

We cannot do this work without being who we are: How understandings of lived experience and academic selves give meaning and impetus to researching qualitatively

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In this chapter we experiment with ways to speak our lives in the academy as we question what counts as research and what should and could be the work of researchers. As we do this we confirm the notion that we cannot do the work of research without being who we are. Our chapter emerges from a body of shared communication which seeps deeply into our lives — our work in education, our values, identities, histories, domesticities and professional and personal experiences. In assembling our chapter we use aesthetic methodologies of story and image to explore our thinking, feeling and manoeuvring through the expectations and requirements of academic life and the everyday happenings of being human. Researchers interested in the human experience have long been attracted to inquiry approaches that possess aesthetic qualities (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 1997). Aesthetic representations and visual methodologies support inquiry and voice, and promote personal and professional connections to ways of knowing and to internal and tacit narratives. For us, these methodologies have opened doorways to deep experiences, thinking and reflection. Acknowledging and responding to our own and each other's ways of knowing and living has created nurturing, reciprocal spaces of disclosure/exposure which we make public and invite others to share.

Our chapter gives attention to the place of the personal in researching qualitatively. Many academics feel significant pressure to produce research, receiving dogged messages about what counts as research, its impact, preferred audiences and outcomes. Our chapter explores the manoeuvring we do to be producers of research, but also our conscious appreciation that we cannot do this work *without* being who we are. Who we are cannot be separated from how we are being produced as researchers through the methodological choices we make. Exploring the potency of listening, collaborating and connecting for research and understanding, we encourage consideration of the risk and value of adventuring with others into public and research arenas to access and speak out loud the experiences of our lives.

Deciding what research is

'It is the researcher who decides what research is or might be.'

(Rhedding-Jones, 2005, p. 18)

Jeanette Rhedding-Jones offers that research should be about topics that matter, questions that are useful and inquiries that are interesting. Remembered for her commitment to 'thinking more-than' (Otterstad et al., 2014, pp. 1-2), we write alongside Rhedding-Jones as two female academics based in different universities on the east coast of Australia. We have only met in person once but for two years have been conversing and acquiring ways to communicate our scholarship and thinking through skype and emails; chapters, articles and theorists; image, poetry, and stories. We came together through a writers' workshop for a book now published (Trimmer, Black, & Riddle, 2015) and through a string of emails which became a cord, then a rope, then a cable and which we have now twisted into an ever growing cat's cradle of our working, writing and living lives.



*Figure 1: Our string of emails have become a cat's cradle for our work in academe
Ali Black, Digital artwork, 2015*

This chapter finds us engaging with poststructural writers like Laurel Richardson (2008, 2010), Jane Bone (2008, 2009) and Susan Finley (2010); others who use auto-ethnographic writing to question further 'the kind of researcher you want to be' (Rhedding-Jones, 2005, p. 148). Writing together is helping us to consider this question as we 'come out' as philosophers, as Rhedding-Jones suggests. Rhedding-Jones points to the importance of researchers going 'beyond simple description and into knowledge' (1996, p. 33) and into spaces where 'fluidity not seen in traditional academic writing' (1995, p. 494) picks up speed.

A question in this chapter is how do we create conditions which will allow such flow to happen? One way is through our attention to texts which nestle inside one another and through the creation of supportive relationships which bring attention to what the other sees as less important. For example, we write emails outlining the most potent experience of our day, with our 'academic writing' attached. We send a text alerting the other to the latest version we have uploaded to Dropbox, conscious it will likely be read amongst backgrounds of meetings, lectures and deadlines, physical exhaustion, medical appointments, sick children, sadness or engagement with grief. We conduct a skype call about a new writing project against backdrops including kids' drawings on office walls and views out of the other's window. These situations have led us to question who we are as researchers and why our own life experiences ought to have a place in our work. Our communication is motivated by the desire to secure more authentic information about each other and about our lives. Our methodologies evolve with the realisation that conventional forms of research/writing constrain and hide what we seek to understand about ourselves and each other as researchers and people.

Such textured/textual pieces, now scattered through this chapter, dialogue our queries about what counts as research and what counts when researching. They are part of our web of manoeuvres

through personal and professional binaries. They are our realisation that the meanings of our lives cannot be laid in a drawer until 'the work' is over.

Ali to Sarah: (July 2014) Hi Sarah, great to see you in my inbox as always. Yes, have been trying to work on this — contribution is slow and my Endnote dropped off so I got side-tracked trying to reinstall that. Then for some reason I googled dad and found he is on Wikipedia which just chilled me and made me feel sick as they list the charges incorrectly and my mum's full name in the spouse section. I was relieved to see I wasn't there. See, I feel ashamed. He sent me a link to join him on Linked-in last week and I just ignored it. Perhaps the sharing of my father story [in our planned writing about our fathers for an upcoming paper] is fickle as I don't name him, can't...

I read the document where you put all our conversations together. I love how real this has become, so much more important than writing a chapter, the becoming of a friendship, yet keeping our writing alive and purposeful.

Sarah to Ali: (September 2014) Hi there Ali, This attached article looks really interesting for the way we will approach our father piece/peace/pierce. Father's day this weekend isn't it? I am keen to get into this head space soon but I have been writing all those Year 12 references and they are almost done now. Keen to lose myself again in our collaborations!

Ali to Sarah: (January 2015) Hi Sarah, I can't sleep and wanted to write to you. It is my birthday in ten minutes, but an hour ago I received a phone call to say my dad has died. He was overseas. Don't know any details. I feel numb. He has forgotten to ring me my last two birthdays, and was adamant he would ring me tomorrow! The kids and I got to speak to him a few days ago and we all said I love you. So that is good. I'm not sure what to say, but given you have lost your dad and we have been in this space of reflecting and writing about our father stories, I wanted to commune with you.

Sarah to Ali: (February 2015) Hi Ali, Did another IVF during the week. We have one vial of sperm left so end is in sight. But this embryo was a 4 cell when frozen. Upon defrosting it started to eat itself and was down to 3 cells when we entered the room, and by the time the lab technician was loading it into the catheter it was only 2 cells which is 'unviable'. I had to sign forms to say I knew it was unlikely to implant.

Sarah to Ali: (April, 2015) Hi Ali, I've got a new abstract together and new title. I should have time tomorrow as well but if you want to adjust and just send it back tomorrow some time, that's fine with me. Sorry. I'm a bit distracted. After your lovely email, so pertinent, I got a very high hormone reading on the weekend which implied a pregnancy might be happening,

couldn't believe it, and spent 2 days scarily happy, but hopes dashed again. I am really OK but just don't get why this can't work.

This chapter represents another strand in our 'deterritorializing' and 'reterritorializing' collaboration (see the beginnings in Black & Loch, 2014) as we allow our views on what matters as research to be changed and moved outwards by the continual sluicing of sharing back and forth with one another. Deterritorialization, described by French poststructuralists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, p. 53), is found in actions such as 'waves or flows [which] go from the central layer to the periphery, then from the new center to the new periphery, falling back to the old center and launching forth to the new'. This movement uses its every slush to pick up and pull in new layers of experience previously positioned on outer edges.

Before we met, we, singularly, felt more on the outer, with responsiveness from the other playing a big part in fostering our desire to keep adventuring. Our experiments with aesthetic ways and forms of communicating and representing experience and knowing – poetry, image, reflection – began taking greater shape in our writing but we were unsure how others would receive these texts. Our early communication drew attention to what we thought important to mention and to what we glossed over. In this chapter, our writing shares attempts to adventure into areas conventionally glossed over. These methodologies speak meaningfully to us, and support our assembling of experience, expression and communication (Black & O'Dea, 2015; Black & Loch, 2014; Loch, 2014).



Figure 2: How important is it to take time to sit with our views about what speaks meaningfully to us, and then to connect with another and be moved, (transformed) by the sharing back and forth?

Ali Black, Personal photo 2011, Using image to connect with what reterritorializing might involve.

How important is it...?

What kind of researcher do I want to be?

Waves and flow, back and forth.

I'm watching.

What kind of research matters to me?

Waves and flow, back and forth.

I'm watching you. I'm watching with you.

Can I be who I am? Can I be seen?

Waves and flow, back and forth.

I see footprints, rock pools, movement, and undulating sand.

I hear a beating heart, the crash (and sighs) of surf, or is that you?

What is it for if not for connecting?

Our human ways of living, knowing and telling?

Waves and flow, back and forth.

I'm watching. I'm watching with you.

Eventide. Tidings.

I sit with what matters.

The sea is sucking back. Beginning again.

I sit with what gives me meaning.

Thoughts become lost in rhythmic bands.

Contemplation. Reflection.

Waiting. Watching. Being. Listening.

Noticing.

Your feet make patterns. Sand on your hands.

Connecting.

I'm here. All still. The earth in place.

A new way of seeing.

Looking inwards. Looking outwards.

Only the sea and its sailors can see your face.

Can see the change, brought by this space.

Waves and flow, back and forth.

I watch you and I sit with you.

I see anew too.

This chapter is also written for others. We aim to provide a point of connection for others interested in researching with 'self-positioning' (Rhedding-Jones, 2005, p. 18) through asking questions of their own becoming. To our readers, we extend an invitation to sit with us in this nurturing, responsive and reciprocal space of disclosure and exposure, and ponder with us the importance of aesthetic tools for finding, using, hearing and comprehending experience and voice (Black, 2015). As with our previous writing (Black & Loch, 2014), we invite consideration about the risk and value of adventuring to speak stories out loud into public and research spaces.

The risks of adventuring to speak out loud

Sarah to Ali: (October 2013) I have been thinking how prayer is used as a language during times of gaps and transitions that often do not have other language. I am not religious or possibly spiritual, or perhaps I am, but I don't use prayer in my life. However, I am interested in recalling my father and understanding the role he played in getting me 'here: becoming-researcher, academic'. I have noticed that through my poststructuralist engagement in writing (which I'm looking forward to working with you to expand), this writing space becomes a type of prayer in my life. Writing of the personal and making connections across difficult spaces seems to be happening through writing which is 'prayer-like'. So, if we were to write about father figures, I might use a type of academic prayer to manage this. I have a feeling what I would write would be unlike the other writing voices I have learnt to use.

Ali to Sarah: (March 2014) It has meant so much to have you take the time to share how my stories have stayed with you. So often in my work I feel that 'what really matters' is not valued. I have observed how one's worth is determined with a glance – with a scroll down a CV to see how many publications we have and how much grant money we have brought in. Such narrow lenses. I think I struggle with the question of where being human sits in all of this educational work. Where do we value the person, each other, interactions, living an ethic of care, learning as a process of sharing experience? We shouldn't have to set aside those things that give us meaning for competitive, heartless processes. Who is research for in the end? Does the research count or is it the research dollars – the greater the dollar the greater the assigned 'value'? Where does all the money go? How does any of it make any real kind of difference? Are lives improved? Anyone's lives? Researchers or researched? So, these are the things I grapple with.

With universities deploying huge infrastructure to ensure research outputs count and can be counted, spaces for experimental inquiry are receding and becoming less viable for researchers to explore (Honan, Henderson, & Loch, in press). It takes courage and conviction to approach research differently when careers and livelihoods are placed at risk. Of an alternative ethics, Laurel Richardson (2008, p. 1) writes encouragingly to those who adventure, 'You are the ones who chose to act differently, to respond to your callings, to build community, to welcome others'. And, what happens when we really pause to consider the purpose of research? Jeanette Rhedding-Jones (2005, p. 148) stresses that change is 'a crucial quality of research' and 'seen personally, research is about surviving the workplace and then transforming both it and yourself. So, what happens when the kind of researcher we want to be is bound up in who we are and our lived experiences? What happens when we want the purpose of our work to support this deep exploration of the meaning of life, of 'what life is for' (Kronman, 2007)?

Writing together has supported our understanding of how the 'whole' of who we are and the 'whole' of our experiences influence everything (Palmer, 2009). As we engage in our 'academic' work together we slip in fragments of our lives: IVF, relationships with fathers, domesticities, struggles, joys. And in this everydayness is a reminder of what research means for us — engaging with the lives and stories and experiences of others, and being changed by these, understanding things about others and ourselves that we wouldn't have been able to — without — this interaction and relationship.

Writing collaboratively with support for the aesthetic and sensual means more than just telling each other happenings; it is reaching into something deep, like communion. Similarly, Jane Bone explores 'everyday spirituality' (2009) and 'spiritual witness' (2008) in educational writing and research processes where the potency of being with and thinking with those being researched allows her 'own memories and personal narrative ... [to] closely engag[e] with the stories of others' (2008, p. 354). Bone (2009, p. 150) draws attention to ways that writing research 'supports a reconceptualisation of endings whereby an ending is simply opening up another possibility and supporting new directions', which is a thought to which we respond. Thinking about ourselves as researchers, we raise our sensitivity towards 'the process of dwelling with the data' (Finlay, 2014, p.

9) by first of all looking around our own interactions to think about what research is and how it becomes ours.



*Figure 3: Writing with you Sarah connects me to something deep, to myself, it is like communion
Ali Black, Personal photograph, digitally modified 2015*

Research through relationship

Our adventuring along this path thinking about what research is and how it becomes ours began with a paper about feeling compelled to respond to one another's writing (Black & Loch, 2014). We were surprised by what happened here, by the ease of opening up, the warmth of writing for someone who wanted to respond and the value of creating safe spaces to welcome others. Our multiple positions as writer-reader-thinker of one another's stories help these spaces form. Our individual voices became stronger as we read — 'That matters! I want to join with you in speaking!'

Reflection on becoming through relationship shows us that responsiveness is central; as is trust and time. Tentative at first, we have developed a rhythm of sharing and responding although in the responding we do not always know what to say. Roles blur as there are many different ways to respond. Even silence registers a response when words are inadequate. But we like the feeling of being called to respond; of mattering in someone else's dialogue; and the energy of (e)motion that stirs us to connect to another's varied life threads. Storying and responding with and to others is how we want to work, write and research.

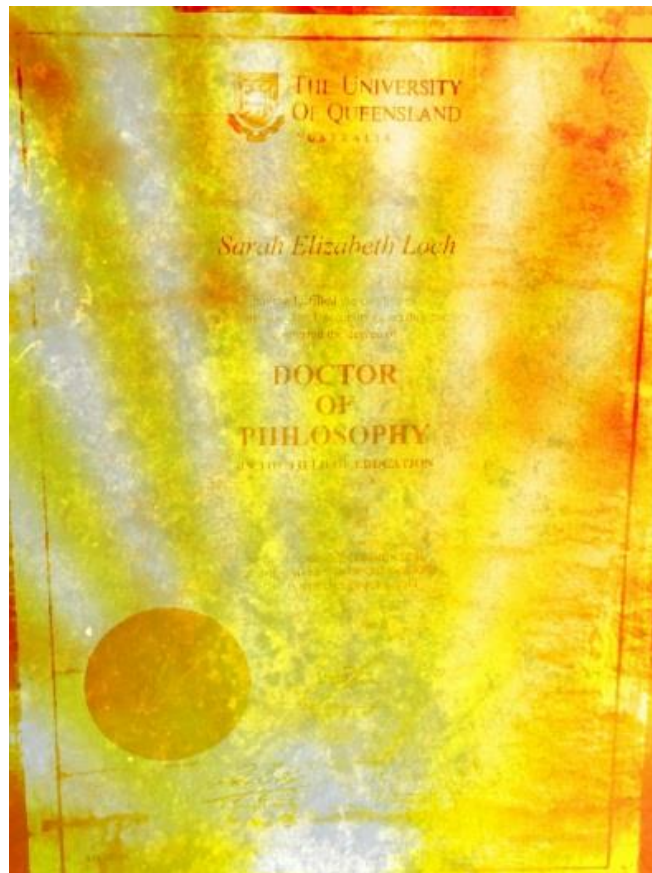
Our we-ness or two-ness is a factor we pause to consider. Writing with an unwavering 'we' implies a twinnedness with two voices speaking from a shared embodiment. Of course, we are different. Sarah has only recently become an academic after being a middle school teacher and taking a break to become a parent. Ali has given many years to academia across three universities. Others who write in collaboration have suggested the value of keeping 'difference alive in the text' by 'giv[ing] expression to ... multiple singularities' (Wyatt et al., 2014, p. 132). But here we dwell on the intensity of how the connection feels and why we experience its force as productive and enabling. We have not experienced conflict in our relationship (for thoughts on conflict between collaborative writers see Wyatt & Gale, 2011), instead in collaboration we enjoy 'our mutual becomings ... expand[ing] creatively and unexpectedly' (Myers, 2014, p. 43) and seeing how the other does things, manages life and academia. A feature of our exchange, however, is unevenness in the intensity, volume and rhythm of our communications. There can be one-sidedness, fast and slow, differences of moods and different needs and goals. Our differences chip away irregularly at our shared projects – one of

us waiting and pushing on alone, the other caught up elsewhere, then returning, rejoining. There are periods of equanimity where a calm and easy back-and-forth deterritorializes us with the rhythm of Deleuze and Guattari's waves. At these times, we move in flows of sharing which in their own time will eventually be interrupted. Accepting an unevenness of collaboration offers different size spaces through which we learn more about the other and ourselves. We find ourselves shifting into expansive places of fellowship and kinship, discovering and rediscovering our common humanity (Boyle, 2011).

Manoeuvring through what cannot be laid in a draw until 'the work' is over

Allowing another to see the items squirreled away reactivates and repairs our connections to parts of us open to damage from zombieifying work cultures that prefer emotionless workers who meet targets and get on with it (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Ryan, 2012; Whelan, Walker, & Moore, 2013). We work to connect so that we and those around us don't shut down; to collectively engage in discovery (Finley, 2014); in stories already underway and ceaselessly occurring.

Sarah, her PhD and becoming academic: I look back over my journey to becoming academic and I don't find much coherence except the dissonance of lining up a PhD that came to being through dedication and sacrifice, and a journey to parenthood pockmarked by failure. The excitement of the next attempt, the nervous knowledge that it is highly likely to fail, and hoping it won't. And I don't actually have any fertility problems. It seems I just find it harder to do than university degrees. This haze of ups and downs has marked this 'becoming academic' period of my life.



*Figure 4: A PhD journey pockmarked by failure?
Ali Black, Digital artwork, based on Personal photo offered by Sarah Loch, 2015*

Ali, her PhD and becoming academic: Sarah, there really is a sense of understanding between us, a place of connection about real things that are generally those 'unspokens'. I like your open interweaving of life and becoming academic. In it I recognise that this is my story too.

What I find intriguing is that whilst there is enormous interweaving, I did not feel able to acknowledge the personal realm in the professional realm in my becoming academic. There has been a definite sense that the personal must stay personal and hidden. Yet, that is impossible. As we are coming to understand, we simply cannot do this work without being who we are. As I reflect back on the first five years of my 'becoming academic' I am startled. During these five years I began my PhD (studying part-time while working full time), my first marriage completely broke down and my husband left me, my grandmother died days after that, and I was visiting my imprisoned father most weekends. My mother moved from our family home into a retirement village and I moved into a house where I subsequently got burgled three times. I got divorced and started a new relationship. My mother had several serious operations. I moved house four more times, got married, and negotiated the blending of families. And in the year our son was conceived and born, my PhD was completed and conferred.

So many dramas, emotions, unspokens. It simply is not possible to compartmentalise life and work — and something essential is lost in the trying.



Figure 5: What is the cost (to our research, to expanding our understanding of the world, to our own sense of wholeness) if we compartmentalise life and work to veil the full dimensions of our own humanity?

Ali Black, Digital artwork, 2015

Contemplation

Contemplate.

I enter this space thinking about how much has changed since I began writing with Ali. I am now living out what I wanted: a full time position as a lecturer in a university, PhD acquired, a more experienced parent, juggling full time work and parenting with more fluency.

Jagged fluency.

My IVF experience continues. The further we go, success-less in this second-time-round, the closer we come to the end. I have resolved this means my boy is my only child and he has no siblings. This doesn't mean I didn't try. It just means we are the loving parents of one child. But everything about this situation stings. Is this something to write about here? Is it relevant, interesting? Does it belong? The potency of this wave of sharing is that through this becoming-ending of my too-long IVF journey, I am finally feeling settled again, not always as yearning. It is allowing me to become 'professional' again.

Research.

Was I ever less professional because I was more personal? Why am I falling into binaries when it is within in-betweenness that I am found? But when you are in-between, although this may be the desired place for disruptive, philosophical thinking, it is not really so nice. There's some benefit in being agile, flexible and responsive, but there's also benefit in drawing nourishment along the roots and lines already established. Slippage.

I'm a professional body and a parent who leaves on the dot to get back home to her child. I can barely bring language to that feeling – do you know it? Having your body in one place, but bolting with that splintered sick feeling to the car to get home to your baby and to be yourself again. In terms of 'extending to others an invitation to also dwell, join and contribute', I will try to find expression for these intermeshes of personal and professional. It may become visual? Perhaps this photo below...

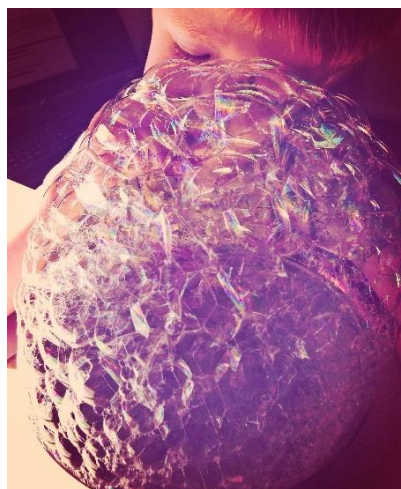


Figure 6: My four year old son loves 'doing science' and he's made a brain out of air. He blows bubbles using a straw in a bowl of water and his creation begins to overflow. What do I see? What else should I be doing with my time? The intermesh of personal/professional.

Sarah Loch, Personal photo, 2015

Pause.

A new way of seeing.

Looking inwards. Looking outwards.

Waves and flow, back and forth.

I watch you and I sit with you.

I see anew too.

Through collaborative adventure, our ideas about inquiry are shared in ways we hope will be useful to others who are also querying who they are in their research and how their stories can matter. We hope work like ours will help more researchers will find ways to tell their academic communities how they do the work they do and who they are whilst they do it. There is richness in connecting with others but we must not forget why we research. It isn't just a game of citations, funding, getting in the best journals; it is about engaging with the lives and stories and experiences of others, and being changed by these, understanding things about others and ourselves that we wouldn't have been able to without this interaction, without these methodologies.

In terms of methodology, beyond manoeuvring around the personal/professional binary, we urge something more; a methodology that, through continued and varied use, becomes ever more mindful. We have found writing, art, poetry and representations of thinking helpful in contemplating, exposing and disclosing the heart of our humanness. We have found that venturing together informs our research by giving us skill in recognising and saying what matters to us and we have developed sensitivity towards the ways we speak about ourselves as well as others. We invite the reader to dwell with us, to contribute and adventure with us, to speak out loud the experiences of a multitude of lives into diverse research arenas.



*Figure 7: What is at the heart of our research if we are not there?
A call to live beyond the divided academic life
Ali Black, Digital artwork based on Personal photo offered by Sarah Loch, 2015*

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