



**Storied, slow,  
aesthetic, relational:  
A wabi-sabi  
approach to doing  
and writing  
'research'**

*Ali Black, Gail Crimmins, Linda Henderson*  
***The Women Who Write***

## Abstract

Our research journeys often begin in ways that connect with the concept of wabi-sabi: “the art of imperfection” (Lawrence, 2001). This may seem to be in contradiction to all things associated with the acts of doing and writing ‘research’. However, in this workshop we highlight the value of wabi-sabi for negotiating the demands of the often sterile and sterilising contemporary university:

*Broadly, wabi-sabi is everything that today’s sleek, mass-produced, technology-saturated culture isn’t. It’s flea markets, not shopping malls; aged wood, not swank floor coverings; one single morning glory, not a dozen red roses. Wabi-sabi understands the tender, raw beauty of a gray December landscape and the aching elegance of an abandoned building or shed. It celebrates cracks and crevices and rot and all the other marks that time and weather and use leave behind. To discover wabi-sabi is to see the singular beauty in something that may first look decrepit and ugly...Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all transient beings on this planet—that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of returning to dust. Nature’s cycles of growth, decay, and erosion are embodied in frayed edges, rust, liver spots. Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time. (Lawrence, 2001)*

Wabi-sabi asks us to re-consider views about ‘what matters’ within the sometimes hard and cruel spaces of the contemporary university where our bodies are subjected to the violence of the ‘publish or perish’ mantra. For this is a mantra that positions us against each other—we compare and compete, and we push and pull our bodies to live up to the demands made upon us. We secretly count up our outputs to ensure that we will ‘count’ when the ‘counting’ is done.

## Abstract (cont)

We work on grant application after grant application in the hope of winning that all elusive research dollar. Because if don't we will not count when the counting is done. But, sometimes serendipity and magic occurs in research spaces. The unintentional, the imperfect, the humble become sites for listening and responding to what research is and can be, and who researchers are and can be. This has been our experience, and this workshop emerges from our learning and becoming 'the women who write' <http://www.thewomenwhowrite.com/>.

Taking a wabi-sabi approach to research, this workshop will challenge you to think beyond such binaries as 'publish or perish' to explore aesthetic and paradoxical notions of research and research processes. You will be asked to connect to your ability to slow down, to shift the balance from doing to being, and to appreciating rather than perfecting (Lawrence, 2001). Nestled in theories of embodiment, affect, materiality and desire we will be deliberately/promiscuously (Childers et al, 2013) breaking the rules and exploring the cracks and chips of our lived experiences and engaging in kintsugi-like golden repair using constructs of slow scholarship and story. This workshop offers space for contemplation, listening and responding—inviting reflection on the theories that resonate, the nature of relational research, and ethics of caring in research worlds.

- Childers, S., Rhee, J., and Daza, S.L. (2013). Promiscuous (use of) feminist methodologies: The dirty theory and messy practice of educational research beyond gender. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26 (5), 507 – 523. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2013.786849
- Lawrence, R. (2001, September-October). Wabi-Sabi: The Art Of Imperfection. *UTNE Reader*. Retrieved from: <http://www.utne.com/mind-and-body/wabi-sabi>

# Acknowledgement of country

*We would like to acknowledge that our workshop is taking place on the traditional lands of the Yugambeh people. We pay respect to the Yugambeh people, and to their elders past and present for their continuing contribution to the life of this region. We also pay respect to other first nation people that are here today and to their elders past and present.*



# The Women Who Write

- <http://www.thewomenwhowrite.com/>



# Slow Scholarship

We value an ethic  
of caring &  
Relationships of

# CARE

**& TRUST** matter to us. We coexist amongst our  
collective stories, our sharing of deep, real things.  
WE REFUSE TO LIVE AFFECTIVELY THIN LIVES.  
We *resist* the corporatist rhetoric & counter:  
**'Not everything that counts can be counted!'**

We make time to acknowledge & reflect on the complexity &  
uncertainty & culture of academic work.

We ask questions, good ones. Ones that give us purpose.  
We respond to shared longings to 'be' differently in academia.  
We care about how ideas are generated, about creativity & rich,  
deep thinking. We choose deliberation over acceleration.

**We follow what feels 'good' to us.**

We give time to conversation. To dialogue. To inquiry. To reading. To joy.  
To thinking. To creativity. To pleasure. To experiencing flow & timelessness.

Ethics of care & self-care guide our decisions.

Affiliation, connection & belonging sustain, nourish & energise us.

We value meaning, connectedness, presence.

We choose to work together—we are better together.

**We value collective, caring, creative,  
intellectual, emotional, relational, ethical &  
experimental inquiry & encounters.**

We are enough.

# *This workshop invites*

- *A slowing down...*
- *A breaking of 'the rules' and 'standard ways of seeing'*
- *Exploration of the cracks and chips of lived experience*
- *Engaging with Kintsugi-like golden repair through slow scholarship and story, caring and contemplation, connection to theories that resonate*
- *Entering into a collective, embodied, ethical space.....*



<https://vimeo.com/90734143>

- *Reconsidering 'what matters'*
- *Understanding our history - behind the person or the material*
- *Gold, connection*
- *An artisan*
- *Embracing our brokenness*
- *Wabi-sabi – finding beauty in the broken*
- *What makes us rich in authentic ways?*
- *A beautiful way of living...*



# Wabi-sabi: *The art of imperfection*



Broadly, wabi-sabi is everything that today's sleek, mass-produced, technology-saturated culture isn't. It's flea markets, not shopping malls; aged wood, not swank floor coverings; one single morning glory, not a dozen red roses. Wabi-sabi understands the tender, raw beauty of a gray December landscape and the aching elegance of an abandoned building or shed. It celebrates cracks and crevices and rot and all the other marks that time and weather and use leave behind. To discover wabi-sabi is to see the singular beauty in something that may first look decrepit and ugly...Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all transient beings on this planet—that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of returning to dust. Nature's cycles of growth, decay, and erosion are embodied in frayed edges, rust, liver spots. Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time. (Lawrence, 2001)

# *Embodied experiences of academia*



responsible

Passed  
over

Not valued

exhausted

Not good enough

overwhelmed

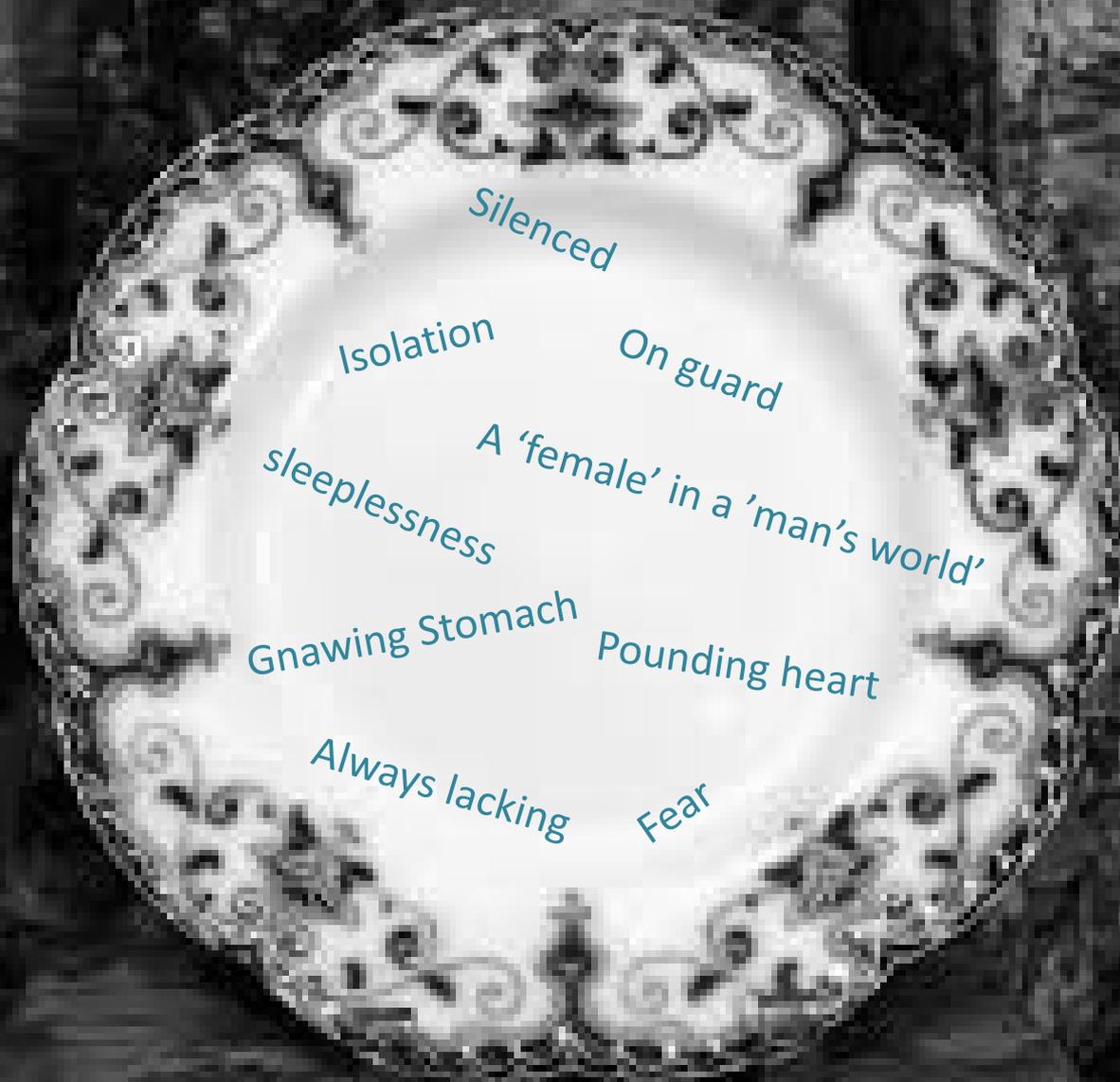
Found lacking

compared

measured

temporary

# *Embodied experiences of academia*



Silenced

Isolation

On guard

A 'female' in a 'man's world'

sleeplessness

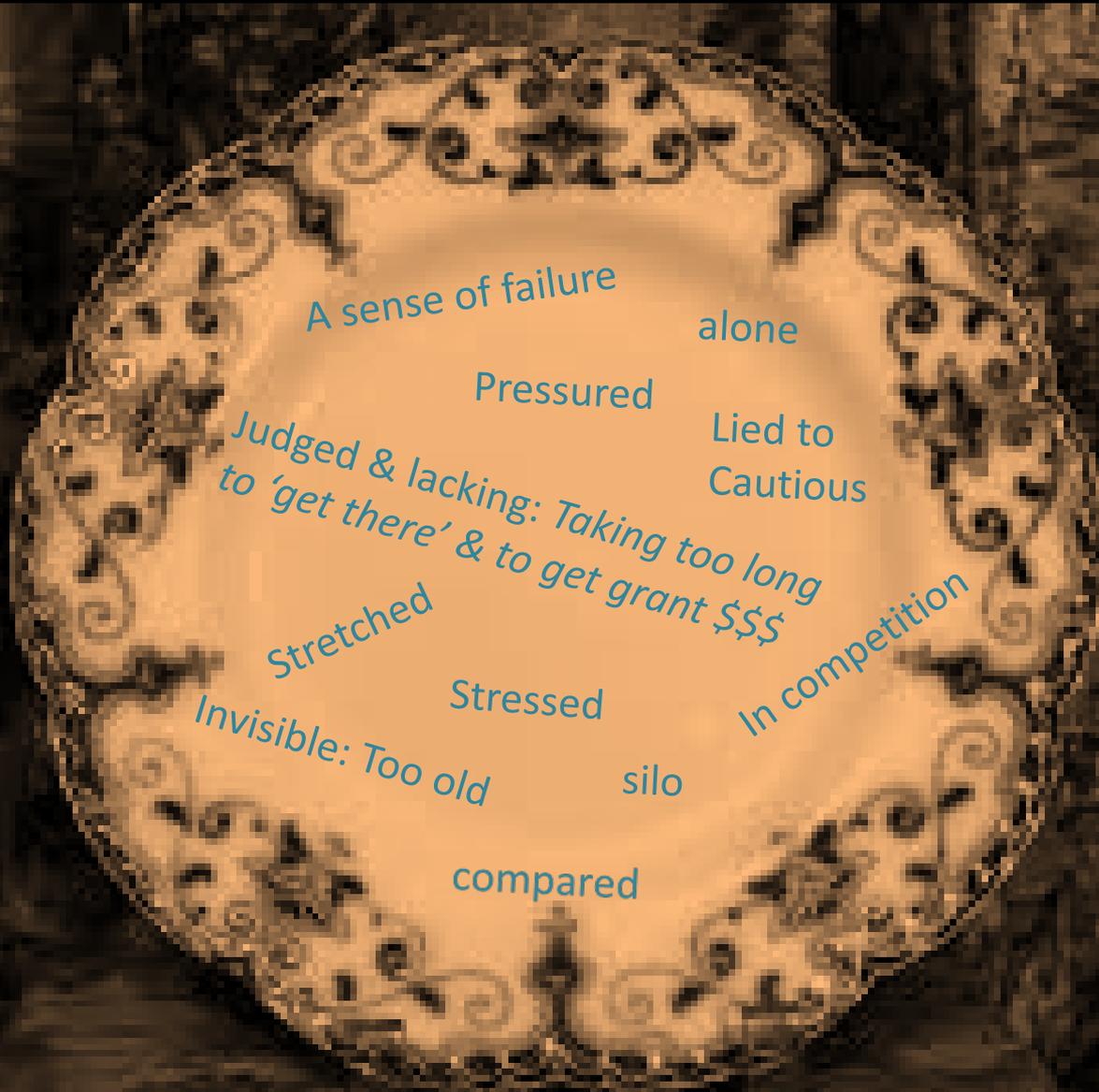
Gnawing Stomach

Pounding heart

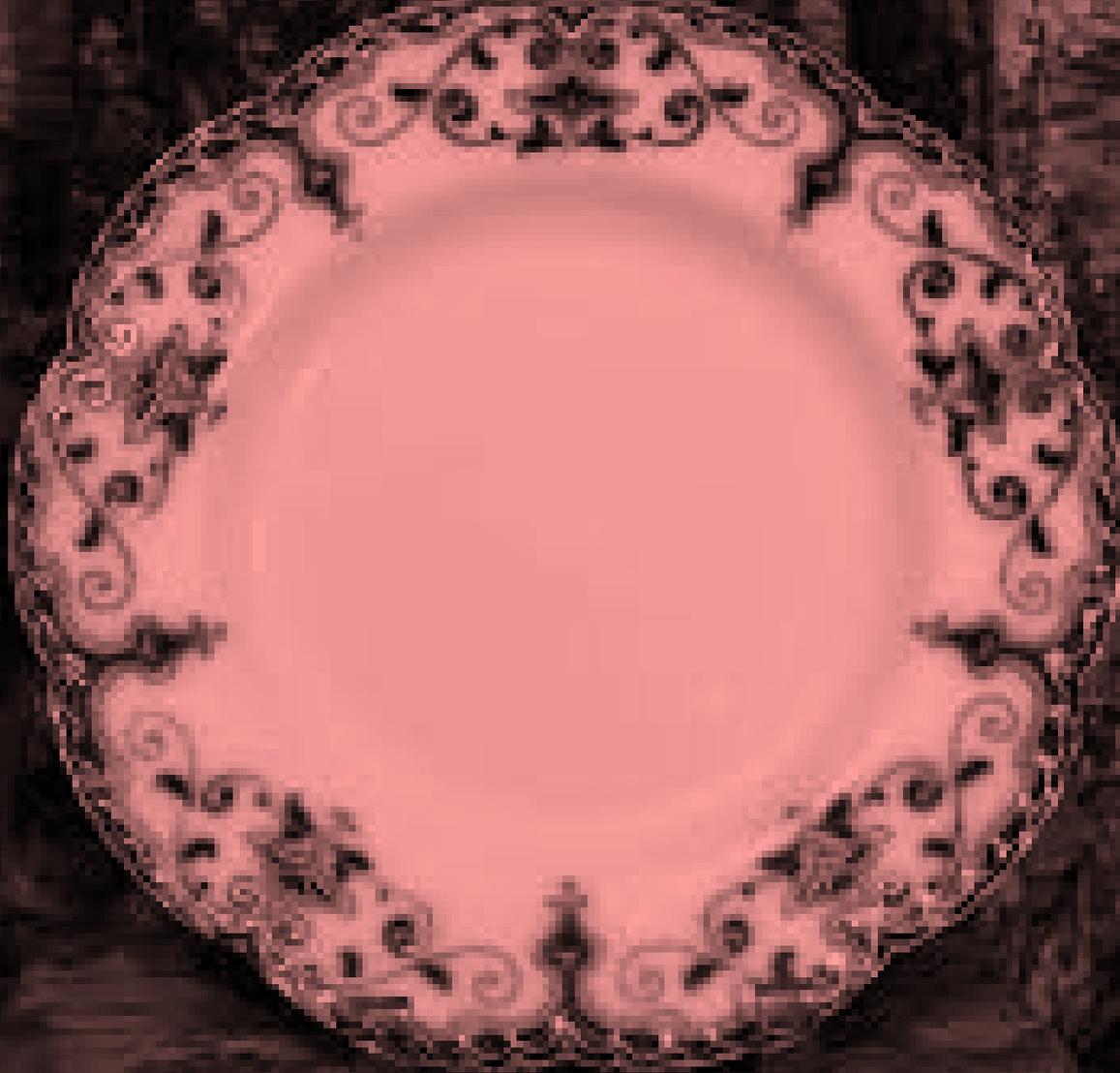
Always lacking

Fear

# *Embodied experiences of academia*



*What are your  
embodied experiences of academia?*



# *Letting the cracks and broken pieces show*

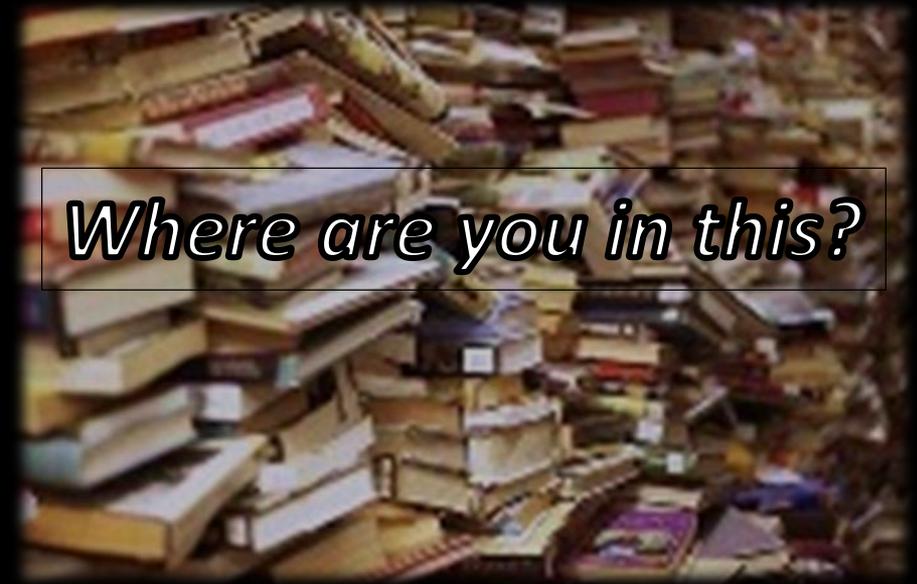
## *Embracing and sharing them*

- *Remembering we matter*
- *Appreciating our history*
- *Recognising the Gold: connection*
- *Engaging like an artisan, caring*
- *Embracing our brokenness & our wholeheartedness*
- *Wabi-sabi – finding beauty in the broken*
- *Doing what makes us rich, being and working with authenticity*
- *A beautiful way of living...*



# *The weight of theory*

- Theory thrust upon us
- Theory that silences us
- Theory as something to hide behind
- Theory as a source of power to claim 'expertise'
- Theory that prevents us from seeing the phenomenon in all its richness and messiness
- Theory that weighs us down or shackles us to certain 'truths'
- Theory that blocks other ways of knowing and being



# *Thinking beyond the binaries*

- Working with theory
- Finding and engaging with theory that speaks to and of you
- Exploring and enjoying aesthetic ways of knowing and working with theory
- Being promiscuous with theory
- Narrating, embodying, expressing



# Theories that resonate...?



# narrative inquiry

- Stories of experience (Michael Connelly, Jean Clandinin)
- Understanding experience as lived and told stories
- How narrative deepens our understanding of [educational] experience
- Honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding
- Everyday ways of making meaning
- Narrative and arts-based methods, alternative forms of representation, learning from the arts (Elliot Eisner)

# ways of knowing

- Honouring diverse ways of knowing (Eisner)
- Creating research spaces where personal and intuitive knowledge is valued
- Beyond spoken and written language (Carl Leggo, Rita Irwin, Susan Walsh – & bearing witness)
- Aesthetic ways of knowing (Patricia Leavy; Maxine Greene: “to look at things as if they could be otherwise”; “wide-awakeness”)

# Maxine Greene

*“I am also suggesting that such feelings can to a large degree be overcome through conscious endeavor on the part of individuals to keep themselves awake, to think about their condition in the world, to inquire into the forces that appear to dominate them, to interpret the experiences they are having day by day. Only as they learn to make sense of what is happening, can they feel themselves to be autonomous. Only then can they develop the sense of agency required for living a moral life.”*

# Deleuze and embodiment

- Psychoanalysis and the 'lure' of the bounded body
- Bodies are historical and political phenomena
- Oedipalised body – “he is the man of speech who must articulate his desires through language as a symbolic order, and who will also live in fear of the loss of that order” (Colebrook 2011:11)



# De-individualisation

Do not demand of politics that it restores the 'rights' of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is a product of power. What is needed is to 'de-individualize' by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individulization.

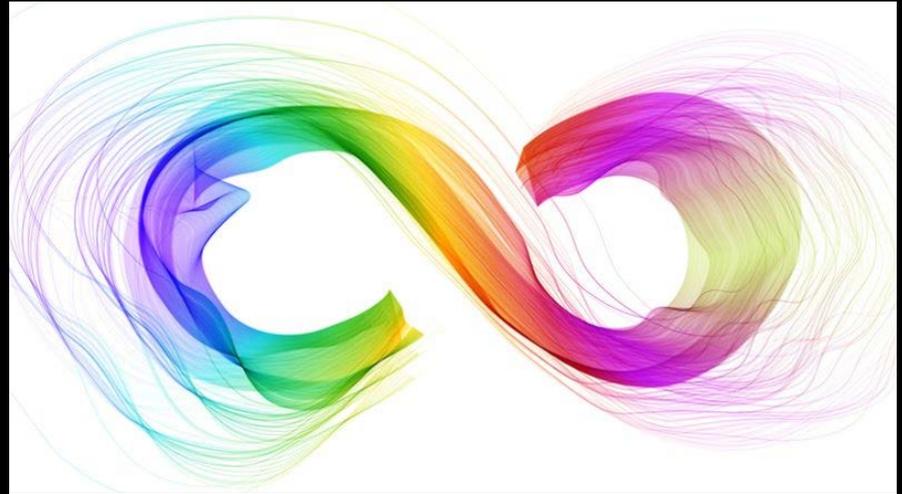
(Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p.xiv)

# becomings...

- Thinking beyond the bounded body
- Becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, becoming-imperceptible
- “Becomings take place when a body connects to another body and in doing so, begins to perceive, move, think and feel in new ways” (Hickey-Moody & Malins, 2007:6)
- “Intermingling of bodies” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 90)

“Bodies articulate. They cannot do otherwise: they operate in the crease where past and future coexist. Bodies are in movement and to move they must fold-in, fold-out.”

(Mannings, 2007:112)



# Walking the shifting sands...

Movement is important it “opens another door or window to perception” (Massumi, 2015, p.11). Massumi (2015) argues that the “codification of language within critical discourse and theoretical writing...can stop movement...cut off the potential of understanding freedom or experience” (p.13). The ability to experience the “uniqueness of every situation” (Massumi, 2015, p.11). This is not about “commanding movement, it’s about navigating movement. It’s about being immersed in an experience that is already underway. It about being bodily attuned to opportunities in the movement, going with the flow. It’s more like surfing the situation, or tweaking it, than commanding it or programming it” (Massumi, 2015, p.13-14).

# postmodernism

Fredric Jameson: PM belongs to the culture of late Capitalism, the age of consumerism and information, where contradictory and fragmentary realities compete with each other for significance.

Post Modernism: concerned with the nature of the “text”: the way we put words together, the way we construct reality; draws attention to the process of meaning making.



# *A Question: how do we write in a post modern age?*

- Dissect/disrupt cultural myths
- Deconstruct 'reality', 'truth'
- To write ourselves into and through the work



# Écriture Féminine

*"Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement."*

# Hélène Cixous & Écriture Féminine

- French feminist writer, professor, poet, philosopher and literary critic
- 'Best known as a mid-1970 feminist theory and leading practitioner of écriture féminine (Leitch 1979, p. 1938)
- Her seminal essay on women's writing 'The Laugh of the Medusa' was published in 1975
- Cixous did not simply privilege the 'female' half of the existing binary of male/female → **questioned the logic and adequacy of either/or** to express cultural realities
- 'White Ink' – another term for écriture féminine



*White Ink*

# Écriture féminine

- Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies
- writing has been run by... [a] typically masculine economy
- Write your self. Your body must be heard.
- There is something essential about women's bodies, which, if they can tap into it, will allow them to write in a way that will enable them to overcome patriarchal repression and regain control of their bodies and their selves.



The Laugh of the Medusa (1976)

*Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself.*

Hélène Cixous

# Writing who you are

Academic discourse makes arguments, solves problems, analyses texts and issues, tries to answer difficult questions—and usually refers to and builds on other academic discourse. So why can't these jobs be done by personal and expressive writing?

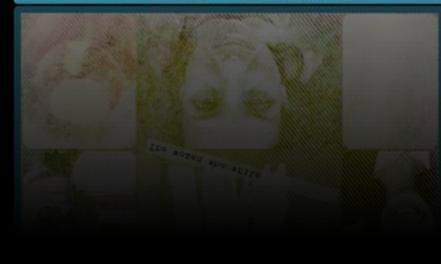
Elbow, Peter 2000 *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, Oxford University Press, USA.

# Generating something unique, something else, something different, new ways of experiencing and embodying academia



# Connect with us...

- <http://www.thewomenwhowrite.com/>
- [ablack1@usc.edu.au](mailto:ablack1@usc.edu.au)
- [gcrimmin@usc.edu.au](mailto:gcrimmin@usc.edu.au)
- [linda.henderson@monash.edu](mailto:linda.henderson@monash.edu)
- *Date claimer: Conference for women in academia USC First week in Dec 2018*
- *Routledge books in 2018*



# *Benediction – Omid Safi*

Give me someone who knows their own vulnerability and sees mine.

Give me someone whose cracked spaces are golden.

Give me someone who has helped do kintsugi to my cracked spaces.

Give me someone who is open to me doing kintsugi to their cracked heart.

So friends, wabi-sabi me.

Let me wabi-sabi you.

Let's repair each other.

Let's seek what's cracked in each other.

Let's heal our broken spaces.

Let's fill what's broken with gold.

May we emerge more beautiful, more whole, and luminous.

...come and see the beauty in my cracked spaces.

I see the beauty in yours.

You are not a heart that I will discard.

Do not discard me.

We can emerge from this healing golden, more beautiful.

May all that is cracked and broken be healed

be illuminated.



<https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-illuminating-the-beauty-in-our-broken-places/>

THANK  
YOU



## Read/cite our recent work...

Black, A.L., Crimmins, G., Henderson, L (under review). Positioning ourselves in our academic lives: Exploring personal/professional identities, voice and agency, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*.

Crimmins, G., Black, A., Jones, J., Loch, S., Impiccini, J. (accepted). Rupturing the limitations and masculinities of traditional academic discourse through collective memoir. *Creative Approaches to Research Journal*. Special issue on 'Creative approaches to research in further, adult and higher education'.

Henderson, L., and Black, A.L., (accepted). Splitting the World open: Writing stories of mourning and loss. *Qualitative Inquiry*, SAGE

Black, A.L., Crimmins, G., Jones, J.K. (in press). Reducing the drag: Creating V formations through slow scholarship and story. In S. Riddle, M., Harmes, and P.A. Danaher (Eds) *Producing pleasure within the contemporary university*. Sense Publishing.

Loch, S., Henderson, L., Honan, E. (in press). The joy in writing assemblage. In S. Riddle, M., Harmes, and P.A. Danaher (Eds) *Producing pleasure within the contemporary university*. Sense Publishing.

Loch, S., Black, A., Crimmins, G., Jones, J., Impiccini, J. (in press). Writing stories and lives: Documenting women connecting, communing and communicating. Book series *Transformative Pedagogies in the Visual Domain*, Common Ground Publishing. Eighth title *Embodied and walking pedagogies engaging the visual domain: Research co-creation and practice*. Kim Snepvangers and Sue Davis (Eds).

Henderson, L., Honan, E., & Loch, S. (2016). The production of the academic writing machine. *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology*, 7(2), 4-18.

Loch, S., and Black, A (2016). We cannot do this work without being who we are: Researching and experiencing academic selves. In B. Harreveld, M. Danaher, B. Knight, C. Lawson and G. Busch (Eds). *Constructing Methodology for Qualitative Research: Researching Education and Social Practices*. Palgrave MacMillan: UK and US

Honan, E., Henderson, L., & Loch, S. (2015). Producing moments of pleasure within the confines of an academic quantified self. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 8(3), 44-62.

Black, A.L., and Loch, S (2014). Called to respond: The potential of unveiling hidden. *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology*, Vol 5, No 2, Special Issue. <https://journals.hioa.no/index.php/rerm/index>

## Write with us...

If you would like to begin a jointly authored, collective paper with us:

Please send us your 'response' or 'reflection' in terms of what opened for you at our workshop – for instance...

awakenings/epiphanies/feelings/new perspectives/ways of thinking about research and theory; about connecting with imperfection (wabi-sabi) and its beauty/what it can teach us; about engaging in slow scholarship and ethics of caring; about being ourselves in our work; any meaning-making that feels important to you...

50-100 words is enough, (but you are welcome to write more...)

Email your response to Ali: [ablack1@usc.edu.au](mailto:ablack1@usc.edu.au)

Please also email any photos of the processes we engaged in and images of the transformation of your plate.

*Thank you xxx Ali, Linda and Gail, on behalf of The Women Who Write*