THE NEW NORMAL

NOMADIC IDENTITIES AND THE FUTURE OF DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

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INTRODUCTION

Who is this “I” that would attempt to narrate my research trajectory? Perhaps if you allow me to turn your question inside out, as it were, and ask: what material forces were contributing to the reiterative materialisation of this “I”? Which political forces and texts that I was reading helped constitute “me”? (Karen Barad, 2013, in an interview with Juelskjær and Schwennesen)

At present most of the dominant narratives regarding supervision are the official narratives of performance contracts, evaluations and rankings (Halse & Malfroy 2010; Jones 2013; Maritz & Prinsloo 2015). As such, these narratives constitute and perpetuate a particular understanding of doctoral education and graduate supervision in the broader social imaginary in higher education. This social imaginary not only presents templates for how faculty and supervisors are allowed to imagine their careers, identities, roles and effectiveness as faculty and supervisors, but also shapes our sense-making and, as such, presents norms and standards of what effective supervision should look like (see Taylor 2002). These norms and standards then become internalised and embodied enactments entangled in the nexus between structural arrangements and notions of agency.

In telling our own stories as supervisors, we attempt to claim back our narratives and provide a counter-narrative, to speak instead of to be spoken for and to represent ourselves (Frank 1995) instead of being represented in institutional reports, performance management systems, templates and rankings.

We acknowledge that formulating these narratives is anything but straightforward and exempt from contamination (see Morrissey 2015). Our counter-narrative also

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does not want to “nostalgise some glorious past for the academy, replete with morally superior values of equality, or solidarity in and with the broader public sphere externally” (Morrissey 2015:617). Another point to note is that although we agree with the notion of the pervasiveness of “hegemonically scripted and anticipated” subjectivities (Morrissey 2015:628) in higher education, this does not mean a loss of agency. We agree with Butler (1997:46) that

to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition for its agency. For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations, if not a relation that can be turned against itself, reworked, resisted?

In addition, this narrative is an attempt to think diffractively, in other words “to move our images of difference/s from oppositional to differential, from static to productive, and our ideas of scientific knowledge from reflective, disinterested judgment to mattering, embedded involvement” (Kaiser & Thiele 2014:165). We share our narrative departing from a relational ontology that cannot (and should not) be separated from epistemological processes: “Ontology and epistemology become inter-intra-laced as onto-epistemology” (Kaiser & Thiele 2014:165).

The telling of our narrative is therefore not only about formulating alternative ways of thinking about doctoral education and supervision, but also a commitment to the idea that our practices matter (Barad 2007:89). In this chapter we would like to practise “care of the self”, as proposed by Foucault, by locating ourselves “within the network of values and social practices that characterise a culture at a particular time, since these practices and relations change and are constituted very differently in different historical eras” (Besley 2014:11).

Mapping the context of higher education

There is certainly no dearth of literature on the shifting sands in the broader context of higher education. Not all universities in all contexts are the same. We therefore acknowledge our specific location as two doctoral supervisors at a mega distance learning institution, the largest on the African continent and one of the mega universities in the world. Despite the specificities of and shaping intra-active conditions in/at this location, we are not exempt from broader trends in the higher education landscape.

There is also a danger that, in describing some of the profound shifts taking place in the broader context of higher education, we perpetuate the narratives of crisis, change, and disruption currently characterising debates in higher education.

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Examples of such narratives are: “Failure, crisis and disruption: The (perpetual) end of higher education” (Fullick 2012), and higher education as “heading for the ‘Great Disruption’” (Charbonneau 2012). It is furthermore tempting to see these descriptions as a recent phenomenon while there is ample evidence that these concerns have been endemic to the discourses in and surrounding higher education since the 1990s. Hartley (1995:414, 418), for example, spoke of the “McDonaldisation” of higher education with efficiency, quantification, calculability, predictability and control becoming management’s mantra where “(f)unding now follows performance rather than precedes it” and where our rituals of “fake fraternisation” were aimed at keeping faculty happy, and of course, productive. Also in the 1990s LaCapra published “The university in ruins?” (1998). Compare this to the recently published “The slow death of the university” (Eagleton 2015) and it may seem as if current changes, though specific in nature, are caught up in an interregnum of constant crisis (Hall 2015).

The overview provided by Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009), although perpetuating the notion of ‘an academic revolution’, provides a clear map of some of the broader trends in the shifting higher education landscape. The identified trends are (1) the impact of globalisation, (2) the phenomenon of massification, (3) inequalities in access, (4) increasing student mobility, (5) changes in teaching, learning and curricula, (6) changes in quality assurance, accountability, and qualification frameworks, (7) the financing of higher education, (8) the public good-private good debate, (9) the immense growth in private higher education, (10) dramatic changes in the academic profession, (11) dramatic changes in the research environment, and (12) the impact of advances in information and communications technology. Of particular interest to this chapter is the forecast by Altbach *et al* (2009: xix) that the massification of higher education will continue, and that student diversity will increase with female students becoming the majority population in most developed countries. These authors also foresee that the undertakings and roles of the academic profession will be more expanded and specialised and subject to different employment contracts. The scope and impact of the “academic revolution” referred to by Altbach *et al* (2009) on the identity and roles of doctoral supervisors will also be determined by other questions such as the following:

How is “academic capitalism” (Rhoades & Slaughter 2004) shaping supervisory roles and undertakings where academics “sell their expertise to the highest bidder, research collaboratively, and teaching on/off line, locally and internationally” (Blackmore 2001:353)? How do we understand changing supervisory roles in the light of the fact that the middle-class existence of professors is a thing of the past and many

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professors now moonlight to make ends meet (Saccaro 2014)? How will supervision and expectations of supervision change in a context where higher education has not been put on a diet, but is increasingly starved by government policies and changing funding agreements (Prinsloo, 2016)? How will supervision change when Altbach and Finkelstein (2014) state that “research universities will have three classes of professors, like the airlines. A small first-class cabin of researchers, a business-class section of academics who will teach and do some research, and a large economy cabin of poorly paid teachers” (par 16)? And how will doctoral supervision evolve considering that the number of adjunct faculty and administrative staff members far exceeds the appointment of academics (Giroux 2014), and, in the context of the USA, the majority of professors are appointed on adjunct and contract basis (Scott 2012)?

The above raises the interesting possibility that nomadic identities in doctoral supervision may be the new normal ...

In describing some of these broader trends in the context of higher education, it is crucial that we do not think of ourselves as being separate from these contexts, but that instead, we acknowledge that our subjectivities and agency are (often uncomfortably) entangled in these shifts.

Nomadism as alternative heuristic

In following Brah (1996) and Braidotti (2011), nomadism presents a form of agency and activism which “foregrounds the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (Brah, 1996:16). As such, nomadism is not a metaphor for the general condition of humankind, which, according to Braidotti (2011:3) is a “banality ... [and not] helpful in times of fast changes and economic and social transformations”. Nomadic identities as a construct is therefore not a figurative way of thinking but rather “materialistic mappings of situated, i.e., embedded and embodied, social positions” (Braidotti 2011:4).

Excursus: Due to the fact that nomadism and intersectionality as heuristic constructs originated in various feminist discourses, it is important to briefly explore issues of ‘difference’.

In following Brah (1996:88) we see difference as a “social relation constructed within systems of power underlying structures of class, racism, gender and sexuality, and so on”. While supervisor identities are shaped by different economic, political and cultural societal and institutional structures, it is also important to point to “experiential diversity” inherent in the notion of “difference” (Brah 1996:89).

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It is therefore important to conceptualise 'difference' not only as markers of the "distinctiveness of our collective histories" but also as "personal experience, codified in an individual's biography" (Brah 1996:89).

While Brah (1996) explores 'difference' as experience, as social relation, as subjectivity, and as identity, it is the aspect of identity that we turn to now. As point of departure for our discussion on supervisor identity and trajectories we take Brah's (1996:123) description of identity as

... marked by the multiplicity of subject positions that constitute the subject. Hence, identity is neither fixed nor singular; rather it is a constantly changing relational multiplicity. But during the course of this, flux identities do assume specific patterns, as in a kaleidoscope, against particular sets of personal, social and historical circumstances.

Individual supervisor identity is therefore understood as "that very process by which the multiplicity, contradiction, and instability of subjectivity is signified as having coherence, continuity, stability; as having a core – a continually changing core but the sense of a core nonetheless – that at any given moment is enunciated as the 'I'" (Brah 1996:123-124). When 'supervisors' are categorised and described as a collective category, we need to define the collective entity "as a political process" (Brah 1996:124). Supervisor subjectivities and their collective political identity "are produced in the interstices of these multiple, intersecting loci of power" (Brah 1996:25).

Our fractured and entangled identities and career trajectories

Our career stories both followed alternative, entangled and fractured trajectories, which brought with them emotional wounds, hopes and dreams, and a decent amount of fear and much anxiety. As will be illustrated, neither P nor J saw themselves as members of faculty when they started their careers. Not only was the notion of a clear 'career trajectory' interrupted and fractured, but their careers were entangled in contexts, structures and agency (or the lack thereof) with wider implications for their identity as supervisors (Maritz & Prinsloo 2015:975).

Immediately after finishing high school, P enrolled in higher education and completed his bachelor's and master's degrees and did his doctoral examinations in theology. P's struggles with the incommensurable aspects of his identity, namely, being gay and a minister of religion, came to a messy resolve when he left the ministry after seven years. After a period of unemployment, he was appointed as an administrative officer at a higher education distance learning institution. Once again entangled between finding a new career and a new identity, he completed a postgraduate

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Management Development Diploma and a postgraduate degree in art history, and started with his law degree. His career in the administrative section of the higher education distance learning institution ended when he successfully applied for a position as a curriculum and learning developer (a professional position). He felt that he had arrived. During this period he completed his DLitt et Phil and started to supervise MBA students. Throughout this period P became increasingly involved in doing research and was appointed as research professor at the age of 56. He was appointed as sole supervisor for a doctoral student and several master's students.

J's career trajectory started late. She enrolled for a basic nursing diploma at the age of 30 (after she had cared for her two sons who later died) and thereafter enrolled for a bachelor's degree in nursing education and administration. She progressed into a teaching position at a nursing college after only two years in the nursing field. She completed her master's degree and then spent a number of years in a corporate setting while completing her doctorate. Her first permanent position in higher education was that of associate professor at the age of 49. She was immediately allocated six doctoral students and eight master's students to supervise as sole supervisor. She became a full professor at the age of 52.

METHODOLOGY

We followed a narrative auto-ethnographic approach while using electronic mails and personal interviews as data. We see personal narratives as a response to positivist science. Personal narratives and autobiographies are scientific research in their own right, while also celebrating the position of the researcher 'within' the research project, and not outside of it. Traditional scientific approaches require of researchers to "minimise their selves, to view the self as a contaminant and do everything to attempt to transcend and deny it" (Wall 2006:2). Maguire (2006:par 1) postulates that the "conscious positioning of authors within their texts opens up possibilities for evocative, innovative ways in which researchers may represent realities, themselves and their research participants in their texts".

Personal accounts of journeys in a particular context and time are often accused of being contrived, manipulated, manipulating, narcissistic and self-indulgent (Ellis, Adams & Bchner 2011:par 3). In telling our stories, there are a number of dangers such as "the banality of heroism" (Frank 1995:92) and/or the selectiveness with which we decide what to reveal and what to hide.

An electronically mediated environment challenges the auto-ethnographer to reconsider and reflect on taken-for-granted assumptions about embodiment, the (digital) self and identity, social presence and consciousness (Niamh 2014:np). In

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our case, digital letter writing in the form of e-mails seemed to offer a medium for our 'over-distance' collaboration. These texts as well as face-to-face conversations became our data sources.

Diffraction offers an alternative vocabulary, technology and methodology for analysis that foregrounds differentially (Kaiser & Thiele 2014:166). In providing an alternative for reflection, diffraction affirms our knowledge-practices as mattering here-and-now as opposed to after-the-fact. The onto-epistemology departs from discrete units of analysis to give space for agential forces such as the self, culture and spaces as dynamically produced and infused. I did an open inductive thematic analysis to identify the main salient points of our narratives. These were refined and merged as our conversations progressed.

Positivistic approaches to science claim there is only one way to 'do science', and the criteria of rigour, reliability, validity and generalisability are well established. Wall (2006:3) writes regarding auto-ethnography as follows:

The questioning of the dominant scientific paradigm, the making room for other ways of knowing, and the growing emphasis on the power of research to change the world create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned.

How do we then evaluate personal narratives and auto-ethnographic accounts? Holt (2003:12) refers to criteria proposed by Richardson (2000):

- **Substantive contribution.** Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life?
- **Aesthetic merit.** Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring?
- **Reflexivity.** How did the author come to write this text? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text?
- **Impactfulness.** Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action?
- **Expresses a reality.** Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience?

In this auto-ethnographic exploration the "autobiographical mode is useful as a disruptive device that reveals [our] narrative as an interpretive retelling, vulnerable to challenge from other interpretations as the vagaries or self-representations of an individual" (Brah 1996:10).

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DISCUSSION: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Our narratives mark our differences and different journeys “from within and as part of an entangled state”, where “knowing is a material practice of engagement as part of a world in its differential becoming” (Barad 2007:89). Our narrative and analysis as an agential realist account does not reveal what is already there; rather what is ‘disclosed’ is the effect of the “intra-active engagements of our participation with/in and as part of the world’s differential becoming” (Barad 2007:361). Our account does therefore not aim to point out causality or “causal relationships between distinct sequential events” (Barad 2007:393) but rather provides subjective/subjected accounts of intra-activity.

Two main themes emerged from the analysis (see Table 23.1). The first theme refers to spaces that shaped our unfolding story with reference to age, gender, race and politics as forms of capital as well as being and becoming perpetual nomads. The second theme refers to sites of crisis. Both our academic career trajectories were deeply influenced by our identities-as-fractured and in-process.

TABLE 23.1 Main themes

Spaces that shaped our unfolding stories	Age, gender, race and politics as forms of capital
	Being and becoming perpetual nomads
Sites of crisis	

Spaces that shaped our unfolding stories

Our lives – as every life – take place somewhere. The spaces we live and work in influence our identity and our career trajectories. We constantly create images of what we see, hear and how we feel. This in turn, creates a sense of where we come from, the behaviour we display, the choices we make and the meaning we create from the spaces in which we find ourselves. We both referred to the occurrence of context in our unfolding stories. It is interesting to note that we both claimed a sense of agency in that, although the context shaped our identity and careers, we still had agency over the decisions and choices that we made:

P: My identity as supervisor was irrevocably shaped by my context, the choices I had at my disposal, the privileges of my class and race, as well as the choices I made – the good ones and the bad ones.

J: My identity as a supervisor and my choices of careers have largely been moulded by context and the decisions that I have consciously made, by a lack of direction, societal norms or by external forces not within my control.

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Age, gender, race and politics as forms of capital

Age, gender, race and politics intersected in the spaces that shaped us professionally. This mattered in the spaces of becoming supervisors. We both acknowledge our age, gender, race and our queerness, as well as the privilege that it brought us:

P: I therefore embrace my identity as a white, gay, Afrikaans, 56-year-old, single male and a researcher ... My race, my gender, my talents, etc, provide me with a certain value in my community.

J pondered on these dynamics:

I am a white, gay female in my mid-50s. How would this influence my supervisory role and identity? What does this afford me and how does it advantage or disadvantage me?

The political regime (during apartheid) that we grew up in profoundly shaped the opportunities we had and the education we received as well as the choices we were afforded. During that time we never interrogated our whiteness and its benefits; we assumed it to be natural.

P, however, notes that:

The impact of those years of privileged access to resources will still be felt for many more generations to come.

For P, "(a)cknowledging white privilege and the way it shaped my education and provided me with opportunities is not surrendering to the notion of victimhood and suffering that is prevalent in much of the current white, Afrikaner discourse".

Being and becoming perpetual nomads

Our nomadic existence prior to entering higher education was not a choice but a result of life circumstances flowing from our race, age, gender and predispositions and choices. In one communication, P reflected that our nomadic existence before entering higher education reminded him of the Peripatetic School of Aristotle, where they "wandered without a clear curriculum or intended outcomes but in the act of wandering discovered, discussed, learned".

This view resonated with J: "Being outside of the 'official' system, I needed to learn the game on my own. I became a self-taught private academic often 'whoring' myself to any institution for any amount of pay just to gain experience. I learnt of the unwritten agendas and the price that you had to pay for the learning on the side."

The nomadic existence also held positive aspects. P commented as follows:

[M]y inter- and even intra-disciplinary lives provide me with such a wonderful and rich background and toolbox to engage in and move

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across fields. This is, most probably, the reason why much of my research is collaborative. I love crossing boundaries and reading myself into different fields.

J also felt that she brought along a certain set of skills or capital:

Being outside of the formal academic setting, the corporate setting endowed me with an ability to see the bigger picture, to be and plan strategically, to do a lot with a little. I knew how to manage myself, meet deadlines and to keep on going no matter what. I knew what hard work was, getting up at 4 am and working an 18-hour day, most days of the week.

For P, “all these are symbols of and forms of capital that allow me to negotiate transactions and shape my interactions with others”.

Sites of crisis

The politics of space often leads to sites of crisis in one’s life and career. These sites refer to places and spaces (both personal and career) of crucial points or situations usually involving reflection and change. They are often intense and difficult but always lead to growth and learning. Each space leads to an opportunity of either redemption or re-invention and an eternal process of anxiety to prove oneself worthy.

P: I realise that there was six months of intense trauma between exiting the one location and entering higher education. It was an intense time of recalibration, to use a technical term, a frantic re-assessment of what I have, what is needed, what I don’t have and what it will take to ‘enter’ a phase of (relative) stability. As such the six months in between were characterised by a sense of loss, a sense of deep un-ease with not belonging and a profound sense of possibly never belonging again but also a sense of not-yet-ness. A promise of becoming and being different.

I had a profound sense of the need to perform. It was as if I knew that I was given a second chance, a chance to redeem myself, to find myself, to re-invent myself – and I did.

For J her first site of crisis was the ‘empty nest’ when her children started school:

It provided the ideal context for taking into account where I was, where I had been and where to from now.”

As with P, J equally came to academia with hopes, dreams and expectations:

After being a consultant and self-employed I was just so relieved to find a permanent academic position. I felt invincible. I was going to change the world. I looked forward to having resources such as an office space, access to scholarly work, internet and discourse with colleagues. I brought along a heap of optimism and gratitude. Being in the cutthroat

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corporate setting, I longed for a nurturing space where I could blossom in fertile soil.

Our initial dreams and enchantment did not last long:

J: I soon understood that this measurement culture was quite a fetish. Although I now knew how my work and I would be measured, I had no idea how to go about tasks. Talk about a knowing-doing gap. I could publish, I could teach in a residential setting, but now there were a huge supervision load, community engagement, academic leadership and little guidance. I felt very alone, and anxious, a feeling that I would get to know intimately.

P: [I]ndividuals are constantly classified as rated or non-rated, where papers are accepted or rejected, and where we live in constant anxiety looking out for the writing against the wall.

Being disenchanted seems to be an essential characteristic of being an academic. It is as if even when we have the brief satisfaction of receiving acknowledgement (for example a student completing, an article being accepted for publication or positive feedback on a blog), these moments seem rare. We have both learned that these brief moments where we had glimpses of the initial enchantment and deep satisfaction were short-lived and that we should not be tempted to become re-enchanted.

Implications for doctoral education

For the academic and supervisor who had 'other' career trajectories prior to entering higher education, the anxiety to perform extends beyond mere identity constructs. Feeling awkward, alienated and on the margins might be a permanent state of being. We agree with Braidotti (2011:79) that we have come to "the end of pure and steady identities that have limited our capacity to expand all-too-commonly-held images and beliefs about what it can and should mean to be (an academic or supervisor)". There is no point of levelling off or being 'done'. There are only continuous cycles of being and becoming. This leaves the supervisor entering from the margins underprepared for the various roles and responsibilities.

According to O'Hehir (2014), there is a vast difference between recognising and addressing white privilege and indulging white guilt. White people often have built-in social advantages that they mostly cannot or do not perceive, or they are reluctant to acknowledge the privileges provided. We do however, have the responsibility to be alert to the advantages we may possess, and not take them for granted.

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Although whiteness has certain privileges, entering higher education from the margins or holding part-time positions brings with it certain constraints. Permanent positions allow for career developmental opportunities that provide for an environment where situational learning (Lave 2011) can take place. Over time, with nurturing, recognition and support, the novice supervisor in the pipeline trajectory moves from the periphery into a more central and responsible role. Norms, practices, rules, relationships and structures – as well as the values of the academic culture and ways of being and doing – are instilled. Being in or entering from the margins, one often sees this as a ‘hidden curriculum’ that regularly reinforces existing social inequalities and the perpetuation of unequal distribution of cultural capital. It also maintains the *status quo* related to race, gender and class matters. The (older) supervisor entering from the margins needs sustainable training, support and mentoring as much as the novice supervisor in the ‘pipeline’ track.

From educational psychology we know that a learning environment must be safe and enriching. By safe, we mean an environment that breaks through the sense of isolation and alienation that those entering from the margins might feel. Without a safe environment, the person perpetually feels that he or she is not able to act confidently. This state of affairs maintains the feeling of being an outsider. Acknowledging and nurturing the competencies and talents that those on the margins bring may go a long way in enriching doctoral education and supervisory practices. We should be “thinking with and through differences rather than pushing off of or away from and solidifying difference as less than” (Barad in Juelskjær & Schwennesen 2012:16).

(IN)CONCLUSIONS

In sharing our narratives of fractured and entangled career trajectories we have shared our identities and careers as alternative nomadic heuristics. We have also paid tribute to the political forces, imaginaries and texts that helped and still help to constitute our careers and identities, not as separate entities, but as entangled, embodied becomings, fractured and fracturing the notion of the career as is and the precariousness of its working conditions which produces temporary settlers and resident foreigners (Braidotti 2011:18).

In the context of “academic revolution” (Altbach *et al* 2009) characterised by, but not limited to increasing concerns about “academic capitalism” (Rhoades & Slaughter 2004), the impact of funding constraints, the rise of the all-administrative university (Giroux 2014) and changing faculty appointment regimes (Scott 2012), we have to seriously consider supervisory identities and career trajectories as entangled in the constant crisis or interregnum in higher education, caught in a liminal space

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of perpetual change. Nomadic identities might well become the new normal in the future career trajectories of supervisors in doctoral education and as such may alter the rules of the game and challenge the current master codes.

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