(Re)configurations: articulating VET knowledge making practices. A work in progress

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Abstract

Turbulent times are marked by distractions, disturbances, changes and unrest. Rather than position such a time as negative, this paper seeks to take up this destabilising moment to consider ways of doing VET research-work differently. How/do we know and do this thing called 'VET'?

In this paper, we draw on Haraway's 1985 theoretical framings of cyborg as 'figuration' and as narrative device (Haraway: 1985). By inhabiting the heuristic space thus provided, we interrogate knowledge-making practices in and through VET over the same timeframe (1985-2010). Utilising four interventions: witnessing; situating; diffracting; acquiring (Wilson: 2009), we story collusions, learning and unlearning, in and of VET + [vocational education & training] that saturate our thinking-work. By the displaying of messy practices, contingencies and relationalities, we consider the potential for hybridised knowledge-in-the-making practices in VET. This raises difficult questions for articulating an ethics of practice in VET.

> The point is not just to read the webs of knowledge production; the point is to reconfigure what counts as knowledge in the interests of reconstituting the generative forces of embodiment. (Haraway 1994, p62)

1. Introductions

Turbulent times are marked by distractions, disturbances, changes and unrest. Rather than position such times as negative, this paper seeks to take up this destabilising moment to consider ways of doing VET research-work differently. Who are the 'we' doing VET research-work differently? How do we do this thing called 'VET'? Can we say we know this thing called VET? In this paper we draw on selected works of Donna Haraway to reflexively reconsider ongoing conversations we have been having for many years now, about our learning, unlearning and collusions with and about VET. Donna Haraway argues that this involves knowing hybridly and names its necessary underpinnings as

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[1] Following a line of thought illustrated in Haraway's writing practices we are conscious of the many other people, organisations and institutions that have contributed to the ideas in this paper. Amongst them are WAVE, S4W, ACAL, SACAL, Waltja and others.

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'knowledge-making practices'; 'knowledge-in-the-making' and 'differential literacies' or 'multiple literacies' (Haraway 1997 p11).

Why Haraway?

Rather than critique Haraway's work (e.g. see Thrift 2006; Braidotti 2006, Hayles 2006, Shields 2006), we utilise the insights and strategies for reading, thinking and learning she offers in a spirit of informed optimism, to think and 'see' differently, to seek out connections, inter-weavings, silences and gaps. This does not mean that we call on Haraway's theoretical offerings uncritically; rather, we come to her works with a solid background of over three decades' experience of working theories to centre stories from the margins. Similarly, our knowledge practices are informed by a multitude of diversely located projects (always feminist/anti-racial/multi-cultural) that continue to necessitate crossing and tangling 'boundaries of disciplines, institutions, nations (and) genres' (Haraway 1994, p61) – always seeking reconfiguration. In our efforts to make a difference, believing that the world can and should be otherwise, we practice Haraway's concept of *materialized refiguration*: '…to make a difference – however modestly, however partially, however much without either narrative or scientific guarantees. In more innocent times … such a desire to be worldly was called activism' (Ibid, p62).

Since 1985 (and before) we have read, digested, taught and practised a variety of inter-related (for us) theoretical sociological/philosophical approaches from Freire through feminisms; from andragogy to self reflexive criticism and situated knowledge practices, from modernism to postmodernism and back again; discourse to deconstruction; from anthropology to cultural studies and social geography, then post colonial studies and space/place studies; always working through a critical lens of gender-race-class with an eye for boundary crossings. More recently, one of us (Elaine) employed ANT (Actor Network Theory) to dig deeper into the shortcomings in constructivist complexities of agency and action, human/non human when writing both from and towards 'elsewhere'. This, in turn, reconnected us once again with Haraway.

There are many aspects in Haraway's oeuvre of work that resonate with our struggles - personal and academic, always looking for 'the missing thing' in our travels with and through theories; our experiences of working (in and against) VET[2]. Her attention to 'underlays', networking and multiple interconnections lend themselves well to look again at this globalising/globalised thing called 'VET'. Thrift (2006, p191) describes a feature of times-now as being characterised in part by how we see 'VET' - as 'more and more things … being tagged and integrated into metasystems which are part and parcel of those things' existence. Then these metasystems themselves become new ways of categorizing this augmented existence'. Our work has always centred gender-race-class, albeit in different ways. We share an enduring commitment to social justice that is integral to and so throughout our knowledge practices. Given this, we 'get' why and how, in Haraway's work:

> "(c)losure, totalisation, self-certainty and self-righteousness, essentialism, and claimed or desired detachment or objectivity", are all pointedly avoided. Passion, critique of domination, especially those of sex/gender and race; rigorous and creative scholarship; partiality in argument and an appreciation of more limited forms of political

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[2] We both work in VET and we both 'work' VET. In this paper we signal this double movement thus: working (in) VET.

> coalition are the aims, all written with an abiding sense of her own implication in the worlds and practices she critiques. (Schneider 2005, p26)

Moreover, Haraway's approach provides us with the space to locate and acknowledge our own complicities, to consider the ambiguities in and implications of our practices as we seek an ethics of practice. Her approach offers us the potential to interrogate our own work as 'knowledge workers' while at the same time interrogate knowledge work practices in our field of endeavours – in this instance, vocational and education and training (VET) - 'VET' that is inextricably located in and part of society, of specific places and times. We address issues of time/place and seek to interrogate the tensions and contradictions of 'holding incompatible things together' (Haraway 1985, 66) in VET and VET knowledge/s, while at the same time resisting the temptation to speak universalising Truths. Using Haraway, we story our real-actual experiences of 'VET'.

Haraway's Cyborgs

Haraway attracted wide and controversial attention with her 1985 paper *Manifesto for Cyborgs,* in which she explicated her use of cyborg, and three boundary breakdowns: humans/animals, humans/machines and physical/non physical, at a time when 'all forms of life and culture (were) becoming increasingly commodified' (Haraway & Gane 2006, p148). She named this work a Manifesto, '… a coming to terms with the world we live in and the question 'What is to be done?' Manifestos, she says, 'provoke by asking two things: where the bloody hell are we, and so what?" (Haraway 2006, p136). In this celebrated paper ('… a legend of late 20th-century scholarship' (Hayles 2006, p159)), Haraway (1985) utilised the cyborg as a new figure for cultural criticism, to imagine a different material-semiotic world, and, as Schneider (2005, p62) puts it, '… a different conception of identity and related politics, and a different kind of feminist and cultural criticism from those available' at the end of what Haraway referred to as 'the Second Christian Millennium'. Although we came to her 1985 paper later, the time of its writing coincides with our early academic careers. Similarly, its genesis coincided with harbingers of change in post-compulsory education in Australia that would soon result in a unified national training system, now most often called into being as 'VET'. The events and sites that Haraway storied in this Manifesto, 'calling the cyborg out of abstraction to trouble the actual real' (Shield 2006, p211) were (and still are) at the centre of unrest in our lives: '…the lived geography of women in circuits of culture and capital: Home, Market, Paid Work Place, State, School, Clinic-Hospital and Church' (Haraway 1990, pp170-3 cited in Shields 2006, p211).[3]

As Shields (2006, p210) suggests, 'inhabiting a 'social science fiction' we should not look for cyborgs of flesh and steel crossing the street. The inky cyborg is a hybrid subject of history offered as part of a new political myth'. We hope that 'embracing this equivocal figure (will) open a heuristic space not for judgement but for learning'. (Ibid p21) We are looking for ways to story 'VET' in a 'processural' manner rather than focusing on its production; that is, we do not seek to provide a set of closures in debates about VET and VET knowledge practices, nor do we aim to write to create order from its inherent messiness. Rather, we want to work articulations, tensions and re/configurations, believing that, 'while all is linked, all also is, 'in the making' or unmaking or changing or is possible to change;

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[3] In his 2006 article, Shields updates Haraway's cyborg sites (2006, pp212-216) and 'adds' newly emerged sites as 'bracketed sites'- (body) & (The web) (216-7), following with discussion about spatial scale and fractal bodies.

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in process.' (Schneider 2006, p161) When considering 'VET', we also recognise well the need to take on board Haraway's cautioning 'against reification of ideas, of mistaking the word (usually a noun) for the thing or things it (too easily and violently) collects up; or of 'reducing' complexity and dynamism to simplicity and stasis; of misplaced concreteness'; of idolatry'. (Ibid p161)

As described by Braidotti (2006, 199) and again this resonates with our work, 'Haraway's cyborg inserts an oppositional consciousness at the heart of the debate on the new technological societies currently being shaped, in such a way as to highlight issues of gender and sexual difference within a much broader discussion about survival and social justice.' Cyborgs, as material-semiotic objects located in space-time with specific histories but without humanist origin stories enable the transcendence of binaries between human/non human, realism/relativism, nature/culture; they are '…objects into which lives and worlds are built'; '… dense nodes that (can) explode into entire worlds of practice, …'figures that map the universes of knowledge, practice and power' (Haraway 1997, p11). When 'doing' VET, we hold firmly to Haraway's claims that 'no-thing comes without its world'; that 'things might have been and could still be other than they are' (ibid p162).

Haraway's works insist on and synthesises both the literal and the figural (literal/figural). Given the ongoing 'rub-up' with and against binaries and 'truth games' we continually attempt to dismantle, especially in work around gender-class-race, figuration provides a way into troubling taken for granted assumptions that shape so many meta discourses and so the world around us. For us, while knowing well that Haraway's intellectual work continues to evolve, the explanation offered by Schneider (2005, pp62, 66) illustrates how cyborg/figuration remains useful in our reflexive endeavours:

> The cyborg is not only an image or figure, an entity in fact or imagination, but is also a positioning, a way of thinking and seeing, that Haraway believed could – if taken up, lived – make the survival of living beings in late- or post-modern technoscience worlds more likely. …
> Multiplicities. Heterodoxies. Monstrosities. Improbable but promising couplings made by choice and based on assumed short-term common ends as well as means. These are the marks of Haraway's cyborg as figure to think and live with.

Figurations

While considering how best to approach this collaborative paper in a way to bring our work together, it was almost serendipitous that, while reading *Gender, Place and Culture,* the article by Wilson (2009) provided a timely reminder of the continuing importance of Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, and specifically the use of *cyborg as a figuration*, in critical methodology, with 'figuration … opening knowledge-making practices to interrogation' (Wilson 2009, p499). So- how can we think and work figurations?

> *Figuration has many meanings besides, or intersecting with, those proper to the legacy of Christian realism. …*
> *Figures must involve at least some kind of displacement that can trouble identifications and certainties.*
> *Figurations are performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds.*
> *…Figures always bring with them some temporal modality that organizes interpretive practice. (Haraway 1997, p11)*

The work of figurations is important for us here. 'Figuration is Haraway's overarching approach to critique' (Ibid, p501). It 'invoke[s] multiple ways of being/becoming and knowing/seeing; as such, they are both epistemological *and* ontological' (Ibid, p503 emphasis in original). Figurations do not

explain, describe, present; rather they "are are about arrangement, as a series of arguments or the composition of an image" (Ibid, 501). Haraway says figurations are about 'inhabiting': they enable shift, epistemological and ontological mobility – in fact demand a flexibility of thought not easily captured by contemporary notions of reflection or even reflexivity. Haraway's gift of counter-figurations (cyborg, modest witness, companion species) assists us to seek out and see 'alternative structures of otherness' (Braidotti, 2006, p201). Moreover, and significantly for us, 'figurations also entail a discursive ethics: that one cannot know properly, or even begin to understand, that towards which one has no affinity'. (Braidotti 2006, p200) We both are deeply implicated in knowledge-making practices in and of VET.

We have both been involved in work in and out of academia and as workers in education, work, training, research for over three decades… long before a unified VET system was 'made' in Australia. During our time as educators (knowledge workers) we have designed degree programs and associated curriculum materials, taught and evaluated courses, supervised students in diverse settings and for differing reasons, been involved in national, state and international projects, sat on various high level government committees, acted as advocates, provided 'expert' advice – at times even when it was not wanted – generated special editions of journals and so on. Our work is rich pickings for cyborgean interventions.

In his 2009 article, Wilson focuses especially on epistemological hybridity of the cyborg figuration, emphasizing its potential as '…a narrative device, to embed and craft associations, to historicise differently ... to enter into … storytellings, to make a mess of fact/fiction, subject/object and mind/body.' (Ibid, p503) By tracking carefully through Haraway's various works and associated literatures, Wilson 'distilled' four epistemological strategies involved in knowing hybridly: witnessing; situating; diffracting and acquiring, in his effort to re-activate the cyborg; to 'intervene in narratives of knowledge production, to challenge their knowledges-in-the-making.' (Ibid, p504)

In this paper we explore what it means to engage in a way of talking from the beginning about knowledge-in-the-making rather than say "make knowledge about VET". We recognize like others that knowing VET is bound up in socio-cultural, economic, political and ethical practices not always evident at first glance. To paraphrase Haraway (1997, p10) our interest here is in troubling 'those instances of barely secularized Christian figural realism at work' in the discourses of *vocational-education-and-training and VET*. This requires us to think anew about the conceptual tools we have available to think and do *vocational-education-and-training and VET.*

As we will show, this way of 'knowing VET' demands epistemological hybridity along with different (multiple and often diverse) literacies (Schneider 2005 p. 158): tolerance of ambiguity and awareness of how we narrate and are narrated by 'machinic' VET. First we briefly place ourselves in relation to what is called the contemporary Australian VET system. Assisted by Wilson's four 'interventions' as epistemological strategies in cyborg geographies, we position our work since the mid-1980s as a critical politics and ethics of figuration of *vocational-education-and-training and VET* for/by VET researchers. We ask how these reconfigurations loosen up what counts as VET practice and hence open up for VET researchers the possibility that 'we might learn something about how worlds get made and unmade, and for whom' (Haraway 1994, p. 70).

2.   RE/CONFIGURING VET

When we speak the word 'VET', often ever so casually, we are categorizing – pulling together a global/local collection of myriad parts and people and things into some kind of supposedly containable and knowable (monstrous) concrete 'real' 'thing'. We work 'in VET'; we teach in and about and for 'VET'; we research 'VET'- all the time with a belief that 'we' individually and collectively understand and so 'know' that about which we talk and teach and research and write. We inhabit a reified "VET" where the acronym is the homogenising container for the multitude of heterogeneous often disconnected and at times competing 'parts'. 'We' configure 'VET' - we are deeply implicated in its various settings up (if not its design), its arrangements, and of working with and in the 'purposes' of 'VET'. Similarly, and passionately, we seek out ways in which to re/configure 'VET', to achieve what we each desire from VET, each for our own reasons.

For over two decades now, adult-vocational-education-and-training has been in a constant state of flux. Sectoral and ministerial boundaries are drawn and redrawn, with re/forming legislation and policy-on-the run squeezing and shaping and pushing and prodding and testing vocational education and training. The array of associated companies, subsidiary bodies, acronyms and acolytes multiplies ceaselessly, as do the ever changing definitions and so the work of VET. We two, colleagues and others, have lived these two decades through gymnastic intellectual, pedagogic and practical work, with passion and intellectual agility, accumulating barely manageable ever growing repositories of papers, publications, policies, flow charts, acronyms, dictums and despairs. So - how can we 'know' and speak of this 'arrangement' - the singularity, the 'it' that we call VET? It is this singularity that we frame as 'machinic VET'.

Machinic VET is best located within the capitalistic meta-discourses and materialist-discursive practices of global capital – the global flows of commodified marketable knowledge. In contemporary Australia, Education[4] is the third largest industry; the second largest services export sector behind Tourism, having achieved a 15% average growth per annum. (Austrade Education, 2010) In 2007/8, Education and Training (excluding public sector components) returned the third largest profit margin (24.5%) for Australian 'industries', behind Rental, hiring and real estate services (41.1%), and Mining (37.9%) (ABS 2009, p15) A multi billion dollar industry, its major twin goals are those of profit and productivity – 'to drive economic growth'[5]. As proclaimed by the Australian Government, 'The Australian Government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is dedicated to the internationalisation of education' with an enviable 'international reputation as a leading supplier of education and training' (Australian Education Int. 2010) For example, 'international education activity contributed $17.2 billion in export income to the Australian economy in 2008-09, up 23.2 per cent from the previous financial year'. (Austrade 2010) 'VET', formally operating presently under the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development as the National Training System, enrolled 1.7 million students in its public system in 2008 with a total operating expenditure of $635.4 million. (NCVER, 2009) In terms of internationalisation, VET, a 'part of the international education commercial phenomenon' (Skills Australia 2009,46) is now leading the way in the Education industry, ranked first by volume of

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[4] Here Education with a capital 'E' designates the industry, rather than the activity.
[5] DEEWR Australia's National Training System. Australian Government
http://www.deewr.gov.au/Skills/Overview/Governance/Pages/NTS.aspx

enrolments (almost a quarter of a million students in 2009[6]), and also as the fastest growing sector (35.6% growth, compared to 12.4% in higher education). (Austrade 2010) In fact, the growth rate in international enrolments in VET between 2002 & 2008 has increased by 226% (Skills Australia 2009).

From our practice sites in VET, this rapid commercialization and positioning of VET as a major export industry is something that we 'know' partially and often put at a distance in our day-to-day work. So this then is the monolith that comprises singular VET. This is unified VET, most often depicted (mapped) in flowcharts, matrices and dense diagrams designed to capture, insert boxes, boundaries and demarcations, to order and thus illustrate the whole – a task that defeats capture in words (e.g. see NCVER 2010[7]; Knight & Mlotkowski 2009[8]; Evesson 2009[9]). The word VET, then, becomes the (singular reified concrete) 'thing'; the word VET works to collect up multiple worlds, then homogenises this heterogeneous complexity, to render it knowable, knowing and known as 'itself'. Haraway has something to say about 'things', and it is with these insights that we write the word 'thing': 'Commodity fetishism is a specific kind of reification of historical human interaction with each other and with an unquiet multitude of non-humans, which are called nature in Western conventions. *In the circulation of commodities within capitalism, these interactions appear in the form of, and are mistaken for, things.*' (Haraway 2000, p113 (our emphasis)) We seek to disrupt this homogenization of VET and 'VET knowledge', and encourage multiple knowledges-in the making with/in vocational-education-and-training

While tracking the multitude of variations in adult community vocational education and training we have witnessed, we embarked on a series of listings, commencing with the branding of its various iterations. 'In the beginning' (well, since the 1980s) we worked in and with adult and community education (ACE), and 'TAFE'- technical and further education – loosely connected and collaborating systems. Since the establishment of the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) in the early 1990s, the acronyms used to badge adult community vocational education and training have shifted. It is informative to note the slippages and the erasures, albeit briefly given the limitations of this paper.

Prior to the heady days of NTRA, people 'went to TAFE' and 'did TAFE' for a variety of reasons. Post NTRA, ACE became one step removed from TAFE (and also in status and resourcing), framing itself and perhaps remaining as the 'Cinderella' 'sector'. While TAFE continues as the major provider of publicly funded VET courses, deregulation spawned a myriad of private providers[10] to cohabit with TAFE in what is now known as the VET sector – a highly competitive and market driven industry. The shifts in popular usage to identify vocational-education-and-training to 'VET' have been accompanied by erasures: for example, the and in vocational-education-and-training `to VE-T (VET).

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[6] This figure is from Austrade Education documentation as cited. We have found that this figure differs between sites (e.g. Skills Australia (2009); ABS (2009)), and have been unable to verify the 'real' figure.

[7] 'Building a complete picture of the VET workforce is a puzzle which has proved elusive' (NCVER 2010).

[8] 'Understanding Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system can be daunting for observers. … This report is intended to make the VET system and its inner workings more comprehensible to observers' (Karmel, in Knight & Mlotkowski, 2009).

[9] 'ascertaining VET's efficacy is a difficult task' (Evesson et al, 2009 p9)

[10] Skills Australia (2009, p69) lists the numbers of provider for 1.67 million students as: TAFE (59); other govt. providers (100); community education providers (529); other registered training providers (1384), on 12,427 delivery sites. See also information for RTOs on Training.Com: http://www.training.com.au/

Similarly while 'Technical' remains in international acronyms (TVET)[11], it too is 'disappeared' in Australian VET, with the exception of (a government sponsored limited liability company that 'supports' VET) TVET Australia Ltd[12]. The disappearance of the 'and' signals directly to the diminishment of education *per se*, and the concurrent and continuing privileging of training in the VE(-)T=VET equation. The disappearing of Technical is also interesting, both how and why, as well as who decided that it would be so, especially given its synergy with industry, applied sciences, specialization and skill.

The VET monster may be a collation of many parts, but one thing that we know for sure is its status as a much manipulated government 'tool' for/of micro-economic reform. The goals of VET are unashamedly productivity, consumption, growth: in short all the elements of capitalism (Thrift 2005, p. 20/21; p.40; p.95-96). Rather than knowledge-in-the-making approaches, these goals are achieved through knowledge management and marketing, the main qualities of which are peculiar to what Thrift describes as 'soft or knowledgeable capitalism' (Ibid p.21). Central to this process is the manner in which 'knowledge' about VET and VET-related knowledge/information is so often disseminated: through high profile costly seminars by and for those 'at the top' – those in 'the know' and aspirants who need to 'know' (and be known). Then there are also management gurus peddling ideas of 'predictability', 'empowerment', 'esteem' and 'self-belief' (pp 38- 41) – core principles of 'new age training'. In both ways VET is solidified and reinforced as a singular knowable entity.

Since NTRA, what is evident in so many ways post the declared 'death of curriculum' is the rise and rise of 'skill', co-opted from (knowing) workers and workplaces, assessed whether significant/worthy/valuable or not for commodification by industry representatives and/or delegates and bureaucrats. These were then bundled into packages of diminished knowledge; marketable and ever-proliferating 'training packages'. And all this is in the name of flexibility, choice and accessibility. Paradoxically, this now taken-for-granted production-line process of bundling training 'content' under the guise of 'competency' supplants wider views of knowledges, capabilities, capacities - the very things around which the global trade in knowledges operates. Along with this diminishment of knowledge/s, we witnessed the squeezing out of social-cultural knowledges, as evidenced by the in/out/in again/gone forever 8th 'key' (Mayer) competence around cultural awareness and understandings. While there is no room for nostalgia or the romancing of utopian histories in these events, we believe strongly none-the-less that these histories of erasures, voids and chasms should be remembered as learning (un-learning?) events, and recorded along with the acts of capture-codification-commodification in the establishment of the machinic singularity that is VET.

VET, it appears, is now the solution for all (economic) problems; it is intrinsically linked to and interwoven into legislation, policies and practices associated with trade and export income; with welfare; with migration and citizenship (completed full fee training for visas); with industrial relations, labour force requirements, skills forecasts and future planning of productivity and population, to name some of the associations. It is significant that we remember that, in all of the various ideological shifts and efforts to re/create (a singular knowable identifiable do-able sale-able)

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[11] Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is the UNESCO term used to describe the area referred to by the acronyms VET, VTE and/or VE&T. The term "TVET" was adopted at the 1999 TVET World Congress as the preferred term to describe the broad scope of activities. http://www.unesco.org/education
[12] See: http://www.tvetaustralia.com.au/about

VET over the last 2 decades, the more this disparate assemblage morphs, the more it resists capture, fragments and becomes unruly.

While we see well the 'world shaping world-making' impact of VET, and acknowledge our complicity (along with the ambiguities and frustrations) as knowledge-workers in and of VET, we remain aware of Haraway's implications when she argues for '[c]ritical reflexivity, or strong objectivity, [that] does not dodge the world-making practices of forging knowledges with different chances of life and death built in to them' (Haraway 1997 p37). This requires us to recognize the chameleon character of VET – its hybridity, its figural qualities – and opt to inhabit rather than to control them. We seek to work in vocational-education-and-training, while interrogating and challenging VET. This awareness draws us into 'displacement[s] that can trouble identifications and certainties… performative images that can be inhabited. Verbal or visual, figurations can be condensed maps of contestable worlds. … [They] always bring with them some temporal modality that organizes interpretive practice' (Haraway 1997 p 11). And of course to paraphrase Haraway (in Schneider 2005 p150) we might (and do) 'discover things about [ourselves] that [we] wish [we] didn't know'.

3.   KNOWING AND DOING VET: STORIES, COLLUSIONS AND COLLISIONS

The idea of 'inhabiting' figurations is important to our knowing and doing VET. We can't stand outside our work – we have inhabited policies, toolboxes, standards, (training) packages, tenders, projects, program design and delivery and so the list goes on. In Haraway's terms (1997, 2) each of these are collective instances of how 'the imaginary and the real figure each other in concrete fact, … as constitutive of lived material-semiotic worlds'. So, while configurations of VET did in fact shift 'official' VET knowledge and the subjectivities that could/should/did inhabit VET, they were not quite what we had in mind. Nor were they likely to be the kind of projects Haraway had in mind when she imagined working difference through 'antiracist feminist multicultural studies of technoscience' (Haraway 1994 p61; 1997 p268). As she describes it this involves the 'noninnocent, complexly erotic practice of making a difference in the world, rather than displacing the same elsewhere' (Haraway 1994 p63).

In tracing back through our many and varied stories we drew on a favourite architecture of our thinking work – a few days escape away from 'domestic' responsibilities including dogs, families chores, emails and (many) other things. During one of our early attempts to talk through these ideas for this paper we…

> *are sitting at a table at a coastal town south of Adelaide. There is a torrential rain*
> *hammering down outside. We are struggling to decide on the figuration/s we can use*
> *to 'think and see' 'VET'. Through the window we see cars parked on the road …*
> *blocking our view of a rugged coastal cliff and surf beaches. Three young men have*
> *been surfing for much of the morning, looking like seals in their black wetsuits. They*
> *come up from the beach and gather round the back of a white station wagon sitting on*
> *the tailgate. A figuration is there right in front of us: surfboards. And through them, all*
> *the articulations, the connections- nature/culture, subject/object, material/human,*
> *global/local, work/leisure consumption/production, knowledge/skill, along with any*
> *number of actors/actants, interconnected and interwoven disparate knowledges and*
> *articulations. The more we look, the more we see - along with countless connections to*

'VET-in-the-world' – to learning, and especially knowledges-in-the-making. Some time later the three drive off, get pies and chips and return to sit on the tailgate eating in their wetsuits. We watch them entice a lone magpie to take a chip, wonder if they are old enough for work or still at school, … we laugh about their 'sickie' and our conversations about VET continue, but our minds repeatedly turn to the figural qualities of surf, surfing, weather, water, motion and and and... We go for coffee and return to sit at the table with Wilson, Haraway, Thrift and VET.

This figuration gets us started again, in a different energised place. Wilson's accounts of cyborg knowledge practices, epistemological interventions bring some clarity to Haraway's admittedly 'dense' material-semiotics. Four interventions are drawn from her work: witnessing, situating, diffracting and acquiring. As Haraway argues, differential literacies invoke words which come with meanings already attached, lodged in the semiotics of the modest witness to a culture of no-culture. If a modest witness is objective and simultaneously invisible our task in using differential literacies is to trouble 'what counts'. Can we/are we 'modest witnesses' in and of VET?   Can we, as Haraway (1997, 277fn3) puts it:

> …trouble what counts as insiders and outsiders in setting standards of credibility and objectivity. "Disinterested" cannot be allowed to mean "dislocated"; i.e., unaccountable for, or unconscious of, complex layers of one's personal collective historical situatedness in the apparatuses for the production of knowledge. Nor can "politically committed" be allowed to mean "biased".

Troubling what counts involves witnessing, situating, diffracting and acquiring – the four epistemological strategies (or interventions) mapped by Wilson. So this brings us to a brief overview of each, before we employ these strategies in our attempts to tell VET differently.

'Witnessing is seeing; attesting; standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to one's visions and representations. …a collective, limited practice that depends on the constructed and never finished credibility of those who do it, all of whom are mortal, fallible, and fraught with the consequences of unconscious and disowned desires and fears'. (Haraway 1997, p267) To conceive of witnessing as similar to observation or calling to account or rehearsing misses the point of "differential literacies" deployed by Haraway. Witnessing invokes 'multiple situatedness, not from the single perspective of Author, but from the appendaged collection of authors-in-the-making'. (Wilson 2009, p505) Authors make knowledge. Knowledge '–in-the-making' is not made and disseminated.

Situating draws on Haraway's (1991) well-known work on 'situated knowledges'. Wilson (2009, p505) explains it thus: 'to be attentive to this cyborgean situatedness, (we) have the responsibility to place these knowledges-in-the-making, not with some reified, exacted place, but as a placing – an objective, yet contingent, collusion of objects, subjects and spaces'. Witnessing and situating are not possible in a Haraway sense (as differential literacies, as hybrid knowledge practices) unless, to paraphrase Wilson (2009, p505), we 'inhabit figurations to 'see' and 'place'… the multiplicity of relations that make [VET] geographies. To 'see' and 'place' in VET is also caught up in the definitive 'acts of amnesia' of knowledgeable capitalism (Thrift 2005, p20). Thrift argues it is now common to 'acknowledge the importance of capitalism, which then acts as a means of forgetting all about it and

getting on to more interesting things'. For Wilson, hybrid knowledge practices interrupt this amnesia. 'It is therefore not enough to reflect on one's co-implication in knowledge practices; rather, it is our responsibility to diffract, to document the difference generated by such knowledge practices' (Wilson 2009, p506). This is a very different kind of situating than that advocated by conventional notions of reflective practice or even more contemporary notions of reflexivity. Yes, it involves a placing historically. As Braidotti argues, Haraway's post-humanistic leanings push her to account for 'historical aspects of European culture, like colonialism and fascism, which are in open contradiction with Europe's stated beliefs in humanist ideals and principles'. (Braidotti 2006, p198) And it requires us to be visible as agents in that situating, placing, locating, while at the same time, countering '… a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere' (Haraway 1997, p188).

Haraway's notion of diffraction is drawn from the science of optics, with a focus on distinguishing between reflection and diffraction. 'Diffraction is about heterogeneous history, not about originals. Unlike reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere'. (Haraway, 1997 p273) Diffraction is explained by Wilson (2009, p505 citing Haraway 2000 p102) as 'a recording of the 'history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, (and) difference' '. Rather than generating a genre of 'mirror image' (official) knowledge, diffraction acts with/in figurations, to alter the politics and construct knowledge differently. … (it) is about changing knowledges, reconstructing knowledge practices such that alternative understandings of these knowledges emerge'. (Wilson 2009, p506)

As with diffracting, acquiring is, at first glance, not a word to be read off against a popular meaning. It is, rather, a problematic intervention (Wilson 2009) that requires all of Haraway's "mixed and differential literacies" (Ibid p. 501) to be brought to bear on understanding research practices as 'knowledge-in-the-making'. 'To acquire is to become vulnerable to alternative, even contradictory discourses – doing so enables the kind of hybridising diffraction that messes knowledge practices based in reflection extraction and synthesis' (Wilson 2009, 506).

Bearing these interventions in mind, we now move to story (a very few of) our experiences of working (in) VET, selecting figurations, each to work as a 'narrative device, to embed and craft associations, to historicize differently' (Wilson 2009, 503), to place stories 'on record', differently.

Sue's stories:

My entry into professional work in Australia around 1979 came some years after I had completed a basic science degree but of course I had been 'doing' vocational work prior to that: maker of 'fine wet weather apparel' (raincoats), kitchen maid and barmaid (yes that's what we were called then), street maintenance worker (a wonderful occupational category!), gardener and various kinds of clerical and office work. Not surprisingly, my professional CV reveals few signs of this work in Textiles and Clothing, Hospitality, Horticulture and Local Government: the containers for such work in the new architectures of contemporary VET. This period, marked a time between gaining a science degree and… what? A career? A vocation? … settling down? I was going somewhere but not quite sure where. I returned to graduate and postgraduate study, worked my way through a series of education contracts and positions in what used to be called the technical and further education sector and read Freire (of course). There was little else to help me make sense of the adult basic education work I was doing in an Adelaide TAFE or with Aboriginal controlled organisations in

Central Australia and later back in Adelaide. It was many years before I encountered women, feminism and/or race in my adult education graduate studies in 1979/80. Graduate study in language and reading (in the early 1980s) was also 'missing' anything that articulated with Indigenous adult literacies although I learnt a lot about literacy practices. Some colleagues will note, as usual, that numeracy is also a 'missing thing' in this story.

Fast forward to 1990s. I am a university lecturer in adult education. Adult literacy policy, provision and research is about to enter a new and highly visible phase in VET. The effects of the first national policy on languages (DEET 1991) are starting to filter down through the field. Funding flows for a range of projects to ensure articulation with VET, which remains clear in its vision to 'build literacy in' to its architecture, forms of governance, research and pedagogical practices as these 'things' are also perpetually reviewed and revised.

It's 1992. With colleagues, I 'won' a grant to develop ways of thinking and doing inclusive curriculum. We are excited and terrified at the same time, wondering how our focus on notions of advantage and power would be accepted within a broader milieu more comfortable with terms like 'disadvantage', access and culturally responsive curriculum. For my part I wanted to put on the table a growing uneasiness about the unspoken norm that drove assumptions about productive workers and responsible citizens – enterprising loyal subjects caught up in '"whiteness" as a transnational form of racial identification, […] global in its power and personal in its meaning' (Lake and Reynolds (after du Bois) 2008 p3) that functions as *a priori* description and prescription to constitute hierarchies of consciousness about human capacity' (Shore 2010).

In later reading I came to understand how our project was caught up in what Ghassan Hage (1998 p10) describes as a fantasy position *viz.* 'White-and-very-worried-about-the-nation-subject'. In effect we wanted to shift the focus of an emerging culture of worrying in VET, from 'worry about others', *their* problems, and the purported negative drag they exert on the economy, to a more productive way of thinking about people *in* the economy, consuming and so also contributing to it, creating it and of course being worn down by it. *Positively Different* was written in an era exemplified by control, tightly regulated governance structures and naming practices. In the years following completion of the project things got even tighter. The roll out of competency based curriculum, and later redevelopment of Training Packages prompted many to believe the central ideas in *Positively Different* – visible explication of the workings of advantage and power – were obsolete. [I exaggerate (a little) here. A few people occasionally would come up to me and say they loved the report, it's ideas about 'difference' and the extent to which it challenged the social production of mainstream knowledge as norm. Practically the annotated bibliography at the back helped them to situate potential teaching resources in/against mainstream discourses of empowerment and change.]

The 'figuration' of worrying presents me with different ways of understanding what was going on when 'building literacy in to VET' gained some moments of success or wavered and lost traction. In hindsight I'm inclined to think that 'building literacy in to VET' was "the last resort of the weak… the last available strategy for staying in control of social processes over which they have no longer much control" (Hage 1998 p10). And of course here I am referring not to individual people *per se*, but to that notion of singular monolithic VET as it sought to control a feral object – literacy.

In related work I also engaged more and less intensely with a series of large-scale national and international surveys designed to measure population literacy. The first, a national survey undertaken by Wickert (1989) established amongst other things that literacy was a complex set of social practices not accurately (or usefully) recorded by existing scales and measures. But *No Single Measure* (Wickert's report) disturbed many as it showed that substantial portions of the Australian population were operating at levels far below the imagined 100% literacy rates recorded in UNESCO discussions about Australian literacy in the 1970s and 80s. Subsequent international surveys in 1997 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997) and 2007 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007) promoted similar messages accompanied by recurring feelings of disbelief that so many people could have such a broad range of literacy difficulties. Furthermore, the international survey findings, almost 10 years apart, showed very little change in the skills in the population overall. How on earth could this happen when so much money had been spent on workplace and 'welfare to work' programs in the intervening 10 years? My engagement with these surveys varied: 'parroting' and/or explaining the figures to interested audiences; asking people to interrogate the assessment practices involved in such surveys; engaging in broad-based education and research campaigns to interrogate the data and link it to government skill inquiries (Shore 2003); exploring collaborations with the Australian Bureau of Statistics via public seminars; and, a circling back to my ongoing interest in the unspoken assumptions about whiteness that were central in shaping expectations about texts, reading practices, employment and citizenship (Shore 2009).

Working on *Positively Different* exemplified many of the collisions and collusions with machinic VET that were to be repeated over the years in subsequent projects, committees, collaborations and conferences. In these contexts, words have many meanings… they 'never arrive naked' (cf van Toorn 2006). For over two decades I have engaged in what I see as the messy, almost 'feral' articulations between literacy (and of course numeracy), survey data, employment practices and their associated promises for 'knowledges with different chances of life and death built in to them' (Haraway 1997 p37). In general everyone wants to know how many people can't read and write, why not and what we are doing about it. In general no one wants to hear or know [well, that may be a slight exaggeration, but sometimes it feels like it] that there are other 'missing things' shaping whether a person enters training or employment, is offered ongoing employment and/or has access to promotion opportunities at work. My work during this time has been an engagement with these 'missing things' in employability and citizenship debates, yet not so curiously, these issues are never absent in research projects, policy analysis or teaching I have undertaken.

For example I teach a course that is quite explicit about the focus on disrupting 'whiteness' as part of the delivery of an undergraduate VET teacher education degree and this presents many opportunities to know differently. This is a course that messes with notions of vocational-education-and-training and work. We explore the 'construction work', the effort involved, the organisation required to not speak about repertoires and practices anchored in a white transnational norm. This manifests in different forms at different levels of the system that is VET. With practitioners we have read beneath the apparently neutral content of Training Packages to complicate discussions of aged care and community services through performance statements that require 'props' such as running water, enclosed shoes (indeed shoes *per se*). We query what it means for hospitality workers to filter employable subjectivity through the polite, neat, controlled yet enterprising demeanour of whiteness. We have explored what is involved in adding race to discussions of hair, hair colour, hair

straightening and skin care and how ideas about whiteness embedded in Australian resettlement and training programs shape refugee engagement in/with Australia. The result was a seeing and placing of whiteness at work in vocational training (Shore 2010).

As I worked up presentations on international surveys I also wondered about the research *evidence* that documents the wasted time and strain involved in developing 'communication strategies' with rude, racist, sexist members of the public, employers or colleagues. I'd like to know what unit of competency might accredit this emotion work/emotional labour (cf Hochschild 1983). What 'Industry Skills Council' might take ownership of such a unit and under which Training Package? How might that drive cultural change around such amazingly homogenous notions of 'employability'?

In my policy work I wondered why no one has thought to withdraw the fourth objective of the 2004-2010 National Strategy (ANTA nd): 'Indigenous Australians will have skills for viable jobs and their learning culture will be shared'. Of course Indigenous people would want 'skills for viable jobs'. Indeed many of them already have both. But the objective is so explicit in its intentions to capture and control in the service of capital that it demonstrates remarkably little awareness of the paradoxes inherent in its renewed colonial gesture to decide that Indigenous learning culture will be shared. And, problematic as it would be, there is little interest in aligning this exploitation of 'learning culture' with the usual standards of capitalist reward that apply elsewhere in VET. I ponder the policy adviser training that might produce a different kind of 'fourth objective', one that would open itself to the vulnerability associated with 'acquiring' and would, in so doing, without doubt begin to fray the edges of 'singular VET'.

Working with people to generate a shared understanding of vocational-education-and-training knowledge-in-the-making has involved 'opening' up to other ways of knowing. Some of my learning here has been prompted in no small way by being involved in Indigenous controlled training organizations during the 1980s. These experiences taught me much about indigenous knowledge but also about not being in control. Not having veto over curriculum, not having my advice acted on, even if I was pretty darn sure it was right! But I also remember the knowledges shared with gardeners, 'stitchers', and the road crew in times when everything we said and did was not monitored via 'workplace literacies'. I am not harking back to 'the good old days here. Literacy is, after all, absolutely critical to VET – singular or otherwise. It's a trainer's tool of trade, but like other tools passed between workers, it is not always used in ways consistent with advice in the instruction manual. This 'figuration' – literacy as a 'tool of trade' – lacked traction in 1990s VET. Tools were usable objects often portrayed in rather instrumental ways in VET 'toolbox' terms. Literacy on the other hand was a shape-shifting kind of 'thing'. 'Building literacy in' to training, Training Packages and governance architectures relied on a figuration that would 'put literacy in place in VET' rather than a figuration that would mobilize diverse notions of literacy@work, literacy work, literacy in work (and of course life).

Repeated references to the economy, to productivity, to capitalist notions of consumerism and accumulation place VET *in* economic discourses. However, within the literature that represents VET as singular, monolithic, controllable and absolutely anchored – 'placed' – in architectures of economic governance, there are few mentions of the gaping differences between the 'optimistic mobility, the intellectual liveliness and "the logic of daring"' (Said 1993, p403) that saturates employability discourses in contemporary VET 'and the massive dislocations, waste, misery, and

horrors endured in our century's migrations and mutilated lives' (ibid p403). This is a big 'missing thing'. Really big. In 'researching and leading in turbulent times' I experience a constant tension in attending to the here-and-now yet never falling prey to a form of amnesia that forgets how my figurations shape the 'author-in-the-making' knowledge practices (cf Wilson 2009) I am co-implicated in.

ELAINE'S STORIES

How does one begin to 'tell' decades of 'knowing and doing' vocational-education-and-training and VET? Is my insistence on vocational-education-and-training and VET setting up yet another binary? I like to think not; that this is an 'equation' that signifies relationality, ever connected by the 'and/s'. I work in adult community, vocational –education-and-training- and I 'do' VET. The figuration I have carried over years in working in this field has always been that of the Cat's Cradle – a game I played as a child in a small country school in outback South Australia.[13] For me, the fascination was/is the potential of a piece of string, the engagement, the mysteries and challenges it held: beginning with something as mundane as a piece of string (or wool); knotting it into a continuous loop, and then the intense concentration of those involved in the game, passing this object to and fro, growing the complexity of the patterns almost intuitively while still maintaining the whole. For this, nimble fingers, not dropping the game and not letting the tension go slack were all important (as they remain today). Finally, and significantly, the close relationship with those involved in the 'game', the fierce concentration cannot be forgotten – the 'patterns' have been.

I came to Haraway's 1994 article on Cat's Cradle much later, while reading feminist literatures. In fact I all but fell on her words around it, seeing many more connections now in my academic life. I too had read through many diverse literatures in my search for knowledge (and 'answers') from critical theories, feminist literatures, those of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, philosophy and psychology, along with the education texts of the time/s. These literatures, far too many to list but to which I owe a deep debt of gratitude, along with my working experiences before and in education (TAFE and universities) now inform how I 'know', how I 'read' the political and policy, and so my figuration of Cat's Cradle. How I think about the whole and the parts; how I think about the tensions, and how the tension is managed at any one moment. By imbuing these into my figuration then, it is indeed an equivocal figure with epistemological flexibilities that can 'map the universes of knowledge, practice and power' (Haraway 1997, p11). This, then, is how and where I direct my energies, with the impetus to 'get in and dirty', always informed by feminist-antiracial-social justice sensibilities – the 'why' of my work. My struggles have always been around subjugated knowledges - resisting domination through knowledge-games, and 'fairness' – knowing that 'things might have been and could still be other than they are' (ibid p162). I like to think that I join with Haraway in some small ways, albeit without the where-with-all she has gifted us; 'like [her I] am kicking and screaming in symptomatic universalist objection, [knowing] that there is no pan-human, no pan-machine, no pan-nature, no pan-culture. … There are only specific worlds, and these are irreducibly tropic and contingent' (Haraway 1994, p64). So- what does/has this meant in working 'VET'?

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[13] See http://www.ifyoulovetoread.com/book/chten_cats1105.htm

STORY #1: IN THE BEGINNING- THE NTRA, MARKETS AND ALL THAT 'STUFF'.

If there is an 'origin story' of (machinic) VET, then it is most likely to be found in the intense and highly political period in the 1990s when the state-based TAFE sectors were 'unified' under what was named the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA). This was a period of major national economic reform and deregulation that firmly located Australia in global marketplaces. Given that vocational education and training reform was a major plank (one of three) in the micro-economic reform agenda, it was also a period of intense struggles around education and educating/training, relationality between the socio-cultural and 'the' economic, about the naming/dissecting, cooption, ordering and packaging of knowledge into competencies and skills, around professional identities and subjectivities. It was a period of upheaval and struggles around power, cooption, categorisation and marketisation of what previously had been a 'public good' – vocational education and training became VET in this period. Much was written through this period- and much of it is now forgotten and/or lost. However, and without rehearsing in any detail, the decisions that were made in this period still permeate the foundation of Australia's National Training System, including moves from education to training; knowledge to skill; skill formation to workforce development (Evesson et al., 2009).

My areas of focus in education and training at this time were in health and in community services and community development. I was invited to join a group prior to the establishments of ITABs (Industry Training Advisory Boards) that were to be mandated as a central part of the new VET governance structure. This invitation, and my continuing membership for some time was unusual, given the antipathy (loathing) that some of the architects of the reform had for educators, and especially academics. The Committee consisted of representatives of many community sectors- youth, social services, health, disability and so on. We recognised perhaps too well the implications of what lay ahead, for better and for worse, but all agreed that working with/in the new arrangements was critical to ensure that the histories and values that were our various areas of practice might survive, if not prevail. Our first major challenge was that 'we' were to become an 'industry', along with knowing (but not the extent) that this Agenda would be 'industry driven'. Bringing together the giant of 'health' and the disparate collection of services that were/are 'community' into one body was interesting enough, but to then consider ourselves as one industry sector was something else again. Nearly twenty years on (and back to the future) Evesson et al (2009) find it necessary to re/investigate four central domains of social and economic practice in VET: the core service and/or product of interest; the context of labour's deployment and development in production/service delivery; the pools and flows of potential workers and learners; the formal system of vocational education and training (p9). These were central to our passionate and informed deliberations. Of the first (core service &/or product of interest), and our deep discomfort at being categorized and so morphed into an Industry, Evesson et al (2009) now state: 'Too often in VET the notion of industry is assumed to be self-evident. We show that nothing could be further from the truth'. (p 9)

The next (huge) challenge was not fearing that all training would be nationally accredited (which we saw as a good thing especially in the services industries), but learning just what the dictum that standards would be competency based, and determined by 'industry', would mean. This resulted in vast amounts of intellectual work, investigating notions of competence, and especially how knowledge could be incorporated; how values could be incorporated into competency statements,

and how assessment might best be enacted, as well as by whom. Manuals were written for the 'sector', evaluated and endorsed. Ultimately, they and the knowledges and intents invested in them, came to naught. Seminars were run, and research projects conducted, into assisting those less articulate in CBT-talk (and especially low paid women workers) to 'name' the 'skills' that comprised their knowing labour in work places. Struggles to 'write' standards followed the ever-tightening systems of governance and representation that were legislated. Many academic papers were written, with most of my work being collaborative at that time (and since)[14]. At the same time, I agreed with colleagues[15] to draft competency standards for non-teaching school staff (SSOs)[16]. During this exercise, and all too well aware of what happened to the knowledge gleaned from workers when it was manipulated to fit into the CBT grid, we 'tracked' (using different coloured highlighter pens) all the knowledges that 'dropped off/out', despite our very best efforts. By this time, the new system was well and truly 'formed', with the establishment of ANTA, ever proliferating bodies and acronyms, and so I/we sought out where (in the cat's cradle) knots formed, tensions were managed (and by whom), the knowledge sets that were informing these decisions, and opportunities existed to influence ways of doing and seeing policy problems to address issues of difference rather than homogenizing populations might be inserted. This resulted in membership of a number of high level committees, and, at the same time, an ongoing project of research and advocacy work, located in networks such as WAVE and S4W[17] informed by academic work, individual and collective, from universities, bureaucracies, TAFE institutes and so on, often giving voice to those who have been gagged from speaking out.

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[14] For *some* examples, see: Butler Elaine & Connole Helen (1992) 'Sitting next to Nellie. Re-viewing the training debate for women workers' in *What future for technical and vocational education? International conference proceedings*, Vol 2 pp 53 - 82. Adelaide, NCVER; Butler Elaine & Connole Helen (1993) 'Contesting skill: women, work and training in Australia" in Butler Elaine & Brown Mike (eds) *A gendering skill: conversations around women, work and skill. An Australian perspective*. Geelong, Deakin University Press; Connole Helen & Butler Elaine (1994) 'Dancing on the coals: reforming the gender politics of workplace education and training' in *Feminine forces: redefining the workplace. National conference proceedings.* Perth, Edith Cowan University; Butler, Elaine & Shore, Sue (eds) (1994) Gender and adult education. Special edition of *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*. July 1994; Butler, Elaine & Brown Mike (eds) (1993) *A-gendering skill. Conversations around women, work and skill. An Australian perspective*. Geelong, Deakin University Press; Connole Helen & Butler Elaine (1995a) 'A gender critique of the National Training Reform Agenda' in *Converse* No 1, 1995, pp 15 – 20; Connole, Helen and Butler, Elaine (1995b) *Beyond Tick Women. Gender equity issues and strategies in the National Vocational Education and Training System.* (Unpublished) Canberra: Dept. of Employment; Butler, Elaine and Lawrence, Kate (1996a) *Access and equity within vocational education and training for rural and remote Australians. A background report.* Brisbane, ANTA; Butler, Elaine (1997e) 'Gender equity and training reform - reflections on a decade of optimism and disappointments' in *Education Links*, Winter Edition, Vol 55, July 1997, pages 13-17; Butler, Elaine (1997d) 'Education, training and work: Where are women in 1997? The cold hard facts.' in *Converse* No 2 1997, pages 13 -16; Butler, Elaine (1997b) 'Challenging metrocentrism. Issues of equity in vocational education and training for rural and remote Australians' in Armstrong, P (ed) (1997) *Crossing borders, breaking boundaries. Research into the education of adults. Proceedings of International Conference*, University of London, 1 - 3 July 1997; Butler, Elaine (1997a) *Beyond political housework. Gender equity in the post compulsory school environment*. Sydney, Department for Women, Premier's Council for Women; Butler, Elaine (1998b) 'Persuasive discourses: learning and the production of working subjects in a postindustrial era' in Holford, J; Griffin C & Jarvis P (eds), *Lifelong learning in the learning society: international perspectives.* London, Kogan Page; Butler, Elaine (1998a) 'Equity and workplace learning: emerging discourses and conditions of possibility' in Boud, David (ed) *Current issues and new agendas in workplace learning,* Adelaide, National Centre for Vocational Education and Research Ltd. (NCVER) pp 89- 109; Kempnich Barb, Butler Elaine & Billett Stephen (1999) *(Ir)reconcilable differences. Women in business and the Vocational Education and Training System*. Adelaide, National Centre for Vocational Education and Research Ltd. (NCVER); and so the list goes on and on.

[15] Dr. Helen Connole and Ms. Margaret Hypatia

[16] I was also involved as a committee member in the drafting of national competency standards for community workers.

[17] WAVE (women in Vocational Education & Training) is an NGO: See http://www.wave.org.au/. S4W is an Australia Federal Government women's alliance: See: http://www.security4women.org.au/

So- what has all this meant? Very little, in terms of outcomes for women, and perhaps for gender politics generally, as the Australian VET system continues to stumble around equity issues in general, and is increasingly resistant especially to 'doing women and girls'. We are now at the point where the last national policy for women and girls in Australian education, let alone VET, Women: Shaping our future 2004-2010 (ANTA 2004) is about to expire, and the new body charged with the responsibility for equity in VET - NVEAC (National VET Equity Advisory Council) appears to all intents and purposes to have no gender expertise or knowledge of gender analysis – perhaps no interest. At the same time, by seeking to work in a variety of situations, albeit with common motivations, I too am indeed deeply implicated with/in VET, albeit as a very small and insignificant 'player' (not quite ever a 'stakeholder').

At various times through these two decades, I have visualized and indeed felt the cat's cradle of VET to be concretised- more of a cutting grid like old fashioned metal ice block trays. However, as a figuration, it has never been dropped or even let be for a short while. The points of tension have shifted depending on how, why and by whom in what ideological contexts the 'itness' of VET was being managed. There have been brief glorious moments when it has been possible to grab hold of a 'string' and tweak it, even create the beginnings of a new albeit fleeting pattern. However briefly though, this has illustrated that interventions are possible, if not profitable or lasting; that working at multi-levels- inside/outside; centre/margins is always worthwhile, even if to challenge, contradict, insist that there are other ways of looking and other worlds involved in, and impacted by VET. VET does not exist in a vacuum - it is interwoven through all social, cultural, and economic aspects of our lives. The actors and actants, their knowledges and values that it/VET resists so strenuously do have the potential to create better models, better worlds.

So - thinking about Haraway's act of witnessing, of being a modest witness, I have been/am publicly accountable- perhaps in too many ways, for my visions and dreams and interpretations. My practice is indeed a 'a collective, limited practice that depends on the constructed and never finished credibility …' I am indeed all too ' …mortal, fallible, and fraught with the consequences of unconscious and disowned desires and fears'. (Haraway 1997, p267) Similarly, my work has always been enriched and informed by 'multiple situatedness'. (Wilson 2009, p505) This brings me to the next story.

STORY #2: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION- A BRIEF TALE OF NOT KNOWING
Working with situated knowledges is central to my VET work, and has been since my times in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Africa, Viet Nam and other countries, where the impact of western knowledge (and economic) regimes on local knowledge systems is all too apparent. The struggle (my struggle) has been and is around insisting on not only insertion but an equal placing of what I read from feminist literatures as subjugated knowledges, whether those around gender, and also around place, race-ethnicity and class into formal documentation, be it curricula, policy documents, standards and competence statements; in teaching, writing, research. More recently, I worked as the Gender and Development (GAD) - equity and access advisor on a bilateral aid project (Australia & PRC) in China, where the Chinese VET system was/is in the process of major reform, drawing on the then Australia model. This, for me, was an all too potent reminder of how (VET) knowledge makes worlds, and of globalising (meta)systems of ideas and (neoclassical economic) ideals.

While my activities overseas were highly formative and educative, this insistence on foregrounding local (subjugated) knowledges became palpable and set me on a very steep (never finished) learning curve when working on curriculum development for ANTEP (Anangu Teacher Education Project) in the Pitjantjatjara homelands in the 1980s. Given concerns about whose knowledge was being used for what purposes, and my position as an outside/non-owner, I have never written up any of this work, although the area I was mostly concerned with continues and grows.[18] More recently, and directly connected with/in VET, has been the collaborative work I have been involved with through WAVE with Waltja[19], in remote Central Australia. This has involved three sequential research funded projects[20], each joining WAVE with Waltja (and especially Kate Lawrence) in partnership relationships, each bringing differing knowledges and experiences to the projects with the aim of enhancing live, opportunities through the vehicle of training (VET) in remote communities, working especially with senior women who in turn link with girls and their wider communities. In brief, the current project involves Waltja and WAVE working together to support senior women in community based consultations about their training needs, then presenting the findings (after work-shopping), to a regional training forum in Alice Springs (16th April 2010).

Part of the Waltja's way of working is honouring their Executive's decision that meetings take place on communities rather than in Alice Springs, as often as possible. This has resulted in the great privilege and ongoing extreme learning challenges for me, of meeting and working with senior Aboriginal women leaders, in various 'remote' communities, testing all my city based sensibilities and academic/experiential knowing of VET, as we/I seek out ways of working VET for outcomes relevant to these women and their respective communities. I was asked at AVETRA last year, if this is 'research'. I can think of no better way of learning to be a 'researcher' in VET. It tests to the extreme (and most often beyond) every research paradigm I have ever read of and practiced. It is humbling, challenging, tests and finds wanting most of my knowledges and temporal sensibilities. As yet, I have no answers, no comfortable certainties, and no expectations that I will ever find such a comfortable place of Truths. And yet VET is a national 'public good', as much as it is an economic tool - well, it should be. Its architectures, governance, funding, policies, resourcing and so on and so on might be represented as 'flexible', but where does 'and inclusive' fit into all this? So - what might the responses be from government/s, training providers and indeed VET, when our findings are put (again). Only time will tell.

This unfinished tale is an illustration of situating and diffracting in practice. I ponder about 'acquiring'. All of this work that I tell above is centred around co-production of knowledges, of 'knowledge-(forever?)-in-the-making. My 'knowledges' continually unravel, and so require re/forming around heterogeneous multiple ways of knowing – not 'a' knowledge, nor 'my' knowledge. The cat's cradle figuration works again through and for my above tale. However, its

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[18] Wirura Nyinanyi (We are living well)

[19] Waltja Tjutangku Palyapayi Aboriginal CorporationSeehttp://www.waltja.org.au/waltja.html

[20] (1) 2004: *Lifelong learning: work-related education and training for women (*S4W/WAVE*):* Helping people to help themselves: a study of training issues for Aboriginal women and their remote communities in central Australia see http://www.wave.org.au/files/HelpingPeopletoHelpThemselves_Waltjareport_July05.pdf . (2) *Minmaku Palyantja: Waltja Women Leaders' Project (Value Women's Good Work (OfW/WLDP). See http://www.waltja.org.au/default/Minmaku.html.*Also see: http://www.wave.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=45&Itemid=66 *(3)* 2009- 1010 *Ulkumantjuta Ukarratjuta (adult women and young women) Together for Learning: Waltja and WAVE Women Learning and Talking about Training* – work in progress. See: http://www.waltja.org.au/default/Waltjanwave.html

origins are different, as they were in my recollections of working in PNG and elsewhere. This cat's cradle is made from different 'stuff', by different hands and for a multitude of purposes, economic, social and cultural. Making string or thread is one of the oldest human technologies, and is still widely practices in indigenous communities, in Australia as it is in PNG. It is most often work associated with women working individually or more often together in groups teaching young women as they work and chat, and results in many utilitarian objects as well as what we now regard as 'art' and 'craft' works. It ('string') in this way has profound metaphorical resonance. String and string games are also a mode of knowledge transmission in indigenous communities. 'A coil of string held between the hands marks the beginning of the narrative of the string game and a process of communication through gesture and observation' (Lawrence, 2003). Lawrence cited Uncle Lewis O'Brien, a Kaurna elder to show this:

> *I understand the lesson of string. That's what our people were, a fibre culture, and they played with string and knew what they were on about. (O'Brien, 1990)*

I have much to learn from this evolved figuration. Knowing what I 'know', I can say 'yes, this is how multiple and differential literacies work'; yes, I have learned to be/am vulnerable to new ways of knowing and being. But perhaps that is all too easy. As ever, the hard yards lie ahead – for me personally, and yes - for VET.

SALVATION PEDAGOGIES

Common to our varied stories is an uneasy complicity with salvation pedagogies. This is not simply a plea to position oneself as 'not knowing' or a challenge to 'unlearn one's privilege'. Multiple and differential e-literacies draw on hybrid practices of knowing that insist on a researcher's recognition of their/our non-innocence in such matters. In framing up these complex problems of employability, knowing, literacy, adult learning and so on, we must also acknowledge our own actions in the framing: 'There is an area that you have excluded; you have drawn boundaries in such a way as not to notice those who aren't included in – the constitutive outsider in Judith Butler's terms – that makes your little inside possible' (Haraway in Schneider 2005, p152).

Our stories tell of our work practices and the 'wrong-footedness' we have experienced in not lining up like obedient servants behind that singular VET entity, of not fitting in. It's possible that some would interpret this as simply not being good enough scholars, not having our finger on the pulse of present day research or government agendas, not being able to write reports the way 'they' want, a sign of poor or dissident researcher literacies. This paper has given us the opportunity to revisit our work and position how we have known and done VET over this period of time. In our work together this has been something of 'a practice of critical theory as cat's cradle games' (Haraway 1994 p69) a passing back and forth of repertoires, patterns, knots and moves for two people 'who cannot *not* desire what we cannot possibly have' (Haraway 1997 p268).

The telling of stories using cyborg knowledge practices – 'hybrid epistemological strategies' (Wilson 2009 p505) – loosened us, offered ways to connect differently, to see the '-in-the-making' aspects of VET and so also our academic practice. The stories help to place our work locally and globally and suggest articulations that might help us to know VET differently rather than to 'know' VET. We have worked hard to create our own architectures for thinking work. In our stories we focused on

examples of work we have done, how it has/has not fitted with dominant understandings and accepted practices of singular VET and the tensions that produces for our 'academic' work. What doesn't 'fit' into that singularity has most often been the centre of the work we undertake; always looking for a way to do/know/voice – a/the 'missing thing'. On reviewing our work, we identify a number of recurring problematics that have continually resurfaced, 'demanding' attention in our research and theorising and projects, viz:-

- the origin myths of VET, traces of which are ever present in its very foundations and continue to shape the (instrumentalist) way VET is constructed, and so what counts as 'really useful' research and 'really useful' VET knowledge;

- our (lived) experience of VET as always incomplete, messy and in the risky spaces of the everyday – and a firm belief that these traits are not merely 'background' for theorising about VET, they *are* VET;

- that policy is the answer[21], always already, and so…

- the recurring presence of salvation pedagogies in our work – struggling with the contradictions between imperatives to produce neat, do-able, action-based solutions that fit the mores of the day, while at the same time insisting on foregrounding 'difference';

- the need to acknowledge knowledges made through ever changing human-non human-technology assemblages, and, always,

- that the 'things' that don't fit (gender, race-ethnicity, whiteness) are not 'ands' to be tacked onto the end, considered as optional extras for token attention once all else is in place. This, in fact, takes us full circle back to VET's origin myths.

Like Haraway 'we' have found that this kind of thinking work means 'our' VET work, 'our' pedagogical approaches have often been received as ''out there'; 'about something else'; as 'not [VET]' … 'hard to understand', 'political', and/or 'subjective' within such reading formations and/or discursive practices' (Schneider 2005, p158) that constitute the mainstream space/s in *vocational-education-and-training and VET*' and circulating in dominant conceptions of what constitutes 'real' VET scholarship. This has prompted us to think about not only our own practices but also an ethics of practice that would [witness, situate and diffract], making visible and calling to account the knowledge-in-the-making practices that do the construction work responsible for reproducing VET as singularity. We wait in anticipation of footnote along the lines of the following:

> This paper represents a collective authoring shaped by all those (dead and not so dead) white, financially secure, heterosexual scholars (male and female) who subscribe to machinic notions of VET, patriarchy, and masculinist notions of skill that marginalize gender, ignore working class knowledges and accelerate the colonization of indigenous culture whilst conveniently pocketing any profits gained in the process.

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[21] 'Too often in VET policy-making it is assumed that, if we established "the right kind of VET system", desirable broad-based change such as boosting productivity and participation would be achieved' (Evesson, *et al* 2009 p9).

Such an acknowledgement might well be the beginnings of 'credible testimony to matters of fact by… the self-aware, accountable, anti-racist FemaleMan" (1997 35).

(RE)CONFIGURATIONS? ETHICS OF VET KNOWLEDGE-IN-THE-MAKING

So - here we are/here we go again, as yet another re/formulation of VET is underway (COAG 2009), this time with the aim of increasing contestability even more.[22] While the 'massive expansion of places in a more responsive Australian Training System' is underway, and new governance systems are in place, for now at least, it would appear that there is a pause in further expansion of (neo classical economic) market mechanisms, and contestability in the name of the national productivity agenda. All this despite the plethora of research that continues as ever to question, even dispute the efficacy of 'markets' in education and training (see for example Marginson 1997; Anderson 2009). In its December 2009 communiqué[23], COAG Agreements include new approaches to expanding apprenticeships, endorsement of a new Green Skills Agreement that will deliver skills for sustainability in the Australian training system, as well as a national regulator, established under Commonwealth legislation and responsible for the registration and audit of registered training providers and accreditation of courses in the VET sector. We are delighted that, finally, issues of sustainability might be addressed in VET, albeit through 'green skills, for example. Is this a moment in which to grasp one of the threads of our VET cat's cradle yet again, to insert new collaborative patterns? Or is that an ineffectual strategy, with the time for such dreams well past?

Our questions are many and we leave them with you: Where/is vocational-education-and-training in this heady mix of VET design? What are the ethics of knowledge-in-the-making for vocational-education-and-training and for VET? What would it mean for VET design to rest on a statement of principles that are about much more than markets, productivity and profit? As VET researchers and practitioners, how/might we (all) work to reinsert education along with a broader view of 'vocation' into this agenda, along with multiple knowledges and ways of being in the world, other than through involuntary insertion into The Labour Market through compulsory VET?

Times, as ever, change continually. We still have more to learn from Haraway here. She

has provided us with a method, a way of being critical in and about the world. She provides the tools to undermine powerful and established understandings by asking simple yet profound questions and by making seemingly absurd connections. She sees the significant and remarkable in the everyday and quotidian. Whether we are all capable of matching the mental agility, humour and acumen that she brings to the task is of course another question. (Cassidy 2006 p 327)

As ever, developing and inhabiting an ethics for VET knowledge-in-the-making, and the worlds it might create remains an ongoing professional/personal responsibility for us/all.

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[22] http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-12-07/index.cfm?CFID=485145&CFTOKEN=63297567#productivity
[23] See COAG http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-12-07/index.cfm?CFID=485145&CFTOKEN=63297567#productivity

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