

**Seeing through the bars; speaking our way out: How creative work helps us confront (in)visible violences in tertiary education and beyond**

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**ABSTRACT**

Montesanti and Thurston (2015: 2) emphasise the need to examine gender-based violence in ways that recognise the “interplay of personal, situational, and sociocultural factors”. In this article, we focus on operations of symbolic and systemic gender-based violence in the contemporary Australian tertiary education system, and consider how theatre and creative writing can help us perceive these often invisible forms of violence. We deploy a creative duoethnographic methodology, drawing on our personal experiences, including reading and engaging with the plays *Bone Cage* (Gillham 2011) and *iSize* (Di Niro 2011), and poetry by Bengali women writers (Mukherjee 2005). We draw connections between issues of violence within tertiary institutions and gender-based violence on a larger socio-political scale, and we argue that engaging with creative works can raise real but insidious problems in ways that make it possible to speak out, raise awareness, and push for change.

**Introduction**

the oyster of my eye drips wordless saltsea fog  
(Sinha 2005: 3)

'Thin these four walls wha' I say goes!  
(Gillham 2011: 41)

falling. I am crying, no sound in my throat.  
where do I get stars from?  
I am inside-less black hole radiation,  
blind heat, far from the rays' gaze  
(Mitra 2005: 23)

Show some int'rest can't ya... Look wha' I give ya!  
(Gillham 2011: 40)

Doesn't it just make you CRY OUT for a foolproof method...  
(Di Niro 2011: 44)

running alone  
run, run – run though I am dead

so close to me, yet he doesn't know this?  
(Mitra 2005: 23)

Yer stinkin'. Know that?  
(Gillham 2011: 38)

the broken-wing alphabets  
are crying on the stairs...  
... fairy tales  
breaking stories from newspapers  
their ink dripping on my sari  
I sit here helpless –  
a prisoner  
(Chaudhuri 2005a: 26)

Your life. Not openin' it 'gain for ya before morning  
(Gillham 2011: 37)

o my mewling daughter... I, your mother,  
give you now  
this whispered incantation:  
for you this universe  
has only poison  
(Chaudhuri 2005b: 28)

... that will give you what YOU are searching for?  
(Di Niro 2011: 44)

This is my 'ome. 'E takes care of me, 'e looks after me. I belong. 'E keeps me safe  
(Gillham 2011: 43)

The above assemblage of voices is drawn from Geoff Gillham's play *Bone Cage* (2011), *The Unsevered Tongue: Translated Poetry by Bengali Women* (Mukherjee 2005), and the play *iSize* by Corinna Di Niro (2011). *Bone Cage* and *The Unsevered Tongue* are creative works that have raised our awareness about issues of violence and inequality, while *iSize* illustrates how we as creative practitioners use the Arts to address and discuss important social issues. Agreeing with Stephanie Rose Montesanti and Wilfreda Thurston that examinations of gender-based violence need to recognise the “interplay of personal, situational, and sociocultural factors” (2015: 2), we discuss in this article how theatre and creative writing can help us perceive and bring attention to often invisible forms of violence to push for change.

Drawing on our lived experiences as female academics in the fields of theatre (Di Niro) and creative writing (Walker), we show how symbolic gender-based violence in the contemporary Australian tertiary education system (particularly universities) relates to the broader issues of gendered inequality. In agreement with Michael Tomlinson, Jürgen Enders and Rajani Naidoo (2020: 2), we consider symbolic violence as “acts of violence that aim to constrain and subordinate, but which are simultaneously highly symbolic because they are achieved indirectly and without overt force”. For example, in higher education, acts of symbolic violence we have witnessed or experienced include denying a person the validation and security of a proper job contract and conditions. In Australia, the issues of gendered symbolic violence seem even more pertinent in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic than before, given that this has brought not only increased rates of domestic violence (Bradbury-Jones & Isham 2020) but also an increase in wage theft, among other forms of exploitation, for workers in universities (Maslen 2020).

In the sections that follow, we proceed via duoethnography: research writing in a play script form to share and compare perspectives and thereby generate knowledge (Norris *et al.* 2012). As we have discussed in our previous work, duoethnography was initially developed for social sciences and cultural studies research. However, we continue to find it relevant for creative arts inquiry as some of its benefits include its capacity to disrupt meta-narratives, its emphasis on ethicality, and its accessibility for diverse audiences of academic and non-academic readers (Walker & Di Niro 2019).

Our first section below illuminates issues of inequality in the Australian academic workforce, particularly regarding casualisation and hurdles to career advancement. These inequalities are the reason we want to create change in academia in Australia and beyond. We build on earlier collaborations (Di Niro & Walker 2017, 2018, 2019; Walker & Di Niro 2019) which, reflecting a theme also present in the broader literature on university worker exploitation (Palmer & Cantrell 2019), argued that these challenges especially affect women and/as people subject to intersecting kinds of marginalisation. This article extends that argument, showing connections between structural and systemic inequalities in and outside academia; that is, between problems of tertiary institutions and those of society broadly.

The second main section turns to *Bone Cage* and *The Unsevered Tongue*, explaining how they helped us re-see issues of inequality in academia and elsewhere. We develop our argument for how creative work encourages people to recognise issues of violence, speak out, and promote change. In the third section, we shift the focus from works that have inspired us to our own arts practices in and beyond academic spaces, discussing what we as artist-academics are doing to redress gendered inequality and related problems.

### **Structural and systemic inequalities in and beyond academia**

DI NIRO: In a 2019 article, Kelly Palmer and Kate Cantrell described the struggles faced by casual academics (known in some contexts as “sessionally employed academics”, or “adjuncts”):

... you have no annual leave, no holiday leave, no research leave, no carer’s leave, no domestic violence leave, and – less critically, since you’re never unwell – no sick leave. You don’t have access to funding for conference fees or travel, or any form of professional development. There’s no remuneration for designing and re-designing teaching materials and curricula; no compensation

for attending meetings, organising readings, digitalising resources, peer-reviewing articles, replying to e-mails, or hosting negotiations with Jenny from Payroll (n.p.).

I, like many Australians (Duffy 2020), have been a casual academic for over five years now. With two small children to raise, I'm finding it harder each year. It's not just me who can never be unwell, I'm always crossing all my fingers and toes that neither of my children is sick on any of my teaching days at the risk of my being seen as "difficult" and not getting another contract the following semester.

WALKER: I find it unfathomable that tertiary education treats good employees so poorly. In a sensible world, universities would be bending over backwards to lure staff with your expertise – a PhD-qualified TEDx speaker with publications, industry experience, a brilliant teaching track record, and boundless passion. Yet, from being in the system, I know that the perverse "casual carousel" is the reality for you and so many highly skilled, PhD-qualified academics. Published literature reveals that poor treatment of casual academics is not unique to our own institution or location, but endemic throughout universities internationally (Wardrop & Withers 2014; Black & Garvis 2018; Palmer & Cantrell 2019). Your point about caring responsibilities reflects how academia's violence sits within a broader culture of patriarchal ideologies and gender-based violence (Montesanti & Thurston 2015; Black & Garvis 2018; Di Niro & Walker 2018).

DI NIRO: And it is a real form of violence; the treatment of casual academics that is. It seems to me that, in addition to inequalities between casual and permanently employed staff, there are also inequalities among casual staff themselves. I have seen some of my highly skilled colleagues overlooked and/or applications rejected because of factors that other casuals are not even questioned over. Even in the current "publish or perish" culture there are different rules for different staff. Those with PhDs are sometimes overlooked for course coordinator positions, which are handed to others with fewer qualifications.

WALKER: Yep – because they're cheaper!

DI NIRO: So, some casuals without Masters/PhDs are promoted to course coordinator positions while others are told they need post-graduate qualifications for career advancement. Another example is that some casual academics are allowed to supervise PhD students while others are told that it is against policy. Promoting casual academics without appropriate qualifications is bound to affect quality standards. This is further complicated by the fact that there can be inconsistencies *within* a university in its engagement with casual academics – some sections (otherwise known as units, schools or departments) allowing casuals to work as course coordinators while others in the same university do not. Stefano Allesina (2011: n.p.) observes in the Italian system that such nepotism is like a "cancer", in that it is not a merit-based system and ultimately undermines academic integrity. Aside from those casuals afforded special privileges, the reality for most casual academics is that they are not privy to research groups, meetings and other opportunities available to permanent academics. This is an entrenched form of symbolic abuse. I feel like an annoying interloper, just like Margaret Mayhew (2014: 272), who likens a casual academic to a mosquito, saying "[I am] constantly buzzing in the ears of my colleagues, asking for basic information, listening in on corridor chat, smiling and hoping I can be included". Is this feeling of exclusion the same for you now that you're "in the club" so to speak (albeit on a contract)?

WALKER: Funny you say, “in the club”. Mostly, I feel more like a thief who snuck through the castle walls: surely it’s a matter of time until I’m caught and ejected! This isn’t imposter syndrome. It objectively recognises the precarious position I hold on my 12-month contract. Although better than a 12-week semester-long casual arrangement, my situation is still highly insecure compared to career path norms of even 20 years ago. That said, there are privileges casual academics don’t get: professional development workshops, assistance with grants, conference funding... ironically, the very things that help with securing a contract, but it’s only those already on contracts who receive assistance in getting those runs on the board. The point you made earlier about PhD supervision demonstrates the similar injustices active in that space: people are often turned down for permanent jobs because they haven’t supervised completions, but at most institutions, casual academics aren’t allowed to be supervisors unless someone weaves a loophole. I’m reiterating this because the issue is too often overlooked and invisible: it needs to be brought up, recognised and addressed.

DI NIRO: I’ve heard that these double standards happen at all levels; some permanent academics struggle to get promotions.

WALKER: Definitely. The same sorts of injustices continue at every level, often as gendered injustices.

DI NIRO: Gendered? No surprises there!

WALKER: I have seen academics turned down for promotion who had multiple books out with top tier publishers and countless high-ranking journal articles, but in fields their institutions deemed non-significant. Surprise! Surprise! We’re talking mostly about feminism and/or queer theory. Grants are even more disheartening: a highly regarded creative writing academic I know recently lost her position at an interstate university and was told one reason was her “lack of grant income”. She’d actually had countless grants, but arts grants, for small amounts. The number of grants, strength of projects, and resulting publications aren’t what matters. It’s all about dollars, which advantages academics who are willing to seek funding from possibly compromising sources – for example, mining companies, which have historically been linked with colonisation and environmental destruction (Caxaj *et al.* 2012; Nursey-Bray *et al.* 2020).

DI NIRO: Not necessarily an ethical source of funding...

WALKER: It’s definitely an ethical problem. Mining in the hands of corporations that damage our environment has been violently disrespectful of sites that are sacred to Indigenous people. This is an example of what Louis Althusser (1971) wrote about when he discussed how different social institutions operate in conjunction with one another. Education was by Althusser’s terms an ideological institution – one that works on people’s beliefs and values. When universities make deals with mining companies, education hops in bed with a suite of patriarchal, neo-liberal organisations that collectively encourage problematic social ideologies of individualistic competition and exploiting of others for personal gain.

DI NIRO: Advantaging people who are prepared to seek funding from, for example, mining companies means that people willing to compromise ethically are more likely to climb the academic ladder. There are rules and “unwritten rules” for how you get ahead in academia. These symbolic violences persist not just on an individual level but on the broad scale of how courses are funded in universities. For instance, recent Australian Federal Government legislation has doubled the fees charged to students for Arts and Humanities degrees, which

are seen as less likely to lead to employment (Kelly 2020). This reflects a point we have previously argued: that the Arts are feminised in patriarchal cultures and their benefits overlooked (Di Niro & Walker 2018).

WALKER: The problem self-perpetuates: when the ethically lax climb the academic ladder, and when the Arts are squashed out of university learning, those who subscribe to and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies gain power. As former National Tertiary Education Union President Jeannie Rea's recent article (2021) pointed out, Australian levels of "racial, cultural and religious diversity amongst academic staff" are "low compared to similar countries", while "sexism and gender-based violence are still common" (12). Academic workers already marginalised by gender, race and/or intersecting factors thereby become more susceptible to insecure employment in a "two tier" model comprising a privileged tier of "ongoing staff... [who] have a career" and an exploited tier of staff "employed sessionally... [who] do most of the teaching" and "have no security, no career paths, no paid leave, no say, and... [whose] casual contracts can be withdrawn anytime" (12). Our universities thereby keep vulnerable staff – including but not exclusively female staff (especially mothers) and people of colour – down through precarious contracts and substandard conditions. Precariously employed casual academic staff are thus prone to living with constant anxiety due to real ongoing risks; for instance: not having leave entitlements if health problems arise, not knowing if it will be possible to make the next rent or mortgage repayment, and so on (Palmer & Cantrell 2019).

DI NIRO: Agreed. But what do we do about it? I don't feel like I am being a good enough role model to my two daughters by continuing to teach courses that are not actually in my area of expertise because the glass ceiling prevents me from realising my full potential and having others see what I am capable of. If either of my girls were in my position, I'd be right there educating them to take a stand.

WALKER: Good point. This isn't just about us. What can we do now so women in the future get a better deal?

### **How creative works help us re-see issues and the scope for change**

WALKER: We've arrived at a question of how to create change beyond our current situations, for future generations of female academics. As a creative writer, I believe the Arts offer a means for pursuing change. In most immediate terms, writing and art can awaken us to injustices so socially entrenched they're basically invisible. Re-presentation of the situation via a story or play can restore visibility and thus the possibility of action. For instance, your staging of *Bone Cage*, with its central motif of a girl in a cage who views her captor as her protector, made me think about how, in my days as a casual academic, I would work endless hours beyond those on paper, never complaining because I believed I was lucky simply to have income.

DI NIRO: Definitely. Staging *Bone Cage* was my response to the vast imbalance of power that exists in academia, particularly the position of casual staff. Thinking of the dangling carrot of more work – and the drip-fed information that is just enough to get you to stick around each semester hopeful that your time for promotion has come – reminds me of a really bad relationship I was once in: the coercion, control, manipulation and abuse of power were intentionally interspersed with small fragments of acts of kindness and love, and it took a long time before I realised that I was being abused. *Bone Cage* can speak to any form of abuse, and if I think about how it fits in academia, then I am the casual academic in that cage – sometimes wondering if I belong or if I should leave. Also, there is a key scene in *Bone Cage* that really

speaks to this dilemma. When the door of the cage is eventually opened, the woman inside struggles to embrace her freedom and an uncertain future. To me, this state of indecision reflects my own career path in the university: does one stick around and wait for merit to finally prevail or does one cut one's losses and step into the unknown?

WALKER: *Bone Cage* is powerful in its ability to provide metaphors and analogies for countless differing scenarios. Perhaps metaphor is part of what makes the Arts effective for raising issues of violence. Metaphors are multiply interpretable, and interpretations are complementary, not competing. They can illuminate interconnections between distinct issues, revealing scope for differently marginalised groups to work together in alliance.

DI NIRO: You're right, Gillham wasn't thinking about the casualisation of academics, and possibly not even domestic violence issues when he wrote *Bone Cage*. However, the universality of his play stems from his use of metaphor, leaving each audience member to interpret the play how they choose. This universality is what makes the play very powerful for raising various social issues. There are a lot of metaphors in poetry too and it's another art form used to activate change. Is this your understanding of it? Having listened to you speak about the poems from *The Unsevered Tongue*, and the way in which their writers use poetry as a platform to speak out about their experiences, makes me think of the interconnectedness and intersecting nature of poetry and theatre. Both tell stories, both transport us into different worlds, both invite us to question, reflect, respond, react...

WALKER: Yes! The way you describe it captures exactly why poetry matters to me. I first read *The Unsevered Tongue* in 2008 when I was in Kolkata, attending poetry readings by writers in the book. On a literary level, the work is already stunning, but connecting with the context of writing intensified that. Those women were so brave to write despite the risks.

DI NIRO: What sorts of risks?

WALKER: At that time, there were huge controversies around Taslima Nasrin, a gynaecologist-turned-novelist-and-poet who had been exiled from Bangladesh, then India, because of her feminist writings (Nasrin 2018a). I saw extremists burning effigies of Nasrin in the streets. She remains a favourite writer of mine. Here's a sample from her poem "You Go Girl!" (Nasrin 2018b, n.p.):

They said – take it easy...  
Said – calm down...  
Said – stop talkin'...  
Said – shut up...

DI NIRO: So many of us can relate to that!

WALKER: As the poem continues, Nasrin encourages women to laugh at those who call them "rotten" and/or "whores":

Stand firm and say,  
"Yes, yes, I am a whore!"

At this, Nasrin suggests, the detractors will "be shocked" and "stare in disbelief", and:

The men amongst them will turn red and sweat.  
The women amongst them will dream to be a whore like you.

WALKER: If we accept the premise of all words as metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), Nasrin's transformation of "whore" is another example of metaphor's power. She compels readers to question and remake the word's associations. It's "whore", not "sex worker", because Nasrin isn't referring to the occupation; it's "whore" as a slur for any woman who claims freedom, sexual and/or otherwise. Nasrin makes "whore" positive in a sense similar to how LGBTQIA+ activists have reclaimed the word "queer" – a former slur now used as an affirmation of pride (Bianchi 2014). It transforms language, and because language is connected with thinking, it thereby transforms attitudes, which is formidable artistic activism: when attitudes change, behaviours and actions follow.

### **What we are doing as artists in academia to help promote change**

DI NIRO: Your description of how Nasrin reclaims "whore" as positive reminds me of the character Miss Direction in *iSize* (Di Niro 2011), a one-woman show I produced.

WALKER: I wish I'd seen it! The Commedia shows of yours that I've seen were phenomenal. I sense that your work often tackles political issues through humour. Did *iSize* do that too?

DI NIRO: I don't always set out to do political shows, but for *iSize*, I intentionally used the stock Commedia character La Signora to discuss gender (in)equality and men's objectification of women.

WALKER: I'm not familiar with Commedia's stock characters... What's La Signora like?

DI NIRO: She is the female equivalent of Il Capitano, and they are selfish, narcissistic and egotistic. For the purposes of *iSize*, I turned La Signora into a modern-day businesswoman, CEO of her own company, a real power figure in the corporate world, and adopted a lot of the stereotypical alpha-male characteristics we find in the twenty-first century.

WALKER: And what's the plot?

DI NIRO: It's Miss Direction's sales pitch about *iSize*, an iPhone app she created for women to test if a man is the perfect "fit", as in the app scans the front of his jeans to reveal his "size". The app is designed for women like her who don't have time to sit pretty in a bar waiting for a man to chat them up. It blends Commedia, mime and burlesque and is delivered like one of those annoying late night home shopping commercials.

WALKER: Hilarious! Where did you get the idea?

DI NIRO: I came across two images and merged them together. One was a fish-measuring chart at a beach where you measure the fish you've caught and if any are too small to keep you need to throw them back in the ocean. The other was a poster for Valentine's Day, which had a heart made of iPhones and some cheesy saying like "...there's even an app for that" ...and so *iSize* was born. It's a very tongue-in-cheek show that subverts the patriarchy.

WALKER: What a perfect way to call out the different sets of rules society condones for men and women. How did the audience respond?



DI NIRO: Women loved it and asked me if the app was real and where they could buy it. Most men enjoyed it and could see the message I was trying to convey. Some men thought I was being too harsh on men and didn't like the objectifying gaze being turned on them. One man refused to come up on stage with me and be "sized up".

WALKER: Perhaps he didn't understand that your point was not to suggest women should treat men as objects, but rather that such objectification is unacceptable under all circumstances.

DI NIRO: Yet it happens to women daily and became normalised before the #metoo movement. *iSize* holds a mirror up to society and highlights the difficulties women face in the dating game. By flipping the genders, it makes something familiar strange, and forces us to take our blinkers off and see issues and question them.

WALKER: That's a prime example not only of theatre working for social change but also of "defamiliarisation" (Gunn 1984) as one of the processes via which arts practices make visible what was previously overlooked (in addition to metaphors and reclaiming words, which we discussed earlier). Now I'm curious about how *iSize* feeds into your more recent work.

DI NIRO: Through my co-authorship with you from 2016 onwards, my creative outputs have become more geared towards socio-political issues. Personal experiences of domestic violence, motherhood and job uncertainty over the last four years have also influenced and shaped my writing and performance.

WALKER: This is where our experiences of duoethnography have been valuable to me and writing collaboratively was a turning point. Since 2016, my writing has become increasingly political again, following my PhD candidature phase during which I felt like a failure because I took so long to complete. Writing about that process with another person and comparing experiences through duoethnography (Di Niro & Walker 2018) helped me see that what I'd experienced was not an individual issue. It was a situation that arose because of systemic and social issues, including gendered inequalities in universities. I came to understand that lots of women had their PhDs and other studies similarly affected. Now, continuing to collaborate is about encouraging such women to recognise that they are not alone, and that the frustrations they face are about things way beyond individual failure.

DI NIRO: I found that writing to be very cathartic. I was also struggling with feelings of failure during that time. Completing that writing with you made me see the benefits of co-authorship and collaboration. It led me to want to engage in more collaborative creative work and help other women to not feel as isolated as I once did. Developing *Becoming-game* (Di Niro *et al.* 2019) and directing *Bone Cage* (Di Niro 2019) are examples.

WALKER: Both of those were powerful experiences for me too – and examples of how once the collaborative ball is rolling, one thing grows from another. Through our second collaborative article (Walker & Di Niro 2019), we identified that we wanted to experiment with larger group collaborations. Then the opportunity to write a chapter for a new book arose (Black & Dwyer 2021), we reached out to other women in academia and formed a collective of eight women with whom we wrote about academic "games", using poetry and prose to creatively bear witness to injustices (Gou *et al.* 2021). We generated more material than expected, so we developed *Becoming-game* (Di Niro *et al.* 2019) as a spin-off, a theatrical performance

interweaving everyone's words, conveying our points for a live audience, whereas the book chapter targets academic readers.

DI NIRO: *Becoming-game* was the first time I collaborated with more than two other people on a writing project. Then to hear that we would perform our work was just wonderful. Like *Bone Cage*, I see *Becoming-game* as transformative learning through theatre, which requires engaging with the subjective-objective dialectic, naming the lived traumatic experience, and making sense of that experience through creative arts (Lawrence & Butterwick 2007). The audience is also learning, and that's key for me. I want the audience to be moved and challenged by what they see, and to let go of their long-held perspectives to consider a different, and sometimes challenging, alternative.

WALKER: How does the audience learn through theatre work?

DI NIRO: By careful positioning of the audience, you can have them experience a type of passive role play. They are not in the show, but they feel they have become one of the characters for that limited time. Their intimate experience of seeing into the "other" can lead to a shift in the role player's own perspective, which can activate social change. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston (2009) talk a lot about theatre as activism and it has a strong history in the work of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal, among others.

WALKER: Aha... Yes, our duoethnographic collaborations have entailed similar intent to activate change. Specifically, when we created characters like Mister Obviously-Has-Stable-Employment, Doctor No Idea, Doctor Crossroads, and Doctor Opportunist (Di Niro & Walker 2018; Walker & Di Niro 2019) we used duoethnography to embed into those characters the dilemmas we were confronting as casual academics at the time. For example, Doctor Crossroads and Doctor Opportunist could be said to represent the academic struggles of Di Niro and Walker respectively, whereas Mister Obviously-Has-Stable-Employment and Doctor No Idea reflect the broader issues of Arts-based PhD graduates trying to gain recognition and employment in tertiary institutions. *Becoming-game* (Di Niro *et al.* 2019) was also a kind of role play: we were literally on stage acting out exaggerated versions of ourselves and/or those stunted women that the discourses we confront at work and elsewhere try to mould us into.

DI NIRO: Indeed. *Bone Cage*, *The Unsevered Tongue*, *iSize* and these characters you've just mentioned all in some way or another highlight the patriarchal structure and the gendered inequality within academia. Our duoethnography and collaborative writing continue to be a means of challenging the status quo by women coming together to write, create, perform and empower each other to call for change. And you've been involved in collaborations beyond just the ones we've engaged in together, haven't you?

WALKER: Yes. Collaboration is increasingly a major focus for me. Methodologies like collective biography (Davies & Gannon 2006) appeal because they bring the critical and creative together, for instance by combining academic writing and poetry. These methodologies let us use the Arts to speak in academic spaces and to say things that standard academic writing perhaps can't. Collective biography also articulates multiple people's experiences, which, as we earlier noted, makes visible how seemingly individual problems are often actually shared ones. I think that's why I love collaboration and/in the Arts – both enable dialogues through which people connect and discover possibilities for making the world a kinder place.

DI NIRO: You're right. Through duoethnography, we have sought to illuminate how gender-based inequalities in universities connect with problems inherent across contemporary society, and to understand what role the Arts may play in activating change. This is a work in progress and has given me a lot of ideas for our future collaborations.

### **Concluding thoughts**

This article has drawn on our lived experiences as female early-career artist-academics subject to symbolic gender-based violence in the Australian tertiary education system. Our first section considered specific instances of inequality in academia, especially casualisation and its particularly troublesome implications for women and mothers, and demonstrated the crucial need for change. We then turned to the question of how the Arts can contribute towards change, presenting *Bone Cage* and *The Unsevered Tongue* as examples of creative works that have had an impact on us and inspired us. Following on, we discussed our own work as artist-academics, offering instances of projects through which we have sought to raise awareness about injustices to which we and other women are subject. Our dialogue raised four mechanisms through which the Arts can raise awareness and encourage action: use of metaphors and analogies to show connections between distinct but related forms of oppression; reclaiming words like “whore” and “queer” in positive ways; making the familiar strange, to hold a mirror up to society; and collaboration as a means through which people of differing experiences can assemble and engage in dialogue.

These four mechanisms can guide strategies for raising awareness of gendered symbolic violence in tertiary education contexts – a prerequisite for overcoming problems. For instance, arts-informed strategies can be used to advocate for changes for casual academic staff. The metaphor of the “bone cage” is a fitting one for the situations casual academics face and could be used as a touchstone for discussions among people in this position. It is also a metaphor with strong potential for use in dialogues with other academics, for whom it may provide a means towards understanding and thus the generation of empathy and solidarity. In terms of words that casual academics may reclaim in the same spirit that Bengali poet Taslima Nasrin reclaims “whore”, the possibilities are vast and may depend on the particularities of specific workplaces, contexts and professional cultures. In our own scenario, “shit-kicker”, “wage-slave” and “mozzie” are three that come to mind. The very use of these terms is a way of making the familiar strange and breaking down misconceptions that because we are academics we are all privileged and part of the institution. Regarding collaboration, this paper itself is one example of how casual academics can work together to re-create the sense of professional community and connection that we are denied by the atomising experience of not being officially part of the team; such collaborations can also involve working together on creative outputs such as theatre performances that directly address our situation and push for change. For example, the performance of *Bone Cage* (2019) at the conference titled *Indelible/Indelebile: Representation in the Arts of (in)visible violence against women and their resistance* sparked dialogues about the relationships between gender-based violence and worker exploitation in universities.

We hope that, by sharing these findings, we may offer some insights into strategies with which other women, artists and academics can likewise activate change through writing, theatre and the Arts generally.

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