Fishing for a Career: Alternative Livelihoods and the Hardheaded Art of Academic Failure

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Abstract

Charting the course: The world of alternative livelihood research brings a heavy history of paternalistic colonial intervention and moralising. In particular, subsistence fishers in South East Asia are cyclical attractors of project funding to help them exit poverty and not 'further degrade the marine ecosystem' (Cinner et al. 2011), through leaving their boats behind and embarking on non-oceanic careers. What happens, then, when we turn an autoethnographic eye on the livelihood of the alternative livelihood researcher? What lexicons of lack and luck may we borrow from the fishers in order to 'render articulate and more systematic those feelings of dissatisfaction' (Young 2002) of an academic's life's work and our work-life? What might we learn from comparing small-scale fishers to small-scale scholars about how to successfully 'navigate' the casualised waters of the modern university? Does this unlikely course bring any ideas of 'possibilities glimmering' (Young 2002) for 'exiting' poverty in Academia?

Keywords

Autoethnography, casual academics, poverty in academia

Part 1: Shipwreck

It is 2012, and I'm at the world's largest Coral Reef Science Conference: over two thousand delegates, held every four years, marine science's equivalent of the Olympic Games. It's two months after the abrupt failure of my marriage, perhaps two weeks since my father was diagnosed with operable cancer, and almost two years since the completion of my doctoral fieldwork. I am presenting in the 'socio-economic stream', which is somewhat drowned out by the eleven other parallel sessions on various aspects of coral and fish ecology. Real science has invited the social in, but only as a side-show.

I'm bright, but brittle, as I take the stage to give my paper about using simulation games to encourage small-scale fishers into alternative livelihoods, the result of work on a project entitled 'Finding a Way Out for Depleted Subsistence Fisheries' or FindFishSup. The argument seems straightforward: the sea is overfished, so let's stop

people fishing. I describe our workshops in the Philippines in mostly Pollyanna terms, emphasising the laughs and the learning rather than the silences and doubts. The cracks probably don't show as I bumble through, since it's a modified version of a talk I've given at several other conferences. I learned this recycling manoeuvre early, it is one of the tricks of my trade. Conference talks, networking, asking pertinent questions: these are the core skills of this livelihood of mine that, on the surface, looks so different from the fishers' one, out on the ocean-blue. However, as we shall explore, it seems the current global epoch has us both at the end of the proverbial line.

After my talk, as I walk to the conference dinner, I think, well, that went ok. Piece of cake. My writing may have stalled, but I can still hold an audience. At the dinner, I flow between old friends, new mates, vague acquaintances and perfect strangers. Currents flow thick and fast among the teeming school of academics. Here I find a Costa Rican ecologist who knows the fishing village where I used to work. There I dance with my labmates from Manila. Here again, chatting with the Germans I'd accompanied on a dishevelled research cruise in Sulawesi back when my doctoral research still sparkled with unrealised promise. Each experience adds colour and texture to my tapestry of knowledge about small-scale fishers from elsewhere and their responses to our global problems. Conferences are the gilded edge of academia, a global community gathered together in a ritualised cultural celebration. It's our work, and we *love* it.

Can conference dinners be compared, perhaps, to the 'jackpot' moments of the fishers? Where a large landing is secured, and by osmosis, or just gossip on the wind, and representatives from all households turn up on the beach to take part in the joy of the successful labour of the fishers, and take part in the sharing out of the catch (Mangahas 2000)? More planned, perhaps, but still with the sense of ceremony, the guarantee of a good feed, and the subtle yet persistent knowledge of an unspoken hierarchy, which influences proceedings in ways that do not start or end with the event itself.

Back to our dinner. When the venue is emptying at around midnight, a friend introduces me to a man about my age. I lapse into clichés. He's tall, dark(haired) and handsome, and, as an aside, known to have leapt up the academic ladder with the greatest of ease after completing his thesis – which was written at the same time as he was completing several lucrative consultancies. His livelihood is certainly looking a lot more secure than mine, dangling, as I was, at the tail-end of a stipend scholarship, and juggling casual teaching contracts. Opposites attract, etc.

We move on to a sleazy backpacker club with other delegates. His hand brushes against my thigh as we dance. Some hours later, we leave together.

As we emerge onto the street I realise I have no idea where I am. Like so many other shared traits with Norman Rush's protagonist in Mating (the one who was 'working her tits down to nubs on a thesis that didn't exist') (Rush 1992), I too have topological agnosia, an inability to locate myself in relation to my surroundings. Assoc. Prof Tall, Dark and Handsome offers to help me back to my apartment, if he can stay, as his own lodgings are not within walking distance. Somewhere amid this, he reveals he has a wife, and my axis falls further out of line. Talk turns to unfulfilled promises of platonic behaviour.

After, he says, 'I can't stay'. I nod. He says, 'I'm going,' and I say 'go.' He leaves. The departure of this exemplar of white, male academic perfection seems prophetic in retrospect. My feeling of being left behind begins there perhaps: marooned, stranded, alone. My fringe-dweller status in the world of academe is confirmed: as a social scientist among scientists, as a casual employee among the tenured, as a woman among men. My professional instability is exacerbated by the intrusion of my personal life: my parents' failing health, the wreckage of my marriage. I leak salt onto my pillow, and my thoughts turn to the leaky pipeline, that evocative metaphor for how women are 'lost' to the academy at every step from PhD onwards (Van den Brink & Benschop 2012b). But do we leave, or are we left behind?

The next day, back at the Conference, I am once again brittle, but bright. I bounce through sessions and have a coffee with someone who saw my presentation and is intrigued by the approach. However, my batteries are running very low. I receive emails in the following weeks, requesting advice on participatory methods in poor countries, and, for the first time, I bin these without responding. Circulation of academic goodwill, the exchange of free knowledge and advice, this is the bread and butter of collegiality and collaboration: what gives life to academia's global workplace, and not infrequently secures employment opportunities. But when your butter pot is empty, and the bread is stale, who has the energy to connect with strangers?

I'm fraying. The toll of divorce, my father's cancer, my project inescapably broken and delayed despite my sunny presentation. Cells, bodies, relationships, ideas all misbehaving, mutating, non-conforming. Butter, bread, ropes, batteries, these are the mixed metaphors of un-oiled cogs grinding against each other. Oops! There goes another one. I have nothing left to feed the machine. Drowning in my own rhetoric, I can't possibly work under these conditions.

In the following months, I take leave from my PhD. First 6 weeks, then 12. Finally, after months of agonising stagnation, I decide to quit. In a quixotic move, the university offers no easy way of withdrawing from a PhD. I search fruitlessly through the depths of our website for an appropriate form. Instead, I can put it all on hold—for a year, two years. My therapist, provided free of charge through the student union health services, provides documentation supporting leave, and I secure the relevant signatures. Leave is granted, and I pack up my office.

Part 2: Lifejackets

It turns out to be difficult to find work off-campus. The new conservative federal government 'needs' to find 'savings' and even those in 'permanent' jobs are being shown the door. In my town of government work and government contracts, the economy beats to parliament's drum. I end up tutoring again. It's my 5th 'casual sessional' contract at the university in half as many years. The money isn't bad, enough to pay the rent, and though the marking rate doesn't cover the time I spend googling suspiciously perfect sentences to prove plagiarism (an occupational hazard), I enjoy the face-to-face teaching in small groups. The students and I get to know each other, the exchange of stories, knowledge and experiences feels genuine and grounding. But in the

four-month Summer gap between semester 2 and the following semester 1, 'casual sessionals' do not get paid. My seasonal work is about to disappear.

In a lucky break, (or is it my winning ways? We shall return to this question), about half-way through the semester, the mother of one of my (local, high-quality, public) high school friends, who also happens to be a founding professor of one of our most lauded research schools, invited me to work for her. She knows I'm struggling, and has provided lunch, tea, and timely, sage advice since. Here again, a safe harbour in otherwise rough seas. This is what keeps you hoping that just around the bend is security and fulfilment, or, at least, a nice place to work. The job – and handouts from my parents loosely associated with Christmas and birthdays – has kept me limping along ever since. These three facts (good public school, a job, monetary gifts) speak worlds of my life of relative ease and privilege. Failing, giving up, giving in, never getting started, were (and are) only a few suburbs away, so consider my complaints as soft ones, perhaps of the 'first world' variety.

For more than three years, the same length of time you are nominally given to do an entire Australian doctorate, I have been working as a bottom feeder in the academic system. This should also not be a complaint: university bottom feeders are comparatively well-nourished. Although I only earned 70% of our full-time minimum wage last financial year, my hourly rate is 228% of that (Australian Government Fair Work Ombudsman 2016). This means I can work less than half the hours of, say, the cleaners I greet vaguely on the rare days I arrive before 8am, to reach my society's accepted subsistence level. This is such a luxury. Much of the agonised writing coming out of North America in particular speaks of the very real struggle of existing on casual wages, in places where there are no competing employers or accessible alternatives for most people who complete any kind of tertiary education.

Alongside my sporadic hours as a research assistant, my doctoral studies hobble on. For reasons I can explain but do not fully grasp, I cannot let my thesis go unfinished, even now long after the sunk cost fallacy has become a clear truth and the hardheaded, rational response would have been to give in gracefully. I stubbornly want that Dr: many (many!) journal entries attest to my sincere desire to have the right to a genderless honorific. If it seems shallow, a poor motivator, then feel free to judge. I have little status to lose in this world, so I will cling to this life craft of sorts.

In the spirit of 'neo-liberal self-improvement' (Murray 2013; Vijayakumar 2013), I attend countless writing courses, enrol in Massive Open Online Courses to boost my time management and productivity, hire a writing coach I can ill-afford. When I finally finish the first substantive piece of writing in about four years in January 2016, I email an ex-supervisor jubilantly, inviting him to be co-author if he could give me some feedback and a bit of guidance about where to try for publication. A few weeks later he gets back to me, saying he cannot read it until September (he's flat out!), and I should put it in for a conference in the meantime. He reassures me about this daring recommendation, saying I shouldn't worry, his position on the conference committee would mean my paper would (luckily! nepotically!) 'get in'.

The casual assumption of the benefits and privileges associated with academic networks is, of course, well-placed (Burris 2004; Sherren et al. 2009). It's only now, on the fringes of other people's projects, that I realise what was offered early on. Attachments to people, projects and programs allows you access to more than just funding, conference attendance and your name on papers. It is acceptance, opportunities and a general sense of being part of an 'in-' crowd. Before the first year of my doctorate was up, I had: half a dozen collaborative articles in the pipeline; presented at as many international conferences; and participated in countless professional development activities run by colleagues and colleagues of colleagues. Like so much else, this abruptly stopped at about the time of the events described at the beginning of this essay. The project funding my work finished, one supervisor retired, another moved fields and the third moved away: my access pass disappeared with these changes.

This transition from inside to outside was, in many ways, a transition from a masculine experience of the academy, to a feminine one: researchers from across the globe confirm that women are disproportionately excluded from collegial circles that are critical for continuing acceptance and success (Brown & Watson 2010; Kantola 2008; Martin 1994). Who you hang out with at conference dinners (and the like) turns into who cites you (Van den Brink & Benschop 2012a), who tells you about employment opportunities (Bagilhole & Goode 2001), who invites you to publish and present (Kantola 2008), and who praises your work to recruitment and grant committees (Van den Brink & Benschop 2012b). Life on the academic margins is one of eking out a livelihood, that task of minorities the world over. And so, despite the comfort of my class and race, I begin identifying with the fishers and not with the men who study them.

Like 'real' poverty, academic poverty is not just material, but rather social, political, emotional and psychological hardship and resource scarcity. It comes with crippling isolation, self-doubt, a sense of things going on around you, not with you, and an intuitive certainty that at some level the institution just wants you to *go away*.

Part 3: To Fish or Not to Fish?

And why not leave? There is so much world outside these walls, notwithstanding my earlier inability to secure a job. And surely, especially for those to whom academic culture means nothing, a PhD is a useless adornment compared to a livelihood. Get a real job, bow to the weight of the empirical knowledge that I, like most others, do not belong here. It is now oft-argued that PhDs are in oversupply (Cyranoski et al. 2011). PhD training has in the past been specifically, if not solely, the entry point for a vocational career in academia. No longer: PhD students outnumber tenured positions with an estimated ratio of 1:20 (Crossley 2013). Doctoral students are now offered an array of alternative livelihood workshops to prepare them for the seemingly inevitable alternative life outside the academy.

For those familiar with the 'alternative livelihood' nomenclature, this choice of words will seem odd. It is a largely unspoken assumption that 'alternative livelihoods' are devised for the poor, rural and (mostly) brown, not the (relatively) rich, urban and (mostly) white. Indeed, it was a deeply unsettling experience when I realised that what I

was doing to the fishers, the university was trying to do to me. I was perusing the latest offerings from our research education office, a team of dedicated, lively people, when the title 'PhD to Present' caught my eye. The idea behind the workshop is that livelihoods beyond the sandstone walls are available. Not only available but desirable! More money, more security, more of everything outside the campus. I recall, ruefully, the fisher who said to us 'you want us to stop fishing, don't you? Then why don't you just come out and say it'. I imagine the response if I were to say the same thing to the university's workshop organisers.

'Landing' a permanent academic job has indeed become the domain of the very lucky or very skilled, depending on your perspective. Armed with this knowledge, why do we still flock (school?) to doctoral programs? It's a pending question.

The very same discourse of luck and skill is discussed by Volero (1994) in relation to Filipino fishers. Where control is elusive and stakes are high, rationality bifurcates. Those who do well attribute this to either internal characteristics (skill, or 'diskarte') or external forces (luck or 'suwerte'). Amongst the fishers, skill is more likely to be attributed where boats are big and fishing gear hi-tech. Material abundance gives rise to faith in one's own ability to command the tides of fate and destiny. Luck, on the other hand, is the purview of the small-scale fishers. Armed with hand-made nets, traps and spears, fortune's fluctuations are firmly out of one's hand. No-one's fault, just the way of the gods and the sea.

Of course, when catches are small and jobs are scarce then more people are out of luck. At this point, luck disappears as an explanatory variable, and the focus shifts to upskilling. The ones doing badly become the target of interventions that will give them the 'competencies' and pathways they need (Brien, Burr & Webb 2013). This is how particular groups are rendered the site and source of a problem, and the systems perpetuating said problem vanish from view (Ahmed 2017). Circular logic becomes common at this point. As Christophe Béné mocks in his hypercritical paper on structural exclusion from fishing grounds, scholars have tended to fall into claiming people are fishers because they're poor and poor because they're fishers (Béné 2003). We could easily substitute this with 'people are untenured because they're poor performers and poor performers because they're untenured', resulting in precisely the problem lamented regularly in higher education supplements and related popular publications across the globe.

Economic resources and socially enabled privilege are not foregrounded in the skills/luck framework. The idea of merit (I deserve this! I am skilled!) may take on special weight when your hold upon it is so tenuous – untenured. If, as David Mosse (2006) has argued, it is a matter of routine institutionalised practice that success is collectivised and failure individualised, we must point to high achievers as markers of a system that is working, and ask the losers what they are doing wrong.

I am sure part of my internal resistance to finishing my PhD (why else would I sit here day after day, not doing, not doing?) is from looking on at my long-finished contemporaries. Many are juggling multiple short-term contracts, where your time is up just as you're getting started (Saracci et al. 1999), and those who aren't facing cyclical

contract expiration keep working hours that many (and I) consider barbaric in their length and intensity (Hemer 2014). At least while I stay in undone limbo land, working very little (I must finish my thesis) and studying even less (I must work), I have an excuse for every situation which more or less holds water.

Likewise, the fishers who participated in my simulation games (that I reported on at the conference which began our journey) were often very resistant to the idea of leaving fishing and joining the bottom feeders of market capitalism. This is really what alternative livelihoods usually mean – explicit encouragement into seasonal, precarious employment or becoming dependent sole traders of dubious economic viability (Wright et al. 2015). One fisher put it rather poetically, recommending another to 'never mind, just get a job cleaning up the shit', a reference to the unpalatable labour requirements so often expected of Filipino workers, both home and abroad (Semyonov & Gorodzeisky 2004).

The fishers' stubbornness in sticking to fishing, even in the face of (unrealistically) highly paid and accessible other employment options within our simulation games, was commented on in frustration by government workers and scientists alike. 'They're so stubborn', 'I think they'll just die fishing' were common refrains. 'Hardheaded' is the literal translation of the expression for stubborn in Filipino (*matigas ng ulo*). It has none of the English 'hardheaded' meaning of being practical and realistic. Rather, it is commonly used as an admonishment. The same affective qualities appear in the bulletins and blogposts about the PhD glut. Even as some describe the programs as pyramid or Ponzi schemes ('The disposable academic: why doing a PhD is often a waste of time' 2010), there are still undertones of condemning the irresponsibility shown in signing up to an activity so likely to end in failure.

It does beg the question: why? This is where the analogy with the fishers starts to collapse. Certainly, fishers are known to testify that they enjoy their occupation because of the freedom, the lack of 'a boss', and their connection to the ocean (Pollnac, Bavinck & Monnereau 2012): substitute ocean for 'field of study', our comparison still holds. However, the small-scale fishers' oppression by exploitative market arrangements, their vulnerability to climate change, their constant displacement from traditional fishing grounds, and the impacts of the usually unfettered access of commercial fishers to both high sea and near shore fisheries mean a precarity of existence that only in extreme cases could describe any urban student (Fabinyi, Foale & Macintyre 2013; Knudsen 2016; Lim, Matsuda & Shigemi 1995). As the fishers told us in no uncertain terms. In many cases, if they had access to more attractive livelihoods, then most would not hesitate to do other things. The fishers were being hardheaded in the English sense, practical and realistic.

On the other hand, however you frame it, labelling a PhD program as a livelihood of last resort is not convincing. We are attracted to it; enrolments continue to expand despite the disgruntled whisperings from within the academy and without (Cuthbert & Molla 2015). Why? Let us centre the figure of the autonomous scholar: this is what institutions foreground as the outcome and therefore 'the point' of PhD programs (Harrison 2010). Here again, the idea of being free, having no boss. Further, it is a way of 'being productive' without creating the material waste so symptomatic of other areas

of modern Western culture. By not selling anything, we are not forcing anyone else to buy.

But does this logic hold? The academy's distance from capitalist relationships of production has never been shorter (Thornton 2015). I shall never forget how I mistook my first cheque for a popular journal article for an invoice. We academics are so alienated from the products of our labour that it is more common to pay than be paid. That students should retain intellectual property rights over the knowledge (or other) products of their research is a battle that has but temporarily subsided in my university, as it moves to position itself as an institutional, intellectual bourgeoisie. Intellectual property, after all, is 'what we produce', and my institution owns (Thornton 2015, p33). So, in a quest to understand the pull, I still end up confused – if I had understood the route, would I have started the journey?

Part 4: If the Sea is Empty, Should we Encourage Fishing?

Before I went into the field to meet my fishers, the university rightly insisted that I pass an ethics committee assessment. An ethics application revolves around the risk of causing harm, and the distribution of benefits. The risks must be considered reasonable and the benefits adequate if the research is to be given permission to go ahead. As a thought experiment, I wonder what the university's ethics application for enrolling a PhD student would look like? How would the potential harms be identified? To whom do benefits accrue? If we put the reported levels of mental ill-health, physical malaise, and hours that would violate labour codes in other industries (Lucia 2016) together with the alleged economic gains the university stands to make from each graduating student (Brien, Burr & Webb 2013), it looks like a very lopsided equation. I wonder again if the required disclosure of risk now being demanded of doctors and medical specialists around the Western world were applied to our admission offices (Alani & Kelleher 2016), how long this 'PhD Ponzi scheme' would continue to operate.

What, then, of my current limbo state, occupied by so many in today's corporate university: as both PhD student and casual employee, I sit in the centre of the Venn diagram of the university's growing labour problem. Tied up, but not tied in, we wonder what we should do: to accept and valorise our casual state may be to relinquish the gains made by workers, such as sick pay, long service leave, maternity provisions. Alternatively, maybe we just keep muddling on, occupying small spaces ethically, diligently, and with a strong splash of defiance. In support of this, the vision offered by O'Gorman and Werry (2012) is an attractive one: we may 'slip the yoke of commoditization by failing to achieve permanence, failing to offer the bankable rewards of virtuosity.' We can deliberately puddle around, be unproductive, opt out. This pathway is still risky though, as these authors warn: 'Failure hurts. Failure haunts. It comes laced with shame, anger, despair, abjection, guilt, frustration.' Not to mention no necessary connection with, or contribution to, a collective realisation of an alternative society.

It seems fitting that around the time I started writing this essay, my mother told me she wished I worked more. I think of my community-making art projects, my volunteer English teaching, my endeavours for our food co-operative, my vegetable garden, my

lover and his children; but still her comment rankles, even though I know it comes from a place of love and concern for my security and wellbeing. As Halberstam (2011) has written 'it is grim' to push against individual success, that logical linking of achievement, (protestant) ethics, and personal worth inside the indispensable collective.

In a culture that does not value that which does not add monetary value, those without career aspirations do not fit. Value-as-price so often contradicts value-as-moral. Likewise, within an economic system that demands efficiency, surplus and a link between supply and demand, many small-scale fishers and PhD students/graduates are excess to requirements – the ultimate failure. I think again of the fishers: in the fishing game we played, they would subvert our Boolean rules of fishing OR 'alternative livelihood', somehow managing to wrangle it so they could always have fishing AND 'sideline' activities. Fishing is not just marginal subsistence. It is instant fresh food, the satisfying deployment of a hard-won skill, privacy from an invasive world, all these intangible and tangible pleasures rendered invisible by that question: 'how much do you earn?'

Part 5: A Way out of Depleted, Subsistence Fisheries?

Late capitalism does not offer any easy alternatives to this question, and expecting an individual answer to a collective problem is dicey at best. Even so, another thought experiment: how might we reconfigure our values-as-morals? One small idea, a start, one coming straight from the laboral pastiche entailed by casual and intermittent academic work. A pleasure of my unearned privilege of being able to survive working less than pleases my mother has been having time for other activities. Exploration in free time has led me, among other things, to performance, physical theatre and dance. I've come to think that if the outworkers of the university come to define themselves as what they do after hours, as did the moonlighting fishers, then we may have the workings of a plausible labour alternative on our hands.

With this we may start to reclaim territory, what we *are* will no longer be merely what we *do* in exchange for money. Breaking open the cracks of our overworked society is aided by a stubborn (hardheaded even?) focus on the nascent possibilities of non-capitalist transactions (McKinnon, Gibson & Malam 2008). Just as fishing is primarily food and a life on the waves, not a cash income, wherever possible perhaps we can prioritise everything non-monetary. That may be morally valuable, a reconfiguration that is meekly revolutionary.

So, to bring the story back to me, the protagonist and story-teller, and whether I will fish for a career inside academia's ivory walls. No. I will make art, and I'll be a Research Officer as long as my contract holds. I will take my real work, my precious work, my heart work, into a world of ensemble performance, where to speak of individual achievement betrays the ethos, the practice and the product. Sometimes the star, and sometimes the chorus, sometimes on stage and sometimes on page, I can work with others to create inside, outside and beyond disciplinary divides. I may well continue to be poor: poorly received, poorly remunerated. It's a gamble requiring both luck and skill, a precarity embraceable only because of my cushions of class and education. I wonder if I can spread my safety net to capture the falls of others. Perhaps, in my state

of minimal work, I can let 'contented idleness…(be) the succulent mistress of creativity' (Wendt 1980), thereby helping devise collectively ingenious ways to instigate the transformation necessary so that 228% of the minimum wage is the standard rather than the exception, in both directions. The fishers I will leave to their own devices: they do not, and never did, need me.

I think back on the conference, and realise I wasn´t stranded, but invited to strike out for a different shore. In being left behind by those things I thought I wanted - a marriage, a nuclear family, an academic career – new and inviting navigation lines appeared. In company, always in company.

Welcome to our side-show.

Author Bio

Deb Cleland is a contract academic, currently working on how individuals and institutions can build social capital to improve regulation, quality of life and citizen engagement. Combining her background in human ecology and interest in creative research approaches, at long last Deb finished her PhD thesis on how to design and play interactive games for science communication in fisheries (or, alternatively, a PhD on how to use different epistemologies to analyse 'conservation for development' projects) in 2017. She blogs on occasion at www.onefishtofish.com and tweets from @debisda. When not making ends meet through working in Higher Education, you can watch her perform (usually for free) as an acrobat with the aerial dance troupe SolcoAcro or the arts group Distaffic Collectif in and around her home town of Canberra, Australia.

Acknowledgements

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