Doing collective biography differently by incorporating methods of narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry and performance studies into the analysis of writings-as-data

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TEXT Special Issue 59: Creating communities: Collaboration in creative writing and research
eds Alex Philp, Ella Jeffery & Lee McGowan, October 2020

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Abstract:

This article reports on methods used to analyse creative writings as data in a collective biography research project undertaken by eight academics. All of us bear broadly feminist and/or queer outlooks, and all experience deep dissatisfaction with neoliberalism's deepening on academia. We came together to witness shared struggles and imagine things otherwise. As outlined in *Doing Collective Biography* (Davies & Gannon 2006), collective biographers respond to themed writing prompts in a group workshop setting. The writings become data that the team analyses to generate, enrich and transform knowledges around the research theme. We followed these processes, but *did collective biography* differently by additionally incorporating analysis methods of narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry and performance studies. This article discusses the benefits and challenges these methods offered. Our objective is to share our learning with other researchers interested in pursuing similar projects.

Biographical notes:

Chloe Cannell is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include young adult literature, diversity in storytelling and queer writing. In 2018 and 2019 she worked on the organizing committee for the South Australian Gender, Sex and Sexualities Postgraduate and ECR Conference. Her research writing has been published in Writing from Below.

Dr Elena Spasovska is a researcher and educator with a strong interest in conflict transformation, sustainable peace and gender justice; feminist and women's activism against nationalism, populism, militarism and patriarchy; and the political participation of women from diverse backgrounds.

Yuwei Gou is a PhD student at University of South Australia. Her research focuses on Irish writer Anne Enright's work. In the lens of French feminist theory, Yuwei's research examines how Enright's work reframes Irish womanhood in contemporary Ireland, such as women's negotiation with socially scripted roles of daughter/wife/mother, women's reconnection with time, space, as well as their relationships with others on a new ethics unbounded by Irish patriarchal order.

Alice Nilsson is a philosopher currently based in Tarndanya (so called Adelaide, Australia). Their research interests range from Value-form Theory, Marx, and Left-Communism. They have been published in *An Alternative Geology of the World*, VORE Zine, and Writing from Below, and has given talks and performed at 4S, Format Systems, and Diffractions Collective.

Dr Rebekah Clarkson is the author *of Barking Dogs* (Affirm Press 2017). Her short stories have appeared in Griffith Review, *Best Australian Stories* and *Something Special, Something Rare: Outstanding Short Stories by Australian Women* (Black Inc.) and have been recognised in major awards in Australia and overseas. She has a BA in Aboriginal Studies and PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Adelaide. Her current research investigates Australian women writers and their subversive use of short story forms.

Dr Corinna Di Niro completed her PhD in Theatre in 2016 and now teaches at the University of South Australia. She is a guest lecturer for the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, Sydney, and runs her own theatre company, Stage Secrets. Her research has been published in the European Journal of Humour Research and the edited book *Lived experiences of women in academia: Metaphors, manifestos and memoir* (eds Black & Garvis, Routledge, 2018).

Dr Nadine Levy is a feminist researcher whose work investigates the texture, complexity and emotional aspects of women's lived experiences across a range of contemporary social sites, including spiritual community, health, and the legal profession. Her current research examines gender, belonging and friendship and considers the ways women make sense of their place within late modern society.

Dr Amelia Walker is a poet, creative writing researcher and lecturer at the University of South Australia. Her PhD thesis, completed in 2016, investigated the challenges that creative writers in universities face and argued the benefits of creative approaches to learning, research and knowing. She is the current secretary of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, a member of the editing team for Writing from Below, and co-editor of book reviews for TEXT journal.

Keywords:

Collective biography – writing-as-research – collaborative research – data analysis – academic activism

Introduction

The following excerpts are from reflections penned in the final stage of a collaborative creative writing research project in which we – eight academics from differing backgrounds, all bearing broadly feminist and/or queer outlooks – came together to witness neoliberalism's assaults on academia, and to imagine things otherwise.

Firstly, we decided to shift.

To shift, because ruptures prevailed in our life. We had to stride over at two poles of painful chasms: to fulfil maternal care and family chores and to sustain unbearable academic workloads; to carry on the deteriorating body and to dress smart-looking suits and boots. To hold fast to a tenuous utopia dream of academic freedom whilst to subject ourselves to the encroaching utilitarian beauracy. We

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were disturbed and horrified at the ruptures fiercely cracked and widen up in our life. Because we had been overburdened by playing the splitting roles in silence for a long time, in this workshop, we were determined to expose the hidden abysmal gaps in our life…

…We shed off our exterior roles, excluding the institutional temporal-spatial laws, carrying nothing but metaphors and languages close to our truly beings into the space. We created poetic discourses; we indulge ourselves in silly games and fluid conversations; we let our discourses to shift us through the disjunctions between the reality of our lived experiences and our rigidly defined identities in institutions.

(Excerpt from Yuwei Gou's post-workshop reflection.)

While I am aware that many young scholars share similar experiences and face similar challenges, talking about it with others was therapeutic in a way. We are all positioned differently in terms of our multiple identities, but our lived experiences as women and who try to build their careers within generally male dominated and neoliberal education system bring us together. I spent most of our PhD years navigating through all the challenges by myself (for various reasons), and I find it very liberating to be able to share my experiences, successes and failures with others. Hearing other people's words was encouraging inasmuch as it was thought provoking (e.g. we have all sacrificed and continue to sacrifice so much for a career path that is becoming increasingly precarious). However, I did find a renewed sense of purpose after being part of this collaborative project.

(Excerpt from Elena Spasovska's post-workshop reflection.)

Gou and Spasovska's testimonies reflect the radically transformative potentials of collective biography, the main methodology we engaged. As Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon in *Doing Collective Biography* (2006) explain, collective biography teams conduct research through writing workshops in which co-researchers respond to writing prompts themed around their research topic. The writings become data that the group analyses to generate, enrich and transform relevant knowledges.

This article focuses on adaptations we made to collective biography at the analysis stage. In addition to conventional collective biography's recursive sharing, listening, discussion and rewriting (Davies & Gannon 2006: 3), we incorporated elements of narrative inquiry (Daiute 2013; Clandinin 2016; Webster & Mertova 2007; Wells 2011), poetic inquiry (Faulkner 2019; Owton 2017), performance studies (Taylor 2013), and Hanley's notion of 'writing as assemblage' (2018). By discussing the benefits and challenges these differing approaches offered, we aim to expand existing knowledges around methodological design in collaborative creative arts-based research, and to share our learning with other writers and researchers interested in undertaking similar projects.

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This chapter's next section provides background to our project including samples of our 'raw' data—our creative writings from early workshops. Following this, we turn to data analysis, including our use of conventional collective biography methods as well as why and how we drew in additional techniques. The first of these was narrative inquiry-based coding. The second entailed creating and performing a short theatre piece called 'Becoming-game'. Excerpts from our individual post-workshop written reflections are woven throughout the article.

Background to our project and 'raw' data samples: 'Making SHI(f)T Happen' through infinite games

As earlier noted, we came together to write about neoliberalism's effects on academia through a broadly queer feminist lens. Our impetus was the call for chapters for a book arising from the online conference *Making SHI(f)T Happen*, at which two members of our collective had presented via podcast (Di Niro & Walker 2019). Our collective biography project was inspired by conference discussions of slow scholarship as activism in the academy. It also grew from Di Niro and Walker's engagements with duoethnography, in which researchers share and compare perspectives through writing in theatrical script format (Di Niro & Walker 2017; 2018; Walker & Di Niro 2019). In an article considering duoethnography in relation to other collaborative research methodologies, they identified collective biography as 'exciting for creative arts research' with larger groups that typically collaborate on duoethnographic projects, adding that 'we would someday like to try it' (Walker & Di Niro 2019: 6). The chapter for *Towards A Kinder Academy*, formerly *Making SHI(f)T Happen,* became that 'someday': Di Niro and Walker called for collaborators, and so began our game(s) of collaborative writing-as-researching.

The call for book chapters came with suggested provocations, one of which was Harré, Grant, Locke & Strum's (2017) argument for 'infinite games' as activism to transform academic cultures. Infinite games are those in which the purpose is to continue the play, whereas in finite games, the purpose is to win; infinite games encourage collaboration, mutual aid and lateral alliances, finite ones competition, individual pressure and hierarchies; in infinite games, play is sought for playfulness and pleasure – play for play's sake; finite games make play a means towards an end (Carse 1986). However, as Harré elsewhere explains (2018), the in/finite game relationship is a straightforward binary opposition. Infinite games have finite ones woven in and through them – and vice versa. People play finites game in infinite ways. The same game can transform from one to the other and be both at once for different players. Infinite gaming is less about the games themselves and more about playing – about attitudes, relationships, and values reflecting a ludic spirit.

We find the infinite game concept well-suited to collective biography: both foreground teamwork through non-hierarchical relationships, privilege practices over products, and share connections with queer-feminist activism. We felt enticed by the idea of games as a metaphor for academia, and by questions about how games we played as children might have trained us

to think and behave in ways conducive to the maintenance neoliberal ideologies, gender normativity, and intersecting modes of inequality in the neoliberal academy. 'Games' thus became the overall theme of our collective biography workshops.

The 'raw data' writings we produced were diverse in style and content. Rebekah Clarkson raised a comparison between the invisibility of women's pain and the high regard for male athletes' in the game of AFL football. Recounting the unfortunate medical mismanagement which occurred after she broke her shoulder falling in the driveway one night, tired from working long hours across a collection of casual jobs, Clarkson described how 'I knew that night' and even 'said that night', 'If I was an AFL footballer, I would get the best and right help tonight and fast'. Instead:

> We rang the local regional hospital – no doctor there to see. We rang a private city hospital – too expensive. We rang a big public hospital – hours long wait. It was already midnight and tomorrow I needed to work on teaching plans. My son took me to hospital the next day to have an x-ray – not broken was the diagnosis, see a physio was the advice. Blinding, pass-out pain. No sick leave. I kept working. Students offered to carry my books, escort me to the next seminar; I always took seminars back to back, to minimise commute time, to maximise efficiency looking back. I marked all those essays, hundreds of essays. A badly broken shoulder, left to heal wrong, misdiagnosed from the outset, mismanaged all the way along. Nothing in my body is the same again. No time to stop.

The demands gendered games make on time and the body were similarly visible in Nadine Levy's depiction of how the exhaustion of juggling motherhood with academia deepens her frustration with 'games that involve everyone sitting around a table with some kind of instruction-sheet and counting device, committing to set of arbitrary rules that have no real life meaning':

> when I have a choice about how to spend my free time I only do one thing: I lie on the couch and let me mind be a potato. I let my mind rove like a dog off a leash, sniffing the things that don't matter and nuzzling up to the things that don't. Oh, and it always involves tea. Perhaps this is because I am too busy, wrangling a toddler who is full of beans (both literally and metaphorically today), coordinating three sociology topics at once and feeling perpetual guilt about the book I need to write.

Writing from a different perspective, and through the medium of poetry, Yuwei Gou composed a poem about 'Mah Jong', emphasising how in China it is 'not a game for fun' but rather:

…a maelstrom of threads of relationships that are fighting, negotiating, surrendering, or revenging.

You don't want to play that game

But who want?

You feel like you are an outsider

But who is really the insider?

Those who are in that game have long been lost in it

Or, some might have long been crystal-clear of the mist

some might have been seen through the brutality, and living beyond it already

But they still choose to stay in that game

Working in a yet another style, and from a different angle yet again, Alice Nilsson zeroed in on the semantics of the word 'game', reminding us that although 'the notion of academia as an infinite game' conventionally 'lends itself grammatically only to the use of game as a noun', it can also be an adjective – 'being eager or willing to do things which are new or challenging' – which in academia includes challenges of '[t]he gate keeping tool to conventional academia – the PhD' and ongoing pressure for academics to 'publish so they are not to perish'. Nilsson likewise signalled the potentialities of 'game' as a verb in the sense of gaming the system:

> …writing between the lines to circumvent ostracisation due to heterodox views is in a sense, the gaming of the academic status quo. When one is to write between the lines, they are able to fly under the radar of orthodoxy, while disseminating heterodoxy for those who are privy to find.

The academic games and pressures signalled in abstract terms by Nilsson surfaced in directly personal ways through Di Niro's account of deception – of others and oneself – as a crucial yet silent strategy of academic gameplay. Opening with the provocative quote, 'Have we become complicit in own exploitation?' (Kalfa, Wilkinson, Gollan 2018), Di Niro confessed:

> Every day when I prepare myself for work I lie. I lie to family, to my students, to my colleagues, and most importantly – to myself. I lie through the clothes I choose to wear. Smart casual, professional – something that says I am valued and part of a professional team, even though I don't feel that way. My "go f*ck yourself" jacket remains in my wardrobe.

> I lie through the smile I put on my face every time I go to work and sit in the cold "sessional" office they lump all us minions into. The smile I show my colleagues in the corridor, or in the meeting I have to be at even though I'm not being paid to attend… The smile I keep firmly fixed on my face when I've yet again been rejected for a permanent position, a spot on a research team, a training opportunity,

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or when another academic has claimed my research as their own or taken my few teaching hours away. I don't speak up about the injustice, the nepotism, the unfairness… I just smile.

Elena Spasovska also wrote of deception, this time in the context of childhood gameplay. In a piece about how an older male cousin used to beat her at 'Monopoly', Spasovska recounted how

> …he thrived buying properties and taking my money when I'd step on one of his fields. I would always end up completely broke. I suspected he cheated too, but I was never able to prove it. He even invented the borrowing system so that we could continue playing after I'd lost my money. Needless to say, my situation deteriorated further after I made a 'pact with the banking devil'. Often, I'd end up losing all of my money and every little property I owned.

Themes of gender and power in childhood games were likewise evident in Walker's prosepoem about how her childhood love of Barbie dolls led adults to believe she was 'a girly girl'. Questioning this in retrospect, Walker posed an alternative explanation:

> I was playing with the Barbies, yes, but it wasn't just that, and it wasn't just my game. All the while, I was being played and meanwhile playing at much, much more. I was playing with the Barbies, yes, because they were the tokens I held, the things I could use to play the adults' game.

Chloe Cannell also wrote power in games of youth, focusing instead on teen years and the game "Never Have I Ever…" (in which players take turns to name daring acts and other players who have performed those acts must out themselves by taking sips of their drinks):

> …It is never quite exciting until they pick a target or a story or even a secret. When there's someone who has agenda to be 'caught' so they can tell their wild story. For their wild story to be celebrated because nobody else but them can drink. I think it is supposed to be fun if they find out a secret. However, in a reality nobody wants to out their friend's secrets (I hope), and it's very easy to cheat...

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> I felt our group was very supportive and there was a lot of trust shown by all the members. Trust that speaking in this way would be safe and trust to keep what was

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said contained to our group and only shared through the writing with permission. This type of methodology is, according to Cowman (2011) 'an invaluable way of attempting to recover past experience as well as of suggesting ways in which this was shaped by the broader structures in which it was situated.'

 (Excerpt from Corinna Di Niro's post-workshop reflection.)

The workshop space was often constructed as a cone of silence as we expressed our concerns with our universities. Hearing or reading others' creative writing based on these issues felt intimate and liberating.

(Excerpt from Chloe Cannell's post-workshop reflection.)

Gilligan (1993) described … an 'ethic of care', in which relationships are considered more important than being right or wrong. I believe our group modelled this spirit of relational inquiry. No one was out to 'be right' but rather listen, learn and reflect.

(Excerpt from Nadine Levy's post-workshop reflection.)

Conventional collective biography data analysis involves recursive sharing, listening, discussion and re-writing through which participants gradually 'make visible to ourselves the ways our stories became entangled with each other's stories', thus intensifying, not distorting, each remembered moment's 'specificity' (Davies et al 2013: 684-685). Di Niro's and Cannell's reflections (above) indicate how these practices were interwoven throughout all our workshops in ways crucial to the work we did and the insights we developed. They also signal the importance of trusting relationships between co-researchers.

In *Doing Collective Biography* (Davies & Gannon 2006), accounts of multiple projects describe how trust and relationality is fostered through researchers living together in week-long writing retreats where they also engage in social activities such as hiking and cooking meals together. We would have loved to have done this, but lacked the necessary resources of time and accommodation: our three day-long workshops were held in a university classroom we booked for the purpose, spread across three months and held on dates chosen simply because they were the ones when we could all be there. Nonetheless, we incorporated social and relational activities through the (literal) games we played in our workshops. For instance, the ice-breaker activity for our first workshop was a set of 'Dinner party conversation-starter cards' with questions that, although sometimes twee (e.g. 'If you could invite five famous people to dinner…') at least gave us some laughs and helped us relax around one another because we were talking about things that weren't purely related to the research and getting to know one another as holistic humans with lives beyond our academic roles.

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Another crucial way we strengthened group interrelations was by leaving the classroom workspace to take our meal and coffee breaks in affordable eateries that were within walking distance, but which enabled us about fifteen minutes of walking each way. Walking and eating together, as Davies and Gannon (2006) describe in their collective biography projects, was thus still part of how we connected and built trust, just in a different way. These informal elements to our method supported the formal agreements we made in workshops about respect, confidentiality, content warnings and freedom to exit the sessions or request a break whenever required. The following excerpt from Gou's post-workshop reflection indicates the success of these trust-building strategies enabled enriching modes of vulnerability:

> When our words cried our anger, frustration and desperation, the air in the room became 'abject'. According to Kristeva, 'abject' happens when our 'superego', a self-identification heavily inscribed with the authoritarian rules and norms becomes problematic, unstable and is followed by an emergence of an alter ego, one that 'lies outside, beyond the set', fluidly transgressing and breaching the 'rules of the game' (Kristeva 1982: 2). When we unravelled our stories of being ignored and marginalised, we weaved in the room of our most vulnerable and fragile fibres of our beings. We were abject, however, it was in our fearless demonstration of our discomforts and restlessness that the deep voice in the bottom of our soul emerged, so as our genuine, courageous unconstrained 'alter ego'. As Kristeva says, 'abject and abjection are my safeguards' (ibid: 2). We were abject together, yet we were experiencing self-salvation in the abject time together.
>
> (Excerpt from Yuwei Gou's post-workshop reflection.)

Affirming the points Gou makes, these words from Levy provide a specific example of how such interactions translated into knowledge generation and transformation:

> One of the most important lessons I learned thanks to a conversation I had with one of my collaborators was that we must make a vow to never forget what it is like to be unemployed, underemployed and/or precariously employed. We are all a stone throws away from this reality. This is a lesson that I will hold onto for the rest of my career. I have come to believe it is not merit that secures meaningful and well-compensated employment but luck. This group is a reminder that we are a group of very vulnerable workers and we must do everything we can to support casual academics regardless of our own employment status.
>
> (Excerpt from Nadine Levy's post-workshop reflection.)

Conventional collective biography methods thus remained deeply essential to our data analysis, but we additionally experimented with other approaches that could be considered more formal in the sense of formalised processes. These, like the games we played and the writing prompts we used, provided activities and experiences around which to build our discussions. Much of

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the time we were less interested in the ostensible results of our explicit processes than we were in the intuitive interactions and realisations that occurred both along the way and at later moments when we talked – sometimes prompted, sometimes in spontaneous dialogue – about how we had found particular activities and what their supposed findings brought up for us.

The first alternative analysis method we engaged was narrative inquiry-based coding. This involved identifying themes across the works – for instance, metaphors, imagery, tropes – and classifying them into categories (Faulkner 2019). This was a knowingly cheeky move, for collective biography relies strongly on Deleuzian theory, which typically resists categories and codes, which are perceived as rigid and reductive (Grosz cited in Davies & Gannon 2006: 5). From a Deleuzian perspective, coding can be considered a 'striated' approach because it 'intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, organizes horizontal … lines with vertical…planes' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 479). We were, however, approaching the coding as a different kind of game – playing (with) it in ways similar to those in which Harré (2018) recognises the possibility of playing finite games in infinite ways. We split into four teams of two to work separately then compare findings because, as Levy in her post-workshop reflection noted, 'being non-positivists, we all knew that our subjective approaches would produce different results'. Those results were as follows:

Team One:
Food and Drink; Feelings (pain and pleasure); Ethical Dilemmas; Objects; Inevitabilities / Fundamentals; Expression; The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

Team Two:
Sight; Touch; Smell; Listen; Taste (all bodily experiences)

Team Three:
Philosophy; Students; Joy; Unwanted; Consumerism

Team Four:
States of Mind; Food and Drink; Activities; Office Objects; Adjectives / Descriptions of Academia's Effects; Bodily / Sensory Experiences

However, as already noted, it was not the explicit results but the dialogues and reflections we had around them that most mattered for us. Experiences of the coding process for different members of our team were mixed. For Spasovska, it was 'interesting that so many of us had similar words: coffee, wine, sleep, books' and 'illuminating because we drew links and connections between words and meanings that have such a strong significance in our current lives'. Di Niro similarly identified benefits in the process:

> …categorising was beneficial as it helped me to dive deeper into the meaning of our words. Putting things into boxes that may not make sense to someone else but did for my partner and me was interesting. It showed different perspectives to things we may otherwise take for granted. A continual theme that emerged was the need for sleep, coffee, chocolate, alcohol…
>
> (Excerpt from Corinna Di Niro's post-workshop reflection.)

Cannell, too, noted how the coding 'revealed themes across our work', particularly 'tools to survive the workload such as alcohol, coffee and laptops'. She also observed how the approach 'distanced us from the personal nature of our writing' in ways she considered 'useful for the work' but ultimately 'not uplifting and unifying as a research group'.

For Cannell, richer benefits came through the second alternative data analysis method we engaged (in) – creation and performance of a work that drew together fragments from all our writings:

> The textual form beautifully flowed from introducing the game(s) and everyone's position to it, to how to win the game, to who is really winning the game, and in what ways they play the game. The textual form of the assemblage pulled all our writing close together and creating a performance further encouraged a unity… The assemblage of the work makes similar connections to when we categorised our writings, but it holds the power of belonging and unity.
>
> (Excerpt from Cannell's post-workshop reflection.)

We created the performance script using methodological techniques from poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry-based data analysis shares common ground with narrative inquiry in that practitioners sometimes use coding techniques to analyse poetry as data. However, poetic inquiry also offers the option to analyse data through practices of poetry writing, including re-writing and/or re-mixing texts through practices such as cut and paste poetry, *bricolage*, erasure and more. For instance, researchers sometimes create poems using lines drawn from research interviews (Faulkner 2019). This enables an intuitive, artistically driven means for connecting and opening up themes in often surprising, unexpected ways that drawn on tacit ways of knowing, enabling consideration of things that could otherwise have remained overlooked (Faulkner 2019).

From a Deleuzian perspective, we consider the creative recombination of disparate texts a 'smooth' way of analysing writings as data – one that, instead of sorting things into boxes, forges links, operating in 'a space of affects, more than one of properties … an intensive rather than an extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties' (1987: 479). We also consider the fusion text we produced an instance of what Hanley (2018) terms 'writing as assemblage'. For Hanley, also drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, this writing is 'a form of thinking' (original emphasis: 414) that 'asserts both its own cohesiveness as textual territory,

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and its own liability to slip, divide, become other'. This is a mode of *becoming* that 'effaces what we think we know', enabling a 'possibility space' of 'creative potential' in and through which new ideas may arise (Hanley 2018: 414). Because Deleuzian becoming is also a key part of collective biography (Davies & Gannon 2006), we titled our assemblage 'Becoming-game', which, recalling Nilsson's verb/noun/adjective focus, plays on the idea of a *becoming-game* (noun) through which we collectively and ongoingly *become-game* (verb) to question and remake the games we are called to play in academia and beyond.

We performed 'Becoming-game' at the JM Coetzee Centre's 'Scholarship is the New Conservative' Symposium on September 6 2019. Di Niro, a practicing theatre director and producer as well as researcher of theatre and performance, took the lead in devising how the work should be visually and dramatically represented. In line with methodologies of performance studies research, which traverses the 'schism between literary and embodied cultural practice' (Taylor 2013: 13), rehearsing and presenting 'Becoming-game' entailed much more than simply taking the words off the page and translating them into a theatrical medium. As Walker's, Cannell's and Di Niro's post-workshop reflections convey:

> Rehearsals extended and intensified the analysis begun through combining the textual fragments in the assemblage. With Di Niro's guidance, we experimented with different ways of moving and standing (or sitting, crouching, or lying down, or curling into a ball like a child in a sulk). There were so many possibilities to explore in terms of how we would hold our bodies; how we would position ourselves in relation to one another, the props and our space; the speeds with which to move; the clothing to put on our bodies; and the expressions to wear on our faces. That's before even considering the spoken lines themselves – questions of volume, pitch, expression and so much more. We tried doing all of these things in different ways, and each way showed us something different about the words we had written – things we didn't know about the words as we were writing them, because there's almost always more going on than a writer consciously realises. Performing it live for an audience and feeling their reactions took all this to another level yet again.
>
> (Excerpt from Walker's post-workshop reflection.)

> The rehearsal of the piece allowed us to live in each other's words for a moment as we played with speaking order. Reading and embodying our own words in rehearsal and the performance highlighted the connections in our work. Reading the assemblage after performing it I am struck by the collective energy the piece continues to contain. I still hear how everyone said their words and remember the energy of our audience as they connected to the work.
>
> (Excerpt from Cannell's post-workshop reflection.)

I echo Chloe's words here that the textual form of our voices, and through doing the performance, really helped unite us. Heron and Johnson (2017: 283) consider the ensemble as 'a temporary community'. This is crucial, as when you're performing in an ensemble, you need to know that you can rely on your fellow cast to get you through. It really takes a village to put on a successful show.

Our performance still resonates with me. I remember how everyone worked together, how we helped settled each other's nerves, and how the audience watched and listened with intent.

(Excerpt from Di Niro's post-workshop reflection.)

Cannell and Walker reflect the point made by performance studies scholars of how the use of performance within research can help raise the 'embodied knowledges' so often excluded and erased in and by academia's dominant discourses and procedures (Taylor 2013: 13). Incorporating performance into the data analysis for our collective biography project thereby enriched our appreciation of the multiple themes running in and across our writings—and thus of the complex games played in and through neoliberal academia. Our findings about those games are discussed in the *Towards a Kinder Academy* book chapter for which we initially came together to write about the problems of the contemporary neoliberal academy and the ways in which things might yet be(come) otherwise.

Conclusion

In this article our focus has been on the methodology of our collaborative creative writing research project – specifically on giving an account of how we *did collective biography differently* at the data analysis stage. In our three day-long workshops we used alternative methods alongside conventional collective biography methods to analyse our writing-as-data. Many of the techniques of collective biography analysis, including recursive sharing, listening, discussion and re-writing, were consciously and unconsciously used throughout all our workshops. Our informal interactions, such as playing games, and walking and eating together on breaks, helped build connections and trust thus enabling vulnerability that was important for our work.

To analyse our writings, we first engaged the method narrative inquiry-based coding: identifying themes across the works and classifying them into categories. We found the dialogues and reflections we had around these categories to be of greater interest than the explicit results themselves, but researcher experiences of the coding process were mixed. While Spasovska and Di Niro agreed the process drew connections and meanings from the coding, Cannell found the process did not contribute to group unity. As eight academics from differing backgrounds, recognising our diversities in and between our perspectives is crucial to working together.

The second analysis method we discussed was creating and performing a short theatre piece called 'Becoming-game'. Poetic inquiry techniques were used to create our collective script by recombining our disparate writings which forged connections in unexpected ways. Our assemblage playfully enacted collective biography as a practice of ongoing transformation and coming-to-know new potentialities. Rehearsing our assemblage extended the analysis by experimenting with different ways of moving and using voice to reveal different meanings behind our writings. Performing to an audience added to this analysis as well as strengthening our unity as a research group.

While we may still fantasise about week-long live-in writing retreats, a welcome benefit of doing three workshops over three months was the time to foster relationships between co-researchers, and give distanced reflections about our experiences of and findings from the process. Incorporating narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry, performance studies and writing as assemblage into the analysis of our collective biography project led to fruitful benefits within the work and with each other. We hope that what we have shared can be of use to other creative research teams broaching similar projects.

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