

Sharing the Lived Experiences of Women in Academia by Remembering, Reclaiming and Retelling Stories of the Feminist Imaginaries

Bev Hayward

Birkbeck College, The University of London, UK.

Abstract

Feminist Imaginaries are psychological and social spaces where creative possibilities are overflowing. They facilitate new ways of being, new ways of knowing and new ways of knowledge creation. This paper embraces a decolonial and feminist approach to storytelling, remembering, reclaiming and retelling; telling the stories of a band of wandering women, journeying to the psychosocial spaces of the Imaginary. Drawing upon a feminist theoretical tapestry, creative writing methods and autoethnographic approaches, the story is an example of the possibilities for Feminist Imaginaries in academic research. Many female students I have encountered naively believe they have social justice and equality but the inequalities are hidden in low paid, part-time work and unpaid care. To explore patriarchy's deceptive nature, reference is made to the canons of Western art and literature as spaces from which to depart. It is from this space and time of departure that our journeys to the Imaginaries begin. Our lived experiences as artists as educators makes our activism all the more urgent to care for racialised, working class and disabled students. Those experiences are illustrated in poetry and visually in an artwork created to accompany this paper entitled, *Remember, shout her name, tell her-story*. Furthermore, creative writing is a form of the Imaginary and is used to tell this tale. I suggest, by borrowing from Laurel Richardson, creative writing is a method of inquiry to learn about ourselves and our research. By writing into the topic, rather than reading around and then writing, the imagination can wander and wonder freely. I include a small demonstration of how this process might be performed. In this way the story is open-ended, to be continued, as so too the fight for social and gender justice must continue. Accordingly, I invite you, the reader, to remember your stories, reclaim, imagine them, document and share them.

Keywords: Creative writing; storytelling; poetry; art; lived experiences; marginalisation; feminist imaginaries; patriarchal discourses.

Introducing stories of the feminist imaginaries

The conceptualisations of the stories presented in this paper have been entwined in my subconscious for many years. The threads from stories of my past, with that of my ancestors, are stitched together with the present. The stories are meshed within the closure of the University for the Creative Arts (UCA), Rochester campus, in July 2023. As I wander the empty corridors, a ghostly presence of patriarchy haunts the landscape at Fort Pitt (Tuck & Ree 2013, p. 640). Fort Pitt is the name of the road upon which the campus is constructed, a large tower on a hill, the foundations of which are the remains of a Napoleonic fortress. It is necessary to record our affects from this departure 'as artists as educators' and researchers (Clover, 2010). And although it is important to remember, it is essential to search for what future (re)searching might become, as we imagine different ways of writing stories, telling stories, imagining in a feminist aesthetic, as talents are developed in creative practices. The telling of which embraces creative methods, poetry and embroidery in order to imagine 'a better world' (Formenti and West, 2018), a just world of inclusion and diversity, a world of utopian imaginations (Piercy, 1976). With this in mind, the middle part of the paper tells the story of a group of women pilgrims, the support workers at UCA, on a journey to feminist imaginaries. Those feminist imaginaries are 'differently academic' ways of writing, searching and gathering stories. They encompass psychological and social spaces where creative possibilities are overflowing. They facilitate new ways of being, new ways of knowing and new ways of knowledge creation. By drawing

upon a creative approach to record our stories, I make psychological and geographical connections to explore how an application of the feminist imaginary might ‘rupture ... the prevailing relations of power, a shaking loose of normative perspectives, the generation of new knowledges, histories and possibilities and senses of hope (Clover et al, 2022, p. 1).

So, the scene embroidered, is a collective of women, departing from Rochester to Canterbury, both Cathedral cities with towers-fortresses and campuses dominating the landscape. This is the same journey many made through the centuries as actual pilgrims. Strangely, this geographical location, Pilgrim’s Way in Kent, is often in my thoughts as it was where my ancestors resided. The journey illustrates the mapping of my ancestors’ lives as I researched my family tree some years ago and their experiences are described in the poem, *Sisters, We Hear You, We Shout Your Names* (towards the end of this paper). Searching for hours, I gathered their stories from the archives and parish registers. The experience of remembering was painful, as the poem depicts. The embroidery, figure 1 is in remembrance of them and the women with whom I have the privilege to converse, these past 15 years as support workers at UCA. But like all tapestries there is a back to the embroidery, figure 2, which shows the underside to the scene. Turnover the aida fabric and much is revealed; there are many knots with hanging threads, stitches overlapping, and threads jumping across the perfect rhythm of the weave and weft. What is this story? Back to a story, stitching back, back stitching time. ‘For we think back through our mothers if we are women’ (Woolf, 1929).

Thinking back, we, the women support workers at the University, have been leaving this place of employment when the first round of redundancies occurred in 2016. Now as the last of us depart, or as the management like to inform us, we are taking part in their ‘transformation;’ some decided to make that journey from Rochester campus to Canterbury campus. Thus, the backstory illudes to the damage neoliberalism and patriarchy are inflicting upon higher education. Human capital is a cost that can be cut; for as a resource in the market masculine economy (Cixous, 1976) we are commodities to be removed or moved from one campus to another.

In the context of the short story, the feminist imaginary is an approach by which the researcher acknowledges that qualitative research practices are messy, entangled processes (MacLure, 2013). They are tapestries of rich colour, where some stitches are raised and pronounced and others are smooth and faint, as are the diverse voices of the researched and researcher, weaving together a ‘good story’ (West, 2016). Imagined is a story contextualised into a Chaucerian genre of a Mediaeval milieu. Engaging this feudal, misogynistic narrative, as an historic backdrop, a story is told of patriarchy’s grip upon the lives of a group of women within the current and overt neoliberal pedagogic agendas in England’s educational system. But as feminists we must be active, patriarchy must be named and slain, whether the many headed hydra from Greek myth, or this story’s insidious bogymen. The monster that is patriarchy may seem inescapable but just as in Chaucer’s (1476/2007) tales of pilgrimage, where women were often prevented from fulfilling their dreams, on occasions there were/are opportunities to celebrate their achievements (de Pizan, 1405/2000).

Inspired by the travails of Alison, *The Wife of Bath*, a pilgrim from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400/2007), I unlike Chaucer, am not drawing upon stereotypes (Turner, 2023), for ‘[w]riting stories are not about people and cultures “out there” – ethnographic subject (or objects). Rather, they are about us – our workspaces, disciplines, friends, and family’ (Richardson, in Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 967). Thus, storytelling is a way in which to legitimise the subject-object (hooks, 1988; Smith, 1993). For this story, I recall and reframe fragments of fiction and literary sources that are not irrelevancies ‘out there’. They all have meaning to me and are used to extend the dialogue between you the reader, myself as the reader and writer and the narratives of the protagonists of the story. Cixous suggests value can be given to literature in the same way that a researcher can draw upon theory and academic writing to support the exploration of a topic (1993, p. 21-22). Often as I am writing I remember and recall texts that temporarily hold my thoughts and consciousness. Similarly, Cixous (1993, p. 5) says that certain texts call to her in ‘different voices’; they have a certain ‘music’ that she is ‘attune to’. When texts stay with us, they inform us as writers, they transport the reader and facilitate creative ways of knowing, suggesting that reading is a form of the feminist imaginary. Those

texts-images which have formed the threads of this story are Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400/2007), Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* (1338-9), Dante Alighieri by Domenico di Michelino (1465), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and most importantly my continued dialogue with H el ene Cixous.



Figure 1 & 2: Beverley Hayward, Remember, shout her name, tell her-story, tapestry with mixed media front and back.

A pronounced thread in the story is religion, as Catholicism was part of my childhood. Being educated in a faith school, the patriarchal discourse was running under the surface and above in religious paintings that saturated my psyche. More importantly, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) was a hugely influential book in both the form and content. Simultaneously, exploring the lives of women in a dystopia, overlaid with a utopian future, narration swings back and forth in time. It is an example of how a just society might develop in the feminist imaginaries. Similarly, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405/2000) is written as a dreamlike vision; it serves as a counterpoint to the lack of literature by women about women in the Middle Ages. *The Book of the City of Ladies* illustrates a safe

space for women, free of misogyny. I have borrowed these writing devices to create a dialogue with women of the past, present and future.

My story stitches together the many stories I have heard, the ‘gifts’ from friends (Cixous, 1976, p. 876; 1991, p. 66), colleagues and feminist imaginaries, as well as histories from those men that made up the canons of Western art and literature. Studying English Literature, A Level, in the 1980s, women were completely excluded from the syllabus. Chaucer was part of the curriculum, and it was *The Miller’s Tale* that was selected. At that time, I did not understand the point of the story, other than it was slapstick, misogynistic degrading humour. Then as a mature, first-generation degree student in the late 1990s, I gained a degree in humanities with art history, and again sameness was reproduced by the exclusion of women and people of colour (Smith, 1993).

I cannot unpick those memories as they punctuate my psyche. I have included them in this story to explain how and why these texts have lingered just under the surface as I write (Partridge 2022). I explore the inspirations, motivations and reflections upon the poetry and embroidery presented. The fabric upon which the feminist imaginary is woven does not confine our creativity to canons, rules and dogma (Vintges, 2017). We are free to wander (Braidotti, 2002), and in ‘[t]his multiplication of narrating subjects’, there are spaces to thread the strands of our stories (Smith, 1993, p. 399).

This approach significantly differs from the epistemologies of the masculine ‘heroes’ of history and the writing of the monograph. By the mid-2000s, I undertook a master’s in Art History, the course presented ways in which art history might be written, such as the monograph. It opened with *Caravaggio: A Life* (1998); another uninspiring story about a master of the arts. There were the same ‘boring’ stories of monographic monotony (Hooks 1994); these were stories boring into the soul with no relevance to our experiences as women. Laurel Richardson (2005, p. 957) ‘found much of qualitative writing to be ... boring’ characterised by patriarchal structures of reading, writing and research. Conversely, the feminist imaginary creates a canvas bringing together variety, enthusiasm and inspiration (Clover, et al 2022), where the depths of the feminine knows no bounds in a kaleidoscope of psyches, sights and sounds (Hayward, 2021). In this approach the social constructs of taken for granted truths are disrupt. With this in mind, this paper is neither about self-promotion, nor the genius of the individual; instead, plurality of difference is encouraged in a network of support, tangled in a ‘hive mind’ of ‘collaborative life writing’ (Shani, 2019, p. 15; Smith, 1993, p. 400).

Thus, in the research and writing process, it is so important not to be enticed by those masculine economies that desire the perfect student researcher who collects data in a mechanical unthinking process. Instead, it must be an ethical way of knowing the self and others, facilitating ‘access to knowledge’ (Skeggs, 2004:14). In a dialogue of compassion, care and friendship with the self and others (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), the writings and craft-artworks bring from the shadows the parts of us that we avoid, stories that are painful, traumatic and distressing. Seeing those discourses that are harmful, society’s collective shadow is acknowledged, and named, and by understanding patriarchy, it becomes less insidious (Abdellatif, 2021). This enables our journey into the light of new knowledges (Cixous, 1993, p. 3; 1976, p. 876; 1986, 79). The fabric of our stories marks shared spaces of ‘resilience-vulnerability’ (Hoult, 2012) depicting emotions, familiar, raw and significant to us, not out there but somewhere, remote to some just not to us. Feminists’ imaginaries in their plurality, creative freedoms of practices and community, enable a collective survival, a legacy of feminine resistance and tenacity needed to challenge the monstrous hydra (Vintges, 2017) or in my experiences the insipid, slippery bugaboo.

Thus, by following creative and imaginative approaches, they challenge epistemological research traditions of a ‘homogenized voice of “science,”’ that sets up the research process in a logical, structured, standardised format, so knowledge is produced by the dominant authority. The organisation of which is hardly ‘enlightened’, rather an example of how a scientific experiment would be conducted; structured with an introduction, literature review, method, analysis and conclusion. And there lies the problem: we are not objects upon which to experiment; rather we are people with

feelings, affect and emotion. Research, as a collaborative embodied process, weaves the voices of the many, those imagined in my short story, those read from theory and literature and those from interactions and lived experiences. The pilgrims-support workers were invited to share their journeys as they either left Rochester for Canterbury or for new landscapes but they were not able to contribute to this narrative at this time. Accordingly, I have drawn upon the work of Saidiya Hartman (2008) and her notion of fabulation, which is a way to redress the gaps in history. Hartman's use of critical fabulation is a counterpoint to the omissions in archives and historical records, particularly those in the lives of enslaved people. She suggests the use of storytelling and speculative narration as a means to understand new possibilities in stories yet to be told. These stories of the present facilitate new narrative landscapes that rupture the neat archival accounts presented as the universal truth. I have used creative writing as a method of inquiry to illuminate the way I saw the trauma of our redundancy. Remembering, reclaiming and retelling stories, the stories of the present within the feminist imaginaries are presented and here begins our tale. The context for the short story in chapter 2 combines feminist theories, with creative writing practices and the events of neoliberal policies in an arts university

Chapter 2: Feminists' tales of the imaginary

Clouds hang heavy as the portcullis ascended, creaking, pregnant with the strain of the thick latticed metalwork, poised above our heads. The penetrating spikes of this creaking gate were a metaphor for the danger that lay in our wake. Tangible was the fear, although dissipating now we are leaving the fortress. Yet, the menacing concrete construction loomed behind our pilgrim's train, as we left the threat of this monstrous edifice, a reminder of the bugaboo within.



Figure 3: Ambrogio Lorenzetti, The Tyrant in Allegory of Bad Government, 1338-9, fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy (A head of the hydra/ bugaboo).

Our fears were difficult to define; all at once elusive but there all the same. Our fate was hell on earth, spinning in Dante's circles of hell, whirling in and around the citadel's hierarchical systems. Strangulating the populous within. The goodness was squeezed from the community through treachery, greed, violence, and fraud, consuming the essence of our souls. A shadowy presence, not quite within reach, slippery, insidious; firstly infecting, subtle changes in values and morals. Then, behaviours oppressing, pressing our bodies down in the mire until we could taste the muck of immorality.



Figure 4: Domenico di Michelino, Dante Alighieri Dante and the Three Kingdoms, 1465, oil on canvas, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

Chapter 3: Departing from patriarchy's illusion

The sense of relief was palpable in our urgency to be free of the suffocation of body, mind and spirit. We were free, no longer confined in a corrupt patriarchal society of vice and sin. Knowing we had far to travel, the city of Canterbury was but an apparition in our collective conscience. However, feeling the small delicate droplets of rain sprinkle our faces, like translucent freckles, was a reminder we were free. Free to feel, at a distance away from the encasement of the cold thick stone walls and those therein. No longer oppressed in captive servitude, our containment was over. But the presence of the towering monster was difficult to relinquish from our psyches, as his threatening prevailing authority was only just behind our small party. A constant reminder of dangerous times of bygone days, days gone by without realising. Beyond conception, beyond comprehension, beyond a state of conscious contemplation.

Residing at the fortress for the last fifteen years, it was a sanctuary for women when we arrived; however, as time went on, the hydra's heads multiplied and there we were, deceived in the knowledge that it was a place of safety, comfort and community. We were tricked, betrayed into believing this illusion of truth. What treachery. As teachers for those less fortunate, we tried to educate the people that arrived in search of something better. But they too were deceived and should have fared better in the community from whence they came. Yet for all the weight of patriarchy's need to oppress our very existence, it served as a reason to band together and forge firm friendships. Women, whose mental bonds gave us a commonality, to push back against the master's misogyny. Leaving our daily lives of familiarity and ritual, now we are in a space of lightened liminality, journeying to replenish the emptiness of our being. For neither were our talents developed, nor our creativity imagined.

If he had not imposed such draconian ideologies upon the inhabitants, we women still might be at the fortress, teaching, caregiving, weaving, sewing, creating. However, we are in a time of immense poverty where the disadvantaged are left out, left without fuel, food and substance. Yet, like it or not, we are in the great age of pilgrimage and in this cultural climate we could not ignore this opportunity to escape. So 'likeness of lot and intension is converted into commonness of feeling into

communities' (Turner & Turner, 1978). In our own small community, of a 'hive mind' we are mobile in public, an unusual occurrence in the day and age of medieval times (Shani. 2019). We travelled on, private with our thoughts of our adventures to come. Happy as a small band of wandering women, we sought to intercede for those we left behind. To pray for the sick, the starving, the ill and infirm but what of ourselves? None of us wanted to go back, for his power was all consuming. He sought to conquer all in his way. Slowly choking our humanity and spirit, we were under the rule of this tyrant, from a far-off land where dragons and hydras were real and not yet slain.

So just as those seeking solace made their way to this fortified tower of safety, we took our own path to another tower, a different type of fortress, a stronghold to the power of good Christian beliefs., Canterbury Cathedral. Was this a mistake? Substituting one manmade edifice for another? When profit and greed are put above the needs of the disadvantaged, religion's righteous morality is conveniently put aside for economic gain. How do men justify the ethics and morals of treating others with such cruelty, contempt and subjugation? By treating women and those of racial and cultural differences as objects or commodities, the taken for granted truths will never change. These 'truths' are a blight on society that scar the opportunities of those that are neither white nor male. The ego of the Lord of the Tower was such that support, compassion and justice for others, was lacking. Good governance was left for those with a conscience. Citizenship was the attribute of other more accepting communities, not ours. There was neither peace, fortitude, prudence, magnanimity, temperance nor justice. Rather power was abused, accountability and transparency were eliminated, as fraudulent activities took hold. Outsiders and strangers were exploited for their coin, just as those that lived there for many years. The direction of violence was not selective, and discrimination was rife.



Figure 5: Ambrogio Lorenzetti - Allegory of Good Government, 1338 – 1339, fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy.

Chapter 4: Tales of women wandering

Following in the footsteps of the many, travelling along Pilgrim's Way, this band of wandering women acknowledge the perils of their journey. To a spiralling sanctuary in the ever-increasing towers to the trinity, we went. For those perils were less than that which was to befall the inhabitants left at the fortress. Ill equipped to uphold the peoples and the city's needs, the good women had no choice but to leave. To part take in pilgrimage was a plausible excuse to leave with little notice. After all, why would men such as this bother about the disappearance of a group of insignificant women. But that was their mistake, for we are not insignificant but artisans, unlimited, unbound, unruly, and women wandering, troubling the landscape.

So, our sojourn took place at The Woolpack Inn, Chilham. The fire was raging, ash drifted in the air as we sat down to rest. Although we were bereft of food for our body, we were a group of

women that knew how to support each other in times of need. We talked about our hopes for the future and past traumas. Settled into the hospitality offered at the Inn, the stories came with ease as we were comfortable in our friendships. Having a familiarity with the women in the group only comes with many years of understanding and knowing. The story I told was about my mother but equally it might apply to many having suffered a loss. She was in my mind as my pilgrimage was to pray for her departure. She was gentle and kind and too good for this world. I could feel her presence as an energy filling the room. She was a *Presence Everlasting* (2019), in my psyche. It makes me sad how she suffered but she is at peace now. I remembered how I watched the changing colour of a rose bush in the grounds of the fortress. The changing colours reminded me of her life and death. Death opens up possibilities of new meanings. In bereaving, leaving, lamenting the loss; beginning, being. Remembering. I remember the dialogue I had with Helene when her father died of the white plague, the pain of loss birthed her creativity; she said:

I had gone into the cemetery rotten, used, extinguished, expelled, annihilated by myself. I came out the other side. Nothing is what we think. On that day everything began a little less, a little more, not quite what it is. (Cixous, 1998. p. 53)

I entered the cemetery. She leaves on the other side. The side of the other. Nothing (death) is not what we think. Our thinking falsifies. Death offers a beginning from which everything may be different, other. My cradle, my tomb. (Cixous, 1998. p. 82)

I sat thinking, contemplating, gently cradling, cradling grief, and grieving in the **cradle of creativity**. In the rocking motions, emotions, oscillating back, singing back, swaying forth, akin to the thin branches of the osier tree, bending, weaving the willow, stitching the soul together in sadness and celebration as the withies shape the basket made to contain a new world. Helen continued: Death gives 'everything, it gives us the end of the world. ... We need to lose the world, to lose a world, and to discover that there is more than one world and that the world isn't what we think it is (Cixous, 1998. p. 10) So, in losing the world in which our parents occupied, we are *Newly Born* (Cixous & Clément, 1986) as the tomb is the womb in which a new world is cradled into existence. On the death of Cixous's father, her mother was able to pursue a profession as a midwife. Uncannily, death brought about a new world and literally new life.

Chapter 5: Wandering in the wonder of the imaginary

And what of that world? The warmth of the fire and our friendships softly covered my being, I wondered what would happen to the generations to come. Would they have agency to be creative, or would they be constrained in the ways of men? My eyelids heavy, sinking into the depths asleep, a sleep so deep, it would take me to another space. Invading the dreamscape, escaping to the realm of the Real, unknown and unknowable. I could feel my head nod backwards, finding a worn space in the fabric where many bodies had rested before me. I dreamt of uncanny happenings of my future selves, and those that sought refuge in the subconscious.

Sisters, We Hear You, We Shout Your Names

I give thanks to my ancestors,
Without whom I would not be here,
Writing stories,
Of pasts long ago.

Up were my Sisters,
As the sun relentlessly breaks the dawn,
Day after endless day,
Cleaning,
bodies broken in,
Mines,
Factories
Farms.
Labours that break the soul.

What of your souls, dear brave sisters?
 Women who gave their lives.
 Electrocuted,
 In the asylum.
 Dying
 In the workhouse,
 Dying
 In the big house,
 In service,
 To the masters who abused bodies and babes.
 Sisters, Aunts, Cousins,
 Dying
 In childbirth.
 Babies,
 Crying,
 Not heard by those that would have loved them.
 Given
 Up,
 Up to those that are not knowing.
 But I know you; never forgotten.
 You are all
 Seen,
 Heard.
 Names, now spoken in dusty archives
 Found, not forgotten
 Searching
 Fearlessly,
 Tirelessly
 Not in vain,
 Broken is the seal of shame.
 We are here.
 Proud to know,
 Florence, Lizzy, Daisy, Lucy, Doreen ...
 I, with you my Sisters, shout all your names.

I woke up, knowing. I knew, it was here in a collective community, here was my salvation. Ivory towers are made by men for men. We had no need to worship at edifices that held the bones of the dead. We had already reached a space of possibility, a space of feminist imaginaries:

Where the red sky flows bleeding into the sea,
 The turbulent tides of the raging wild Imaginary.
 Turns back the tiny trickling stream of the Real,
 As the essence of the mystic's gifts are revealed.
 Here the depths of the feminine knows no bounds.
 In a kaleidoscope of psyches, sights and sounds.
 The beautiful abundance of flora and fauna,
 Shore up the banks of a flooding limitless aura.

Diving into the pool of the creative unknown,
 And dreaming in the unconscious, now shown.
 What jouissance the rich mystic mind conjures,
 Made possible in the mysteries far beyond us.
 Picture the flood of tempestuous transformations ...
 Whirling in the pools of majestic imaginations.
 Feeling the surges of oceans' expansive emotions.
 Forming imaginative concepts – see the explosions!

Absorb the experiences. Lie back, ... take it all in.
 Sharing, embracing the wild waves of feeling,
 Floating in land-seascapes, boundary-less, timeless.

Be knowing of our freedoms, enchanting success,
 Embody the mysteries of those that transgress,
 Where the azure sky seeps into the sea green.
 Let us bask, enjoy our expansive senses. Seen -
 Are the swirling, flooding, overflowing, women,
 Wandering, joining, together. We invite you in.

(Tides of Imaginary Transformations, a version of which is published in Hayward, B. 2021. *Memories Made: An Anthology of poetry in a covid context*)

Chapter 6: Remembering, reclaiming and retelling in the feminist imaginary.

To facilitate this fabulated narrative, I sought the support of my theoretical friend, by including an imaginary dialogue with Helen Cixous. The suggestion of which was from Maxine Chester, a member of the Feminist Imaginary Research Network. I often sought her support and she kindly read a draft of this paper and then I realised that she too was on the pilgrimage and will travel to Canterbury to work. She asked me how I am able to write in this creative way. On reflection, it is not enough to promote the feminist imaginary to challenge Eurocentric, masculine ways of writing and knowledge creation, this process requires an unravelling of the praxis. This was problematic as much of my work is intuitive but by inviting others to be ‘academically different’ (Jackson,2004) action is required. I thought about Maxine’s suggestion and situated at the end of chapter 4, was an ideal place to converse with Cixous in a way that was intuitive, expressive and creative. After my mother’s death, I did see the world differently for no emotion could come close to the pain I felt. Accordingly, the fear of failure no longer had a grip on my psyche for the worst had happened. So I began my doctoral studies, part of which included creative writing, poetry, art and art curation; I had the motivation and courage to attempt that which I previously found insurmountable. It was as Cixous argued: death births

Birthing the Feminist Imaginary
 Gently cradling,
 Cradling grief,
 Grieving in the cradle
 of creativity.
 In the rocking motions,
 Emotions,
 Oscillating back,
 Singing back,
 Swaying forth.
 A-kin to the thin
 branches
 Of the osier tree,
 Bending.
 Weaving the willow.
 Stitching the soul

creativity and in response, I referenced her writing of her father’s premature death from tuberculosis. For this paper the phrase that most resonated with the feminist imaginary was: ‘My cradle, my tomb’ (Cixous, 1998, p. 82), as often creativity is birthed from loss. In the diagram below I have tried to show that creative process, which birthed the feminist imaginary.

Therefore, this example of creative, embodied writing is a way to confront the norms of writing and researching in the masculinised academy. At the same time, I hoped to have engaged your curiosity, and not to have bored you. But maybe you are wondering if this is ‘academic writing’ as I once did, when some years ago, I read *Language and Discourse in the Academy* (2004) by Professor Sue Jackson. Immediately I was drawn in, as the chapter began with the classic children’s fairy-tale opener: ‘Once, upon a time, a time that has gone and a time still to come, in a far and distant place, not too far from here, not too far from now, live the Guardians’ (Jackson, 2004, 101). I did not understand the full importance of this significant example of the feminist imaginary, I did not

understand the significance of language (Jackson, 2004). I was discombobulated; the writing was at the same time creative, embodied, familiar and unfamiliar. Uncanny. I was to come back to this example of the feminist imaginary. She discusses the part that ‘language plays in widening women’s lifelong learning opportunities’. This resonates with me and many of my students, for learning how to write academically is challenging; it feels detached and sterile (Westmarland, 2001). It is achieved, I argue at the expense of the creativity possibilities of the feminist imaginary. Jackson made this point, outlining ‘how academic discourses disable ways to be differently academic’ (Jackson, 2004, p. 101).

My cradle is my tomb

- My process: I researched cradle for meaning to ignite and stimulate ideas.
- **cradle** ˈkrɑːdl̩. : a bed for a baby usually on rockers. : a place of origin, the cradle of civilization. : the earliest period of life. to hold gently or protectively
- **cradle** [usually singular] cradle of something, the place where something important began
- this linked to the idea of birthing creativity, a place of importance to nurture the feminist imaginary. Also the word rocking brought to mind the conceptualisations of grief, swinging through a vast range of emotions.

Cradle

- I often use repetition and alliteration which supports a rhythm to the prose and links to the back and forth motion of the rocking cradle.
- **Gently cradling, cradling grief; grieving in the cradle of creativity. In the rocking motions, emotions, oscillating back, singing back, swaying forth.**
- I then researched etymology: "baby's bed," usually mounted on rockers or suspended for rocking or swinging, c. 1200, *cradel*, from Old English *cradol* "little bed, cot," from Proto-Germanic **kradulaz* "basket" (source also of Old High German *kratto*, *krezzo* "basket")

Cradle-craft

- I held the word basket in my mind and wrote the line above focusing on 'oscillating'. In the story I told, I felt myself oscillating, between the past, present and future, remembering and retelling and this feeling I visualised in the rocking motion of the cradle.
- When exploring the meaning and etymology, I made a note of the words before and after cradle, specifically 'craft' and oscillate - 'osier'. I did not know what osier meant; accordingly I looked up the meaning:
- a small Eurasian willow which grows mostly in wet habitats. It is usually coppiced, being a major source of the long flexible shoots (withies) used in basketwork.

Cradle-craft basket

- The osier connected with weaving the withies to make the basket-cradle. This definition took me back to when I supported a student create a structure using the craft of weaving the withies. **Basket-cradle-craft.**
- I then wrote: **swaying, a-kin to the thin branches of the osier tree, bending. Weaving the willow**
- Using the metaphor of weaving, I thought about how sewing, stitching is a means to repair, mend, make and created: I wrote
- **stitching the soul together in sadness and celebration, the withies shape the basket made to contain a new world.**

Prose to poem

In agreement, Richardson states qualitative researchers are not required to write as ‘disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge’ (2005, p. 1413). We have the means to fabulate, embody stories, by untying ourselves from epistemological traditions of knowledge creation. It is difficult to relinquish those ingrained approaches to researching and writing, tying ourselves to objectivity, positivism, neutrality etc. However, this is an example of a sharing of our lived experiences of women in academia by remembering, reclaiming and retelling stories of the feminist imaginaries. Going against the grain is a risk and it has taken me many years to embrace a way to write in the feminist imaginary, or in the words of Sue Jackson, ‘differently academic’ (2004). By embracing this approach, I share the words of the women liberated in the knowledge that academia is not the ‘Ivory Tower’ that we must climb; we have our own stories to tell in spaces other than those man-made colonised towers to which we make pilgrimage. Sue Jackson explains:

I heard tell that one of us reached the Ivory Towers once, shielding her eyes from the crown of Truth, dodging the sword of Power and pushing aside the shield of Knowledge. But the Ivory, so dazzling and full of promises, was just the bleached bones of something long dead, and the Word was ours all the time, waiting to be freed (Jackson, 2004, p. 101).

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About the Author

Bev Hayward is an Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London, within the Psychosocial Department. She teaches on the master's programme in Education, Power and Social Change. Having a learning disability and working-class, she was often marginalised in the UK educational system; accordingly, by exposing her vulnerabilities she hopes to foster a transformative and democratic pedagogical student experience. During her PhD in Education, Transformation and Lifelong Learning, Dr Hayward presented her research at SCRUTREA and was awarded the Tilda Gaskell prize for the best student paper and prior to that she won the Laurel Brake award for her master's dissertation. She is a poet, writer and embroider and is interested in the artist as educator. This position was drawn upon in the exhibition she curated, in 2022 entitled, *Unruly Women*, and presented in a piece created to celebrate the collaboration entitled *Wandering Women: A Journey as Feminist Imaginaries*, exhibited in 2023.

e-Mail: b.hayward@bbk.ac.uk

