

## **P2 Beaumaris 1 Thursday 6 December 16.45 - 17.15**

### ***Exploring embodied academic identity through creative research methods: A video essay (0417)***

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Higher Education research is conventionally disseminated through papers, book chapters, talks and presentations. The use of film or video essays, whilst more common in anthropological and ethnographic disciplines (see journals such as *Journal for Embodied Research* and the *Journal for Video Ethnography*), is still a more unusual mode of dissemination within education. However, film is a medium that is able to capture and share the emotion of experiences in a way that is able to 'haunt' or affect and stay with the audience (Wilson, 2018). As such, it seems an appropriate mode to share and disseminate work that uses creative methodology designed to elicit and capture personal and emotional stories.

This paper is to screen a 20 minute video essay that draws from a study funded by the Society for Research into Higher Education in 2016 that used visual and creative methods to explore embodied academic identity. My approach to researching embodied academic identity was authentic to my background and training as a somatic movement therapist and practitioner.

Embodiment is a contested concept (Sheets-Johnstone, 2015). When I use it, I mean both a state of being and an on-going process of bringing conscious self-awareness to the body, mind, feelings, images, thoughts and emotions. I use the word embodiment as a signifier, as it is understood as a meaningful word (though that meaning may be different depending on disciplinary perspective). It is commonly understood to concern the mind/body connection, or the presence of the meaty, fleshy, breathing body in the world. My understanding came through the practice of yoga, integrative bodywork and movement therapy, and authentic movement over the last 30 years.

Many Western somatic approaches are connected to, or influenced by the practice of yoga or martial arts (Johnson, 1995). Cultural differences have led to diverse systems of thought in the East and the West, and different holistic and analytical approaches to movement and the body can be explained in part by these (Bailey, 2001). If embodied practice is understood as any practice that leads to an increased conscious self-awareness, then by extension there are many different forms of embodied practice. Many academics enjoy an embodied practice of some kind outside of work, in addition to those who explicitly engage in one as part of their academic practice. In my study I asked participants to self-identify as having an embodied practice, so

my own interpretations and definitions did not limit who might take part.

I met with 12 academics from a variety of disciplines including sociology, maths, drama, dance, music and anthropology, with a range of seniority from PhD student to professor. Each self-identified as having an embodied practice and reflected on their experiences of academic life and work (Malcolm & Zukas, 2009). Meetings took place in studios, and were on average two hours long. I asked the participants to reflect on their academic identity, to share their embodied practice with me, and to reflect on what it meant to them through drawing, talking, moving and sharing. The data were multimodal and included video footage, drawings, representations, transcripts and my own reflective journal.

As a methodology it evoked honesty and openness with strangers, and created a fertile ground for expression of experience, feeling, and constructions of identity. However, it challenged traditional ideas of what counts as rigorous methodology and practice within higher education. As such it serves to disrupt the traditional hegemony of the Cartesian disembodied body/mind (Russell, 1946). Although this approach has similarities to posthumanist work (Barad, 2007) it draws on philosophical and practical theory grounded in the bodily and embodied experience.

In the context of investigating sensitive issues such as those around embodied identity, these methods, which use embodied methods to explore embodied research questions, may feel the most appropriate (Brown & Leigh, 2018). These approaches lie along the boundary of therapy and research, asking much of both researcher and researched (Leigh, 2018). Similarly, the data themselves lie on the boundary of art and research, in that they can be seen as more than a tool to facilitate reflection, but as artifacts in their own right.

In my writings I took an autoethnographic stance, as I was very aware that my own understanding and positionality were very much a part of the stories in the data. This allowed me to begin to process my own story of being an academic, having a movement practice, being ill, and coming to terms with the constraints and pressures of operating within the academy.

This essay however, was edited from over 18 hours of footage as a collaboration with a visual anthropologist filmmaker. It takes an anthropological perspective to provoke questions around identity, embodied practice, creative methods and the vulnerability of researchers and researched (Csordas, 2002). It tells a different story from the more conventional outputs that I have written and presented on this study. The collaboration put me in a more vulnerable position, as I did not have the control over what was seen or not seen. The filmmaker told the stories that she saw in the data.

The essay is about the pain and emotion and struggles of being an academic in the current climate, and how the creative methods allowed all of us to share our stories.

After the film I will ask the audience to consider whether the use of film provoked more honesty in research participants? Whether a film screening allows more emotional connection with its audience? And how does this kind of research approach and dissemination compare to more traditional forms – is it riskier? If so, for whom? What else could this approach bring to the academy?

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