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Prudentia as becoming-shame: knowledge production in Southern Theory research practice

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Introduction

For over a century feminist intellectuals, peoples of former colonies and scholars and thinkers from Indigenous and black communities, have contested the idea that universal reason resides only in a white male-centric global North (Cooper, 2012). Contributing to this tradition, our project centers on *Southern Theory* (ST) (Connell, 2007), which highlights the reification of ‘Northern’ metropole scholarship in the academy. The metropole comprise of key intellectual centers (Europe and North America) as well-resourced and capital-exporting countries (Collyer, 2014). *Southern Theory* also speaks to the grand erasure of colonization in the canon of sociology and the reduction of non-metropole peripheral countries (Southern) to data gathering grounds rather than sites of theory generation. In this article we center on how to engage with *Southern Theory* in the academy in scholarship and research praxis. Rather than a geographic unit, we see ‘South’ as “a specific epistemological form that could be defined by its negative and repairing relationship to colonial capitalism” (Rosa, 2014, p. 853).

In this paper we document engagement with Raewyn Connell’s (2007) *Southern Theory*. This embrace has influenced the way we view our research work - how we do it and the power relations that are embedded in the knowledge production within the academy. We recognize the transformational impact of *Southern Theory* on reflective scholars and acknowledge that this ontological change can be regarded as the crossing of thresholds (Meyer and Lands, 2005). Such crossings tend to be profound shifts where retreats to a familiar knowledge position are untenable.

We are part of a group of twelve academics in an Australian regional university engaging in a slow scholarship of collective theorising. The University of New England Comparative International Education Research Network (CIERN) of twelve members formed as part of a ‘capacity building’ drive within our University context to enhance our position in relation to the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) measures of performance of scholars and institutions. However, we struggle against performative spaces in higher education. Stephen Ball (2013) argues that, in this shifting education landscape, it is important to “avoid being subsumed into the sensibilities, discourses and values” that leave us powerless to critique the conditions of our constitution as neoliberal subjects. But, rather to find useful spaces for meaningful research that suggests “things are not as necessary as all that.” To do this work, we reject a reading of Northern theory as universal (Connell, 2007) and consider how we can reflexively explore the tacit taken-for-grantedness that underpins our scholarship and research.

Our exploration is undertaken through collective biography (Davies and Gannon, 2006) with the CIERN group. As Connell (2014a) points out “[i]ntellectual labour is often collective” (p. 212). As a group of teacher educators who strive to promote efficacious learning in our own students, it stands to reason that we should engage in learning oriented collaborations that unsettle our taken for granted understandings and engage in practices that facilitate the telling of ‘unwelcome truths’ (Kemmis, 2006, p. 474). Learning is described by Barnett (2011) as “the formation of a radical-but active- doubt” a process of “self-doubting enquiry” where one can experience an “edifying” process of understanding the world anew” and “become better placed to negotiate one’s way through the world” (p. 5). Critical collaborations of this nature facilitate engagement with ‘dirty theory’ where we “sink roots into the mud of [our] particular landscapes” (Connell, 2007, p. 206).

In the following section, we outline the important considerations associated with *Southern Theory*, in particular the call to destabilize hegemonic power relations in the academy. The subsequent section provides an account of our approach to collective biography. This is followed by the memory work and analysis. Finally, the conclusion summarizes our argument that a collective undertaking such as ours is necessary to unsettle assumed understandings in order to be open to 'unwelcome truths'. It is through the process of unsettling stable taken for granted practices and troubling ‘unwelcome truths’ that we are able to reflexively enhance what we do and who we do it for.

North and South as a non-binary intellectual sphere

Raewyn Connell, an Australian sociologist and gender theorist of renown, frames her work, *Southern Theory*, as an “experiment with truth” (2007, xiii). She uses scholarship from Africa, Iran, Latin America and India to challenge the invisibility and erasure of non-metropole writing in metropolitan ‘Northern’ contexts. Mindful of knowledge hierarchies in the academy, Connell strives to disrupt this hegemonic structure by making Northern texts central to the intellectual project. She frames how a geopolitical pattern of knowledge prioritises the theories generated from a constructed metropole power base or North as a major problem in social science. This complements sociological work of postcolonial theorists (Bhabra 2007), subaltern theorists (Chakrabarty, 2000), liberatory scholars (Freire, 1972), and academics who profile the importance of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies (Barker, 2008; Smith 1999; Smith 2012). Although a common denominator is that many countries were once colonies or protectorates, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) note the complexity of framing a South as ‘other’ to North.

“ ... ‘the Global South’ assumes meaning by virtue not of its content, but of its context, of the way in which it points to something else in a field of signs—in this instance, to its antinomy to ‘the Global North’, an opposition that carries a great deal of imaginative baggage congealed around the contrast between centrality and marginality, free-market modernity and its absence. Patently, this opposition takes on a hard-edged political and economic reality in some

institutional contexts, like the G-8 and world bond and credit markets. But it obscures as much as it describes. (p. 126)

Avoiding North and South as a geographic binary, we are careful to highlight that ‘the South’ can encompass diverse features and can be multiplicitous in nature and nations cannot simply be roughly grouped on the periphery. We speak back to the dominance of the metropolitan regime and refuse to be denied our voices and our knowledges because we have our own contributions to make. We specifically want to disrupt what Connell (2007) refers to as “the center relations in the realm of knowledge” (p.viii) and offer our stories – a counter-hegemonic contribution to social theory.

Becoming shame -prudentia

Writing shame is an exposure of intimacy in the “clashing of the mind and body” (Probyn, 2010, p. 81). Probyn (2004a) writes, “shame... dramatically questions taken-for-granted distinctions between affect, emotion, biography, and the places in which we live our daily lives” (p. 328). Affect is a prepersonal, relational intensity that exceeds emotion (Massumi, 2015). Shameful encounters enable us to question our actions and our relationship to others and the world (Probyn, 2005). Just as shame “makes us feel small, and somehow undone”, it is no wonder that “in most societies, shame tends not to be talked about, let alone vaunted” (Probyn, 2005, p. 86). Through “ideas and writing about shame” it is possible to “seek to generate new ways of thinking about how we are related to history and how we wish to live in the present” (Probyn, 2010, p. 89).

Drawing from the Latin word for shame, we use the term *prudentia* to describe an analytical moment in which one experiences the stripping away of all past props, scaffolding and protections that shield oneself. In particular, in this article we illustrate *prudentia* through referring to threshold moments (Meyer & Land, 2005) in academia where it is conceived as an affective flow between bodies and objects. Affect can be thought of an intensity or concentration that acknowledges and highlights the embodied ‘material equation’ resulting from an encounter. (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 79). It is a corporeal experience that passes between humans as a margin of change that moves us (Hickey- Moody, 2013). *Prudentia*, as affective shame, is embedded in Deleuzoguattarian (1988) ontology, where meaning is less important than what it affects within the relational assemblage that produces it. Through collective biography, we share storied assemblages that reveal moments of *prudentia*. Below is a glimpse into journeys of shame, -exposed selves and the abyss of *prudentia*.

A collective biography of prudentia

Our collective biography is a context specific, collaborative and intellectual endeavor. Knowledge production is labor created through particular contexts. Connell (2014a) writes, “producing knowledge is a form of labour, done by specific groups of workers in specific social contexts” (p. 212). Our context is situated in Education the Research Network is a group formed at the beginning of 2014 and drew academics from across the university who shared an interest in sociological and philosophical theories. Commencing by reading *Southern Theory* (Connell, 2007) chapter by chapter, the

CIERN group met weekly and, at times, biweekly to discuss, debate, theorize, question and interrogate different ideas from specific designated chapters of the week. We also selected secondary literature on *Southern Theory* (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012; Rosa, 2014) to complement the themes that were emerging through our collective scholarship. After six months of meeting to discuss specific chapters, we drafted our own articles for an edited book.

Raewyn came to the University of New England to meet with us and offer feedback on our work. This dialogue broadened our perspectives on *Southern Theory* scholarship. A collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006) project emerged through the sharing of our own stories as an organic grassroots methodology. The process of sitting together and sharing our work is both powerful and transformative for us. Collected biography affords an exploratory process that allows for flexibility thought. It encapsulates an ongoing struggle with 'doing' *Southern Theory*. In the milieu of the neoliberal public university various measures are used to ensure competition between individual academics and institutions (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Collective biography enables us to disrupt the insular and individualized conception of 'the competitive academic'.

The approach is collegial and acknowledges that restored memories can be theorised. The stories in this paper are moments that emerged from deliberate scholarship interrogating published *Southern Theory* articles and storied memory texts which transformed into a process of oral storytelling and then memory writing. This embodied engagement in the physical spaces of the university and beyond enabled us to story embodied narratives around undertaking *Southern Theory* work. The storied memories drilled down into practices of collective scholarship.

Firstly, members of the group restored a reflective memory of engaging with *Southern Theory*. We participated in a listening process where we exchanged stories verbally, listening closely, and questioning any aspects of the stories for further detail. We initially arranged a series of meetings with a specific focus on the storying process. In these meetings written accounts were shared that focused primarily on what we learned from participating in the group. As the dialogue unfolded, we saw where our narrative accounts could be further drilled down to explore the assemblages of embodied memory work.

Collective biography privileges oral storytelling. We listened to the stories asking about moments that could be expanded on, challenging clichés and working toward a "collectively generated theorization" (Gonick, 2015, p. 66). We were careful to move from detached narrative to a place-based methodology, where we told of being present in places. These remembered moments were significant to our physical embodiment as scholars in a regional university and also reflective of our approaches to learning and scholarship. Having met 4 times to discuss the stories, we then left our campus to find a space outside the university where we could talk, share and write together in a focused manner.

The CIERN group scheduled a one day retreat to spend time together to share stories. In this article we have selected three narratives that provide affective accounts of grappling with *Southern Theory*. Personal moments, they give voice to thoughts that convey “(un)welcome truths” (Kemmis 2006, p. 474). These new ideas are both uncomfortable and generative. Our settled knowledge and complacency as researchers are unsettled in the following stories. The stories are examples where *Southern Theory* calls researchers to account through reflectively examining their own positioning. Probyn (2004b) writes, “shame buried in memory seems to erupt, having lost none of its sharp pain” (p. 85). The process of talking prudentia was embodied in that we experienced the physicality of this affect as we re surfaced and shared these memories collectively. Through prudentia, as an affective intensity, we experienced affect in a bodily and psychological way. In this article we detail three stories that demonstrate how shameful encounters are not only tolerated but celebrated in that they facilitate reflexive engagement with *Southern Theory*.

The three stories ‘Into the abyss of prudentia’, ‘Uncomfortable insights: Prudentia instigates change’ and ‘Undoing Northern theory’, have themes that highlight how the reflexivity of *Southern Theory* work can surface generative moments of prudentia. We focus on prudentia and its potential, to foster alternative way of thinking about intellectual labor.

Into the abyss of prudentia

Anouk, an early career researcher in the quest for an alternative way of being in the Academy is confronted with the realization that ideas are not self-generating, they require human practice and intellectual workforce organize in certain way to generate knowledge. She realizes that various knowledges are always more complicated on the ground than a theory because complexities are lived and compacted.

As always Anouk was happy and looking forward to attend the regular CIERN Wednesday meeting because she finds comfort in having a space where she can discuss big, difficult ideas. She had to unlearn not to accept being alone in academia and that her existence as an academic does not have to be a solo journey. The process of getting ready for the CIERN meetings is very important – eating the right amount of food at the right time, bringing a bottle of water, leaving her phone behind so she’s not interrupted..

That Wednesday in July was even more special because Ato was in town today. He is an interesting character and when he is around he tends to say things that make us question our core existence – in a good way. The small meeting room feels cold. As the heater kicks in a smell the musty smell of the heater filled the room.

It started to warm up, both figuratively and metaphorically. Anouk is lost in thought, trying to take in the various ideas – what is ‘North’? What is ‘South’? Why use such binaries to describe something so complex? Etc. Etc. As she opened her muesli bar, wrestling with the plastic wrap trying to recharge her

grey cells, out of nowhere she heard Ato:

“Southern theory is more about a critique of imperialism and anti-colonialism and less about whether or not a body of knowledge is generated in and by ‘North’ or ‘South.’ And yet, she [Connell] is vague about this point, possibly influenced by the recent postcolonial fad that tends to privilege the critique of Eurocentricism.”

After, Ato simply got up and said he had to go to another meeting, leaving Anouk silent with her half opened muesli bar. The room is silent. In this moment of clarity many questions without answers surface for Anouk. Questions about her PhD thesis; was she part of the machine that fostered the imperial power relation in the South? She feels uncomfortable, shrinking down in her chair little by little, while wondering whether she unintentionally betrayed those who trusted her with their stories. Do her participants’ stories become just another story from the South, which is conceptualized in the North? She was aware of Southern theorists. Why wasn’t Southern Theory central to her thinking, her process and her analysis at the time? How shameful, thought Anouk. In confusion, consumed by silence, she sat for the rest of the meeting.

In Anouk’s story Ato’s words evokes prudentia and a confrontation with ‘unwelcome truth and a reconsideration of how she ‘does’ *Southern Theory*. Ato triggers Anouk’s engagement with a past, recreated in that particular embodied moment in the meeting room. Thus, this moment is not a true representation of itself, but a representation of collective moments. Rather than isolated in the specific moment, the event is created and shaped across multiple times and spaces. It may not have been Ato’s question that held such a profound truth for Anouk. Through her engagement with Southern Theory and the group based critical talk, she may have just been ready to reflexively consider her positioning as a researcher.

The CIERN network provides a safe space for Anouk to think and explore her truths including those that emerge as ‘unwelcome’. The collective process of thinking differently together with others is refreshing for her and reassures her that she is not alone in thinking about different possibilities. At the same time the Network pushes her to her limits – to uncomfortable spaces. For instance, her story calls into question the representation of engagement in the data fields of the South as researchers positioned in the North. Anouk’s discomfort is not guilt, but disappointment in herself for not honoring the voiceless, the silent witnesses who entrusted her with their story. Moreover, this unease demonstrates a level of awareness, a degree of prudentia and with it a sense of fraudulence. Anouk’s ‘unwelcome truth’ is realizing that she was one of those researchers that Connell referred to in her book – ‘a data robber’ – one who appropriates the knowledge acquired overseas and treats the periphery as a site for data source. At the same time there is a reigniting passion and reconnection of purpose with the opening up of new possibilities.

Anouk’s concern with the representation of her participants’ stories is worth some

attention. Although she was aware of Southern theorists, she did not use them to frame her thesis. Anouk's intention to 'do good' by her participant appears to be there, but were the participants represented the way they would have liked? In reviewing this issue in her research Anouk has heightened awareness. It points to a tension between what is learned and what can be applied. Whether Anouk's prudentia prompts critical action is unclear. We do not know if she will rewrite the contributions she has made to existing knowledge. This would enable Anouk to ontologically locate herself and contribute to further research aligned with Southern Theory. This scholarship could demonstrate the struggles and paradoxes that researchers face in 'doing' *Southern Theory*.

Uncomfortable insights: Prudentia instigates change

Hannah's story recounts the impact of an interjection by the maverick; Ato. He identifies the 'uncomfortable truth' that underpins Hannah's approach to *Southern Theory*. Hannah had become complacent and was oblivious her lack of critical analysis of her own position. Her usual reliance on poststructuralism was, in this circumstance, not tenable. Coming to understand this would be dependant on an uncomfortable, but transformative, moment of prudentia.

Sitting at the back of the hall, she surveys the crowd. Latecomers bustle past looking for an empty seat. Soon there are none and the audience is quiet awaiting the speaker, Raewyn Connell. Hannah wriggles, fiddling with notebook, bottle of water and her pen. She was keen to capture and record the cutting lines of critique and wonders at how she will use the ideas of today in her writing. As she scans the room, she wonders about the audience; why are they here? How does Raewyn's work inform theirs? It is evidently a multidisciplinary audience indicative of the intellectual reach of this renowned Australian sociologist.

The lecture is as she had expects -informative and Hannah's notebook appropriately fills. She has heard some of this at an earlier conference lecture and is feeling agreeable and intellectually satisfied. The rest of the day will be meetings and work-shopping ideas, which are equally nourishing.

As the day of CIERN workshops draw to an end, Hannah is feeling self-congratulatory about her own thinking and writing. For her contribution, Hannah is revisiting her early postgraduate work on 'giving voice' to Indigenous women authors with a Southern Theory lens. She is confident that she and the work are well located and informed. Until an awkward but revealing moment occurs.

A maverick query arises from Ato about the theoretical 'elephant in the room', Hannah finds this colloquialism boorish and meaningless! It annoys her as much as 'at the end of the day'. Why do people use these terms she thinks? But, in the next moment, she pauses and reflects -realising she had been promoting an ill-fitting poststructural elephant in the group discussions and it

had been visible to any but herself. This moment of prudentia even rears its head 'at the end of the day'. Hannah gathers her belongings and leaves the room, reeling with uncomfortable but revelatory thoughts. Hannah realised that while she thought she had been advocating Southern Theory, in practice, she had continued to draw from her more comfortable poststructuralist Northern position.

As her pace quickens Hannah's embarrassment propels her to challenge herself and to go back to her writing and rethink her researcher position. She heads down the hall to her office purposefully.

Hannah's story speaks to the surfacing of 'unwelcome truths' that disrupt her complacency. Hannah spent her day absorbed by Connell's critiques yet could not turn the critical lens on herself until it was pointed out to her by a colleague. Even then she resists, not wanting to let go of her comfortable bricolage of poststructuralism, postmodern positions. Finally Hannah had to relinquish the safety of these ideas to recognise how she was produced through metropolitan frameworks as a researcher. Connell (2014b) frames the argument that poststructural feminism is a Eurocentric construct that has emerged from grand sociological narratives that have erased experiences of colonization through an emphasis on empire and can be said to be examples of "reading from the centre".

Many people have sensed the paradox here. The tension between whole-world politics and Eurocentric theory has helped drive contemporary feminism's emphasis on global diversity—whether understood as postmodern fluidity and multiplicity of identities, or as local cultural difference. But those are Eurocentric framings, too, derived ultimately from the historical experience of the global metropole and overseas empire. They are examples of the "reading from the centre" characteristic of Northern theory. And they leave us with a dilemma about how to understand the foundations of feminist knowledge and the status of concepts ranging from "patriarchy" and "identity" to "gender" itself. (Connell, 2014b, p. 521)

Gayatri Spivak (1988) also censured post-structuralism for failing to give account of geopolitics in its analyses of Power' and the 'Sovereign Subject.' By ignoring the impact of the international division of labor on discourse everywhere, she argued, and by rendering ideology invisible, post-structuralism participated in an economy of representation that has kept the non-European other 'in the "shadow" of the Western "Self"' (p. 280)—thereby allowing the Universal Subject to remain securely on Euro-American terrain.

Hannah had continued to resist the discourse of the day, she was listening but not asking the uncomfortable questions of her own practice or positioning. In the final moments of the story readers will observe her awkward threshold crossing. It was followed by a new energy marked by a cautious confidence that to pursue this particular academic project, she would need to make a very conscious undertaking to reconsider her theoretical stance.

The cheeky maverick in Hannah's story offers a trigger for change and the unraveling of her embedded theoretical practice. In this context, her oft used theories were not applicable and the longer she clung to them the more obvious her blindness to the metropole; its privileges and power and her own participation in that, became. Indeed, Hannah as enters a prudential space of analysis, she is conscious of generative possibilities for thinking. This could only occur however, once she overcame the sense of shame at being exposed as failing to take up the core purpose of the academic exercise and continuing to do her own 'thing'. It was only through the actions of the trickster, a mischievous adversary who incites new thinking through provocative challenges. In this story he not only dislodged Hannah's complacency thinking but through propelling her into this liminal arena of prudential analysis, revealed the possibilities for *Southern Theory's* transdisciplinary reach.

Undoing Northern theory –Sam

Sam is a new academic to the university, embarking on collective *Southern Theory* work. Both the embodied experience of being with more senior academic colleagues and the physicality of conducting research work on someone else's country, facilitate threshold moments for Sam.

The room is stark and dark. The windows look up to the underside of concrete steps and an embankment. A broad table announces solemnity and around it bodies shuffle and settle, papers rustle, and keys clank to the table. The meeting begins.

It is only a few months into her beginnings, a new university, a new town, new colleagues, and here she is in this group. She is unsure about what it means to be in this place, the brown grassed terrain beyond the modular walls of the university and within the halls and corridors, an assemblage of bodies with histories and relationships and memories –many with tracings of far away dirt. The group has underlined and highlighted pages in their books. They talk about an erasure of colonisation in the canon of sociological theory and thumb through the shared text searching for resonances in the pages.

*As the talk unfolds, she also feels the anxiety of not being plugged into the 'right' theories. The spoken sociology she hears is a power language, a tome of knowledge embodied in the lived experiences of the academics around the table. She thinks about Connell, a white woman of colonial settler heritage and ponders the inherent tension of her own researcher positioning – her heritage of four generations in the South, yet very much shaped by Northern worldviews. Skin privilege is inherent in all her moves -how can she 'do' *Southern Theory* field research she wonders?*

Sam feels her embodied disconnection acutely. The university sits on a hill reifying a proud tradition of husbanding colonial knowledge. Looking around the confident faces, she feels a fraud. She is on someone else's country. There was no welcome to country when she arrived and the language is silent.

Where are these traditional owners she has never met? How can she know that her day-to-day practices are respectful? Is this yet another erasure? She blushes guiltily at the confident faces around the room - knowing there is an onus on her to learn these things.

Sam's story reveals prudentia as the 'guilt' of complacency that her actions contribute to an erasure of Indigenous ontologies. The story highlights two particular thresholds. Firstly, there is a new encounter with how the "canon of sociological theory" influences and frames social science research and the perceived power relations within the North and South. This is conceived as a powerful discourse that Sam has little knowledge of and therefore experiences prudentia. Secondly, there is a prudentia in her ignorance of local knowledge practices. A theme addressed in *Southern Theory* in terms of the "grand erasure" of the global South (Connell, 2007, p. 46). Sam's shame emanates from both her lack of understanding and awareness that she needs to take action and the collective prudentia that the institution she works in does not foreground Indigenous cultural practices as a matter of course in induction protocols.

In joining the group, Sam partakes in a relational ethics of shifting the focus beyond Northern ways of knowing the world, to undertake scholarship and research in solidarity with and learning from Indigenous communities (Thomas, 2015). If practices are to be reframed in the academy, it is valuable for scholars to work alongside Indigenous communities and destabilize knowledge hierarchies to "carve political space for more people to advocate for a relational ethics" (Thomas, 2015, p. 974). It is ironic that within the context of the CIERN *Southern Theory* group Sam speaks about being versed in the 'right' theory. Thus she reifies the hegemonic metanarrative of sociology, a discipline premised on erasure of the worldviews of colonized 'others'. Sam expresses an imagined signature disciplinary epistemology and against which she 'others' the theories she knows. In considering the knowledge hierarchy in the room, she demonstrates prudentia by positioning herself as a non-knower and assuming that others have superior knowledge positions.

Connell (2007) writes of being of colonial settler stock -of finding her connection with the land and the importance of place. Sam ponders how she can find legitimacy in the South, on land belonging to traditional owners -owners that in the story are non-present in the faculty. Sam expresses prudentia that is derived from the embodied experience of sitting with others in the group and realising the 'unwelcome truth' that she is ignorant of local Indigenous knowledge practices. In doing this, she frames a particular conception of South, suggesting that it is possible to 'discover' the Indigenous people. This desire to 'discover' implies that there are essential truths to reveal. It must be noted that Indigenous people are not 'tour guides' and the story raises a question about the appropriateness of an academic's expectation of guidance from non-Indigenous faculty.

Sam wonders what academics can do to embrace Indigenous epistemologies and also how universities can centre Indigenous knowledges in the physical and intellectual spaces on which they reside. It can be seen as problematic that Indigenous groups can

be expected to produce formulaic introductions or take up tokenistic roles, rather than being located as authentic voices in partnered knowledge production in universities. Hill and May (2013) argue that “non- researchers can implement successful and beneficial projects in Indigenous contexts” where reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants can be established and maintained so that they can contribute crucially to the success of research projects in Indigenous settings (p. 48). Australia, by extension, is an Indigenous setting and therefore careful consideration of the relationships between Indigenous groups and the migrant settlers should be core to ‘university business’. The story draws attention to the position of Indigenous people in the power relations of universities and how scholars can reflect on the relational positioning of all parties in “mud” of particular academic landscapes (Connell, 2007, p. 206).

Discussion

The restoried memories are moments of intrigue and contestation that reveal prudentia as affective shame, coproduced between people, objects, ideas and discourses. This collective biography frames thresholds of prudentia that unsettle taken for granted truths. Prudentia in each account impels the storytellers across thresholds in their academic practice. It moves them from the stasis of complacency in their academic work. Anouk questions whether she inadvertently fosters imperial power relations in the South. Hannah rethinks the entrenchment of her academic positioning. Sam is confronted by prudentia that is co-produced through encountering new communities.

The prudentia in these three stories is immersed in the fragility of “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998, p. 117). Simply learning from an event is different to insight. The insight of difficult knowledge concerns “the acknowledgment of discontinuity from the persistence of the status quo, and hence asks something intimate from the learner, learning *from* requires the learner’s attachment to and implication in knowledge” (Britzman, 1998, p. 117). In the process of pulling away the props that offer a sense of legitimacy, the academics in the stories engaged in an uncomfortable and productive process of gaining insight from difficult knowledge. Difficult knowledge work, afforded through collective biography, explores both the crossing of thresholds and new possibilities for practice.

Prudentia is inherent in the reflexivity of *Southern Theory* work, particularly when academics, who may be privileged people, broker North and South on a day-to-day basis in the academy. Although we acknowledge the potential of the *Southern Theory* project, on the surface it could be romanticised. We concur with Connell (2007) who emphasises that *Southern Theory* is inherently action oriented and poses value in researchers getting their boots dirty in ‘Southern’ landscapes. According to J. Wood (personal communication, 18 May, 2015) “in order for an idea to take root in a culture, the ideas have to be adopted, rehashed and spoken and used by real people.” In the light of the raw and earthy practice of contextually located research, we have outlined a journey to unsettled spaces without armor or shield. We have presented

exposed selves, through mining the struggles of researching *prudentia* through *Southern Theory*.

Prudentia marks threshold moments that are co-produced through affective provocations. As powerful resources, threshold moments enable us to consider both how we position ourselves in the discourses of the academy, and the intellectual work we do. Building capacity in the academy through consideration of threshold moments is an ongoing project. Meyer and Land (2005) argue this work is productive and generative and offers a transformed view of “matter”, “landscapes”, or even “worldviews” (p. 373). Like Kemmis’ (2006) ‘unwelcome truths’ and Britzman’s (1998) difficult knowledge, Meyer and Land (2005) draw from Perkin’s (1999) work to highlight that ‘troublesome knowledge’ is uncomfortable.

The thresholds in the stories highlight how academics can work liminal spaces to promote new intellectual ways of thinking, new research practices, and alternative ontologies in the academy. When we cross thresholds we adopt new discourses and potentially take up new identities, to “think otherwise” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 375). Significantly, when deliberately entering the *limens* (Josephs, 2008) one cannot simply just retreat. When one crosses a threshold into the *limens*, it is a generative opportunity to encounter new terrain, yet just as the three stories demonstrate, once a threshold has been crossed, there is no return. One cannot go back, learning in liminal space and beyond is irreversible.

As scholars and academic workers, we operate within a global system. Although our work is generated within locally situated institutions, we acknowledge that we are shaped by the social relations and material conditions of broader socio-political contexts (Collyer, 2014). Collective biography practice can surface powerful cultural and ideological forces, embedded in universities, that serve to construct our contemporary world. Rather than mere self-conscious self-reflection, collective biography supports scholarly review of the evolution of dominant discourses in academic social science as social-historical phenomena.

Conclusion

It must be acknowledged that *Southern Theory* has not emerged from a vacuum. Rather, Connell’s work builds on a rich critical tradition (e.g. Friere, 1972; Said, 1977) that is the groundwork for the possibility of accepting and embracing Southern theories and associated knowledge production from a range of heritages. *Southern Theory* is grounded in the experiences and stories of situated traditions. Embedded in an ontology that forges space in the academy for various forms of knowledge production, the stories disrupt the machinations of Northern theory. In two of the stories, the maverick Ato, acts as a catalyst for this ‘difficult knowledge’ and ‘unwelcome truths’ and propels the storytellers across academic thresholds into liminal spaces. This compilation of stories brings presence to a generative process of unsettling the comfortable, stable and unquestioning nature of work in the academy. Just as *Southern Theory* serves to destabilize the metanarrative of sociological grand

theory, the grounded experience of prudentia unsettles knowledge production and serves as a 'counter-hegemonic narrative' (Connell, 2007).

Prudentia in academic contexts is a necessary element of surfacing and recognising 'unwelcome truths', a process of engaging in collective scholarship that addresses 'difficult knowledge' through reflexivity. We highlight the value of collective biography as a means to critically examine prudential moments as thresholds for rethinking knowledge production through a Southern lens.

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