

Varied starting points and pathways: A duoethnographic exploration of 'diverse' students' uneven capacities to aspire to doctoral education

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This article argues that the language of 'diversity' does multidirectional work – highlighting issues of social justice, as well as obscuring the varied experiences of those gathered underneath its umbrella (Ahmed, 2012). It builds on existing debates about widening participation in higher education, arguing that nuanced accounts of 'diversity' and doctoral aspiration are required. We present a duoethnographic text about two doctoral students' pathways to study. While both students may be positioned as 'diverse' within their institution's equity policy – as a sexuality minority student, and a working-class woman of Māori and European heritage – they reveal dissimilar expectations of what university study was, or could be. These histories of imagining the university shaped their trajectories into and through doctoral study. Drawing on Appadurai's (2004) work, we argue that aspiration can be a transformative force for 'diverse' doctoral students, even if the map that informs aspiration is unevenly distributed. We then investigate why the idea of the 'academic good life' might have such aspirational pull for politically-engaged practitioners of minority discourse (Chuh, 2013). The article makes two primary contributions. First, we call for more multifaceted understandings of doctoral 'diversity', and for further reflection about the ways that social difference continues to shape academic aspiration. And second, we demonstrate the potential for duoethnography to provide insights into the experiences of ourselves and an-Other through a shared examination of university imaginings.

Keywords: diversity; aspiration; doctoral education; duoethnography; first-generation students; indigenous students; sexuality; social class.

Introduction

This article critically examines the intersection of categories of social difference and the capacity to aspire to doctoral education. It is informed by a growing body of research that has explored increasing access and participation in higher education (Archer, 2007; McCulloch & Stokes, 2007; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Sellar & Gale, 2011), and more specifically, the ways that social difference shapes doctoral student aspiration, experience and achievement (Gay, 2004; Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Maccauley & Ryland, 2011; Solorzano, 1998). It is our goal in this article to foreground the

complicated and messy edges of diversity and doctoral aspiration. We extend existing debates in the field by offering a close account of the ways in which doctoral subjectivities may be shaped by early imaginings of the university. Drawing on the emerging research methodology of duoethnography, we share a critical dialogue about our own curricula of be(com)ing academics. At the university in which we both undertook doctoral study, we are hailed as members of ‘equity groups’ and described as part of ‘the University’s diverse communities’ (Blinded). However, as a middle-class Pākehā¹ sexuality minority student, and a working-class woman of Māori and European heritage, our personal histories with regard to the university are varied. In this article we take our duoethnographic conversation as data, and critically read the text to trace the circulation of meanings related to the aspiration for an academic life. In particular, we draw on Appadurai’s (2004) work to argue that aspiration can be a transformative force for students who are positioned as ‘diverse’ within the academy, even though the ‘map’ which informs aspiration may be unevenly distributed. We then weave in a second strand of analysis. Taking up Chuh’s (2013) work on minority discourse practitioners, we explore why we, as ‘others’ within the academy, continue to invest in the idea of the doctorate as leading to ‘The Good Life’. We conclude the paper by arguing that if debates about ‘diverse’ doctoral students wish to work toward social justice ends, they need to pay greater attention to the uneven mobilities that become clustered under diversity’s umbrella.

Locating interest in doctoral diversity

Much of the existing research surrounding diversity and doctoral education has sought to unsettle imaginings of the ideal doctoral candidate as ‘young, male, full-time, with few other commitments’ (Pearson, Cumming, Evans, Maccauley & Ryland, 2011, p. 528), and has tracked the ways in which institutions can better serve their ‘non-traditional’ doctoral students (Naidoo, 2015). Indeed, this work on the diversity of the doctoral cohort has increasingly become a necessity, given the demographic shifts to doctoral populations across the Global North in recent decades (Pearson, Evans & Macauley, 2008). While historically, doctoral students may have been a relatively homogenous group, in a country like Aotearoa/New Zealand (the location of the present study) today’s doctoral cohort is increasingly ‘diverse’. Since 2009, there have been increases in the participation of Māori and Pasifika² students, with enrolments in both groups having risen over 20 per cent by 2014 (NZ Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4). In 2014 there were also more women than men enrolled to study doctorates, as well as a higher proportion of women graduating with doctorates than men. However, the key driver for diversification in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been international students, who comprise 44 percent of the country’s total doctoral student population (NZ Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 3).

Like Sara Ahmed (2012), we are interested in the project of ‘following diversity around’ (p. 1) within higher education institutions. Ahmed’s (2012) work examines the performative role that the language of diversity plays within universities. While institutions appear to be increasingly comfortable with ‘diversity’ as a concept, some critics have wondered about the disappearance of other words such as ‘equality’, ‘equal opportunities’ and ‘social justice’, which arguably have a more ‘critical edge’ (Ahmed, 2012, p. 1). It is suggested that the replacement term of ‘diversity’ is more palatable for the managerial university, as a focus on diversity works to ‘conceal the continuation of systematic inequalities within universities’ (p. 53). While Ahmed’s work emerges from the UK and Australia, and most often connects the language of diversity to non-white bodies, within the institution where we undertook doctoral study, the term is used in an encompassing way to discuss ‘equity groups’ – such as Māori, Pacific peoples, people with disabilities, LGBTI people, those from

¹ A Māori term for people of non-Māori descent, typically of European origins.

² Māori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand. ‘Pasifika peoples’ is a term widely used in Aotearoa/New Zealand to describe communities that have migrated from the South Pacific Islands.

refugee backgrounds, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and ‘men or women where there are barriers to access and success’ (Blinded).

As a number of feminist and critical race scholars working across higher education and critical management studies have argued (Ahmed, 2012; Ahmed & Swan, 2006; Benschop, 2001; Mirza, 2006; Taylor, 2013), research done under the name of ‘diversity’ may have a number of political limitations. It is Ahmed’s view, for example, that such research often ‘becomes translated into mission speech, turning stories of diversity and equality into institutional success stories’ (2012, p. 10). As she notes, there is much less research which foregrounds the complex and messy realities of diversity’s enactment within higher education institutions, and the critical angles that such enactments obscure. In the sections that follow, we provide further empirical flesh to Ahmed’s (2012) argument. Our intention throughout this article is not to argue against diversity per se. Instead, we are much more interested in tracking the varied starting points and pathways of those hailed thus, and exploring the impacts these various positionings may have on the capacity to aspire to doctoral study.

The duoethnographic method

Duoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that was created by Joe Norris and Richard Sawyer in 2003 (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). In subsequent years duoethnography has been increasingly used across social science research (Grant & Radcliffe, 2015; Madden & McGregor, 2013; Norris & Sawyer, 2012). Duoethnography possesses significant connections to other approaches to research which employ dialogical and collaborative methods, particularly those that have emerged from feminist and queer scholars³. These links can also be seen in collaborative autoethnography approaches (Martinez & Andreatta, 2015) and collaborative writing as a method of inquiry (Wyatt, Gale, Gannon, Davies, Denzin & St. Pierre, 2014). While duoethnography has clear connections to other approaches, it explicitly invites researchers to engage with issues of lived difference through a shared conversation. This emphasis on conversation marks duoethnography as different from other dialogical methods which may be based on writing, for example. Duoethnography is also distinctive because it foregrounds interacting narratives and the researchers themselves as the locus of the research (Breault, 2016). In framing duoethnography as a methodology, Norris and Sawyer draw upon Pinar’s (1975) concept of ‘currere’, which views a person’s life as a curriculum where one’s present abilities, skills, knowledge and beliefs were acquired and learned. They describe duoethnography as ‘a collaborative research methodology in which two or more researchers of difference juxtapose their life histories to provide multiple understandings of the world’ (Norris & Sawyer, 2012, p. 9). Duoethnographers are called to examine the role that their life history plays in meaning-making and behaviour. Rather than necessarily seeking universal truths or tidy consensus in meaning, duoethnography foregrounds experiences of difference.

Research context

Our first experience of duoethnography occurred at a workshop offered by Norris in our first doctoral year. As an exercise during his workshop, Norris invited pairs to begin on a duoethnography of their own. As we participated in this exercise we became intrigued by the possibilities duoethnography could offer for re-thinking our own academic identities. We saw an opportunity to learn about

³ There are a number of examples of feminist scholarship that draw on collaborative research approaches. An early example of this type of work is found in Karen Sayer and Gail Fisher’s (1997), ‘Something vaguely heretical: Communication across distance in the country’, where the researchers examined their class experiences by writing letters to each other. A more recent example is Berlant and Edelman’s (2014) *Sex, or the Unbearable*, which uses dialogue as an experimental form of theoretical production.

ourselves through Norris's methodological framework, which seemed to provide welcome space for dialogue with an-other at a key transition point in our 'academicity' (Petersen, 2007). Our duoethnography took shape as an approximately hour-long conversation focussed around a central question: 'how have we come to know the university?'. This conversation was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by the researchers. In the section that follows we have reproduced edited sections of this transcript. The speakers in the text are JB (a middle-class Pākehā sexuality minority doctoral student in his 20s) and CM (a working-class woman of Māori and European heritage in her 30s). Both JB and CM studied in the same faculty of education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, and are researchers in the field of doctoral education. We allow this transcript to do its own performative work, before analysing it in the sections that follow.

Be(com)ing academics: A duoethnographic conversation

JB: I grew up around the university. It was definitely very familiar place for me. We lived in a university town, and my Mum was an academic. University felt comfortable, my Mum had an office on the top floor and there was often no one around in her building. So as a kid I'd sometimes go there after school or on sick days. If I had an assignment to do for high school I could get books from the library, or use the printers. Mum's office was a quiet place for me to work in. I had a friend whose Dad was an academic too, and I knew the university quite well. Ultimately, I guess I was just a kid running around the uni, occupying that space.

CM: Did it feel normal to you?

JB: Yeah, it was just Mum's work.

CM: So, when did you know you'd go to university?

JB: I can't remember a moment in my life when I wasn't going to go. It wasn't a conscious thought, it was an unspoken expectation. Preferably I would study something 'useful', but of course I would go. I wasn't an athletic kid, I was a queer kid. It felt like there were no other options. I couldn't just suddenly decide to be a mechanic. And it was a strong expectation in my family that going to university is what you do. My Mum was one of the first in her family to go to university, but my Dad never had the opportunity, so it has become a part of the way my family talks about success. It was unthinkable when I was growing up to imagine not getting a university qualification.

CM: You know, for me, this kind of ordinariness about the university didn't exist. It wasn't a normal part of my life. My earliest memories of The University are in third or fourth form at high school and watching *Brideshead Revisited*⁴ re-runs. University seemed to me to be a place of privilege. People were sophisticated, charming, well dressed, good looking – and clever. They were also British, and witty! It was a seductive image. I had this dream of going to Oxford, which was so far beyond my college in regional New Zealand. It was this exclusive better world of grand buildings and fine places. It was a fantasy. Outside of a few teachers, I didn't know a single person who'd been to uni. In that sense I locate myself in a different position to you in terms of my journey into higher education and class background and so on.

⁴ This refers to the television serial *Brideshead Revisited* (Lindsay-Hogg & Sturridge, 1981). The story of *Brideshead* explores the social tensions associated with class, religion, desire and duty in the United Kingdom. It centres on the character of Charles Ryder and his relationship with the aristocratic Flyte family. The story is first set in the 1940s, but much of the early part of the narrative takes place in the 1920s, at the University of Oxford. Audiences are transported to Oxford via Charles's memories to his time as a young student and his serendipitous meeting with the beautiful and eccentric Lord Sebastian Flyte. The television adaptation closely follows the narrative of the original novel of the same name by Evelyn Waugh which was published shortly after the end of World War II.

I guess when I was dreaming of going to uni, while not fully understanding what uni meant, I was strongly propelled by the vision of determining my own path, and being independent and that kind of translated into economic independence. It was about practical considerations of how I could look after and decide for myself. And that is why I chose law.

JB: I recall something from our earlier conversation when you said you didn't have the audacity to think you should enjoy your studies, or that it could be fun or stimulating - it was work. I noticed when you said that, because it was different to my experience. I expected that university would be fun and stimulating! The intersection where our stories met was doing first year law, but we made different choices. You decided to stay and I decided to change courses. I remember being anxious about telling my Mum I wanted to shift majors, as she was trained as a lawyer. But I understood it like this: I wanted to do the best I could, I recall thinking 'If I do law I won't be, there are other students who are better at this than me. I am better at cultural studies, political science, subjects like that'. That's how I justified it. So I studied literature, and film and classical studies, I guess you could call them 'academicy' rather than necessarily career-driven subjects.

CM: Was that brave?

JB: No, not really. I was just following my interests, and I thought I would get a liberal arts education, and follow that up with a post grad degree. I thought I was going to be a diplomat so I decided to learn a second language. That was my narrative. It fitted too because my Mum never wanted me to be an academic. She didn't see me with all of the committees, and all of what she saw as the bullshit of academia. She hoped I would work for a large organisation, travel abroad, that was the vision I think she had for me. I recall her message was 'dream bigger', that I might come back to being an academic, but that wasn't where I should initially set my sights.

CM: Interesting, when you talk about your family's sense of dreams and hopes for you, I notice I can't pinpoint what dreams or visions my family had for me. I can't recall any conversation or behaviour that indicates that they dreamed anything in particular, outside of getting a job. I know they would have had hopes for my future, but I can't really identify them. My parents never said anything, outside of the odd comment about being good at school, so I had to dream for myself. It would have been encouraging for people to have had big dreams for me, but on the other hand I didn't feel pressured, or restricted. I had a lot of intellectual space, which was perhaps constrained by my lack of knowledge and self-belief. I could choose for myself, but I don't know if I necessarily made the right choices! I operated from a solitary position in the sense of going to university as the first in my Whānau⁵, and right or wrong I had to work it out for myself. Thinking back, it would have been nice to have people support me in those terms, but it was not a part of my family discourse.

JB: This is interesting to reflect on. I think a lot of my emphasis on being a bright student was connected to sexual identity, and my need to develop self-worth and options for myself. I had to be good at something because I was an abject failure in the areas of gender and sexuality in rural South Canterbury! All I had was being brainy. I would always try and talk to Mum and Dad about it. But the thing is, I think they always expected I'd get good reports, so they never made much of a fuss.

CM: Funny, my parents are similar. I remember my whole life my Dad had a particular seat, 'the right chair' at the table and he used to take our reports and look at them for 30 seconds

⁵ This is a Māori-language (and increasingly New Zealand English) word for extended family.

and then say ‘that’s good dear’ and fold it in half and stick it in the jar behind his chair. My parents certainly didn’t keep track of that stuff, I am sure that they liked that I was good, quite good, at school, but it just wasn’t a focus. And in fact other things came before my studies really. My Dad, decided to buy a fish and chip shop when I was 13, and as a result of that, I had to work six nights a week, after school, for the next three years, including School C⁶. So, I remember begging not go to work, cause I hated it, and because I wanted to study for my exams. Interestingly, my sense of being good at school came from primary school, it became a pigeon hole within the family. I just remember thinking when I was very young: it is good to be smart. That connected later on with how to have a good life, I thought the only way I could do that was through education. I had a very modest dream, that was motivated by the idea of independence and security - that is what I saw in uni. That is what I held onto into despite hating secondary school.

JB: Yes, I am connecting to your idea of security, and as you say that I can see that it did partly represent economic security for me as well. But ultimately I think most of it was cultural security. ‘How can I have a good life, as a queer person? What options are available to me? What kind of job will let me become myself?’ It was also a way of boosting myself up amid the bullying and awfulness of high school. I think my attitude was ‘well fine, I will get to ‘the end’, and I will be Dr whatever’. And I am still in that space to some extent. I think a PhD is still a source of pride and self-esteem for me, among other things. I wonder if this is a common thing for queer kids, whether we have bought into the idea of the university as leading to something better?

CM: Yeah, the promises of university were really big. But then I didn’t really know what an academic was. For me, it still represents lots of things that I am not, lots of things that are better than I am, I guess. In some ways I approach my own studies, with a kind of survival tendency, or with uncertainty and hesitancy.

JB: I can see that, I can hear some of the uncertainty – and I notice too my privilege to be more playful. In fact I often have positioned myself as an activist in the university, thinking: I need to rark you guys up! In some ways I guess I have developed quite a lot of confidence about being in the university, we have spoken about this as a difference between ourselves.

CM: I don’t want to name it in a way that isn’t helpful, but I look back at my distant idea of going to uni, and my thought that I would never get there, and just keeping on going. It was sort of like ‘Oh I might do that, it might be ok, I will just keep going’. This sort of mirrors how I approach things now. I wonder what that means, people are capable of growth and change! But things haven’t shifted enormously for me.

JB: That’s interesting that you say that. That’s different to how I viewed you when I saw you at the duoethnography session. I was impressed by how confident and chatty you seemed!

CM: Sometimes, I wonder about the gaps between the understandings we have of ourselves, and our academic identities, and how others see us. I think the anxiety and uncertainty has had quite an impact on how I have achieved. I was worrying about my place, worrying about what to do at the end of it that will earn money. For a long time I couldn’t commit to my work because I didn’t have a clear vision of my future, so that made me quite easily confused. So that’s why it took me quite a long time to find a way forward that was right for me. You know? It also makes me think of mentors or people around you that can provide some guidance, and how powerful that can be for those who aren’t native to universities.

⁶ School Certificate was a New Zealand qualification for secondary school students in Year 11 (formerly Form 5).

Other academics and working class, women, and indigenous writers have talked about the alien nature of academia too.

JB: Yes. Whereas I think the main part where I come unstuck as a university native is around queerness – the rest of my background prepared me to fit in quite well really. I am trying to pick out some of the key narratives we have been talking about. You mentioned that part of this is having a good enough job, but there seems to be something more, like a social justice narrative as well?

CM: Yeah. The more people that see themselves reflected, having greater diversity within the academy, the more people understand they can also be a part of it.

JB: And perhaps that desire for visibility is something we share. I want to make a contribution as a visibly queer academic. Being in this position is important to me, so I try and make space for my difference to be present and seen. I wonder if it would be fair to say we see ourselves as part of a broader process of creating more space for people like us in the university?

CM: Yeah, but when I say that, I soon want to add for myself that in a small way. Talking about social justice is a kind of grand narrative, and I am interested in small stories too and the human aspects of being or becoming an academic.

JB: Yeah. The interesting thing for me is how some of this identity stuff works. I take some of the pains of my educational past, and re-purpose them. I write about queer. I am quite good at incorporating my 'other' and my native identity, and making it work for me. I want to acknowledge I have the language and capital, and confidence to do this: 'Yeah I am queer, and I am going to base my career on this' and um, try and get some scholarships!

CM: I have quite a conflicted sense of dealing with some of the deficit discourse around being a first-generation student, and knowing what some of the research says about who gets the jobs etcetera. How, you position some of your experiences of oppression into strengths is really powerful. So I am wondering, what is the gift or the value in living, as I do, with so much uncertainty within academia? What is the good in me being conflicted, how can I reframe that, or how can I understand what that gives me? I hear some of the things you say, and I think. 'I am on the wrong team! I am never going to make it, if I am this worried about my research proposal – give it up'

JB: That question – what is the value of my position – sounds like a really interesting thing to unpick. Maybe the gift of your anxiety is a critical gift? What does it help you to understand about being a first generation PhD student? Hesitance, and uncertainty themselves might have some positive attributes – perhaps they open onto carefulness, deliberation, attentiveness? What I am noticing now is that we both have a similar concern for those who experience feelings of alienation in academia. So in some ways our journeys come to another meeting point. We cross, separate, re-join, it is like a figure 8. I'm also trying to understand some of the negative feelings I feel in higher education as both potentially problematic, and valuable. This is not to say that feeling depressed, for example, is great everyone should stick with it. I want to acknowledge it, and acknowledge that its presence can offer some critical feedback on what it may be like for some of us to be involved in higher education itself.

CM: And the need to challenge the individualistic, Tory voting, competitive....

JB: ...white, hetero, neoliberal values. And I think that we, in small ways with our bodies, and writing, can make some trouble.

Analysing our duoethnographic data

The duoethnographic text that appears above is the current version of an audio-recorded conversation that took place near to the beginning of the doctoral experiences of both of the authors. While the text that has been printed is around 2,500 words, the initial transcript was over 8,000. In preparing this manuscript for publication the two authors discussed which aspects of the conversation might be kept in order to highlight meanings that we could discern about our curricula of be(com)ing as doctoral students, as well as which parts of the text might be cut. In initial stages of revising the transcript, we eliminated areas of repetition within the text as well as digressions from the key topic of becoming a doctoral student and our histories of learning about the university. Further edits were made to the transcript for its performance at a conference (blinded) and a scholarly meeting (blinded). As such, the transcript has been altered and revised a number of times over a lengthy period of time. This means it should be understood as a text that has been re-constructed to enable the researchers to explore elements within the original transcript. One point to note about our construction of the transcript is our clear intention to leave in moments of vulnerability (e.g. moments of misrecognition, interjections, revealing privilege or its lack) that both of us might have wished to erase to protect ourselves from discomfort. We let these parts of the transcript stand because we understand that difficult conversations about educational starting points and pathways require vulnerability, and we hope that they may enable learning opportunities for others. We will return to the challenges that this caused us in the concluding section of this article.

In terms of the analytic method, we were interested in what might be possible if we employed multiple analytic approaches to the close reading of the text we had produced. Following Honan and colleagues (2000), we sought to offer multiple readings of the same data, with the knowledge that multiple readings and varying theoretical approaches influence ‘what can be found in the data and how it can be found there’ (Honan et al, 2000, p. 9). In terms of process, both of the researchers began by independently reading the revised transcript alongside the theoretical resources they had accumulated for their own doctoral studies. CMs doctoral study focused on first-generation doctoral students (blinded) and so her reading of the text paid particular attention to educational aspiration as a phenomenon related to social class (e.g. Appadurai, 2004; Bok, 2010). JB’s doctoral study also explored doctoral aspiration but focused on animating queer concepts in this context (blinded), and so his initial analytic reading drew more heavily on these (e.g. Berlant, 2011; Chuh, 2013). While each of the authors offered their own initial reading of the text based on their intellectual curiosities it would be wrong to suggest that each of the authors ‘owns’ the voice produced below in any literal sense. The reality is much messier than this. While each of the authors drafted an initial reading, both authors have collaborated to produce the final versions that are now offered. We have written onto, over and alongside each other’s voices in the careful and clumsy ways that close colleagues do. In the end, the two readings we offer are variegated. We acknowledge that this variety might produce some bumpiness for readers, but paraphrasing Grant et al. (2016) we stand by this as an intentional strategy, after all student identities are ‘themselves bumpy rides for those who inhabit them’ (p. 130).

The following two parts of the article now explore our reflections on our aspirations to higher education and what this might teach us about our ongoing doctoral subjectivities. CM drafted this initial discussion.

University orientations: Engagements with the imagination and aspiration

While JB and I both shared aspirations for higher education, the ideas that underpinned these aspirations were strikingly different and reveal the impact of our varied socio-economic locations. As someone who was geographically, socially and culturally distanced from the university, my notions of

it were largely shaped by indirect forces. In addition to some influence from teachers and school, my imaginings were fashioned through often serendipitous encounters with the cultural narratives made available by popular media, especially those in film and television. This was different from JB's experience, which was grounded in the concrete realities of his childhood experiences. JB's curriculum of be(com)ing enabled him to view people like him (e.g. his mother) occupying university settings, whereas the impression I had gained from watching film and television was that inhabitants of the university were highly privileged people who looked nothing like me. University-goers seemed to reside in grand places that bore little resemblance to my own working-class world.

A wide body of scholars have written about the ways in which class positioning shapes an individual's sense of possibility and aspiration (Appadurai, 2004; Bok, 2010; Mahony and Zmroczek, 1997). For example, Appadurai (2004) argues that aspiration extends beyond any simple notion of an individual's wants and preferences for themselves, and must be viewed as a cultural phenomenon. As he puts it, aspirations are 'always formed in the interaction and thick of social life' (2004, p. 67). In this way, the capacity to aspire should be understood as something that is unevenly distributed because the well-off:

have a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes ... [and] are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors and pathways. (2004, p. 68)

Appadurai further describes the capacity to aspire as the ability to read 'a map of a journey into the future' (2004, p. 76). Bok (2010) extends this argument, stating 'for students to develop their capacity to aspire, other people within their local communities and those that they encounter in their daily lives must have experience navigating particular fields and pathways' (p. 164).

For students from lower socio-economic backgrounds there may be fewer opportunities to access cultural experiences of the university to inform their aspirations. Certainly, my own 'map' of the university did not contain many clearly marked coordinates. As I revealed in our duoethnographic text, the university I imagined was not even in my home country of Aotearoa/New Zealand. It was the University of Oxford, in the United Kingdom, from some time in the distant past. In the university of my imagination, an individual needed to be incredibly intelligent to first get there, and then to gain a degree. This made it hard for me to ever imagine being a university student, as I understood myself in much more ordinary ways.

In his discussion of the notion of imagined worlds and the mediascapes that contribute to them, Appadurai (1996) highlights the significance of distance on individual and social imaginings. He says:

what is most important about these mediascapes is that they provide (especially in their television, film ... forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narrative, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world ... The lines between the realistic and the fictional landscapes they see are blurred, so that the farther away these audiences are from the direct experiences of metropolitan life, the more likely they are to construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects. (p. 35).

The historic and somewhat fantastic university of my imagination highlights the impact of my distance from the world of higher education and clearly fits with Appadurai's description of the effects of mediascapes on those far from 'metropolitan' centres. However, going to university still seemed to be a way to have a good, and secure life. The idea of freedom from economic struggle represented something very important for a young working-class woman like myself. While my imaginings of the university were elaborate, and in many ways disconnected from the realities of higher education in Aotearoa/New Zealand, they remained meaningful. They provided ways for me

to plan, undertake action, and persevere. Despite my own unfamiliarity with the university, and limited knowledge to imagine an academic career, the haphazard collection of various fictional representations of the university that I encountered did contribute to my ability to aspire. The filmic images of academics in flowing black capes, and grand buildings with perfectly manicured lawns were deeply compelling. This university, as I understood it to be, was something quite spectacular and I was inspired to pursue it.

However, my own limited knowledge about the university has also had troublesome effects on my ability to negotiate higher education. The filmic constructions of the university that provided a backdrop to my imaginings represented a world (if it ever really existed) of a very particular group of privileged people. It did not highlight the more complex ways the university can affect the lives of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Indeed, as Reay (2003) observes, 'the recent emphasis on widening participation and access to higher education assumes a uniformly positive process, yet in reality, particularly for working-class students, is often confusing and fraught with difficulties' (p. 301). Taylor (2007) also argues that the emphasis on efforts to widen participation can function to 'ignore and divert attention from the subsequent experiences of working-class students who have often, rather precariously "made it"; who uncomfortably exist within higher education institutions' (p. 35).

Moreover, recognition of the realities of complex and contradictory experiences of non-traditional students within higher education do not seem to significantly affect or shape the almost uniformly positive messages or narratives about the university that abound in popular culture. This is an issue which takes on more weight if we consider the resources students at distance from the university have in terms of higher education knowledge or experience to assess the claims on offer. I now recognise that a more nuanced view of the university, and how it impacts on the lives of diverse students, is required. As Sellar, Gale and Parker (2011) observe the problem of achieving equitable outcomes, rather than only focusing on access to higher education 'is more complex than simply encouraging people to aspire in terms that will potentially see the promised returns recede in front of them' (p. 47).

In my case, my limited understandings of what a university education 'does' became apparent upon the completion of my first degree. Despite my happiness about graduating, I also experienced a sense of disillusionment as I found that the rewards I believed would be associated with studying did not exist in the ways I had naively assumed they would. Despite the considerable efforts I had made to become the first person in my family to go to university, and the significant personal and financial costs I had borne, I found myself unsure of what I should do at the end of my bachelors study. By this point too, I had realised that by pursuing a degree in law I had not chosen a career pathway that I particularly wanted to follow. I am not alone here. Transitions from university into employment, or from undergraduate study to postgraduate, can be challenging for many students, however, I believe this was exacerbated by my lack of understanding about how to map a successful pathway after the completion of my first degree. The impact of my simplistic understandings of the university meant I took a longer route to reach doctoral study, and to pursue the academic role I now hold in a polytechnic.

These reflections of my early academic endeavours are based on my memories, and are distanced by time from the days of my transition to university as a school leaver in the mid-1990s. Critics may consider them to be largely redundant with regard to my doctoral experience, especially if, in Bourdieusian⁷ terms, I have subsequently developed a significant amount of educational capital over

⁷ Bourdieu (1986) defines different kinds of capital or assets that an individual can possess. In addition to economic capital (control over economic resources) he identifies: cultural capital, which represents forms of knowledge, skills and education a person has; social capital, as the resources available to an individual by virtue of their group membership or social

time. However, I argue that my early ideas about the university continue to shape my academic identity. I am still mobilised by dreams of transformation through education, and seeking opportunities for an academic ‘good life’, although I now have a better understanding of the complications and contradictions associated with this aspiration for higher education.

Most importantly, following Appadurai’s (2004) metaphor, I think about the availability of navigational information in terms of my capacity to aspire; to set goals, identify pathways, and construct narratives which will aid me, or otherwise, to chart my doctoral and academic life. While I recognise the research picture remains unclear, there are indications that non-traditional doctoral students may, in general, not be as successful as other students in gaining access to the academy. A survey of the literature about access to the US professoriate by Kniffin (2007) for example, suggests that first-generation students who move into academic roles are still less likely to be found working at prestigious academic institutions. This reality is something I think about as I look toward completing my doctoral studies, and any further transitions in my academic life.

Aspiration, the doctorate, and ‘the good life’

Drawing on the juxtaposition of our stories, CM has illustrated the impacts of the uneven distribution of capacities to aspire to HE. As our text details, my own (JB) middle-class background, and familiarity with the university, gave me greater resources with which to dream in its direction. As CM noted earlier, not only did I know what a university looked like and know people who had been to, and worked there; there were expectations that this was a place where I would go, and knowledge within my family and social world to assist me in getting there. As a child I had already spent many hours inside a university. Often I would play in my mother’s office, spinning on her chair or drawing on her whiteboard. Other times I would be set loose in the library while she collected her books. Unlike CM, I never imagined university students as the kind of people who wore expensive clothes and spoke in unfamiliar accents. Had I seen the *Brideshead Revisited* reruns CM saw, I suspect I would have been more likely to have located them in a particular time (the 1920s) and place (The University of Oxford). Rather than the glamorous and ‘filmic’ image CM describes, my experience of the university led me to believe that students were probably like adult versions of myself. Indeed, my early experiences of the university were located at an institution with a strong agricultural focus. So rather than academic gowns or fine suits, my early memories include rows of gumboots⁸ lined up outside the library. These memories paint quite a different picture of the university, perhaps one that is more humble and accessible to someone like me. So comprehensive was my map of the university, that I often felt confident, comfortable, and even playful, as I navigated my higher education journey.

It was not until I began the duoethnographic conversation with CM that I recognised the significant gaps in our stories of becoming. Sitting face-to-face with my friend, hearing her story and sharing my own, shifted my consciousness. While I was already painfully aware of institutionalized normativities around sexuality and gender in education, I was called to contemplate the impacts of whiteness, and class positioning on my own capacity to aspire, and that of my friend. That I arrived at such a realisation attests to the value of duoethnography as a methodology that can bring participants to new understandings about the impacts of difference (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). However, the reality that the force of this understanding arrived at such a late stage in my postgraduate education has also generated feelings of embarrassment. Indeed, publishing the transcript of our encounter has felt challenging for the both of us. We have been self-conscious about the people who appear on the page, and as emerging academic subjects we have felt tempted to tidy these people up, by erasing their ignorance and naivety. As identified earlier, we edited our text, in order to fit the confines of

network. He further introduces the concept of symbolic capital which refers to the degree of accumulated prestige or honour a person possesses.

⁸ Gumboots are the New Zealand English word the rubber boots that UK English speakers might call “Wellingtons”.

this article, but have endeavoured to leave in many of the revealing, awkward and uncomfortable parts, in order for them to be available for others to read and consider. For myself, a result of this conversation has been to reflect on what I can do as a colleague, teacher, and supervisor to address the kinds of educational inequalities that are illuminated by the interplay of our stories.

In her reflection, CM identified the ways in which aspiration is differently constructed for students at a distance from the university. I agree that we ought not simply take the widening participation agenda alone as symbolic of a reduction in educational hierarchies. What does messaging about a new more open and welcoming university actually *do*? Does, for example, the rise of this 'accessible aspiration-talk' actually efface the enduring impacts of educational inequalities? As our narrative suggests, simply because students (like CM and myself) are encouraged to aspire to HE, does not mean that we are equally resourced to do so. I agree with Taylor (2013), who has expressed concern about the ways in which newly accessible, 'diversified' higher education institutions have become linked to 'individual choice as an option, where individuals ('responsible parent', 'meritocratic student') should capitalize on and maximize for themselves' (p. 244). Indeed, this idea that the university is accessible for all who aspire to it can serve to position those who point out its ongoing inequalities and 'sore points' (Ahmed, 2012) as 'anachronistic,' rather than the inequalities themselves being recognised in this way. A key message of our conversation then, is that class is not a 'relic of the past' (Taylor, 2012, p. 6). What is required instead, is further analysis and action that addresses the ways it endures.

In the remainder of my reflection I wish to stay with the scene of aspiration to university, and what dreams of HE might *do* for particular constituencies of students. The social agent who I pursue in my reading of our duoethnographic text is the 'unconventional or counterhegemonic' (anti-racist, queer, feminist etc) doctoral student (Chuh 2013). In thinking about this subject what I am seeking to do is to examine the reproduction of fantasies 'that frame and condition our expectations of ourselves, each other and academic work' (Chuh, 2013, p. 1). Reflecting on this issue, Chuh asks us to consider the following questions: 'Why *this* attachment? How, in this context, do we relate to aspirations to academia? How do we relate to or apprehend our own aspirations of and to academia?' (2013, p. 1).

In forming a response to Chuh's questions I have found it helpful to read cultural studies work on optimism and aspiration. For example, Lauren Berlant (2011) has theorised the affective structure of conventional 'good life' fantasies, noting that what is projected onto our attachments are often a 'cluster of promises' that we want our object (the university, the PhD) to 'make to us and make possible for us' (p. 23). If we read across the duoethnographic conversation between CM and myself, what clusters of promises appear to attach to the PhD?

For each of us, I argue, the PhD appears as an object of desire that connects to fantasies of the 'academic good life' (Chuh, 2013). The projections that we manifested onto this good life fantasy reveal similarities, and important differences. For both of us, the PhD appears to promise to meet our basic material needs. CM described this as the 'practical considerations' of looking after oneself. Yet arguably, CM's fragments of text contain a larger cluster of economic and social mobility 'good life' promises than my own do. For CM, higher education and the PhD are 'held onto' because they purport to offer the 'really big' promises of 'determining [her] own path' through economic independence, and security. It beckons CM, by promising an 'exclusive better world' far, far away from her working-class high school.

While in the duoethnographic text I agreed that my doctoral aspirations connected to the fantasy of economic security, my sections of the text also contain another cluster of promises about academic life, which Chuh (2013) has called 'the good academic life for (aspiring) politically-engaged/minority discourse practitioners' (p. 2). One might track the makings of this plot with the narrative of the queer child, who looks to the apparently cushioned world of academia as a lifeline away from the hard, masculine-oriented industries of rural Aotearoa/New Zealand. I, the queer child, seem to

attach my self-worth to academic success, identifying ‘being brainy’ as the thing I was good at, in contrast to my status as an ‘an abject failure in the areas of gender and sexuality’. The social capital attributed to the PhD seems to promise cultural security for me, for example, ‘well fine, I will get to “the end”, I will be Dr. whatever, you can’t hate on me then’. While my mother advised me to ‘dream higher’ than the ‘bullshit of academia’ – I read the ‘academic good life’ as also promising a ‘good queer life’. Here, academia is fantasied as a world that might let me become myself. This is both an imagining of the university as an escape route, and ‘refuge for non-normativity – a place that might accommodate unconventional desires and ways of being and perhaps even allow them to flourish’ (Chuh, 2013, p. 2).

There is a related promise that is noticeable in the text. This is the idea that the university is a ‘site of the socio-political and route for transformation’ (Chuh, 2013, p. 2). As Chuh notes, the legacies of activist-scholars of the middle-late 20th century have ensured that the idea of the university as a site for social transformation is almost axiomatic. I argue we can see shades of the fantasy of the minority discourse practitioner in my narrative of the ‘queer academic’ and ‘activist’ who hopes to make a contribution to social justice through my work. But it is not only my teaching or research that is fantasied as potentially transformative. I assume that my presence and visibility within the institution itself might both ‘create more space’ and ‘rark’ people up. These fantasies also fit for CM. She states that she believes in education, ‘I think I can make a contribution’, and also hopes that her presence will be potentially transformative by making space for other students like her to feel a part of the academy. These fantasies reveal what Chuh (2013) might describe as an identification of selfhood, and attachment to a politicized institutional definition. For both CM and myself, it appears that our presence in the university is fantasied as possibly contributing to a more socially just kind of institution.

The challenges of using duoethnography

We have found duoethnography to offer valuable ways to investigate the socio-cultural context of doctoral aspiration. Nevertheless, we have also encountered a number of challenges in using the method which we would like to share for the benefit of researchers who are interested in using duoethnography in the future.

The first challenge we encountered regards ethical questions surrounding collaboration in duoethnography. As Breault (2016) notes, because of the ‘potentially intimate relationship between co-researchers, the ethical stance between participants [must be] deliberately negotiated and requires constant vigilance’ (p. 779). We would like to echo Breault’s (2016) thoughts here. Given the material that we shared is ‘close to the skin’, we found that a process of checking in with each other repeatedly about our choices to reveal or remove information has been vitally important. What felt acceptable to reveal at one point in the process, may have changed at another point along the way. We found that cultivating trust between each other was crucial in order to raise and talk through these complex issues.

Another challenge that surfaced in this project was the question of what researchers, who both work inside the post-critical paradigm (Gibson, 2016; McKenzie, 2005a, 2005b), might do with the question of ‘the selves’ that are presented in the duoethnographic text. We continue to feel a degree of ambivalence as we negotiate this in this article. On the one hand the voices we have represented felt in some way ‘real’, and recognisable as our own. And yet, we also find ourselves interested in understanding them as textual selves, or discursive constructs (Kelly, 2015). Like Kelly (2015), we are worried that the presence of our own voices might invite a reading of two selves which are stable and whole. However, we also maintain an investment in the importance of subjective voice in order to subvert ‘the all-seeing eye that is the narrator of high realism and the positivist researcher’ (Kelly, 2015, p. 1155). Perhaps another way of framing this challenge is to say that we found ourselves

constantly travelling between the hyphen that connects post- and -critical in our interpretation and understanding of the selves we were constituting. When it came time to represent and interpret the selves in the text, we both attempted to cultivate a level of detachment. Rather than authentic versions of 'us', we imagined 'CM' and 'JB' as social actors who articulated wider cultural scripts and meanings. We invited each other to comment on, and edit, both speaking positions in the duoethnographic text, and to act as interpreters of the discourses that circulate within them.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the language of 'diversity' that circulates around doctoral education is complex and contested. While the rhetoric of 'diversity' can be mobilised for social justice ends, it can also work to elide differences between the very educational actors it groups together. This article explored these concerns in detail by presenting a duoethnographic text about two 'diverse' doctoral students' pathways to study. Our reading of the duoethnographic text demonstrates how different histories of imagining the university can shape trajectories into and through doctoral study. Drawing on Appadurai's (2004) work, we argued that aspiration can hold transformative power for 'diverse' doctoral students, even if their capacities to aspire are variable, and may have been pieced together from a complex assemblage of encounters with the university. We then investigated why the idea of the 'academic good life' might continue to have such aspirational power for politically-engaged academic minorities (Chuh, 2013).

We have sought to make two primary contributions in this article. The first contribution is substantive. We have called for more multifaceted understandings of doctoral 'diversity', and for further reflection about the ways that social difference continues to shape academic aspiration. In concluding this article we wish to affirm our belief that greater care is required when engaging in debates about doctoral aspiration. In particular, we propose that there is a need to exceed a solitary focus on *access* or the agenda to widen participation to higher education, which currently appears to dominate discussions about diversity. A broader understanding of aspiration is required, one which recognises aspiration as a form of cultural capacity. Such a perspective would, we argue, open up for analysis the unequal distribution of economic, social and cultural capital, and the ways these forces shape the capacity for aspiration (Bok, 2010). While our duoethnography alone cannot suggest remedies, the details it contains underline the reality that some 'diverse' students may require greater opportunities to develop their navigational maps of the university. The second contribution we make in this article is methodological. We have demonstrated the potential for duoethnography to provide insights into the experiences of selves and an-Other through shared examination. We argue that duoethnography is a valuable qualitative methodology that has the capacity to generate complex accounts of educational difference. The duoethnographic text we have published demonstrates the possibilities that the methodology can set in motion to bring people of diverse backgrounds together in solidarity, as well as to hold us accountable. We hope our demonstration of the methodology prompts others to explore the possibilities of sharing their own dialogues across difference.

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