Unsettling the Researcher's Gaze: Rendering a Diffractive Account of Music Studio Teachers' Lived Experiences

Ryan Matthew Lewis
University of Melbourne (Australia)

Abstract

Thinking with philosophy, this paper unsettles the researchers' gaze and critiques how accounts of music studio teachers may come to bear. Calls to professionalize the liminal spaces in which music studio teachers operate requires discussion of their political underlay and the colonizing effects of identity work that seeks to label and describe. Contextualized through personal experiences in Malaysia and making use of composite vignettes, critical posthumanism is introduced to disentangle these relations of power as well as the discomforts of authorship and positionality within the research process. Barad's theory of agential realism and a diffractive methodology are posited to explicate these material-discursive practices, highlighting both a relational ontology and *knowing-in-being*. These framings offer the possibility for more response-able research and to ethically reconsider *what* becomes *knowable* in seeking to professionalize and support the working lives of music studio teachers.

Keywords

Critical posthumanism, Barad, diffractive methodology, researcher's gaze, coloniality, music studio teachers, decolonizing research methods

This paper presents a tale in two parts, reflecting on personal lived experiences in Malaysia and specifically an encounter with a music studio owner. The first part begins by considering the role of research in seeking to professionalize the informal practices of music studio teaching. How this process of professionalization is achieved and who gets to decide depends precisely on how the lived experiences and role identities of these music studio teachers are understood to begin with. This leads to a political discussion of how teacher identities are theorized, particularly within liminal spaces that are not immune from neoliberal and neocolonial influences. And where the researcher's positioning installs them as a sovereign knowing subject (MacLure 2023; Mulcahy and Higham 2024), this forms a critical juncture to reconsider how processes of knowledge production are organized and determined. The epistemic foreclosure and potential harms in naming, labelling, and identifying bring together a critique of the researcher's gaze that is conditioned by the power of coloniality and a dominant need to know when researching into the lives of others (Arndt 2017; Darder 2019; Paris 2019; St. Pierre 2016).

Thinking with philosophy (Jackson and Mazzei 2022), the second part takes as its departure more embodied ways of knowing-in-being. By introducing critical posthumanism and specifically Karen Barad's theory of agential realism (Barad 2007; Braidotti 2013) it is possible to interrogate existing and potentially oppressive knowledge claims, considering differently how the teacher subject comes to be known within material-discursive practices. This includes rejecting binary thinking and dissolving the boundaries that separate notional differences between personal and professional selves.

In support of an anti-colonial project, my lived experiences and positional authority as a researcher are diffracted through a critical posthuman lens, to explicate the performative nature of these intersecting role identities (between the researcher and the subject-to-be-known). Through a relational ontology and becoming-*with* (Haraway 2016), these framings offer the possibility for more responseable research and to ethically reconsider *what* becomes *knowable* in the context of identity work, and how these feed into future discourses around professionalizing the practices of music studio teachers.

In response to the theme of this special issue and what philosophy may offer for the future of music education and its contemporary challenges within the

current geopolitical climate, I follow Marek Tesar's (2021) conception that "philosophy as a method is an ontological, epistemological, and ethical relationship with a thought" (545). As such, there is no leap to certainty and claim that the application of philosophy *will* "resolve methodological and educational issues" (Tesar 2021, 544). In this case, the processes of reading through and thinking with philosophical texts explicates the ethical concerns of doing identity work and addressing more broadly the limitations of "established mental models" that shape practices in music education (Barrett and Westerlund 2023, 3).

Finally, unsettling the researchers' gaze and positivistic ways of doing identity work require an approach to inquiry that is speculative rather than procedural or deterministic (Springgay and Truman 2018; Truman 2021). The following author's note clarifies something of my own positionality and the ways in which contextual matters and the empirical world *are* worked into this paper.

An Author's Note: On Philosophy, Methodology, and Coloniality

The primary ethical concern is where I write from as I reflect on personal experiences from my time working with music studio teachers in Malaysia. As a British, white male, having lived and worked across postcolonial states and now completing a PhD in the settler colonial state of Australia, my complicated positioning and relationship to these spaces does not go unnoticed. I worked as a consultant in Southeast Asia to one of the UK's largest music examination boards and spent over a decade visiting music studios, getting to know numerous teachers and studio owners in the region. It was based on this experience and the precarity of music studio teachers' working practices, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, that led me to reconsider what forms of structural support may confer plenitude on these teachers in the future.

Given the lack of primary research into the lives of music studio teachers in Asia, it would be easy to occupy an empirical gap based alone on my own experiences. That is not what I aim to achieve and the very notion of *occupying* has imperial connotations (Tynan and Bishop 2022). Importantly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) provides a sobering reminder that "the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples" (1). Furthermore, the emancipatory belief in any such scientific research "is as much a reflection of ideology as

it is of academic training" (Tuhiwai Smith 2021, 2). While this paper is neither empirical nor claiming to be in any way *scientific*, my inseparability as the writer who reflects on personal experiences as its subject matter leaves me ethically responsible for how they are portrayed. For the writer, Tesar (2023) describes this as a process wherein "there is a need to perform the entanglement of self, philosophy, and methodology and examine and understand the anatomy of this engagement. The ontology of ourselves and the ontology of our writing calls us. Haunted by this call, we examine our hollow, empty, passive, indifferent, and somewhat also apathetic methodological choices" (18).

The methodological choice to think with philosophy (Jackson and Mazzei 2022), then, is to challenge dominant worldviews that may shape identity work. This involves dismantling any assumptions I may bring with me to the writing (Tesar and Arndt 2020), while remaining sensitive to the colonial implications of my own being-in-the-world and authorship of this paper. Overall, my commitment is to practice anti-colonial solidarity (Zembylas 2024) in challenging structures of social injustice that are implicated both by my own positional authority as a researcher and by my presence historically, through the work I was engaged with in Southeast Asia. As the author, attending to the discomfort of positionality (Chadwick 2021) includes recognizing that my own cultural dominance and/or Otherness cannot be rendered inseparable from the very processes of writing, reflecting, and theorizing about the contextual matters presented in this paper.

Having spent over a decade building relational trust with numerous teachers and studio owners in Malaysia, I remain custodian to countless stories. To practice story stewardship herein is not to divulge and exploit such intimate knowledge of peoples' lived experiences, but to challenge dominant and Eurocentric bodies of knowledge that claim to know, label, and describe in the first place, including abstracted and disembodied ways of knowing in music education research (Lewis 2024). An ethical response therefore requires a methodology of refusal (Tuck and Yang 2014)—that is, a refusal of making claims in the analysis and communication of qualitative data that are deterministic. Instead, through a speculative approach it possible to consider *what else can be known.*

In this paper I make use of composite vignettes (Spalding and Phillips 2007) which serve an autoethnographic, yet critical function (Huber 2024; Humphreys 2005). These precede each section, providing a semi-fictional and indicative

account of what characterized many such encounters over a decade of professional experience working with music studio teachers in Malaysia. My commitment then is to not make claims of the empirical kind, but to use their illustrative function to draw out more embodied ways of knowing-in-being. This includes attuning to the affective dimension and relations of power that are implicit within such encounters (Huber 2024)—the storytelling does not rest on dialogue alone but also paying attention to what else is there.

A critical posthumanist reading of the vignettes will follow in the second part of the paper. As Haraway (2019) suggests, "it matters what stories tell stories; it matters whose stories tell stories" (565), which extends to consider the agencies of non-human others in the very processes of narration and building of relational trust amongst music studio teachers. What counts as knowledge and what is knowable become the imperative site of interest, but not in qualitative ways that seek to categorize, objectify, and claim. The distributive agency of "things" calls attention not just to what else *matters* (Bennett 2010), through further labelling and representation, but rather through more materially subversive ways in which power operates.

Finally, this inquiry takes as its aim not the need to describe or speak for those that are voiceless, but to consider the affective ways by which they could be heard and come to be known in future research. Crucially, these semi-fictionalized narratives of Others do not serve to "give voice" to these empirically missing teachers. As Arundhati Roy (2004) postulates: "there is really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced and the preferably unheard" (para. 4). The descriptive vignettes and their viscerally affective components should not succumb to representational logics, positing just causal relationships (MacLure 2013). Instead, from their illustration I will speculate over the change processes and relational shifts that occurred through my encounters *with* Others. Hence, this "is less a refusal of the possibility … to represent the lives of Others, but a call to do so with a view on the often hidden, banal, or unspoken social relations of power" (Gerrard, Rudolph, and Sriprakash 2017, 391).

Practicing refusal (Tuck and Yang 2014), then, means this new empirical domain—the undertheorized landscape of music studio teaching—should not fall into the same extractive, colonizing ways of doing research and the knowledge claims that evolve from it. This refusal is practiced in the second half of the paper, which

follows the posthuman turn (Braidotti 2013, 2019b) and makes the methodological shift from critical reflexivity to a diffractive methodology (Barad 2007; Haraway 1992). The encounters illustrated in the vignettes become positions from which to articulate tacit relations of power and renewed ways of knowing, through a relational ontology and becoming-*with*.

Vignette 1: The Meeting Place.

The windowless office is flooded by the overhead fluorescent light; shadows hide from its glare. The air-conditioning cools the space, vividly. Its low drone barely masks the overlapping sounds of pianos being played from the adjacent rooms. A medley of pieces required for music exams, racing against one another. These walls of sound frame the office room, containing it. The light flickers.

Opposite, across a wide desk, a half-smile greets me. The music studio owner, once a musician and teacher himself, has welcomed me to his school. Into this sound world. Behind him are personal and institutional accolades on a shelf, with posters on the walls promoting studio services, international music exams, and the incentivizing benefits of learning music. Duplicated certificates from high-scoring candidates are plastered everywhere, throughout the corridors—the very best are saved for his room.

And yet we don't really talk about making music.

Instead, like countless conversations I've had in the past, the main impetus is around music exams, managing parent expectations, and getting better results - key performance indicators. I wonder why there is no mention of the music teachers.

"It's getting more difficult to teach the kids nowadays, to prepare them for the exams. They are so busy with other tuitions." He sighs. "How do we get more marks?" With just a short amount of time for the meeting, I provide some general advice and opportunities to invest in. His smile becomes more strained. It's not the quick fix solution he wanted.

I shift around in the leather chair, feeling oddly warm in the cooled space. I can sense his frustration. I think he can sense my own.

We continue to talk and round off the meeting. I close my notebook and thank him for his time. He smiles, more broadly now. "It's our pleasure to have you visit us. Have you taken your lunch?"—food is a way of life here in Malaysia. I shake

my head. "Then please let me take you next door. They do the best laksa!" I hear
a brightened tone in his voice; a quicker energy in his pacing as we exit together.

He turns off the light; the room vanishes into darkness. Just the small yellow-
green light of the air-conditioning unit, left on, alone, droning away attention-
less.

From this vignette and reflecting on this interaction with a music studio owner, I distil two main discussion points in this first part of the paper.

1. What constitutes a teacher identity and being professional in this context, given the lack of regulation and structural support for these unsystematized practices?
2. What effects might dominant worldviews have in determining the (professional) identity of a music studio teacher?

Teacher Identities Within an Informal Professional Discipline

The professional identities of music studio teachers remain undertheorized across several global contexts, despite researchers paying increasing attention to instrumental learning and teaching in recent years (Creech 2024). Understanding what professionalism means or what is considered professional in such unsystematized practices requires further discussion. Professionalism as a "contested concept" (Barrett and Westerlund 2023, 25) was evidenced in a recent study that sought to understand the meanings of professional development for piano teachers in Malaysia (Ang, Lewis, and Odendaal 2024). Notions of professionalism amongst piano teachers were revealed to be self-conceived and self-determined, which were highly individual and contingent on geopolitical conditions Along these lines, Julie Ballantyne (2024) summarizes: "broadly, it is acknowledged that professional identities are the ways teachers make sense of themselves within their professional lives. Beyond that, however, a clear definition of what constitutes professional identity is elusive" (198). As I combed through the literature with much frustration, I was often left wondering what being professional meant or could mean in these contexts, but more specifically whose version and understanding of *being professional* might be applied.

If professionalism is to be understood in the managerial or organizational sense (Whitty 2008)—that is rule-bound, with formal training, external oversight,

and clear accountability measures—then the professional markers of music studio teachers' work remain unclear. Minimum qualifications or prior pedagogical training are often not required to do this work (Boyle 2020; Hallam 2017), and so, given the absence of regulation and policy surrounding the isolated work of such musicians (Bautista, Stanley, and Candusso 2021; Myers 2017), these working practices have been deemed an "informal professional discipline" (Gaunt, López-Íñiguez, and Creech 2021, 335). This may imply what Julia Evetts (2009) refers to as an occupational professionalism, that is collegial, internally defined, and based on shared values. However, the core issue comes back to how this (informally professional) occupation is defined in the first place and how teacher identities are constructed in relation to it, for which a broader historical context is required.

For the musician, studio teaching often forms part of a portfolio career and is mostly characterized by one-to-one tuition in an instrument or voice (Boyle 2020; Gaunt, López-Íñiguez, and Creech 2021). Some have described the closed-door nature of these practices, often taking place in private settings, as a "secret garden" (Burwell, Carey, and Bennett 2019, 4). Overall, these practices stem from an inherited master-apprentice tradition in Western art music, preparing the next generation of musicians for performing and composing work (Burwell 2012), but there are legacy issues within these "closed-loop" systems that lack re-contextualization (Teachout 2012, 686).[1] Without the same standardization and regulatory oversight as other professions, this informal professional discipline remains a socially constructed practice. Various guides have surmised what it means to *be* an instrumental music teacher in the context of studio teaching (Colwell, Hewitt, and Fonder 2018; Mills 2007), but the process by which identities are constructed in the first place remain unanswered.

The extent to which music studio teachers' "calling" to the work is altruistic, rather than self-interested (Angelo 2016, 186), is colored by several contextual factors and little is known about their motivations for accessing this teaching work (Hallam 2017). This is at odds within the wider body of literature on teacher identities in education, where exist many assumptions regarding the positioning, autonomy, and altruism of people who go into teaching (Schutz, Hong, and Francis 2020). Thus, proposals to standardize or regulate an informal professional discipline are dependent on both how the occupation is defined—and by whom—and what assumptions are employed around teacher identities in the first place.

Understanding how this occupation presently operates—or some notion of an occupational professionalism—remains contingent on its history as a socially-constructed practice. These contingencies bring about a political discussion, especially where these practices of teaching Western art music occur within non-Western contexts.

Dismantling Assumptions About the Teacher Subject

The first vignette illustrated the situation in Malaysia where there is a dominance of international music examinations. The historical presence of such examination boards form part of the critical discourse surrounding the normalized standardization of Western music education in non-Western contexts (Johnson-Williams 2024). The homogenizing effects of such a standardization have led to complex identity issues amongst those educated within postcolonial states (Kok 2011) as well as broader debates on decolonizing music education curricula across the world (Hess 2021).

Thinking more specifically about the identity of music studio teachers operating within Malaysia draws attention to how their teaching roles have been conditioned, especially when operating within competitive and neocolonial settings (Johnson-Williams 2024). To make assumptions, then, about the positioning, autonomy, and altruism of music studio teachers would be to ignore the political underlay of their working practices. As Lauren Kapalka Richerme (2020) importantly argues, viewing music education as an *apolitical* process would leave these ethical issues and their alternatives unexamined and unconsidered. What must be examined and considered, then, are the power relations that frame these roles and how music studio teachers are produced as subjects (Lewis 2024).

In Southeast Asia more broadly, the activity of music studio teachers operates within the prolific scope of private tutoring industries, with an entire field in the literature dedicated the work of non-state actors in education (Bray 2024; Zhang and Bray 2020). The primary impetus for these tutoring services is to mirror school subjects, helping prepare children for national exams, and to get ahead (Kenayathulla and Ubbudari 2017). This ethos of getting ahead and drivers for exam success may fuel transactional approaches to education and in particular private tutoring, which in Malaysia, for example, are deemed a household necessity (Kenayathulla 2016). Thus, the requirement for music lessons outside of school is

often co-opted by the same consumerism and parental demands for certificates (Ang, Lewis, and Odendaal 2024), leading to numerous music studios opening across the region.

How this occupation is defined needs wider consideration, given that music studio teachers are left navigating these neoliberal logics that determine practices, pedagogical decision making and approaches to professional development (Ang, Lewis, and Odendaal 2024). Hence, the common question signaled in the first vignette: "how do we get more marks?" And while the private tutoring space carries with it some regulation in parts of Southeast Asia (Bray and Kwo 2014), music and the arts remain outside of monitoring scope (Okajima 2023). Without wider regulation or formalized routes to be socialized within this occupation, the music studio teacher's notion of what constitutes "being teacher" or "being professional" are individually determined and conditioned by the context and environment in which they live and work (Ang, Lewis, and Odendaal 2024). Overall, this lack of formal recognition and structural support forms yet another dimension through which musicians teaching Western music education in non-Western contexts are culturally Othered (Au 2022).

Returning to the issue of power, in her article on musicians as competency nomads, Sidsel Karlsen (2019) notes the struggles musician-teachers face in the wake of neoliberal pressures. She astutely draws on two themes which are relevant here, critiquing the Global North's privileged stance of "security-making resilience," described as seizing opportunity and "denying vulnerability," in contrast to the "majority world subject who practices 'resilience as/for survival' out of mere necessity" (189). The lack of recognition and structural support for music studio teachers may lead to precarious working conditions (Canham 2021), and so it cannot be presumed what motivations these teachers have in doing this work and what professional knowledges they knowingly, willingly, and ably act upon when navigating external challenges. The first vignette provides an illustration of these challenges, but also the frustrations revealed suggest more fundamental misunderstandings by which teachers are produced as subjects within these conditions.

The teacher subject is therefore framed by contingencies and not immune from the neoliberal and neocolonial conditions that surround these working practices. The performative nature of such roles and issues of power have been theorized amongst instrumental music teachers (Jordhus-Lier 2021; Natale-Abramo 2014)

and classroom music teachers (Varkøy 2021) within the global literature on music education. Suggestions then to professionalize the siloed working practices of musicians (Westerlund and Gaunt 2021), including music studio teaching, are done so with the aim to strengthen the profession and may address some of these precarious working conditions or relations of power. The problem with such calls, which are global in scope and specifically directed from Western scholars, is precisely the risk that a Eurocentric vision of the subject may be foregrounded within such interventions. To avoid the colonizing effects of identity work, this requires thinking differently about how teacher identities are theorized in the first place and how research is conducted.

Attending to Relations of Power in Doing Research

Professionalizing the work of music studio teachers based on limiting ideas around teacher identity or privileged worldviews risks an unethical and colonizing process, which must be carefully reconsidered. Identity research that considers the human as individual, rational-minded, and self-autonomous—as is prevalent with the use of socio-cognitive theories in music education (Lewis 2024)—appears quite reductive when thinking about the teacher subject as somehow producible or predictable (Wallace, Rust, and Jolly 2021). Instead, Patti Lather (2016) refers to the "incalculable subject," which is more in touch with contingencies, relationalities, instabilities, and histories (126). Fixed notions of identity may fail to take power differentials into account and requires disruption in support of an anticolonial agenda. Where this vision of the subject follows a Cartesian logic of the mind and body as separate, the affective and embodied nature of being teacher are not accounted for (Braidotti 2013; Barad 2007).

The main concerns researching in this undertheorized area are rooted in an over-deterministic view of what constitutes the teacher subject in the first place and how such knowledge is produced. The dominant need to know in educational research comes with "assumptions about knowledge itself. In relation to teacher Otherness the problem lies in the idea that knowledge acquired about the Other is representative of a particular truth, of culture, or lifestyle" (Arndt 2017, 13). This raises questions of what counts as knowledge and what empirically comes to be represented, for which feminist and anticolonial scholars have also critiqued disembodied forms of knowledge production (Haraway 1988; Harding 2008). More

critical attention is required in the research process itself, especially in non-Western contexts and the issues of naming beyond the white settler colonial gaze.

Django Paris (2019) invites us to consider "how would we name, research, and know ourselves and others if this gaze weren't the dominant one through which education (research and practice) was imagined and enacted?" (218). This question is of great importance as I reflect on the discomforts felt while navigating swathes of positivistic research that did not account for the power relations that I witnessed amongst the lived experiences of music studio teachers in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, it draws attention to the relational dynamics within the first vignette itself. Firstly, in terms of my own positional authority and being the perceived expert on Western art music, given my own education and racial background. But secondly the frustrations that I drew out from this encounter, given the assumptions I brought with me in terms of how music studio teaching should operate, and the judgement that clouded my own gaze. These reflections, together with navigating literature on decolonizing research methods (Tuhiwai Smith 2021), led to a shift for me from the dominant need to know, to reconsidering how knowledge was produced to begin with.

The process of de-centering the researcher's gaze becomes important when critically reconsidering their positioning not just in relation to research design, but the dynamic change processes in which they, together with participants, undergo through executing the research (Holman Jones and Adams 2023). This is what the composite vignettes in this paper seek to illustrate and will be addressed more clearly in the second part, where my position within the vignette is akin to what a researcher might experience "in the field." Overall, this process of de-centering the researcher in forms of intimate scholarship that are autoethnographic or where the researcher is an active participant (Strom, Mills, and Ovens 2018) becomes necessary in attempting to reduce power differentials that exist within these acts of doing, reflecting on, and writing up research.

Thinking about more embodied ways of knowing, the ontological turn (Pickering 2017; Zembylas 2017) provides a renewed way of considering how forms of subjectivity come to be produced; starting with music studio teachers, herein, whose lives are at the nexus of these liminal, educational spaces. De-centering the researcher in forms of intimate scholarship involves highlighting their entanglement and inseparability through the research process (Holman Jones and Adams

2023) in determining and interpreting these same educational spaces that come to be produced. It is here the explication of the posthuman subject (Braidotti 2013, 2019a), a subject always in-relation to the world around them, provides critical ways of conceptualizing the complexities and possibilities of entering the messy and political terrain of identity work.

Introducing Critical Posthumanism

The posthuman, for Rosi Braidotti (2019c), does not represent some dystopian future, but is the embodiment of the present geopolitical conditions and encapsulates humanity's collective position at the intersection of technological, ecological, and socio-political crises globally. As such, the posthuman subject is at the nexus of these intersecting movements, not inseparable from them and so the human is not an individual, isolatable entity. Critical posthumanism also provides a critique of Cartesian logics, anthropocentric thinking, and human exceptionalism (Braidotti 2013; 2022). Within this framing, the human is not rejected, but binary thinking that separates human/non-human, nature/culture, self/other, teacher/student, and so on is dissolved through a processual and relational ontology, which denies the fixity of identity and things (Braidotti 2019a).

These dualisms might be considered modes of control, as Braidotti (2018) argues: "your identity pins you, nails you almost, to a location of power, which usually are binary machines" (210). It is for this reason that assumptions surrounding teacher identities and the desire to ascribe these labels within the liminal spaces of music studio teachers' work can be potentially problematic and oppressive (St. Pierre 2022). Instead of layering fixed meanings, which is a posthumanist critique of social constructivism, it is possible to think of these teachers in a constant process of becoming that is non-linear and neither predictable nor fully knowable (Strom and Martin 2017; Wallace, Rust, and Jolly 2021), or more simply as subjects in process (Peters and Alba 2015). As such, "questions of how we come to know teachers—identify and label them—become replaced with questions of what the teacher *is* and how the *teacherly-self* is constituted" (Lewis 2024, 320) and enacted, within the environments in which they perform the role of teacher.

Within the field of music education, there have already been important contributions that apply the work of post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and many more (Angelo 2016; Jordhus-Lier 2021;

Natale-Abramo 2014; Richerme 2020; Varkøy 2021). However, I argue that new conceptual tools may help to understand in more nuanced ways the present conditions of music studio teachers' work. Critical posthumanism, which is explained further in the second part of the article, helpfully brings together an all-encompassing genealogy of concepts from feminist, post-structuralist, and anti-colonial thinkers (Braidotti 2022). This pluralism of knowledge construction supports a view of humans not as individuals but as multiplicities, and it better attends to the complexities of their lived experiences. Altogether, this framing necessitates a commitment to decolonizing research methods (Tuhiwai Smith 2021), for which the continuation of my own story provides a meditation on other ways of knowing-in-being.

Vignette 2: The Eating Place

My glasses are steamed up. The humid warm air relaxes me, as I defrost from the office experience. We sit amongst a small stretch of tables in front of the shop lot, between the pavement and the road. The rumbling traffic noises meet the bustle of the restaurant; many enthusiastic patrons huddled over their bowls. It's cloudy overhead, but the afternoon heat makes itself known.

We sit opposite one another, this time on a smaller table with plastic stools. The laksa order is placed, accompanied by a cooling glass of limo ice—kurang manis (lemon ice drink—less sweet). His arms rest on the table, leaning forward, excited to tell me the history of the restaurant and this particular laksa preparation, since there are many recipe varieties throughout Malaysia. I am charmed by his rousing passion for food.

A gentle breeze flows from the inside of the restaurant, cooling the light sweat on our foreheads.

It feels good to be outside.

As we start to eat, a silence falls upon us. The spicy and slightly sour taste of the broth tingles my mouth; so many flavors that I cannot describe and do not even know. He looks at me curiously, with a warming smile: "so you can take spicy food?" "Yes!" I reply, proudly. He laughs. We carry on eating and talk about life in the community. He shares some stories of his time growing up around here and speaks fondly about his family. I'm humbled to get to know him, to learn about this place in all its aliveness.

The laksa gets tastier. The bowl seems like it will never end. A pause in the conversation. Unfazed, the food takes precedent.

But then he rests his spoon; head tilting slightly. "You know, I'm quite worried about the teachers actually." I am taken aback by the pivot. There was no talk of this in the office, nor was I expecting him to confide in me. We just met for the first time today.

I take a sip of the limo ice—the ice truly melted by now. I invite him to say more, assuring him that the details remain private between us. I'm sorry that he is feeling this concern, this pressure. It is me who leans forward this time. He takes a deep breath and continues to share; his shoulders soften.

Our bowls of laksa remain still, vibrant, waiting for us.

It feels good to be outside.

These vignettes allow much to be considered, but a practice of refusal requires resisting immediate epistemic foreclosure (Tuck and Yang 2014)—that is, determining a specific interpretation and meaning from them, positing cause and effect relations. Thinking with philosophy (Jackson and Mazzei 2022) allows for a slower, diffractive reading of these stories and how they came to be (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017). The point here is not to interpret and describe what *is*, but rather to articulate change processes through a series of relational dynamics and matterings (Barad 2014). Attending to what else is there, incuding the non-human, is theorized within new materialism (Coole and Frost 2010), not only emphasizing the role of matter in shaping social and cultural life, but is "relational and contingent rather than essentialist or absolute" (Fox and Alldred 2018, 2). New materialism places an emphasis on the 'agency' of all living and non-living matter. Critical posthumanism provides a broader umbrella and similarly challenges traditional humanist perspectives, but also tends to the ethical implications of these distributed agencies and related processes of de-centering the human (Braidotti 2013; Barad 2007). Two further discussion points help to frame the second part of this paper:

1. What can a relational-materialist approach offer by way of understanding identity, beyond that which is captured or colonized by language alone?

2. How might this same approach and *knowing-in-being* unsettle relations of power that are inherent within the researcher's gaze?

Barad's Agential Realism and Critical Perspectives on New Materialism

To account for the complexities of identity work and to dissolve binary, individualistic thinking, an onto-epistemological shift is provided through Barad's theory of agential realism (Barad 2007). This theory offers an entangled understanding of reality and knowledge, such that "practices of being *and* knowing cannot be isolated from one another, but rather are mutually implicated" (Jackson and Mazzei 2022, 92). The nature of reality (ontology) and how to examine or know reality (epistemology) are no longer separable and requires *pushing paradigms* beyond fixed and conventional parameters of doing research (Kvile et al. 2025).

Within agential realism, the world is not experienced and perceived passively, viewed and represented by abstraction, but knowing comes from a "direct material engagement with the world" (Barad 2007, 49).[2] This challenges positivist and interpretivist paradigms that rely on a belief in a fixed reality or in fixed meanings, to abstractedly measure and observe the world—the colonizing effects of which have been critiqued (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). This has significant implications for identity work that is based on disembodied forms of knowledge production, especially where research practices in education are more broadly rooted in social constructivism (Murris 2022). The point here is not to reject these framings entirely, but to consider what else can be known through an agential realist account and by flushing out the relations of power inherent in research processes.

Thinking back to both vignettes, the accounts as they exist on the page are reducible to words alone. However, they are not reducible to what alone was spoken (and only a selected transcript was offered at that). The very process of sanitizing an interaction to the spoken words alone is to remove so much of the vibrancy (Bennett 2010) of what colored these events, hence the detailed descriptions I have tried to provide. Overall, this points towards the potential of non-representational theories and methodologies. As Phillip Vannini (2015) explains, "by animating lifeworlds non-representational research styles aim to enliven rather than report, to render rather than represent, to resonate rather than validate, to rupture and reimagine rather than to faithfully describe, to generate possibilities of encounter

rather than construct representative ideal types" (32). Beyond mere description, then, the vignettes have more to say.

In the processes of doing identity work, like drawing out interpretations from the vignettes in this paper, the dominant need to know may risk leading to deterministic assumptions (Arndt 2017). For example, by essentializing the content of these vignettes, it might be compelling to deduce that formal and informal settings elicited different qualities of dialogue, or that a formally organized meeting (or interview) rendered different types of accounts to those that were shared through a more spontaneous meeting (over a bowl of laksa). Such observations might claim that a given number of fixed and independent variables determined a specific type of outcome.[3] Furthermore, superficial readings in the new materialist sense might isolate these independent variables, positing the effects of eating a hearty, spicy broth in one another's company, claiming that the bowl of laksa has "agency".

In the scholarship on new materialism, Jane Bennett (2010) advocates for the "vitality of matter" (ix) to counter human-centered narratives that overwhelmingly account for the world's historicity. The temptation to over-correct this disparity is to confer a distributive agency and "thing-power" to the non-human that, in essence, separates it (Bennett 2010, xvi). However, "these formulations risk sliding into subject-centered ethical and political models even as theorists work actively to undo" them (Luciano 2015). Working with the non-representational is not so much a "new" endeavor in the materialism sense, given that Indigenous epistemologies foregrounding people's relation to the land have existed for millennia (Tompkins 2016). Instead, attention is turned to what material coordinates produce and what in those conditions become sensory and felt (Luciano 2015). Rather than positing the singular causes and effects of a "thing," it is possible to consider sets of relations that produce the affective dimension within these vignettes (Zembylas 2021).

Importantly, then, the locus of analysis here remains at the level of social and human relations. Barad's (2007) theorizing of relationality is based on quantum entanglement: "to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intrarelating" (ix). The notion of intra-action affirms the inseparable nature of entities

that come into being, such that a traditional understanding of causality and boundaries of subject/object are reworked (Murris 2022). The intra-action of two humans within the vignettes is produced through an array of material conditions, and so this unique and unpredictable type of encounter was contingent on those sets of relations. Agency is therefore not something that each individual "thing" can be said to have, such as the bowl of laksa, but rather agency is something processual and relational (Barad 2007).[4] It might be more meaningful to consider the shared experience of eating together—a specific performance or practice (Bozalek 2020)—and what sort of "reality" and affective dimension emerged because of it.

Barad (2007) goes on to describe the ontological inseparability of such intra-actions as phenomena, which constitute reality and are "specific material configurations of the world's becoming" (91). For Barad, phenomena become the primary ontological unit, not *things*. In essence, phenomena are an intensive force that characterize an inherent inseparability to a world that entities do not pre-exist. This is different, for example, to Merleau-Ponty's philosophical phenomenology. While he also emphasizes embodiment and the nature of experience, such that "the body is our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 169), the emphasis still falls on the human body at the *center* of these experiences, thus privileging human perception. By contrast, Barad's (2007) agential realism does not posit the same unidirectional relationship (or gaze) between the human and the surrounding world; phenomena are not things to be perceived by human consciousness, but rather phenomena are the primary units of reality itself. Thinking then in terms of phenomena that produce intra-actions, it is possible to consider the material, affective boundaries of relational encounters and the world's *becoming*—and specifically those which reveal and neutralize relations of power.

Relations of Power and Material-Discursive Practices

Tending to relations of power is essential to an agential realist account, since Barad follows a line of post-structuralist thinkers in formulating this theory.[5] For example, Barad draws on Foucault's theories on power, highlighting that "power links discursive practices to the materiality of the body" (Barad 2007, 63) This goes beyond a discursive analysis of language and labels, but to consider the historical ways in which subjects are affected upon and the material conditions in which their

subjectivities are produced (Fiore 2018), through an "entangled state of agencies" (Barad 2007, 23).

Within vignette 1, the material conditions offer a historied account of what running a studio looks like that teaches Western art music within these localized settings: the temperature-controlled climate, the insufficient soundproofing, the absence of natural light. The observation here is not to cast a materialistic judgement, but to suggest that this man-made and artificial environment is the site of certain relations of power. The music studio owner, in this case, is not necessarily the producer of these relations of power, but mutually implicated and affected by them. This is the site, after all, for transacting music exam results, which are so central to making this business a success, thus conveying the workings of a material-discursive practice (Murris 2022), where music studio teachers are produced as subjects.[6] It is not possible to claim, I would argue, that the affective dimension of this encounter in vignette 1—the strained dialogue and tense atmosphere—were produced irrespective of the environment in which it all took place. Similarly, there is no single cause and effect for these affective responses, that I believe were *felt* by us in different ways. The meeting was not just the coming together of two individual entities (myself and the music studio owner), but the environmental conditions framing it suggest an entangled state of agencies which pre-exist our intra-action (Barad 2007).

It is here that Barad's (2003) notion of posthumanist performativity, which contests the "excessive power of language to determine what is real" (802) further constitutes a material-discursive practice. Where Judith Butler's theorization of performativity "exposes the ways in which discursive formations evoke a doing that constitutes a subject, Barad's posthumanist performativity accounts for how matter makes itself felt as part of this doing" (Jackson and Mazzei 2022, 100). I am drawn again to the certificates hanging on the wall in vignette 1 and how their positioning was performative and felt within the environment of this meeting. However, I am also drawn to the livelihoods of music studio teachers whose job it was to transact those exam results.

Extending beyond the boundaries of the human body, Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism can further "contribute to a new materialist understanding of power and its effects on the production of bodies, identities, and subjectivities" (224). The certificates on the walls in vignette 1 become tangible assets within these

relations of power and are historically connected to the livelihoods of music studio teachers. Thinking about the identity instabilities of the musician-teacher dichotomy (Jordhus-Lier 2021), these might also be formed through material-discursive practices, which are felt and marked upon the body, as a form of emotional labor (Day 2018). The question "How do we get more marks?" therefore takes on greater vitality when considering the neoliberal conditions through which the body is worked and how those marks are integral to their survival as music studio teachers.[7] Hence, material-discursive practices "produce, rather than merely describe, the subjects and objects of knowledge practices. In Foucault's account, these conditions are immanent and historical rather than transcendental or phenomenological" (Barad 2007, 147).

These immanent and historical conditions form the spaces for encounters, wherein the researchers' gaze and embodied presence become entangled within the production of subjectivity (Barad 2003; Fiore 2018). This goes some way to explaining my own discomfort—the affective dimension—within vignette 1. However, the contrasting experience in vignette 2 and the changed environment played some role in neutralizing these relations of power, and whereby a bowl of laksa had an agentic function in "undoing" the performative. The untimely nature of this second encounter—an invitation to eat together—reveals something of the phenomena that produce intra-actions, for which I now discuss methodological implications in the processes of doing research.

Towards a Diffractive Methodology and Unsettling the Researcher's Gaze

Through a critical posthuman lens, the performative role of "being teacher" must account for the affective—the materiality of the enfleshed, embodied self—as well as the environment of human and non-human actors that mutually constitute it (Braidotti 2013, 2019a). Furthermore, agential realism "resists pathologising and psychologising relationships with 'others' … [and instead] draws out the ontological conditions that make such performative practices of pathologising and psychologising possible" (Murris 2022, 22). Thinking with Barad's agential realism allows for more nuanced ways of attending to the complexities of music studio teachers' lived experiences and subjectivities, in so far as they are co-produced by the very

researchers who seek to analyze and describe them. This requires careful attention to my own material and affective positioning within the stories that have been told, which in turn requires careful attention to what gets spoken and, more broadly, *what* speaks (Haraway 2019). In the context of identity work, this includes the environmental conditions that bear upon the account given by participants.

Expanding on the notion of performativity, Butler (2005) challenges the truthfulness with which one can give an account of oneself, based on the power relations between the speaker and the person who has called them to address. Following Foucault, Butler (2005) further explains what "constitutes the truth will be framed by norms and by specific modes of rationality that emerge historically and are, in that sense, contingent" (131). Disentangling these contingencies within the researcher-participant dynamic can be potentially problematic, especially when reflecting on one's own experience is "correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability" (Butler 2005, 131). Therefore, the issue of reflection and recall, whether from the position of the speaker or the listener, become contestable sites that seek to represent truth and reality. Donna Haraway (1997) critiques the notion of reflection and reflexivity as a self-referential exercise of "displacing the same elsewhere" (16), remaining "caught up in geometries of sameness" (Barad 2007, 72). Moving beyond historical contingencies, the representational trap of language, and that which can only repeat back on itself, altogether become the impetus for both Haraway's *and* Barad's use of diffraction as a methodological tool.

Haraway's (1992) initial definition affords "a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear" (300). Providing a counterpoint to reflection, Barad (2007) highlights the importance of Haraway's diffractive methodology as a "critical practice for making a difference in the world. It is a commitment to understanding which differences matter, how they matter, and for whom" (90). Mapping such patterns of difference is not confined to the realm of language and semantics but provides a "de/constructive move" away from it (Murris 2022, 77) to consider how matter comes to matter (Barad 2014). A diffractive reading of vignette 1 may reveal the effects of difference in the strained dialogue, beyond the basis of discussing the working practices of music studio teachers. In particular, this *sensing* of frustration—the felt, affective nature

of this intra-action (Luciano 2015)—is precisely the non-representational locus of analysis that cannot be reducible to language alone. What is sensed here, rather than what is said, maps the effects of difference and potentially exposes conflicting worldviews together with relations of power associated with race. My unfamiliarity to the environment invoked the effects of difference, which were experienced—it would seem—by both me and the music studio owner.

Attending to the complexities of identity work, then, diffraction helpfully "queers binaries" (Barad 2014, 171) of nature/culture and self/other, revealing how "differences exist both within and beyond boundaries" (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 6). Through diffraction, *what* speaks and what gets spoken lifts any contingent notions of speakability that are confined to language alone. From a methodological perspective, this counters the effects of linguistic imperialism (Darder 2019) and how data is constructed (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020), which support wider commitments to decolonizing research methods.

For Barad, diffraction is "a useful tool highlighting the entanglement of material-discursive phenomena in the world. Diffraction is thus predicated on a relational ontology, an ongoing process in which matter and meaning are co-constituted" (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 2). How as a researcher I provide an account of a music studio teacher's lived experience requires attention to how differences are mapped and understood. Such an account is not a site of reflection, which stabilizes the "I" position of the researcher and casts dichotomous assumptions that further entrench power differentials between self and other. Rather, a diffractive account necessarily involves focusing on what produces difference within material-discursive practices (Barad 2007), thus revealing the workings of a relational ontology and becoming-*with* (Haraway 2016) research participants. Importantly, diffractions are untimely (Barad 2014)—that is, they are spontaneous and cannot be predicted in advance, which the effects of the vignette 2 further illuminate.

From the positioning of a researcher and my writing of the two vignettes, the purpose of intimate scholarship traverses the "ontological space between self and other" (Hamilton and Pinnegar 2015, 73). However, rather than storytelling which still centers the researchers' affective and personal experience within autoethnographic writing, whilst still holding the world they describe at a distance, a diffractive account and analysis provide an onto-epistemological shift (Vu 2018). This shift goes some way to countering the colonizing effects of such authorship, with

the emphasis now placed on knowing-in-being (Taguchi 2012). This disruptive process that discourages identification and refuses understanding (Jackson and Mazzei 2008) shifts analysis from the "ideas, actions and feelings of individualized subjects to the impersonal flows of performativity through the intra-actions of different discursive-material practices" (Vu 2018, 82). A re-reading of the vignettes can de-center my own positioning, replacing more deterministic assumptions with more speculative language and approaches to knowledge claims (Springgay and Truman 2018). Hence, Chau Vu (2018) posits a "diffractive autoethnography [that] looks at the self in entanglement with the discourses and materiality around the self" (80).

The move from storytelling to knowing-in-being challenges the very authority and privilege that the researcher brings in the process of authorship and/or writing themselves into the narrative, since they remain inseparable from this process of knowledge production (Holman Jones and Adams 2023). Again, "phenomena are specific material performances of the world" (Barad 2007, 335), and the strained dialogue in vignette 1 between the music studio owner and I revealed the impersonal flows of performativity. These phenomena were composed of, but not singularly reducible to, the materialization of the artificial lighting, the surround-sound effect of overlapping pianos, the dry, cool air, and so forth. These are not causal relations, but differences that emerge "as an effect of connections and relations within and between different bodies, affecting and being affected by each other" (Taguchi 2012, 269). Furthermore, to unsettle the tacit forms and unspoken social relations of power (Gerrard, Rudolph, and Sriprakash 2017) still requires an understanding of "power in the fullness of its materiality … to account for non-human forms of agency and matter's implication in its ongoing historicity" (Fiore 2018, 360). The historical contingencies that frame the teacher subject can be mapped to account for the same intra-active, material components of the office space, which included my own presence as a foreigner to the music studio owners' school and land.

Finally, the chance encounter over a bowl of laksa in vignette 2 revealed further effects of difference. In this instance, there was no formalized call to address for the music studio owner nor to give an account of himself (Butler 2005). Instead, more elements were "invited in" to our encounter with one another, and he too invited me in to share something of his own culture, which transcended the

material coordinates of the air-conditioned office and the relations of power with which it was contingent. The performative effects of the office environment were not only neutralized, but the artificial divides between "professional" and "personal" selves were also dissolved through the practice of eating together. Beyond mere description of the laksa's vibrancy, the phenomena produced within this encounter—this reality—actualized a different quality of engagement and affective dimension that was not predictable in advance. Again, diffractions are untimely (Barad 2014), and it is precisely these moments—exemplified through a relational ontology—that are largely absent within bodies of literature surrounding teacher identities in education research more broadly (Martin 2019).

Beyond the descriptions provided in the vignettes, my refusal then is not to somehow interpret these narratives in terms of causal relationships, coded by a researcher's gaze (St. Pierre 2016), that can be cemented as truth claims and contributions to knowledge. Nor are these detailed explications of a diffractive methodology and speculative practices supposed to elicit alternative ways in which data may be authentically or productively mined. My claim here resists the reductivism and determinism of research practices that perpetuate a dominant need to know (Arndt 2017). Instead, what these accounts and their diffractive readings offer are lingering moments and affective spaces to rethink the workings of power and the boundaries of material-discursive practices. This has implications for future research on music teacher identities and the perceived boundaries of an occupational professionalism.

A Relational Conclusion

Rendering an account of music studio teachers' lived experiences is no straightforward matter, given the highly unsystematized nature of the field (Gaunt, López-Íñiguez, and Creech 2021). Through a critical posthuman lens, the inseparability of music studio teachers from the world around them is emphasized, but so too is the positioning of the researcher and unfolding inquiry that seeks to understand their lived experiences. Therefore, it might be that those involved in identity work—and processes to professionalize the liminal spaces in which music studio teachers operate—are potentially implicated within relations of power. This requires critical attention when processes of research, that are characterized by a dominant need to know, seek to explain or label undefined spaces, especially with

pre-existing identity categories or assumptions about what "being teacher" ought to comprise. Ethical considerations then become paramount to counter the colonizing effects of identity work, especially where elusive conceptions of professional identities might already be conditioned by neoliberal and neocolonial influences. As argued in this paper, an ethical response is made possible through a relational-materialist approach—that is, knowing-in-being.

Firstly, a relational ontology means that there is no separation from the known and the knower. Instead, Barad (2007) postulates that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing, but rather from a "direct material engagement with the world" (49). This inseparability implies a responsibility for one another, in what Barad refers to as *ethico*-onto-epistemology, summarizing that "ethics is about accounting for our part of the entangled webs we weave" (384). This is not just a case of writing a good positionality statement or making clear the limitations of the research, but accounting for the ways in which we as researchers are mutually entangled throughout. Agency is not unidirectional between researcher and participant, no more than it is between us and the environment. Instead, the universe speaks back, and through processes of becoming-*with*, researchers can think about how they do research-*with*, instead of research *on* someone or some "thing."

Secondly, from an ethics and research-design perspective, it is not only the notion of responsibility that counts, but response-ability—creating the conditions through which the participants and the environment are able to respond and are able to speak back (Murris 2022, 75). This notion of response-ability helps to reduce the power differentials between researcher and participant, accounting for how they are both enfolded through the research as it unfolds, thus rendering each other capable (Bozalek 2020). This also "entails evaluating the world-making practices that the research is part of and to be response-able to how the research is enabling some futures while restricting others" (Fjeldstad 2024, 9), highlighting the importance of decolonizing research methods overall (Tuhiwai Smith 2021). In response, a diffractive methodology offers an "ethical and socially just practice" (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017, 11), which de-centers the researchers' phenomenological gaze (St. Pierre 2019). What then becomes know-*able* is not pre-determinate within an agential realist account, but instead the focus lies on the effects of difference, through the entanglement of matter and meaning. This goes beyond the

limits of spoken words alone and requires attention to the affective dimension produced through intra-actions.

Lastly, developing and working with new philosophical concepts helps music educators to think differently about the world, in all its richness and complexity, for which a critical posthuman lens offers much to consider, especially when committing to anticolonial work. Moreover, themes of relationality are akin to Indigenous epistemologies, of which posthumanist perspectives are cautioned not to appropriate or extract from (Pasley, Jaramillo-Aristizabal, and Romero 2024). Instead, this critical posthuman lens unsettles the researcher's gaze from something individualistic or objective, and instead mutually implicates all actors involved, both human and nonhuman, through a material-discursive enactment, making possible the speculative process of research-creation (Nordstrom and Ulmer 2017). Ethical responsibility involves music studio teachers being response-able, affording them agency as co-researcher and co-speculator within research processes, thus including them in the future worlding and world-making that arises from it. After all, "it matters what stories tell stories; it matters whose stories tell stories" (Haraway 2019, 565), as these ultimately produce, in all their differential becomings, the very educational spaces that we as researchers continue to deliberate over.

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About the Author

Ryan Matthew Lewis (he/him/his) is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Australia, putting to work continental philosophy to reimagine the subjectivities of musician-teachers within ecologies of education outside of formal schooling contexts. He was awarded the prestigious doctoral scholarship from the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia (PESA) and twice attended Rosi Braidotti's summer school courses at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Ryan continues to present his work at education, music education, and philosophy of education conferences globally and has published journal articles in *Music Education Research* and *Research Studies in Music Education*. Originally from the UK, he spent over 11 years working across Asia in various music

education leadership roles, supporting the work of numerous musician-teachers. Ryan holds an MA in Educational Leadership from the Institute of Education, University College London, and is appointed a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). www.ryanmatthewlewis.com

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Notes

[1] The challenges of such a master-apprentice tradition concern the emphasis on didactic and technicist approaches (Creech 2024), which may prize the value of elite performance and preserving a high art over the learning experiences and wellbeing of musicians themselves. This has been reflected in discourses on authoritative teaching styles within tertiary education settings (Burwell 2021). An emphasis on preserving a high art form, or what Thomas A. Regelski (2012) referred to as being "musicianists" (53), has led to conflicting identity positions among musicians who teach—in both classroom and studio teaching contexts. It has been posited that these identity tensions may stem from a "failed performer" complex (Boyle 2020, 6), where careers in performance are valorised over those in teaching.

[2] This means that the apparatus used to measure and understand the world, for example the human researcher, is not separable from the world they are attempting to measure or understand—the world is not held at a distance (Taguchi 2012).

[3] It is worth noting here that the encounters between the music studio owner and I in the vignettes might be comparable to what participant interviews look like in the process of doing empirical research.

[4] To clarify, agency—in the agential realist sense—is not considered the same as being self-autonomous; "agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity" (Barad 2007, 177) nor can it be described as an attribute or something that someone has. Instead, agency is doing. It "comes about through performances or practices" (Bozalek 2020, 137) and is therefore processual and relational, not individual. Realism in the traditional sense connotes being *in* the world and that reality does not exist independently of perception. Barad's

agential realism, however, connotes being *of* the world and knowing-in-being (Taguchi 2012).

5 It is important to qualify that Barad's (2007) seminal work *Meeting the Universe Halfway* heavily references the work of both Foucault and Butler, attending to the issue of power by extending theorisations of discursive practices and performativity. The purpose of thinking with philosophy (Jackson and Mazzei 2022), then, is to create a disruptive effect that, in the case of Barad's theoretical treatise exposes these relations of power. One of the critiques of new materialism is precisely the privileged worldviews from which it is used and explored, failing to account for critical categories such as race (Tompkins 2016). The selective omission of this criticality has also been discussed with regards to music education research (Young 2025). Furthermore, the pre-occupation with the new and the yet-to-come within post-qualitative research, for example, should not be forgetful of the critical traditions from which they emerged (Gerrard, Rudolph, and Sriprakash 2017). It is Braidotti's (2022) timely contribution, *Posthuman Feminism*, which indexes the field's origins in feminist thought, returning to the central plight of these -isms that are becoming ever fashionable within educational research. Similarly, Gert Biesta (2020) cautions against non-pragmatic approaches to working with theory and misrepresenting or causally ignoring its genealogy of thinkers.

6 Thinking about how the teacher subject is produced within a material-discursive practice, Barad's theorisation provides a contestation of the word and label "teacher" itself. While not directly referring to teachers, Barad (2007) more broadly discusses that "a "worker" is not a fixed and unitary property of individual human beings, but an actively contested and disunified—but nonetheless objective—category that refers to particular material-discursive phenomena, not individuals" (243). Akin to the "worker" designation, the "teacher" then is not an individual, but constituted by a series of material-discursive practices which compose them. For example, teaching as a fallback career set against a backdrop of precarious work conditions is entangled within hierarchical notions of professional status and personal needs (Boyle 2020).

7 These marks, which form outlines of numbers and words on a report or certificate, have a different, material agency. Barad (2007) argues that "primary semantic units are not 'words' but material-discursive practices through which (ontic and semantic) boundaries are constituted" (141). Marks on a page, certificates that go into frames, frames that are displayed on walls, walls that contain a room, all become the spaces in which the teachers' subjectivity are rendered inseparable.