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James Gardiner

Hayley Singer

Jennifer Hamilton

Astrida Neimanis

Mindy Blaise
Edith Cowan University

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Reading Group as Method for Feminist Environmental Humanities

James Gardiner ^a, Hayley Singer ^b, Jennifer Hamilton ^c, Astrida Neimanis ^d
and Mindy Blaise ^e

^aGender and Cultural Studies, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; ^bSchool of Culture and Communication, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; ^cDepartment of Literatures, Languages, Linguistics and Cultures, University of New England, Armidale, Australia; ^dEnglish and Cultural Studies/Community, Culture and Global Studies, The University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, Kelowna, Canada; ^eCentre for People, Place, & Planet, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article argues that reading groups are a collective field building and research method in Feminist Environmental Humanities, an interdisciplinary scholarly area at the intersections of feminist social justice and environmental concerns. We begin by historicising three Australian Feminist Environmental reading groups (*COMPOSTING* Feminisms, Eco Feminist Fridays, The Ediths) within a longer feminist tradition, then demonstrate how they respond to declining research funding in the neoliberal university and accelerating ecological crisis. Drawing on survey data, we first thematically code and analyse the results to categorise the groups' functions and impacts. Departing from more traditional data analysis, we then develop a method of interpretation called 'transversal poetics'. Via a captioned photo essay, we unpack how transversal poetics yields new ways of reading the data. We show how this practice-led, creative method reveals additional themes and crystallises the reading groups' key ethos: building situated communities of care across difference. Overall, the research underscored that while never free of ethical tensions and compromises, Feminist Environmental reading groups can be a playful, affirmative and generative method for field building and research.

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Introduction

Between 2015 and 2018, three feminist environmental humanities reading groups – *COMPOSTING* Feminisms, Ecofeminist Fridays and The Ediths – emerged in universities in the Australian cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, respectively. The authors of this paper were participants and co-conveners of these reading groups, and our essay explores the significance of these groups as methods for field building and research in the Feminist Environmental Humanities (FEH). While feminist reading groups have long played a

CONTACT James Gardiner  james.gardiner@sydney.edu.au

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role in advancing feminist movements within and outside of academia (Farr 2022), the Australian context in which these groups were formed is noteworthy: in settler colonial publicly funded institutional contexts in a time of neoliberalisation, on a continent with specific environmental challenges.

The essay begins with an overview of the groups as part of a broader history of feminist reading groups. Then we theorise the work of these three groups in their contexts and focus on how the neoliberalisation of higher education intersects with research practices in a time of climate change in Australia. With an awareness of the broader historical and ecological circumstances, we argue that these groups also become in and of themselves a unique method of research that critically responds to their contexts. The tactic of building and maintaining our field in the absence of more fulsome institutional recognition and support and in the face of real existential threat is meaningful in itself. Drawing on a qualitative survey completed by reading group participants, we analyse this mode of coming together as a collective and feminist research method.

To think through the survey data, we draw on the feminist concept of transversality (Braidotti 2019; Yuval-Davis 1999). The transversal is a mathematical line which cuts diagonally across a field. As it crosses the field (in our case, several printed A4 pages of data) it makes new connections and functions as a useful material metaphor for the work of FEH. Our analysis operationalises transversality in three ways: first, the texts read within reading groups functioned as transversals, gathering up differently situated group participants in meaningful community. Second, the groups themselves became transversal feminist infrastructures capable of cutting across different levels and disciplines within academia and to communities beyond it. Third, we literalise the transversal line as an experimental, practice-led method for sorting and analysing our survey data via a 'transversal poetics'. The poems that resulted, offered in this paper's final section, illustrate how new ideas generated in the reading groups diffract through and beyond the group in ways that we (as convenors) are unable to capture directly, but that the survey results confirm. This contributes to FEH as itself an interdisciplinary and multisited research field whose richness is owed to the diversity of perspectives and concerns it holds together – as underscored in our transversal method. As such, we argue that reading groups are also a key method for multivalent (rather than centralised or hierarchical) field building.

Feminist Reading Groups

Reading groups have emerged as an object of study across many disciplines, but most prominently in education and in relation to the history of feminism. In education, the most obvious reason for focussing on reading groups is their value as a pedagogical tool. Students often convene as a class or in groups to read and discuss texts with peers. Reading groups in this form have featured prominently in both educational research (O'Brien 2007) and in the everyday classroom practices of teachers and university tutors. Scholars also use reading groups to explore the concept of 'Critical Literacy' (Freire 1987). The scholarship of Blackburn and Clark (2011) and Johnson (2017) approaches reading groups in this tradition, viewing them as a way to assist students to make sense of their social world. Schools also use reading groups to attend to the wellbeing of minority students. Focusing on gender and sexuality diversity, for example, Miller (2016) and Meixner and Scupp (2019) have demonstrated the propensity for reading

groups to improve learning conditions and nurture activist groups and student-led political change within schools. Thus reading groups feature in classroom-focused research, as well as research on approaches to education systems that empower young people.

Reading groups have also played a key role in feminist movements and have informed feminist scholarship in fruitful ways. Since at least the nineteenth century (Long 2003), women in the USA, including Black women (McHenry 2002) and other marginalised groups of women (Farr 2022), have used reading groups to enact political and emotional solidarity and resist patriarchal dominance and white supremacy. Continuing this tradition, second-wave feminists in the 1970s used reading groups as a method of consciousness raising (Leuschen and Applegarth 2021; Leuschen 2016), integrating literary practices into everyday activism to build community and collectively envision change. Since then, reading groups feature most prominently as ‘book clubs’, spurred into more visible public consciousness alongside the long-running TV segment Oprah’s Book Club. Scholars like Janice Radway (1984) have interrogated the ability for reading communities to be used by women for feminist ends, indicating that collective reading habits can both empower women as well as reinforce conservative narrative expectations. Building on that work, Elizabeth Long’s *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* illustrates that book clubs have been a space to rally against the dismissal of women’s cultural consumption (Kiernan 2011), while also being a transformative social space where ‘participants can speak, imagine, or live alternative subject positions’ (Long 2003, 145). Through this lens, book clubs are spaces where texts act as a springboard for broader, often political, discussions and critical reflection about the self, intimate relationships and everyday life (Twomey 2007).

Reading groups are also an emerging method in Australian environmental and feminist research today. Brigid Magner’s and Emily Potter’s environmental literature project ‘Mallee Reads’ builds ‘infrastructure’ for reading literature in situ and is ‘interested in the new knowledge that can be generated by reading in place’ (2021, 2–3). Further, Australia-based scholar Laura McLauchlan (2018) proposes that reading groups conducted with a feminist ethos can be welcoming, collaborative and joyful spaces for emerging academics. Our work complements Magner and Potter’s understanding of reading groups as infrastructure with grounded connections to place and community and McLauchlan’s theorisation of the energy and joy of specific kinds of feminist collaboration. Our groups play a role in building Australian FEH academic, activist and artistic communities. We illustrate this, first, by turning to a more detailed description of the three groups that are the focus of this paper.

COMPOSTING Feminisms and Environmental Humanities

COMPOSTING Feminisms and the Environmental Humanities (hereafter *COMPOSTING*) began in Sydney, Australia, in 2015 as a response to Hamilton and Neimanis’s mutual interest in probing some of the feminist elisions and silences within an otherwise robust and growing environmental humanities community in Australia. Inspired by Donna Haraway’s (2016) ‘compostist’ declarations and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1999, 106) joyful promiscuity, the group’s initial intention was to read classic feminist texts alongside environmental humanities ones to trace how the feminist ideas were ‘composted’ in more recent texts (or not), and to map an often-unnamed feminist genealogy

as foundational for the emerging field of environmental humanities (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018) (Figure 1).

Commandeering University of Sydney meeting space (and tea kettles, washroom facilities, white boards, and digital infrastructures, particularly when the group moved onto ZOOM), a shifting group of scholars, artists, activists and community members met approximately monthly from 2015 to 2021. A (non-university hosted) website and newsletter announced the meetings – each with a ‘Lead Composter’ who chose a theme, primary readings (usually around 20 pages, and sometimes including audio or visual texts) and supplementary readings. In-person meetings featured a long piece of butchers’ paper and markers, which served both as a meeting archive of doodles and notes, and as a tablecloth for tea and snacks. Each announcement included detailed instructions for accessing the meeting room, and an invitation to BYOM (bring your own mug).

These details, focusing on inclusion, creative expression, nourishment and conviviality, were central to *COMPOSTING*’s protocols. Each meeting began with introductions around the table (and later, around the zoom room), and underscored the importance of knowing something about the others with whom ideas were being shared. Meetings were never

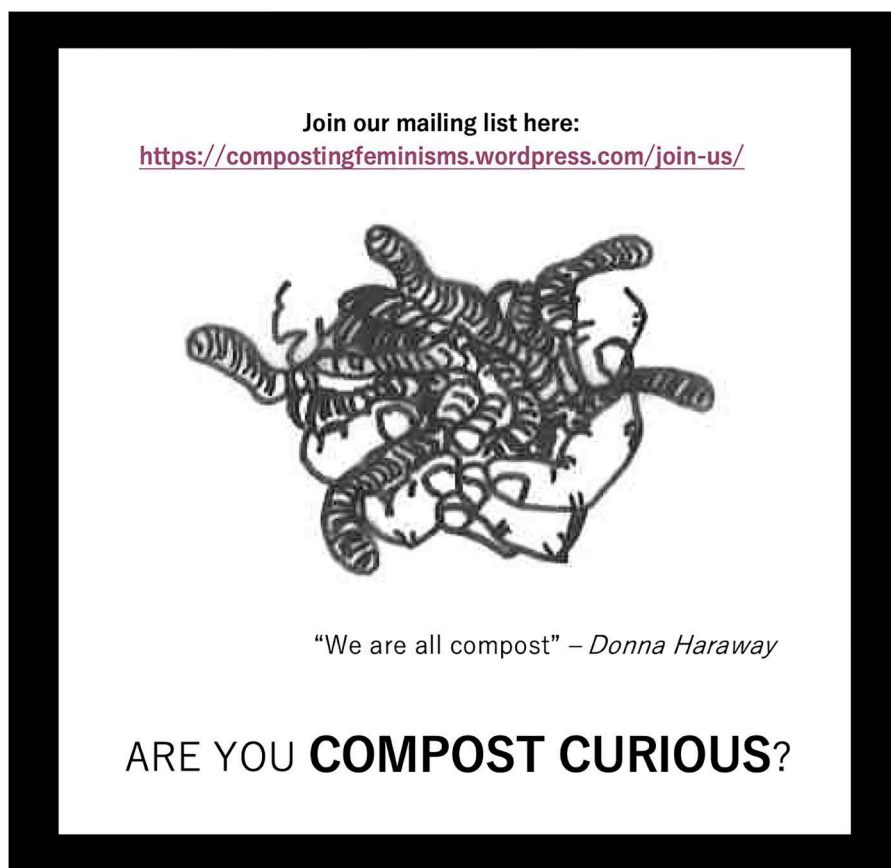


Figure 1. *COMPOSTING*’s first email flyer.

recorded, but a photograph of whiteboard notes (and later a ZOOM chat transcript) was made available to participants. A small grant from the University of Sydney in 2016 funded a 'Compost Stirrer' for 2 years to update the website and send out a monthly newsletter, but other expenses were donations of the facilitators. The convenors steadfastly resisted including the group within the University's formal research structures (i.e. on corporate research pages or as a part of departmental or faculty business). This meant that this research did not 'count' in the same way as traditional outputs such as papers or conferences. When Hamilton left Sydney in 2018 for UNE in Armidale, a virtual group ran in parallel to the in-person one in Sydney, but with COVID, both groups merged into one ZOOM-based monthly meeting. Participation ranged from 5 composters to over 50 on a few occasions. A shifting group of regular participants was complemented by at least one new composter each meeting. *COMPOSTING* also convened several field trips and side events in collaboration with other community groups, artists and galleries, and hosted panels and talks at academic conferences. When Neimanis left Sydney in 2021, a few more ZOOM sessions were hosted before the facilitators decided that *COMPOSTING* had served its function for the time being. Committed to lifecycle rhythms and graceful endings, they sent an email to mailing list subscribers, thanking them for their contributions and informing them that they were letting the compost pile rest for the indefinite future.

The Ediths

The Ediths is a feminist interdisciplinary research collective originally located within the School of Education at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. As an act towards recognising the significant role that education plays towards justice, *The Ediths* is named after Edith Cowan, a Western Australian social reformer who worked for the rights and welfare of women and children and was the first female member of an Australian Parliament. *The Ediths* began as a capacity-building initiative to create a space where the skills of situating, responsive practice and collaboration could be supported while developing a research culture together in ways that intentionally interrupted the hyper-individualised context of the neoliberal corporate university. It was made possible by Blaise's Vice Chancellor's Professorial Fellowship and was considered an important strategy for enhancing and strengthening the research culture in the School of Education. The co-conveners were part of the interdisciplinary research team that Blaise led and included two postdoctoral fellows (Jo Pollitt and Jane Merewether) and one PhD candidate (Vanessa Wintoneak). Being situated within a School of Education brings its own unique challenges related to the feminisation of the field, including how teacher 'training' pushes aside the ethics, politics and philosophical grounding of education for the public good.

Originally *The Ediths* met in person and came together around a key feminist environmental reading, usually one that Blaise had encountered as a result of her involvement with the *COMPOSTING* reading group, to develop and practise the skills for critically and creatively engaging with texts that sit outside of education. It was important to recognise with others that reading is work, especially texts that reside uncomfortably outside of one's discipline. Over time, this goal changed from developing skills and confidence related to reading outside of one's field to creating a space for participants to develop

responsive, critical, and creative skills and attitudes necessary for being part of inter and transdisciplinary scholarship. COVID-19, the shift to online everything, and Blaise's new role as co-director of a University Strategic Research Centre, offered *The Ediths* an opportunity to expand outside of Education to reach across schools, disciplines, and multiple contexts. This resulted in a series of online Responsive Roundtables that invited panels consisting of artists, scientists, and educators to respond to a Feminist Environmental Humanities reading (see [Figure 2](#)). The Responsive Roundtables provide opportunities for *The Ediths* to read, respond and connect across multiple differences. Many of the protocols, such as not recording the online meeting, keeping cameras on, doing place-based introductions, adding-to ideas and stumbling and thinking together were practices learned from *COMPOSTING*. An unexpected outcome of *The Ediths* was the lively and generative online chat, which seemed to foster care and community across disciplinary silos.

EcoFeminist Fridays

EcoFeminist Fridays (endearingly known as the 'Effies' to participants) comprises a small group of artists and scholars who are committed to traversing texts that make up the histories of critical ecological feminist thought and action. Founded in 2017 and affiliated with the University of Melbourne, the *Effies* are driven by the need to engage in slow, emergent and collective modes of learning. Like the other reading groups surveyed in this paper, the *Effies* has from its inception maintained a strong commitment to carving out space within academia for community-building grounded in reading, in ways that push back against the neoliberal productivity-driven agendas of Australian higher education. Together, the group participants work with the idea that reading aloud is a generous and generative act, which inspires wild conversations and stirs up unexpected stories from participants ([Figure 3](#)).

Effies' founder Dr. Hayley Singer contributed to the design of the survey whose results comprise the data analysed in this article and members of the *Effies* contributed responses. But precisely because of the untenable working conditions that form the context of this research, and which disproportionately impact scholars in insecure employment, the *Effies* were not involved in the analysis of the results and subsequent writing up of this article. Their key contributions to building environmental feminist communities in Australia nonetheless remain a significant inspiration for this research.


Reading Together in the Context of University Neoliberalisation and Climate Change


These three groups responded to the environmental, political and economic circumstances within the Australian public university system at a particular moment in history. The familiar story of global austerity, defunding, fee-inflation and the devaluation of research-for-research's sake within the University sector is deeply felt. The added urgent need to better understand climate change as a social and political issue means that although institutionally and economically marginal, researching in this space is vital for planetary survival.

The funding context for arts and humanities environmental research presents a unique set of challenges in Australia. Compared to the UK and the USA, for example, there are

Responsive Roundtable Series 2022:

Reactivating Ecologies





Soil granule. Watercolour on paper. Aviva Reed 2022

The Ediths (ECU), Centre for People, Place and Planet (ECU), Common Worlds Research Collective, and Nulungu Research Institute (University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome Campus)

Twitter: [#Responsiveroundtable](https://twitter.com/Responsiveroundtable)

Building on the *Responsive Roundtable Series 2021: Ecologies in-the-making*, this series continues to think-with Isabelle Stengers' (2005) proposition that ecology of practices is a tool for thinking through the present ecological and climate crisis we are facing. In the spirit of Stengers' scholarship, this **Responsive Roundtable Series 2022: Reactivating Ecologies** features respondents from art, science, and education to approach practices "...as they diverge, with attention and appreciation to difference(s)" (Stengers, 2005, p.192). These various responses bring us together for cultivating "other ways of trusting the world" (Papadopoulos et al., 2022, p. 32).

This 2022 series has a focus on the deep reading of a single text, *Reactivating Elements: Chemistry, Ecology, Practice* edited by Dimitris Papadopoulos, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Natasha Myers. Each Roundtable will begin with a 10-15 minute "reading along and reading aloud" of the Introduction (free and accessible here <https://www.dukeupress.edu/reactivating-elements>) in a practice inspired by *Ecofeminist Fridays*.

This time of shared "reading along and reading aloud" will be followed by interdisciplinary responses to a selected chapter from *Reactivating Elements: Chemistry, Ecology, Practice*. A Roundtable discussion will follow, with the intention of learning how to dialogue across difference(s) and of thinking together.

● **Responsive Roundtable 1:**
19th April 2022, 9-10 am AWST

Chapter 1: *Receiving the Gift: Earthly Events, Chemical Invariants, and Elemental Powers*, by Isabelle Stengers

Respondents: Professor Steve Chapman, Vice Chancellor, Edith Cowan University / Professor Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, University of Western Ontario & Common Worlds Research Collective / Dr Annette Nykiel, slow maker and artist-researcher, The Ediths.

● **Responsive Roundtable 2:**
3rd May 2022, 9-10 am AWST

Chapter 9: *Embracing Breakdown: Soil Eco-poethics and the Ambivalences of Remediation*, by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa

Respondents: Aviva Reed, visual ecologist, La Trobe University / Dr Jane Merewether, School of Education, Edith Cowan University & Common Worlds Research Collective / Dr Anna Hopkins, School of Science, Centre for People, Place & Planet, Edith Cowan University

Figure 2. The Ediths responsive roundtable poster.

relatively few Universities and even fewer private ones. The University sector is almost entirely reliant on public funding and government-regulated student fee income. Within this context, there are also no humanities-specific government funding streams, unlike, for instance, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in Canada.

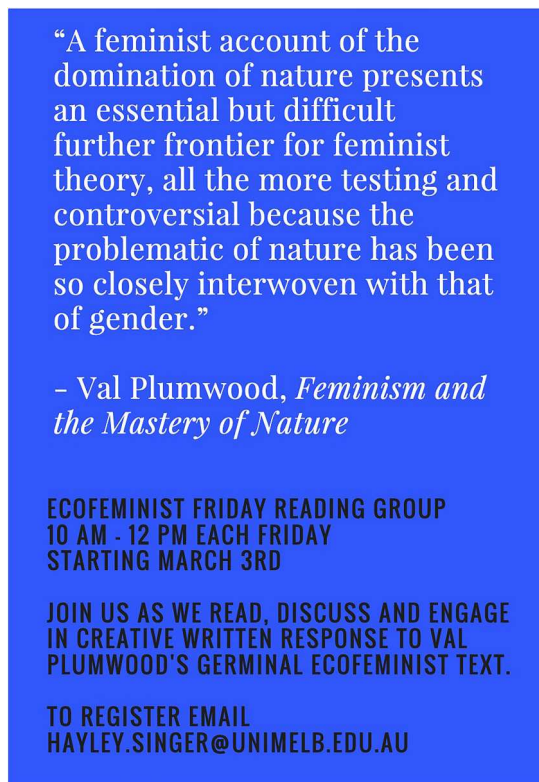


Figure 3. First promotional flyer for *Ecofeminist Fridays*.

While ostensibly arts and humanities research can equally access the support of the Australian Research Council, the funding data suggests an unequal distribution of these funds.¹ For example, between 2011 and 2022, combined research funding for in Engineering and Biological Sciences research fields is 4793 projects for a total of \$2,656,159,047; meanwhile, the convenors of the reading groups place their research in fields classified as ‘Language, Communication and Culture’, ‘Education’ and ‘Creative Arts’ which combine to account for 971 projects and proportionally less money. While the success rates between STEM and Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) disciplines in various funding categories are comparable for the same period, fewer applications come from the latter. Global data does not exist for humanities and arts research funding in relation to environmental issues and climate change specifically, but a longitudinal survey (Overland and Sovacool 2020) of natural and technical sciences as opposed to social sciences on the topic revealed that the former received over 770% more funding than the latter.

In addition to limited funding opportunities, contemporary workplace practices in Australian universities make it more difficult to build new critically oriented fields (Sims 2021). Marked by rampant precarity and overwork, established scholars are being asked to do more with less while emerging scholars are provided few coherent or likely pathways to secure employment (Allen and Hamilton 2022). Dedicated attention to reading – which would seem to be an obvious cornerstone of humanities scholarly labour – has thus become increasingly squeezed. All this has specific implications for trying to build

the field of FEH. Like our Environmental Humanities (EH) colleagues, we work across and between disciplines (Rose et al. 2012). While sceptical of 'impact'-driven agendas when these are driven by commercial agendas to feed fossil fuelled economic growth, we are interested in real world impact because the environmental crisis' harms are unevenly distributed. However, unlike EH, which often states its contribution as a field in normative terms, FEH is committed to challenging established terms of reference across multiple established fields of research at once, as they cross-cut our feminist commitments to tracking the effects of heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, racist, colonial and ableist structures of power. But, FEH's commitment to a broad counter-cultural research agenda without defined objects or areas of focus (Hamilton and Neimanis 2019) means that it is hard to establish new teaching programs, secure new hires, or win competitive funding in terms of institutional priorities. The convergence of these historical forces has important implications for thinking about reading groups as collectives that bring honours, postgraduate, early career researchers, precarious researchers, activists, artists and interested community members from outside institutions together with established 'tenured' academics as a pathway to field-building. The reading group thus becomes a way to create para-academic communities wherein an FEH research agenda can be immediately activated, this research can flourish against the neoliberal logic of contemporary academia, and a slower kind of collaboration can be modelled – even and especially amidst austerity and climate emergency.

A Participant Survey on Feminist Environmental Reading Groups in Australia

After a number of years convening these groups, our observations suggested they were responding to the need to generate vital new knowledge that was being substantially curtailed by changes to the university sector described above. Curious as to whether our perceptions of these functions matched the experiences of group participants, we administered a qualitative online survey. This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of New England (HE21-203).

The survey asked seven open-ended questions that elicited written responses, which could be as long or as short as participants desired. These questions asked reading group members to reflect on what motivated them to attend their respective groups, the nature and regularity of their participation, and the impacts (broadly construed) of their attendance. The survey recorded 137 responses across the three groups.

Our motivation for conducting a survey was to thicken our understanding of these groups. We wanted to check any misguided assumptions we had about what participants might say, while also creating space for surprise, critique, and participant voice. In this spirit, we were explicit in encouraging participants to take their time in their responses and to take seriously their own versions of 'impact' which might exceed or escape the boundaries of what the University deems rewardable. For example, one question was phrased in this way:

We are interested in the impact that our groups have had. You might interpret impact in any number of ways, even proposing new definitions of what could count as impact. We invite you to take whatever time you need (perhaps you want to get a cup of coffee or go for a walk?) to reflect on the following question: Please describe how your participation in this

group influenced your teaching, research, artistic or activist practice, or other everyday activities. Please be as specific as possible, or as general as necessary.

One participant responded,

I really love the way this question is phrased [...] and I think it goes to the heart of what my COMPOSTING experience has been: care, reflection, recognition of the fact that good things (like compost) take time... This is in such contrast to the urgency and unceasing demands of academia.

Our first attempt at analysis drew out four key themes from the research: first, the reading groups as a method for generating and sharing new knowledge; second, the reading groups as a way of building a field and community around feminist environmental humanities; third, the reading groups as a method for resisting the neoliberalisation of the university, and finally, the ways in which reading groups are a space for confronting and negotiating the ethics involved in any kind of community space.

Generating and Sharing New Knowledge

The first central theme highlighted how the groups facilitated the generation and transmission of new knowledge. Participants articulated this process in different ways: being able to participate in the 'unfolding of ideas', being 'intellectually nourished' and experiencing 'generative flow on effects' that helped to create new work. Some participants saw the groups as a source of fuel that drove future research, with one participant noting that 'even 5 years later, ideas and artworks continue to flourish'. Others saw the groups as the space where research itself happens, in one instance articulated as a 'reading-thinking-with practise' that was able to introduce participants to new ideas, enliven engagement with ideas that were on the outskirts of their thinking, and necessitated thinking across disciplinary and methodological boundaries. Respondents also focused on the groups as a space to experiment: to 'stutter', 'hesitate' or 'voice half-formed ideas' which in turn nurtured the production of new outputs. Further, the groups filled a gap in research infrastructure for scholars who had finished their PhD but have not secured full-time academic work. As one participant noted, 'For the first time since finishing my PhD (2014), I feel that I am part of a group of academics all working (diversely) on thinking-anew'.

Field Building and Community Building

Another significant theme concerned the reading groups as a means of building a community and 'the field', defined more broadly than a field of academic scholarship. Only 52% of respondents identified as academics while other vocations listed included gardener, artist, activist, mother, composter, writer, tarot reader and curator. One participant wrote, 'It was great to see people who were attached to universities in precarious ways – sessional teaching, students, former students – feel like they belonged', while another considered the group 'a wonderful example of inclusion and openness to people beyond university "walls", creating a broader sense of community with people interested in the ideas'.

The sense of community was generated through the protocols, culture, and ethos of the reading groups, guided by the facilitators and reproduced by the group members' practices. As a participant explained:

What I love about *COMPOSTING* is the protocols of equity that are built into the meeting. It ensures everyone gets a voice and that that voice is listened to without unwarranted critical interpretation. It is a fundamentally safe place and it makes me feel nurtured and increasingly confident in my articulations of these ideas being discussed.

Evidently, feelings of safety, support and generosity were central to the sustenance of the reading group as a type of community, and it was these same structures of feeling that allowed for a style of intellectual community-making that included people peripheral to academia.

The ethos of care that emerged alongside this community-making is delightfully illustrated in an anecdote from a group member of *The Ediths*:

On returning to Australia this year, I quarantined in Perth. A mentor and dear friend works at ECU & when she dropped a care package off to the hotel for me (cheese, fresh fruit, olives, newly-baked sourdough bread), she had tucked a copy of *'The Ediths Press'* in among the other items. The pages inspired me, made me laugh, made me think. So when I saw the section on *The Ediths* Roundtable Series, I looked it up online and signed up. That initial gift was intended to nourish and sustain me over those two weeks in isolation but participating in the Roundtable Series for the remainder of the year has extended that care and kindness well beyond those moments in Perth.

The integration of physical (food), emotional and intellectual sustenance in this anecdote further exposes the model of community that these reading groups have established. By treating FEH ideas as not just as ideas but as ways of life, these reading groups model a formation of intellectual community that both serves and takes into account the whole self in context, while also working to break down arbitrary barriers as to who belongs in this space.

Against Neoliberalisation

Another theme in the survey responses is the value of these reading groups as methods of resisting the neoliberalisation of research (and everyday life more generally). This theme was particularly salient in participants' discussion of their relationship to time. For example, a participant wrote that they attended the groups 'to listen. Listening is often a luxury given the time constraints'. Another wrote, 'I made time for this group in a context of "no time"'. Also of note was the appreciation of 'two options for reading: one with all the readings and one for the time-poor'.

Time was also a factor in the way group members engaged with the reading group: 28% of participants attended regularly, 22% occasionally, 30% infrequently and 15% never attended a meeting but appreciated the regular newsletters. Reflecting on how the culture of the group addressed time pressures within a neoliberal regime, one respondent wrote, 'If I couldn't make it, I always thought "they will know I couldn't". That is really nice. We are all doing the best we can'. Group members felt that any absence would be understood because the facilitators were explicit about recognising the intense time constraints that neoliberal productivity frameworks enforce, articulated in the data as 'feeling the pressure to create'.

Further, participants felt that the reading groups enabled them to be more politically active in resisting neoliberal agendas. This was articulated as the reading groups providing a type of emotional and intellectual support that enabled members to, for example,

'be explicitly political with how and what I teach [and] to push back when the administration is resting or failing'. In addition to inspiring resistance to corporate management tactics, the group was a platform to practice ways of being that refute neoliberal logics, such as 'disrupting the notion of showing up as a silent observer (unintentional or otherwise) to extract or mine knowledge from other scholars and scholarship' and being able to 'create together, non-competitively'. One participant wrote

Receiving your emails was one of the highlights of last year. Even though I never joined you, as I sorted myself out during a difficult year, I felt that I was still part of something that existed somewhere with people joined by common interests. I thank you for this.

Here the participant felt that they could be supported and sustained by the sense of community in the reading groups despite being unable to fulfil the role of a hyper-productive academic subject.

A Place to Negotiate Prickly Ethics

The survey data also suggests that the reading groups were spaces for participants to navigate complex and uncomfortable ethical issues. A focus on reflexive practice allowed group members to safely but productively re-assess how their practice and everyday lives were bound up in power struggles. One participant defined this atmosphere as a 'feminist safe and brave (Micky Scott Bey Jones) space'. Others focused on the affective resonances that accompany ethical-intellectual work: 'It was very challenging. It was often difficult and emotionally and intellectually painful. But I knew from experience that 'trouble' often leads to openings so I persisted'. Similarly, another group member noted:

I always found the tone and the moderation of the meetings really useful/helpful in allowing myself to be challenged without the stress/shame of being called out or pulled up in more aggressive ways ... the way the meetings were moderated was always very respectful and supportive of people who were/are in a process of (un)learning and unpacking (I mean, isn't that everyone?).

Thus the sense of community and generosity in these groups allowed many participants to engage in uncomfortable and reflexive ethical work without feeling attacked, rejected, or devalued.

Transversal Poetics: A Captioned Photo Essay

While the above data analysis gathers some common themes from the survey, we knew there were affects, tensions, and revelations that this kind of analysis could not capture. In the experimental vein of the groups themselves, the following mini-photo essay, alongside the interpretation of these figures in the following section, offers insight into the importance of new methods of data analysis. The method of transversal poetic data analysis has four steps: (i) draw transversal lines across the data; (ii) transcribe the words touched by the transversal line as a list; (iii) create 'found poems' out of the words keeping in mind the theme of the data set and research question/s and (iv) reflect on the new meanings created in the poems. We found the insights gleaned from this process diffracts through both the groups and the research for this paper. We include

images from these exercises below less for the specific words and phrases they contain, and more to model for readers various examples of how this process unfolded for each of us. The captions offered by the respective authors reflect on what each process and poem elucidated (Figures 4–9).

Transversal Poetics as a Way to Understand Reading Group as Method

This final substantive section offers deeper analysis of the photo essay above and delves more deeply into the value of the ‘transversal poetics’ method beyond more conventional methods of survey data analysis. We aim to illustrate that only in the embodied, hands-on doing of this method could we come to fully appreciate transversality as a key concept to explain how the reading groups functioned. In other words, this section is also an argument for creative, situated, practice-led methods of data analysis that are aligned with the experimental curiosity of the reading groups themselves. This creative risk-taking and experimentation is what enabled their field-building agency in spite of the neoliberal academic context we have outlined. We hope this section will encourage readers to experiment with similar methods.

As noted in our introduction, the concept of transversality emerged as a potential way to understand the resonances and connections apparent in our data, while still holding onto difference as an irreducible element of the reading group methodology. In mathematics, a transversal is a line that intersects at least two others. It puts things previously unconnected into relation. Nira Yuval Davis presents transversality as an alternative to universalising assimilationist politics on the one hand, and rigid identity politics, where group membership based on shared identity is a priori assumed, on the other. Grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology, this approach holds all positions to be unfinished (rather than invalid or relative), whereby, difference encompasses (rather than replaces) equality (1999, 95). Transversal politics recognises the work of power and seeks to overcome this by recognizing the starting point of each participant (98).

Between the mathematical and the political, it is not difficult to relate the idea of the transversal to these feminist environmental reading groups. First, the reading group itself (whether in person or online) functioned as a transversal, where the ‘line’ was the space time of the group itself, putting bodies of ideas, human bodies, and more-than-human bodies into relationship. Second, the texts that we read together were also transversals, cutting a line across the participants and their disparate investments in feminist issues, labour politics, environmental activism and poetic sensibilities. Similarly, the responses to the readings, whether aloud or written in the chat, were gathered up by the transversal line of the group space. This is resonant with Rosi Braidotti’s call for a transversal posthumanities, as the reading group method also finds its place among ‘new modes of knowledge production of cognitive capitalism that cut across traditional institutional divides and add new urgency to the issues at stake’ (2019, 1184). The reading groups were a place where these differences could rub against each other without the need for reconciliation within a grand narrative, and where hierarchies could be recognised but muted.

Importantly, the transversal was also a material method that helped us past an impasse we encountered during data analysis. Our initial discussions elicited interesting insights and some overarching themes, as noted above, but the generalisations that emerged

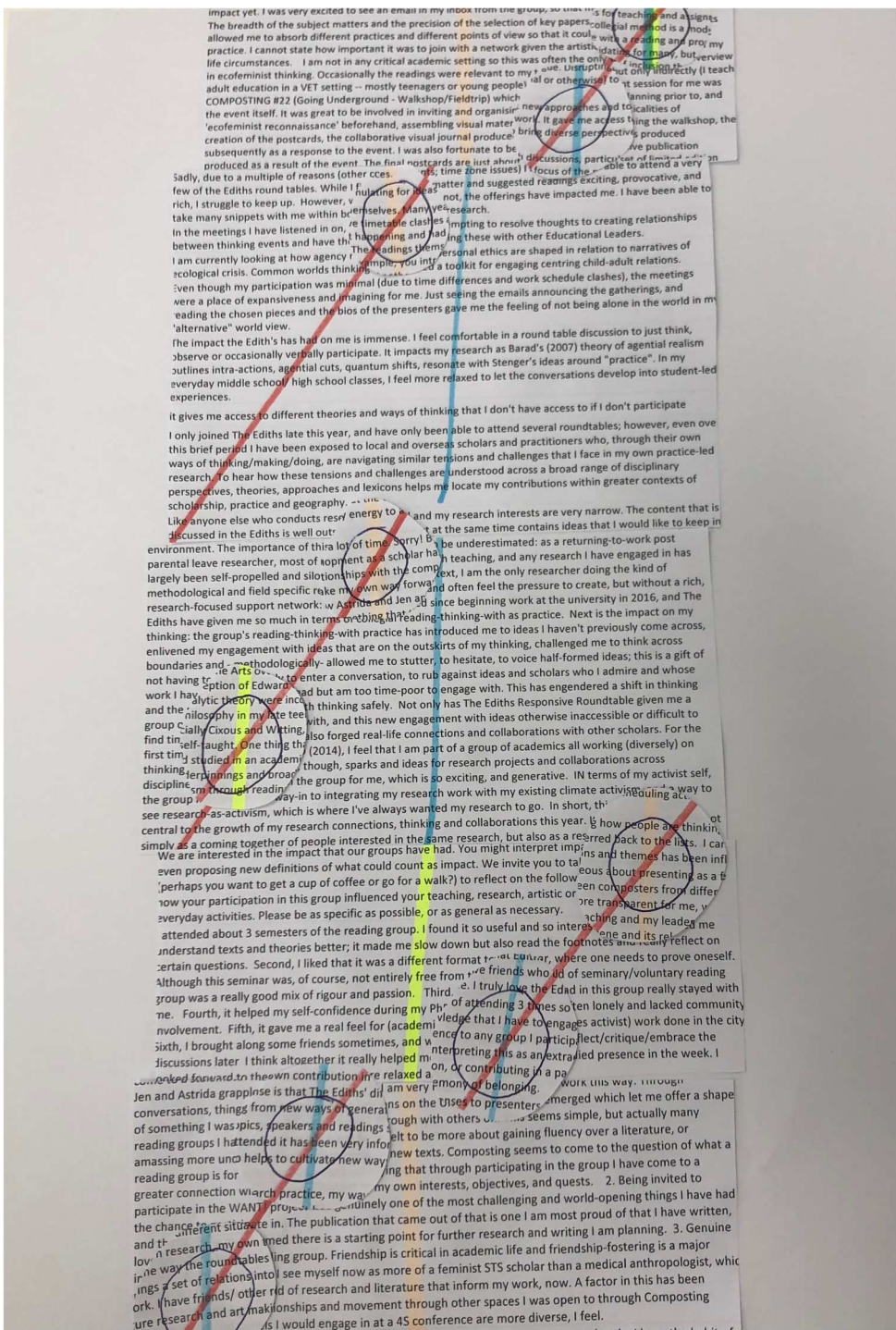


Figure 4. There was something unnerving about picking out one word and taking it away from the thoughts that framed and informed these ideas. To attend to this, I located where the two lines met and made a small imperfect circle as an attempt to honour the situatedness of the reading groups. However, I still had a feeling of unease, that removing these summaries from their context was insufficient, and imperfect. I can't help but wonder how the reading groups themselves are like these imperfect circles? (Blaise).

Page 2:

overtly active feminist. I wanted to learn. I wanted to learn what to do, how to do it, and why I needed to do it."

Ecofeminist Fridays

"I joined this group when I first became interested in eco feminisms / post-humanisms but had no access to any mentors, classes, resources (or guidance on who/what to read)."

"To participate in a slow reading and analysis"

The Ediths

"I joined because I was frustrated with sexism in my field. Also, because I wanted to be a part of something positive and dynamic in my institution. I think the Ediths are more forward thinking and progressive than the majority of the people who shape the direction of ECU, and knowing this gives me tremendous comfort."

"I admire and enjoy the method of scholarship that emerges from the Ediths group and responsive roundtable; the invitation to think with, to stumble, and the create together, non-competitively. As an ECR returning to academia after parental leave, with relatively little research trajectory post-child-bearing, I relished the change to talk and think with scholars I admire on issues I find stimulating and central to my research desires and purpose. In short: feminist methodologies and climate justice in the context of childhood studies drew me to the group."

"I want to learn more about ways to transform society towards loving relationship with people, place and planet. I've spent most of my life trying to work towards a better society, however the opposite is clearly happening. Also, it is interesting, engaging, fun and I love the new directions."

"I wanted to be a part of the unfolding of these ideas."

"On returning to Australia this year, following a two and a half year postdoctoral project abroad, I quarantined in Perth. A mentor and dear friend works at ECU & when she dropped a care package off to the hotel for me (cheese, fresh fruit, olives, newly-baked sourdough bread), she had tucked a copy of "The Ediths Press" in among the other items. The pages inspired me, made me laugh, made me think. So when I saw the section on The Ediths Roundtable Series, I looked it up online and signed up. That initial gift was intended to nourish and sustain me over those two weeks in isolation but participating in the Roundtable Series for the remainder of the year has extended that care and kindness well beyond those moments in Perth."

Words that the line brings into contact:

Overtly needed to Ecofeminist this group when any mentors, classes in a slow reading frustrated with sexism dynamic in my institution the people who shape scholarship that emerges to stumble leave think with purpose childhood studies drew me desires and society towards loving society towards loving society towards loving fun and I love postdoctoral she dropped sourdough bread made me laugh up online two weeks that care

Figure 5. When collecting the words touched by the line, I accidentally cut and pasted 'society towards loving' three times. It was a resonant mistake that I decided to keep as a provocation that shape-shifts as it loops. The mistake made me consider: What moves us in research? What sticks? What do we move toward? (Gardiner).

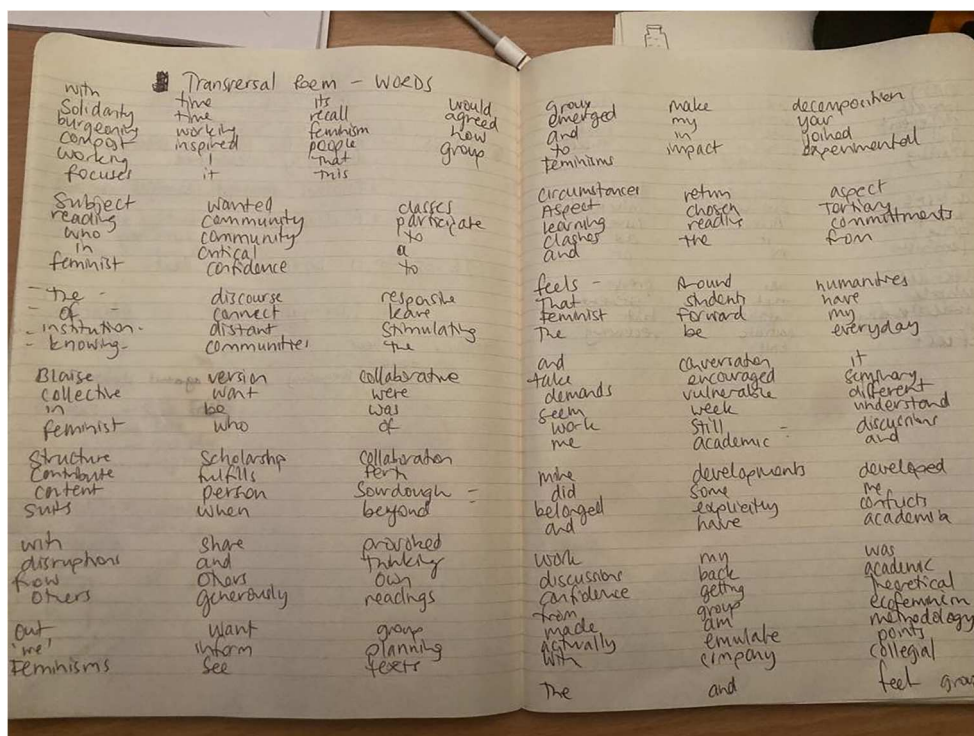


Figure 6. The transversal exercise produced a long list of words that highlighted certain preoccupations in the data set (community, community, collegial, scholarship, feminism, feminisms, ecofeminism). I was really sceptical about this exercise, because it felt arbitrary. But it isn't totally arbitrary because the words are in the data. As well as common terms, the exercise brought to the fore other concepts like solidarity, sourdough and vulnerability, which did not stand out because they weren't repeated, but nonetheless linked to some latent thoughts and feelings I had had about the reading groups and the subsequent poetic play gave me permission to develop those ideas too (Hamilton).

out of this shifting tableau mostly repeated what we already knew. Moreover, as we discussed the survey results in more depth, we kept seeing and making connections across the themes we identified; data and observations connected differently depending on what we were looking for. We were stumped on how to hold onto the overarching themes while still doing justice to the creativity and complexity that characterised both the groups and the survey commentary.

On impulse, we decided to experiment though poetic inquiry, literalising the concept of the transversal that had surfaced in some of our discussions. To undertake this experiment, we collated the responses from the respondents into one text that, in a standard font, spread across 12 pages. Our task was then to draw a line across a page of text, seeing what words or phrases the line transected, and compose a poem from those words or phrases. We each had our own micro-protocols – e.g. whether only transected words could form the poems; whether all transected words must be in the poem; whether the non-transected spaces and forms could inform the poem, and so on. Some results of these experiments are reproduced in the photo essay above, where instead of

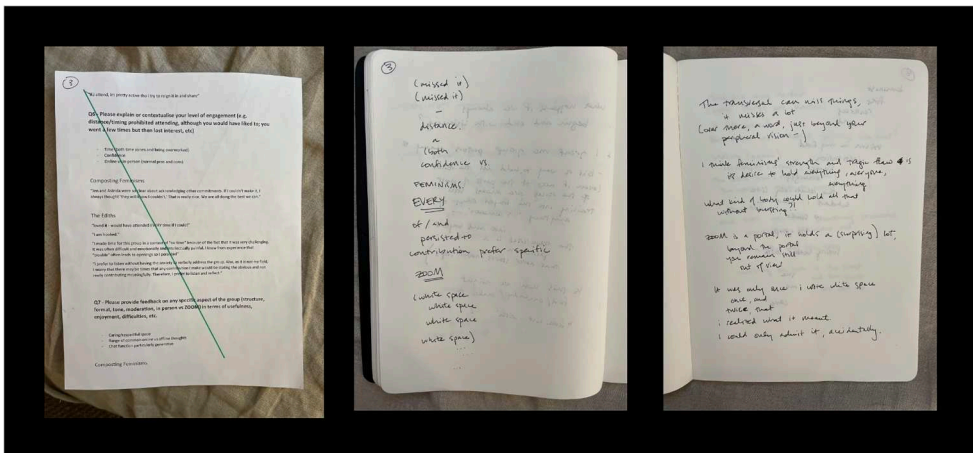


Figure 7. In my second experiment, I noted how ‘the transversal still misses things’. The bottom tail of the line hung loose in ‘white space/white space/white space’. I observed: ‘It was only when I wrote “white space” once, and then twice, that I realised what it meant. I could only admit it accidentally’ While buoyed by all kinds of differences, the majority of participants in our groups were still white. This transversal poetics illuminates tensions you don’t always want to account for. (Neimanis).

offering belaboured ekphrastic accounts of each image, the captions highlight both the materiality of this practice and some key insights it generated.

In turning this experiment into method, we also attended to questions of validity and rigour. Poetic inquiry has a feminist history of practice that is embodied, relational, addresses the limitations of language (Faulkner 2019), and is no less valid than other methods of qualitative analysis. Qualitative analysis often codes data to understand meanings; our method of coding was attending to what fell on the line. Nor was our method random, as we did not get to simply select what words or phrases will become part of the poem. The line (which is both spatial and durational) issues an imperative to do the hard work of holding and attending to all that it gathers. This is the case even when the line reveals tensions that we would prefer not to attend to, as with the 'white space' noted in Figure 7. Instead of 'random' our method would be more accurately described as 'situated', in the feminist epistemological sense: although a slashed line could yield almost infinite possibilities, the cut one makes is a body responding to a space, a time and a context. In this sense, our transversal method shares the rigour of any close reading practice. These findings also align with a *COMPOSTING* methodological ethos that is not interested in innovation for innovation's sake. The transversal does not leave its relations behind by inventing something new, but instead tends to what has already been placed in the field (Hamilton and Neimanis 2018). As the poem in Figure 9 reveals, what is boring and repeated sometimes needs to be noticed anew, precisely because of its banality.

Our transversal poems nonetheless revealed three additional common themes: community/mutual care; difference; and context. These ideas became things we were not willing to let go of as we turned the poems into meaningful analysis. Regarding the first theme of community and mutual care, we were pulled up by the repetition of the strange phrase ‘society towards loving’ in [Figure 5](#). This is also expressed through attention to the word ‘back’ in the poem ‘Feels’ ([Figure 8](#)). The ‘insisting on love as the least and the most we

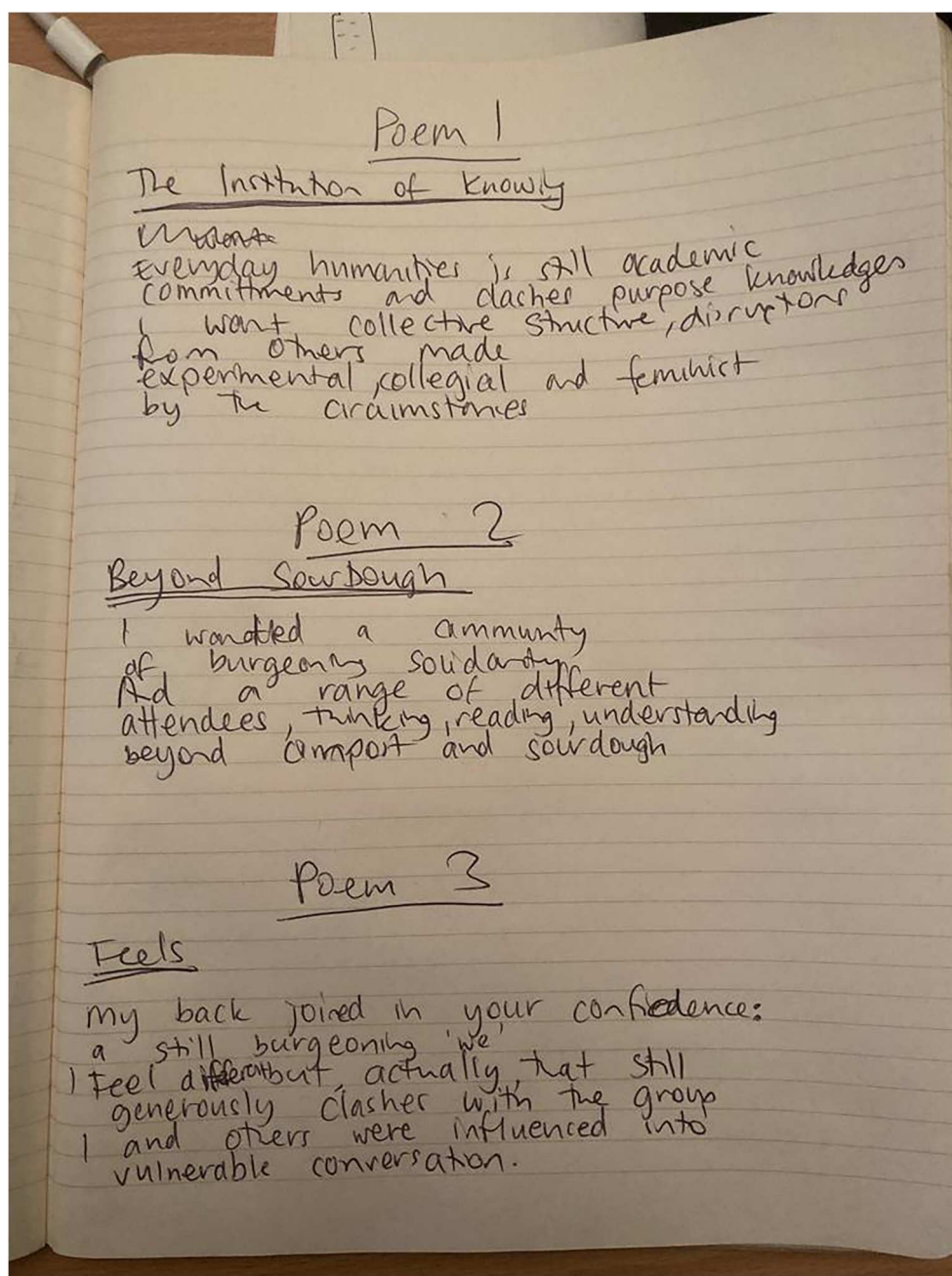


Figure 8. My three poems highlight three really important aspects of *COMPOSTING* for me. 'The Institution of Knowing' highlights how the groups relate to the establishment as a para-academic group, part funded by the University, part outside it. It highlights the freedom afforded by the liminal position and the modelling of a different 'institution of knowing'. 'Beyond sourdough' was about ideas exchanged beyond the material. Being an environmental feminist academic, attending to the material is important (sourdough and compost) but these material communities of living creatures are not meaningful without wider contexts. Sometimes it can feel hard to carve the time for more speculative playful thinking. Finally, 'feels' reveals the importance of allies who can do this work with you safely. The word 'back' was really important for me to express this, as for some reason it stood out as commitment and effort – putting my back into it – but buoyed by the confidence of my collaborator, and creating a space for tension, vulnerability and generosity (Hamilton).

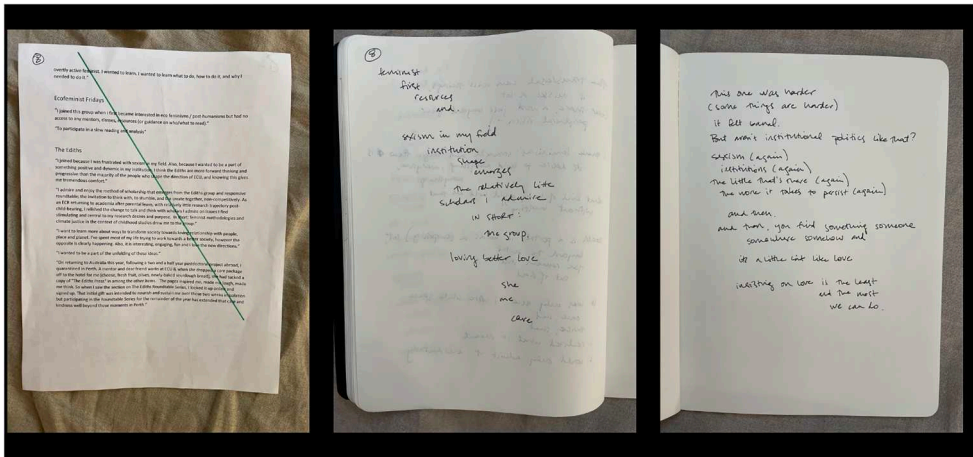


Figure 9. At first I didn't think my third experiment yielded anything interesting. As it transected words like 'sexism in my field' and 'institution', I wrote that 'It felt banal'. Upon reflection, though, I added: 'But aren't institutional politics like that: sexism (again), institutions (again), the little that's there (again), the work it takes to persist (again) ...' I noted that the transversal finished on the word 'love', so I concluded my poem with 'insisting on love is the least/and the most/we can do'. This transversal poetics locates meaning within, not against, the banality of this work (Neimanis).

can do' noted in Figure 9 also underscores the affection, care and feeling that the transversal poetics were able to distil from the survey data. The second theme was difference as an ethos. Difference was not something to be resolved, but rather something to be tended to in both its world-building qualities and its tensions. As the poem in Figure 7 notes, 'feminism's strength and tragic flaw' is a desire to hold everything. 'What kind of body could hold all that without bursting?!' it asks. This is the poem that also asks the author to confront the whiteness that dominates the reading group space. Engaging with these experiments reminded us of difference as something that is always internal and present. As different and as *difference*, the groups become the 'small imperfect circles' observed in Figure 4. Finally, these experiments also gave rise to thinking more deeply about institutional contexts – both the fact of institutional context, but also the commitment to responsivity and contextuality as part of the reading groups' ethos. Again, Figure 4 makes the important point of not removing things from their contexts, as this was experienced in a very material sense in the crafting of these poems.

Our aim in this section was to underscore that these poetics revealed something that a more conventional sorting and analysis of the survey data couldn't show us on its own – not because it wasn't there, but because it needed to take on a new form to become meaningful. This experiment reminded us of why the creativity and experimental form of our reading groups was so important.

Conclusion

Writing against the image of the solo scholar conducting research alone, building fields by publishing in journals and teaching in large halls, this article has argued that the themed reading group is both a field building method and a research method. We specifically

investigated how this is a method in Feminist Environmental Humanities, an interdisciplinary scholarly area at the intersections of feminist social justice and environmental concerns. The research was conducted by co-convenors of three Australian feminist environmental reading groups (COMPOSTING Feminisms, Eco Feminist Fridays, The Ediths) and one of the groups' participants. We see these groups as situated in a general feminist reading group tradition, but given the need to maintain a research practice and build a field despite austerity and climate change, we see the groups as responding to and arising from declining research funding in the neoliberal university and accelerating ecological crisis, doing so in ways that seek to advance an inclusive feminist agenda.

We also developed a new method of data analysis we call 'transversal poetics'. The concept of the transversal is a lens to make visible the connections between ideas, themes, and questions in datasets. The captioned photo essay illustrated the process with the view that it can be repeated by others. We conclude by unpacking the significance of the process in terms of the data. This creative and theoretically inflected method of analysis revealed a more atmospheric or tonal element of the reading groups: they are communities of care that bring together different, otherwise institutionally or geographically disconnected, people. Overall, the research underscored that while never free of ethical tensions and compromises, feminist environmental reading groups can be a playful, surprising and affirmative method for field building and research. These groups also, most importantly, provisionally instantiate new kinds of communities aimed at the creation of new kinds of worlds. This essay is dedicated to all the reading group participants who helped build these worlds with us.

Note

1. All the data in this paragraph is taken from the 'Australian Research Council Grants Dataset'. This is a live dataset that is continually updated. Accessed April 3; 2023. <https://www.arc.gov.au/funding-research/funding-outcome/grants-dataset>

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ORCID

James Gardiner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8631-5801>

Hayley Singer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1842-8182>

Jennifer Hamilton  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6380-9067>

Astrida Neimanis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7666-8507>

Mindy Blaise  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2476-9407>

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