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The emotional knots of academicity: A collective biography of academic subjectivities and spaces

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Abstract

The highly imagined and contested space of higher education is invested with an affectively loaded ‘knowledge economy optimism’ (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015). Drawing on recent work in affect and critical geography, this paper considers the e/affects of the promises of the ‘knowledge economy’ on its knowledge workers. We extend previous analyses of the discursive constitution of academic subjectivity (Petersen, 2007a, 2007b) through the figuration of ‘emotional knots’ (Thrift, 2008, p. 206) as we explore three stories of the constitution of academic subjectivities in institutional spaces. These stories were composed in a collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) workshop, where participants constructed accounts of the physical, social, material and imaginative dimensions of subjectivities in the ‘academic-city’ of higher education spaces. Identifying moments of ‘*perturbation*’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 6) in these stories, this paper considers the micro-contexts of ‘becoming academic’: how bodies, affects and relations become knotted in precise times and places. The figuration of ‘knots’ provides an analytical strategy for unravelling how subjects affectively invest in the promises of spaces saturated with ‘knowledge economy’ discourses, and moments of impasse where these promises ring hollow. We examine the affective bargains made in order to flourish in the corporate university, and identify spaces of possibility where ‘optimistic projections’ of alternative futures might be formed (Berlant, 2011, p. 263). These stories and their analysis complicate the metanarrative of ‘knowledge economy optimism’ that is currently driving higher

education reform in Australia.

Introduction

Contemporary higher education systems are characterised by ‘knowledge economy optimism’: ‘optimism about the transformative potential of knowledge for individuals and for national economies’ (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015, pp. 33-34). Knowledge economy discourse assumes that ‘education and training can make individual workers more productive, and that in the aggregate, more productive workers will stimulate and bring about national economic development’ (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015, p. 34). The discursive explosion of ‘economization’ as a dominant education metanarrative is contested by many scholars, both for its neoliberal rationale and for its impacts on the subjects of higher education, including higher education knowledge workers. As Sellar and Lingard (2013) point out, the OECD suggestion that skills are ‘the global currency of twenty-first century economies’ draws on ‘theories of human capital, life long learning and knowledge-based economies’ and justifies policy interventions that purport to ‘improve, simultaneously, both the well-being of individuals and the economic strength of nations’ (p. 922). However there is evidence that this economization is having the opposite effects. Davies and Bansel (2010) note, for example, that the economization of higher education has restructured the sector into an audit culture with detrimental effects including ‘reshaping the hearts and minds’ of academics, and detracting from the knowledge project that was once the central function of universities.

The concept of a ‘knowledge economy’, although replete with promise, discursively positions and defines academic subjectivities in particular ways and with material consequences. In this article, we explore the intense socio-political and affective investments made in and through these higher education institutional spaces. We extend previous analyses of how ‘knowledge economy’ discourses shape academic subjectivities to further explore the effects and affects of physical, social and imaginative higher education spaces on the constitution of academic subjectivities. We draw on poststructural notions of subjectivity that reject humanist conceptions of the autonomous, rational, coherent, stable individual with the agency to ‘choose’; and

that draw attention to fluxes, contingency and relationality. Drawing on recent work in critical geography, we unravel the emotional and affective knots that constitute academic spaces and subjectivities in environments saturated with ‘knowledge economy’ discourses. These discourses that centre on productivity and the development of human capital construct knots that locate some subjects, particularly women, on the periphery (Acker, 2014; Aiston, 2014; Gardiner, Tiggemann, Kearns & Marshall, 2007). Through collective biography, we perform a process through which we can construct and reconstruct multiplicitous selves in the academy.

Our central figuration of ‘emotional knots’ is borrowed from cultural geographer, Nigel Thrift (2008, p. 206). Thrift, alongside other theorists associated with affect and space (Berlant, 2011; Braidotti, 2011; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/ 1987; Massey, 2005), offers conceptual tools for thinking affect, feeling and emotion together with the materiality of spaces and bodies. We draw on these tools in the second half of our paper to analyse three collective biography stories from a research workshop where participants shared memories of becoming or being recognised as academics¹. The stories constructed detailed accounts of the physical, social, material and imaginative dimensions of subjectivities in higher education. Of particular interest to us are the spatialities of threshold moments in the ontological project of ‘becoming’ academic.

Discursive critiques of the constitution of the academic subject

‘Academic’ is a discursive category established through repetition of particular discursive practices: ‘acts, articulations, desires’ and uses of the body deemed to be ‘appropriate and relevant’ in academic settings (Petersen, 2007a, p. 479). The constitution of academic subjectivities has been previously examined by scholars working with a poststructural interest in discourse, power and subjectivity.

Academicity is defined as a performative construct and ongoing process of becoming through which academic subjects ‘come into being by being appropriated by, and by appropriating, available enactments and desires that are recognisable as “academic”’

(Petersen, 2007a, p. 475). Academicity entails those ‘culturally intelligible academic subject positions and practices’ that create us as ‘the right kind of person’ to be in an academic context, and, indeed, to *be* - and to be recognizable as - ‘an academic’ (Petersen, 2007b, p.173). The boundaries of academic subjectivities are policed from both within and without: failures ‘need to be repaired or restored’ while ‘successful appropriation of the boundaries calls for explicit reinforcement and celebration’ (Petersen, 2007a, p. 480).

Previous discursive analyses have elegantly unravelled how academic subjectivities are established through performative processes of repetition where identities become resignified within the cultural parameters of intelligibility. This process of resignification is not a choice made by a wilful, discrete and essentialised subject, but rather, subjectivity is mobilised within a discursively constituted matrix that provides an illusion of stability and inner coherence. While these analyses have explored the constitutive effects of discourse on academic subjectivity, we argue that the spatial and affective dimensions of higher education warrant further exploration. The spatial accoutrements of ‘academicity’ in ordinary and everyday interactions in these spaces are our focus. This collaborative and critical project is important to undertake in an academic milieu that prioritises and individualises the achievement of academics, and at the same time ‘systematically dismantles the will to critique’ (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 5).

Affects in the ‘academic-city’

This paper began in a session entitled ‘Feminist poststructural narrative moves and methods’ at an Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Theory Workshop, during which we explored memories of becoming or being recognised as academics. During the workshop one of the participants noted that we were writing about ‘academicity’ in the ‘academic-city’ of higher education. This pun, combined with Thrift’s (2008) suggestion that cities are ‘roiling maelstroms of affect’ (p. 171), led us to explore higher education spaces as ‘cities’: sites formed by and forming particular affects for those who teach, learn and research within them.

By ‘affect’, we refer to pre-personal intensities, distinguished from ‘emotions’ which are the labelling of these sensations in language (Massumi, 2002). Affect precedes and exceeds what the subject can articulate in language, and affective processes are in constant motion. Affects arise *in between* bodies (whether human or non-human), as intensities that ‘circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). A body’s capacity to affect and to be affected varies according to the shifting conditions of a particular situation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/ 1987). Bodies are affectively weighted and attuned differently, so that particular movements through particular affective states may be more or less accessible for differently positioned bodies. Attending to ‘ordinary affects’ (Stewart, 2007) and everyday spaces indicates how shifts in institutional discourses and practices impact on the formation of subjectivity.

Before Thrift described the elusive ‘urban affect or mood’ of cities with the term ‘emotional knots’ (2008, p. 206), Deleuze and Guattari and Massey also associated spaces and subjectivities with knots. For Deleuze and Guattari, ‘affects or drives form part of the infrastructure itself’ (1983, p. 63), forming tangles of lines in subjectivities, spaces and institutions that constantly change in dynamic relation. Analysing the ‘inextricable knots’ of concrete social fields, and analysing concrete social fields (like higher education spaces) becomes a cartographic strategy of disentanglement of the lines of these knots that form these subjectivities, groups, territories and institutions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994/ 2009, p. 68). For Massey (2005), space and place are shaped by stories, albeit stories that do not settle or resolve but are ‘ongoing’ with ‘loose ends’ and interweavings so that ‘[a]rriving at a new place means joining up with, somehow linking in to, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made’ (p. 119).

We use the term ‘knots’ as a figuration. A figuration, according to Braidotti (2011), enables a ‘nonunitary image’ of a ‘multilayered subject’ (p. 14), and a complex, matrixed space to be drawn. Using figurations, subjectivity is de-essentialised, as neither ‘biological’ nor ‘social’, but as the ‘point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological’ (2011, p. 319), as well as the affective and spatial.

The figuration of knots therefore extends the poststructural notion of subjectivity beyond discrete individuals and draws attention to the contingency and porousness of subjectivities and spaces. Threaded academic subjectivities and higher education spaces also loop with ‘temporal extensions’ that enable ‘projection or thrownness into the future’ and are thus able to provoke action and imagination’ towards alternative futures (Thrift, 2008, p. 206).

Appropriating the term ‘emotional knots’, we explore the entanglements of the affects of ‘knowledge economy optimism (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015) with spaces and subjectivities. Berlant’s book *Cruel Optimism* (2011) has also provided us with conceptual tools to thread these stories of affects in spaces with broader affects in global circulation. Berlant’s (2011) cultural analysis starts with close readings of singular moments of perturbation in texts as ‘exemplary cases of adjustment to the loss of this fantasy’ of the good life (p. 11). Similarly, we consider the promises of ‘knowledge economy optimism’ and their e/affects: how subjects affectively invest in these promises in particular spaces, and moments of impasse where these knotted promises slip loose. In our collective biography, we question how knots are articulated as emotions that circulate between bodies in the ‘academic-cities’ of higher education.

Collective biography

Collective biography is a method we have taken up for working with memories to unravel the emotional and affective knots that constitute academic spaces and subjectivities. As an explicitly poststructuralist method, collective biography aims to ‘bring theory into collision with everyday life and thus to rethink, collectively [...] the discursive contexts within which our lives make sense’ (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 4). Various collective biography projects have examined subjectivities, discourse and material and affective spaces within a poststructuralist and most recently ‘posthuman’ paradigm (e.g. Davies & Gannon, 2006, 2012). In its consistent critique of the individualism and competition of neoliberal subjectivities, collective biography also claims to destabilize the privatization of research outputs that is associated with the

academic capitalism promoted within the neoliberal climate of universities (Davies & Bansel, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015). The conception of a stable self is also destabilised via narrative explorations of nomadic, fluid subjectivities. Those working with collective biography prefer to think with multiplicities and multiple and partial readings of data (Gannon & Gonick, 2014).

From the outset we undertook to write stories of what it felt like when we felt a sense that we were being 'academic'. Gannon (2008) reminds us that memory is fragmented and only ever a re-storied conception of an event: 'Memory writing is not a veridical act that reproduces the original experience as it was lived but is necessarily always constituted from a particular time and place and discursive frame' (p. 483). We see '[m]emories as mo(ve)ments' (p. 7) and appreciate their 'very unreliability' (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 3). We wrote of ourselves in schools, in the university and importantly, always somewhere in between, dynamically moving in and through embodied spaces. Sharing and writing the stories that emerged in these memories, we did not impose meanings. Rather they emerged, 'wily and analytically unrestrained', through a collective writing process where thinking, analysis and theorizing happened simultaneously and 'exceeded the containment of phases, time, and space' (Childers, 2014, p. 820). We use fictional names and the third person to highlight that these stories are not naturalistic representations, but rather performative productions that we theoretically interrogate (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 3).

In writing these stories and analysing them, we identified particular performative moments of 'perturbation' (Berlant, 2011, p. 6). Berlant (2011) describes her use of Deleuze's word as a marker for 'disturbances in the atmosphere that constitute situations whose shape can only be forged by continuous reaction and transversal movement, releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries' (p. 6). In these moments, the 'world is at once intensely present and enigmatic' (Berlant, 2011, p. 4). A thread in the academic subject's sense of self slips loose, and she is suddenly alert to the political dimension of 'knowledge economy optimism': that certain forms of knowledge are accorded more value, that certain bodies are accorded more weight as knowers, and that space

is deeply entwined in these intra-actions. In these moments, ‘many complicated flows across bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories and contexts entangle and intertwine together to form just this affective moment, episode or atmosphere with its particular possible classifications’ (Wetherell, 2015, p. 160). In a moment of misrecognition in or abjection from a space, or a moment of recognition and embrace in a space, we identify where the fictionalised subject has hesitated, temporarily bewildered by the apparent intractability of this moment. Pausing to further unravel the knots of perturbation that have been threaded in and between our memories, we collectively examined our affective investments in these spaces and subjectivities. This examination of these ‘simultaneous, incoherent narratives’ of what ‘seems possible and blocked in personal/ collective life’ is politically necessary: examining these perturbations, blockages and impasses suggest how the present has been produced (Berlant, 2011, p. 4). Unthreading these knots and examining their constitution, we consider alternative (collective) subjectivities that may be re-threaded.

In the remainder of this paper, we draw on three of our narratives to unravel the lived, material, technologised, affective *felt* sense of higher education institutional spaces and the academic subjectivities that are enabled and constrained within them. We ask: *What affects and discourses are associated with these spaces? How do these spaces, affects, and discourses form particular emotional knots and particular emotional investments? How do these knots loosen and tighten around those recognised (or not recognised) as academic subjects in higher education spaces?*

The stories suggest how ‘knowledge economy optimism’ produces different expressions of academicity in different spaces and relations. They document connections and dislocations with colleagues and spaces as subjects grapple with the unstable and multiplicitous thresholds of ‘academicity’.

Being casual - Becoming academic: A politics of location

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the neoliberal university is notorious for the casualized workforce that it relies upon, our first story is about the unstable threshold of employment. The evocation of this (non)status in the opening phrase, takes us

immediately into the precarious academic subjectivity of the part-time casual academic worker.

Employed part time as a casual, Lyn makes her fortnightly hour-long unpaid trek to the University campus meeting. The thirsty Australian landscape of meadows and scrawny-looking sheep starkly contrast the verdant pastoral belt of Lyn's home. Driving the arrow-straight roads, Lyn ponders her pathway – relinquishing a secure school-based position to toil on a doctorate and endure the commensurate insecurity of being a casual academic.

This first day of work in the university provides her with a sense of connection and authenticity. She can mentor her own group of pre-service teachers, challenging their thinking with exciting and contested Education theory. Is she a 'real' lecturer like that diverse and quirky group of intellectuals that she encountered all those years ago as a student of 18 in another place? She had been in awe of their formidable knowledge base and bohemian free-thinking. Now she can also be called (casual) academic. The title 'casual academic' seems simultaneously filled with both promise and legitimacy. Yet Lyn knows that she hovers on the periphery of collegial relationships and institution practices; she is not quite in.

Lyn comes to recognise that 'becoming-academic' means going the extra mile - driving an hour to meetings, long trips to visit rural schools (unremunerated for travel time) and many evenings on the phone with students. She contemplates the academy with its prestigious journals, bustling conferences, and frocked hierarchy. It is a rock face, a buttress where she climbs stealthily – striving to keep a grip on the protruding, yet sharp handholds, keeping a wary eye on the looming ledge above. There are overhangs - selection panels, journal reviews, teaching evaluations and research funding applications.

In recognition of Lyn's theoretical and practical knowledge, her senior colleague discusses with her how the course can be reworked to draw from the skills and resources that she brings to the faculty. Hopeful - her fingers tuck into the rock grooves. With knuckles and knees she grips on to her place on the escarpment.

At the beginning of the next year Lyn blanches to hear a new (non-casual) Level A academic had been appointed in her place. It is a split role between campuses. She

tells herself that it is a dispassionate decision, a numbers game. Her hours are drastically reduced. With fears of an uncertain employment future, she spirals into a crisis of confidence - in both the university and herself. All she wants is to 'be academic'.

In the story of Lyn, the university is constructed as a 'politics of location' (Braidotti, 2011, p. 14) composed of literal and figurative spaces. For this recent immigrant to Australia, both the bush and university landscape are unfamiliar. She has left her 'secure school-based position' for a 'casual' position. Grappling with temporal and spatial cartographies of becoming, Lyn seeks a figurative 'foothold' for a different subjectivity; legitimacy as an academic in geographical and psychically new places.

Lyn affectively invests in this academic work in the promise, threaded in memories of other spaces and relations, that she might become like that 'diverse and quirky group of intellectuals' she had known as a student 'in another place'. Lyn is optimistic, ignited with a sense of possibility. Affective flows between students, colleagues and Lyn offer her different intensities: trust, awe, and excitement. But there are affective blockages that thwart the 'promise' of the position, and that turn 'feeling hopeful' into a 'crisis of confidence'. Her labour is poorly remunerated, even as she goes the 'extra mile' - literally and figuratively. She performs the 'willing casual academic' subject by working additional hours to be eligible for ongoing employment. She progresses 'stealthily', uncertain about legitimacy and authority. The neoliberal university is affectless, pragmatic, 'dispassionate'. Yet the figurative labour to become academic is dramatically embodied as in her image of 'knuckles and knees' gripping on 'to her place on the escarpment'. Lyn attempts to secure a stable place on the academic rock face; to form a knot that might hold her there.

If we consider the narrative through the trope of ravelling and unravelling, then the precarious emergent academic subjectivity threaded through campus meetings, tutorials and consultations unravels at that moment when someone else is appointed to the job that Lyn had begun to think of as hers. As a 'becoming academic' she is 'cut loose.' This situation 'threatens utter, abject unravelling' (Berlant, 2011, p. 6) of this

academic subject. The cruelty of Lyn's optimism has become apparent. Berlant (2011) explains that optimism is 'cruel' when 'the object/ scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person [...] risks striving' (p. 2). The subjectivity of 'academic' and the scene of the 'university' that Lyn had risked striving for in her geographic and psychic movement to this new place have suddenly made it 'impossible' (in this space, at this time) for her to attain this vision of 'expansive transformation'. She is momentarily unthreaded from the emotional knots and affective intensities of casual academicity. These knots and intensities are symptomatic of the casualization in the 'academic-city', where the promise of becoming a knowledge worker in the knowledge economy is precarious, and its dividends uncertain.

Relocating: location

Our second story relocates legitimacy as an academic to the precise spatial and architectural accoutrements of power. These are specific to each institution as, over time, spaces are coded and striated and their hidden meanings become sedimented. Kath takes some time to learn the codes and to be put in her place by her new colleagues and by the institutional practices surrounding the allocation of space.

Kath hadn't really ever referred to herself as an academic until she arrived in Australia. One of the things that struck her about being recognised as a legitimate academic was that it was assumed that she would have an office – not a hot desk. The location, size and lighting of her office mattered. Oh, and whether she got a parking space or not. The trouble was it took her a while to tweak.

As she moved around the various university buildings, she would chat with peers and colleagues, introduce herself, share stories. One of the first things the majority of people asked her was to do with her location in the university.

'What building are you in, Kath?' Sally queried.

Kath pointed up the road and before she could actually verbalise her office location, Sally was affirming it.

'Really? And what floor are you on?' she probed.

'Third', Kath replied.

'Oh, I thought you'd at least be on 16', she said, looking a bit taken aback.

'You do have a view and parking space though, right?' Sue jumped in.

'No, I wish though,' Kath smiled. 'How do you get those?'

'I think it all depends on your academic rank. You're a senior academic, right?' Sue asked.

'Yes,' Kath replied.

'Career academic or practitioner?' Sally asked.

Kath made some rather inane comment about her career and then tried to turn the conversation away from parking to finding out more about the students she was going to be teaching in the next couple of weeks. However, the focus quickly turned to 'academia' again and writing, publications and quality research outputs, and then back to office size and the number of windows one had.

Kath's mind wandered back to the previous universities she had worked in. Yes, I think I knew how to act, speak, think, write and feel in those worlds and yes there were hierarchies, levels and titles which dictated place, space and mindsets – but not minds. She thought of Deb and Rose and Suzy and Andy... and all the meaningful discussions they had had about their students, their teaching, their research, their learning. The word 'academic' just wasn't there. It wasn't needed. It didn't matter.

She asked herself, am I losing that self, that voice?

She was becoming academic.

The story of Kath captures the fluxes experienced in the formation of academic subjectivities in higher education spaces. University life is constructed in the 'politics of location', although this time, Kath is threaded into a configuration where she is attributed all the legitimacy and promise of an academic subject-in-becoming (Braidotti, 2011, p. 14). Until relocating, Kath's subjectivit(ies) were, apparently, not overtly affectively invested in being an 'academic'. She is not a newcomer to academic workplaces, though she is new to this place, and to the subtleties of rank

and location as they figure here. The politics of academic work are highlighted in the discussion of office location and carpark provision. The coding of power with location is literal and stark as her colleague pins it with precision to particular buildings, floors and parking spaces. As Kath shifts spaces, she suddenly apprehends the semiotic correlation of her institutional value with the particular space where her body is assigned to work.

Movements of affect and power among people in the conversation are hinted at with ‘affirming’, ‘smiling’ and ‘taken aback’; subtle flows of positive and negative affect. The moment of unravelling is the irruptive query: ‘Career academic or practitioner?’. A previously unfamiliar discourse and dichotomy intersects with her awareness of the significance of the allocation of space. In what seems initially to be a benign and friendly conversation, Kath’s colleagues interrogate her about what they consider are appropriate, relevant and legitimate or inappropriate, irrelevant and illegitimate acts, articulations, desires and bodies in an academic context. Petersen (2007b, p. 179) reminds us that ‘academics are continuously engaged in inclusionary and exclusionary discursive practices.’ As such ‘the boundaries around the category “academic” and the subject position “academic” are forever being produced, reproduced, challenged and negotiated’ (Petersen, 2007a, p. 479). This discursive positioning is tangibly affective and spatial. ‘[N]ew forms of friction’ materialise ‘as backgrounds change size and shape’ (Thrift, 2006, p. 145). These ‘[o]bservable lived relations’ suggest some of the ‘newly proliferating pressures’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 8) that accompany knowledge economy optimism and its consequences for how bodies in spaces are recognised and discursively positioned.

In the coda, ‘previous universities’ and the familiar institutional practices of knowing ‘how to act, speak, think, write and feel’ are invoked to retrieve a thread of legitimate academic subjectivity. Drawing another thread into the weave, she recalls other ways to be academic: ‘Deb and Rose and Suzy and Andy... and all the meaningful discussions they had about their students, their teaching, their research, their learning’. It is clear that Kath will need to form ‘patterns of adjustment’ (Berlant,

2011, p. 9) to move with the differing codings of space, relations and subjectivities of this new workplace.

A room with a door in the Fiery Cottage

The final story is also concerned with physical spaces and buildings, but in this instance being on the periphery is intensely generative. The story begins, as did our first story, in the precarious space and time that is occupied by the PhD student.

A new doctoral candidate, Ellen is assigned a desk in the corner of a meeting room in the fiery cottage. This cottage was a women's academic space designed by Margaret Somerville to promote a women's scholarly community. Elated and proud, this doctoral candidate arranged her pens and paper with care. There was no computer, so she brought in an old monitor and each day carried her computer box home. Some months later, she was assigned a room.

A room, with a door and eventually a computer, in a women scholar's cottage. These were threshold moments of the emergent academic self. Ease of access to the generative academic discourse with women who worked in or visited the cottage, but also an easy retreat to a private space. The women scholars of the cottage were positioned at all stages of their careers and generously shared their life experiences and academic advice.

The room was a small room off a kitchen in a university house converted to office space. Inside the walls were lined with bookshelves, lovingly filled with texts of feminism, philosophy, theory, and photographs and objects. Ideas on post-it notes littered the walls, lines from Judith Butler, Delores Hayden, Chris Weedon and many others. Eventually the post it notes reflected her own ideas. As her confidence grew, so did her voice and willingness to experiment and embrace the messiness of research.

The community within held lunches of soup and bread and discussed feminist poststructural ways for viewing the world, the boundaries of the university and emergent selves in the academic journey. Back in the enclave office, she began to play with text, to imagine an emergent thesis.

Between writing the thesis part time and feeding her baby, she pondered the (dis)embodied scholar and the displacement of note books, breast milk and the writing of a thesis. She recalled earnest undergraduate exams a decade earlier, leaking breast milk onto exam papers. Good students do not leak.

These were exultant times in her own room, with a door, in the fiery women's cottage with regular celebrations of writing, academic community and collegial conversations. The door opened and shut many times: she would retreat to write, or rush out to engage debate, share, present ideas, co-author, co-publish. It was a busy, generative, and passionate dance.

The cottage sits empty now; the office is just as it was left. There are few indications of the lively academic culture that propelled and transformed them into women scholars. Now they take the cottage with them. After the last lock was turned, the cottage became a conversation and a metaphoric space. We, women scholars, still meet to talk, mentor and sometimes write together.

The spaces of academia are literal and figurative in the story of Ellen, which rather than a single moment, records several episodes: arriving to the 'fiery cottage', getting a 'room with a door', and departing the cottage, but taking it along as 'a conversation and a metaphoric space'. This space quarantines these 'becoming academic' feminist scholars from other affects circulating through the neoliberal university. Breast milk, writing, lunches with soup and bread, debating and sharing ideas contribute to the 'busy, generative and passionate dance' of becoming academic. This space, if 'regarded as a knot tied from the strands of the movements of its many inhabitants' (Thrift, 2006, pp. 141-142), dynamically fluxes with potentiality.

Just as communal space is important, so too is private space, the room with a door and a desk and a wall of one's own. The positive affect that circulates through the cottage exceeds its human inhabitants; the achievement of academic subjectivity requires far more than merely human desire and interaction. Ellen 'lovingly' fills the bookshelf with scholarly texts. Photographs, objects and post-it notes are part of the more-than-human threading of academic subjectivity with(in) this space. Although temporality features in the episodic structure of the story, it does not regulate the times or bodies

of academic workers, as Davies and Bansel (2005, 2010) suggest characterise the neoliberal university. The ‘hearts and minds’ of the ‘women’s scholarly community’ in this women’s space are captured in a generative, productive and creative mode of being. This ‘lively culture’ stands in stark contrast to the ambivalence of neoliberal academic subjectification and intensification of competition.

Although the university has abandoned the cottage as an academic space and it now ‘sits empty’, Ellen says that her office is ‘just as [she] left it’. While the implication is that the walls are clear and the shelves are empty, the ghostly remainders of those academic artefacts and relationalities remain in the memories and in the practices of the academic subject. There are, as Thrift (2006) writes, ‘corporeal traces’ in this cottage that ‘provide a kind of half-remembered poetics’ (p. 139).

This is not a story of an unravelling of the academic subject, like those moments in our earlier stories where the academic subject loosened or became stuck in affective knots. This perhaps utopian story maps the multiple threads that contribute to a particular *feminist* and *feminine* academic subjectivity – one which stirs affective intensities amongst those of us who do not have ‘a room with a door’ in a ‘fiery cottage’. Perhaps this cottage is an imaginative, and transferrable academic space: without walls, shelves and doors, but still generative.

The emotional knots of ‘knowledge economy optimism’

To understand, critique and begin to undermine the e/affects of ‘knowledge economy optimism’ on the constitution of academic subjectivities, we have explored ‘ordinary affects’ (Stewart, 2007) in ‘ordinary’ higher education spaces. These stories have indicated the ‘overwhelming ordinary that is disorganised’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 9) and the e/affects of ‘knowledge economy optimism’ in the corporate university. These ‘spatial swirl[s] of affects’ are ‘difficult to tie down but are nevertheless crucial’ (Thrift, 2006, p. 143). Affect ‘registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 16). Affects are thus ‘evidence of historical processes’ (p. 16) – ordinary manifestations of the impacts of casualization, restructuring, deregulation, and other ‘new precarities’

(Berlant, 2011, p. 20) in the corporate university. Our stories have explored the tightness of emotional knots of academicity and attended to the complex entanglement of power and affect in higher education spaces.

The formation of academic subjectivities is deeply entwined with the promises and the relationalities of institutional spaces. In these stories, ‘bodies are continuously busy judging environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 15). Particular physical, material spaces are associated with particular promises. The first two stories evoked the competitive environments of higher education where individuals try to hold on to ‘compromised conditions of possibility’ or ‘clusters of promises’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 24) measured by stable employment, office location and parking spaces. Attention to the ‘relations, fractures, discontinuities, practices of engagement’ of place-making (Massey, 2005, p. 85), we note how the location of the academic subject’s physical body in particular spaces is semiotically coded with the value of the academic subject’s knowledge, and may augment or diminish the body’s capacity to act. The body retains impressions or traces of affects associated with (unspoken or explicit) promises in particular spaces. These traces or impressions accumulate over time, threading knots of subjectivities, inter-affective knots between subjects, and institutional emotional knots.

Returning to the suggestion that Australian universities are shaped by ‘knowledge economy optimism’ (Cuthbert & Molla, 2015), we have explored micro-contexts that produce academic subjectivities and have complicated this powerful metanarrative driving higher education reform. These stories suggest that the ‘delocalised processes’ and institutional practices, cultures and affects associated with neoliberal governance have transformed, or at least displaced, postwar norms of ‘reciprocity and meritocracy’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 9). ‘Optimism’, the affect associated with the ‘knowledge economy’ (Cuthbert and Moll, 2015), is differentially felt. For some bodies, in particular moments, spaces and times, the investments that they have made of their time, knowledge, energy and sense of self accord with these promises and there are dividends. For other bodies, in other moments, spaces and times, a relation of ‘cruel optimism’ becomes apparent: what is desired is an obstacle to flourishing.

This 'knowledge economy optimism' may be a contagious affect that travels through spaces, between and through bodies, even as it is apprehended differently by differently positioned bodies. Those who learn, teach and work in these institutional spaces make a range of 'affective bargains' in the process of attempting to thrive (Berlant, 2010, p. 94).

These stories highlight how 'academic identity remains a dynamic and slippery construct' (Billot, 2010, p. 719). In particular, those positioned as 'academic' must continue to interrogate the ways in we understand and value ourselves and each other, including our own complicities and regulatory practices (Jackson, 2010). We must continue to ask: how are we signified and re-signified by, in and through our relations to space, and how do we discursively position each other within these spaces? As we position our academic selves with(in) particular spaces that are coded with signifiers of value and power, we see the instability of professional self-formation. In one moment, possibilities proliferate and in the next, they dissipate. Unpicking the threads of these knots, we query the notion that the academic subject is a coherent, rational and independent self. None of these stories suggest the masculinist neoliberal 'academic' subject of the knowledge economy, and several of them articulate other potential spaces and practices of academicity.

Collective biography has provided a collaborative and relational way of (un)ravelling subjectivities to explore uncertain and multiplicitous threads of 'academicity' and rejects an individualistic neoliberal ideology. Yet, our figuration of 'knots' has its own limitations: unravelling the 'knots' that 'bind us' assumes that strands can be held separately, that they can retain integrity as separate threads. Discursive, material and affective knots that constitute and position subjectivities tend to be much more complicated and entangled. Deleuze and Parnet (2006/ 1977) caution that 'precautions' are needed when lines (or 'threads') of knots are disentangled, with care taken to 'soften' or 'suspend' lines rather than cutting them loose. This care is necessary because these lines (or 'threads') that separate bodies (according to seniority, performance and space) condition our sense of value and security. These threads are 'so much a part of [our] conditions of life'; undermining a line does not merely undermine existing hierarchies, but is also aimed 'directly at ourselves'

(Deleuze & Parnet, 2006/ 1977, p. 103). It is confronting and unsettling to unweave a thread that you had understood to be part of your very self.

Conclusion

This story and, indeed, our collective writing process, suggest the importance of community within fragmented and individualized academic-cities. The cartographies of academic spaces are tense and precarious, dependent on hierarchies of power and voice. Yet, recognising and unthreading the perturbations and impasses that we face in the present makes re-threading alternative conditions possible. In the third story, a group of women scholars are committed to immanent corporeal practices in a space where ‘potentiality is affirmed’ and collective and individual subjectivities are formed and re-formed (Berlant, 2011, p. 261). We are not advocating a romantic re-investment in past places, practices, and subjectivities; an impossible return to the past. Rather, disavowing the cruelty of the ‘optimism’ of contemporary ‘knowledge economy’ discourses, we wonder what other ‘optimistic projections’ of alternative futures might be formed: visions of ‘a world that is worth our attachment’ (Berlant, 2011, p. 263). Rather than being framed through discursive constructions, we recognise the generative possibilities for creating new relations within academic spaces. These projections require the (re-)writing of other stories and the relational (re-)threading of new places, affects and subjectivities.

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ⁱ From the larger group of workshop participants, only people who opted to co-author a paper and contribute their written stories continued through to this paper. The stories we selected were those that were explicitly about spaces of higher education. We thank AARE for organising the Theory Workshop and providing the opportunity for us to begin thinking through our collective experiences of academia.