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GANNON, Susanne, TAYLOR, Carol, ADAMS, Gillian <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2088-8708>>, DONAGHUE, Helen, HANNAN-SWAIN, Stephanie, HARRIS-EVANS, Jean, HEALEY, Joan and MOORE, Patricia

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## 'Working on a rocky shore': Micro-moments of positive affect in academic work

Susanne Gannon, Western Sydney University, Australia

Carol Taylor, University of Bath, United Kingdom

Gill Adams, Sheffield-Hallam University, United Kingdom

Helen Donaghue, Sheffield-Hallam University, United Kingdom

Stephanie Hannam-Swain, Sheffield-Hallam University, United Kingdom

Jean Harris-Evans, Sheffield-Hallam University, United Kingdom

Joan Healey, Sheffield-Hallam University, United Kingdom

Patricia Moore, Sheffield-Hallam University, United Kingdom

### Abstract

Neoliberal ideologies, marketization and performative regimes associated with recent reforms in universities have exerted considerable pressure on academic working conditions and subjects in recent years. While analysing these pressures is important, it is also productive to consider the ways in which academics engage in moments of resistance by mobilising resources beyond those of critique. This paper therefore focuses on joy and positive affect in the everyday moments of academic life. It utilises the feminist methodology of collective biography to explore ways of making the restricted spaces of our working day more expansive and finding within them unexpected openings for joy. Our analysis of the stories included in this paper traces the mercurial and ambiguous affective atmospheres of academic work. We suggest that joy is founded upon connections with others, that it arises in different academic spaces and that it can lead to revised knowing of ourselves. We argue that the glimpses of joy evident in this paper provoke affective attunement within the everyday, sensitizing us to other fragments of joy and providing strategies to strengthen that resistance.

Keywords: Affective atmospheres; Joy; Collective biography; University

## Introduction

The pressures that neoliberal ideologies, marketization and performative regimes exert on academics in the contemporary university have been the subject of much critical attention (Brown, 2015; Harmes et al., 2017; Smyth, 2017; Taylor and Lahad, 2018). Indeed it has been suggested that ‘already it seems there may have been too much written about the problems with universities’ (Harmes et al., 2017, 4). In response to the deluge of misery about academic workplaces, Harmes et al. invited contributions that focused on pleasure within and despite neoliberal ideologies, market forces, audit practices, performative regimes and crisis rhetoric. The intention was not to deny or erase such pressures but, rather, to open new pathways to multiply and complicate the ways we might think about academic subjectivities, practices and temporalities. Despite the authors' endeavours, the tropes that frame their chapters reaffirm the direness they aim to work against – ‘the confines of the neoliberal university’, ‘escape from the dominant system’, ‘reducing the drag’, ‘the Idios Kosmos’, ‘reclaiming pleasure’, ‘pleasure and pain’, ‘the salvaging of joy’, ‘from frustration to flow’ and the ‘academic killjoy’ (Harmes et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the authors suggest a diverse range of strategies which work against the individualizing, surveilling and competitive practices of neoliberal performative regimes and, in doing so, they bring together a set of collaborative, collegial and passionate experiments in thinking differently, together. Alongside this, feminist interventions emphasize the affective complexities of neoliberal academia, for example by considering its ‘flights, fights and failure’ (Taylor and Lahad, 2018) and proposing strategies to address inherent sexism (Crimmins, 2019).

This paper is aligned with these intentions to think academic otherwise. In it, we utilize a strategic attention to positive affect by focusing on joy in the everyday moments of academic life. The stories that we present as data in our collective biography trace the affective atmospheres enveloping and producing bodies, objects and encounters and their mutability from moment to moment. We argue that affective attunement to glimpses of joy

within the everyday is a strategic response to the well-documented debilitating impacts of academic neoliberalism. The paper emerges, then, as an experiment in thinking differently together, one which uses collective biography as a feminist methodology that invites attention to the embodied, affective and relational labour of everyday academic life. We begin with a justification for, and description of, this methodology, drawing out the themes that arose out of our collective endeavour. To frame the themes found in our stories, we then theorise affect, reviewing prominent literature and exploring its conceptual productivity in supporting modes of thinking differently about neoliberal academia. Next, we introduce and analyse four stories, tracing micro-moments of joy in the everyday. Finally, we conclude with our thoughts on collective and aesthetic action as subtle resistance within neoliberal academia.

### [Working in the interstices of everyday academic life: developing a collective biography](#)

Originating in the collective memory work of Marxist sociologist Haug and others (1987), collective biography has developed into a poststructurally oriented research methodology (Davies and Gannon, 2006) which – as method/ology and text – offers a flexible, generative and creative approach to interrogating lived experience and the formation of subjectivities. Rather than producing narratives of the production of coherent subjects, collective biography emphasises the moment to moment formations and affective and discursive encounters that produce bodies, objects, subjects and through which they come to cohere. Collectives work with their own memories on an agreed theme of common interest (for example, academic work: Charteris et al., 2016; Gannon et al. 2015, 2018); girlhood: Gonick and Gannon, 2014; place: Davies and Gannon, 2009) or they may begin with a concept or theory that the collective wants to investigate (such as reflexivity, subjectivity, power/knowledge: Davies and Gannon, 2006; or intra-action: Davies and Gannon, 2012). Collective biography workshops have occurred in many locations, often off site, and over extended periods of time with people who already know each other well, who may be working with similar theoretical ideas, and they have incorporated arts and drama methods alongside writing (Davies and Gannon, 2009; Gale et al., 2013; Gannon et al., 2012). However, this workshop took place in the interstices of everyday routines. Rather than an unfolding of shared interests over time, or the freedom that a site away from the university

might have allowed, this workshop took place within the crevices of institutional life. A day and half was carved out of the first week of a new academic year, before classes had begun, as the machinery of the new academic year's administration was still cranking up. A meeting room was booked, catering was ordered and a group of twelve women came together to share experiences of academic work. We were variously and multiply located as visiting scholar, research leader, senior researchers, administrators, PhD students, early career academics, lecturers, and professional staff. Some people knew each other already, while others met for the first time in the workshop. Our disciplines and experience varied. Our interests in materiality and space led to the only instruction that preceded the workshop – take a photo on your phone of your academic life. Thus we incorporated a photo elicitation technique into our collective biography methodology. Rather than straightforward representations, we mobilised the images as provocations that we worked with laterally and affectively, writing about each other's images as well as our own.

At the workshop, we followed the usual procedures for collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) in that we settled collectively on a prompt which related to our broad topic of 'academicity', inspired by Petersen's work on academic subjectivities (2007, 2008). The first day began with an invitation to participants to share stories of 'concerns' about academic life. However, by the time we came to write the stories we had shared and discussed in the group, the concerns had sharpened and our prompt became: 'write a story about being heard/not heard'. By the end of the first day, we had written and read out our first drafts of our stories, which were then rewritten overnight and uploaded to the project dropbox. Further revisions took place in an iterative process as stories were shared - reading them aloud, listening with care and questioning points of confusion, tension and interest (Davies & Gannon, 2006). The images we had brought with us were also used for 'writing warm ups' at the beginning of each day. Our initial prompt for the images was 'write the story of this moment of academic life' and, while on the first day, people wrote to the image they had brought with them, on the second day participants wrote stories in response to images that others had brought as mobile phones were pooled amongst the group. Each image triggered more memories and stories of academic lives proliferated amongst the group, beyond the initial intention and curated collection of individual images that we had begun with. The image was thus detached from its originator and mobilised as an affective

and material resource to generate additional material. The purpose of this sort of 'deterritorialising' strategy (Gannon et al., 2012) was to loosen our attachments to singular and individualized truths and, instead, to work towards the 'collective' production of biographical accounts. Participants were encouraged to incorporate embodied and material detail in their writing, to focus on a moment or vignette of experience and to attend to mundane quotidian everyday practices and moments of rupture rather than grand narratives or explanations. Each participant wrote three stories through the 1 ½ day workshop. This paper includes stories from across these activities.

Stories were shared, told and heard. Vignettes of experience were written, read and rewritten. New stories emerged overnight, even in our dreams, and in response to each other's stories. These processes enacted a collaborative inquiry methodology that Heron and Reason (1997, 283) describe as a 'democratic dialogue as co-researchers and as co-subjects'. However, our formation as a collective was provisional, time-limited, and quickly recolonised by workplace duties. Following the workshop, eight participants elected to continue with the extended writing, reading and rewriting at a distance that would be required to generate the two scholarly papers which emerged from this process.

Our stories of academic life, we found, often entailed grim tales of meetings in small rooms where conversations were constrained by hierarchies of command and control, men in suits, doors, passageways, institutional forms, routines and procedures, silences or forced joviality – all of which is consistent with previous literature on neoliberal managerialism. Teaching, learning and research were almost absent, although ostensibly academic work is about these practices above all. The atmospheres we described were constraining, oppressive, even claustrophobic. But we also found amongst and within our stories micro-moments where different atmospheres emerged, where energy was released, where a crack opened and something else was let in. Joy was not a topic we had nominated for collective investigation; pleasure had not been discussed during our workshop. However, as we worked through the collective biography stories that remained in our shared Dropbox, we began to notice that many of our stories were either explicitly about joy being found in mundane environments, or of joy being found, despite the violence of the situation, in gestures, glances, attunements, and momentary flights of imagination or desire. We began to recognise that these were also integral to how we emerge and become as academic

subjects – to the ‘selves’ we considered ourselves to be as academics. This paper, the second to emerge from our collective biography workshop, focuses on these micro-moments of positive affect. We consider their conditions and contingencies, and the glimpses of liveable lives in the academy that are part of what keep us wanting to be here. Such micromoments, we suggest, provide insights into how our bodies, and the academic labour they do, are saturated with affects and emotions, how they are entangled with the concrete specificities of material spaces and objects, and the part played by joy in forming the subjectivities of those who enacted the academic dramas within them.

### Affects, atmospheres and attunements

The ‘affective turn’ announced by Clough more than a decade ago (2007), inspired by Deleuze, Spinoza and others, has produced a proliferation of important publications investigating philosophies, methods, critiques and experiments in writing otherwise (e.g. Ahmed, 2010; Anderson, 2009, 2014; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Knudsen and Stage, 2015; Stewart, 2007, 2011). These have rippled across disciplines including cultural studies, critical geography, digital humanities and, less frequently, education. Affects, as described by Gregg and Seigworth (2010, 1), are ‘resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances’. Affects are not synonymous with emotions, which tend to be codified, categorized and individualized feelings. Happiness, for example, might be something that individuals feel they can recognise and name, but the turn to affect moves beyond naming and containment of that feeling in a particular body. In Ahmed’s (2010) investigation of the promise of happiness, she turns to happiness as a ‘happening,’ always in motion between people, things and ideas. For Gregg and Seigworth (2010, 2), affects are forces, often subtle, ‘shimmers’ of feelings and sensations in the midst of ‘all the miniscule or molecular events of the unnoticed’ and the ‘the ordinary.’ Affect is movement, potential, immanence, it accumulates as it circulates and it ‘emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness’ (2010, 4).

The elusive and ephemeral elements of affect, which is pre-discursive, a-subjective, unconscious, embodied, and simultaneously unmoored from bodies, in excess of bodies,

and moving between bodies (including non-human bodies) has led to strands of work on 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson, 2009, 2014) and 'atmospheric attunements' (Stewart, 2011) – concepts which became important to us in exploring our stories' meanings. Anderson (2009, 780) considers how 'affective atmospheres' swirl about 'before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions'. They form the ground for collective action in that they are the 'shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge' (Anderson, 2009, 78). Affects are ephemeral, quixotic, and always unfinished: 'perpetually forming and deforming, appearing and disappearing, as bodies enter into relation with one another. Never finished, static or at rest' (Anderson, 2009, 79). Furthermore, affective atmospheres can characterise particular 'epochs, societies, rooms, landscapes, couples, art works and much more' (Anderson, 2014, 137). Affective atmospheres are inherently ambiguous, immersive, and irreducible, excessive and intensive. They are 'resources that must be attuned to by bodies' (Anderson, 2014, 145). Attempts to explore how an atmosphere can 'envelop people and things' (Anderson, 2014, 137) or 'how things come to have an affective charge' (Anderson, 2014, 138) need to retain this sense of ambiguity. This is evident in Anderson's meticulous empirical tracing of the uneven and volatile trajectories of affective atmospheres in a hospital waiting room (Anderson and Ash, 2015) and an emergency services training workshop (Anderson, 2014). In Anderson's theorization, affective atmospheres hover 'between presence and absence, between subject and object, and between the definite and indefinite' producing a particular tone or feel for any site, episode or encounter (2014, 137).

Modes of writing are important for inquiring into the movements of affect and producing what Stewart (2009, 2011) calls 'atmospheric attunement.' Writing through little scenes from everyday life (bees, pockets, coal mining camps) as 'little random cases' of the ordinary, Stewart examines quotidian practices of 'worlding'. These she describes as 'atmospheric attunements' that capture some of the 'plasticity and density of lived compositions' of the times (2011, 446). For her, atmosphere is not merely background or context but 'a force field in which people find themselves ... not [as] an effect of other forces but a lived affect – a capacity to affect and be affected that pushes a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event' (Stewart, 2011, 452). It



requires writing that pursues ‘descriptive eddies’ and that chronicles the ‘incommensurate elements [that] hang together in a scene’ (2011, 452). While the vignettes that form our stories in this paper may be more contained than the ‘associational registers’ that Stewart suggests, her notion of ‘compositional mode’ (2013) has been important to us in mapping the affective registers and proliferations of affect in the little scenes of everyday life in the university that we produced in our workshop and include in this article. They are our own ‘little random cases’.

### Collective biography and affect

As indicated, affect provides a more expansive way of thinking through interactions between bodies, things, places and feelings than emotion. The dynamism of affect has to be kept in mind where particular emotions— such as pleasure, joy or other positive or negative feelings – are evoked and investigated. Collective biography has previously examined joy through memories of everyday experience. Joyful assemblages of girlhood were examined by Gannon et al. (2013), and the production of joy in the mundane practices of academic work was examined by Kern et al. (2014). For Gannon et al., the concept of ‘affective assemblages’ from Ringrose (2013), after Deleuze, enables a mapping of ephemeral and fleeting forces and relations, of life affirming flows of desire and possibility amongst bodies of all sorts. Kern et al. (2014, 838) examine memories of their working lives in academia, positioning joy as a ‘constitutive force’ in academia, and they determine to ‘follow joy around in order to learn where it comes from, what it does, and how it keeps us here.’ For them, joy is embodied and relational. It is ‘a practice, as well as an emotion or affect’; it is characterized by ‘swirling messiness’ and emerges as ‘excess’ from a ‘turbulent set of conditions’ (Kern et al., 2014, 841). Important for our purposes in this paper, they argue for the reclaiming of joy as ‘radical praxis’, an analytic move that might, they suggest, ‘counter the cynical, detached subjectivity’ which attends the habitual suppression of positive affect (2014, 841) often cultivated by academics as a mode of survival.

Glimpses of joy in our collective biography project became apparent for us in different ways. Analytically, joy emerged as a central theme only after the workshop ended, when we began to work collaboratively with the texts we had produced. However, during the

workshop, we sensed and felt joy: joy wafted through our workshop – an ordinary classroom but colonised differently so that it became a place rich with possibility. Joy was there in the positioning of women together around a big table, in the silent periods of writing, separate yet together. It bubbled up as each of us read our stories aloud, as we listened to each other, and gave feedback. Joy was the soft hum behind our coming-together as bodies in the room, with our writing materials, mobile phones and chocolate biscuits, all of which contributed to the joyful, dynamic affective atmosphere that was forming and reforming around us. The collaborative biography we put in motion seemed, in these unexpected moments in this quotidian space, to hold the busy work of neoliberalism momentarily at bay. The atmosphere of joy that suffused the room seemed, we think, to create space-times of affective attunement, space-times in which to breathe, ponder, and reconfigure our sense not simply of what was happening but also of what was possible, supporting the temporal fabric (Jardine, 2013, 2) of our storytelling, as we re-fashioned ourselves into being through talk and writing, reading aloud and listening, providing us with ‘an odd experience of going somewhere new and returning to somewhere old at the same time, and coming to (re)inhabit a place already inhabited’ (Jardine, 2013, 2). The affective attunements of joy we sensed and experienced – and relate in our stories – may be contingent, provisional, fragmented and fleeting, but the broader point is that they are, nevertheless, there. Even in the midst of neoliberal hierarchies, even when one is ‘poised for rejection and shocked into joy’ (Kern et al., 2014, 843) – subtle shifts in atmosphere may occur and, in those moments, different energies are released, different attunements made possible.

## Stories

As we noted earlier, many of our stories about being heard/not being heard shared a common context of meetings and the rooms in which they take place. Such rooms, our stories said, are deadening spaces, spaces somehow symbolic of a university workforce weakened and fragmented by casualization, precarity and work intensification (Loch et al., 2017). The affective atmospheres of such rooms and the bodies and objects that form encounters within them tend to be oppressive, frustrating and sometimes even dangerous. The room in our first story partakes of these qualities, but it also contains a tiny swerve, as

eyes glance elsewhere and meet in a subversive and collegial gesture of resistance. This shifts the affective atmosphere of the room, for just that moment. Unlike the other stories, this meeting does not take place in the university but in the workplace of a part-time doctoral student. In this site, academia arises in a sort of mid-meeting daydream, a demonstration of the ever-present nature of academic work, in this case, the academic work of the doctoral researcher. Affects swirl through the room, colliding with words like 'emergency', thereby bringing hierarchies of organizational power into our drifting daydreams. A meeting of eyes – 'that look' from a colleague – draws the author back into the present of the meeting.

#### Story 1: A glance, a swerve

*I'm sitting in a small meeting room, it's an emergency meeting so I'm both intrigued and anxious. Competing feelings but my body is reacting in similar ways to both. My heart racing slightly, the flutter of my stomach, thoughts competing for room – wanting attention to be paid. As soon as the senior member of staff walks through the door the room falls silent. She starts to talk about how important staff's thoughts about the company are, how much they value our honesty and it was great that we all filled out our semi-annual company review. I repress a frown which is creeping into my brows, there is a 'but' coming I can feel it and as she rambles on I tune out and start to think about my PhD, the next journal article that I have to read, what is on my growing to do list sat at home untouched. At the words "I've been told this team thinks I put too much on your team leader" I snap back to the meeting in hand. The tone of her voice is already one that says she is here to challenge that idea, not discuss it and let us "say it like it is" as she was promoting just a few seconds before. As she explains why we are of course wrong, and it's our fault that our team leader has so much work both relief and anger wash over me. First, my heart slows, my stomach is more settled, but that is soon replaced with a tightness in my jaw and the urge to fidget. The room feels stuffy and threatening, I have a growing urge just to leave or argue against the fallacy of her argument, but that would land me in disciplinary so I bite my tongue – literally. I glance up and notice my colleague sat there shaking her head, I suppress a grin, she looks up and sees me watching her and she gives me that look. I repress the urge to roll my eyes and show my solidarity at what I know she is thinking. As the meeting comes to an end, with the manager*

*reminding us that staff have two options, to get on board with how she works or they will eventually leave one way or another, the hypocrisy of her words compared to what she promotes as a company value hits me. The whole team leaves silent – silenced by the manager who also says we should challenge and have our say – so long as she agrees, it seems.*

At first this story perhaps feels as though it speaks more to the ideas of neoliberal constriction, as the narrator describes an oppressive meeting where the views of the team are being silenced, with the 'senior member of staff' interpreting an opposing opinion as a complaint. According to Ahmed (2017, p., 203) 'the word complaint derives from plague.' Just like the plague, discontent from the injustice which the complaint has been borne, spreads and infects those around the complainant. The only way to stop this infection from spreading is for the manager to perform an act of dominance in the form of controlling speech and asserting their authority to push their own agenda and end the dangerous resistance from the subordinates, which threatens to destabilise established, hierarchical power relations. This meeting could be viewed as quite a violent encounter: there is a clear insinuation that the team's jobs are on the line if they do not conform, if they do not stop resisting the rhetoric that is being espoused, if they do not shut up and take ownership for a situation that they 'wrongly' feel they are not solely to blame. The narrator details the embodied emotional labour of the performance of being a good employee: 'I have a growing urge just to leave or argue against the fallacy of her argument, but that would land me in disciplinary so I bite my tongue – literally.' The feeling of discontent is tangible to the reader. The affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009, 2014) of this meeting room is overwhelmingly oppressive; it is, in Ahmed's (2010, 41) words, 'already angled [...] felt from a specific point.' The point of angle here is the embodied narrator documenting the moment to moment affective shifts that form and reform through the meeting. While the 'competing' feelings that swirl around and through her jostle for attention, her heart and stomach react to the atmosphere. These bodily reactions seem to confirm Ahmed's (2014, 40) point that anxiety 'is sticky: rather like Velcro, it tends to pick up whatever comes near'. And yet in this story there is a micro-moment of joy. Just for a moment the atmosphere shifts as the narrator catches the non-verbal expression of empathy from a colleague and is called into a response by the gesture, which lifts the tenseness of the encounter and brings

a small moment of pleasure. That glance across to a colleague, the look, the shake of the head, the grin suppressed: even in this disciplined environment where staff perform control, complicit in their silence, bodily sensations force attention to affect and belie the performance of conformity. The power in the look exchanged between the two workers opens a crack, perhaps with an unspoken potential for future subversive action. Dirkx (2008, p11) states that 'joy or elation, (is) often regarded as pleasant interruptions of an otherwise sober environment.' The story illuminates this as it tells of an oppressive and joyless meeting, a meeting which appears to have been called to put people in their place, remind them what is expected of them and to instil fear in an attempt to get them to toe the line. And yet, even within such a meeting, the atmosphere shifts or swerves – in Ahmed's terms – again as the narrator thinks of her life outside those walls – to the academic labour of her doctoral work. Dirkx (2008, 10) notes that the workload within adult learning can provide students both with 'joy and elation' as well as with a sense of being 'overwhelmed by the multiplicity of demands within their lives.' Atmospheres are ambiguous and the narrator's perspective could be taken either way as what she feels during this small section of the story is not explicitly communicated: 'I tune out and start to think about my PhD, the next journal article I have to read, what is on my growing to do list sat at home untouched.' In the context of the atmospheres forming and reforming in the room, however, this was a moment of escapism and joy: the doctoral work that had to be completed enabled the narrator, albeit momentarily, to escape this oppressive workplace.

Story 2: An audience with ...

*An audience with ...*

*The symposium ends and the focused energy in the room begins to disperse. From the rows of chairs, knots of people form, loose groups, weaving around the furniture, gently moving it to make space, the knots pulling tighter together. Old friends meet. Knots open to welcome newcomers. The door opens and the bright sunshine begins to pull people gradually out of the shady room, onwards to their next session. As I pause to gather my papers from the presenters' table I am stopped by a hail of recognition from the first speaker, a dynamic,*

*scarily articulate, incisive leader. She had been sent our paper to review for an edited collection - the paper I'd led and laboured over.*

*She talked. The strengths of the paper, the links to her evolving work. I felt the warmth of her words, caught the excitement, a connection through theory and method.*

*She talked. Smiled a suggestion for change. I responded. We started moving, joining the thread of people.*

*She talked. She liked the paper, had recommended its acceptance. As we moved together into the sunlight she set me a challenge to improve the paper, eyes sparkling.*

*She talked. Offered up others whose work might help me move closer. She promised to email her written comments direct to me. The anonymous reviewer (is) swept away.*

*In reading me, she heard and responded.*

In story 2, a physical meeting at a conference with a respected academic (who reviewed a co-authored paper led by the narrator) becomes a moment of support and collaboration. A positive connection forms between them. The anonymity of peer review is obliterated by the embodied presence of the senior academic. Even the critique implied in 'a suggestion for change' and a 'a challenge to improve' is lightened when it is delivered as a smile by a woman with 'sparkling' eyes whose critical comments are delivered as offerings and promises. Their conversation about academic work generates a positive affective atmosphere that envelops the protagonists of the story, the room, the outside spaces and even reframes the anonymous and distancing processes of peer review. Although the senior researcher seems to do most of the talking, this provokes a feeling of warmth in the author who is 'caught' by a contagious 'excitement.' The opening three words of the story – 'An audience with ...' – implies both the stature of the senior academic (is she like a queen?) and reinforces the narrator as listener, a mostly passive or responsive recipient of the academic advice, rather than an equal contributor. Indeed, she is literally 'hailed' into 'recognition' and thus academic legitimacy by the powerful senior academic, both in the moment of the conference space and in the paper that had been previously reviewed and found to be worthy. The opening of the last line – 'in reading me' – conflates academic labour (the paper) and the academic subject (the narrator), reinforcing how high the stakes can be.

Affective attunements come into play in the light and movement of the story. The post-symposium atmosphere becomes, in Stewart's (2011) words, a sort of 'force field in which people find themselves' (446) or 'a composition ... of potentiality and event' (452). This potentiality is reflected in the beginning of the story in the open door and bright sunshine that literally draws people onwards – to the next session but also towards a future of academic success. The pleasurable and purposeful movements of bodies – loose knots, weavings, openings – throughout the story intersect with the small drama of the act of academic recognition. The author first appears in the story in a 'pause' by the presenters' table, although all around her is movement. She is 'stopped' by the words of the senior researcher, and then animated – inaugurated into a new mode of academic becoming – by them. Later they move together, now in unison, joining the 'thread' of moving bodies, entering together 'into the sunlight'.

The micro-moments of academic joy in this story pertain to the importance of intellectual validation whereby positive affect is attached to ideas, to the connections of theory and method, to the potential for a senior academic to confer recognition and respect on one who is ostensibly her junior. Here, joy comes not through resistance but through tentative acceptance into an academic community. The narrator conveys at once a sense of liberation and constraint through this connection, a glimpse of becoming (an academic). At the same time, within the neoliberal university, it is clear that the narrator is aware of academic hierarchies and status, of the significance of a paper's acceptance and who leads the writing of it, and of how it counts in a performative culture. This fleeting yet intimate conversation about academic work enables her to feel that she counts.

### Story 3: A whole community of organisms

*The picture is of me working on a rocky shore in Filey, it was taken a few years ago - which is a story in itself about biology teaching perhaps. The picture was taken by one of the students – we shared all our pictures of the day on the Blackboard site. I'm working with both post-graduate and undergraduate beginning science teachers and we are looking at how you might teach ecology as a secondary school teacher. I'm modelling an approach. I think I am proud of myself on that day – I really like the context and I am pleased that I can remember*

*the Latin names of quite a lot of things (it had been a while). What looks at first glance like a mass of slimy green and brown stuff is actually a whole community of organisms. I am fascinated by the fact that it is possible to 'decode' the world around you, to a certain extent, and to recognise what is going on at a deeper level. I am trying to get the students to stop being bored and anxious about the activity and its possible links to an assessed task and to make them enjoy it. I want them to think about how amazing this beach is and all the things that it is possible to know about it. I want them to think about this bigger picture and get away from the idea that biology is just about naming things – to think about the interconnectedness of it all, and to realise that understanding something in a scientific way doesn't detract from how you appreciate it.*

*It was a cold but lovely day, and I am pleased to be out of doors. I like the potential that this slow and extended activity provides for getting to know students, the context is almost informal. Outdoor dress can be a great leveller. Because the pace of the activity is slower and the conditions are potentially more challenging than a classroom, lab or lecture theatre, there are layers to what can happen in terms of interaction. It will be the same for the students with their pupils.*

*I like the potential for excitement from everyone when we find interesting creatures like hermit crabs and sea anemones. As I'm writing I am remembering other really positive things. It's Filey, and it's not raining!! There is a café at the top of the beach that sells tea and coffee and walnut cake. My colleagues and I like cake so it is an important part of the day. The students like this and respond to it – so we all eat cake before we go back to the coach.*

Some of the stories generated in the workshop were memories from some time earlier, as is often the case in collective biography. The images were particularly prone to evoke stories from the past, as snapshots were taken of desks or noticeboards and photos of photos that were already on display as representing significant and memorable moments in academic life. Working on the shore at Filey was one such photo, its pastness indicated by the authorial comment, 'a story about biology teaching perhaps,' implying that this sort of excursion of 'a few years ago' may no longer be available for students and teachers in pre-service teacher education. Learning takes place here in a different space, away from a classroom, and opens different ways of being together. It enables a slow and multilayered



pedagogy. The narrator enjoys 'the potential that this slow and extended activity provides for getting to know students' and observes that 'outdoor dress can be a great leveller.' In classrooms and laboratories, roles, positions, hierarchies, along with dress codes, are prescribed, less so on the shoreline.

This story emphasises the positive affect experienced by the narrator, and the potential of affective engagement in learning by students. The moment frozen in the image spools out in the story as an account of the affective atmospheres produced during the day by the formations of students, teachers, cake, beach, marine creatures, sunshine. The narrator presents her account of working with beginning teachers with pride, interpreting the world of the rocky shore, bringing it to life in naming and describing, whilst simultaneously and consciously working to model both teaching biology outdoors and enjoying the environment. The affects expressed by the students initially are boredom and anxiety and the teacher sees that her job is to 'make them enjoy it,' even to amaze and excite them, so that, in turn, when they are teachers in secondary schools, they can incite these affects in their future students. There is an expansiveness in learning here. As Ahmed and Anderson suggest, while atmospheres are produced through encounters between bodies, objects, places and myriad other factors, we do not come to them as neutral observers or recipients and affective atmospheres do not precede our arrival (Ahmed, 2007; Anderson, 2014). The moods we arrive with – teachers, students in this pedagogical instance – partly initiate the dynamic affective ensemble that emerges and then traverses bodies.

The teacher endeavours to orchestrate movements in the affective atmospheres that swirl through the day working on the beach. From the narrator's perspective, rather than merely interpreting slimy stuff, the students are learning to 'decode the world', to appreciate 'interconnectedness' and learn 'at a deeper level.' Such learning makes a decisive shift away from learning as transmission or 'banking' and towards the potential of learning as an immanent, material praxis in which cognition does not feature as an objectivist mode of knowing 'about' something but, instead, is engaged as a form of enactive affective embodiment. McPhie and Clark (2015) suggest that such learning cannot be a carefully planned pedagogical endeavor but emerges in the moment as a relational experiment. In our example, this experimental becoming-with works as an affective participation in the

world's becoming. There is joy in the accomplishment of the teaching for the narrator and in the feeling of the cold day; there is joy in the rocky shore with its 'mass of slimy green and brown stuff'. Together, this rocky shore, the outdoor clothes, the altered interactions, create a space of potentialities with cake to follow. An affective charge is produced. Here, this story says, is another way to be as teacher, where different spaces offer possibilities for different ways to relate and for pedagogy to emerge.

#### Story 4: The gift of this class

*The research students came to the last class in national dress – a coordinated surprise for me. They looked so different, so colourful: an Indian sari, Nigerian robes and turbans, an Indonesian salwar kameez. Halilu striking, all in white, looking like the prince he actually is. My first year at the university and the gift of this class. PhD students who wanted help in writing their theses in English. We had a year together, we knew each other. I knew all their research projects and had researched the academic writing convention of their disciplines: engineering, biology, human resources, mathematics, education. We talked about research and language, we asked and answered questions, we analysed texts, we had running jokes and we laughed and laughed. Within that colourful silk, those robes, hats and headscarves, those shoes and bracelets was a community with a shared interest, a connection, friendship, and achievement. Lucky me, to be part of it.*

Here, the narrator remembers her class as 'a community with a shared interest, a connection ... Lucky me to be part of it.' Joy is threaded throughout this story, in the surprise of the last class. The group, students and tutor, working as one: 'we analysed texts ... we laughed and laughed.' The students co-opted their cultural accoutrements to initiate a positive affective atmosphere in the final class. National dress provided another way for the group to know each other, their connections spinning joy outwards, beyond the writing class. This was a warm, colourful joy, one of knowing and being together, a shared joy. A joy not measurable on student satisfaction scales.

Affective qualities are also produced in the aesthetics and 'rhythms of stories' (Anderson, 2014, 144). Just as this story prompted an emotive response through the process of writing

this paper, so the affective ensemble or atmosphere exceeds its containment in the story and continues to move, and to move us. Story 4 swerves into the sort of writing that Stewart describes as promoting 'affective attunements' – a 'compositional mode' that privileges sensations, movements and intensities (Stewart, 2013, n.p.). One of us wrote, and all of us wrote through, the text in the following paragraph – a collective 'we' is evoked who exceeds the figure of teacher-narrator in the story and an imperative mood creeps in to the text. Although we recognise a shift in style and tone in our discussion below of Story 4, it seems to us that the 'associative registers' that Stewart (2013) writes about have taken off for a moment in our text, nudging aside the neutral academic voice that we struggle to assert.

And so, we feel this story both evokes and produces a memorable joy: a joy to be carried and treasured; a joy to be remembered as we suffer with repetitive strain in our mouse-worn hands, our brains numbed; a joy which might assuage our weary, overextended bodies and minds, hyperextended, hyperactive limbs, minds slowing to an exhausted stop at the end of the academic year as we wake and wonder just what we have achieved, how we measure up. Struggling to breathe. This story reminds us to simply stop for a moment and look: look and see how lucky we are. Remember how it felt working with these students, even within such constraints we find joy. This classroom, a 'deadening space' no longer, is suddenly transformed into a temporary home for this colourful community, a community remembered as rich and warm and welcoming through the communicative value of the clothes the students chose to come to class in on this last day. These clothes – signifying the pride of heritage, home and the individuality of beautiful bodily display – bring the 'there' and 'here' together in an international array of joyful connectivity. In materialising what has come to matter to these people – a care of and for each other – the clothes act as 'vital players' (Bennett, 2010, 4) in the classroom space, generating powerful affects which course through those present creating an atmosphere of fun and belonging. Mauss (2009:, 23) says that 'to give something is to give a part of oneself'. He was speaking of the meaning of the gift in Māori customs but his notion that gifts are about how spiritual bonds are enmeshed within social chains of connections which themselves are materialised in the giving and receiving of gifts is relevant to the affective flows of becoming and belonging this particular story tells of.

## Joyful moments that matter: discussion

A number of researchers highlight the tensions between the consumer driven, audited system currently found in higher education and the development of academic identity (Archer, 2008; Harris, 2005; Archer, 2008 (Should these be alphabetical? I have reordered.); Kern et al., 2014). They recognise the struggle to find time and space to think and learn in different ways in these 'standardised institutions' (Kern et al., 2014). In some of our stories it is through unusual settings or different ways of working that narrators produce their remembered moments of joy, fulfilment and happiness. Honan (2017, 14) urges us to consider how we might engage with 'collaboration, collegiality and communication, to produce joy, to engage in a critical political project that creates a space for doing the "passionate work" that ignites and drives us in our academic lives.' Our stories suggest the need to add creativity to collaboration, collegiality and communication. We also want to suggest that joy is already, if often fleetingly, present – is interleaved within the neoliberal context we work and sometimes suffer within – and is here (and there) as something to be apprehended, realized and celebrated in our stories of teaching, learning and research. Perhaps, then, the insights our stories hold out are about how we might begin to reconnect with joy in the mundane dailiness of our often disconnected and fragmented academic lives, how we might recognise and produce positive affects that also circulate in the atmospheres of our daily working lives. Joy seen as a potentially, if momentarily, connective and affective force might be apprehended as an affect which flows through collaborative activity, releasing opportunities for creativity and as possessing liberatory potential.

In the stories we present in the paper, narrators connect with others through a glance, a chance conversation. There is joy in interactions with students and peers. Pleasure emerges relationally, through work with students and colleagues (Archer, 2008; Harris, 2005). Moments of pleasure can be triggered by a planned or surprising shift in the power dynamic of relationships (Kern et al., 2014) - something that resonates with several of our stories. In our stories, colleagues become fleeting co-conspirators, relationships between students and academics become more collaborative through shared experiences.

Stories 3 and 4 illustrate opportunities within the timetabled teaching at the university for space that allows people's experiences and emotions 'to entwine' (Kern et al., 2014). Gannon et al (2015) agree that the concept of relationality itself is debated but agree that it challenges Western ideas of individualism and independence and Kern et al. (2014) hold up the idea of the '(masculinized), brilliant, loner' as one to be challenged (841). It is clear from most of our stories that our remembered moments of pleasure and joy come through connection to others. Moments of happiness through connections had not been our initial focus but they became evident as we remembered and told our stories to one another. Our stories take place beyond the university, in the workplace, at conference, on a field trip and the fabric of students' lives. These were safe spaces, created through connections to others. Like Varney et al. (2014, p.40), we recognise the significance of physical space in shaping these experiences but note too that otherwise closed spaces, such as our teaching rooms, can be transformed by actions, practices, clothing, imagination. We inhabit the creative spaces that Varney et al. (2014) seek in university environments, although there is some irony that in these times of huge expenditure on university buildings, several of our stories take place elsewhere, at conference, on the shoreline, in our minds.

These connections with others, and in different spaces, change who we are and who we imagine we can be. We glimpse alternative fragments of our possible learning, teaching, researching academic selves. The stories here illustrate the chance or 'hap' of happiness (Ahmed, 2017), tell of the opening of possibilities through connecting with others and reconnecting with ourselves. An optimism and strength that help us 'snap to it' (Ahmed, 2017), to challenge neoliberal ideologies and performative regimes, to attend to what these moments of positive affect do and open up spaces for them to spill into our daily lives. As noted earlier, the workshop that brought us together to begin our collaboration in collective biography worked with(in) the constraints of the neoliberal university, serving to remind us that we can, temporarily at least, put multiple demands on hold, and direct our attention to the textures of our working lives. The methodology is a 'means of learning to read/write embodied social selves' (Davies and Gannon, 2006) one that 'enables us to begin to unravel, collectively, the discursive nets within which our bodies, and our ways of understanding lived experience, are constituted, and to imagine how they might be constituted otherwise' (14).

## Conclusion

'A culture of being continually 'on', available and responsive, leaves little opportunity to experience the pleasure in thinking cognitively and deeply as university researchers should.' (Collins, 2017, 126). Yet the first steps (for some of us) into collective biography leaves us urging others to 'make space, create, communicate, experiment – become unravelled' (Loch et al., 2017, 78). The 'sense of potentiality' (Stewart, 2011, 452) recorded in our stories urging change, is an urgent call to us to change how we practice.

Although the collective is (perhaps) temporary, the practice and affect, for some of us at least, will be carried forward, changing, in subtle ways, how we think about our work lives. Significantly too, for those of us at early stages in our academic writing lives, the warmth and structure of the shared endeavour of writing will alter how we think and go about it. In the workshop space there was a loosening as we began our stories. Words spill out, unchecked, uncensored. A release. Words not counted or judged for quality but freely flowing, singing forth, rambling, rushing 'making space/creating space/understanding space' (Loch et al., 2017, 68) with and for each other and ourselves. There is a temporary suspension of the striving to keep up, meet demands, those that we are subject to and subject ourselves to. Joy is possible in the deliberate way that we have come together. Irrepressible joy. Yet 'language can serve either as a prison house, or as the material of liberation' (Haug et al., 1987, 62). As we learn to loosen the words, let them out, get them down then gaze upon them critically, these 'words which are and yet are not our own' (Haug 1987, 65), we offer them on to another to unravel or or rewind.

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