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Becoming-game: an assemblage of perspectives on challenges for early career academics in neoliberal times

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Abstract:

Our script *Becoming-game* is an assemblage in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the assemblage as a contingent formation of elements that could equally be separate, differently formed and/or combined with other things altogether. It comprises fragments of our distinct creative writings around the theme of games from 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 share and compare our experiences and perspectives with the aim of realising strategies we can engage to resist inequality in and beyond academia today. Performing our assemblage 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. Theatre researcher and practitioner Di Niro directed our collective in translating the creative piece to a theatrical medium. We performed *Becoming-game* at the JM Coetze Centre's 'Scholarship is the New Conservative' Symposium on 6 September 2019. Overall, this collaborative work speaks to games of power and privilege, especially although not only those of gender and late capitalist modes of production.

Biographical notes:

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 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.

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.

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 and space, as well as their relationships with others on a new ethics unbounded by Irish patriarchal order.

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.

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.

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*.

Keywords:

Theatre performance – infinite games – creative writing-as-research – collaborative research – academic activism

BECOMING-GAME

An empty stage.

Enter Cannell, walks to centre stage carrying The Game of Life board game.

CANNELL 'Never have I ever I kissed a girl,' Jack begins. Unoriginal. Uninspired. Unintelligent. I still watch intrigued to see which girls raise their cups while my cup of cordial sits on the table.

Cannell walks to upstage right, places game in front of her and remains standing.

Enter Nilsson, walks to centre stage carrying a deck of cards.

NILSSON Academia as an infinite game. Noun, Adjective, or Verb? Taking the notion of academia as an infinite game, it lends itself grammatically not only to the use of game as a noun, but what if we are to widen the scope of how we use the term game.

Nilsson walks to downstage centre, sits on the floor and plays with cards.

Enter Di Niro, walks to centre stage carrying a chess set.

DI NIRO Every day when I prepare myself for work, I lie.

Di Niro walks down stage left, kneels and begins to play with various Chess pieces.

CANNELL Most members of the table drink from their red cups. It should be exciting.

Enter Spasovska, walks to centre stage, carrying Monopoly game.

SPASOVSKA When I was young, I used to always play Monopoly with my cousin. I am not sure what's the problem with this game, but every time I'd play, I'd lose.

Spasovska walks to upstage centre, places game on the ground and remains standing.

DI NIRO (*stands*) 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.

Di Niro kneels and goes back to playing with Chess pieces

Walker enters skipping and very excited to centre stage whilst holding a two Barbie dolls.

WALKER In nineteen eighty-seven, my mother's take on feminism was buying me Doctor Barbie.

*Walker moves to downstage right, kneels down and begins playing with the dolls.
Clarkson walks to centre stage holding a deck of cards.*

CLARKSON As a rule, I don't play Monopoly. It's the only game I know that either ends in literal tears or actual hurt feelings—not feigned—that can take hours or even days to heal.

WALKER (*jumps up excitedly*) I loved Barbie. They all said. The adults. I was a girly girl—they said—and I was. Because I played and played and played and played and played...

Walker kneels down and continues playing with dolls

DI NIRO (*stands*) My “go f*ck yourself” jacket remains in my wardrobe.

*Di Niro kneels and continues playing with Chess pieces.
Gou enters, walks centre stage holding Mahjong cards.
Cannell, Spasovska and Clarkson begin playing with their games.*

GOU In China there is an anecdote: ‘When your airplane is landing in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan, the first sound you will hear is a widespread rumbling, from thousands of tables where Mah Jong is playing’.

Gou moves centre stage right, sits and begins to play with the game.

WALKER (*jumps up and spins around*) ...and played and played and played and played and...

*Walker sits and continues playing with dolls.
Levy walks centre stage holding various rule cards and sheets found in board games.*

LEVY I hate nerdy games: games that involve everyone sitting around a table with some kind of instruction-sheet and counting device, committing to a set of arbitrary rules that have no real life meaning.

*Levy moves to centre stage left and kneels looking at sheets and cards.
From this point, cast continue to play with their games unless they are delivering their lines.
Those kneeling / sitting stand to deliver their lines, those already standing take one step forward when delivering their lines.*

CANNELL I imagine boys whooping and cheering in a macho fashion. The girls winking with cheeky grins or blushing red when they know their kisses are more than small pecks. It's not exciting though.

SPASOVSKA My cousin is three and a half years older than me and he has always had a very entrepreneurial, money-driven attitude in life. He always wanted to be 'the boss'.

WALKER ...and played and played and played and played and...

GOU Do you think it's just a game for fun? / people from all walks of life, from professors to peasants, from bankers to housewives / Everyone fritters their time away by sitting around the table, from broad daylight to the deep midnight.

CLARKSON I don't even like being in the same house as a group of people playing Monopoly. Is it the paper money, I wonder, that gets people so fired up, so desperate to have it? Its close relation to accumulation of wealth via property in the real world—the real places represented on the Board?

NILSSON Game as a noun cannot be understood as a totality of amusement as one would usually understand—it can only be partially so, but is fundamentally based upon forced labour under capital.

CANNELL Everyone knows what the kisses are. I think it is best described as "drunk girl kisses". And only by the straight girls. Some girls call them attention seeking. They are just a mouth to kiss when you're drunk, and you can trust your female friend to feel the same.

LEVY ...when I have a choice about how to spend my free time I only do one thing: I lie on the couch and let my mind be a potato. I let my mind rove like a dog off a leash. The dog is sniffing the things that don't matter and nuzzling up to the things that do. He is not a bad boy.

DI NIRO If this were Chess, I'd certainly be a pawn. A little insignificant pawn. 'It historically represents infantry, or more particularly, armed peasants'.

WALKER ...and played and played and played and played and...

CANNELL 'Never have I ever got so drunk I puked outside my house.'

LEVY 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.

- DI NIRO A casual is a peasant in academia, but I am not armed with anything. Like a pawn I stand there on the front-line. The first to be sent out and the first to face the chance of death. All this in an effort to protect the King and Queen.
- NILSSON We can reasonably unproblematically take academia to be game in the sense of one being eager or willing to do things which are new or challenging. This is arguably the key thing academics need to do throughout their careers.
- DI NIRO If this were Monopoly, I'd most certainly be stuck in jail—jail being the place of casual academics. It's cutthroat, it's gang-like, and it's dangerous. Who knows how long my prison sentence will be...
- WALKER ...at birthdays, I even asked for more Barbies. Presumably because I liked Barbies.
- DI NIRO If this were Survivor, I'd have no alliance; I'd be on my own. I'd be doing whatever I needed to do to win immunity, just to survive until the next day, the next challenge, and more importantly—the next tribal council.
- SPASOVSKA All of our role plays were firmly grounded in relationships of power imbalance. He would be the King and I would be the servant; he would be the Director and I would be the employee; he would be the teacher and I would be the student.
- WALKER Or did I just like the game of Barbies? Because I was good at it. It was what I knew. I'd had training and knew how to play, knew how to win.
- CLARKSON Apart from the intensity, I also remember boredom. Bored of the relentlessness, laboriousness nature of the game. How long it took to resolve. When will this end? How long will it take? Can't we just count the money and call it quits? Must there be a single winner?
- WALKER Yes, there is winning with barbies.
- SPASOVSKA I always complained and rebelled against it, but mostly with little to no success. He was older, a boy and he had the privilege to decide when to come to my house to play, and when not to. In addition, many of the toys we played with, including the Monopoly box, were his.
- WALKER Nothing's written down or announced over a loudspeaker, but there's prizes nonetheless. That's what makes the winning so special and so hard.
- DI NIRO You can't blindside the top dog in Survivor if you don't have the voting numbers. In Monopoly, you can't buy up property until you're out of jail, and you can't get out of jail unless you roll two dice with the same number.

- NILSSON Verb: understanding academia as a game in the sense of the manipulation of a situation has been—in a sense—a key part of academia and writing for millennia.
- WALKER ...the game of Barbies is so much more than the game of Barbies.
- DI NIRO As for Chess, only when a pawn reaches the other end of the board it can be promoted to any other piece, but to reach the other side, the pawn must survive all attacks and outwit and kill off its opponents in order to reach the end.
- SPASOVSKA 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.
- CANNELL ...a few more rounds. 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.
- GOU No, it's not just about fun / underneath the table / Hierarchy and power are reinforced / Sex and desire are traded / Money is circulating from today's winner to tomorrow's loser.
- WALKER I was playing with the Barbies, yes, because they were the tokens I held, the things I could use to play the adults' game.
- GOU Hypocrites, fawners, flatterers / Seducers, traitors, cowards, bigots / the nuances of most hideous and hidden human nature are running around that small squared table.
- CANNELL 'Never have I ever been to a *Short Stack* concert'.
- CLARKSON I struggle with tempo, with finding and staying at a sustainable speed. This is intricately tied with notions of productivity and validity, of being a product of generations of women who got the job done quickly, who cut corners and kept things together behind the scenes with sticky tape, staples, pins, and paper clips.
- GOU You don't want to play that game / But who does? / 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.
- CANNELL 'Never have I ever dyed my hair an unnatural colour'.

CLARKSON It is not helped by the casual work cycle, of heinously over-committed, impossible workloads, followed by the jolt of stark unemployment.

CANNELL 'Never have I ever...' The game continues...

NILSSON The act of writing between the lines to circumvent ostracization due to heterodox views is in a sense, the gaming of the academic status quo.

LEVY Maybe I should stop being such a Grinch I thought, do something outside of my comfort zone, as my mind trailed off thinking about what kind of sausages to cook for dinner the next day.

She exits the stage.

WALKER 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.

NILSSON 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.

CANNELL My tongue rubs over my front teeth feeling the sugar left behind by the cordial. I'm happy to be included.

She exits the stage.

CLARKSON This is text. This is a text. A text is an assemblage. The assemblage is a concept from Deleuze and Guattari. Concepts are also assemblages. The creation of concepts is the mode of philosophy. An assemblage is a mode of creation.

She exits the stage.

WALKER Our collaboration theme is *game/s*, specifically those games of power at play with-and-in ideas about gender and our different-yet-interconnecting situations as female and/or queer subjects all entangled in the 'infinite games' of the university system (as learners, researchers, lecturers and/or administrators, among other ways). The writing-as-thinking we practice is an inherently ludic or playful practice of *becoming*—of ongoing transforming and coming-to-know new potentialities.

She exits the stage.

SPASOVSKA We therefore consider it a *becoming-game* (noun) through which we collectively and ongoingly *become-game* (verb) to undo the wicked knots in which dominant (pre)conceptions of gender, scholarship, and economics might otherwise have us bound.

She exits the stage.

NILSSON Game / geim/
Noun 1. an activity that one engages in for amusement or fun.
Adjective 1. eager or willing to do something new or challenging.
Verb 1. manipulate (a situation), typically in a way that is unfair or unscrupulous.

They exit the stage.

GOU In the cloistered office / swamped
by books and poems / she
asked herself / was she free?

She exits the stage.

DI NIRO My work has become a game. But who am I on the board?

She throws a pawn into a Chess box making a loud sound and exits through the audience. The games are left on stage in a mess.

Research statement

Research background

In neoliberal times academics, particularly early career researchers, face workload increases, endemic staff casualisation, and research evaluation protocols that privilege quantifiable products or ‘outputs’ over caring processes and intangible modes of value (Mountz et al. 2015). Our collective experimented with writing as assemblage and theatre performance to respond to the idea of the ‘infinite game’ as activism to redress neoliberalism’s crushing effects on academia (Harré, Grant, Locke & Strum 2017).

Research contribution

Becoming-game is an assemblage, in the spirit of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), comprising fragments of creative writings responding to the concept of games as a metaphor for our experiences in academia. Di Niro’s use of theatre techniques created a dynamic actor-audience relationship where the audience witnessed the effects of the neoliberal academy on the ensemble. The ensemble members’ repetitive actions, such as continuously playing a game or remaining still, helped the audience imagine each individual story ongoing without dialogue. Di Niro created the illusion of spotlights to draw the audience in by using her training in Suzuki method, a movement-based actor training where there is an emphasis on creating work that gives importance to stillness. Allain (2003: 159) describes such technique as ‘dynamic stillness’ where stillness allows the spoken word to become visible.

Research significance

Our performance spoke to how the games in our lives reflect the normalisation of social inequalities across academia and broader societies which are exacerbated by global neoliberalism. *Becoming-game* is an example of the need for researchers to collaborate as a form of activism in order to ‘document, subvert and ultimately rewrite the rules of the finite games we currently live by’ (Harré, Grant, Locke & Strum 2017: 5). Our performance at the JM Coetzee Centre’s Symposium in 2019 was met with a standing ovation.

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