. We approach them as a mode of knowledge production that does more than enhance accessibility and engage diverse publics with research topics and stories. Instead, we argue that the arts in general, and comics specifically, enable readers to simultaneously consider the parts and the whole; the contiguous images and words that characterise comic art allow

readers to be challenged by individual carers' stories while also considering the larger socio-cultural context.

The use of comics and other art forms enables us to reach out to minoritised groups because of the multi-layered accessibility of the drawing form compared, say, with the more rigid academic codes. However, it also serves another purpose, which is the engagement of the privileged who, should they want to, are able to live their life without questioning the societal structures which confer them power, including because of the gendered, classed and raced chains of care which enable some to perform the illusory identity of the care-free academic. See, for example, 'Dave', a pseudonym, in Moreau and Robertson (2019) and in the drawings in this article. Engaging with the privileged, in higher education and other spheres, is key to bringing about social change. It is worth noting here that in this sector as in many others, decision-making is mainly in the hands of those who are a close fit to the archetype of the 'bachelor boy'. In the UK, for example, men represent 86 per cent of vice-chancellors, in sharp contrast with the strong numerical presence of women and girls in the higher education population (HESA 2020).

A particular endeavour through this project relates to raising awareness of carers' presence in HE and of the diversity and intersectionalities of their experiences, so as to encourage the development of social, including writing, practices which are equitable to caregivers. The drawing form also has a wholeness to it. Although, like writing, it is selective in terms of what is included and what is left out, the vignette format has a wholeness to it that enables us to 'draw a fuller picture', one where information is contextualised and where the oft left unsaid is made explicit (for example, the fact that the body of the scholar can be drawn, rather than left to the imagination of the reader, and that this body can be marked by gender, class, race etc. in intersectional ways), in contrast with the universal yet masculinist take of many higher education texts which render bodies invisible. The drawn form also appeals to the individual as a whole and encourages a simultaneous intellectual, emotional and at times physical engagement, while the format of the exhibition facilitates communal engagement as the viewers physically present in the space of the exhibition can converse with each other. Indeed, as argued by Vanover and colleagues,

> When arts-based practices are used skilfully to produce a provocative work of art, researchers gain the power to strike the imagination and speak directly to the public. A piece of art or performance of "high aesthetic quality has the potential to engage audiences emotionally and communally" (Saldaña, 2018, p. 374). Such is rarely the case with academic journal articles. (Vanover et al. 2021, p. xv)

The arts, especially the comic arts, increase the possibilities and reach of academic knowledge dissemination while not compromising the complexity and nuance of the stories and analyses contained within. In this way comics-based and arts-based research is not only highly effective but also deeply engaging.

Pandemic reflections

Researching carers in academia has never been more timely. We know from a small number of studies that this group represents a significant presence in academia (Mason et al. 2013; NUS 2013; UCU 2017) and we know that care work is a highly gendered activity as it is constructed as 'women's work' (Atkinson 2017). We also know that carers experience a broad range of issues, including in terms of work-life balance, finance and health as well as range of feelings and emotions (Brooks 2014; Hook 2016; Moreau & Kerner 2015; NUS 2009 & 2013; Wainwright & Marandet 2006). It is precisely these affective and emotional components of carers' experiences which tend to be overseen by policies and research; grappling with this omission is at the centre of this project.

These emotional and affective elements of care came into particularly sharp relief during this project for the simple reason that we did this work during a global pandemic that magnified the costs and stressors of carers' work. We certainly did not know at the time of starting this project that it would take place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we both enjoy a number of privileges linked, for example, to our classed, raced and geo-political positioning, the US and the UK were particularly affected by the pandemic. In both countries, the pandemic context has been characterised by the emergence of 'post-truth' narratives and social movements, and a call for a return to more conservative forms of politics which threaten the rights of minoritised groups (Burke et al. in press). Research also shows that for academics as for other groups, the pandemic has reinforced gender and other inequities, for example, as women have taken on a disproportionate share of home-schooling and of the reproductive work related to it, such as preparing meals, cleaning, etc. (European Commission 2021).

However, maybe more crucially, the ongoing pandemic has suddenly thrown light on the care arrangements which had been rendered invisible by care-free academic and societal norms. While the current situation means that the exhibition of the art work had to be postponed, sharing the art work discussed in this article through online seminars has comforted us in the view that art work 'speak to the public' and, in that particular case, can trouble the care-free norms of academia and encourage collective mobilisation, ultimately drawing/writing equity into practice. The newly acquired visibility of care work is a critical moment that needs grasping if we are to embrace the idea of the 'care-full' university and to be accompanied by the mobilisation of discourses of care as a set of relationships enabling the production and maintenance of our world rather than a burdensome, individualised commodity. This art- and research-informed collaboration is part of this effort.

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ACCESS

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Writing the
field of equity

Writing the value(s) of colonised equity practices in higher education

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Abstract

The reasons promoted for investments in processes of widening participation in higher education are commonly couched in a language of equity, albeit a conceptualisation of equity imbued with notions of social mobility and/or employability. Methodological considerations of equity-oriented research and how these shape knowledges about equity, or indeed the ways in which 'the problem' of equity is constructed, is a matter of some ongoing debate. Less prominent across the field of equity and widening participation are discussions concerning methodologies in relation to the approaches to practice taken up in higher education to, for example, create more inclusive environments or more transformative possibilities as the case might be in different contexts.

In this article we tentatively explore how the terms and concepts higher education staff adopt to imagine and implement approaches to 'equity practice' in higher education are shaped by the language systems available to us. We do so by co-authoring a paper that attempts to 'dig into' a recent interaction between two colleagues at an Australian university; an arguably dialogic moment in which a term drawn from a language other than English available to one of the colleagues created a new articulation of approach of perceived value to both of us. This articulation of approach to practice is then juxtaposed with a social imaginary that demands forms of accountability that legitimises instrumental programs logics and tend towards policy short-termism, exalting certain types of evaluation to effectively undermine efforts that hold ethical, unstable, generative, uncertain commitments at their core.

The article is also an effort to foreground the enduring histories of colonisations and how these continually shape our contexts and our practices in higher education.

Keywords: language, culture, praxis, colonisation, evaluation

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> Is one way that social reality, capital, class difference, relations of subordination and exclusion come to seem natural and familiar precisely through the language that impounds these notions in a subtle and daily way into our sense of reality? (Butler 2003, p. 203)

> the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting, […] used […] with deafeningly repetitive frequency in the modern period, by the British, the French, the Belgians, the Japanese, the Russians, and now the Americans. (Said 1993, p. xix)

Commencements

Louis: *For me, the student gatherings are linked to language and justice. The people we support, they utilise different languages. And when they communicate in their languages, they become familiar, they build belonging and social connections among themselves and then among other local communities and even the university. What we are talking about here is inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, participation, representation, recognition. It is all intertwined – weaving each other. Allowing language capability into a space, it is capacity building for a particular community where there are oppressions that prevent them from using their own ways of integrating with a space.*

Matt: *Perhaps that could be a focus for this paper then Louis? Trying to grasp these sorts of presences in processes of 'widening participation'? And how language produces realities? Trying to situate our practice, including the horrific aspects of the everyday, the taken for granted action that carries the inclusion, exclusion, discrimination, racism, representation, recognition. And maybe, how different colonisations have and continue to produce these? Trying to write about what is present when you do what you do. When I do what I do. Not that we can be totally 'aware' but as a sort of responsibility to try and remember?*

Our (Louis and Matt) intent with this paper is partly captured in our recorded interaction above. We attempt in these pages to identify and convey aspects of our context in higher education, aspects that we argue can easily be forgotten. Specifically, the work is an effort between colleagues to remind ourselves of the enduring histories of colonisations – perhaps the most 'undiscussable' parts of our everyday interactions – and how these histories continually shape us. We have this stated intention, yet we are sensitive to the idea that in acts of communication, 'intention doesn't govern' (Butler 2003, p.204). We assume that readers are already remaking our sayings here, in flights that we will never know. Our intention is therefore precarious and uncertain, tentatively offered as a vehicle for possible frustration, confusion, growth and expansion.

We have co-authored this paper attempting to 'dig into' a recent interaction between us. In a regular meeting, one of us (Louis) reached for the term *bourgeon* to articulate an approach to an activity on campus, and the term was immediately perceived as of some new value to us both. Specifically, we were discussing how to begin to evaluate the approach Louis was taking to a series of structured social gatherings as part of efforts with students from refugee and refugee-like backgrounds to navigate university study. A crude translation from French to English has *bourgeon* meaning something akin to a bud or sprout, holding the shoots of a plant with yet to

be developed leaves and/or flower(s). This initial interaction between us led to ongoing conversations on the topic, drawing new articulations from the interpretations we were making around this new term, this new tool and the possibilities we felt it held. We began to discuss how the term helped us to think about unknown multiplicities, new worlds, creative growth and flourishing. We enjoyed how this seemed to escape some of the more functional or cause-and-effect understandings of the initiatives in which we were involved. We began to record discussions as we could sense the dialogue taking directions neither of us understood but were interested to explore more deliberately.

When this special issue was proposed, we began to read together articles we felt were related to our discussions. We were trying to identify something we didn't yet grasp. We had hoped of course to publish in this paper some grand insights. What has emerged is more to do with a process of placing ourselves in histories. For, in this effort to locate our work, we have come to know each other as colleagues in new ways. The development of the paper has become a new space for us in trying to read and write and say together. This is a messy mix of the personal, interpersonal, and political; a mix guided however by the theoretical/conceptual framework of the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) to which we both belong. The influences weaving the work draw largely from feminist, decolonising and post/structural thinking and projects. For example, we claim to draw on feminist commitments (in close concert with 'critical' and 'post/structural' theories) that help to consider the embodied subjectivities and practices involved, bringing attention to the ways inequalities are experienced and felt through complex formations of personhood (Burke 2012).

CEEHE is a centre that attempts to bring research and practice together in critical thought, gathering around attempts to address persistent inequalities and 'generate transformative impact for equity in and beyond higher education' (CEEHE 2021, np). In this context, the development of personal and shared praxis (Van Rensburg 2006) is deeply valued, whether it be within projects of research or practice or deliberate blending of these two. CEEHE is also a place where the focus of research/practice/praxis is not always fixed on individuals or groups positioned as 'in need' or 'vulnerable'. Rather, held in focus also are the relatively privileged agents in these relations of doing equity in higher education. These are the practitioners, researchers and senior staff guiding the methodologies of equity and widening participation as part of university institutions with long histories of exclusion and forms of violence. This focus is important because these agents (and we count ourselves amongst these) carry in their being, knowing and doing the very gendered, classed and racialised inequalities that projects of social justice in education seek to engage and disrupt. In this project, CEEHE follows Burke (2012) by taking up Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice (Fraser, 1997, 2003), holding this together with insights from the critical, feminist, and post/structural perspectives referred to earlier.

In this context, we have wrestled with the challenge of writing together. For example, is it inevitable that one author's voice will dominate as another is slowly silenced? In the next section we begin to try to foreground aspects of our positionalities, including how they are linked to classed, raced and language-based relations of power. Certainly, the irony of writing this work in English is not lost on us. As a way of working through these problems, we have noted that, as socially situated subjects, our writing is not necessarily 'our own' but produced through existence in social fields. For this special issue then, we would note that such issues:

> are central to concerns about access, both in terms of accessing different forms of knowledge, some which are given greater social value and legitimacy than others, and in terms of accessing the processes by which a

> subject may be recognised as an author, as having authority within the field of higher education. (Burke 2012, p. 83)

These are concerns from which we perhaps cannot or should not always shy away. And they are concerns that this special issue seeks to address. We want to write together, for many reasons, but at least one of these reasons being to offer perspectives from those who:

> inhabit the margins of academia or are excluded from its realm is an important political and scientific project. Crucially, the view from the margins also sheds light on the power relationships and norms which operate at the core of academia. (Moreau 2017, p. 9)

We begin the paper by partially locating ourselves and the contexts of our work, including some of the problematic aspects of the widening participation methodologies in which we are involved. We then identify specific colonisations and their effects, with a focus on language as an aspect of imperialism. We move to critique hegemonic evaluation culture, which resembles both the problematic aspects of widening participation and new colonisations. We do so because this paper stemmed from a discussion where Louis reached beyond the everyday language of program logic for a term that he felt better able to represent an approach and intended impact. We close with reflections on what we co-authors might tentatively claim to have become, learned and unlearned (Datta 2018).

Introducing our contexts of learning and unlearning

Louis: *What I do over there is for them to see me acting as one of their cohort. Sharing my experience and hearing from me using broken English but doing my job. I think it is important. They will feel represented. They will feel that they are recognised, regardless of what the main society think of them. A longer-term outcome is the network we form as we try to wipe away those empty feelings. Instead, enhancing and exploring their capability and the future, and the person – the human being valued within a place.*

Matt: *That's interesting Louis. Given you are so familiar with that experience of having to navigate yourself the dominate language practice here being English, to think about what is it that you do in the student gatherings that you think helps the participants.*

We locate ourselves here professionally in a context of Equity and Widening Participation in university higher education. The idea of 'Widening Participation' – as a series of policies, funding schemes and programmatic activity – has become an increasing focus within many higher education systems across the globe. The reasons given for investments in processes of Widening Participation are often presented in a language of equity but with a close association with ideas such as 'social mobility' and/or 'employability' (Lumb & Bunn, 2021). Largely, the underlying imperative is guided by individual or national-level economic benefit. Often the focus of interventions stemming from this policy and funding are groups of students that have historically been underrepresented, or altogether excluded, in higher education. For example, in the Australian context from which we write, the official equity groups are Low Socioeconomic Status (Low SES), Disability, Indigenous, Women in Non-Traditional Areas (WINTA), Regional and Remote, and Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB). An immediate problem though, is the way in which processes of targeting have an effect of 'homogenizing those communities, for example, through policy categorizations … [and] … often perpetuates a

pathologising, neocolonial gaze while ignoring differences within as well as between communities' (Burke & Lumb 2018, p. 16).

There has been significant financial investment in these regimes in recent decades (for example, over 1 billion dollars in dedicated equity-oriented funding in the last decade in Australia). Yet what research from many different higher education systems has demonstrated is that:

> While the 'success story' of expansion in higher education has led to a more diverse student body, it ironically has not produced a more inclusive higher education sector. Instead we find in the 'open' market place universities have become more polarised and segregated along hierarchical race and class lines. (Mirza 2018, p.8)

This paper is developed from a context in which the intended beneficiaries are students from refugee and refugee-like backgrounds, with Louis' work focused on working alongside students to navigate the perilous structures of higher education. The focus of the paper is not solely this 'equity group' or even a sustained investigation of an aspect of understanding or supporting educational journeys involved. Instead, we take this context as a point of departure to bring together questions of colonisation, refuge, language and evaluation as the paper develops. This is not to turn away from or to understate however the importance of universities working more and better with students from refugee backgrounds because, as Molla (2020) has shown, many community members from refugee backgrounds in Australia continue to face lingering challenges in the areas of educational attainment, employment, cultural adaptation and social engagement. Also drawing on Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice, Molla adopts the notion of *misframing* to demonstrate how higher education policy in Australia does not specifically engage the notion of refugee status and therefore creates structural impediments to the construction of support. A growing body of work in the Australian context is illuminating the situations, strategies and successes of this unofficial 'equity group' (for example, Naidoo 2018; Naylor 2019; Molla 2019 & 2020). Whilst the practices focus on developing new types of relational support for students from refugee backgrounds, the contribution this paper attempts to make is broader than this particular 'equity group', important as this focus might be. This paper elevates the attention to methodology of Equity and Widening Participation practice, in addition to approaches to research and evaluation that might relate to these contexts. Methodological considerations of equity-oriented research and how these shape knowledges *about* equity, or indeed the ways in which 'the problem' of equity is constructed, is a matter of some ongoing debate. Less prominent across the field of equity and widening participation are discussions concerning methodologies in relation to the approaches to practice taken up in higher education to, for example, create more inclusive environments or more transformative possibilities as the case might be in different contexts (Rainford 2021).

The activity Louis engages in as part of CEEHE is diverse and the processes of facilitating student gatherings is only one dimension of a networked, community-located strategic framework he has developed over time. The idea of gathering can be constructed as simple and 'natural', but also as complex and difficult. This paper emerged from a discussion together trying to produce something of a shared understanding across different positionalities (including language) of how we might understand and evaluate this aspect of Louis' work. As part of our praxis, a method we undertook was to share written reflections back and forth via email as we read and walked and talked together. At one point, we shared something of an autobiographical snapshot which we have decided to include here, inspired by feminist approaches to understanding work such as this paper as socially situated with knowledge formation being

contextual, political and relational.

Louis writes here about growing up in Burundi and moving, through forced migration, to Australia.

My name is Louis. I am an African-Australian, born and raised up in Burundi which is a country wedged in between Tanzania, the Republic Democratic of Congo (RDC) and Rwanda. I lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania for seven years and during that time I worked with refugees through different United Nations organisations including working at high school as a teacher for four years (from 2003 to 2007). When I arrived in Australia, education in English language and Australian ways of doing things challenged me. In terms of my education, I went to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW for five years and I got three diplomas in community services sector (community services work, Mental Health and Case management). Afterwards I completed a Bachelor of Social Science degree at the University of Newcastle. Now I am working at University of Newcastle in Centre for Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) where I work with students from refugee or refugee-like backgrounds, helping them to navigate higher education. In 2021, I completed a Master of Social Change and Development. Being born in Burundi, which was colonised by Belgium, has impacted me psychologically and academically, my world views and my social positionality. It has shaped the ways the world thinks I am. A short history of Burundi is important for this work. The ethnic citizens of Burundi (Hutu, Tutsi and Twa peoples) lived in Burundi for at least 500 years, before the German chancellor Bismark gathered western powers in 1884 to agree how Africa would be controlled (Rosenberg, 2004). From this time, Germany occupied Burundi, until after the First World War when they were forced to give territory to Belgium.

Colonisation is an invading, an establishing of power over a space or occupant, a claiming of total ownership. It is like when a plant establishes itself in an area and previous plants disappear forever. Following the directions of colonisers, Burundi accepted without revendication French as the official language to be used in offices, schools, and health. Being born in a family/clan where education was denied, I had a strong dream and commitment to have French language and then be able to communicate with those situated among intellectuals, able to hear the language of colonisers. I grew up believing that getting to be recognised as a person of intellectual capability, you had to know western languages, especially French. I started learning French in year three of school, to advance an intellectual identity, a mark of someone who lines up with the 'civilised' world. Embracing French language capabilities meant being able to communicate with those who hold the earth in their hands. With colonisation, there is always superiority and the sense of subordinate or inferiority on the side of the colonised. Someone is up there; someone is down there. Having embraced French, I felt that that when using French, I am an international person, with knowledge, global knowledge. But then, in South Africa and when I came here to Australia, I couldn't use French to prove that I am somebody. Instead, I felt ashamed, empty. This the reason I took paths into education to shine again as a person of values and integrity.

And Matt writes here about growing up as a White male in a middle-class home in NSW.

My name is Matt. I grew up on beaches on the mid north coast of NSW in Australia. My feelings of belonging on beaches is of course an ongoing colonisation (of Gumbaynggir Country and of the Polynesian/Hawaiian practices of surfing). Raised as I was amongst sand dunes, each afternoon I trod carelessly on the hot remnants of shell middens and massacres to ride waves in the boisterous manner expected of exulted White male bodies in surfing sub-cultures, one that

tends to thrive often on 'the attempted domination of nature, and the domination of woman "as nature"' (Salleh 1997, p. 12).

As a young boy though I was quite scared of the ocean. Growing up on the coast, this is not acceptable. The most legitimate masculinities involve Whiteness, surfing large and dangerous waves, tanned muscled skin and blonde hair, a girlfriend waiting dutifully on the sand. To overcome this, I took on partially something of a waterman discourse in certain social circles, a way of being that facilitated the proper performance of a body in place. My parents I have always considered quite progressive, yet they bought land on the side of a hill nearby and named it in a local Aboriginal language. The problem of ownership and thin recognition/cultural appropriation is mostly part of the unspeakable contemporary Australia – one of the ways we sustain the constitutional invisibility of Australia's First Peoples.

This safe, middle-class upbringing set me up well to join the symbolically violent work of university outreach, producing programs built on problematic assumptions, confused and dazed by a policy and funding environment coercing Widening Participation practitioners to target fellow community members based on some assumed deficit of, for example, aspiration. It is these assumptions that come to matter. The constructions of the Other that legitimate the intervention. The unethical separateness that limits our response-abilities, the possibility of being in common. I entered this fray from a professional teaching and community work background, with perhaps an empathetic yet uncritical set of dispositions. This is what has led me to worrying a lot about evaluation and how hegemonic value systems corrupt these processes from their inception.

Sharing writing in this way has enriched the deliberate sessions of dialogue we have adopted over the course of developing this paper. We have not approached the work explicitly positioning ourselves as doing 'decolonising' theoretical/practical work. We have however taken some guidance and inspiration from the possibility that Datta (2018) outlines in terms of a decolonising approach being a deliberate and on-going process of becoming, unlearning and relearning. The praxis we have attempted to produce is one that remembers how the institutions and legacies of various colonialisms remain. The idea of 'decolonising higher education' has become an increasing focus in recent times (for example, Luckett, Hayes & Stein 2020) with, as Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes writing from the Aotearoa New Zealand context, the term having taken on different meanings in time and in different contexts:

> Decolonization, once viewed as the formal process of handing over the instruments of government, is now recognized as a long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power. (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999, p. 98)

As stated earlier, our intent was develop ways to remember aspects of our context that hold the social reverberations of colonisations and bring these to the fore as a praxis. In this next section we briefly explore some of the ways that the English language has become such a hegemonic force through various imperial projects.

Embedding linguistic hegemony

For Butler, the concept of *hegemony* emphasises the ways 'power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power' (Butler, Laclau & Zizek 2000, p. 14). We share this paper from the settler colonial context of contemporary Australia. This is a context

where for example, in the early 1800s as part of efforts to 'Civilise and Christianise', an institute was created in Parramatta (Sydney) by Governor Lachlan Macquarie to indoctrinate the First Peoples of this country to European ways of knowing and learning (White, 2013). This is a contemporary context in which the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently drew direct parallels between the suffering of first fleet colonists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, suggesting it 'wasn't a particularly flash day' either for those arriving on the tall ships from England. This dismissal of the ongoing historical injustices perpetrated on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through equating it with the trauma experienced by colonisers provides disturbing insight into the embedded racist frames of reference structuring contemporary Australian society.

As part of an effort to build for ourselves a partial history of the present, in this section we look briefly at how expansionist projects have helped to create the macro conditions in which gatherings with students from refugee backgrounds are located. This reading and discussing such histories was part of our ongoing effort to make the familiar strange, as a praxis that largely led to us getting to know each other differently as colleagues navigating discourses of equity in contemporary Australian higher education. A focus in this section is how English language particularly, as part of broader cultural imperialisms, has been used within deliberate projects of creating worlds and orders with significant and enduring consequences. For example, Phillipson (2008) writes of Winston Churchill receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature for *A history of the English-speaking peoples* prior to secretly meeting:

> President Franklin Roosevelt to coordinate war strategy, and plan for the ensuing peace. He declared in the House of Commons on 24 August 1941: "…the British Empire and the United States who, fortunately for the progress of mankind, happen to speak the same language and very largely think the same thoughts…" (Morton 1943 cited in Phillipson 2008, p. 3)

These types of successful efforts at embedding linguistic supremacies continue to be guided by those with economic capital and military might (Harvey, 2003). Taking up the idea of linguistic capital, Phillipson (2008) describes below how English has also been an essential element in the recent missions of the contemporary American neoliberal project (Phillipson quotes here from 'In praise of cultural imperialism?' in *Foreign Policy*, by David Rothkopf and published by the Kissinger Institute in 1997):

> It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable. These are not idle aspirations. English is linking the world.

In this paper, we do not have the room to pursue Gramsci (or his followers) in an elaborate analysis of how language and hegemony intertwine across local, national and global scales (Ives, 2004). We do want to recognise, though, that there are important explanations in these literatures of how language is one means by which the values and norms propagated through networks of power become accepted by citizens as common sense, providing legitimacy for those in positions of hierarchical power, helping to hold in place a status quo. We would certainly agree that English is not just a tool of communication. Indeed, 'Language not only communicates to us about a ready-made world but gives us a world, and gives it to us, or indeed, withholds it from

us by virtue of the terms it uses' (Butler 2003, p. 203). The English language, for example, is part of value systems tied to social processes and identifications this language serves in a particular cultural context. Louis, in the interaction presented below, speaks to having to re/position himself constantly in a setting in which it is has become utterly 'natural' to speak particular forms of English, in the settler colonial Commonwealth of Australian whose head of state is the Queen of England and in which there endures a constitutional invisibility of First Nations People, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

These are the aspects of histories we want to try and remember as an anti-hegemonic practice. We don't want to overclaim here, however, the significance of remembering the colonial backdrop of our practices in higher education. We don't boldly assert this claim to praxis emancipates us from hegemony. We do, however, want to contemplate and hold in our practices these backdrops. We do want to consider these problems in our ongoing valuations and co-constructions of formal evaluation, including program evaluation. We do so in the critical hope (Bozalek et al. 2014) that it might help us to resist and disrupt some of the worst effects of distributed power at play.

Matt: *Something else you talked about last time Louis, was, well, 'time'. You mentioned that if CEEHE operated in French you felt you would have done many more things. I'd be interested to talk about that again, in terms of language and inter-cultural work, and questions of justice.*

Louis: *I remember. In my position, diving into English language, I do double and triple things. I learn the language, the context, the meaning, and when to use terms, when is it appropriate. If I was using French, I would not have to wait so long each time to learn new jargon or I would not be so hesitant to contribute on an idea. Before I do something in English, I must process how to say it, how to position myself. However, I see that it was necessary for me to undergo these processes to understand someone in similar shoes as I am.*

We can be surprised what people are capable of. An example is me presenting at a local service where I meet people who are learning English but also have University qualifications from back home. When I tell them that I don't know enough English they laugh at me. And then they say, 'Tell us about your story'. So, I tell them that when I came here, I didn't know anything, I learned, from whatever TAFE (Technical and Further Education), whatever. Then they are assured they will reach a certain level where they can express themselves. Where they won't have fear to commit an error when they are communicating.

Having been on that journey myself, to meet someone on that journey, it is wonderful to understand one another. It builds trust between us.

We also want to acknowledge some of the volume of scholarship that holds a kinship to our own co-authored commitments to increasingly 'just' language arrangements in education. As we have noted earlier, Burke (2012) has translated Fraser's multidimensional conceptualisation of social justice to the contexts of higher education. Burke in this work also draws on McNay to highlight the strengths and limitations of Fraser's deployment of the concept to develop an interrogation of the politics of recognition as an ongoing dynamic operating across higher education contexts including pedagogical spaces. In an analysis of the (lack of) political economy of language education research, Block (2018) draws on the work of Nancy Fraser too, to examine whether a *translanguaging* approach is capable of 'transformation' of structural inequality in relation to language justice. Block first asks whether affirmative action can ever really attack the roots of inequality and injustice in societies and to eliminate them, recognising that:

> In Fraser's view, it cannot and does not, and she proposes instead that actions taken in favour of recognition and redistribution need to be "transformative," providing "remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework". (Fraser 2008 cited in Block 2018, p. 244)

Translanguaging relates to resisting homogeneity, stability and boundedness as a set of starting assumptions with 'mobility, mixing, political dynamics and historical embedding [becoming the] concerns in the study of languages, language groups and communication (Blommaert & Rampton 2011, p. 3). Block maintains a critical position in relation to translanguaging literatures but also acknowledges that it has become an important lens for how researchers examine multilingual practices in and around education given that:

> many scholars have begun to argue that it has transformative potential, that is, that the promotion of translanguaging may be key element in ongoing battles against inequality and injustice in contemporary multilingual and multicultural societies. (Block 2018, p. 250)

With more space we might continue to unpack the notion of translanguaging for our context, and we will continue to do so beyond the context of this paper. The field has appeal for developing pedagogical practice that can resist homogeneity and boundedness, to influence our current discussions on valuing diversity differently, including perhaps how to begin to sensitively and respectfully evaluate the approach taken to the student gatherings designed to support university students, as part of our project of producing a praxis by historicising our practices. In the next section we explore further the dimensions of this challenge: that of evaluating equity practice whilst holding an explicit recognition that the conditions surrounding it were formed by ongoing colonisations.

The challenge of evaluating an 'equity' formed by ongoing colonisations

This paper, this dialogue, emerged from a discussion regarding how a process of evaluation might commence by adopting the commitments and approach used to construct the social spaces of an initiative. This question of how evaluation intersects with projects of equity and social justice, particularly in contexts of formal education, is of interest to us and to CEEHE. Evaluation of equity and in higher education is a contested field of scholarship, policymaking and practice (Burke & Lumb 2018) in which processes can reinforce rather than challenge inequality (Gordon, Lumb, Bunn & Burke 2021). These contestations play out in what Lather (2007) describes as 'a worldwide audit culture with its governmental demands for evidence-based practice and the consequent (re)privileging of scientistic methods' (p. 2). An aspect of our attempt to situate our practices was trying to take note of these demands for certain forms of accountability; demands that we argue work to legitimise instrumental programs logics that tend towards policy short-termism, that exalt only certain types of evaluation and effectively undermine efforts that hold ethical, unstable, generative and more uncertain commitments at their core. Ghanbarpour et al. (2020) notes that there has certainly been limited discussion in relevant literatures of how language, equity and power relate in the context of evaluation practice. This is certainly our perspective in relation to higher education, equity and evaluation of policy and practice. What does exist often focuses on methods, yet what we want to think about here is methodological. Specifically, we want to foreground how methodology is underpinned by the language shaping it. For example, 'evidence' immediately shapes the way we think methodologically and with hegemonic effects. And, in historicising our practice as a

praxis, one that might help us to remember what it is we are bringing to the project of trying to understand and potentially evaluate an activity in higher education, we yearn for an approach that foregrounds throughout how 'language suppression and erasure have historically been used by colonizers as a tool of oppression' and what this might mean for evaluative projects in education (Ghanbarpour et al. 2020, p. 39).

There are longstanding and ongoing debates that consider the complicated role evaluation plays in relation to social justice efforts, including how the common 'what works' focus makes it almost impossible to ask prior, important questions including who gets to determine what is meant by 'working' (Biesta 2007). This is deeply entwined with the limitations of language and how language shapes the imaginaries of what processes of evaluation can be like and what they can 'do'. In our view it is certainly not common enough to see policy and program evaluation engage at length and in detail with 'contextual dimensions of power, economy, living situation, and class, among other denominators of equity and socio-political status, and the contextual dimensions specific to culture' (SenGupta, Hopson & Thompson-Robinson 2004, p. 6). It is also important to consider how privilege (including White privilege) tends to operate in relation to processes of evaluation (Kirkhart 2016), or to challenge the presumption that evaluators can fully understand a cultural context (LaFrance 2004). If we are interested in equity, then we need to consider how knowledge systems influence evaluative thinking and how a particular 'politics of knowledge' and evidence hierarchies become obstacles to more equitable evaluation (Wehipeihana & McKegg 2018). Specific to our immediate context and project are questions explored by some scholars of evaluation (for example: Cooksy 2007; Rallis & Rossman 2000) in terms of the role that language, as an aspect of culture, plays in processes of evaluation, and how related value systems can be unpacked to produce more explicit and participatory way of forming value positions (Alkin, Vo & Christie 2012). Beyond this, though, we want to also challenge evaluation (and evaluators) to consider the ways that language is itself an active force tied to knowledge and power that helps to regulate and produce the ways we are able to make meaning, and to be, and to do, including in contexts of evaluation. If we are to take seriously, for example, evaluating funded efforts to walk alongside students from refugee backgrounds in higher education as they access and navigate racialised institutional contexts inhabited by histories of exclusions and injustices (including those relating to language and culture), then we would argue that evaluation approaches and practices must engage extensively with these aspects of the context in question.

Our dialogue commenced attempting to begin an evaluative stance, trying to identify the ethical terms on which an evaluation of the approach taken to a student gathering might be co-constructed. Evaluation is commonly developed as a bolt-on, although we would argue it is active throughout a social process, regardless of how explicit.

Louis: *For me, 'bourgeon' works to allow language to operate in a given place, allowing diversity to flourish in a space, and also a kind of follow up and constant evaluation. The idea of 'bourgeoning' is about learning of changes after the implementation of a particular context.*

Following Flores, Garcia and Seltzer (2021), we want to note here how some populations explicitly marked by race, such as those targeted as underrepresented in higher education, can be perceived by the 'White listening subject', constructed as unmarked by race, as using language that should be corrected, 'even when engaging in ostensibly the same linguistic practices that are unmarked for White subjects' (García, Flores, Seltzer, Wei, Otheguy & Rosa 2021, p. 9). If, as Butler asks:

> Then the critical question emerges: what world is given to us through language, and how might the alteration of our language give us a different sense of world? (2003, p. 203).

Then how is that we can better value differences present in our support contexts in higher education? We are wary of proposing a naïve and emancipatory potential by relating to language 'differently'. We do, however, believe it is important to value the different knowledges and capabilities that have historically been excluded to provide opportunities for representation of different histories and experiences (Burke & Jackson 2007) if we are taking equity seriously.

Louis: *I mean, people participate in a student gathering for example. We must ask how the gathering can be an event that makes things easier for the participants for them to achieve what it is they want to achieve. So, the 'bourgeoning' is the outcome, the fruit springing from those interactions, those activities.*

Matt: *So, rather than pre-determining the outcome of the space, you are trying to ask what the outcomes could be, what the fruit might be of the interaction? I like that shifting the idea too of what evaluation can be. We live and work in this audit culture with endless processes of pre-determining and checking. I think you used the word 'ask', asking the participants what the outcomes could be, because they are expert in their experience of that space?*

Louis: *If someone is new in a space, we can help by meeting people and talking to people and think on their side. Exploring what is available and knowing the challenges and how to convince people.*

Matt: *What do you mean by 'think on their side' Louis?*

Louis*: I will give you an example. With the current news we've heard about Afghanistan. For example, Australia is going to provide 3,000 places [to refugees]. For me in the equity space, I start to think 'ok, if there are people coming here from that situation, there are people who will want higher education, how can we support them?'. We know there will be issues around qualifications and different education systems, so it is being there to question how better to support. It can be simple things too. A few years ago, we organised for community members to contribute Ethiopian food to the student gatherings inside of the University and people got ideas that the University is not a place of monsters. 'Thinking on their side', it is to have patient understanding and a willingness to support.*

Final reflections

Our intention with this paper was to think and to write together from an effort between colleagues to remind ourselves of the enduring histories of colonisations and how these histories continually shape us. In pursuing reflection on practice and praxis, though, we want to recognise the warning that Kemmis (2010) offers in that:

> when we make practice/praxis an *object* of our thought we risk shifting from the 'rawness' of conscious human social activity to *discourse* about it. We risk shifting from the perspective of action to the perspective of knowledge, from the perspective of practice to the perspective of theory. (2010, p. 11)

What can be lost in Kemmis' view is the immediacy, 'sensuousness' and 'human-ness'; a

sociality that can be both obvious and difficult to grasp. We remain stoic in a belief, though, around the importance of explicitly developing paths to personal praxis. We commonly see methodological commitments of deficit-fuelled certainty in Equity and Widening Participation. On this basis, we would advocate that a focus on producing critical praxis is important for making possible something different, that makes a broadly valuable set of differences.

We began this paper by locating ourselves in the contexts of our lives and our work, including the methodologies of higher education equity research, evaluation and practice in which we are involved. We then took up a focus on language as an aspect of imperialism and held this attention throughout a critique of hegemonic processes of evaluation that arguably help to hold in place a deeply inequitable status quo. Our effort here to develop a praxis by historicising colonised equity practices has focused on language, and languages, as an aspect of the challenge of building equity in higher education. We have attempted to draw on the conceptual framework of CEEHE and would align ourselves in this regard with Freire's (2004) advocacy for shifting pedagogical relations. Freire's famed context was adult literacy programs in which the communities he engaged were differently able to 'word the world' from their perspectives. We want to close this paper now arguing for the ongoing construction of critically hopeful spaces and frameworks that hold the possibility of apprehending, if only partially, and always imperfectly, the foundational frames upon which policy, practice and evaluative research is conducted in the Australian context. These are colonised, raced, gendered and classed frames of reference that reframe us as we adopt them. We believe in the importance of finding ways to remember this and, for us with this paper, we have tried to locate ourselves in histories as a responsibility to those targeted by policy and funding schemes.

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VIEWPOINT
A reflection on my academic journey: The struggle to shape my destiny

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Abstract

Based on my personal trajectory, in this paper, I discuss the barriers to access to quality higher education and writing. Access to higher education is very competitive in the Global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Being from Eritrea also aggravates this condition, not only because of the presence of few higher education institutions with limited postgraduate programmes, but also the authoritarian government which restricts the movement of its citizens through exit visa. Despite these challenges, some students are able to finish undergraduate studies and travel abroad to undertake postgraduate studies. They become relatively privileged to research, write and give their voice and the voice of others who share the same experiences. However, studying abroad requires adequate academic, financial and visa preparations. It also demands social and cultural adjustments after reaching the destination country.

Keywords: Access; pedagogy; research; higher education; authoritarianism; Eritrea

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Introduction

Almost four decades ago, I was born in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea, at a time when the Eritrean liberation struggle was at its highest stage. At the time, the Ethiopian government was imprisoning and killing Eritreans who were suspected of supporting the Eritrean liberation struggle. Hence, many Eritreans were left without an option but to flee the country or join the armed resistance, in many cases, leaving their family behind. In addition to life events such as divorce and death, these situations also forced many women to become single mothers and children to grow without their fathers. Despite my mother being economically independent, her experience is likely to have been one of struggle, with a new baby, my father in prison and no guarantee that he would be released. When I was three years old, I went to live with my grandparents, an elderly couple living in Keren, the second biggest city, 91 kilometres away from Asmara.

Living with my grandparents had some benefits. I was able to connect with the older generation through their stories and experiences. However, life became harder when I started primary school. Both my grandparents, as many other people of that generation, could not read and write. They were able to send me to school with the required essentials, but they could not support me in my academic activities, particularly homework and other academic assignments. Moreover, there was no other relative to turn to for academic support. We lived the three of us together, with only the occasional visit from my cousins. I joined elementary school at the age of six. In first and second grade, I remember times when I was struggling to complete my homework in the absence of clear instructions from the teachers. In schools, most of the teachers were also not aware of my conditions. My challenges were not unique and many other students faced similar circumstances. However, in contrast with many of them, I am now not only the first university graduate in my family, but also one of the first few PhD holders from my elementary school.

In this article, drawing on my personal experiences, I explore my academic journey within Eritrea and beyond. In particular, I discuss my experiences as a student and staff of the University Asmara (and later the National Board for Higher Education). Moreover, I reflect on my journey and experiences as an international student both in China and the UK.

Accessing the University of Asmara: A dream come true

Until 2003, the University of Asmara was the only higher education institution (HEI) in Eritrea. Up to 1994 about 10 per cent, and from 1995 to 2002 about 19 per cent of the secondary school students who sat for Eritrean Secondary Education Certification Examinations (college entrance examinations) were admitted to the university, at first degree and diploma levels (Leonida 2004). Therefore, getting access and maintaining a position at the university was very competitive. Despite those challenges, like many students, I saw joining the university as my main goal after finishing secondary school.

My academic challenges had gradually improved as I transferred to middle and senior secondary school. I was able to work closely with my friends and classmates, and these elective binds provided a range of support. We shared resources, studied together and helped each other in preparing assignments and exams. Their influence was significant in improving my academic capacity. Furthermore, the support from our teachers, particularly during the preparation for the Eritrean Secondary Education Certification Examinations, was enormous. As a result, in 1998, I scored a mark that allowed me to join the University of Asmara degree program. However, this was not enough, as accessing university education goes beyond joining

the institution. It includes providing quality education that helps students to become independent learners and prepare for the future (hooks 2010). It is through good quality education that learners can achieve their potential and achieve a more sustainable world (Nevin 2008).

Furthermore, like any student, I had to work hard to avoid academic dismissal, particularly in the first year of my studies. In fact, I was surprised to see students that I admired in my secondary school struggle and even fail at the University of Asmara. Those students joined the university with very high marks, but they could not sustain the academic practices, such as the academic rigour, of the university. In the Eritrean case, students' first-year results also determine whether they will join the program of their choice or not from their second year onwards. Due to intense competition, many university students are not given a chance in what to study. Instead, they are allocated to degree programs based on available spaces. This pushed many students to join a department that they have no or less interest and, thus, affected their learning by decreasing their motivation, attention and class engagement (Harackiewicz et al. 2016).

Although the University of Asmara had many vital resources and experienced teachers, most of my classes were dominated by teacher-centred pedagogy. Many teachers considered themselves as the ultimate owners of knowledge where students are required to conform to their teachers' perspectives and not challenge or question them. Some teachers got angry when students called them by their names without using their title (Doctor or Professor). While teachers have every right to be respected, such practices risk increasing hierarchical social relations – teachers already have the authority regardless of their academic qualifications. As hooks (2010) notes, teachers who use a teacher-centred pedagogy and, thus, dominate the teaching and learning process, could not help students to acquire the knowledge and skills that provide them with the opportunity to shape their perspectives. On the contrary, such teachers mostly produce loyal citizens that adapt and cope with any hegemonic structure (Freire 2010). Later on, this experience raised social and academic challenges as I moved abroad to study. For example, I had the challenge of calling my professors by their first name although they insisted that they preferred to be called by their first name.

Nonetheless, I also benefited from teachers who were striving to nurture students with the critical thinking skills needed to examine things, apprehend the structures of inequality and contribute to making the world a better place. Some of these teachers used mixed pedagogical practices to enable students to participate in the class interaction. They incorporated interactive methods such as class discussion and collaborative inquiry when the class size, time and resources permitted. However, most of the time, teachers lacked enough resources and time, in particular, to enable such pedagogies, due to large class sizes. This hindered teachers from engaging and recognising all of their students since the time was shared between lecturing and student engagement.

After four years of study and one year of national service, I graduated with Bachelor of Arts degree in Education Administration (with distinction) in July 2003. I saw this as a privilege compared to those who could not join a higher education institution or a program of their interest due to limited spaces, or those who could not finish their study because of academic dismissal and other reasons. Soon after my graduation, in September 2003 I was assigned and later in 2004 recruited as a Graduate Assistant at the University of Asmara based on my academic merit.

Pursuing my graduate study: Desires and challenges

My recruitment at the University of Asmara, in general, and involvement in different academic and administrative activities, in particular, cultivated an undying interest in pursuing my postgraduate study. I deeply felt that I needed further education to strengthen and accelerate my intellectual development as well as acquire further practical experiences. Accordingly, since there was no postgraduate programme in Eritrea, particularly in the field of education, in 2004 I started applying for master's degree programmes to different universities in Africa, Europe, the USA, Canada and Australia and was offered a place with a full or partial scholarship in several institutions. Nevertheless, I could not leave my work and country to pursue my study because of the extended national service and exit visa restriction policy of the government of Eritrea.

Accessing postgraduate programs in the Global North for those of us from the Global South is very challenging. It demands a great deal of academic and financial preparation. It requires certified (verified) academic certificates, letters of recommendation, good grades in international examinations such as TOEFL, GRE or IELTS, and, in many cases, application fees. Despite meeting these requirements and secure scholarships such as the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP), I was still unable to pursue my studies due to the exit visa restriction policy. The visa restriction hindered not only me, but also many other university graduates who secured a full scholarship to study abroad. This 'forced immobility' incites many Eritreans to leave the country illegally by crossing the border to Ethiopia, Sudan or other neighbouring countries with the help of smugglers (Tsegay 2021). They risk their lives to achieve their dreams and, in many cases, become asylum seekers or refugees as they fear for their life upon return after finishing their studies. Although I deferred some of my admissions and scholarship, I was not able to obtain an exit visa until 2013.

In April 2013, as part of the cooperation between the governments of Eritrea and the People's Republic of China on human resource development, I was allowed to study in China. After exploring my options in Chinese universities, I applied to Beijing Normal University.

Back to college: Completing my Master's and Doctoral studies

In September 2013, I joined Beijing Normal University. Although I had the opportunity of taking some in-service short courses in my organisation, I waited for ten years after my undergraduate graduation to access my master's studies. My master's studies exposed me to new scholars and perspectives. I started to read Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Sondra Hale and many other critical educators, and I felt that they were speaking to me and reflecting on my previous experiences.

Freire (2010), through his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, helped me to realise (or perhaps further) many of my questions and doubts on the socioeconomic, political and educational system of Eritrea. As indicated in the next section, the democratic process of the country has been disrupted for the last two decades (United Nations Human Rights Council 2015 & 2016). Despite the voices from inside and outside of Eritrea to rectify the problems, no significant change has been achieved so far as the pleas have been falling on the deaf ears of the government of Eritrea. On the contrary, these pleas have been causing another misery (detention, torture and migration) due to the intolerant nature of the government. I vividly remember being in complete agreement when I read Hale's (2007) argument that naming our problems is not enough because we may still feel powerless to do anything about it. The time

was a moment of reflection in which I was able to connect my classes with my lived experiences and the things that were happening around me – both within and outside of my country. Such academic experience, in addition to my academic achievement, motivated me to pursue my doctoral studies. After applying to four universities, I was offered a place with full scholarships in China and the United Kingdom (UK).

However, studying abroad (China and the UK) was not without challenges. Acquiring a visa, particularly to the UK, was very difficult. Despite holding a full scholarship, my student visa application to the UK was first rejected, which forced me to defer my admission and scholarship and reapply for the visa after a year. On top of the wasted time, this incurred significant expenses to repeat my medical check-up, sit for the ILETS examination and pay for the visa application again. This alone is likely to hinder access to postgraduate programs in the Global North for prospective students from the Global South. In addition to the despair about getting the visa, not many universities offer the opportunity to defer a scholarship and not many students get the money to reapply for a visa. Moreover, considerable differences between Eritrean, Chinese and British cultures and pedagogies brought some challenges. Soon after I arrived in China and started my studies, I realised that I had to understand the socio-cultural conditions of the country in order to be sensitive to the people's cultural values and traditions and, thus, acquire culturally appropriate skills such as culturally appropriate communication techniques (Tsegay et al. 2018). The same was true with the UK.

At first, I used to forget to say 'please' and 'thank you' while asking/getting services, which are very important phrases in UK social relations. I was forgetting to say 'please' and 'thank you', not because I was rude or ungrateful but I grew up in a place where saying these phrases is not expected, particularly while asking/getting services. I had also never experienced anyone in China demanding I say 'please' and 'thank you' or getting offended because I failed to say so. Moreover, the local context and culture of teaching and learning framed my experiences. It affected the way students and staff spoke, behaved, taught and learnt. For instance, I remember getting confused in a class when a professor in the UK asked about the 'X factor' of our PhD thesis. After a reply from two students, I understood that she meant the 'main contribution' of our thesis by the character of students' responses and confirmation of the professor to the ideas. Then, I had to google it to confirm its context and meaning, a common thing that I do after hearing an unfamiliar word or phrase.

My previous learning experiences had made me a very disciplined individual who did not speak out of turn and never without the teacher's permission. As noted above, I had little experience of independent learning having been used to much more authoritarian teaching and vertical relationships with teachers. At first, this hindered me from sharing my ideas in class as students were simply speaking while I waited, raising my hand, to be given a chance by the teacher. In my early days, I also found the 'student-centred' pedagogical practice challenging because it requires students to be proactive and to take responsibility for their learning. Through time, I was able to fit into the teaching-learning process and use my prior educational and work experiences to make an impact among my classmates. Based on my academic and lived experiences, I developed my master's and doctoral thesis focusing on the nexus of globalisation, migration and higher education. While completing my thesis, I also published some articles in different peer-reviewed journals.

Conducting research: The absence of a democratic state

Over the past half-decade, besides completing my master's and doctoral thesis, I carried out research studies to enhance people's understanding of various issues. While conducting research, I noticed that certain issues, such as the sensitivity of the topic under study, the research context and positionality, to be great challenges in conducting the study. I am aware that, as a researcher, I need to follow certain ethical guidelines such as those outlined in the Belmont Report to protect the rights and safety of my participants and myself (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1978). However, I found that these ethical guidelines are not adequate and/or their application is not fully certain in some areas (see also Campbell 2010). In particular, it is not easy to protect the safety and security of researchers in countries with dictatorial regimes like Eritrea.

The ethical frameworks that higher education institutions use to manage risk in conducting research tend to put the onus on the researchers to protect both themselves and their participants from any potential harm that could be caused as a result of their studies. This doesn't mean that researchers are not exposed to great danger because of their studies. Some governments do not allow research in certain areas which they call 'a matter of political and/or social sensitivities or a threat to national security'. Others do not want to see any criticism against their policies. Since 2001, the Eritrean government has imprisoned many high government officials and journalists and froze the constitution which had been ratified in 1997. The political situation of Eritrea, especially the absence of the rule of law, caused violations of human rights including religious persecution and imprisonment of individuals without due process. In fact, the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea stated that Eritreans are being ruled by fear, not by law (United Nations Human Rights Council 2015 & 2016). In such cases, like many other researchers, I did not feel safe to freely collect my data on any topic of my choice and critically analyse it to protect myself and my research participants. Hence, for my master's thesis, I had to conduct my research into a topic which was deemed less sensitive and had less connection with the government, in particular (see Tsegay 2016).

Many of these concerns, however, would have been absent if Eritrea had been a democratic state that abides by the rule of law, which is also essential for all aspects of society and education. A democratic state is important in ensuring and promoting human rights and freedom which greatly affects research (Misiaszek Jones & Torres 2011). In its absence, it is difficult to respect persons and, thus, further socio-economic, political and environmental justice. If anyone dares to cross the line placed by an authoritarian government (the Eritrean government in my case), the fate is very clear – they are cast as an 'enemy of the state' and end up in prison without due process or escape and become a refugee. At first, with the hope to return to Eritrea, I had the challenge of fully documenting the voices of my participants without jeopardising my life and theirs. Mostly, I avoided researching sensitive topics. Nonetheless, I was also afraid that part of me that trusts in social justice and holds hope could perish for the sake of protecting my life and my participants. Hence, I did not want to leave any topic due to its sensitivity or criticism to the government as far as it addresses issues of social justice. I decided not to cut any transcription from my data because the participants' stories are accounts of their experiences, views and values, and represent their talking voices that they wanted me, as a researcher, to know. This made me focus on researching issues of social justice even at the risk of not returning to what I call home.

Conclusion

Being from the Global South, particularly Eritrea, not only affects one's access to quality education, but it also limits one's opportunity for studying abroad due to factors related to lack of finance, visa restrictions and recognition of academic qualifications. Eritrea is one of the countries with the lowest tertiary education gross enrolment ratio (GER 3.4 per cent) in the region – with 3.9 per cent for men and 2.8 per cent for women (UNESCO 2021). This is very low compared to the average GER in sub-Saharan Africa which is about 9 per cent (World Bank 2020). In addition, Eritrea is not a democratic state and requires its citizens to obtain exit visas to travel to other countries and detains anyone caught leaving the country without one (United States Department of State, 2018). Despite these challenges, I could say that my marginalisation was my privilege. I was able to finish my doctoral studies, which few of my classmates in Eritrea could achieve. Furthermore, I am privileged to write and give my voice and, perhaps, the voice of others like me.

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