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

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

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[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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