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FRACTOGRAPHY AS ASSEMBLAGE

Connecting para-academic pathways in the ruined university

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This creatively-critical collaboration confronts issues of precarious employment in contemporary universities. As three early career academics currently employed on casual or fixed-term contracts in Australian universities, we have produced a writing-based fractography — a study of cracks — in order to show the effects of what Bill Readings has called ‘the ruined university’ on the bodies, minds, and lives of academic workers. To produce this work, each of us penned an individual narrative employing cracks as a metaphor for our lived experiences of working in academia. We then spliced the three separate accounts into fragments and combined them into a single text, interwoven with quotations from published sources. The quoted materials set the personal against the political, showing how our individual and particular experiences reflect specific but non-isolated instances of a much bigger, shared problem. Our polyvocal collaboration thus forms an instance of what Drager Meurtant describes in terms of ‘artistic assemblage’. In line with Cathryn Perazzo and Patrick West, we engage this approach in order to affect ‘non-didactic didacticism’ in our critique of the socio-political problems rife throughout academia today.

Keywords: precarious work; para-academia; the ruined university; collaboration; assemblage

Contextualising statement

In May 2019, Australian academics Kelly Palmer and Kate Cantrell, citing statistics from a National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) study, reported on the grim situation for employees in Australian universities as follows:

over half the work conducted in universities is undertaken by employees who do not have an ongoing contract. Of these workers, 43% are employed on a casual basis, while 22% are engaged on a fixed-term contract. (Palmer & Cantrell 2019)

Similar issues have been acknowledged by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), who in December 2019 released their ‘Statement Regarding Insecure Work in Higher Education’, in which the organisation flags that:

sessional, unsecured work as a long-term experience of academia is the difficult reality for many of our members, and we recognise that the stratification of secured and unsecured staff risks fostering inequalities and untenable power relationships on university campuses that do not best serve staff or students. (AAWP 2019)

These problems observed in the Australian context are commensurate with accounts from a wide range of international locales, which collectively represent the steady worsening of conditions for university workers since at least the mid-1990s (Readings 1996; Rolfe 2014; Crimmins 2018; Withers & Wardrop 2014; Brennan & Magness 2019; Connell 2019). As early as 1996, American professor of comparative literature Bill Readings recognised higher education to be in ‘ruins’ due to forces of market capitalism turning learning and qualifications into a commodity (Readings 1996: 38). The global financial crisis of 2007–2008 served to compound these issues (Geiger 2015), as reflected in the multiple accounts of unliveable work conditions collated in *The Para-Academic Handbook* (Withers & Wardrop 2014).^[1] Since early 2020, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of reduced student enrolments and funding cuts to higher education have made the situation for academic workers even more challenging than before (NTEU 2020).

As three early career academics currently employed on casual or fixed-term contracts, we recognise the above issues only too well, for we have lived and continue to live them day in and day out. Agreeing with the AAWP that ‘a sustainable future for academia requires re-imagining the structure of our professional lives and the operation of our professional communities to ensure equality and wellbeing for everyone’, and in line with their statement points about the importance of bringing lived experiences to the fore in order to foster ‘inclusivity, solidarity and community’ among those of us striving to create change (AAWP 2019), we have elected to share our personal stories. As Brenda Cooper notes, ‘experience and anecdote’ offer ways of knowing that ‘may add to our archive of meaning in interesting ways’ (2015: n.p.). Following Cathryn Perazzo and Patrick West, we are engaging assemblage as an approach capable of affecting a ‘non-didactic didacticism’ in its critique of socio-political issues (2015: n.p.). Drager Meurtant notes that the term ‘assemblage’ is given many meanings across differing fields of scholarship and the arts, but we use it to indicate ‘an entity made of separate, in themselves independent, elements’ (2015: n.p.).

To produce our assemblage, each of us penned an autobiographical narrative employing ‘cracks’ as a metaphor for working in academia. This metaphor was inspired by the study Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness present on the ‘cracks in the ivory tower’ (2019) and facilitated our creative fractography — a study of cracks — into how the academic system is broken and why it needs to change. ‘Cracks’ became a method as well as a metaphor when we spliced our three separate narratives into fragments, then combined them as one text, interwoven with quotations from published sources, which set our personal accounts against a broader political picture. This approach reflects our response to Gary Rolfe’s (2014) depiction of the ‘paraversity’ as ‘a rhizome, an underground, tangled root structure in which, as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, any point can be connected to anything other’, and his call for para-academics ‘to connect with anything other, to plug in, to become entangled with as many people and projects as possible’ (Rolfe 2014: 3, original emphasis). Our assemblage articulates interconnections between our experiences, as well as those of others, showing how these individual accounts reflect specific but non-isolated instances of greater

collective problems.

Fractography as assemblage: connecting para-academic pathways in the ruined university

Fractography (fræk'togræft):

'the study of fractures or cracks in a material, esp metal, in order to predict or identify the cause of a failure in a structure' (Collins 2020: n.p.)

1. Falling through ... (cracks in the support structures of PhD programs)

'prevalence rates suggest that a sizeable group of PhD students experience psychological distress or is at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder' (Levecque et al. 2017: 877)

D, a theatre maker turned academic, was eight and a half weeks pregnant on the day she received feedback from her PhD examiners

M was writing a novel for his PhD. His supervisor had made a deal with him to stick around

until the end of his candidature, but something seemed a little off

W was three years into candidature and close to submission of her thesis about poetry in everyday life, she thought — then her university

underwent a restructure

'Most prevalent are feelings of being under constant strain, unhappiness and depression, sleeping problems due to worries, inability to overcome difficulties and not being able to enjoy day-to-day activities' (Levecque et al. 2017: 877)

D had been examined under the wrong criteria and thus failed her PhD

'Turning to the leadership style of the PhD supervisor, we see evidence for a better mental health in those PhD students who are advised by a professor with an inspirational leadership style' (Levecque et al. 2017: 875)

M asked his supervisor whether he needed to address a certain theory that seemed relevant to his approach: *No*, came the answer

'...when PhD students were exposed to a laissez-faire leadership style, the risk of experiencing psychological distress significantly increased' (Levecque et al. 2017: 875)

M was knocked back at the first panel meeting for not addressing this same theory

in the restructure, both of W's supervisors were ousted
overnight

D's joy and excitement of pending motherhood was now overshadowed by the very dark
and devastating reality that the last four years of her life were potentially for nothing.

second year in, M's supervisor took a package. M had to forge relationships with
his new supervisors, do a major rework of his methodology, and
request a six-month extension to his PhD scholarship

W's new supervisors looked at her thesis and said, *tear all that down —
rebuild*

from scratch

D appealed. A long and gut-wrenching ordeal. The cracks began to surface and
she was at a real risk of falling

that December, waiting to know if his scholarship extension would be approved,
was the longest of M's life

2. Jumping the cracks (in pursuit of stable employment)

*'surveys show that PhD students aspire to a lifelong career in their area of specialization. The
typical PhD student seeks to become a professor after graduation' (Brennan & Magness 2019:
196)*

the offer of casual teaching came through, a week before semester's start.

W

took it, thinking one thing would lead to another. With the PhD over,
she

had cracked the code, survived the quake. This was solid
ground

now — right?

*'the number of such part-timers can be expected to rise as the collapse of the job market
causes the graduate student teaching assistants of the old apprenticeship model to be
increasingly replaced by part-timers (many of them with recent doctorates' (Readings 1996:
195)*

fresh off his PhD, M reminds his new supervisor he's available for hire. A couple of
months before semester, he gets the call to teach and coordinate
the Honours program

*'As a casual, you have no annual leave, no holiday leave, no research leave, no carer's leave,
no domestic violence leave, and — less critically, since you're never unwell — no sick leave'*

(Palmer & Cantrell 2019: n.p.)

the casual contract cycle keeps D spinning; there doesn't seem to be a way to get off the merry-go-round.

'You don't have access to funding for conference fees or travel, or any form of professional development. There's no remuneration for designing and re-designing teaching materials and curricula' (Palmer & Cantrell 2019: n.p.)

D sees her friends and colleagues being tapped on the shoulder and offered more permanent positions, yet, she's still stuck spinning

'...no compensation for attending meetings, organising readings, digitalising resources, peer-reviewing articles, replying to e-mails, or hosting negotiations with Jenny from Payroll' (Palmer & Cantrell 2019: n.p.)

another year has gone by ... D's not progressed ... she's not climbing the academic ladder. She jumps from contract to contract, course to course

W *should* have been on solid ground, but the aftershocks
continued

after two years of helping Honours students through and maintaining record
completions for his Division, M gets an email that a senior
academic fancies the role, and he's out

instead of one dramatic quake, W confronted perpetual ruptures ... and no
time
for poetry

M picks up other work in time for the start of semester, but it takes another
couple of years before the new management acknowledges
him as a human being

D catches wind that those who publish more get longer contracts so, again, she leaps — harder and faster now — she starts writing for publication ... there's no more time for theatre making

for W, it felt like those video games she played as a child — the ones
where the
character had to leap from platform to platform quickly and
constantly

each year, M teaches more courses, works harder than he's ever done in his life.
He can't afford not to ... no time to revise his novel manuscript

one, two, three publications ... four, five, six ... D thinks, *surely this will do it ...*

as soon as the player touched one platform it would crumble, allowing only
 just
 enough time to spring towards the
 next

No. A colleague. A male colleague. A white male colleague. A single white male colleague. No PhD. No publications. There it is. She sees it. The tap. The tap on HIS shoulder.

‘The meritocracy, while vaunting its imagination and creativity, is no more inventive than the antebellum Southern plantocracy in spinning out a rationale for economic exploitation’ (Cude 2001: 227).

D’s crushed ... ‘try one day without the Arts’ (Archer 2013: n.p)

3. Being cracked (body and/as mind)

‘Your classes might be scheduled on the same day, and the campuses that you work at might be located not minutes but hours apart ... When your back aches from driving, and you’ve just filled up your tank for the third time this week, or you’ve missed the last bus home and can’t afford an Uber, you won’t be thinking how much you enjoy your job. You won’t be thinking, “Wow, it’s so flexible!” You’ll be using another word that starts with f’ (Palmer & Cantrell 2019: n.p.)

‘step on a crack and you’ll break your mother’s back’, D recalls

early in the year, M notices that for the first time, he’s having trouble reading in
 low light, especially anything in fine print

W’s body cracks now in ways it never used to: knees, hips, spine, joints
 sliding,

fluid shifting as she rises from her desk, twists, stretches, tries to
 unwind

from the locked posture in which she’s found herself once
 more

‘mothering as an academic is permissible, frequently venerated, but not in a form that allows for “interruptions” to one’s career in any radical way’ (Bueskens & Toffoletti 2018: 21)>

as a mother in academe on casual semester contracts, bad luck seems to be commonplace

‘...The messiness of family life can be acknowledged and accommodated to the extent that it does not change the system; where it does, mothers are either excluded from tenure and/or promotion or exclude themselves through leaving academia’ (Bueskens & Toffoletti 2018: 21–22)

'Pity you missed Friday drinks; if you were there, I'm sure you would have been asked to join the new research team too', D hears a fellow academic say

some mornings it takes M minutes before he can focus on the writing on his smartphone

in the mirror, more cracks: W's lips are dry and bleeding, deep lines pit her eyes,

brow

gouge across her

D has been overlooked for countless opportunities because she wasn't at the right place at the right time

M refuses to go to an optometrist

or more so, because she was preoccupied with motherly duties, when on paper she had all the credentials

'Written all over your face', W thinks, screwing her nose

she's a single-turned married mother and a wannabe permanent academic

he can still read the laptop screen just fine, and he figures a better lamp will help for the printed stuff

it's backbreaking work

W's becoming what she studies: a book, readable to anyone.

he does find a lot more pleasure in natural light these days, because it means he can read more easily

what's the point of skin when it won't stay sealed? W wonders, skin that dredges

up and displays all the secrets it's meant to hold in?

as a casual academic, M doesn't allow himself the luxury of contemplating any medical expenses that aren't for anything life-threatening

4. Joy in the cracks?

the Japanese form of pottery, Kintsukuroi (golden repair), uses gold lacquer to fill cracks so to embrace the flawed or imperfect and celebrate the history of that object

'The selection panel recently considered your application and I'm emailing to let you know that you won't be proceeding to the next stage ...', D reads in her latest rejection letter

Hope is a dangerous thing. M hums lyrics by Passenger: 'Hope is a tree sitting on a mountain, where the grass don't grow' (Rosenberg 2014).

In a follow-up meeting, D is told that she did not produce enough publications, and that she needs to 'keep up' with the rest if she wants her academic career to progress

'Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete[?]' (Shakur 1999: 3)

the advice comes just after it was acknowledged that D's the primary carer of two small children and has no research hours

'Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk without having feet' (Shakur 1999: 3)

cracks were, W recalled, things with the capacity not only to divide but to join

up, to connect, like pathways, networks,

lives

this year, M's motto was 'back yourself': learned from a modern pastor who wears Doc Martens and references the zombie apocalypse in her sermons

hope/less

so he backed himself: broke his record for classes taught (17), supervised two Honours students, accepted work outside his area of expertise, organised some of his poetry students to read on community radio, performed his own poetry at an art launch. Said yes to everything:

D finds herself in a state of repair.

journal articles, creative / collaborative papers, conferences, teaching and learning symposiums, an overseas study tour, last-minute: 18 students, three weeks

W reads Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and begins thinking of cracks as openings,

spaces of potentiality

cracks create gaps, spaces, like those of fictocriticism: spaces where things can

happen, as Anna Gibbs (2005: n.p.) writes, creatives make alchemy with *'the*

discontinuities, ruptures, gaps and silences that lie hidden in the smooth

features of argument', thereby enabling *'another speaking'*... another

way of

speaking, in which *'fragmentary form emerges ... the parts do not add up to a*

whole ... totality as well as closure is

resisted'

M's daughters missed him terribly

in their patterns, too, cracks are nonlinear, non-hierarchical, rhizomatic:
always

splitting off and meeting up in new ways. W wonders how she might make
of this

a strategy for survival in the ruined

university?

'It is the duty of the little para-academic machine, then, to connect with anything other, to plug in, to become entangled with as many people and projects as possible' (Rolfe 2014: 3)

this would give M leverage, surely: he'd be owed a favour. His value would be seen

inspired by Rolfe, W begins connecting with others in similar
circumstances,

collaborating through co-authoring papers fiercely critical of the system

it's voluntary, yet D finds joy in it — the little bit of writing and creative research she can find time to
do helps her escape the inequity she continues to face. Her love is in her creative outputs

M is advised that the PVC shut down the possibility of him having a one-year contract
to cover a senior academic on long-term sick leave. Nothing personal, apparently

D keeps working, as a casual ... on two 12-week contracts per year just to pay the bills, while the
golden lacquer fills her broken lines

W is the only one from her cohort who has no

children

'ROPE [research opportunity and performance evidence] is relevant to all researchers, but it is especially important to those...who have taken parental leave, or had a period of part-time work' (Kucej 2019)

W is the only one whose contracts run twelve months as opposed to twelve
weeks

*so where's the joy in cracks? M wonders ... how does one survive the leavings of that
deadly animal, Hope? Keep backing yourself. Pivot. Diversify. Contemplate an
alternative lifestyle — where you are no longer defined by your work.*

D has needed to dig deep before to survive ... she knows she will have to dig deep again ... the cracks will not define her

spend more time with your kids. Show them there's a better way, and that their dad won't be broken by the pitiless machine of modern Academe. Help your fellow casuals out. Show them they're valued.

publishing papers critiquing the system in journals of the system is, W thinks at

first, the ultimate coup

'Here we have something like the New Historicist idea that power covertly licenses limited subversion in order to bolster its own position' (Hopkins 2005: 96)

W's contract is renewed for another twelve months, but it brings no joy when

colleagues and friends remain out in the cold. She agrees with the AAWP's

statement on insecure work in higher

education:

a sustainable future for academia requires re-imagining the structure of our professional lives and the operation of our professional communities to ensure equality and well-being for everyone (AAWP 2019)

For D, the statement reminds her that she is not alone ... in many universities her fellow casuals are struggling too. Perhaps a wave of change is coming? ... the recent media attention highlighting the exploitation of casuals and wage theft has her thinking that she has allies in the fight^[2] ... *in solidarity*, she quietly says to herself.

M wonders how this re-imagining of university work can take place, in a corporatised environment segregating academics into those few fortunate enough to be on secure contracts, with the majority consigned to the precarity of semester-to-semester.

One glimmer of hope is the sense of community and care fostered among his colleagues, where expertise is valued regardless of inequality in terms of employment. That, and the continued appreciation from his students, keeps him going for now.

Their pathways connect ... they start talking ... they start writing ...

[1] The term 'para-academic' describes the ever-increasing portion of academic workers globally 'subjected to the callous mediocrity of temporary contracts that offer absolutely nothing in terms of "career development", or any kind of rung on the ruthless academic ladder', who continue devoting immeasurable time and energy to the higher education system 'all in exchange for the perks of library

access and the meagre portion of teaching that keeps them “in the game” (Withers & Wardrop 2014: 7).

[2] Duffy, C 2020 ‘University underpayment so rampant tutors “instructed to do a poor job” to avoid unpaid hours, former staff say’, *ABC News*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-18/rmit-ug-now-among-universities-accused-of-underpaying-staff/12565528> (accessed 18 September 2020).

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