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Women's non-linear journeys into and through higher education are considered through an emergent research process that spans qualitative and post-qualitative practice

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ABSTRACT

Founded on and sustained through patriarchal thought and value systems, higher education remains a highly gendered and en/gendering institution. This reflects and simultaneously constitutes epistemological injustice, and creates a viscous cycle or de/privilege. Moreover, regionality de-centres and further marginalizes women academics, and those belonging to other equity groups experience compounding inequities. To understand the experiences of 'becoming' women academics within regional universities, we engaged a qualitative collaborative autoethnography and the post-qualitative practice of re-considering and re-inscribing ethnographic 'data' that glowed in us. These glowful data illuminated our 'non-linear' and non-teleological careering away from, around, and into academia, highlighting synergies between our 'non-traditional' academic pathways and (un)structured, in-the-making epistemological practice. In this paper, we share our 'glowful' process and consider the possibilities (and tensions) of engaging in research that occupies a space bordering qualitative and post-qualitative inquiry, designed to resist Cartesian and Positivist epistemologies and methodological practices.

Introduction

This paper explores the shape and shaping of eight women[1] academics' careers within Australian regional universities. Considering the mutually constitutive relationship between form and content, we reflect on the shape, rhythm, and porosity of women academic career journeys in relation to philosophical and methodological tradition, positing

that expansive epistemological frameworks are required for women academics' full inclusion and participation.

Structurally, we first consider how reliance on logocentric epistemologies constitutes epistemic injustice, paying particular attention to the way that imagistic knowing or making meaning through sensory or affective engagement with imagery, has been sub- jugated through androcentric/Cartesian/Positivist philosophical tradition. We then con- sider how this philosophical landscape forecloses women's full inclusion in the academy, and the compounded disadvantage experienced by women academics in regional universities.

To address this, we describe how we undertook a collective autoethnographic/quali- tative research project designed to uncover the small stories of our career journeys as 'women' academics in Australian regional universities. We further illustrate how we engaged with the 'data' using Maggie MacLure's (2013) post-qualitative notion of data intensities and through doing so unintentionally blurred the boundaries of qualitative and post-qualitative practice.

Our data intensities illuminate patterns of non-linear pathways that include chasms, books as bridges, and resistance, imbued with what Thomson (2000) describes as a dis- tinctness or a 'thisness' of regionality (as understood from an insider's perspective). More- over, the data that resonate are plump with imagery and metaphor, describe events and people and highlight *other than* cognitive ways of knowing and describing/evoking experience. We then further theorize the messy and boundaryless form/s and functional- ity of the research process.

Finally, in 'desisting' (MacLure 2024) and/or agentically resisting androcentric or linear discursive forms of logic or communication, we provide writerly space (Barthes 1970) around certain 'data'. The space is not an error or unconscious lack of adherence to aca- demic convention. It instead, provides space to allow 'data' to rhizomatically (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) inter/intra penetrate a thought or generate impulse. The form of this work, therefore, is at times 'deliberately' promiscuous and reflects an in-the-making method- ology, where form and content are mutually constitutive.

The paper's contributions include considerations of the affordance expansive philoso- phical and methodological approaches provide for 'women' to be included in the academy. We specifically posit that an expansion of philosophical and methodological systems of thought and practice, including valuing embodiment, relationality, affect, and imagistic communication, and evolving premises and phenomena are required for epistemic justice which is essential for women's full participation in the academy (as a virtuous cycle of inclusion). We also consider how the staccato, messy, staggered career journeys of women in regional universities in Australia dismantle the myth that White, able-bodied, care-free 'benchmark man' (Thornton 2013) and linear career trajec- tories are the norm by which academics ought to be valued. Finally, we consider how 'qualitative-cum-post-qualitative' research process (inhabiting an *emerging* onto-epis- temology) might assist in displacing what St. Pierre (2021) describes as the reification of European ways of knowing that are rational, objective, and separate from the natural world. We offer 'qualitative-cum-post-qualitative' as but one of a 'thousand' splintered and emerging methodologies that might undermine a dogmatic adherence to the construct of the rationale as the pinnacle of human characteristics (St. Pierre 2021).

Bodies of knowledge and ways of knowing in the academy

The nature of what is considered valid and valuable knowledge, ways of knowing, and knowers determines *who* is legitimized in higher education, *what* is studied, *what* is funded, and *how* ideas are investigated and communicated. In other words, all aspects of knowledge and knowledge production reflect a hierarchized epistemology. Although epistemology is considered as old as any philosophy (Steup and Neta 2020), there has been a relatively recent surge of interest in the field, particularly related to appeals for epistemic plurality within higher education (Fricker 2007). Such appeals advocate for an expansion of epistemological frameworks acknowledging that knowledge traditions have been used as gatekeepers to exclude women, gender diverse people, Indigenous people, and their/our ways of knowing, from higher education (de Sousa Santos 2010; Harding 1991; St. Pierre 2021). Yet simultaneously, traditional, White, Western, masculine bodies of knowledge and knowers have been privileged (Fricker 2007; Harding 1991).

The problem with privileging a relatively narrow framework of knowledge and ways of finding new knowledge is threefold. First, a limited focus prevents a diversity of approaches and lenses from being used in research, which potentially stymies new knowledge production, and new ways of interrogating existing knowledge from being unearthed or generated. Second, people who do not adopt/embody dominant epistemological frameworks are marginalized and/or considered 'lesser' within the academy (Crimmins 2022). Third, narrow 'constructionist' epistemological frameworks foreclose recognition of the inseparability of ethics, ontology and epistemology or what Barad (2007, 90) termed 'ethico-onto-epistem-ology'.

The supremacy of logical 'denotational' language over imagistic and relational language offers an illustration of how epistemological injustice is practiced. For instance, Annis Pratt (1994) attests that contemporary Western culture is dominated by logocentrism, a philosophical position that all forms of thought are based on an external point of reference and given a certain degree of authority. It establishes the Positivist notion there exists *a* singular truth, knowable and externally verifiable, exists prior to and independently of researchers and its representation by language. It further presents that language is an innocent and neutral mediator of 'truth'. Logocentrism both results from and propagates the myth of a Cartesian duality between body and mind where logic and 'innocent' language are considered epistemologically superior to image, subjectivity or relationality. In this duality, denotational language is associated with the mind, logic, masculinity, maturity (Lerner 1986), and individualism (Grasswick 2018). In contrast, image, relationality, and subjectivity are associated with the body, feeling, femininity, immaturity and social relational being (Grasswick 2018).

Consequently, the valorization of denotational language over image and external verification over subjective description becomes for Pratt (1994) an act of gendered stratification, and Lerner (1986) contends that the dominance of logocentrism supports and works in concert with phallocentrism, which works to attribute greater value to the masculine linearity and classification systems. Further, for Lerner (1986), a phallogocentric linguistic code serves to subjugate linguistic forms that incorporate analogy, image, and relational or subjective ways of knowing.

Yet, for many philosophers, imagery and imagistic communication are considered to have a direct relationship to affect and experience, and a capacity to circumvent culturally

infiltrated language. As early as 1942, Langer claimed that imagery provides a rich source of unmediated experiences that is 'spontaneous … less controlled by the politicized forces of language' and is a strong mediator of emotion (Langer 1942, 43). Correspondingly, imagery is infused with immediacy, affect and subjectivity, that resists the influence of a phallogocentric linguistic system (Lerner 1986). Finally, Fleckenstein (1996) recognizes that epistemologically, logocentrism is used as a gatekeeper ensuring that those imbued with a logocentric code (and related systems of thought) are granted full entry into public office and spaces while restricting those without. This epistemological valuing of *logo* and *phallo* centric systems of thought and communication is especially problematic for people from collectivist cultures and women, for whom knowledge-making might more closely align with a subjective and relational process (Anderson 1995; Grasswick 2018; McIntosh and Wilder 2023).

We do not essentialize women or any genders, or people inhabiting non-Western locations of thought. Rather, we emphasize a distinction between notions of women's/ feminine and social feminist ways of knowing. In concert with Butler (1990), we understand that there are multiple genders, inscribed and patterned by pre-existing and developing cultural texts. Women and gender-diverse people might be acculturated into engaging in feminine and/or relational ways of knowing; epistemologies that are subjugated within the academy. For this reason, Fleckenstein warned against a complete rejection of denotational language by suggesting that to be purposeful 'images must have a linguistic life within the dominant conversation', or women just exchange one kind of silence or exclusion for another (1996, 924). She thus promotes the use of language rich with metaphor and relationality to replace a turgid, hegemonic text. Fleckenstein explicitly advocates for a fusion of image and language within a narritivized epistemology to make manifest the experiences of women, claiming that 'by transforming language imagistically, women hold the potential of feminizing the dominant culture, of reframing the conversation' (1996, 924). Relatedly, Anderson recommends engaging with a feminist social epistemology, which she describes as 'a branch of social epistemology that investigates the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge' (1995, 54).

The social construction of norms also influences our understanding of regionality as space and place. Regions in Australia are defined geo-politically, and distinction is made between the regional and the urban based on population demographics (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2023). While there is a lack of consensus on how 'rural' space might be defined (MacGregor-Fors and Vázquez 2020), in Australia the term carries specific connotations, having been 'othered' through deficit modelling and approaches in government policy. Yet there is a gap in the literature on academic women's experience in regional contexts, with a few studies focusing on working conditions and career pathways (Goriss-Hunter and White 2024; Thomas, Thomas, and Smith 2019) that exploring the academic careers of women in regional universities using expansive imagistic and relational methodologies might begin to address.

Methodological expansion

Over a decade later and in association with these ideas, when documenting the key characteristics and foci of qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) determined

that qualitative research had traversed several significant movements, including the crisis of representation (circa 1986–1990). This 'crises phase' reflected the realization that lived experience, as captured and documented within qualitative research projects, is constructed through the subjectivity of the researcher. There is no 'view from nowhere'. This significant shift in paradigm was followed by a postmodern era of experimental ethnographic writing (circa 1990–1995) and post-experimental inquiry (1995–2000), where researchers more consciously and explicitly communicated data texts using non-traditional, creative, and often imagistic forms of expression.

To engage in this slipstream using collective storying, which might include imagery *and* denotational language, employing a feminist social epistemology can arguably advance the feminist quest to change the subordinate status of women by making manifest their lives and experiences; and extending the communication forms through which women can make manifest their/our experiences, beliefs, and visions for the future. It is within this philosophical context, that we explore our academic journeys in an attempt to understand women's journeying through regional academia, as academics. (We present this context without foreshadowing the epistemological wanderings we experienced *during* the process, as this narrative will unfold in our writing below).

Methodology and methods

We eight 'women' academics research and teach in and across many disciplines including education, communication, science, sociology, gender studies, theatre and performance, and cultural studies. We were brought together by an interest in understanding how women navigate careers in Australian regional universities, and a commitment to using this knowledge to engender equity in higher education. Conversations between two members of this group snowballed into a call for others to join them in a monthly online meeting, to share experiences and to co-construct research projects.

We collectively identify as women and/or non-binary persons. Though all are happy to be described as 'women' in this work. Two of us live with disability, two identify as non-English speaking background persons (NESB) and bilingual persons and come from non-Western countries and traditions. Most of us are the first in our families to attend university, and most have parenting responsibilities, three with children with additional needs. We are united by a commitment to equity, inclusivity and diversity in higher education and its transformational potential.

Our small community meets to share experiences and strategies aimed at redefining the academy as a safe and fertile environment for women and other marginalized people to be and collaborate. One such project sought to explore how we became/are becoming women academics working in regional Australian universities and to consider what we might 'do' with the tapestry of our experience. The project developed into a collective autoethnography.

Collective autoethnography (CAE) incorporates autobiographical self-reflection and ethnographic investigation with a focus on *self-in-relation to* others and social and cultural contexts, facilitated by a collective examination of multiple perspectives (Adams and Holman Jones 2011). The emphasis on relationality lends itself to 'collaborative witnessing' where researchers narrate their lives and those of others through shared storytelling

and conversation (Ellis and Rawicki 2013, 366), highlighting deep listening, working together, and empathetically bearing witness to their own and others' experiences (Ellis and Rawicki 2013, 366).

In practice, CAE involves researchers sharing and 'pooling their stories … and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their socio-cultural contexts' (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013, 17). It requires storytellers to alternate between or dissolve the barriers between self-reflection and critical consideration of the 'outward … social and cultural aspects of their personal experience' [where through] zigzagging or zooming 'backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition' (Ellis 2004, 37–38).

The following four questions were used to catalyze our CAE:

- How and why did you decide to go to university?
- Why did you continue with your degree?
- What sustained you during your degree/why are you working at a university?
- Why are you still working in the university system?

Conceptualized initially as qualitative research, we posed 'open' questions (that started with 'how', 'why', and 'what') designed to garner insights into our experiences, perceptions, and behaviours in relation to entering university and becoming academics. In the tradition of qualitative research, we developed questions we hoped would elicit a richness of individual experience and illuminate common or repeated themes and patterns of phenomenon.

While there are several processes advocated for 'analysing' qualitative data, it generally follows a structured model with a clear progression through each stage, including a focused analysis of the data, integrating it with existing theoretical frameworks, 'interpreting' the results and discussing their contributions to the academic field (Anderson 2010). Yet, once our ethno-stories were written, we witnessed our vulnerabilities entangled in our words and worlds, and we shared Janet Richards' reservation that we would need to 'trespass with muddy feet' into our hearts were we to deconstruct our lived experience/stories into usable or unusable categories of data (Richards 2011, 11). We also accepted Richards' position that our shared stories reflect our truths, and therefore do not need explanation or interpretation.

So, in resistance to what felt like a masculinized, narrow, and teleological data analysis process, we instead allowed the stories that emerged to shape how we would engage with them. We read each other's stories carefully, discussed them with a sensitive and critical gaze, focusing on the sounds of the words, observing gaps, repetitions, courage and persistence, resistance, and irregular rhythms towards and away from academia. The effective and generative process felt gentler and yet more incisive than the traditional analytical process. Our valuing of each other's testimonies simultaneously repelled us from undertaking a traditionally 'authoritative' or clinically dispassionate approach to data dissecting/analysis and attracted us to what we defined as Margaret MacLure's (2013) 'ethico-emotio-analysis' process.

Maclure's writings compel researchers to adopt a post-qualitative consideration of the 'productive capacity for wonder that resides and radiates in data, or rather in the

entangled relation of data-and-researcher' (MacLure 2013, 228). We were drawn to the promise of magic and the generative power of data that 'glowed' with intensities. We therefore decided (post initial data gathering) to engage with the data to observe or sense the resonances that would emerge through our data intra-actions, open to the potential of the new data/narratives our engagement might generate. MacLure (2013) captured for us, in words we had not ourselves formed, how a researcher can experience wonderment with data; a process or experience unavailable through methodical, mechanical, teleological searches for meanings, codes, or themes. She revealed how data can create a kind of glow for the researcher that can provoke further thought and engagement. Conceptualizing wonder as residing in our/researcher bodies as well as minds, MacLure (2013) further describes wonder as relational in that it exists *between* people or between a person and a fragment of text. Finally, she recognizes that we don't necessarily set out to collect wonder-full data, rather it announces itself to us' (MacLure 2013, 230–231) as we engage with it.

These ideas persuaded us to journey on a relatively unbeaten track of data engagement – seeking data that glowed. MacLure's (2013) method of analysis gently guided us away from other more prosaic tasks and research to connect with and explore stories through moments of wondering. The process, without prediction, rerouted our inquiry from what was established as qualitative research into what we describe as a 'qualitative-cum-post-qualitative' process because the data that resonated with/in us defied easy thematic categorization or atomization.

While running the risk of over-simplifying the expansive nature and reach of post-qualitative research and its radical departure from humanist research tradition, we provide here a brief concentration of its key tenets.

Post-qualitative research (PQR) reflects a 'methodology-to-come' (Lather 2013, 635) as the form or forms it takes cannot be known beforehand, and its methodologies are similarly 'in the making' (Lather 2013). This allows for immanent meanings and experiences to emerge. Aligned with Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) call for 'expansive' process, PQR accommodates, and indeed catalyzes, a 'thousand tiny methodologies'. The broad and many-splintered PQR methodologies are cohered by their deliberate challenge to the traditions of Western Enlightenment which privilege notions of rationality, dispassion, and Cartesian duality. Moreover, PQR calls into question why 'knowledge' and humans should be the starting point of inquiry (St. Pierre 2013). It also recognizes an integration of ethics, ontology, and knowledge within an inseparable framework that Barad's (2007, 409) describes as 'ethico-onto-epistemology'. Ethico-onto-epistemology is further understood to create 'relations of obligation' where our ethical debt towards the Other is interwoven into the fabric of the world and our place within it (Barad 2010, 265). Central to an 'ethico-onto-epistemology' is an agential realist understanding of our (inter)subjectivity with all humans and more than human matter and a commitment to response-ability (Barad 2007, 392). PQR is thus philosophically estranged from humanist thought and preoccupation which places the rational and logical human at the centre of inquiry.

Given the philosophical differences between qualitative and post-qualitative frameworks, we later discuss the possibilities and tensions of engaging in a research project that inhabits both.

Findings

To collate our 'findings', we initially read the narratives individually, annotating excerpts that arrested, moved, or sang to us; the words that activated something within us or between us and the text. But when collating these annotations for others' eyes and senses, we recognized vulnerabilities and overlaps and felt it would be both atomizing and exposing to allocate individual names to the findings. We therefore share below our *collective* response to collaboratively created narratives and our responses to them. The findings, an assemblage of the stories we initially shared as auto-ethnographers, blended, and extended with our affective responses, thus merging with our ethico-emotio-analysis in a deliberate stream of emotio-consciousness, where findings prompt musings, evoke affect, and generate new findings (reoccurring). The (dis)order confounds androcentric and teleological form and reflects the unedited, unrefined order of our engagement with/in the data. It is not always clear, therefore, which is an ethnographic statement and which interpretation, which the catalyst and which the evoked response-come-new-catalyst. Finally, the text is deliberatively 'writerly' (Barthes 1970), allowing readers to find/write their/your own meaning or feeling in relation to the narratives, akin to encountering a story told in kin or friendship.

Places of learning: a place of words

We were struck by the line 'I was looked after by my grandparents in a house chiefly without words'.

The pithy description made us gasp, and wonder 'Where were the writer's parents?' 'What did they substitute for words?', How might a young girl with a love for words and story survive 'in a house chiefly without words'. A felt sense of grief for what might have been was experienced. A quiet home and a young girl's ache for words and connection were pictured.

As part of a fuller narrative, the 'house chiefly without words' contrasts with the world of words that books provide, that teachers gift, that contain stories and generate ideas. The house without words is imagined in black and white, cold and heavy, whereas the world of books and story, ideas and knowledge, is vibrant – even cluttered in comparison. The schism between the two is evocatively described as a 'cleft between my home and my school life'.

The imagery of a house without words, clefts, gaps, and chasms between the world of school, books and words are set across the ravine from a house without words.

A linear academic career eluded me

We were drawn to narratives that explored the messiness of women's academic journeys, their lack of linearity, the bodily, financial, and familial barriers and adventuring catalysts that propelled promiscuous 'in the making' (Lather 2013, 635) careers. Presented here in short form, snippets of narratives are re-presented in synergy with the career journeys they describe:

> A linear academic career eluded me – as it eludes many other academic women …
>   taking what opportunities were offered.

I was prepared to take risks …
    propelled by the knowledge that in this world we often don't get a second chance

My 'messy' academic career …

I had an extreme medical episode
    needed to withdraw from my course.
    This was devastating

I attempted further studies in my late twenties, but life seemed to get in the way.

I didn't enrol into a PhD until I was in my mid-40s and working full time
    I had a four-year-old and two-year-old.

In my 40's I was offered a scholarship to the Graduate School of Government
I had several part-time jobs … my parents had no finances to be able to contribute …

I had been seconded to the university after a number of positions

Was on a faculty exchange and lived in Calgary, Canada, for 18 months at the beginning of my PhD study

While I finished university the first time around at 22, I did many other things, including my first post-university job in Tokyo (I finally got to the big smoke like the people in my childhood books), and I didn't return to study until much later. I completed a PhD at 40.

I worked full-time and had young children in my second, third, and fourth degrees.
I was pregnant part way through my bachelor business with my first child.

I decided I wanted to become an academic early, and this sustained me. I decided also that I needed to get some work and other life experience before I became a philosopher.

There were many times when I thought I might give up.

I only wish that during those times I had someone to advise me to embrace and enjoy the journey, as I was moving towards where I am now, slowly yet steadily maturing into my professional identity … pushing out boundaries is problematic for women in higher education.

The elusion/illusion of linear, 'traditional' academic careers for women, the financial, familial, medical, travel, and 'other career' detours are amplified when considered against narratives of wordless homes and clefts, gaps, and chasms between the world of school, books, and words. These materialities are non-conducive to linear career-making, and linear careers are not necessarily conducive to imaginative and bodily materiality.

It seems like our experience may be a norm and the linear an artificial construct that interrupts the detours and re-routes that provide space for families, for health, for broad career experience and travel. Perhaps the linear is established to undermine women's magnificently meandering, embodied, body-led, adventuring journeys into and through academia. Moreover, as the non-linear was not recognized or celebrated, there was anxiety felt for the direction women were moving in and a subsequent regret that they had not enjoyed the journey more.

Academic journeys are presented as a happenchance (our response to encountering our narrative data): Where corporeality, financial constraint, and adventuring connect in these narratives, 'messy' trails are formed that exceed and diverge from conventional career pathways. There is no space for the linear in these individual tracks that exceed

the dominant narrative of a single contained and hierarchical pathway of success in academia.

Narrative explorations of these trails with their sparks of desire, love, learning, health, affect, creativity and wilful progression lit a glowful wondering about how much of our journeying was strategic movement, how much happenchance or a response to the force of risk-taking. We also wondered why these zig-zagged and meandering paths aren't more celebrated as they *exceed* the traditional 'benchmark man' (Thornton 2013) with a richness and fullness that beckons people to create and negotiate their own unique trail. We accumulate much along the rerouted and jangled paths we take, 'other' knowledge and bodies that we carry within and through us, which imbue our academic careering.

We recognize our resilience in working to overcome the dominant and logo/phallocentric narratives that seek to bind academics and students in narrow trajectories through the university 'system'. Yet, despite policies developed to promote equity and equality, workplace cultures in higher education often discount these backward/forward/sideways manoeuvres by upholding notions that staff who work part-time work, or take unpaid sabbaticals, sick leave, parental leave … are not 'committed' to their career.

Narratives of resistance

Yet, our narratives of resistance against the straitjacketed 'traditional' career journeys of 'traditional' and celebrated academics, also resonated.

Some texts that shone of resistance include:

I feel like my experience in waging guerrilla warfare on dominant discourses and finding the loopholes in bureaucratic systems within universities can be put to good use in negotiating a better and more equitable deal for students and staff who come from outside the predominantly middle-class privileged constituents of higher education institutions.

Raging war against dominant discourses emanated agency and possibility, and evoked a sense that:

These experiences fuel a sense of both agency towards self and others, as well as self-accomplishment … it is a source of amusement and wary consternation that with my promotion and leadership position in my university, I could now be seen to be entrenched in that middle-class privilege of academia that I have felt so alienated from in the past and worked to circumnavigate in my travels within university systems.

I see too much individualist, competitive behaviour … , but one I want to stay and be part of the change, and

being comfortable as an outsider … and my experience of challenging the organisational culture and pushing out boundaries

Joy, privilege, and power are found in 'conquering' systems, resisting individualism, and pushing boundaries, sing a possibility of change; the sensations the narrative conjured were described as 'triggering positive'.

The data reflected a shared commitment to social activism that drove decisions to stay in academia (despite/*to* spite phallocentric strictures) and competitive behaviours that were described as inhabiting 'monsters waiting in the long grass'.

The push and pull of the regional

The impact of regionality on our career experiences was illuminated by a sense of push and pull and adventuring, from moving between 'home' to other regional centres or to large cities and overseas. The regional areas in which we have live/d are diverse, as indeed are the campuses we work within.

We work across 6 regional universities, with student numbers spanning 1300+ to 36,000+. All universities have main (or 'home') campuses situated in regional locations, as determined by distance from major cities. However, most have smaller and/or newer peri-urban campuses or study hubs too. Many of the university campuses are dispersed, ranging from 362 km to 2970 kilometres between campuses or main cities. Working in regional universities necessitates significant 'travel' across geographically dispersed campuses, and the travel time and relative isolation considerably reduce access to opportunities for career development and professional collaborations (Goriss-Hunter and White 2024; Thomas, Thomas, and Smith 2019).

While on the one hand, our stories reflect a desire to experience spaces world beyond an immediate regionally based experience, a passion for and connection to our regional contexts and backgrounds are also resonant in our narratives:

> For me, I have never considered having a rural background a deficit. I did, however, wish to get out of my location.

> I was not going to live the future that was often told to me, 'you'll marry a potato farmer and stay here.

> I grew up on a farm. I had little interest in cattle or horse work unlike most of my siblings, cousins, and friends who were always at our place. I didn't get on very well with my mother then, but she encouraged me to read all the time and it was something that we shared, silently, away from the rest of the people and their world … reading was my portal into a different world from the one I knew. I wanted to have adventures in big cities like the people I read about.

> I come from a small village nested in the mountains in North Lebanon. As a child, I loved the place, the connections and the freedom it afforded me … When I applied to study in Australia, I had a choice to accept a study scholarship in the city, but I chose regional.

> I don't know that I could work at a sandstone university, as I feel quite radicalised [in a regional university] and anti-establishment.

We ponder on this data intensity. Why have we chosen to work in non-sandstone, non-prestigious, regional institutions, or is it that they chose us? What draws us to regional universities? What draws regional universities to us? Is it because they attract more non-traditional learners than prestigious institutions, which resonate with our shared focus on equity, diversity and inclusion? Is it that our zig-zagged staccato journeys are more in-step with the non-linear journeys of our peers and students within regional universities?

We consider how agency and energy can reside in places and people, conceptualizations that destabilize the humanist supremacy of people over place and highlight interconnections and mutuality.

We are mindful also of the different experiences that we've had with places and spaces – each harbouring and catalyzing a different energy and suite of opportunities. We also

recognize that 'rural', 'regional', and 'remote' represent long-lasting spatial concepts rooted in the settler-colonial imagination (Prout Quicke 2020, n.p.). In the Australian context, the definitions of 'rural', 'regional', and 'remote' have been influenced by the historical treatment of First Nations people and their land by colonial settlers, including the mechanisms through which settlers acquired land (Moreton-Robinson 2018). We wonder also at how space and place are named and divided along (often) economic lines and again resist the linearity these phenomena represent. We contemplate how the language divides and dichotomizes.

And as we write of non-linearity we recognize/realize our resistance to defining our travelling academic journeys as 'interrupted' – the nomenclature reinforcing the notion that managing health, engaging in travel, producing babies and working in other sectors are considered *interruptions*. They are not. They are embodied adventures and pathways that provide a tapestry of learning and becoming that we bring to our academic lives. We also recognize through our writing and engaging with it that we consciously resist the linear, the disembodied, the hierarchized academy while seeking refuge in words and books, learning, and becoming academic.

We finally reflect on the wonder-full nature of data that is dynamic and generative, that produces and reproduces *more than* themes and patterns, that conjure story, affect, imagination and philosophical musings.

Discussion

The collective autoethnographic approach we undertook to uncover and make known our journeys through higher education is understood predominantly as qualitative research. However, once our autoethnographic narratives were written, we recognized that our stories danced with false-starts, re-routes, cul-de-sacs, snakes and ladders; rhythms and resonances difficult to capture using traditional processes of analysis. Our transgressive academic journeys also resisted neat categorization and nomenclature. We thus recognized that autoethnographic analysis designed to excavate and communicate lived experience in relation to cultural and political contexts (Ettore 2017), could not unearth the *more than* socio-politico logics and rhythm of our stories. Perceiving the affective resonance of our same-but-different/different-but-same career trajectories allowed us to appreciate the complex and entangled career pathways we collectively traversed.

We therefore re-read our narratives as a collection, as a collective, where one narrative informed our response to another, re-shaping our methodological approach from 'analysing' data as discreet entities to themes or codes, to 're-reading' or 're-hearing' them in relation to each other, in relation to ourselves/others/ethico/'responsibility'. The narratives become a tapestry, not belonging to any one individual.

We engaged with the narratives with a sense of wonder, observing data intensities replacing 'core principles of positivist research including the concepts of objectivity, universality, and generalizability' with interpretivist imagistic values and in so doing, dismantling and disrupting Positivist, Cartesian 'dualisms such as rationality/emotion, objective/subjective, and researcher/researched which uphold and reflect patriarchal hierarchies' (Gannon and Gonick 2019, 152).

Our understanding resonated with Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (2012) who noted that in the blurring of object/subject, and your story my story, rich new meanings are created through a process. Trinh (1991) terms the process [as cited in Gannon and Gonick 2019] becoming "both/and" – insider and outsider – taking on a multitude of different standpoints and negotiating these identities, affects and ways of knowing simultaneously. Our practice deterritorialized the research method and meaning-making process itself (Gannon and Gonick 2019, 152), and this method, as much as the narratives shared, became a focus of inquiry to us.

Through our pondering on the research process (and its inexorable relationship with content), we recognize and celebrate its lack of teleological and unidirectional structure, ill-fitting of any one methodological or even philosophical genre. The research process traversed the traditional qualitative process (collaborative autoethnography) and inhabited post-qualitative ethico-emotio-analytic practice. Our agnostic methodological process was compatible with embodied, materially mediated, messy journeying, and synergistic with our non-linear career journeys. We also consider whether we consciously chose these diverse methodological traditions processes, or if the processes beckoned us, in the same way that we wonder if regional universities sought us or we sought them. In so doing, we acknowledge the catalyzing energy residing in bodies, institutions, geographic locations, *and* research processes. This gives us hope. If energy resides in these structures and systems, then they are dynamic and open to change and expansion, as are human agents.

Moreover, we didn't forward-plan what unfolded, instead, we meandered between traditions, accepting that one way, may not suit or fit all … [as] (post)qualitative feminism is 'in the making' (Lather 2013, 635). Thus, in concert with Lather's (2013, 635) appeal to use 'a thousand tiny methodologies' we engaged in the processes that drew us to them at each juncture of the project, as an evolving journey of discovery; accepting that the subject of (post) qualitative research is 'not an atomised individual but … ecological; embedded in material flows' (Le Grange 2018, 34). For us, the process was/is agentic, relational and generative.

In response, we weave back to notions previously presented, that patriarchal value systems and practices (have) *historically and culturally* permeate/d all aspects of the university, including whose bodies and whose ways of knowing are considered valuable. Within and beyond this context, post-qualitative research provides an opportunity for feminist scholars to transgress *andro* and *phallo* centric methodological traditions as a process to embody and claim epistemological space and value. We also consider how our promiscuous (Childers, Rhee, and Daza 2013) agnostic research approach might consciously resist the traditional structures that have made our entry into academia challenging and less valued and create new openings for all bodies of inquiry.

In addition, our collective stories illuminate how our predominantly non-linear and non-traditional careering sit at odds with traditional academic career structures and expectations. Our experiences of complex lives, and familial, financial, medical and travel (re)routes into and out of academia, demonstrate that multiple entry and exit points into and through higher education need to be both available and valued. Concomitantly, it is crucial that discursive and porous ways of knowing are equally valued (with multiple entry and exit points), as we know and come to know as fully embodied beings

patterned by life experience/s (and vice versa). It is a feminist imperative, therefore, that expansive epistemologies and related methodologies permeate academia to create space for women's multiple entry and exit points into knowing and becoming academic.

Further, our findings prompt us to consider if our transgressive 'careers' are more common to women working in regional universities. It is possible that our non-linear routes and experience drew us together to collective autoethnography and glowful analysis of narratives as congruent transgressive forms of research and communication. As Wyatt and Gale (2017, 356) posit, we can be 'drawn to the disruptive, creative, revolutionary world … collaborators offer'. It is plausible that as 'women' occupying liminal spaces, such as regional universities, we have a greater propensity to seek out collaboration with similarly 'liminised' others.

Reflecting on our epistemological journey/ing experienced during the project and subsequently, a journey we have suggested created a 'qualitative-cum-post-qualitative' research process (inhabiting an *emerging* onto-epistemology). We understand that the term runs counter to St. Pierre's position that:

> post qualitative inquiry is not a pre-existing humanist social science research methodology with research designs … It cannot be accommodated by nor is it another version of qualitative research methodology. It refuses method and methodology altogether (2021, 163)

And we wish to enter into dialogue with this stance. We don't disagree. However, we experienced a shift in our research practice (causing ripples through its epistemic foundation) when we engaged with the data-narratives as glowful (MacLure 2013). The process 'arrested' both us and the research process where 'traditional' qualitative analysis felt no longer possible. The data intensities evoked a response that compelled an ethical and embodied response puncturing our (initial qualitative/constructionist) approach. We, therefore, consider (and offer as a provocation) if the research process might *evolve* to traverse more than one epistemological tradition, and in doing so support epistemological justice. We do not provide a dogmatic stance on this, simply share that for us, the emerging process informed us and our understanding of the potentiality of qualitative research to become something other, a hybrid perhaps.

Finally, without attempting to draw a neat or causal relationship between the relatively recent expansion of epistemological constructs and related methodological practices, with increases in women's participation in higher education, it is of interest to the authors that women's entry into higher education as students and academics increased substantially from 1985 (Vincent-Lancrin 2008). We wonder at the relationship between patterns of behaviours and new bodies within academia, with new ways of academic knowing and coming to know. It is possible, that culturally, new bodies have created pathways for new structures of inquiry and knowing.

Conclusion

This paper provides an account of a research project that explored the career journeys of eight 'women academics' into and through Australian regional universities that occupied the liminal space between qualitative practice (a collective autoethnography) and a post-qualitative data ethico-emotio-analysis, involving the identification of data intensities. It explored both the content of the research project, plus the forms of research process

employed, identifying coherence between transgressive career journeys and methodological practice.

Seeking to support epistemic plurality (and justice) we consciously engaged in collaborate, imagistic, and relational practices including collective storying; aiming to make manifest our lives and experiences and extend the communication forms through which we can illuminate our experiences, beliefs, and visions for the future.

To uncover our embodied career trajectories communicated with imagistic communications, we used MacLure's (2013) data analysis process that facilitated recognition of the capacity of data to illuminate data intensities. In addition, we demonstrated the generative function of ethico-emotio-analysis process which facilitated new musings and ideas, some of which are summarized here.

We found that both the materialities of our bodies and lives prevented linear career-making and that linear careers are not always conducive to the body's materiality. The lack of compatibility illuminated the limited (and phallocentric) nature of traditional academic career structures (and the strictures of thought that shape these traditions). We also recognized our comfort as relative outsider women in regional universities and considered whether we had sought the outsider institution or if they had beckoned us. We further redefined the notion of 'interrupted' academic careers as embodied adventures and pathways that provide a tapestry of learning and becoming that we bring to our academic lives.

We reflected on the benefit of the agnostic methodological process, and its compatibility with non-linear, embodied, messy life journeys, resisting the valorization of one epistemological and methodological tradition, and offer the provocation that qualitative research might re-route into a hybrid that inhabits post-qualitative process.

Finally, we transgress from adhering to the traditional 'conclusion' where it's expected that authors illuminate the limitations of the research project discussed. To identify limitations would assume that an aim or telos had been established that we had not met or achieved. This work evolved into a non-teleological and generative journey. So rather than suggesting what further research needs to be undertaken, we instead invite you to consider what affect you experienced with any of the words, ideas, or processes presented here. You may wish to use these as starting points for new inquiry or re-inquiry.

Note

1. It is important to note that we understand all women to be women including cis- and *trans women. We try not to use 'female' as not all women are female. We recognise the complexity of gendered terminology and positionalities, and hope that our work supports people who also live outside of gendered binaries. One member of the team identifies as a woman and non-binary person.

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