

# WHY READ (DIFFRACTIVELY)?

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## ABSTRACT

Academics should produce quality scholarly research. However, the demands of the marketised, neoliberal higher education institution and the increase in the academic's bureaucratic and administrative tasks do not allow for adequate engagement with the deep work and slow forms of scholarship that are needed to produce cutting-edge and insightful research. Many academics find it challenging to think critically and creatively under such conditions, yet they are unwilling to fill their time with shallow work instead. Thus, they are torn between producing an institutionally-determined number of research outputs, and striving towards producing quality scholarly work that advances knowledge in the academic's discipline. Reading groups serve to rework this tension by providing a communal and scheduled place and mind-space for reading major academic works. Reading takes time and persistence. We find that setting aside time and creating creative spaces for reading groups offer an opportunity for silent revolt against the pressures of the higher education institution. In this (post)qualitative inquiry we diffractively read – “through one another” – two autoethnographical accounts to experiment with our experiences of various reading groups over a period of three years while positioning ourselves in relation to Barad's notion of diffraction. This speculative experimentation entails a myriad of ideas and methods that serve to decentre hegemonic, monolithic knowledge systems through seeking alternative ways of knowing, and recognises the importance of the entanglement of matter and meaning in tracing (and countering) the social relations produced in neoliberalist contexts. Such (re)thinking is thus a vital counterpoint to the neoliberal obsessions of the higher education context, (re)directing the scholar to new non-autonomous and mutable landscapes.

**Keywords:** deep work, diffraction, higher education, neoliberalism, reading groups, slow scholarship, (post)qualitative inquiry

## WHY SHOULD WE WRITE ABOUT READING?

Why would an emerging scholar and an established scholar write about why we should read?

Is the answer to this question not obvious? Is it not one of the primary tasks of an academic to read to inform teaching and research praxis? We find that the majority of seemingly “obvious” answers to such questions do not take account of contemporary neoliberal institutionalisation processes in higher education and are therefore decontextualised. Such inadequate answers would intuit clear lines of relation between (a) reading/teaching/research practice and (b) what the institutionally expected outcomes of the higher education institution should be. However, what is missing in such answers is a recognition that contemporary higher education institutions have shifted to operating according to neoliberal market principles and have increasingly focused on revenue generation as part of broader free-market ideo-methodologies (Kandiko 2010).

“Regulated (and rationed) by (in)visible forces: a quagmire(?)  
 besieged by bricks, cold and concrete  
 – remnants of the ‘Antediluvian Empire’ –  
 mechanised by red-tape and ‘to-do lists’, (always) incomplete ...

Inside, Vitruvian Men, inquire and conspire,  
 operating in epistemic silos,  
 negating ontology, scorning ethics – going all haywire ...  
 (imprudently) pleased with their self-manufactured tableaux.

In mirror images they (re)erect words to entertain the ignorant Squire;  
 declaring *repetition without difference* ...  
 More sameness, that’s what they require,  
 just listen to their papers, tone deaf ignorance!”

## THE NEOLIBERAL BEAST AND THE BEAUTY OF SLOW SCHOLARSHIP

In his seminal work, *What are universities for?* (2012), Stefan Collini uses an apropos metaphor to describe the nature of the neoliberal university. It is worth quoting him at some length here to introduce the contextualisation of this (post)qualitative inquiry.

“I work in the knowledge and human-resources industry. My company specializes in two kinds of product: we manufacture high-quality, multi-skilled units of human capacity; and we produce commercially relevant, cutting-edge new knowledge in user-friendly packages of printed material. I hold a middle management-level position, responsible to a divisional head who reports directly to the Chief Executive. We have been increasing output of both products during the last twenty years, while at the same time pursuing a cost-cutting programme by making efficiency gains of 1% per year. We compete in the global market-place and our brand-recognition scores are high.

The company's name is HiEdBiz plc, and its motto is: 'World-class products at rock-bottom prices'.

Let me put that another way. I'm a university teacher. I teach students and I write books. I'm part of what used to be a largely self-governing community of scholars. We still take it in turns to fill the local administrative roles; in principle we all belong to the university's governing body, with the right to speak there, and we elect a number of representatives from among ourselves to sit on the university's executive council. The intensity of the teaching we do and the quality of the things we write have in some respects declined over the last twenty years, since we don't now have the time to do either properly." (Collini 2012, 132).

The last sentence of this quote is probably the most important, i.e., we do not have time to properly engage with quality scholarly work (and teaching – which falls beyond the scope of this article). In this regard, Berg and Seeber (2017) argue that time constraints are detrimental to deep scholarly work as they interfere with our adroitness to think critically and creatively. But, as they explain, "it is not so much a matter of managing our time as it is of sustaining our focus in a culture that threatens it" (Berg and Seeber 2017, 17). Timelessness – "the experience of transcending time and one's self by becoming immersed in a captivating present-moment activity or event" (Mainemelis 2001, 548) – is what we long for. This also implies that we block off time and create a place and mind-space for timeless time as it is crucial to deep scholarly work, without falling prey to feelings such as self-indulgence (Berg and Seeber 2017). Such feelings are detrimental to deep scholarly work, as they could smother and even obliterate our creativity. Next, we make several general remarks about the neoliberal higher education context and how it prevents deep scholarly work and decelerates slow scholarship.

There is a welter of literature on the nature of the neoliberal university (e.g., Collini 2012; Maistry 2012; 2015; Shore 2010). The neoliberal university is a marketised one, characterised by an increased fixation with the commercialisation of knowledge, increasing student input and throughput, performance management appraisals, and national and international ranking systems. To monitor academics in this neoliberal setting requires constant surveillance and the over-bureaucratisation of academic spaces. In this context, numbers matter, and the leap required to make a shift towards quality scholarly work seems too far removed. For example, at most South African universities, the number of publications per academic is valued, counted and captured as research units. Academics' research units are then measured in their annual performance appraisals, which determine how their bonuses are allocated or how they fare when promotions come into play.

The cunning and insidious ways in which the neoliberal university operates engulf academics and fill their time with shallow work to the extent that deep scholarly work is sidelined. Shallow work is "[n]oncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed

while distracted. These efforts tend not to create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate” (Newport 2016, 6). Activities of this nature includes responding to emails, marking and moderating papers, completing work-related administration, attending meetings, etc. The Deep Work Hypothesis asserts that “[t]he ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive” (Newport 2016, 14). In other words, the fast-paced, rapidly changing societal context requires an ethical commitment from us scholars to engage in deep scholarly work if we wish to remain at the forefront of new advancements in our disciplines and beyond. Deep work refers to “[p]rofessional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate” (Newport 2016, 3). Activities of this nature include (but are not limited to): deep reading and studying of the extant body of scholarship, critical conversations with other scholars about subject-matter, focussed writing, and conceptualisation of ideas. It is important to note that if we fail to block off time for deep scholarly engagement, it will probably never happen. French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (9 January 1908 to 14 April 1986), for example, planned her day so that she had enough time for deep scholarly engagements. At times she read and wrote up to eight hours per day (Kirkpatrick 2019). On a typical day, according to her diary, she set out approximately three hours a day for shallow work, four hours for what she called “serious study” (reading and writing), two hours for philosophical conversations with intellectual friends (e.g., Sartre and Merleau-Ponty), and two hours for preparing lectures (Kirkpatrick 2019). In her biography of De Beauvoir, Kate Kirkpatrick (2019, 135) writes that “[De] Beauvoir continued to take deep satisfaction in reading philosophy, which she described as being a ‘living reality’ for her, and she continued to write”, but De Beauvoir also made it clear that reading cannot make up for deep conversation; there should always be a balance.

Engaging in deep scholarly work and imagining a university space free from the shackles of neoliberalism require that we slow down. Slowing down is not a “slow strike”, it requires careful planning to set aside time for deep work. Slowing down is an ethical choice to take time for oneself and for the other (so that) ...

“Multiple new improvisations aired  
as melodic tunes violently collide.  
Rhythmically a new dawn arrived:

the diffractive univers/e/ity reside

in entangled multi-versities.  
Where matter and meaning coincide,

in its intra-action, as part of multiple universes.  
Here, earth-dwellers speculate and experiment;  
creating new patterns of difference(s).

New, unfamiliar territories; lurking excitement!  
But, the fear of the gatekeeper should not be misjudged,  
as he will safeguard his familiar territory: *naïve sentiment!*”

## THE DIFFERENT FACES OF READING GROUPS

In their book, *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*, Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber (2017, 11) state that “[s]low professors act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience ...”. They add to this when stating that

“[s]lowing down is about asserting the importance of contemplation, connectedness, fruition, and complexity. It gives meaning to letting research take the time it needs to ripen and makes it easier to resist the pressure to be faster. It gives meaning to thinking about scholarship as a community, not a competition. It gives meaning to periods of rest, an understanding that research does not run like a mechanism; there are rhythms, which include pauses and periods that may seem unproductive.” (Berg and Seeber 2017, 57).

In this extract, Berg and Seeber suggest that the fruits of research are seasonal, and the food for research complex. Lesley le Grange (2003) describes how academics (especially young academics) must take two competing pressures in academia seriously – the bureaucratic pressure of timeously producing academic research of a sufficient quantity, on the one hand, and the pressure of advancing knowledge in the researcher’s field through high-quality and “timeless-becoming” scholarly engagement, on the other. This signals an understanding that scholarship, in the truest sense of the word, inherently requires slowing down in order to facilitate an opening-up to, and an active participation in the world – a need to contemplate, to connect, and to become in the flow of that which gives research its unique flavour and texture. In the bureaucratised, neoliberal higher education institution, we have noticed that there are few opportunities for academics to engage slowly and deeply with written material in their disciplines; therefore, they cannot harvest high-quality scholarly work (Le Grange 2003). Reading groups then, a scheduled oasis of reading and contemplation, of thinking and sharing ideas with other scholars, provide a material and discursive space for the slow and deep

entangling of ourselves with and through critical academic works we read.

Importantly, reading groups are communal and collaborative. In this regard, Carlson and Walker (2018) employed feminist theories of care to reflect on how two free education projects (reading groups), fostered forms of relationality, locatedness and attentiveness. Similarly, Ey et al. (2020, 1) discussed how reading – as a caring, collegial, and collective practice – has given way in the higher education landscape to meeting individual Key Performance Indicators such as “producing research publications, seeking research grants, or meeting the increasing demands of producing quality teaching outcomes”. They used assemblage thinking to think about reading groups, acknowledging that reading groups entail not merely participants as agents dislodged from their context, but also include “people, books, paper, pens, highlighters, pencils, desks, chairs, emails, rooms, whiteboards and occasionally even grass, trees, pavements, knitting needles and fish” (Ey et al. 2020, 1). Reading groups, for these authors, are about the cultivation of “caring collectives and spaces of collegiality” in the neoliberal institutional context (Ey et al. 2020, 1) and thus, for emerging and established scholars, reading ought to be a team effort.

However, the disruption of the (re)production of neoliberal rationality in the higher education context (Carlson and Walker 2018), through deep work and slow scholarship, as fostered by reading groups that are attended by emerging and established scholars, remains under-researched. While there is a plethora of literature dealing with reading groups in and around classroom settings (Parrott and Cherry 2011), the (therapeutic) benefits of reading groups in relation to literary works (Lynch and Neale 2014; Hansen and Prince 2019; Swann and Allington 2009), and reading for enjoyment (Hicks 2008); little attention has been afforded to thinking of the material-discursive conglomerations of reading groups that cater specifically for academics. Though Parrot and Cherry (2011) discuss deep reading and active discussion as part of student coursework, we suggest that more attention is needed in terms of the multiple universes that are opened up by academic-led reading groups for deep work and slow scholarship.

Considerable research has been done on reading groups from the perspective of library studies (Trott and Goldberg 2012), cognitive and sociocultural analysis (Giovannelli 2017; Olave 2018), sociology (Peplow et al. 2015), and anthropology (Sedo 2003). In this performance, we (re)present a (post)qualitative inquiry, which remains a tangential methodological avenue for the discussion of reading groups. In this regard, our approach differs from traditional methodologies employed in such research.

Major work has been done by Hepler et al. (2019) through their description of the posthuman doing and undoing of academic reading groups at the nexus between literary works

and an assemblage that includes doctoral students. They distinguish between reading groups that entail Traditional / Humanist / Cartesian Duality / Descartes *cogito* Western Rational Man / Tracing; and reading groups that entail Subverting Binaries / Posthuman / Indeterminate / Lines of Flight / Mapping (Hepler et al. 2019). Time, space, signification, subjectivity, materials, productivity, texts, and writing as a group are reconfigured. Traditional reading groups see reading together as the “figuring out” of a book produced by the author as a stable subject, and such groups establish a hierarchical group structure (Hepler et al. 2019, 149). Posthuman reading groups see the text as becoming entangled and mattering through intra-action with the author as part of the publishing house assemblage; participants enter into a cyborg relation when reading, and ideas of expert authority are destabilised through constantly shifting hierarchies (Hepler et al. 2019, 149). We see ourselves as continuing this line of (post)qualitative inquiry in terms of our own performance.

The focus of our creative exploration and speculative experimentation was on the central role that emerging and established scholars, who are entrenched in the everyday tasks of a neoliberal higher education institution, play in reading groups. The question that guided this performance was: *Given the neoliberal beast and the beauty of slow scholarship, what material-discursive intra-actions emerged from a diffractive reading of our autoethnographical accounts about our experiences of reading groups?*

## THE BENDING AND SPREADING OF WAVES

Karen Barad’s (2007) notion of diffraction as an apparatus of investigation also inspired our theoretical and methodological position. The notion and motion of diffraction informed our own fluid positionality.

“Imag(in)e(:) difference

... bending and spreading as the waves violently collide ...

... creating and releasing new crushing waves ...

in our knowledge creation;  
in our ontological make-up;  
in our ethical becomings ...

patterns of difference,

new patterns of difference emerge

More differences! Ad infinitum ...

Attuned to differences without repetition

Differences materialised. The differences that matter:

patterns of difference, make a difference!

Imag(in)e(:) entanglements

differences make entangled effects

... verbal and non-verbal performances leaves wounds on bodies ...

entangled configurations change with each intra-action

... wounds mount up and turn into perpetual scars ...

entanglements are everything! (Always!)

Attuned to the intra-active entanglements of ideas

a new material-discursive ontology arises –

closely linked to knowing through materiality –

engaging as part of the world in its differential becoming.

Entanglements are fluctuating configurations:

always moving (ad infinitum) ....”

## **(POST)QUALITATIVE INQUIRY: A DIFFRACTIVE READING OF INTRA-ACTING AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES**

We pursued autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) because it facilitates the process of sharing personal, lived experience (*auto*) in the culture of reading groups (*ethno*), and it has the potential to stimulate deep scholarly work. This autoethnographical performance is a re/con/figuration of (post)qualitative inquiry. “[P]ost)qualitative research is not a new research paradigm” (Le Grange 2018, 6), but “a thousand tiny methodologies” (Lather 2013, 635). It entails speculative experimentation with a myriad of ideas and methods; whether new and/or old. As far as knowledge is concerned, scientific realists are likely to argue that knowledge accurately reflects physical reality, whilst social constructivists are more inclined to argue “that knowledge is more accurately understood as a reflection of culture” (Barad 2007, 86). (Post)qualitative researchers decentre hegemonic, monolithic knowledge systems through seeking alternative ways of knowing, whereas (post)qualitative inquirers favour an emphasis on nature or matter, and how it intra-acts with the discursive or cultural. Le Grange (2018, 6) avers that

“(Post)qualitative research sees researchers questioning why knowledge should be the point of departure in inquiry, decentres knowledge and embraces the inseparability of ethics, ontology and knowledge, as depicted in Barad’s (2007, 409) coinage, ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’.”

This shows us that “*values are integral to the nature of knowing and being*” (Barad 2007, 37 [italics in original]). In our own search for meaning and understanding of the material-



discursive intra-actions that happens during reading groups, we consciously focussed on how we come to know through reading groups and how it shapes ontology, but more importantly how both knowing and being feeds into the ethical duty of scholars to engage in deep work.

We each wrote a performative autoethnographic narrative (see Le Grange 2018) about our engagements with reading groups over a three-year period. The narrative prompt was: *Use a metaphor to explain how you experienced the reading groups*. We opted to use metaphors to illuminate our personal experiences and to give some degree of structure to our narratives (Carpenter 2008). Although we planned and wrote the entire article together, we did not share our metaphors or narratives with one another prior to diffractively reading them. This decision was made to prevent us from influencing each other's thinking and narrative processes. In addition, we envisaged that the desire to see each other's metaphors and narratives would contribute to the excitement associated with the uncertainty of what a diffractive reading might entail and what it might reveal about the main research question.

To grasp the context of the research better, at this juncture we make several explanatory remarks on how the reading groups “worked”.

### The contours of our reading groups

We participated in 18 reading groups over the course of three years (from 2019 to 2021): some of them we both attended (8) and others not (10). Reading groups were scheduled as monthly (1), bi-weekly (12), or weekly (5) sessions with each reading group focussing on a prominent academic book on Philosophy. Table 1, tables the books, size of reading groups, meeting mode, etc.

**Table 1:** Reading groups: books, size of group, meeting mode

Year	Books	Size of group	Meeting mode	Shared	Petro	Jean
2019	Braidotti, Rosi. 1994. <i>Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory</i> . New York: Columbia University Press.	3	In-person		X	
	Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. <i>The posthuman</i> . Cambridge: Polity Press.	7	Hybrid	X		
2020	Foucault, Michel. 2013. <i>Archaeology of knowledge</i> . London, New York: Routledge.	4	In-person	X		
	Kristeva, Julia. 1991. <i>Strangers to ourselves</i> . New York: Columbia University Press.	3	Online		X	
	Arendt, Hannah. 2013. <i>The human condition</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press.	2	Hybrid			X
	Foucault, Michel. 2007. <i>Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison</i> . North Carolina: Duke University Press.	5	In-person	X		
	Braidotti, Rosi. 2019. <i>Posthuman knowledge</i> . Cambridge: Polity Press.	5	Hybrid	X		
	Barad, Karen. 2007. <i>Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning</i> . North Carolina: Duke University Press.	2	In-person	X		

Year	Books	Size of group	Meeting mode	Shared	Petro	Jean
	Virilio, Paul. 1991. <i>The lost dimension</i> . Los Angeles: Semiotext.	5	Online			X
2021	Stengers, Isabelle. 2010. <i>Cosmopolitics. Vol. 1</i> . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.	8	Hybrid	X		
	Spinoza, Benedictus de. 2018. <i>Ethics</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.	9	Hybrid	X		
	Deleuze, Gilles. 1994. <i>Difference and repetition</i> . New York: Columbia University Press.	4	Hybrid	X		
	Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. <i>The posthuman</i> . Cambridge: Polity Press.	3	In-person		X	
	Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 2007. <i>Phenomenology of spirit</i> . North Carolina: Duke University Press.	5	Hybrid		X	
	Fromm, Erich. 2021. <i>The fear of freedom</i> . London, New York: Routledge.	7	Online			X
	Fromm, Erich. 2020. <i>Man for himself: An inquiry into the psychology of ethics</i> . London, New York: Routledge.	7	Online			X
	Reich, Wilhelm. 1970. <i>The mass psychology of fascism</i> . London: Macmillan.	10	Online			X
	Foucault, Michel. 2007. <i>Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison</i> . North Carolina: Duke University Press.	10	Online			X

In some instances, reading group friends nominated books for consideration. In these instances, we discussed the possibilities and then made a joint decision. The selection of other books stemmed from organic developments of prior reading groups. Most reading group friends already had their PhDs and/or were employed at a higher education institution (on a full-time or part-time basis). We saw various reading group structures and formats crystallise during this period in terms of number of people, mode of contact, and style of preparation. Sizes of the groups varied between two and ten people (with the former often reflecting one-on-one mentorship, and the latter arising through the engagement of larger groups of intra-departmental or inter-institutional academics). Preparation styles differed in the various reading groups. Twelve of the groups used a session presenter to summarise a particular section of the book (to evoke critical discussion), while other reading groups were based on group-discussion and pre-reading (5). Another reading group used experimental approaches (we conducted our reading group by the riverside instead of in offices. We scheduled our sessions on Friday, afternoons but also at 5 o'clock on a Monday morning, and we extended our reading of the book over a year and more. We sketched pictures and recorded voice notes, and we read and discussed while supervising playful children). Reading groups were conducted in in-person (5), online (6), and hybrid (7) modes, with several factors determining the preference for specific modes (the locality of local, national, or international friends; COVID-19 lockdown conditions; the availability of babysitters). In terms of place and space, reading groups took place at the homes of academics (in-person and hybrid modes), in offices and studies (particularly online modes), and in alternative places and spaces such as sitting in nature. The intention has consistently been to create a relaxed, meditative atmosphere and an openness to sharing ideas based on pre-

readings.

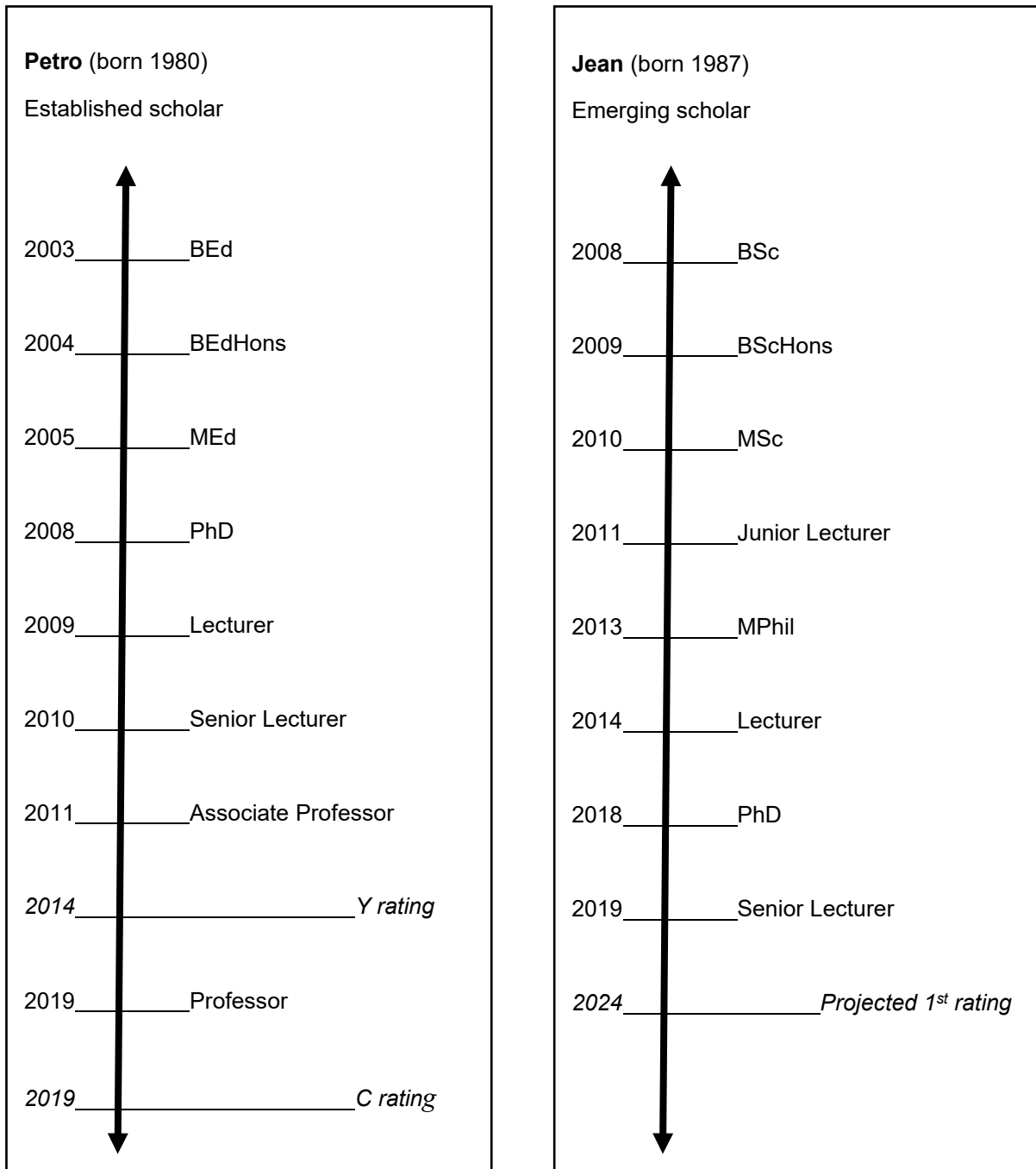
Our reading group spaces were populated by collegial friends – sometimes from our own institution, sometimes from others – all refugees from the fast-paced academic rat race. Where were we coming from, and heading towards? At times the path seemed unclear, but we continuously observed a groundswell of academics wanting to counter the neoliberal milieu of contemporary higher education institutions by choosing to read intently and purposefully. We saw reading groups co-constitutively configured and reconfigured as dynamic tools for dealing with the challenges faced by academics in the higher education institution and countering contemporary higher education paradigms (Eckel, Kezar, and Lieberman 2000, 97).

Our traveling companions were each other, and the many thinkers whose books found themselves in our hands. We saw these fleshy and authorial participants take on diverse roles – roles of friend, opponent, obfuscator, and guru. In offices, bathrooms, living rooms, outdoors, and in coffee shops we read and re-read. Kimberly Blessing (2013, 17) describes Descartes suggestion for “rightly reading philosophy” as follows: First approach the work as you would a novel – read quickly to get a general idea of the material – then read a second time – paying attention to the arguments advanced and marking down points of difficulty – and then a third time while keeping in mind the problems and questions of the second round with an eye to potential solutions. Re-read those parts where difficulties still remain a fourth time. Time and persistence are key in reading philosophy, and while we exhibited plenty of the latter, we soon found that the neoliberal context made the former a more challenging requirement.

### **Meeting Jean and Petro Halfway**

The subject of (post)qualitative inquiry is ecological and embedded in the material realm (Le Grange 2018). It is, therefore, important to understand something about our academic timelines, or trajectories (which include our degrees and academic positions up to now) to gain a better grasp of the context from which our autoethnographic narratives have emerged. Petro is rated an established researcher by the National Research Foundation (NRF)<sup>1</sup> of South Africa. Jean is an emerging scholar who is on the NRF rating track. Our academic timelines are illustrated in Figure 1.

These are merely outlines of our academic lives so far (which we won't analyse, nor make assumptions about); however, it is interesting to point out how Petro, for example, has had a linear (perhaps chronological) timeline, whereas Jean has a complex timeline, partly because he changed disciplines. What is important for this performance is to gain a glimpse into our worlds, of where we are coming from.



**Figure 1:** Jean and Petro's academic timelines

**Diffractive reading of autoethnographical narratives in intra-action**

The narratives were analysed by way of a diffractive reading of the two autoethnographical narratives in intra-action (Barad 2007). A diffractive reading is a material feminist reading that can produce meanings that take the discursive or cultural and material or natural realms into account (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). A diffractive methodology offers ways in which one could attend to entanglements when reading new and significant insights and approaches “through

one another” (Barad 2007, 30). Essentially, “diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter” (Barad 2007, 30). Thus, diffraction necessitates that we think of entanglements of ideas and patterns of difference without confusing diffraction with reflection.

“It is not about mirroring things, neither about gazing from afar ...  
It is about how words come to matter; how matter gives meaning to repertoire.”

Next, we diffractively read the autoethnographical narratives to elicit the complex intra-actions that take place when matter and meaning become entangled, and what it means in terms of posthumanist performativity of reading groups.

## **THE PERFORMANCE: DIFFRACTIONS THAT MATTER; MATERIALLY AND DISCURSIVELY**

To make sense of the diffractions that matter (both materially and discursively), we each explain the context of our autoethnographical narratives. Jean writes:

“The narrative suggests the image of a gazelle being hunted by a predator as important for understanding reading groups and deep scholarly work. I sketch out my story, linearly, in a movement from the gene to the spirit. I sketch the problems that colour my academic life in blood-red letters – to escape and survive, or to perish-without-publishing – reading as I write.”  
Adaptation.

And Petro explains the context of her narrative as follows:

“The haphazard, incoherent narrative bursting with colourful metaphors and tangible images seamlessly flowed – like a mosaic of vivid images – out of my pen. I began using the metaphor of a traveller on a journey to explain how the different reading groups functioned and how I perceived of it. I then (re)created vignettes of particular moments that I graphically remember to demonstrate how my discursive engagements during the reading groups stimulated my material awareness; and vice versa.”

Many diffractive patterns emerged from the autoethnographical narratives. We perform the five diffractive patterns that stood out for us as five scenes, titled:

- Scene 1: The material force of the neoliberal beast
- Scene 2: Violent entanglements between institutions and scholars
- Scene 3: Space and time that matters

- Scene 4: The yearning child
- Scene 5: Just a moment ...

### Scene 1: The material force of the neoliberal beast

“Urgency. Fear. Destruction. The movement of a gazelle in the moment of flight from a predator on the African plains. The gazelle strains its muscles, its heart pounds – it sees the predator not as a being with a separate agency but rather as a threatening force. We find two potentialities in this description – the moment of devastation, or the moment of escape. All is at stake in this encounter – the predator must kill and consume the gazelle to survive, or the gazelle must escape from the onslaught if it wishes to continue its own existence and avoid serious injury. This image, of the relation between predator and prey, figures into my understanding of the role of reading groups in a fast-paced, ever-changing higher education institution. [...] I spoke, in terms of academia and under the auspices of capitalist forms of socialisation, of a chase. At the same time, I found my attention being drawn away from research into administrative and bureaucratic tasks, towards teaching that had sometimes little relation to my own research, and a working environment that – at that time – would engender competitiveness and predation. My feelings of unrootedness as a young researcher were taken up into the complex machinery of the higher education institution and were actualised into academic habits that were not conducive for deep reading and reflection on academic works.”

This extract from Jean’s narrative sets the brutal (mate)reality of the neoliberal predator that thrives on the vulnerability of the gazelle-scholar. Jean’s image illustrates an attempt to make sense and come to grips with the viciousness of the neoliberal higher education context he finds himself in. Petro, on the other hand, uses less brutal images, perhaps indicative of the extent to which she embodies the neoliberal system and how the system has embodied and shaped her, and how she navigates herself in this “normalised” space. She uses the metaphor of a traveller when she writes:

“On my scholarly journey, I have always been directed by the mantra ‘read, write and talk’ that was imprinted in me as a novice academic. I was taught early on in my career that these three things matter and that I should ‘publish or perish’. Wise lessons indeed, but what do they mean in the context of a neoliberal higher education context that cunningly reroutes one onto unfamiliar paths so frequently? My involvement in reading groups created one space where I could give expression to deep scholarly work amidst the neoliberal rodent, slowly gnawing at the heart and soul of my scholarly being. Sometimes I strolled on a narrow path in the dark, not knowing what to expect next, whilst at other times I was walking under the bright, nourishing sunlight whilst inhaling the sweet aroma of deep scholarly work.”

There are numerous material-discursive intra-actions in the autoethnographical extracts provided above. But the question we are interested in is the sense in which social relations are produced in neoliberalist contexts and what this production entails? Social relations in higher education contexts are characterised by neoliberalism which is riddled with questions about

power-relations. The process of individualisation is important in a neoliberal context as it promotes competition and isolation which fuel the bureaucratic apparatus. This apparatus drowns academics in mundane, shallow work and deprives them of deep scholarly engagement. Both of us allude to the frustration of not being able to engage in deep scholarly work; the anxiety of being deprived of the essence of scholarly being, i.e., that which makes us scholars and not academic technicians.

## **Scene 2: Violent entanglements between institutions and scholars**

Jean writes:

“In 2021 we find that images of nature red in tooth and claw are still, or perhaps increasingly, both discursively and materially crucially relevant in terms of my experience of higher education institutions. Discursively, academics find themselves lodged in a proverbial truism of ‘publish-or-perish’ wherein achievement is measured quantitatively (based on research output) and with implications that are epistemologically-ontologically-ethically laden (i.e., with specific capitalist and consumerist agendas at the forefront). Materially, academics must ‘sing for their supper’ – they must teach larger numbers of students, attend to ballooning amounts of bureaucratic and administrative tasks, and produce research at a mushrooming pace to sustain the higher education institution in a capitalist society – very much like a grazing gazelle on the African plains performing certain activities to survive. The result of this system is that, unlike a grazing gazelle, many academics experience depression and burnout.”

This extract from Jean’s narrative is suggestive of the material and discursive contouring of power-relations at work in the violent bureaucratic context of a higher education institutions – a violence espoused in the entanglement of capitalist ideals of the university (discursive) and violent performative enactments (material). Scholars, as material-discursive conglomerations, are entangled with higher education institutions as themselves material-discursive – this intra-action infiltrates the economic (how the scholar is paid by the university, but also pays back the university through expected performance). The spatial (as the academic space) arises through the “differential articulation of the world” (Barad 2007, 235), and into conditions such as depression and burnout in the higher education context.

The attempt to etch the boundaries between the scholar and the higher education institution misrecognises the permeability of boundaries in terms of material-discursive elements such as money, status, bodies, classrooms. Indeed, as Hekman (2010, 24) argues, “the agency of matter is intertwined with human agency”. A violent higher education context enacts the violent becoming of the scholar.

So too the fruits of research are entangled with both the scholar and the higher education institution for different and conflicting reasons (scholars may wish to publish in order to enact their own knowledge, while the higher education institution may wish to publish in order to make money). These contrasting and even contradictory ends are in dynamic intra-action,

forming diffractive patterns through which the scholar and the higher education institution become. Such diffractive patterns matter – they entail a dynamism of constant shaping and re-shaping in which the enactment of the scholar’s own knowledge, and the economic and political goals of the higher education institution both lead to varied social relations that may in turn be generative, disruptive, profitable, stressful, creative. As such, we need to be aware of how the products of research intra-act with subjects and institutions if we are to allow deep work and slow scholarship to re/con/figure into the mutual becoming of the scholar and higher education institution.

### **Scene 3: Space and time that matters**

Petro sketched 3 vignettes to depict how the spaces and times during which reading groups come to matter. This is the second of these:

#### *Vignette 2 – In Front Of The Fire Place With Spinoza Himself*

“Spinoza himself (one of the reading group members acting his persona) arrived in Potchefstroom one evening for an interview with a television presenter shooting a documentary. His entrance immediately heated up the chilly room. The fire was trying hard to keep up with Spinoza. That evening we dealt with Part One of his Ethics. I remember the smell of cigarettes, the bitter-sweet taste of dark chocolate, vanilla chai tea ... I remembered with my senses and recall, as I’m sitting here in the unearthly hours of the morning, the intense conversations about Spinoza’s ontology and structure of existence (his cosmology). His monism immediately grabbed my attention and prompted millions of questions: all rambling on in my head.”

How might we account for body and material elements (as intra-acting) in our reading groups? Petro’s narrative illustrates the intra-acting of matter and meaning through the entangling of the senses with Spinoza (as production of phenomena) that depend on the reading group friend(s)’s constitution of Spinoza in the discursive field of the materialising space. Because the primary ontological units are not “things” but phenomena, the construction and reconstruction of Spinoza is not an individuation process but rather the intra-action of the material-discursive. In this regard, “agency is an enactment, not something that someone or something has” (Barad 2007, 235).

Petro describes in her vignette how bodies intra-act in space: How bodies move differently in the world, and at the same time, how the world moves differently as these different bodies move (differently) in a worldly space that is neither container nor quantifiable, but which represents the emergence of space, time, and matter through intra-action. This is a push-back in which subjectivities are formed and reformed by material-discursive enactments – a wig is removed, a session concluded. So too we find that the reading group, through material-discursive intra-action, entails the shaping and reshaping of a scholar. The scholar as phenomenon becomes through the spaces opened up by reading groups, which allow deep work



and slow scholarship to take place. In this regard agential realism elaborates on performativity to see matter as “an active participant in the world’s becoming” – revealing how “discursive practices matter” and how a Spinoza is materially constituted within the discourses of the reading group (Barad 2007, 136). In another vignette, Petro writes about other bodies in movement through space and time:

Vignette 1: The Monkey That Fell Into The River

“We sat next to the river on an early autumn afternoon, protected by a huge weeping willow tree that embraces us with its hair-like branches. On a soft blanket; each with a glass of cheap wine and a fag in the hand – we begin our discussion on the pre-reading we did of Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). In front of me is an open book with hundreds of scribbled notes. On my lap rests a hardboard with a strange pencil drawing on it ... (I don’t know what it will turn out to be, but I was physically creating something ...) All of this whilst absorbed in one of the most concentrated and complicated conversations about material-discursive engagements, when suddenly a monkey fell out of the tree ... Splash, into the water! Our astonishment was followed by intense laughter and then ... a diffractive moment ... we started analysing the physical space we found ourselves in and how exactly it entangles with the discursive nature of our rendezvous with Barad’s material-discursive philosophy.”

#### Scene 4: The yearning child

Petro writes:

Vignette 3 – Sorry, No Evidence, There Was Only The Hollow Screen And A Yearning ...

“It was my turn to lead the conversation on the introduction of Spinoza’s Ethics. Unfortunately I was not at home where we usually meet for reading groups, so I logged in and began talking about the introductory notes I have made. It felt like I was speaking into a black hole, a void ... I felt totally disengaged, alone and frustrated (perhaps even anxious) ... There was a lurking silence and most had their cameras and sound turned off. It was by far the worst reading group I’ve ever had. So, I looked at the sketch that I drew at the river when the monkey made its peculiar, bizarre appearance. And, as I sat alone in the deserted room after the awfully unstimulating online reading group, I realised what was wrong; what was missing. I yearned for physical interaction, experiencing the atmosphere of advanced intellectual engagement, the spaces and times in which our reading groups occur, and so forth. I was yearning for intellectual affection, like children yearn for affection from their parents. Perhaps just like in the sketch I drew next to the river.”

We see in her contemplation of this evening a cyborg trans-action, one “that transgresses and reworks the boundaries between human and machine, nature and culture, and economic and discursive practices” (Barad 2007, 223). The inherent material-discursive nature of this entanglement shines through for we see in the entanglement of Petro and laptop – speech/body with one-thousand three hundred kilometres of wire – the agency of the material in the production of knowledge and subjectivity. The cyborg trans-action, as “material” in terms of a digital technology artefact and as “discursive” in terms of so-called cyberspace, is an intra-action that diffracts variedly and dynamically.

We also see how emotions of yearning – as entangled bodily constitution – enter into the

differential cyborgian entanglements of technology in Petro's online book chapter presentation. For Petro, the cyborgian trans-action is not bound in time. The intra-action of Petro's body and the machine in the material-discursive space entail (1) the becoming of herself as a child who is yearning for affection from a parent in that moment, and (b) the becoming of herself as this same child through material-discursive elements of her biological constitution (which stretch backwards across the years of her life through memory-making and re-making processes). Through this intra-action of body and machine, Petro is shaped and re-shaped continuously.

The cyborg trans-action figures iteratively into itself, and in this manner social relations are produced wherein "neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior" (Barad 2007, 152), i.e., the machine and the human are neither ontologically nor epistemologically prior. The discursive-material enactment of body and machine, and machine and body, figures directly into our experience of the material and discursive conditions of higher education institutions (where deadlines and bureaucracy inhibit research time due to the clock-like functionality of its institutionalisation, and where we make constant use of technology).

### **Scene 5: Just a moment ...**

Jean writes:

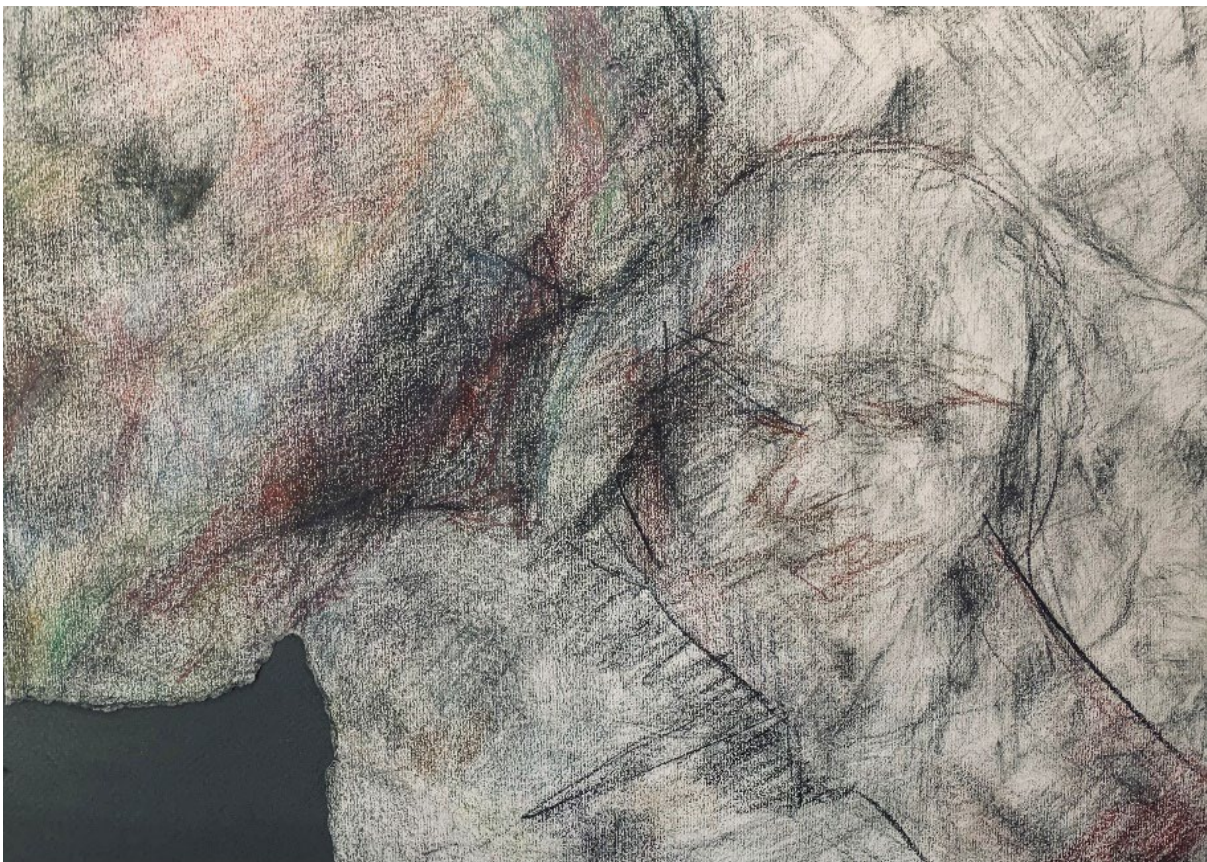
"... the gazelle does not just stare at the predator with innocent virginal eyes ... it flees. The metaphoric relation of the participants is therefore not a linear one of active predator in contrast to passive prey, but rather descriptive of how a specific form of movement on behalf of the gazelle / academic allows adaptation for survival to an existentially violent situation. The gazelle does not move in a straight line – it bounces around from place to place, constantly shifting direction to avoid the attack of the predator. Similarly, the academic must move (or, in the case of reading groups, cease moving) as an adaptation to the fast-paced and inherently capitalist logic of contemporary higher education institutions."

Linearity is the *modus operandi* of the contemporary higher education context – it arranges and reifies undeviating straight lines for materialisation and discursivity. These lines enact unwavering and unchallengeable social relations – predator and prey, management and academic – that violate and violently interject into the materialisation of bodies (Barad 2007: 191). Traced down on the academic body(s) are the lines of neoliberalism and capitalism; concurrently, higher education entails re-presentation (of research, movement, time, bodies) that is ignorant of the dynamism of diffraction. Ever more the higher education institution institutes not just re-presentation, but absolute re-presentation as an iterative process (particularly so for research).

Scholaring is generative, on the other hand. We become as scholars in indeterminate movement through and with seasons and tides that entails diving into and exploring queer

depths. We may map the scholaring process, but we cannot trace it deterministically and autonomously. Ledgers and administrative form(ation)s distract and comport in delimiting and binary ways our thinking and becoming, negating the dynamism of diffraction. But diffractive reading brings us through dynamism to rest; not as a stagnant material and discursive, volitional and agentive act but rather as the shifting materialisations of new knowledge(s). Bodies are materialised in and through violent and linear enactments in the higher education context, where power relations that are preconstructed and fortified against criticism abound, but scholaring resists such linearity. In violent provocation, the scholar shifts direction.

**... AND THIS IS (IN PART) WHAT THE MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE RHYTHM OF DIFFRACTIVE READING SOUNDS LIKE!**



**NOTE**

P=IRO

1. The NRF's webpage describes the meaning of individual ratings, as follows: "The rating of individuals is based primarily on the quality and impact of their research outputs over the past eight years, taking into consideration the evaluation made by local and international peers. It identifies researchers who count among the leaders in their fields of expertise and gives recognition to those who constantly produce high quality research outputs. Several South African universities use the outcomes of the NRF evaluation and rating process to position themselves as research-intensive institutions, while others provide incentives for their staff members to acquire and maintain a rating and give special recognition to top-rated researchers." (<https://www.nrf.ac.za/rating>)

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